

Voices in transit: Language, belonging, and the edge of (im)mobility

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Abstract

In this commentary, I critically engage with the contributions of the special issue Boundaries and belonging in an age of (im)mobility, reflecting on how they illuminate the entangled relations between language, mobility, and voice. Drawing on concepts such as translanguaging, assemblage, and counter-conduct, I argue that (im)mobility must be understood not merely as spatial displacement, but as an affective and epistemic condition shaped by broader structures of inequality. I highlight how the articles explore linguistic legitimacy, belonging, and resistance across institutional, digital, and everyday contexts. I also reflect on the ethical and methodological implications of researching mobility, advocating for reflexive, longitudinal, and intersectional approaches. I conclude by calling for a sociolinguistics that is politically engaged and epistemologically attentive – one that centers the lived experiences of constraint, aspiration, and potentiality in an increasingly bordered world.

Keywords: *Language and (im)mobility, Belonging and identity, Translanguaging, Linguistic legitimacy, Symbolic borders*

1 Introduction: Rethinking language, borders, and (im)mobility

In recent years, both applied and sociolinguistic research have undergone a major reorientation in how they conceptualize language, (im)mobility, identity, borders, and belonging. Moving beyond static and monolithic frameworks, scholars now emphasize the fluid, relational, and contested nature of these categories. This shift reflects the complexities of a globalized world where mobility is far from a universal good—it is unevenly distributed and entangled in structures of power, control, and inequality (Bräuchler, 2021; Bürki & García Agüero, 2025; Cresswell & Merriman, 2011; De Fina & Mazzaferro, 2021a; Diener & Hagen, 2023).

(Im)mobility should not be viewed as simple opposites but as relationally produced through bordering practices that regulate not only the movement of bodies but also

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eISSN: 1457-9863

Publisher: University of Jyväskylä, Language Campus

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<https://apples.journal.fi>

<https://doi.org/10.47862/apples.164096>

the circulation of languages, discourses, and identities. Recent geopolitical events have intensified these bordering processes, mobilizing national, linguistic, and ethnic identities in response to perceived threats (Gilmartin et al., 2018). These dynamics extend beyond geopolitical lines: they are enacted through surveillance, bureaucratic filtering, and symbolic forms of gatekeeping (Andersson, 2014). Language plays a central role in this configuration, functioning simultaneously as a border and a crossing, a tool of inclusion and a mechanism of exclusion. Proficiency tests, integration policies, and monolingual mandates operate as technologies of control that regulate access to legitimacy and participation within mobility regimes. These mechanisms often position language as a fixed, measurable skill tied to national belonging, reinforcing normative ideas of who qualifies as a legitimate speaker or citizen.

Yet, language also harbors subversive potential: it travels, reconfigures, and resists. Recent perspectives such as translanguaging and assemblage theories (Pennycook, 2018; 2024) challenge the view of language as bounded and stable. Translanguaging, in particular, emerges not as a stable category or inherent good, but as a contested and context-sensitive practice through which speakers navigate regimes of linguistic and epistemic inequality. It involves the deployment of one's full linguistic repertoire — across named languages and semiotic modes — to make meaning, enact identities, and negotiate power (Mazzaferro, 2018). In this sense, translanguaging is not only a pedagogical or communicative strategy, but also a political act that challenges monolingual ideologies and racialized language hierarchies (Li, 2022). Complementing this view, the assemblage perspective (Pennycook, 2024) conceptualizes language not as a bounded system but as a dynamic constellation of linguistic, material, bodily, and spatial elements that come together momentarily in situated practices. Assemblage thinking emphasizes emergence and relationality, viewing communication as co-constructed through entangled human and non-human forces — such as tools, affects, bodies, and environments — rather than pre-defined linguistic codes.

