**Abstract**

SNS (Social Networking Sites) are a ubiquitous social space for many, often involving the use of English as a lingua franca in highly multilingual and multicultural settings. This article presents an ethnographic investigation of communication among a group of international students on a popular SNS. The data illustrates the fluid and complex linguistic and cultural practices present in these social spaces. This has important implications for understanding intercultural communication; in particular, we argue that a transcultural perspective provides a significant new dimension to research in which borders between languages, communities and cultures are transcended, transgressed and transformed.

Keywords: Transcultural communication, English as a lingua franca, Intercultural communication, social networking sites, culture and language

**เครือข่ายสังคมออนไลน์เป็นพื้นที่ทางสังคมที่แพร่หลายสำหรับหลายๆคนมักจะเกี่ยวข้องกับการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในบรรดาผู้ที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษาในบริบทที่มีความหลากหลายอย่างมากทางภาษาและวัฒนธรรมทความฉบับนี้นำเสนอการสำรวจการสื่อสารออนไลน์ระหว่างกลุ่มนักศึกษาต่างชาติผ่านทางเครือข่ายสังคมออนไลน์ที่มีชื่อเสียงผลการสำรวจแสดงให้เห็นว่าการปฎิบัติทางภาษาและวัฒนธรรมมีความซับซ้อนและเปลี่ยนแปลงสิ่งนี้มีความหมายที่สำคัญสำหรับการทำความเข้าใจการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรมโดยเฉพาะเราโต้แย้งว่ามุมมองเกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรมที่หลากหลายเป็นมิติใหม่ของการวิจัยที่พรมแดนระหว่างภาษา ชุมชนและวัฒนธรรมมีการก้าวข้ามและเปลี่ยนแปลง**

**คำสำคัญ การสื่อสารข้ามวัฒนธรรม ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารในบรรดาผู้ที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษา การสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม เครือข่ายสังคมออนไลน์ วัฒนธรรมและภาษา**

**Introduction**

Applied linguistics and intercultural communication research is currently undergoing something of a ‘trans- turn’ with an increasing interest in translanguaging, transmodality and transnationalism (e.g. Dooly and Vallejo Rubinstein, 2018; Hawkins and Mori, 2018; Li, 2018). The trans- prefix has been adopted to emphasise dynamic and fluid perspective on languages and modalities, where distinctions between separate ‘named’ languages (e.g. English) and modes cannot be easily maintained, and where artificially isolating and delineating different elements may restrict a more holistic understanding of communicative practices and meanings. However, we also need to recognise the power of names and labels for languages users and researchers, while simultaneously attempting to critically engage with the power structures that naming creates (Hawkins and Mori 2018, p. 6). We believe that transcultural, translingual and transmodal communicative practices and the associated multicultural, multilingual and multimodal resources are of relevance for researchers, not because they are unusual and exotic, but because they are so ubiquitous for many. Although research is beginning to emerge using trans- perspectives, it is still on the periphery and more is needed to develop a deeper understanding of language, culture, communication and the intercultural in applied linguistics. This paper will focus on one such domain of communicative practices, SNS (social networking sites) and the use of ELF (English as a lingua franca) as part of a repertoire of multilingual and multimodal resources used in transcultural communication.

We begin with a discussion of why transcultural communication is an important step furthering, although not replacing, intercultural communication research and underscore the addition transcultural communication makes to translanguaging perspectives. Transcultural communication, in keeping with trans- perspectives, is characterised here as communication where interactants move through and across, rather than in-between, cultural and linguistic boundaries, thus, ‘named’ languages and cultures can no longer be taken for granted and in the process borders become blurred, transgressed and transcended. We focus on transcultural communication in virtual spaces, particularly SNS, and also highlight the important role that transmodal communication plays in such settings. The discussion next turns specifically to language, examining the links between transcultural communication and translanguaging, underscoring the significance of English used as a multilingua franca (Jenkins, 2015) alongside other linguistic and transmodal resources in SNS. To illustrate the value of transcultural approaches we present data from a study investigating communication among users of ELF in contemporary social spaces of SNS and link this to translingual and transmodal perspectives to provide a holistic account of interactions and meaning making. We conclude by suggesting that a transcultural perspective adds an important dimension to the growing body of research in intercultural communication, ELF and applied linguistics that eschews artificially isolating phenomena under investigation and deals with interactions as complex, dynamic and multi-scaled.

