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Translanguaging in performance or performance in translanguaging

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ABSTRACT

This article approaches translanguaging from the perspective of performance as theorised in anthropological and sociological studies. Drawing on the key argument that every facet of social reality is a performance, and social interaction is based on tacit agreement among all the participants, the article aims to make sense of a key participant's making sense of her social world, based on an ethnographic investigation into the work and life of a multilingual, London-based artist of Polish origin. It discusses the creative and critical interpretative potentials that break down the boundaries of performance vs. everyday life, the observer vs. the observed, and the researcher vs. the researched. It also calls for further attention to the performative aspects of translanguaging.

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Introduction

In 2015, we carried out an ethnographic investigation for four months into the work and life of M, an artist of Polish origin in London, as part of a larger project on translanguaging (<https://tlang.org.uk/>). The primary research objective was to understand how M went about working and living as an aspiring, young, female, multilingual, freelance artist in London with a focus on her translanguaging practices. In the vignettes below, we reflected on the process of researching. While we found M and her collaborator creative, imaginative, and having a good linguistic awareness, we also felt that there were elements of performance in what we observed. For Zhu Hua, it is M's awareness of research and her conscious attempt to push the idea of 'participatory'. And for Li Wei, it is our presence as researchers in each other's space made the whole process more of a performance. The following extracts from our reflective fieldnotes illustrate our experience:

From early on, we found that there are lots of metalinguistic comments in M's interactions. She is very clued up about being researched and occasionally, it did cross my mind that perhaps because she was so aware of the research, she was overdoing it for us. ... M & N (M's main collaborator) were very keen on the idea of participatory research and the equivalent in the performance. One time N talked about putting on a different persona for the interview and for the camera. I was quite struck by his approach and began to wonder whether he was performing in front of camera when we observed them – but how can you tell? (Selected from ZH's vignette, 22 June 2015)

I learned a great deal of the work freelancing performance artists do. They are highly creative, full of imagination and are able to transform what they observe in everyday life into abstract ideas and then turn them into a performance. ... Because M does not have a fixed location for her work and her timetable seems rather loose in the sense that her work and social life are not clearly separated, I found the observation rather intimate, and

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sometimes awkward, ... and it is very obvious that M felt our presence, particularly mine. I had the feeling that she was very status conscious (gender, age and social-professional status). It wasn't exactly like she was choosing every word for us to hear. But I did feel on occasions she was 'performing' during the observations. (Selected from LW's vignette 06 August 2015)

This article continues the research process with further reflections on how to make sense of the work and life of M as we 'observed' during our fieldwork. In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researcher is 'trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world' (Smith and Osborn 2008). Whilst we are not doing a strict IPA *per se* for our analysis in this article, we are trying to understand how M tries to make sense of the world around her. We find the anthropological and sociological studies of performance particularly relevant, as they resonate with our take on translanguaging.

Performance as translanguaging

For us, the very appeal of the notion of *performance* lies in the creative and critical interpretative potentials that come from breaking down the boundaries between theatre and everyday reality. This dimension has hitherto not been explored in the translanguaging literature. For example, Turner and Schechner, the two scholars, who are widely credited as founders of performance studies, see 'human seriousness' in play and 'theatrical potential' in social life (Turner 1982). Recognising the commonplace occurrence of rituals and ritualised practices in everyday life and the embedded theatrical features in rituals, Turner describes rituals as 'cultural performance' or 'social drama'. Schechner (1988, xvii) proposes that theatre is only one mode of a continuum of performance that reaches from rituals to everyday life, such as greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, etc. He further argues that even on stage, what is reality and what is performance cannot be easily separated from one another, because 'it is necessary to live as if 'as if' = 'is'' (xviii).

While Schechner's notion of performance reflects a primary focus on the relationship between objects, works or products, Goffman's seminal work (1956) on 'the presentation of self in everyday life' turned attention to social relationships. Starting from the same proposition, i.e. every facet of social reality could be seen as performance, Goffman defined performance as 'all the activities of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers' (1956, 22), Goffman analysed social events through the theatrical terms and structure and, most importantly, through the dialectic relationship between self as social actors and others as observer/audience. What is particularly relevant to our present study is Goffman's argument that the presentation of self is not an isolated activity but a performance based on a tacit agreement between the observed and observer, and both parties have roles to play and ways of influencing the performance.