This dynamic understanding of language is particularly salient in diasporic contexts where mobility is not always physical but unfolds through discursive, affective, and intergenerational negotiations. In the case of Ghanaian youth in Turin, for example, language practices do not simply reflect geographical movement but rather express a more complex mobility across ideological, racial, and generational boundaries. Drawing on four years of ethnographic fieldwork (Mazzaferro, forthcoming), translanguaging emerges as a key practice through which participants navigate and unsettle racialized notions of authenticity and belonging. Here, linguistic mobility is enacted through shifting between Italian, Twi, English, and hybrid forms that defy monolingual logics. These practices challenge both the state's linguistic mandates and the heritage community's expectations, revealing how language becomes a space of embodied negotiation rather than fixed identity. Such linguistic practices do not merely reflect movement in space but instead mobilize language itself as a means of navigating and reshaping relations of power. In this sense, young speakers move through language to negotiate their position within racialized and hierarchical social structures.

It is within this critical and shifting landscape that I engage with the articles brought together in this special issue. The following sections trace how each contribution interrogates key dimensions of (im)mobility, from linguistic legitimacy to digital learning, from spatial belonging to reflexive positionality.

2 (Im)mobility as condition, not exception

The special issue advances an understanding of (im)mobility as a structurally embedded and affectively lived condition. Across the contributions, mobility appears not as unbounded freedom but as an unequal resource, distributed through regimes of surveillance, education, citizenship, and ideology. Intergenerational contrasts in

linguistic orientation (*Generational differences in the use of and attitudes towards the Wu fāngyán in China* by Weekly and Fei) highlight how language becomes a marker of differentiated access to modernity: for younger speakers, languages such as Putonghua and English are linked to upward mobility and global imaginaries, while for older generations, the continuity of local dialects signifies memory, rootedness, and resistance to displacement. These conflicting affiliations render (im)mobility a temporally saturated condition, where language indexes both symbolic inclusion and nostalgic immobility.

Elsewhere, *Language and belonging across time and space: Young adolescents in multilingual urban contexts in Sweden* by Bylund shows how urban space functions as a semiotic regime in which racialized youth navigate stratified geographies and spatialized linguistic ideologies. Feelings of dislocation and of being “out of place” are not only tied to present spatial marginalization but extend into imagined futures, constraining aspirations and shaping projected trajectories. In this sense, immobility is not merely the absence of movement, but an affectively internalized and ideologically reproduced condition—structured through language hierarchies, racialized spatial orders, and the politics of recognition.

3 Language, legitimacy, and the affective politics of voice

Language emerges across the special issue not simply as a communicative tool but as a regime of legitimacy, shaping who can speak, be heard, and be recognized. In his article *Language-in-education policy and boundaries in Botswana, Tanzania, and Zambia*, Reilly underscores how monolingual language-in-education policies in Southern Africa continue to reproduce colonial hierarchies, relegating multilingual learners to deficit positions. Despite students’ fluid repertoires and everyday translanguaging practices, institutional structures valorize only English, turning schools into bordered spaces of epistemic exclusion and surveillance. By contrast, *Translanguaging as a spontaneous online language learning strategy in an age of (im)mobility* by Adinolfi and Tagg examines how learners in a German-language MOOC (Massive Open Online Course), enact translanguaging as an informal pedagogical strategy - supporting peers, performing identity, and circumventing prescriptive norms. However, these acts of agency remain embedded in algorithmically regulated infrastructures that tacitly privilege dominant languages. Visibility is conditional, and linguistic legitimacy is governed by platform logics rather than through dialogic negotiation.

4 Situated (im)mobilities and the temporal politics of belonging

One of the most conceptually rich contributions of the special issue (Bylund) lies in how it rethinks mobility not merely as spatial displacement, but as a temporal and affective process. (Im)mobility is experienced chronotopically—that is, through orientations in time, affect, and memory that define how subjects imagine and inhabit belonging. In her article, Bylund offers a compelling illustration of this temporal politics through her analysis of a “linguistic sense of placement” among racialized youth in Sweden. The article shows how young people inhabit layered urban chronotopes, where linguistic practices are shaped by both past displacements and anticipatory imaginaries of exclusion or mobility. Belonging, here, is tied not only to spatial rootedness but to a contested temporal horizon—a future that is simultaneously desired and foreclosed.

