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Translinguality/Transmodality Relations:  
Snapshots from a Dialogue

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## Translinguality/Transmodality Relations:

### Snapshots from a Dialogue

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This collaborative piece explores the potential synergy arising from the confluence of two growing areas of research, teaching, and practice in composition (broadly defined): multi- (or trans-)modality, and trans- (or multi-) linguality. As we discuss below, these areas of concern emerged almost simultaneously in response to changes in the means and identities of those engaged in communication practices worldwide, changes that have forced compositionists to rethink all that composition entails. However, despite their common points of origination, discussions of modality have remained largely separate from discussions of translinguality, to the impoverishment of both.<sup>1</sup> This collaborative piece is meant to redress this impoverishment by exploring the overlaps, parallels, and points of intersection between the two areas of concern. The two collaborators have each been associated primarily with one of these two areas of concern. Bruce Horner's work addresses the dominance of monolingualist ideology in composition and poses what is termed "translingualism" as an alternative set of beliefs to address those problematics. Cynthia Selfe's work has been at the forefront of efforts in composition to explore and engage responsibly with the affordances of digital literacies. Despite the different trajectories of our work, we both sense a need for a more expansive view and practice of composition, whether in terms of modalities or languages of expression, and a sense that

we can stimulate and support efforts toward that goal by identifying overlaps and parallels in work towards it from questions about both language and modality. That shared sense is what has brought us to work on this project.

This project began and developed as a (mostly email) dialogue between the authors with questions followed by responses followed by responses and questions prompted by these responses, and so on. As this dialogue developed, we started to identify several key issues, explain ways these issues manifest themselves in specific teaching, research, and composing practices, and pose questions and challenges prompted by these manifestations. We've organized the discussion that follows in terms of these key issues, recognizing that there is significant overlap between and among them. We refer occasionally to some of the comments and questions raised in the email process leading up to this text to help explain what prompts our statements. Our project, then, is meant to operate at two levels: on the one hand, it carries out a discussion of the overlaps, points of intersection, and parallels between work on translinguality and multimodality; on the other hand, it also (and, for readers, simultaneously) engages in meta-analysis of just such discussions, leading us to conclusions about how to develop such collaborative work in the most productive ways possible. We shift, therefore, back and forth, between excerpts from our dialogue and commentary on that dialogue to bring out assumptions and problematics of the terms of, by, and with which we do, can, and might explore translinguality, multimodality, and their relations. Our overarching assumption is that such back and forth movement is necessary to the responsible conduct of any such work: work that resists quick and easy sloganeering and the commodification of composing practices that might otherwise have the potential to

transform the work, and the understanding of the work, undertaken in composition by teachers, scholars, and students to the betterment of all.

Our hopes in exploring this potential and confluence are that 1) we can better understand each area of inquiry by defining it in relation to the other, 2) we can re-define each in terms of the other, given what we believe are the significant overlaps and alignments in the concerns of each; and 3) we can better identify important questions for future research as a consequence of our efforts here to outline the current state of affairs in the research and teaching of both.

One more, crucial, point: while the text in hand obviously takes the form of traditional alphabetic print text, it does not fully represent our dialogue, or the work of the project. Of course, no medium or form can fully represent such work, but our argument compels us to work toward incorporating material digitally in a later iteration of this work—features of which we can only gesture towards throughout this (mostly alphabetic print) element of our “text.”

I: DEFINING TERMS OF MODALITY AND LANGUAGE: Multimodality, Transmodality, Multilinguality, Translinguality as Alternatives to “SLMN”

The terms “multimodality” and, more recently, “translinguality” are now circulating in the discourse of composition teaching and scholarship. We trace the emergence of these terms in that discourse as a response to events “on the ground”: the development and increasingly global reach and use of new communication technologies and networks for these; the increasing, and increasingly undeniable, traffic among peoples and languages;

and the consequent recognition by teacherscholars of composition that the assumption of a monolingual and monomodal norm for composition—as communicative practice and terrain of study—is no longer appropriate, if indeed it ever was. What seems apparent to us both is that 1) these relatively recent changes bring into visibility features of all communicative practice to which ideologies posing the “norm” of a single, uniform (“standard”) language and modality (hereafter, “SLMN”) have tended to suppress, but also that 2) these communicative practices are themselves materially different from past, and other, communicative practices in ways that challenge both “SLMN” ideologies and the practices now identified (ideologically) *as* SLMN. In other words, the various terms, and neologistic variants to these, listed in the title of this section represent challenges both to beliefs about the modality and language of all communicative practice (sic) and to communicative practices themselves.

Definitions and inflections of the terms “multimodality” and “translinguality” in composition scholarship and teaching represent different responses to changes in belief and communicative practice. To illustrate; early on in this project, Cindy cautions about the conduct of the project itself:

My only concern [. . .] is the limitations of the alphabetic in doing this job well. [. . .] In fact, I suspect that the success of this piece—on my end, at least—will depend on my ability to focus on specific examples/situations that illustrate these limits, or, at least, that illustrate why people (other than academics!) feel so compelled to turn to multiple modalities to make meaning and why academics (especially those who specialize in semiotics) ought to blessed well pay attention to these efforts and take them seriously instead of ignoring/dismissing/diminishing them as somehow less intellectual, less effective, less... (fill in the blank).