**From intercultural communication to transcultural communication**

To frame the discussion of transculturality as an important addition in intercultural communication research some terminological clarification and historical contextualisation is necessary. Culture is a core concept and, while a single definition is not possible or desirable given the wide range of uses to which the concept is put, a number of characteristics can be identified. Firstly, and most importantly, culture can be characterised as shared ‘systems’, in the sense of an emergent complex adaptive system (Larsen-Freeman, 2018), of discourses, practices and ideologies among groups of people (Kramsch, 2009; Holliday, 2011). Secondly, cultural groupings and the associated systems of discourses, practices and ideologies are shared in the sense of either self-ascription or other-ascription and so are contestable. Thirdly, cultural groupings and systems are constantly in process with no fixed boundaries. The metaphors of complexity theory are particularly elucidating in understanding the manner in which culture can be approached as a ‘system’ but a system that is continuously changing and so can never be fully described (Baker, 2015). Significantly, following a complexity perspective, cultural systems emerge from the interactions of groups of individuals but are not reducible to those individuals. Therefore, in contrast to simplistic, essentialist understandings of culture, individuals are not synonymous with the cultural systems or groups which they may identify or be identified with (Baker, 2015). Similarly, the links between cultures and languages can be viewed as complex, with language as a central cultural practice. However, individual language practices as not necessarily tied to any particular named culture (i.e. the English language and the UK/US). This is in contrast to more deterministic interpretations of language and culture which view them as having inseparable links at national scales (e.g. Wierzbicka, 2006). Instead, as will be discussed throughout this paper, the links between languages and cultures are not fixed and cannot be established a priori, but should be investigated by looking at each instance of communication (Risager, 2006; Baker, 2015).

Turning to intercultural communication, we approach it as communication where cultural and linguistic differences are perceived as salient to either the interlocutors or researchers in understanding the interaction (Zhu, 2014; Baker, 2015). Scollon and Scollon (2001) make a useful historical distinction between earlier cross-cultural communication research and intercultural communication research. Cross-cultural approaches have rightly been criticised as essentialist in the conflation of individual behaviour and national cultures and languages and the assumption that national cultural groupings are necessarily the most salient. Moreover, they fail to take into account the interactional nature of intercultural communication, i.e. that participants typically know they are engaged in intercultural communication and act accordingly, rather than in the same way they would for intracultural communication. In contrast, by focusing on intercultural interactions, intercultural communication research has examined the construction and negotiation of cultural identities, references and practices in situ. Making use of data from diverse authentic interactions intercultural communication research has highlighted the multiple, hybrid and fluid cultural and other identities people draw on and construct in intercultural communication (Jackson, 2012).