A similar dynamic is at work in the article by Weekly and Fei, where the fading presence of Wu fāngyán signals more than a linguistic shift. It indexes a reorientation of affective and epistemic allegiances: younger generations gravitate toward standardized and globalized forms of communication, aligning themselves with projected modernities, while older speakers experience immobility as a space of memory, continuity, and authenticity. As De Fina and Mazzaferro (2021a) argue, such shifts do not simply reflect

linguistic change but articulate broader ideological negotiations of temporality, identity, and mobility regimes.

These chronotopic entanglements echo broader arguments in border and mobility studies (Cresswell & Merriman, 2011; Diener & Hagen, 2023; Pellegrino, 2011), which stress that time and space are co-constituted in shaping differential access to movement and recognition. The special issue thus makes a critical contribution by showing that (im)mobility is not just about physical movement, but about being out of sync with dominant temporalities – displaced in memory, denied futurity, or suspended in waiting.

5 Methodological reflexivity and researcher accountability

In reading these articles, I am particularly drawn to their critical orientation toward the ethics and politics of applied linguistic and sociolinguistic research. The studies in the special issue foreground reflexivity as a necessary methodological stance. Rather than conceiving research as a neutral act of observation, the authors recognize how power circulates through every stage of the knowledge-making process (Palaganas et al., 2017).

In his article, Reilly exemplifies this stance in his analysis of language-in-education policy in Botswana, Tanzania, and Zambia. Reflexivity emerges through his attention to how classroom practices – marked by silence, surveillance, and correction – interact with broader language ideologies, shaping both student participation and researcher interpretation. His multilingual and context-sensitive approach explicitly acknowledges the epistemological stakes of conducting research within colonial and postcolonial regimes of language and schooling.

In their article, Adinolfi and Tagg similarly engage ethical reflexivity in their examination of translanguaging practices in a German-language MOOC. Attuned to the dynamics of visibility, anonymity, and experimentation in digital spaces, they interrogate the conditions under which online language practices are observed and interpreted. Their work foregrounds the need to consider how platform architectures mediate interaction, and how researcher accountability must be recalibrated in semi-public, algorithmically shaped environments.

Bylund brings a relational and spatial lens to reflexivity in their work with racialized youth in Sweden in her article. She highlights the importance of trust, discursive co-construction, and positionality in eliciting narratives of exclusion and aspiration. Rather than treating interviews as neutral data-gathering events, the study situates them within broader spatial and ideological configurations, consciously avoiding extractivist tendencies and underscoring the ethics of relational engagement.

In their article, Weekly and Fei extend this perspective to intergenerational interviews in China, where shifting dialect ideologies are co-constructed between researchers and participants. Their work reflects on how assumptions, silences, and affective alignments shape the narratives produced, requiring a dialogic reading of both researcher positioning and participant strategy in ideologically charged settings.

Taken together, these contributions affirm reflexivity not as a methodological afterthought, but as an ethico-political imperative in researching (im)mobility – one that demands locating the researcher within the field, interrogating the conditions of narrative production, and remaining accountable to those whose lives we seek to understand (Palaganas et al., 2017).

6 Translanguaging, epistemic justice, and the promise of elsewhere

Translanguaging emerges across the special issue not as a stable category or an inherent good, but as a contested and context-sensitive practice through which speakers navigate regimes of linguistic and epistemic inequality. Drawing on a dynamic view of repertoires (Blommaert, 2010; Busch, 2012), the contributions show how translanguaging enables

not only communication but also the performance of identity, resistance, and belonging across stratified sociolinguistic contexts. As De Fina and Mazzaferro (2021b) argue, translanguaging can function as a form of *counter-conduct*—a concept drawn from Foucault (1980) that refers to everyday practices through which individuals resist, reconfigure, or redefine the norms and constraints imposed by governing rationalities. In contexts of forced immobility, counter-conducts such as translanguaging allow speakers to reclaim semiotic space and negotiate alternative alignments of agency within systems that seek to regulate movement, identity, and voice.