So, this piece may well need some online accompaniment—in fact, I think it would be cool to experiment, for instance, with what each of us can—and cannot—say in the different modalities and even perhaps render parts of the argument in multiple ways and using multiple modalities.

Cindy's caution draws on at least two definitions of multimodality: as a set of material practices to which people (especially people other than academics) turn to make meaning, and as a set of beliefs that such practices might allow composers (the authors) to break out of the limitations of SLMN, a set of beliefs obviously at odds with dominant SLMN ideology.

We see a concern about treating multimodality as a fixed set of practices in the following exchange. The exchange starts with a caution regarding fetishizing practices, then turns to the strategic advantages and limitations of specific terms:

**Bruce:** How do we exploit the shift in perspectives that encounters with unfamiliar language/modal forms can produce without then fetishizing these at the cost of retaining dominant restricted understandings of the familiar? How do we learn to recognize the “strange”/“new” in the “familiar”/“old” and the “familiar”/“old” in the seemingly “new” or “strange”?

**Cindy:** Bingo! And not only recognize these unfamiliar forms, but try them out/experiment with them to see what they offer, tell us, show us.

**Bruce:** The “multi-” prefix works against this in seeming to require an additive model of change: counting the number of varieties, whether of languages or modalities, and identifying how they are configured (e.g., meshed or switched between) hence the introduction of the “trans-” prefix as an alternative meant to focus on cross-language and mode work and the need for negotiation (and the difficulty people have of understanding this as anything other than a peculiar way of invoking the enumerative framework for grasping difference.

**Cindy:** I have no problem with “transmodal” as long as we include a discussion about how it is connected with multimodal both in terms of *awareness and production practices*, and the discussion is situated historically, and what specific kinds of work we are hoping to suggest with “trans.”

**Bruce:** I think your point about needing both awareness and production practices corresponds to my comments [. . .] about needing both a change in dispositions and practices. Which makes me wonder if we need to separate these out for analytic or pedagogical purposes: e.g., multimodality as the means toward transmodality as the goal, albeit with the usual cautions about means becoming ends? Another possible way of putting this is to consider how we keep the focus on work across boundaries

of language and modality rather than seeing our task as one of selecting from a menu of languages and modalities?

**Cindy:** This is a great question. I'd rather tackle the problem head on (getting beyond the “piling up” suggested by the plurality model—linked, I suppose to what Brandt talks about with her “accumulating” model). But how, then to avoid the idea of “selecting from a menu of languages and modalities?” is harder!

Bruce, reviewing the literature (!) on translingualism, brings out a somewhat different notion of translanguality and transmodality as in fact “dispositions”:

[C]hallenges to monolingualist ideology recognize the degree to which we are all always multilingual: that, in Pennycook’s phrase, for example, English is a language “always in translation.” These challenges would seem to call for a shift in dispositions rather than engagement in specific practices the dominant has trained us to recognize as multilingual/translations. But instead, the still dominant definition of multilingual resurfaces, leading to the celebration of what we’ve learned to recognize as multilingual and dismissing of what we’ve been taught to think of as monolingual.

The parallel in discussions of multimodality seems to be a tendency to adopt a celebratory stance toward practices that dominant ideology has trained us to recognize *as* multimodal and to push to the background or dismiss as unduly restricted those practices that this same ideology has trained us to recognize *as*, well, monomodal. As in questions of language, specific practices are removed from history and treated, instead, as in themselves having specific significance and effects across contexts.

Here Bruce insists on a distinction between specific material practices, on the one hand, and, on the other, beliefs about/dispositions towards those practices, suggesting that the very notions of monomodality and monolinguality are misleading, manifestations of SLMN ideology rather than (actual) practice, hence Bruce insists that

what’s needed [. . .] is a way to grasp how specific practices are multimodal despite the blindness to that multimodal character that dominant culture’s training has led us to—and I don’t think we can say that the medium in itself controls this (e.g., the alphabet) but, rather, the ways we’ve been trained to grasp things like the alphabet. (music parallel: Western music notational practice can and has seemed to limit both what is recognized as music and the components comprising music [. . .]), most

obviously in restricting the pitch relations recognized to those of the 12-tone system; but this limitation is not so much the effect of the notational system itself as it is an effect of trained dispositions toward that system, leading to restricted ways of putting it to use and modifying it as needed.)

But as Cindy observes in her response, these distinctions aren't so easy to maintain:

[P]art of what is happening with multimedia/multimodality/transmedia/transmodality is tied to/situated within digital composing environments where people have access to composing tools that allow for different forms of hybrid mediation. As the engineers says, "When the only tool in your tool belt is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail." So in composing environments, if your only tool is a pen or a piece of paper, or a word processor—the common sense approach (given dominant ideology in departments of English) often includes "writing" that happens primarily with words (although it includes, as always, other modalities).

Here Cindy foregrounds the effect of material social environments on dispositions, rather than treating these as discrete from them. This same exchange and dynamic between disposition and material social environment surfaces more forcefully in the following excerpt from our exchange:

In the opening, Bruce, in cautioning against fetishizing specific language practices, insists on distinguishing between a translingual disposition and a specific language practice, positing that

One can acknowledge the legitimacy of the "translingual" position while engaged in practices that appear monolingual (and vice versa), and one can acknowledge the legitimacy of the transmodal position while likewise being engaged in practices that appear from dominant perspectives to be monomodal (and vice versa).