In this paper we argue that, just as the interactional data in intercultural communication studies highlighted the limitations of cross-cultural perspectives to language, culture and communication, so more recent studies from transcultural and ELF perspectives have underscored the limitations of intercultural communication approaches. In many cases the ‘inter’ of intercultural communication becomes problematic since it is not clear what cultures participants are in-between. So, for example, Byram’s much cited work on intercultural communicative competence refers to mediation between “practices and products in *one’s own and other cultures and countries*” (1997, p. 53, our emphasis). Similarly, despite making use of the term trans-, translingual and transcultural competence is defined by the MLA as ‘the ability to operate *between languages*’ (MLA, 2007 p. 237, our emphasis) and makes multiple references to ‘target’ languages and cultures (Mori and Sanuth, 2018). In contrast, alternative critical approaches in intercultural communication (e.g. Holliday, 2011; Pillar, 2011; Jenks et al., 2013; Dooly and Vallejo Rubinstein, 2018), have underscored, through the (super) diversity and complexity of languages and cultures present in many communicative scenarios, the difficulty and inappropriateness of attempting to establish set language-culture connections. These perspectives also link to critical approaches in applied linguistics more generally and translanguaging is especially relevant here, as Li argues, “Translanguaging Instinct drives humans to go beyond narrowly defined linguistic cues and transcend culturally defined language boundaries to achieve effective communication” (2018, pp. 24-25). A similar argument can be made in transcultural communication where interactants are seen moving through and across, rather than in-between, cultural and linguistic boundaries in which those very borders become blurred and transcended. Furthermore, boundary-crossing and blurring, whether as an unconscious part of everyday communicative practices or as a deliberate transgressive act, highlights the transformative nature of such interactions whereby ‘named’ languages and cultures can no longer be taken for granted. Transcultural perspectives, thus, directly link to the theoretical orientation of translanguaging approaches which are also concerned with how fluid practices and processes transcend and transform, “socially constructed language systems and structures to engage diverse multiple meaning-making systems and subjectivities” (Li, 2018, p.27).

It is important to stress that adopting a transcultural approach does not entail a rejection of intercultural communication research or even the role of national conceptions of language and culture associated with cross-cultural communication. Nationalist ideologies are an important part of understanding how research participants perceive languages and cultures and need to be accounted for (Holliday, 2010). Yet, they are just one of many scales of linguistic and cultural groupings that can be drawn on, crossed and transgressed in communication. Likewise, while hybridity and ‘in-betweeness’ are significant features of intercultural communication, this does not account for all aspects of communication where participants transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries, rather than mix them, and crucially where the complexity of the interaction means boundaries themselves cannot easily be discerned. In many ways this links back to core concerns in critical approaches to intercultural communication which question who introduces the concept of culture, for what purposes and with what consequences (Scollon and Scollon, 2001, pp. 544-545), and Risager’s (2006, p. 188) observation that the link between particular language uses and cultures is always an empirical question. We argue that a transcultural perspective brings together critical and complex approaches to culture and language as a starting point in intercultural communication research, and introduces an alternative perspective which seeks to avoid the reification of hybridity and third places (Kramsch, 2009; Holliday, 2011).

While transcultural theories are only just beginning to influence language and intercultural communication research, the notion of transculturality is not a new one. Welsch (1999) argues for the importance of moving beyond interculturality to transculturality, emphasising the complexity of the interaction of diverse social groups within and across cultures. Similar notions are also found in Clifford’s (1992) translocal culture and Pratt’s (2008) transculturation. Blommaert (2010) explores the notion of translocality in relation to sociolinguistics and globalisation and both Pennycook (2007) and Canagarajah (2013) have made use of these trans*-* theories in furthering our understanding of sociolinguistics and Global Englishes. In particular, Pennycook in his examination of the global flows of hip-hop practices focuses in on “the constant processes of borrowing, bending and blending of cultures, to the communicative practices of people interacting across different linguistic and communicative codes” (2007, p.47). Canagarajah (2013) documents the manner in which translingual migrants negotiate multiple scales through their use of English and other languages. Canagarajah’s use of the scalar metaphor provides a way to unpack the different layers of context bringing together different perspectives on spatiotemporal and social/power dimensions, and recognising the relational, overlapping, dynamic and mediated nature of context (2013 pp.154-155). Moreover, scales are not predetermined but are open to negotiation and, as Canagarajah argues, “the layered simultaneity of scales and norms in any given place is unpacked and renegotiated to construct translocal spaces” (2013 p. 172). Nonetheless, further work is needed expanding on the meaning of transculturality and linking this to intercultural communication theories as well as going beyond the somewhat narrow characterisation of ELF use and research in these approaches to date (e.g. Canagarajah, 2013 pp.62-68). This paper will draw on aspects of these trans- theories including Canagarajah’s (2013) scales and spaces and Pennycook’s (2007) transculturality, translanguaging and transmodality in exploring communication and meaning making through ELF on SNS.

