

Editorial: Boundaries and belonging in an age of (im)mobility

Parvin Gheitasi & BethAnne Paulsrud

1 Introduction

This special issue, *Boundaries and belonging in an age of (im)mobility*, emerges from the dialogues and insights shared during the 2023 conference on translanguaging and (im) mobility (TIM2023) held in Sweden, where a novel thread became visible: the intricate intersections of language with the sociocultural and geopolitical aspects of (im)mobility and belonging. The increasing intensity, diversity, and complexity of movement, whether voluntary or forced, has reshaped the global social order as well as the ways in which individuals engage with languages, navigate belonging, and encounter borders. At the TIM2023 conference, we also noted the persistence of certain dichotomies: language as a bridge or barrier, mobility as freedom or restraint, belonging as chosen or imposed. As Lim (2024) points out, language performs a dual role, connecting people across cultural divides while also reinforcing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. These tensions are at the heart of lived experiences in an interconnected yet profoundly unequal world. Mobility and immobility, however, are not binary opposites but rather deeply entwined processes that offer both affordances and constraints. In light of this, the special issue aims to examine how language facilitates boundaries and belonging under conditions of (im)mobility.

1.1 Migration linguistics and mobilities

Linked to the evolving field of migration linguistics (Borlongan, 2023), this special issue adopts a broad understanding of mobilities, encompassing not only physical displacement but also social imaginaries, digital flows, and lived experiences (Lim, 2024). The present era has been described as “the age of migration” (de Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020), reflecting the unprecedented scope of human movement, including both chosen migrations, such as lifestyle mobilities, and forced migrations driven by war, environmental crises, or economic deprivation (Gonçalves & Vold Lexander, 2023).

Corresponding author's email: pgh@du.se

eISSN: 1457-9863

Publisher: University of Jyväskylä, Language Campus

© 2025: The author(s)

<https://apples.journal.fi>

<https://doi.org/10.47862/apples.176009>

Migration can be connected to inequities between developed and less-developed nations and between dominant and marginalized communities. These inequities can materialize through language: migrants are judged not only by their linguistic competence but also on how closely their performance aligns with dominant cultural and national norms. Thus, while language may function as a resource, a form of capital, and a condition for belonging, it may simultaneously be a site of struggle.

Mobility can also reinforce hierarchies; speakers of globally dominant languages such as English often see their linguistic capital amplified, while speakers of minoritized or stigmatized languages encounter discrimination and symbolic violence (Gonçalves & Vold Lexander, 2023; Piller, 2015). Privileging certain languages for market and mobility can lead to linguistic damage, including loss, displacement or stigmatization of others (Canagarajah, 2021). Structural barriers may control access to the linguistic and social capital needed to move and belong (Canagarajah, 2021; Lim, 2024).

At the same time, mobility creates possibility. Language users both adapt and resist. Mobile language users create new affiliations and shared repertoires across borders, whether in urban vernaculars or digital peer networks, establishing belonging. Migration thus has the potential to unsettle established hierarchies and opens spaces for hybrid practices that resist fixed categories of identity. In multilingual neighbourhoods, online forums, and transnational families alike, individuals mobilize language not only to survive but also to connect, to express affiliation, and to imagine alternative futures. Belonging in these contexts is not a fixed status granted by institutions; it is dynamically negotiated and enacted through everyday practice. In an illustrative example, Mazzaferro (2025) documents how asylum seekers actively use what he terms “performative-positioning acts,” to assert and reconstruct their subjectivities within rigid institutional settings (p.1). Such practices highlight how mobility can generate opportunities for solidarity and creativity even under constraint.

Thus, migration holds transformative potential. It can disrupt monolithic notions of identity and language, creating spaces for hybrid identities and flexible linguistic practices, such as in translanguaging. Translanguaging (García & Otheguy, 2019; Li, 2018) resists what Canagarajah (2019) calls rigid ideologies of language(s) as fixed entities tied to specific nation-states, and instead challenges the notion of languages as discrete, autonomous systems. Translanguaging is both a communicative practice and a way of constructing and negotiating social identity. Social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps to frame this process as individuals locate themselves within and across social groups through shifting linguistic resources. These acts of identity negotiation do not happen in a vacuum; as Blommaert (2014) reminds us, mobility involves not just the movement of people but also of semiotic resources, ideologies, and communicative norms. In this sense, translanguaging represents both linguistic flexibility and sociopolitical agency.