Which prompts Cindy's important demurral and qualification:

**Cindy:** Well, yes! At the same time, I want to work within the profession to encourage more teachers not only to *recognize* or "*acknowledge* the legitimacy of the transmodal position," but also to *encourage/experiment*



*with/try* more transmodal production, to experiment with different semiotic ways of composing meaning—and to help students do so as well.

We see a similar dynamic at work in the following exchange, which is initiated with Bruce expressing concern about the power of analytic categories to “overwhelm and limit our understanding of the phenomena being studied/taught.” Here, however, the issue is how the effort to break past limits of analytic categories—language and modality—can lead to a flattening of important distinctions: to allow a focus on continuity to obscure important differences. Bruce begins by pointing to problematic distinctions produced through categories:

The most obvious example in language study is the categorization of languages and language varieties. On the one hand, it seems useful, for analytical and political purposes, to identify boundaries distinguishing one language/language variety from another. On the other hand, for other analytical and political purposes, those boundaries seem highly problematic (see Gal and Irvine; Parakrama). The equivalent is true of the category “language” itself as a demarcation of a far more complex ecology of practices. Recall here David Olson’s observations not only that there are “aspects of speech [that] are not represented in a writing system” but also that “writing systems create the categories in terms of which we become conscious of speech,” leading us to “introspect our language along lines laid down by our scripts” (122, paraphrasing Whorf).<sup>2</sup>

Following Olson’s warning (cited above), it seems ultimately problematic to distinguish between language and modality. Dominant conceptions of language offer a highly attenuated, restricted sense of all that goes on in the activity of “language acts” (a.k.a. communicative acts). Kress acknowledges this in calling language multimodal (“Multimodality” 186), vs. thinking of language as itself a discrete mode. Conversely, it seems appropriate to recognize modalities as a feature of language. From this, it no longer makes sense to treat language, whether as writing or speech or both, as apart from the “multimodal.”

Cindy responds with another demurrer and qualification:

Well, yes and no. I think it is quite true that all language use is multimodal. I'm not sure that all environments for linguistic exchange are created equal in regards to the modal mixing they accommodate. For instance, while print texts have always mixed some modalities of expression (words and visual information, for instance), digital environments allow for different kinds/varieties of mixing. Here, I'm thinking of the ways in which print text and video/audio texts can be juxtaposed/combined in a single composing environment. So, while multimodal/transmodal texts have always been present in our lives, I think it might be justified to say that new production tools and environments offer very different ways of accomplishing multimodality that we have come to do in print works.

To which Bruce adds:

So while all language practice is multimodal (using the terms *language*, *practice*, and *multimodal* as "mass" nouns), language practices are not multimodal in the *same ways*, and the differences among/between them are significant. A radio play is not the same as a live theater performance or a television broadcast, even though they're all (in quite different ways) multimodal, and the differences are quite significant from the production, distribution, and reception ends.

\* \* \*

How might we make productive sense of these exchanges in forwarding specific definitions? Tentatively, we conclude the following. First, we see the need to remind ourselves to distinguish between analytic categories and practices to which they are applied, the latter of which, as fluid phenomena, can never be fully represented by the categories invoked. Instead, categories serve as lenses that inevitably distort as they clarify. This appears to be the thrust behind Bruce's caution against consigning specific practices to the monolingual/monomodal dustbin: their seeming monolingual/monomodal character may be more the effect of our mode of analysis than an accurate representation of their actual status as practices. Here the emphasis on dispositions toward modality and linguality has force: we need to be wary of the power of monolingual-ist, monomodal-ist, dispositions to distort our sense of the practices under consideration. This danger

manifests in two ways: the tendency to view practices not “marked” as multimodal or multilingual as SLMN; conversely, the tendency to conflate practices “marked” as multimodal or translangual with multimodal/translangual dispositions, when their non-SLMN character may be more apparent than real.<sup>3</sup>

Second, and paradoxically, we also need to recognize the effect of specific material social environments on dispositions toward language(s) and modalities. As we’ve already suggested, the emergence of changes to communicative practices—most obviously, the development of digital communication technologies and global communicative networks, less obviously, the increasing traffic of (exchanges and changes to) peoples and language practices, reinforced and changed as well by global communication technologies—has contributed to the increasing visibility of, and questions about, language and modality. The “new” communicative practices—those that dominant dispositions lead us to recognize as different—also force a re-evaluation of and change to those communicative practices those dominant dispositions had led us to see and experience as simply “natural,” the “norm.”

Third, and relatedly, while in one sense we might say that, from a specific disposition toward modality and/or linguality, everything is always already translangual/multimodal, it is not the case that all practices are translangual and/or multimodal in the same ways, nor is the experience of them. Thus, we might agree with Pennycook that “English is a language always in translation” while insisting on differences in the kinds and experiences of its translation. (English, for example, is often experienced by users as not “in translation.”) Likewise, we can grant the multimodal character of seemingly monomodal practices (e.g., alphabetic writing) while also insisting that such practices do not deploy modalities in the same ways as other (necessarily) multimodal

practices (and, further, that the ideological residue of specific practices has significant effects on the production and experience of them). This suggests a need for pedagogies that would bring the experience of the transmodal and translingual character of all productions to the fore of consciousness.