Translanguaging is about boundaries crossing, be it the boundaries between languages, modalities or materiality, or at the symbolic level, the existing status quo and structures. In a special issue on Trans-ing Performance (Jones 2016) in *Performance Research*, the editor and contributors examined the rich possibilities that a 'trans-' perspective on performance could open up. They argue that the 'trans-' itself stands for 'fluid and multipurpose', and 'a mode of performing complex relationships between one site, identification or mode of speaking/doing/being and another' (2). Some of the ideas explored in their studies, such as moving across and through bodies (transembodiment), modalities (transmodality), materials (transmateriality) have also been discussed in our studies of translanguaging elsewhere (Zhu, Li, and Lyons 2017; Zhu, Li, and Jankowicz-Pytel 2019; Li and Zhu 2021) and Bradley and Moore (2018). Harvey (2020) further pointed out that boundary 'transing' is entangled in that 'the modes of communication, the experiences and knowledges, and the authors, cannot be clearly identified' and instead, 'they are entangled ... moving across, through and beyond boundaries' (196). Seeing performance as translanguaging, moving across and beyond boundaries, including that of stage and everyday life and modes of communication, is a dimension of translanguaging that we want to investigate further in this paper. It has important implications for

how we make sense of M trying to make sense of the world, specifically, how we interpret M's and our other research participants' actions. Ethnography relies on participant observation and/or interactions with participants to understand the social practices of a group or an individual. Researchers may vary in the extent to which they get involved in activities of the communities under their investigation, ranging from being highly observational (shadowing) to being highly participatory (e.g. co-worker, a member of community), from short, immersive periods of ethnographic fieldwork to a longer-term commitment (e.g. Pink and Morgan 2013; Bradley 2020). However, these roles and the extent of engagement are defined based on 'false dualism' of the observer and the observed. Applying performance theory, Gill (2011) argues that the observer and the observed are spect-acting, i.e. spectating and acting in one:

Where once the audience would only observe, and the actors would only perform, spect-acting encourages spectators to realise that they are actors and actors to recognise their simultaneity as spectators (128)

This reformulation and repositioning of the relationship between the researcher and the researched presents opportunities for a 'more methodologically and theoretically rich and nuanced performance of one-on-one ethnography' (Gill 2011). We will explore these methodological and theoretical opportunities further after presenting some examples.

The project: data, participants and context

The project of which the present study formed a part is a sociolinguistic ethnography of the linguistic and cultural transformations that were happening in superdiverse neighbourhoods in different UK cities. The two authors of the present paper led the London-based study that looked at trans-languaging practices in business, law, sports and arts. The data we are discussing here come from the arts part of the study. We identified a Key Participant (KP) for each domain and carried out participant and non-participant observations of the KPs work and life. In the present case, a bilingual Polish/English-speaking research assistant, AL, was employed to support us with the fieldwork and data collection. The data consist of 19 sets of fieldnotes, 39 sessions of audio recordings of interactions (24 sessions at work, a total length of 21h 17m 00s; 15 sessions at home, a total length of 4h 34m 21s), 80 photographs taken during the fieldwork, 14 items of leaflets and documents such as scripts, audience feedback and draft bids, 44 min of interviews, and a large amount of social media and digital communication data (238 WhatsApp messages, 21 SMS, 101 email messages).

We got to know M, our KP, through a theatre company based in Stratford in East London, with which the university we were working has an on-going collaboration. M was born in the north-east of Poland, near the Belarussian border. She first came to the UK in 2003 to visit a friend. She was supposed to stay for ten days but decided not to return to Poland. She has a BA degree in acting from a drama school affiliated with a UK university and was working towards a diploma in translation at a university in London in a period directly preceding our project. At our fieldwork, she was in her early 30s and living in East London. She became a self-employed artist in 2014 when she resigned from a full-time assistant manager job in a café. In addition to performance art, she also does theatre directing and offers support, mentoring and showcasing opportunities to artists of 'Polish origin' as a co-founder and artistic director of a non-profit art organisation. She described herself as 'theatre maker, producer, half of D collective, language obsessive' on her twitter front page. The 'D' in the 'D collective' refers to a theatre piece she was making at that time, about which we will provide more information below.

She described her own linguistic profile as comprising Polish (first language), English (fluent), Podlaski Dialect (a dialect of Polish in her hometown, fluent), German (communicative), and Russian (mainly passive knowledge). M has a key collaborator, referred to as N here, who develops scripts and acts along with her. Their performances are supported by A, a sound engineer in charge of sound mixing and technical support on stage. A occasionally comes to M and N's meetings when they are developing scripts. He contributes to discussions and asks questions but usually lets M and N lead the conversation.