Yet, as several studies in the issue demonstrate, the transformative potential of translanguaging is never guaranteed: it is shaped by the material and symbolic conditions under which it takes place. For example, in the African classroom contexts examined by Costley and Reilly (2021) (see Reilly in this issue), translanguaging is actively policed and stigmatized, as monoglossic language-in-education policies privilege English and suppress the multilingual repertoires of students, reproducing colonial hierarchies and reinforcing epistemic boundaries. By contrast, Adinolfi and Tagg show how learners in an online German language MOOC use translanguaging as a spontaneous learning strategy—engaging in bricolage, language play, and peer teaching—though even these practices remain shaped by the implicit norms and infrastructural limits of the platform. The same translanguaging act, then, can index resistance and agency or marginality and constraint, depending on the ideological and institutional frameworks in which it is situated.

In this light, translanguaging gestures toward the possibility of linguistic justice and epistemic inclusion—but this promise remains entangled in the conditions of the here and now: its subversive potential, while real, is always conditional—shaped by power, recognition, and the infrastructures that enable or silence linguistic difference.

7 Future directions

The articles gathered in this special issue collectively gesture toward a sociolinguistics and applied linguistics of (im)mobility—one that understands mobility not simply as spatial displacement, but as an affective, epistemic, and political condition. Emerging scholarship underscores that immobility—whether produced through surveillance, legal precarity, or social stratification—has far-reaching consequences for how speakers access repertoires, articulate identities, and imagine futures.

There is a pressing need for longitudinal and affectively attuned research capable of tracing how voice is reconfigured, deferred, or silenced across institutional, digital, and informal contexts. This requires following speakers over time and across sites—not only to observe linguistic practices, but to attend to how they are shaped by shifting relations of power, recognition, and belonging. Voice, in this perspective, is not a stable possession but a contingent achievement: something that must be negotiated in classrooms, migration pathways, online platforms, and everyday encounters. Sensitivity to the affective dimensions of voice—feelings of legitimacy, aspiration, frustration, or fatigue—is essential for capturing how (im)mobility and epistemic inequality are lived over time.

Equally important is a rethinking of bordering—not merely as a geopolitical act, but as an ideological and interactional process unfolding in daily life: in accents evaluated, registers policed, and bodies surveilled. Here, an intersectional lens becomes indispensable to understand how race, gender, legal status, and class shape these dynamics. The contributions in this issue offer an initial foundation, but future research would benefit from closer engagement with critical race theory, feminist geographies, and decolonial epistemologies. Multimodal and participatory methods—especially those that center narrative, embodiment, and co-construction—can illuminate how intersecting power relations shape migrants' capacity to speak and be heard. Recent

work (De Fina & Mazzaferro, 2025) explores how digital, multimodal, translinguistic storytelling can open up new spaces for migrant women's agentive self-representation. Focusing on Sahar, a young Afghan woman, the study shows how multilingual and embodied resources enable her to challenge dominant narratives of dependency often projected onto refugee subjects. While not framed explicitly through an intersectional lens, the work resonates with intersectional commitments to visibility, reflexivity, and epistemic justice—and points to the value of research attuned to how structural inequalities are lived and negotiated.

Belonging, too, must be rethought as an ongoing, situated process—emotional, discursive, and material. The performance of belonging under conditions of immobility demands theoretical tools that can engage with vulnerability, precarity, and affect. Recent developments in affect theory (Alegre Mouslim, et al., 2025; Teo, 2025) and critical migration studies (Neu, et al., 2013) provide promising avenues for such engagement.

Finally, digital environments demand more sustained attention. As illustrated in the article by Adinolfi and Tagg, platforms may offer symbolic forms of mobility, yet they are structured by algorithmic hierarchies, monolingual defaults, and platform logics that constrain what is visible, shareable, or valued. Future sociolinguistic inquiry must take seriously the political economy of platforms: how moderation, code, and data infrastructures mediate linguistic agency and limit translanguaging.

Taken together, these directions call for a sociolinguistics that is structurally critical, epistemologically reflexive, and politically engaged—attuned not only to the circulation of language, but to the architectures of recognition that delimit whose voices are heard, how they matter, and under what conditions.

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