We see this articulated in the following exchange:

**Bruce:** [we need to think] of our work less as discovery of the new and more as the recovery and recuperation of alternative dispositions toward meaning making practices, including both those our dominant training has led us to recognize as monolingual or monomodal and those that training leads us to think of as multi- or trans-lingual/modal.

**Cindy:** [B]ut at the same time, we can't dehistoricize/remove such discussions completely from the context of a rise of extended computer networks/the increase of digital tools for composing/the practices of multimedia composition online that have, in part, given rise to the contemporary interest in multimedia composing.

**Bruce:** So we need both to recover/recuperate and to consider significant changes/gaps between old and new. Hard to do without either fetishizing new or overlooking those gaps (yielding to the temptation to see only continuities and overlook differences).

In light of all this, rather than understanding modality and linguality in terms of fixed (“defined”) categories and practices, we pose the following questions of definition as more productive in bringing out the dialectical relations between dispositions and practices with language and modality:

- What are the material social conditions of composing possibility for the deployment of language and modality (including available and competing dispositions toward and training with these)?
- How are modality and language deployed (or might they be deployed) in this composition? To what end? Demanding, or expecting, what kinds of work? How

does such deployment work on and with the conditions of its composition, distribution, and reception?

- In what ways do our current analytical categories of modality and language need to be revised to accommodate differences in the ways this composition engages these?

## LABORING WITH LANGUAGE/MODALITY: PRODUCTIVE FRICTIONS

Work on both translanguality and multimodality brings on and requires friction through the resistance arising with any encounter with difference. Work is, well, work—hard work on and with materials and culture—concrete labor. In our discussions, we identified two related forms of labor that those pursuing translanguality and multimodality must engage: 1) the labor of reception integral to the “production” of meaning, and 2) the labor, in the sense of the difficulty, in working across differences of language and modality/ies, especially when some of these appear to be unfamiliar to us.<sup>4</sup> However, we recognize the tendency, in some discussions of language and modality, to elide this labor by treating languages and modalities as operating independent of practice and practitioners—in short, independent of concrete labor. The result in these cases instances and leads to the problematics ensuing from commodity fetishism.

### Sense 1: The Labor of Reception

Perhaps as a consequence of being in “composition,” the two of us tend to focus especially on “production,” conventionally defined: the writing/making of meaning by

students and other writers/makers. This risks neglect of the important role played by those reading/listening to/viewing/touching what is “produced” in making meanings out of it—i.e., the role these themselves play in meaning production. We’re thinking here of Jackie Royster’s and Krista Ratcliffe’s important work on listening, and Bourdieu’s oft-cited statement on the difficulty of being heard.<sup>5</sup> To guard against this neglect, it seems that any learning of production needs to be integrated with attention to the dynamics of reading/writing (broadly defined), and to traditions of reception (reading//viewing/listening/interpretive practices). This would necessarily include the dynamics of power relations, since people in positions of power (e.g., teachers, editors) are often positioned to assess the worth of the labor of the writers/composers. The accoutrements of being so positioned have historically included the authority to refuse to engage in such labor and to offer instead, as if it were legitimate, facile glossing. Conversely, the requirement for such labor of reading is historically assigned to the subordinate—the non-native, colonized, the othered by race, class, gender, ethnicity—when reading the writing of the dominant (e.g., canonical British Literature, the law). Who is expected to learn and adapt to whose language, and endure the cost of such labor?

There is a parallel elision of the labor of reception in conflation of a medium with modality, whereby use of a specific medium is thought in itself to produce specific effects, rather than a specific social practice with a medium producing certain effects (all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding). The false assumption that what is called music, or some kind of music, will in itself have specific effects (in invocations, for example, of music as the universal language, or Bach as producing ethereal effects) illustrates this false conflation and elision of labor (of listening and training in a particular listening practice, leaving aside

the labor of the production of specific acoustic phenomena). When the performance does not yield the expected experience, the listeners are judged as defective.

**Cindy:** H'mm, in U.S. colleges, similarly the labor of reading texts that are primarily alphabetic is often assigned by teachers/scholars to students who must read the writing of published writers and who then must in turn try and replicate that performance in the papers they produce. This is often linked to an historically sedimented fetishizing of alphabetic/print text (a fetishizing of a set of modalities?) as *the* modality of education/reason.

**Bruce:** The notion of fetishizing a set of modalities seems crucial: we're not just teaching a format but a modality, and not just in the sense of a medium but a way of engaging with and understanding engagement with that medium, and, as you point out, the status of that medium (as the medium of education/reason, as you observe).

Some extreme examples of fetishizing specific languages—French as the language of reason or diplomacy, Italian the language of love (or is it the other way around?), English as the new global lingua franca, Spanish as the language of poverty, Germany as the language of science, and so on—more clearly illustrate the occlusion of language users' labor with the language, and their working/reworking of these with every utterance, whether produced or "heard." The labor necessary to meaning production, by both the "makers" and "receivers" (readers/viewers/listeners/performers) through a working/reworking of modalities/media, is occluded through fetishizations of these. Even the notion of "affordances" seems to attribute to specific media/modalities the effects of specific practices with these, overlooking the role such practices play. It's the training (in composition, performance, listening) that "affords" these effects, not the technologies of production as ordinarily defined.