Our fieldwork has unpacked M's ways of going about her performance. In learning the ropes of a self-employed performance artist, M relies on her business instincts and understands the need for collaboration, networking, sponsorship-seeking and self-promotion through social media. For M and her team, art-making is a work in progress and created in a state of flux. They thrive on ambiguity, spontaneity, and going with the flow, despite uncertainty, anxiety and chaos that come with it. Her approach to art-making coincides with our view of language as action and meaning-making. We will return to this point later.

Our understanding of M was built around the relationship between her and us and as it unfolded during the project and over several rounds of (re)interpretation after completing our fieldwork (e.g. Zhu and Li 2020). As soon as we started to work with M, we realised that we had to adapt a highly mobile and flexible approach to the fieldwork. Our KP, typical of many freelance performance artists, has a hectic lifestyle juggling several part-time jobs alongside her art projects. She often works at unsociable hours and makes arrangements on a last-minute basis. Rather than visiting a fixed research 'site', we observed M on the move at many physical locations depending on her project, collaborator, and availability of rehearsal/performance space. The locations included the arts centre where M staged her performance, places where she worked as a part-time employee, the cafés, parks, and N's home where she and her collaborator(s) met and discussed artistic work.

This kind of mobile ethnography and M's work style impact the nature of interactions between us as researchers and M in many ways. We found it impossible to position ourselves as 'invisible' observers most of the time. Both sides felt each other's presence acutely, mainly when the observed activities were in small or intimate spaces. Such awareness has led to the impression on the researchers' part that the KP was performing during the observations. These were captured in the vignette written up as a reflection on the data collection process by LW (presented at the beginning of this paper). This led us to start thinking about the question of performance in its literary and epistemological sense. Throughout the fieldwork, we also found that we were getting increasingly involved in M's activities and interactions with others. The boundary between a researcher and a participant became further blurred, adding further complexities to the dynamics of spect-tating (Gill 2011), as discussed above. In the following sections, we will discuss how M performs different identities, how she 'performs' in everyday interactions and how she further breaks down the boundaries between performance and everyday realities through participatory performance.

Performing artists/linguists/researchers

For M, her identities are multiple and subjective. She employs a subversive yet playful, strategic yet practical approach to managing her multiple identities, to negotiating misalignment between identities she embraces and identities assigned by others. In Zhu Hua & Li Wei (2020), we discussed how M goes about 'doing a Polish artist in London' and negotiates her Polishness in her performance and everyday life. Here, we examine another set of her identities that she brings into her work.

As alluded to above, M has a keen interest in language, communication and identity and often crosses the boundaries of an artist, a linguist and a researcher in approaching her art performance. During our fieldwork, M and her collaborators were developing a full-length theatre piece with the title of *Dietrich* (meaning 'skeleton key' in German), through which they explored the question of language and language loss, communication and identity. While we were not always sure whether M and N engaged the language issues specifically for our sake or whether it was genuinely part of their interest, language is at the forefront of discussions about their performance. There is always some mention or discussion of language use, the meaning or the choice of language, etc. In an early version of *Dietrich*, they tried to capture the pain and emotional cost of operating in 'other' languages and incorporated a mini-lecture on linguistic relativity and singing in dual languages as part of the performance.

They were very aware of the need to read and research linguistics and approached the creative process methodically. When we first met M, she had been reading books on linguistic relativity to

inform her theatre pieces. She and N realised that a lot of research was needed to prepare for theatre-making, as illustrated by the following fieldnotes. Interestingly, in the conversation noted, they were eliciting the help of the research teams as applied linguists – we will revisit the role of the research team in the next section.

M wants to talk to some therapists and some applied linguists to understand these things better for the piece. N says that it's probably impossible to understand what therapy is by just talking to therapists over tea. They then say that they are not sure whether they can find any applied linguists to talk to. I can feel their gaze on me as I'm typing my notes and I shake my head to indicate I have no idea where to find applied linguists. (LonHerFn_20150313_AL_005)

Our notes captured M's and her main collaborator N's various discussions about language in the planning stage for Dietrich. They talk about justifying using different languages, negotiating which languages to use in a particular space and the resultant's symbolic meaning of the chosen language. For instance, in the discussion recorded by the fieldnotes, M and N were toying choosing between the 'real language of normal people' and 'dead language' and wondering how they could 'curate', 'choose' and 'place' the language. The use of a particular language could symbolise madness or obsession.

