Guidelines to Building Asset-based Linguistic Practices

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120 MINUTES

Activity Rationale and Aims

Aims

01.
To develop asset-based linguistic practices

02.
To develop practices of multilingual communication that honor multiple cultures and epistemologies

Activity Summary

These guidelines are meant to be a reflective starting place for multilingual collaborations. In multilingual collaborations, there is a risk of privileging one language, and thus culture and epistemology, above others. This can happen in the context of "unidirectional" translation, which is characterized by one-way translations that present information through the dominant worldview (Mignolo & Schiwy, 2003). To develop linguistic practices that honor multiple languages, cultures, and epistemologies, it is important to consider practices that are fluid, collective, and multimodal.

Rationale

Linguistic diversity is a significant asset to collaborative research projects; with intentional planning, multiple languages can enhance the design and depth of a project. Language embodies both the meanings of words as well as epistemologies and cultures. Intentional inclusion of diverse languages can support a design that makes space for multiple ways of knowing and being. To ensure equitable collaborations and authentic understandings, there is a need for strategies that ensure the integrity of practices of interpretation (spoken language) and translation (written language), attending to both the meaning of the words as well as the cultural origins.

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GUIDELINES

1. **Utilize syncretic approaches** to translation and interpretation that are multidirectional and honor the understandings of multiple speakers (Mignolo & Schiwy, 2003). Syncretic approaches involve combining multiple perspectives and processes. Two approaches to enact syncretic translation/interpretation are two-way and co-created translation/interpretation.

   a. **Two-way** (or double) translation/interpretation is where the original passage or statement is translated into the second language, and then the translation is translated back into the original language to verify accuracy, meaning, and understanding (see example from the field, below). In the below example, the interpreter first clarifies the meaning of the original phrase. Then provides an interpretation, adding an example. The interpreter then restates what she said, using the first language. This approach privileges comprehension above literal interpretation..

   b. **Co-created** translation/interpretation is an approach to syncretic practices that is less linear than two-way translation/interpretation. It involves multiple speakers collectively developing meaning based on the specific context (see example from the field, below). In the example below, a bilingual group works together to clarify the meaning of one word that can mean different things, depending on the context. All 5 collaborators work together, using two languages, to verify the meaning of the word that reflects the context and intent of the speaker.

2. **Integrate multimodal expressions** (see Use Art for Multiple Interpretations), such as artistic representations, digital representation, and diagramming can enhance multilingual projects by expanding repertoires of communication (see example from the field, below). In the example, below, collaborators use writing, visual depiction, and oral discussion to develop shared meanings. Multimodal expression can encourage collaborators to think deeply and critically about problems of practice, values, and imagined futures than could be done via words alone (Conrad & Kendal, 2009; Vasudevan et al., 2010).

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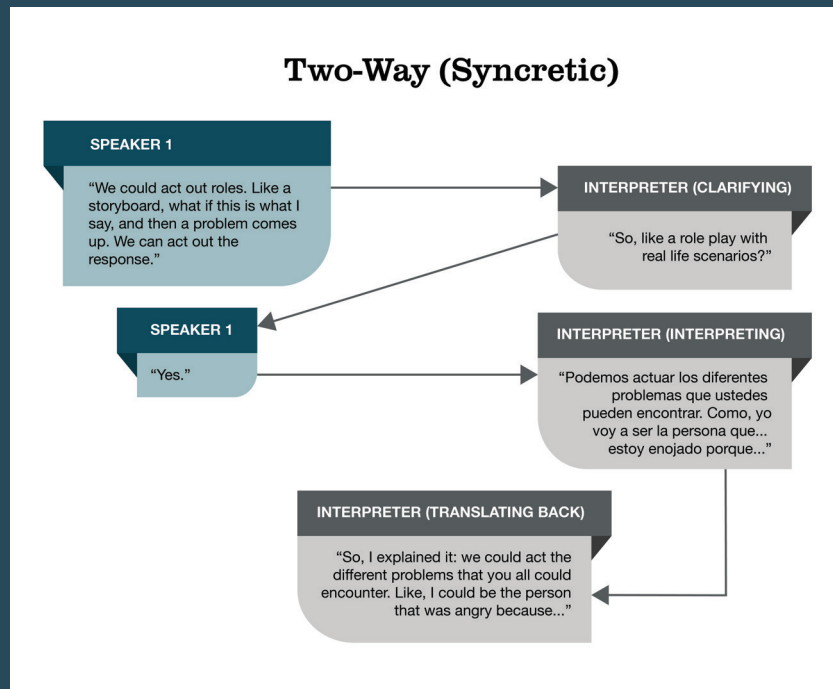University of Colorado **Boulder**