This treatment of modality and language as in themselves producing specific effects is encouraged by the prefix "multi-." The term "multimodality" suggests an array of

discrete modalities which one can then choose from among (viewed as resources), just as the term “multilingualism” suggests an array of discrete languages which one can then choose from among, switch between, or even “mesh.” Distinctions among these various “modes” and “languages” don’t hold up under scrutiny. Absent such scrutiny, there is a slippage between “modality” and “medium” (following the notion of “multimedia”) that leads to restricting understanding of the experience with a particular technological medium to a particular sense (say, printed text understood as associated with the visual). That slippage overlooks the necessary labor of readers/viewers/listeners in their encounters with a particular medium and, more broadly, traditions of reading/viewing/listening practices, and the ultimate inextricability of the senses as they work and rework (with/on) particular media, whether printed alphabetic words, film, audiotape, dance, f2f speech. In other words, dominant understandings of traditions of engagement with specific media (that one approaches speech [and music] only as an aural/acoustic phenomenon, vs. also always simultaneously visual and tactile, say) abstract from the complex of the experience/event a highly reduced understanding of the “mode of production” (to invoke a different sense of “mode”). This qualifies how we answer the question about the relation between acknowledging a plurality of languages/language varieties/modes and the danger of treating these as an array of discrete resources.

Labor, Sense 2: Resistance to Moving beyond SLMN

There may be a parallel between the resistance folks have to arguments for learning new media and the resistance folks have to arguments for moving beyond monolingualism.



While it's tempting to dismiss this resistance as a manifestation of adherence to SLMN ideology (and while often enough that may well be the case), we need to attend to the work necessary to such shifts in practice and perspective. These are not simply beliefs to be shucked off but shifts in material social practice that require not only access to hardware, say, but also time, effort, training, and so on.

However, part of the problem here may be that what seems to be demanded is more than what is being demanded: conventional definitions of multilingualism, for example, seem to demand that individuals develop a putative "native-like" fluency in more than one language (see Horner, Donahue, and NeCamp). Dominant understandings of language competence as an individual achievement of mastery of a "target" language, and the myth of native-speaker fluency (as if all speakers of a given language have identical fluency in all aspects of that language) then lead people to feel personally defective for failing to achieve native fluency in more than one language (or even one language), and to imagine that what is being asked of them is far more lofty and unreachable than it is.

We suspect a parallel/coterminous debilitating belief about communicative competence is operating in people's resistance when they appear to be confronted by demands to be "fluent" in seemingly "new" modalities and communication media. So how do we introduce and advance an alternative view of competence in our work with our colleagues and students (e.g., one that locates competence as an ongoing and collaborative achievement)? This of course leads us directly to matters of pedagogy.

PEDAGOGY

Our discussion pushes toward four forms of resistance, and strategies for making productive use of that resistance, in pedagogies addressing translanguality and trans/multimodality.

The first, already touched on, is the resistance prompted by a debilitating, if false, sense that what is being demanded is a new and complete fluency with multiple languages and modalities. The failure to acknowledge the inevitable labor involved in any working with language and modality, and belief in the chimera of “native-like” fluency with these, produces an oppositional resistance to what would otherwise be a productive engagement with differences in modality and language that any work in composition entails.

We might respond in pedagogically productive ways to the first kind of resistance by demonstrating (through example and making visible our own and others’ experiences) both the broad range of linguistic and modal resources ostensibly monolingual/monomodal individuals already use in their ordinary work in and outside academic settings, and conversely to demonstrate the chimerical character of claims to the kind of perfect native fluency in language and modality. The always ongoing work with, on, and across languages and modalities in speech—with the seeming successes and failures encountered daily—can help to illustrate this, as can the fluctuating degrees of “fluency” in speaking with others over space, time, and social settings. We can also highlight continuities across languages/modalities. In the case of languages, etymology can help us (teachers and students) learn to see the strong interrelations among languages. In the case of media and modalities, there are obvious overlaps both in the design of technologies (e.g, keyboards, the metalanguage for describing digital writing) and corollaries.

Second and third forms of resistance emerge as two responses to the fetishizing of translingualism, and multimodality as new and yet, oxymoronicly, outside history (in the sense of being outside human shaping). One response to these, so fetishized, is to reject them as fads, impractical and irrelevant to the ordinary needs of ordinary students and other writers (of, presumably, alphabetic print texts). Another is to embrace and even celebrate them at the theoretical level while ignoring actual work with them in practice.

Bruce brings out a concern with this kind of fetishizing in questioning the celebration of recognizable forms of translingual practice—currently identified with “code-meshing”—which threatens to render it a species of exotica to be marveled at rather than a feature of everyday language practice. And, Bruce suggests,

There may be a parallel in discussions of multimodality—a tendency to adopt a celebratory stance toward practices that dominant ideology has trained us to recognize as multimodal and to push to the background or dismiss as unduly restricted those practices that this same ideology has trained us to recognize as, well, monomodal.

**Cindy:** Yes—that’s true and I often find myself doing just that! At the same time, I also see another complicating tension: on one hand, a celebratory recognition of multimodality/transmodality and, on the other hand, a push-to-the-background/resistance to teaching certain forms of/environments for multimodality/transmodality production: like some English teachers’ resistance to teaching/recognizing anything but conventional print-based word papers (which, granted, are themselves multimodal, but not in the same ways as texts created in digital environments can be).