They talk about what language to sing the song in. The use of particular languages is intended as a choice but also indicates madness or unconscious slipping into a particular language in the piece. N seems fascinated with the choice of language as a result of an obsession. N tries his German lines and M laughs briefly. (LonHerFn_20150326_AL_007)

What seems to fascinate N, in particular, is the ambiguity of the message expressed by these languages. This is evidenced in his playing with the idea of including inaccurate translations of phrases in the subtitles on the screen and using German as a language that is not quite understood by speakers.

What goes on the inter titles on the screen while the performance is ongoing will be translations of what these people are saying and what M and N are saying, if not in English. N seems fascinated by the idea that the translation could be not exact, but more like an approximation of what the people are saying. M doesn't seem to pick up this idea. (LonHerFn_20150313_AL_005)

There is an idea about using German only as a figurative language, as being there without being completely understood by the speakers. (LonHerFn_20150326_AL_007)

Performance creativity in everyday interactions

M is skilful at employing theatrical performance techniques for various purposes in everyday interactions. We will look at some examples of language play, performative way of speaking and singing in this section.

We have previously discussed how M uses language play to manage her multiple identities and to reject stereotypes while exploiting them (Zhu Hua & Li Wei, 2020). Here we offer another example of language play, and this time, it is an act of subversiveness. Language play in the form of verbal provocation help Me break taboos and enact subversiveness, or in her words, does 'something offensive' in order 'to shock'. Throughout the observation period, M and N often played with the word 'shuttlecock', as the theatre piece they were developing involved playing badminton. M found the word amusing. It was a new word for her, and she expressed disbelief that such a 'ridiculously' sounding word could be a real word in English. In the following extract, M and N planned a badminton-playing scene as part of their play. Pleased with the dramatic turn of the play, N put on a 'faux' French accent when using a technical term of French origin, 'coup theatre'. M was trying to recall the word for shuttlecock but could only remember the first component and initiated repairs in Turn 5. N could not resist the double entendre that comes with the forgotten part, i.e. cock, and teased M by openly suggesting that M should not have a problem remembering the second part

of the word in question. M picked up this implied meaning and protests ('who do you think I am?') in Turn 9. They then engaged in a good-natured banter about the word, its wordiness and innuendo, in the rest of the excerpt. There were some metalinguistic commentaries from both sides as to whether the word is appropriate and why.

Excerpt 1 (LonHerAud_20150310_MP_001, transcription conventions in [Appendix 1](#))

1. M: ok so there is one on one (2) playing badminton?
2. N: I think maybe (3) little [French pron:] coup theatre
3. M: because it will be just it will be just so good like a (.) an element of unexpected because it's ...
4. N: I want a lot of it
5. M: th- th- hang on I remember that word um ss-shuttle feather no shuttle shut- um shuttle
6. N: you can remember that second half of this word you can remember
7. M: shuttlecock (laughs)
8. N: (laughs)
9. M: shut up who do you think I am (2) yeah so having it's gotta be some different name for it surely
10. N: no that's the official name for it
11. M: shuttlecock
12. N: shuttlecock
13. M: shuttlecock it just takes you two minutes to say it
14. N: they go back and forth like a [shuttlecock
15. M: [shuttlecock oh really? In Polish it's lotka
16. N: in case you haven't played the game it's not part of the rule that each time you hit it you have to actually say the name of the thing
17. M: no but it's like oh have you got a shuttlecock let's let's play badminton have you got a shuttlecock
18. N: how much effort was that yes, I do have a shuttlecock shall I show it to you
19. N: maybe that's why they called it but that's what it's called it has no other name in English
20. N: yes

Apart from language play, M frequently uses theatrical techniques in her everyday interactions. There are frequent examples of voicing, i.e. imitating others' ways of speaking, either of characters from plays or real people. This is a good example of the Bakhtinian notions of 'voice' and 'double voicing' (e.g. Bakhtin [1963] 1984), where utterances (what has been articulated) carry with them 'tastes' of specific speakers and contexts, which can be re-articulated and recycled as well as being altered significantly and re-inscribed with new meanings. In Excerpt 2, M and N mocked the way of speaking by a person (anonymised as P in the transcript) they had recently met. The person concerned speaks very softly and focuses on keeping fit. M marked her voicing with the phrase 'he'll be like' twice in the excerpt. The double voicing is carried through a stylised and imagined reported speech of P, in M's attempt to critically evaluate P's way of speaking. N followed M's lead and continued the double voicing in his turns by imitating P's manner of speaking.

Excerpt 2 (LonHerAud_20150304_MP_003)

(M is looking for something on her laptop to show N)

...