**Transcultural communication, virtual spaces and transmodality**

Digital communication and social networking sites (SNS) are an increasingly interwoven part of everyday life for many and potentially of major interest to applied linguistics researchers. Furthermore, the diversity of languages, cultures and communities present online gives rise to unprecedented opportunities for intercultural and transcultural communication and represents “superdiverse space par excellence – a space of seemingly endless possibilities for self-expression and community formation” (Varis and Wang, 2011, p. 71). Yet, as argued by scholars who have focused attention on these spaces (e.g. Dovchin et al., 2016), these should not be seen as unusual and different but rather as highly normalised, in which the hybridity and fluidity is not the end point of the analysis, but the starting point for a deeper understanding of transcultural communication.

As Canagarajah (2013, pp. 163-164) explains, *spaces* are social and co-constructed as opposed to *places* which are based on geographical domains. This co-constructed nature of such social spaces gives them a degree of fluidity and creativity, but there are also constraints on what is possible both due to the technologies they make use of (e.g. templates, programming languages, graphics tools) and the social norms which co-evolve alongside these technical features (Sangiamchit, 2018). In this sense virtual spaces, such as SNS, can be seen as already embodying particular social and cultural norms (Pauwels, 2012, p. 259). Therefore, alongside superdiversity, tensions between fluidity and normativity, access and restriction, agency and control, are as much a part of virtual spaces as any other social space. Given virtual space’s prominence in many of our lives, this is a nascent but still under researched area in applied linguistics; nonetheless, there is an increasing convergence towards trans- theories such as translanguaging, transmodality and transculturality in analysing communication in virtual spaces (e.g. Tagg and Seargeant, 2014; Dovchin et al., 2016; Hawkins, 2018). We believe that transcultural communication provides an important contribution to this emerging research paradigm through demonstrating the importance of a reconceptualisation of intercultural communication.

A key feature of SNS both as a technological affordance and social space is the use of different modes of communication including text, hyperlinks, images, videos and animation to create meaning and affect. Traditionally seen as multimodality (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001), the notion of transmodality is employed here to describe the process of using a range of modes simultaneously in SNS where the use of different modes cannot be usefully distinguished (Sultana, 2016). Similar to intercultural and transcultural, transmodality does not represent a rejection of multimodality but rather a perspective that focuses on multimodal resources and transmodal processes that result in ‘the transmodal moment’ (Newfield, 2017, p. 103). Meaning and affect are created through the interaction of a range of modes, for example text, photos and emoticons, in which the boundaries between each mode are blurred. In attempting to analyse modes separately we may lose a more holistic understanding of the communication. As Pennycook contends, “the separation of language from the complexity of signs with which its use is associated has limited our understanding of a broader semiotics” (2007, p. 49). Likewise, Li (2018) in outlining a theory of translanguaging underscores the importance of, and links between, linguistic forms and other modes of communication.

A number of recent empirical studies of virtual communities have employed elements of trans- theories (e.g. Tagg and Seargeant, 2014). Of most relevance, Dovchin et al. (2016) and Sultana (2016) report on ethnographic projects exploring the linguistic and cultural practices of young adults in Bangladesh and Mongolia through a transglossic framework. Their data shows the creative and playful transgressing and transcending of linguistic, cultural and modal boundaries in virtual spaces. At the same time though, this freedom is constrained by pre-existing social structures including dominant Anglophone ideologies associated with English and the opportunities and affordances available to each user. From a transcultural, translanguaging and transmodal perspective ‘English’ does not function alone but it is essential to recognise that in one form or another it is a significant feature of many virtual spaces. It is, therefore, important that transcultural approaches to virtual spaces connect with the extensive empirical and theoretical work on global uses of English and especially ELF research.