In this comment, we see Cindy bringing out the third form of resistance: celebration (here of multimodality/transmodality), fetishized, and therefore accompanied all too readily with a rejection of the actual labor of teaching their production. The pedagogical necessity of engaging in production activities engaging with multimodality/transmodality (and,

presumably, translanguality) follows from this—what Bruce may be getting at in his response:

I see what you mean: while there are multimodal potentialities, and even submerged features, in any writing of traditional texts, these are overlooked or denied in how they are taught. Your point is well taken: I think we need to work simultaneously on dispositions, language/semiotic practices/modalities, and media while recognizing their ultimate inextricability from one another. If we work on just one of these (say dispositions, my bent) then we ignore the materiality of practices, making our work a mind exercise of limited or no utility; if we work just on practices and media without working on dispositions, we lose the radical transformative possibilities of the former. I tend to err in the first direction, odd for someone self-identified as a cultural materialist.

A fourth form of resistance is more directly material, in the ordinary sense of that term: the challenge of material resources (hardware, but also time, space, institutional support) for engaging in the experimentations with translingual/modal practices that both Cindy and Bruce agree are a necessary and important part of our work going forward. It may be true, as Bruce observes, that “One can acknowledge the legitimacy of the ‘translingual’ position while engaged in practices that appear monolingual (and vice versa), and one can acknowledge the legitimacy of the transmodal position while likewise being engaged in practices that appear from dominant perspectives to be monomodal (and vice versa).” Nonetheless, it seems crucial to work with our students on developing strategies beyond those deploying what SLMN recognizes as legitimate, so that those strategies do not effectually become understood as the only strategies (or possibilities)—especially given the low status accorded anything that doesn’t fit with SLMN “norms.”

As Cindy observes,

I want to work within the profession to encourage more teachers not only to recognize or “acknowledge the legitimacy of the transmodal position,” but also to

encourage/experiment with/try more transmodal production, to experiment with different semiotic ways of composing meaning—and to help students do so as well.

And Bruce responds,

I wonder if this encouragement of experimentation is an argument for a pedagogical strategy: using different modalities just to say you've used them wouldn't by itself be an end, but not experimenting with them will preclude broadening what we can attempt and perhaps achieve in our compositions (defined broadly). A possible analogy: students studying "orchestration" learn at least some of the different capabilities of different instruments and try them out so they can then choose from among them (or not) [and mix them] when composing/orchestrating.

Cindy highlights the necessity of working toward such possibilities by treating "competence" as an ongoing and collaborative achievement, what Cindy calls "truly the hardest work from my perspective":

Getting people to try on the multi/trans perspectives—not only in thinking about making meaning and the various forms it takes, but also in producing meaning. I guess the way I generally approach such situations is to offer teachers some texts to think about from a multi/trans perspective (trying to work inductively toward a multi/trans understanding), and then to involve them in exploring such texts from a multi/trans perspective (practicing with them), and then involve them in brainstorming ways in which to practice creating/making such texts (and/or involving students in doing so).

INSTITUTIONS/HISTORIES/TRADITIONS/DISCIPLINARITIES: RE-INVENTING (VS. "INVENTING") LANGUAGE/MODALITY

Not only is there now a substantial (and growing) body of scholarship affiliated with composition studies (and, more broadly, literacy studies) addressing questions of language and modality; there also exist well-established research and teaching traditions,

represented most clearly by institutional disciplines (and, often, “departments”), devoted to the study and teaching of language, media, modalities. Here we have in mind not so much, or just, composition’s recognizable institutional bedfellows (and occasional rivals) in departments of communication, education, journalism, rhetoric, and (sometimes) media studies, but also traditions of research and teaching in linguistics (applied and theoretical), specific languages (modern and not), and specific media (music, dance, theater, film, photography, graphic design, painting, sculpture, ceramics, printmaking, etc.).

In our discussions of these traditions, at least three kinds of interrelated issues surfaced for us: issues of cross-disciplinary learning; issues of disciplinary boundaries and integrity; and issues of material resources:

**Bruce:** Institutionally, how do we engage productively with the work of established disciplinary traditions that focus (and claim expertise) on matters of modality, medium, and language (film, music, linguistics, “speech,” visual arts, graphic design, the modern languages), ....Aside from simply acknowledging work in these other disciplines, how might we operate as “sojourners” rather than “tourists” (to invoke Michael Byram’s distinction, made with respect to intercultural competence) (and perhaps invite others to do the same) in the territories of these other disciplines?

**Cindy:** This is another really great question and one digital media folks in English depts. struggle with all the time—we have to talk to people in film production programs, art programs, journalism programs about what we do with composing mediated texts that is different from/the same as they do in their own programs. And in terms of scholarship, digital media compositionists are always dealing with scholarly work in new media studies, film, audio studies—much of which has outlier status in other disciplines like cultural studies, film studies, digital audio studies.

In the following, we take up each of these issues separately, while recognizing their ineluctable interrelations.

### Cross-disciplinary Learning

Put positively, there is an almost overwhelming body of work in these “fields” that those of us in composition can and should undertake to learn from. In addition to providing insights into areas of communication not commonly recognized by composition scholarship and teaching, the assumptions and research and teaching methodologies of these other fields can at the very least provide a fresh perspective on those we think of, and practice, as our own—as simply the “norm.” (For example, the challenges of musical notation give a fresh perspective on the notational practices taken as the norm in [verbal] composition, just as the question of “layout” of images brings to the fore the visuality, as it were, of texts *as* images.)