M: so you need to write to P

N: yes

M: and tell him hey there's this thing d'you wanna come with us and then **he'll be like** yeah sure whatever (quietly, aspirated voice, mocking P) yeah sure

N: (aspirated, mocking P) yes sure I think that will be quite nice

M: we're such bitches

N: yes

(M laughs)

N: it will be very interesting

M: (softly, imitating P) but that's gonna conflict with my pilates class

N: yes (laughs)

M: oh we're such bitches

(N laughs)

M: (checks prices for tickets to the event, exclaims:) it's 10 pounds oh my god (.) and then **he'll be like** yeah yeah I'll come with you and then we'll then you'll email him the day after that oh actually there's no tickets

N: oh sold out can you organise some tickets

M: can you organise some tickets I think this is how we

N: we'll try it we'll try it

M is skilful at using her performative way of speaking to manage the topic change. In Excerpt 3, M and N discuss the use of volunteers from the audience in their performance. Having just rehearsed the piece on stage, N realised that they had a smaller space than they thought and wanted to change the plan. He suggested that instead of having four volunteers make the ropes into a full square, they could do with just two volunteers to avoid 'big complication'. M disagreed and reminded N of the purpose of the square. They decided to 'run with it', despite realising that 'it's gonna be crazy' or 'hectic'. In the actual performance, they indeed used four volunteers, and their creative use of the rope in defining the border/stage was appreciated by the audience as the audience feedback showed. There are many conversational features which are worth noting. Halfway through the discussion, when N conceded to M's idea, M echoed N's words in an animated voice. The echoing, which is delivered in partial repetition of N's short sentence, serves to mark the change in a frame (using Goffman's term, 1974), i.e. from a serious discussion to a lighter and collaborative 'pep' talk. The rest of the conversation, in a pep talk fashion, consists of pairs of similarly partially repetitive lyric-like verses. M finished the conversation with another partial repetition of N's words, but this time she made it into a pun playing on an English idiomatic expression 'you can't have your cake and eat it (too)'.

Excerpt 3 (LonHerAud_20150401_AL_001)

(Context: M & N are sitting in the café and discussing how many volunteers they need for the show).

N: so we have a smaller space (3) do you really want to do it with the volunteers rather than just having the volunteers come in and have the rope between us to be the net

M: what instead of having the full square

N: instead of having a big complication we just have two volunteers when we when we're together they come in

M: but the whole point is it's not about this thing it's about

N: I know

M: it's about defining the border and people [watching and what the fuck am I looking at

N: [I know it is alright are you ok to just run with it

M: ...

N: it's gonna be (2) [it's gonna be crazy

M: (animated) [it's gonna be hectic

N: it's gonna be crazy alright fine

M: it's gonna be like

N: but we're gonna dive in there

M: give me my ten minutes of my life back that's gonna be the moment

N: ... alright fine alright

M: ok let's go

N: let's go let's go and get the cake

M: awesome let's get out

N: let's get the cake I'm singing for

M: let's get the cake and eat it

Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) observed that singing takes place in the workplace, such as in kitchens and restaurants, and argued that it could potentially become part of spatial repertoires if it is taken up, responded to, or talked about by others. The instances of singing they have observed are seemingly non-interactive 'monological moments' when people sing to themselves while waiting or working. In our fieldwork, singing was observed frequently. M is at ease with adding a tune to whatever she says or thinks. But different from what is observed by Pennycook & Otsuji, M's singing is more interactive. Her use of singing, in particular, the change from one communicative mode to another and vice versa (e.g. from singing to speaking), is strategic. Excerpt 4 is an example where M adds a tune to what she says to make the interaction more playful. The sung persona is more business-focused. This instance of switching between communicative modes allows M to express her anxiety that they are not being as productive and efficient as she would have liked, but without her stepping out of her usual way of being an easy-going, go-with-the-flow person.

Excerpt 4 (LonHerAud_20150304_MP_003)

M: [singing:] so this is us doing the um arts council application [singing:] not [normal voice:] but it's important

N: it's a planning session we'll get onto it in the last in the last half an hour probably

Participatory research/performance

M's artistic work is often designed around or for audience participation, whereby the role of the audience is transformed into that of fellow performers and contributors. This coincides with the

TLANG project's participatory research design. In M's work, the extent of audience participation is big and bold. For example, in one performance art piece, M invites the audience to join dots on her body. She gives her narrative and instructions as below:

When I was 5 I asked my mother whether freckles on my body are something I should be worried about (suspecting they were brought on by my negligible washing manner). Mother explained that we are all born with our unique set of 'family marks' – as she called them – "No two people share the same pattern. This is our form of identification". Although I was pleased to learn that the freckles are nothing abnormal – I also felt a sudden anxiety: my mother won't be able to recognize me if I covered all of my 'family marks'!