Example from the field   1 / 3

These are examples taken from a collaborative project between university researchers and community activists. The community activists consisted of Spanish speaking and bilingual (Spanish-English) collaborators. The university researchers consisted of English speaking and bilingual (English-Spanish) collaborators.

Syncretic Translation
Two-way translation

In this exchange, speaker one, represented in blue, expressed an idea in English, the interpreter, represented in green, then confirmed their understanding of speaker one's idea. The interpreter then interpreted the idea in Spanish, elaborating with an example. To then ensure accuracy, the interpreter shared her interpretation back to speak one in English. In this example, understanding is privileged above literal interpretation as there is a shared context for collaboration.

Two-Way (Syncretic)

SPEAKER 1
"We could act out roles. Like a storyboard, what if this is what I say, and then a problem comes up. We can act out the response."

INTERPRETER (CLARIFYING)
"So, like a role play with real life scenarios?"

SPEAKER 1
"Yes."

INTERPRETER (INTERPRETING)
"Podemos actuar los diferentes problemas que ustedes pueden encontrar. Como, yo voy a ser la persona que... estoy enojado porque..."

INTERPRETER (TRANSLATING BACK)
"So, I explained it: we could act the different problems that you all could encounter. Like, I could be the person that was angry because..."

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Example from the field   2 / 3

Co-created translation

The transcript below highlights a conversation in which a person on a team of 5 people was seeking clarification on the definition of a specific Spanish word (*hierba*) that has different meanings depending on the context. In this exchange, all collaborators speak some English and some Spanish; not all collaborators have proficiency in both languages. Speaker 1 makes a statement, and speaker 2 asks for clarification on the word *hierbas*. Speaker 3 and Speaker 4 interpret the word as "herbs." Speaker 2 then interprets the original sentence, checking for understanding. The original speaker confirms the first part of the sentence, then through non-verbal communication, elicits the support of speaker 5, who then clarifies that in this context, *hierbas* means weeds, confirming with the original speaker.

Speaker 1:   Necesito ayuda para identificar las hierbas.
Speaker 2:   What is that last word?
Speaker 3:   herbs
Speaker 4:   herbs
Speaker 2   Identify… Is it to identify the herbs?
Speaker 1:   Yeah, it is to identify… (looks to speaker 5)
Speaker 5:   In this context, they are referring to weeds. Hierbas also means herbs, but I think they are referring to weeds. [To Speaker 1]: las hierbas, como las plantas que no quieres crecer, si?
Speaker 1:   Si, a identificar las hierbas, las plantas que no quiero cultivar.

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Example from the field   3 / 3

Multimodal

The image below was taken during a series of activities conducted amongst university researchers and community activists aimed at articulating the community based work. The activities included role-play and teatro (see Boal, 1997), writing and narration, and artistic representations of community activity via drawing and clay modeling (see Teeters & Jurow, 2018). These diverse activities allowed collaborators to move beyond linguistic representation to communicate complex ideas.

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Commitments to Equity and Wellness

Collaborations that bring together people with different linguistic practices are rich with opportunities for pluralistic design, where the process and product makes space for multiple ways of knowing and being. While practices of interpretation and translation often facilitate the process of communication, it is important to consider the ways that translation and interpretation are laden with power dynamics (Lui, 1999; Niranjana, 1992). Unidirectional translations, where one language is translated into another, without any checks for understanding or accuracy, can present the risk of misinterpretations and distortions of meaning. This situation can often result in the dominance of one epistemology at the expense of another (Mignolo & Schiwy, 2003; Mutua & Swadener, 2004). Syncretic and multimodal practices of interpretation and translation make space for shared understandings. When collaborators feel seen, valued, and understood, their wellbeing is supported in collaborative spaces. Close attention to how language is shared and used as an asset can support the affirmation of and care for all collaborators.

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Additional Reading

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