At the same time, and conversely, insofar as every disciplinary tradition ([verbal] composition included), is shaped as much by exclusions as well as inclusions, we would not want to bind ourselves to the (imagined) orthodoxies of these other traditions in re-imagining the work of composing. Thus, while it would be inefficient to “reinvent the wheel” in approaching matters of linguality and modality, given the enormous corpus of scholarship and teaching on such matters in these other fields, there is the possibility of new insights to be gained from reconsidering, from the vantage point of composition’s own disciplinary concerns, the significant findings and practices of these other fields. Here, as before, the notion of “competence” can stand in the way of productive engagement: instead of aiming for (individual) mastery of these disciplines, as traditionally conceived, we might instead aim at collaborating with those in these other fields, for the benefit of all, rather than attempting to either poach from or instruct and correct those in these other fields.

## Disciplinary Boundaries and Integrity

We include both “boundaries” and “integrity” in this section to signal our recognition of both the problematics of disciplinary restrictions and the inevitability and necessity of specific disciplinary commitments and “paths,” as it were, and the challenge and possibility of engaging the dialectical tension between these in cross-disciplinary teaching and study. In parallel with our comments in the section above, we recognize that orthodoxies may well reign within specific disciplines that it would seem counterproductive to wholly subscribe ourselves to in the interest of “interdisciplinary” collegiality, but also that there is a need for respect (recall Royster’s warning, “When”) and attention to the histories underlying such orthodoxies. However, we also recognize that disciplines, especially at first pass, can seem more monumental and intransigent—more internally uniform, stable, and homogeneous—than in practice they are.<sup>6</sup> So, for example, there is radical debate (in the sense of challenges to root assumptions) in the “field” of applied linguists on which Bruce has drawn. It seems paramount, in drawing on such work and working with those in these fields, to learn and learn to recognize the dynamics of such debate.

One consequence of this can be a productive re-cognition, in the sense of re-acquaintance, with the governing assumptions and commitments of the discipline to which one feels most aligned, i.e. for us, “composition,” despite the ongoing radical challenges to some of its key concepts (as in, what constitutes a “composition”—see Yancey—or “writing”—see George, Hesse and Selfe). For example, Bruce can attest to confronting, as distinct to composition, of the overriding pedagogical commitment (a.k.a. “imperative”)



driving Bruce's own analyses, a commitment that renders accounts of language practices in other disciplinary fields to appear to be missing some key element: a question not only not raised but not felt to be in need of asking). Such moments of re-cognition can support integrity of both one's "own" discipline and that of others without yielding to mere submission to the restrictions those disciplinary commitments and practices might impose.

### Institutional/Material Working Conditions

It's easy enough to imagine working cross-disciplinarily in one's research. Indeed, most institutions regularly circulate admonitions encouraging faculty to engage in just such projects. Designing courses and curricula that engage in work that would seem to cross disciplines is quite another matter. Here, given institutional budgeting practices (e.g., departments claiming and counting FTE's generated) and the conflation of disciplinarity with departments, work that crosses disciplinary divides can quickly run aground. We can imagine two strategies by which to navigate these challenges, strategies we identify with the two competing prefixes for the work we explore here. On the one hand, by announcing one's work as "multi," and by bringing in colleagues from other (related) disciplines, as in team-taught courses, the perceived threat of poaching (students or their FTE's, courses, funding) may be dissipated. So, just as one might strategically aim at trans-languaging by first encouraging multilinguality, teachers might aim at transmodal (as well as translingual) courses by first encouraging coursework in a variety of media as conventionally

understood. The danger here is the danger of achieving at best a veneer: like shallow versions of multiculturalism in which culture in the singular is replaced by a set of cultures treated as internally uniform, stable, and discrete from others. Likewise, work across language departments (French, Chinese, Spanish, etc., and English now understood as a language department rather than something else, despite its actual presence as yet another “modern” language) might first develop through programs requiring multilinguality—an updating of, say, work in comparative literatures and languages, and/or translation studies. And again, as the updating reference suggests, the danger is that such a strategy would reinforce monolingualist ideologies teaching languages as (again) internally uniform, stable, and discrete from others.

The “trans” strategy would directly confront the ideologies responsible for the dispersal of work in language and medium into separate “departments” by insisting on the necessity of challenging the assumptions of those ideologies from the start. Here one might contest these from the “inside”—drawing on a range of work from different language and medium/arts disciplines to challenge the assumption that these are not “proper”—i.e., do not belong—to one’s own discipline. This would seem to be the strategy taken by compositionists like ourselves in pursuing our work. At the same time, one might well find and align oneself with “fellow travelers” in other disciplines pursuing analogous strategies from within their own departments. The danger here is a reinforcement, through maintenance, of existing disciplinary divides, and the parochialization of one’s thought, ironically, through cutting off the benefits of working across languages/modalities/disciplines. After all, one still would be working “within” the strictures of one’s own department, and academic institutions are notoriously adept at

accommodating, and defanging, such ventures through “horizontal” structuring: a myriad of diverse and discrete courses, programs, and departments never engaging the work of one another.