Today I still feel like a fraud/ fake self from many years ago. I am an older version of the child I was back then. But my unique pattern of freckles I could be identified by changed & is changing still: new freckles, scares, blemishes and imperfections cover my skin.

Have a look at my skin. Inspect it closely. Take your time. Find the dots (freckles, scares, blemishes). Join the dots using the paints and paint brushes available. Let's create a map. Have a look at your own freckles. What does your map look like? Look closely. Take your time. (The manual for *Joining Dots* by M)

Her collaborator, N, when talking to ZH, commented that it was a brave thing to perform a piece like this, as she would put herself in a vulnerable position at the audience's mercy. Interestingly, this performance art piece also connects with the issue of performed identities in our previous discussion – identities are vulnerable and change with time.

In the spirit of participatory performance, M invited the researchers to take part in her theatre performance, Dietrich, during the observation period. The 'participant observation', central to this ethnographic investigation, took on a new meaning as we fieldworkers became performers. The cleverness of M's theatrical plot is that we did not need to be someone we were not. Instead, we remained in our researcher capacity as observers on the stage. While we played the roles of researchers in her performance, the boundaries between theatre performance and everyday activities became blurred. The following sections describe our participatory experience and rich perspectives it resulted in.

Different perspectives

The participatory performance gave the research team, ZH, LW and AL, our bilingual research assistant, a chance to observe the same performance from very different perspectives. ZH and AL were part of the performance. While both casted as observers in the piece, they had different roles and positions: ZH was sitting in a corner with a notebook in her hands, while AL's brief on the day was to move with the flow of the performance. She was an observer with a camcorder on a tripod. On the other hand, LW was an audience member, who, however, adopted a different role from other members of the audience as he was recording the performance on a video camera from a corner of the stage. Below are the descriptions of the same performance from different perspectives by ZH and LW. The stage with a screen as the background is captured in [Figure 1](#).

So the show began. The audience went quiet and M and N took their position within the ropes held up by 4 volunteers. Here came the signal from M to A who was right at the back row in charge of the music and projector. Then A nodded to AL, who began to walk towards the stage front with a camcorder. I followed suit, taking up my observer's corner at the stage. AL pointed a remote control (which in fact was our audio recorder) at the screen and with that, the characters came into life. M went to the central position, faced the audience and began to put up her scarf. She wrapped up her scarf carefully around her hair. (She was wrapped up in scarf as well in a video recording on Facebook). I was wondering what the scarf was used here for. Was it to signal that she was stepping into the character or she was hiding her identity under another one?

The siren went and N began his line, 'feeding time'. I noticed that the vowel in the word feeding was not long enough, but good enough. M looked up and then lighting went up too. She said 'I'm not hungry'. Her voice projected well and showed her training – I must say. N began to sing a song about raindrop in English. The lyric was funny 'on his red hair' and there were some giggles from the audience. At some point, AL left her camcorder and walked to the back corner of the stage. She squatted down and observed tentatively. I hope the



Figure 1. Stage from the left.

audience could get the idea that AL and I were the observers of what was going inside the ropes, which symbolise a stage.

The attention then moved to the cake box which was now placed in the middle of the stage. A dialogue went on. M: I'm so fucking hungry (strong language there!) ... N: I cannot stand this. This is going to rotten the teeth.' M made a long commentary about the cake. It was not just an ordinary cake. It was a Battenburg cake. The cake was named after Battenburg but became popular in Britain. There were many layers of meaning there.

At some point, the volunteers moved and changed the ropes from a square into a line with M and N stood on either side. A also took the opportunity to change her observation spot to the other side of stage and moved the camcorder closer to the performers. I thought her movement timed well with the dynamics of the show. N got the racket out of a box and there were some giggles from the audience. Were they surprised by the prop which N was keen to hide from audience? M also got a racket out. One volunteer threw a shuttlecock to N and then began the match. While they were playing, they were counting and alternating in different languages (I could tell that one is German with my basic German, but not sure about other languages). They were shouting 'experiment' and then 'fail' when the shuttlecock fell to the ground. When M said 'experiment', I could hear that a rhotic 'R' coming through. Was it deliberate? Or was it just her Polish accent with too much going on?

... They echoed each other's question 'who won then?' One of them said 'It is taking part that counts. Practices make perfect'. I was a bit lost at that time. So what does the match symbolise? It is quite clever to count in different languages, but the presence of different languages was not more than that. There was not any speech made in German or Polish as they discussed the other day.