1.2 Researcher positionality

In reflecting on language and (im)mobility, it is important to acknowledge our positionality as researchers. Even well-meaning research can reproduce the very hierarchies it seeks to critique if it does not attend to the structural conditions under which knowledge is produced (Ganuza, et al., 2020). This requires both asking difficult questions about access, consent, and representation, and being willing to hold ourselves accountable for the effects of our work. How do our own assumptions and frameworks shape the questions we ask? What forms of knowledge do we privilege or silence? How do we navigate the power imbalances inherent in researching communities affected by (im)mobility?

The contributions in this special issue offer both empirical insights and methodological provocations. They challenge us to rethink the role of the researcher, the ethics of voice and visibility, and the boundaries between data, discourse, and ideology. This volume

therefore reflects a shared commitment to epistemic reflexivity (Salö, 2018) in order to explore the ethics of our methods, our positions, and our claims. Reflexivity also allows us to highlight not only exclusion but also the ways participants articulate belonging, resilience, and solidarity. At the same time, we invite readers to reflect on what it means to study language in an age of (im)mobility. Questions about research may be deeply personal and political: they concern the lived realities of those navigating linguistic hierarchies and the challenges faced by researchers seeking to understand belonging in a world shaped by borders and boundary-making practices. We offer this collection as a contribution to that ongoing conversation.

2 Overview of the special issue contributions

The four articles in this special issue examine how language, (im)mobility, and belonging intersect across diverse sociopolitical, generational, and educational contexts.

The issue opens with “Language-in-education policy and boundaries in Botswana, Tanzania, and Zambia” by Colin Reilly, who examines how colonial-era monoglossic ideologies continue to shape education systems. Despite nominally multilingual policies, English remains privileged, while children’s everyday repertoires are stigmatized. The article identifies three types of boundaries that disconnect pupils’ lived multilingual practices from formal learning: between languages imagined as discrete, between home/community and school, and between language and geography. By tracing how these boundaries reproduce systemic inequities, the article reveals how language policy continues to function as a mechanism of exclusion and symbolic violence.

The second contribution, “Generational differences in the usage of and attitudes towards the Wu fāngyán in China” by Robert Weekly and Yue Fei, turns to the sociolinguistic effects of state-driven standardization and internal migration. Based on interviews with speakers aged 16 to 77, the study shows that while all generations express strong cultural attachment to Wu dialects, younger speakers increasingly orient to Putonghua and English as resources for mobility. The middle generation emerges as the most conflicted, expressing regret at the decline of local dialects while recognizing the practical dominance of the national standard. The article underscores the ambivalence between symbolic and instrumental values of language and highlights how translanguaging practices vary across generations.

Moving from policy and generational change to the lived realities of youth, the third article, “Language and belonging across time and space: Young adolescents in multilingual urban contexts in Sweden” by Jasmine Bylund, explores how adolescents in socioeconomically disadvantaged, multilingual neighbourhoods navigate linguistic hierarchies. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, social space, and linguistic sense of placement, the study illustrates how language practices are tied to spatial and temporal trajectories. Monolingual norms dominate school environments, while out-of-school peer interactions are marked by fluid, hybrid repertoires. These spatiotemporal dynamics show how belonging is not a fixed condition but is continually negotiated in the interplay between institutional constraints and youth agency.

The fourth article, “Translanguaging as a spontaneous online language learning strategy in an age of (im)mobility” by Lina Adinolfi and Caroline Tagg, shifts attention to digital learning environments. Through an analysis of learner interactions in a German MOOC (Massive Open Online Course), the authors propose a typology of translanguaging functions: bricolage, language play, and peer teaching/learning. Learners mobilize their full semiotic repertoires to fill knowledge gaps, engage in creativity, and support one another, in ways largely unconstrained by formal pedagogical norms. The study demonstrates how translanguaging operates as a learner-driven strategy that both challenges traditional monolingual ideologies and expands opportunities for collaboration and learning in digital spaces.

By situating language at the intersection of policy, identity, and everyday practice, these contributions underscore both the persistence of inequality and the transformative potential of translanguaging and hybrid repertoires as strategies for belonging. Taken together, the contributions illustrate the complex and uneven ways language is mobilized under conditions of (im)mobility. From African classrooms structured by colonial legacies, to shifting intergenerational repertoires in urban China, to Swedish adolescents negotiating belonging in multilingual neighbourhoods, to online learners co-constructing multilingual learning spaces, the articles collectively show that language is never a neutral medium. It is a terrain of struggle and possibility, shaped simultaneously by top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up practices of adaptation, resistance, and creativity. All in all, these articles reflect the central concern of this special issue: to examine how language mediates both boundaries and belonging in an age of (im)mobility.