#### MAPPING DIRECTIONS FOR TRANSLINGUAL/MODAL WORK

The contours represented by the two strategies described above for undertaking translingual/modal work correlate with two tendencies we note in our own thinking and the conditions in which we work. For example, Bruce looks to work in both translinguality and transmodality to contest SMLN from within: to learn to recognize the degree to which existing (and past) practices are at odds with the ideology of SMLN (e.g., the mythic English monolingual character of the U.S.) and to recuperate the full array of practices occluded by dispositions advanced by that ideology—to see English, for example, as a language “always in translation,” and to see the monomodality of traditional alphabetic print writing as an effect of SMLN. Bruce sees this as aligned with Brian Street’s recent caution that “those working with different modes [in studies of multimodality] may need . . . to develop an ideological model of multimodality” (“Future” 32; see also 33).

Finally, there is a danger that we believe our own discussion, and its very framework as “dialogue,” do not wholly escape: namely, that the work at which we and many others are aiming has become bifurcated: there is work on translinguality, and work on transmodality, seen as discrete areas of concern. Street refers to this danger more broadly in his recent essay on “The Future of Literacy Studies” when he observes that:

there are challenging developments as those working in the frame of multimodality question the traditional dominance of language-based approaches to communication and lay out other communicative practices that need to be taken into account—visual, kinaesthetic, and so on. The implications of this will be profound and those in the field are currently struggling to come to terms with both the theoretical shift and the issue of how we label the various modes (“Future” 32).

Street’s caution, ultimately, is directed at the likely tendency of dispersal: namely that “such a shift may take us back to earlier autonomous approaches, both with respect to the view of literacy as skill and to the notion that each communicative practice has its own ‘affordances’ or determinations” (32). What is needed, then, are ways by which to keep the categories of analysis—including those operating in our discussion here—available for critique and revision. Our own difficulty naming our focus here in a way that recognizes the distinct character of the lines of research and teaching, on the one hand, and simultaneously the many and strong points of intersection/overlap, points to the need for and difficulty of doing so.

One clear direction going forward might then be for forums that directly address such points of intersection. These might take form in conference workshops addressing such points of intersection and ways of addressing them in our teaching and scholarship, but also in conferences and special journal issues and collections. We recognize that the prevailing tendency is to choose from one or the other of these—the Conference on Computers and Composition vs. the International Symposium on Second Language Writing, say, or *Kairos* vs. the *International Multilingual Research Journal*. There are valid reasons and respect-worthy disciplinary histories and research traditions that justify the selectivity underlying the design of such forums and venues. At the same time, like our categories, the institutions and institutional practices in which these inhere can be usefully problematized

and contested in the ways our dialogue here, limited as it is, has attempted. We look forward, and ask our readers to move forward, on moving beyond the boundaries set by this dialogue to question, and help provide more and better answers to, the questions of language and modality we have posed here.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Important exceptions include Cope and Kalantzis, Hawisher and Selfe, Lam, and Wang. For recent parallel efforts at rapprochement between work in New Literacy Studies and work on (especially) visual modalities, see Baynham and Prinsloo.

<sup>2</sup> There is an analogy here from the study of music: whereas traditionally the Western music score, and system of music notation, was understood to represent nothing other than the aural, musicologists have come to recognize the ways in which the score works also as a visual entity (exploited in “augenmusik” directed at performers enjoying the view of the score, and, likewise, the performance of music—including the most traditional performance traditions of Western classical music—cannot be categorized as purely aural, or visual, or tactile (recall Barthes here), or *purely* anything: hence musicologists have had to 1) come up with the neologism “musicking” (see Small) to name the conglomeration of practices that operate in any “musical event” (analogous to the concept of the “literacy event”), and 2) learn to pay attention to “listening” practices to grasp differences in the experiences of different listeners/viewers/performers with (ostensibly) the “same” piece of music or performance of it (reference), and 3) learn to attend to features even of “aurality” of significance that Western systems of musical notation have difficulty representing, e.g., “blue” notes, not to mention other ways of understanding pitch relations. Likewise, distinctions between types of music, and the legitimacy of the category “music” itself (especially to name a distinct category of cultural activity), are vulnerable to radical challenge, as studies in ethnomusicology and “popular” music have demonstrated.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between traditional notions and practices of multilinguality is a case in point: use, or mixing, of different languages does not in itself signal a break with monolingualist dispositions. Rather, interjecting the occasional French or Spanish locution into a predominantly English text may in fact reinforce such dispositions by highlighting (and capitalizing on) a monolingualist notion of languages as discrete. Likewise, predominantly alphabetic print verbal compositions that deploy the occasional image or attached audio clip may simply reinforce an “additive” or ornamental disposition toward modality. We risk this here. For discussion of a richly ambiguous example of a composition that deploys both multiple languages and images, see the discussion of student work in Canagarajah’s “Multilingual Strategies.” For a composition that, to our mind, is fundamentally transmodal (while addressing transmodality albeit not in such terms), see McCloud. On the complex strategies by which writers have resisted monolingualism—including the strategy of writing the “national” language by writers not “authorized” (because of social positioning) to write that language, see Yildiz.

<sup>4</sup> We recognize that labor is necessary not only to both these but also to work ostensibly distinct from these—for example, work within ostensibly monolingual settings still requires translation, as does work within ostensibly monomodal environments.

<sup>5</sup> Jacqueline Jones Royster, “When”; Krista Ratcliffe, “On Rhetorical Listening”; Bourdieu, *Language*.

<sup>6</sup> On this point, see Bazerman 62-63.

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