The show ended with a big applause. M shouted out the volunteers' names as a way of saying thank you. We all helped with tidying up the stage and putting props back into the boxes. (LonHerFn_20150401_ZH_009)

Zhu Hua's fieldnotes detail what happened in the piece, her interpretations and the researchers' parts. There are multiple layers of space and circles of observation. The central stages, where M and

N perform, were marked by the ropes held by the volunteers and the presence of ZH and AL as observers, who were being watched by the audience including LW. These are well captured and articulated in Li Wei's fieldnotes.

Before the break, M asked for four volunteers for their act. They were needed to hold a long rope, which acted as boundaries.

After the break, M's act was on. I made a video of it. AL and ZH were part of the act and they walked onto the stage. ZH sat on the side and performed her observer's role. AL moved several times across the stage with a camcorder, placing it in different places.

There was the use of different languages, especially in the counting when M and N were performing the badminton sequence.

One thing I noticed is that there were different layers/circles of observation/observers. AL and ZH were observers IN the act. To us, they were part of the show. I was observing, but as I was recording it, my role was a little different from that of the audience, who were observing everything together, including my observing and AL's and ZH's observing. (LonHerFn_20150401_LW_011)

For ZH and AL, becoming an artist did not come quite naturally. They both commented on feeling like outsiders, imposters, and 'not real artists'.

After the break, we regrouped in the café, but we soon realised that AL left the equipment upstairs in the backstage room. Three of them were back in their discussion about the piece. AL & I decided to go back to the backstage and waited there. While we were waiting, some artists popped in. They seemed to be very friendly. 'Hi, I'm Josh. I'm from Manchester. Which piece are you doing tonight?' AL and I struggled to put up some convincing answers 'we are with xx's group. We are not the real artists'. They were sounding out each other. (LonHerFn_20150401_ZH_009)

We stayed in the room and waited for the performance to start. As we were sitting in the room, a young guy came up and introduced himself. His name was Josh. He seemed very friendly and was looking to strike a conversation with someone. I wondered whether he was nervous. Maybe it was just that I was projecting my own slight nervousness on him, as I imagine I'd chat to people trying to cover up that I'm not so confident about my performance. Neither ZH nor I had much to say to Josh (or anyone else) – I felt like an outsider. An imposter, in fact. Especially when, a moment later, the main organiser came in with another woman and started addressing the artists in the room. We were among them and I felt that the main organiser excluded ZH and me from this communication, but the other woman – who didn't know who we were – was partly turning to us as well as she was talking to people. (LonHerFn_20150401_AL_010)

Performing through semiotic resources

While discussing their theatre piece, M and N often considered different ways of expressing meanings, including various semiotic resources, from using multiple languages (including what they describe as 'made-up' languages), inaccurate translations, artefacts, background film, inter-titles, clothes, movement, gesture, song, silence, lighting, space, etc. They show great awareness of different affordances and limitations that each of these semiotic resources offers them and of the potential complications of using them in a theatre piece. The team has noticed that M often wears a headscarf in a way that resembles those worn by village women. In Dietrich, she started the piece by putting on the scarf. AL asked about the reason behind the scarf in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5 (Interview)

AL: we've seen you a lot um so far wearing a scarf

M: (excited voice) headscarf

AL: headscarf yes what's what's the meaning [what's the significance

M: [I'm reconnecting with my roots

Having been probed further, M explained that although the scarf potentially served as a provocation, her habit of wearing a scarf started as a joke, but also had practical reasons (protecting her hair from the cold and wind) and potentially served as a provocation.

M: ... I think it's more provocative I think it's it's a provocative thing I think it's a way of sort of making a statement I mean I'm not flattering myself and I've ... of yeah it's like a big statement and everybody like pays attention to what I do like probably

(AL laughs)

M: people just don't give a fuck quite frankly but I like to clock people's reactions when they see oh um a white woman wearing a scarf and it's obviously not not not a Muslim thing not fully Muslim but it sort of rings a bit like Muslim so it's quite traditional but actually it's not so what is it it's just probably a hipster basically um that's me it's just like it's kind of being empowered of wearing a headscarf I don't know I've worn it first time as a joke and then now I just wear it because it's convenient because it actually keeps my hair intact so it's practical reasons as well but also I think it's like some sort of connection with