3 Concluding remarks

This special issue foregrounds how (im)mobility concerns both those who can move and those whose voices, practices, and identities are recognized as legitimate. Building on critical sociolinguistics, it explores the role of language in reproducing and resisting power dynamics (Blommaert, 2017; Heller & McLaughlin, 2017), while also pointing to spaces of belonging and creativity. At the same time, this issue contributes to the emerging field of migration linguistics (Borlongan, 2023), bringing together research from across continents and languages. One of the most compelling takeaways from the TIM2023 conference was the recognition that language, (im)mobility, and belonging are not separate dimensions, but rather co-constructive. Movement is not just a geographical act, but is a cultural, affective, and political experience. Belonging, similarly, is not a static status; it is negotiated through language in everyday practices of community and solidarity.

The studies in this special issue offer implications for educators, policymakers, and anyone concerned with fostering equitable and inclusive societies. As sociolinguists, we must not only describe the world but actively engage with the forces that shape it. By stressing the voices and experiences of diverse communities, we hope to move beyond abstract theorizing to instead contribute to both scholarly and meaningful, context-based engagement that promotes linguistic equity and social justice.

In curating this volume, we were guided by a commitment to diversity, reflexivity, and epistemic justice. We deliberately sought contributions that crossed disciplinary, geographic, and methodological boundaries. Our aim was to include studies that spoke not only to scholarly debates but also to real-world conditions—educational, legal, institutional—that shape how language is lived in mobile contexts. We thus purposefully included research that foregrounded critical approaches, attended to positionality, and engaged with linguistic practices from communities often ignored in mainstream sociolinguistic discourse. At a time when academic publishing often prioritizes speed and quantifiability, this special issue stands as a small but intentional act of slowing down to listen to complex voices, difficult stories, and emergent ways of knowing. It is our hope that this issue not only informs future research but also supports a broader shift toward more critical, inclusive, and socially engaged sociolinguistics.

References

- Blommaert, J. (2016). From mobility to complexity in sociolinguistic theory and method. In N. Coupland (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics: Theoretical debates* (pp. 242–259). Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2017). Commentary: Mobility, contexts, and the chronotope. *Language in Society*, 46(1), 95–99. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404516000841>
- Borlongan, A.M. (2023). Migration linguistics: A synopsis. *AILA Review*, 36(1), 38–63. <https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.22014.bor>
- Canagarajah, S. (2011). Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95(3), 401–417. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01207.x>
- Canagarajah, S. (2019). *Transnational literacy autobiographies as translingual writing*. Routledge.
- Canagarajah, S. (2021). Rethinking mobility and language: From the global south. *The Modern Language Journal*, 105(2), 570–582. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12726>
- de Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2020). *The age of migration. International population movements in the modern world*. (6.th ed.) Guilford Press.
- Ganuza, N., Karlander, D., & Salö, L. (2020). A weave of symbolic violence: Dominance and complicity in sociolinguistic research on multilingualism. *Multilingua*, 39(4), 451–473. <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2019-0033>
- García, O., & Otheguy, R. (2019). Plurilingualism and translanguaging: Commonalities and divergences. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(1), 17–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2019.1598932>
- Gonçalves, K., & Lexander, K. V. (2023). Permanent or temporary homes? Investigating the discourses of lifestyle migration, lifestyle mobilities and multilingualism within a Norwegian context. *AILA Review*, 36(2), 299–320. <https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.00057.gon>
- Heller, M., & McLaughlin, M. (2017). Language choice and symbolic domination. In S. Wortham, D. Kim & S. May (Eds.), *Discourse and education: Encyclopedia of language and education*, (pp. 87–95). Springer International Publishing.
- Li, W. (2018). Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx039>
- Lim, L. (2024). Defining migrants: Invisibilities, im/mobilities, integration. *AILA Review*, 37(1), 10–34. <https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.24007.lim>
- Mazzaferro, G. (2025). Migration, subjectivity and identity: Navigating power, agency and discourse in interviews with asylum seekers. *Multilingua*, 44(3), 373–393. <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2024-0117>
- Piller, I. (2015). Language ideologies. In K. Tracy, C. Ilie, & T. Sandel (Eds.), *The International encyclopedia of language and social interaction* (Vol. 2, pp. 917–927). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Salö, L. (2018). Seeing the point from which you see what you see: An essay on epistemic reflexivity in language research. *Multilingual Margins*, 5(1), 24. <https://doi.org/10.14426/mm.v5i1.87>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of inter-group conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of inter-group relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- TIM2023: Translanguaging in the age of (Im)mobility. Conference held at Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden. April 2023.