M seems to have been constructing her thoughts on the significance of the headscarf as a semiotic resource aloud as she went along during the interview. Her reflective statement about the provocative meaning of the scarf seems to be triggered by the question. She is trying to give a meaningful response and possibly make a big deal. The response she gave, however, is vague, clichés-like and self-contradictory. She hedged the symbolic and faith-related value of a white woman wearing a scarf several times: first, she stated that 'it is obviously not not not a Muslim thing', and then she modified her proposition by saying 'not fully Muslim but it sort of rings a bit like Muslim. So it's quite traditional'. She then accepted that 'actually it's not so what is it, it's just probably a hipster actually', hence negating her previous offers of sophisticated explanations. It is quite a way from her first response whereby she claims that she uses it to connect with her roots, i.e. with the village, eastern Poland style. Here, M is playing around with stereotypes and possibly recycling circulating discourse such as 'reconnecting with one's roots', 'making a statement', and 'being empowered'. However, is she performing in front of the camera? Is she saying what she thinks what we want to hear? Or is she having a dialogue with her inner self?

Making sense of it all

Performance and translanguaging resonate with the creative and critical interpretative potentials that come from breaking down boundaries of various kinds. Seeing performance as translanguaging, i.e. moving across and beyond dichotomies, boundaries and modes of communication, is instrumental in helping us develop a creative and critical understanding of M's ways of going about work and life.

So, who is M?

For M, life is a performance and the world is a stage. Her performance 'in the world' and performance 'on stage' feed into each other. Her life becomes the stage of her social and identity acts, embellished by her theatrical skills. M's performance in life and work is highly original, replete with multiple voices, strategic manoeuvres, acts of playful subversiveness, meta commentaries and reflections.

M is fully aware of the opportunities and constraints she has in her professional and personal life, what other people and institutions expect of her, and what she can and cannot do. But more importantly, she knows how to make the best use of what she has and what the environment and institutional structures can provide, and she does so in a very strategic, creative, playful and subversive way. Although there are many challenges and obstacles in life, professionally, financially, linguistically, emotionally, and things can be rather difficult at times, M is very determined and can achieve a great deal. She does not mind ambiguity or complexity; she seems to cherish them. She also deliberately constructs a complex and multifaceted persona (such as easy-going, sophisticated, artistic, etc.), through self-mockery, strategic manoeuvres, double-voicing, language play and

multimodality. She wants to make friends with various people, including us as researchers, partly to expand her horizons and create more opportunities for herself and partly to reflect on her own identity. Getting involved in the research project is also part of her strategy of making sense of her world. So is her strategic involvement of the research team in her performance. To us and many people who come into contact with her, M is a mysterious character, who appears to be close to easy-going yet never completely comprehensible. The way she goes about with her everyday life and the different persona she acts out presents a real challenge to us in trying to understand who she really is and her thinking process. One can never be certain what is real-life and what is performed for a special audience for a special effect.

Simultaneously, however, these challenges are exactly where creative and critical potentials lie, theoretically and methodologically. What we have learned from M's case is to 'trans' the dichotomy of performance vs. everyday life; the observer vs. the observed; and the researcher vs. the researched. We have learned to situate our interpretation of language use/performance in the broader context of language users/social actors' personal history, capacity, and sense of belonging. We ask the questions: what counts as data? Methodology for whom?

The concept of translanguaging has highlighted multilinguals' capacity to push and break the boundaries between named languages and between language and other semiotic systems. What M has taught us is that translanguaging is also about the multiplex of identity as continuous, dynamic, and ever-changing situated performance that breaks the boundaries between the spontaneous and the rehearsed, the actual and the imagined, and the authentic and the faked. This dimension of translanguaging should be explored further in future research.

We conclude the article with a quote from *Retaliation*, the poem by Oliver Goldsmith, an eighteenth century Anglo-Irish novelist, playwright and poet:

On the stage he was natural, simple, affecting;

'Twas only that when he was off he was acting.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Transcription conventions

| CONVENTION | MEANING |
|------------|--|
| (text) | additional information, explanation or context |
| text [text | overlapping speech, interruption |
| text | |
| ! | shouting or loud speech |
| ? | asking/checking |
| . | a short pause |
| (x) | The length of the pause in seconds |

Appendix 2. List of abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Description |
|--------------|---|
| M | the name of the Key Participant |
| KP | the Key Participant also referred to as M |
| ZH | Zhu Hua – TLANG Research Team |
| LW | Li Wei – TLANG Research Team |
| AL | Agnieszka Lyons – TLANG bilingual Research Assistant |
| N | The main collaborator of the Key Participant |
| A | A collaborator of the Key Participant |
| TLANG | The project: Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating linguistic and cultural transformations in superdiverse wards in four UK cities |