**Transcultural communication, English as a lingua franca, and translanguaging**

It may seem somewhat inconsistent after the discussion of transcultural communication, translanguaging and transmodality to now focus on a particular linguistic mode and even more narrowly on a named language, ‘English’. Yet, English, however we define it, is the most widely used language on the internet (Internet World Stats, 2017) and so is clearly of relevance to understanding communication on SNS. At the same time we need to adopt a critical perspective towards English, recognising that the majority of internet users are not ‘native speakers’ from Anglophone countries and that other languages also have a strong presence on the internet (Internet World Stats, 2017). This means that English is part of a multilingual environment in online communication. How such English use is conceptualised has been extensively discussed in the Global Englishes literature previously referred to (e.g. Pennycook, 2007; Canagarajah, 2013) and most particularly in ELF research. ELF can be viewed as a description of a linguistic phenomenon and defined following Seidlhofer as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages” (2011, p.7) and Jenkins as “Multilingual communication in which English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen.” (2015, p. 73). ELF is also a research field “that enquires into various aspects of the use of English among speakers who do not share a first language” (Baird et al., 2014, p.191). These definitions emphasise the functions of English, rather than ELF as a description of a linguistic system, and recent definitions foreground the multilingual nature of English use in ELF as part of wider multilingual practices in inter/transcultural communication. Such a perspective on English problematizes simplistic notions of English as a bounded ‘code’ comprising of fixed, describable features of syntax, lexis and phonology; questions assumptions about what constitutes English, ‘standard’ English and the boundaries between English and other languages; and emphasises the multiple perspectives (social, cognitive, ideological) that can be taken on English or any named language (Seidlhofer, 2011; Mauranen, 2012; Baird et al., 2014; Larsen-Freeman, 2018). This is not to suggest that there is anything unique about English or its use as a lingua franca, the same processes may be observed in intercultural/transcultural communication that does not use English. However, the widespread use of English among diverse communities provides a readily accessible window into the processes of transcultural communication.

ELF research has dealt with themes of direct relevance to intercultural and transcultural communication research including negotiation, adaptation and hybridity in language and communication; language ideologies and power relationships; and identity, community and culture (see Jenkins et al., 2018 for an overview). Participants in ELF studies have reported and been observed using English to create and index multiple cultural resources and identities including: moving between local L1 identities and more global orientations (e.g. Pölzl and Seidlhofer, 2006); the construction of shared multilingual and multicultural identities in ELF interactions (e.g. Cogo and Dewey, 2012); identification with dynamic communities of practice and virtual communities (e.g. Kalocsai, 2014; Vettorel, 2014); third-place identities with participants embracing being ‘in-between’ and mediating between cultures or other groupings (Baker, 2009; 2011; 2015) and, of most relevance to the aims of this paper, freer, liminal and fluid identities and practices that are not indexed to or ‘between’ any particular cultures or cultural identifications (Baker, 2009; 2011; 2015).

Current ELF research aligns closely with the transcultural perspective outlined here in emphasising that English is one of many linguistic and other resources that may be used in transcultural communication. As Jenkins writes, English as multilingua franca is “used predominantly in transcultural communication among multilingual English speakers, who will make use of their full linguistic repertoires as appropriate in the context of any specific interaction” (2018, p. 601). This is a newly emerging area and at present there are a limited, although growing, number of conceptual (e.g. Jenkins, 2015; 2018; Baker, 2018; Pitzl, 2018), and empirical studies (e.g. Cogo, 2016; Sultana, 2016) which have taken up trans- perspectives on ELF. Li (2016), in particular, outlines the opportunities adopting a translingual and transmodal approach to ELF offers. Through a discussion of Chinglish and ELF, drawing on data illustrating translingual and transmodal processes, Li proposes that translanguaging “transforms its users and their subjectivities, creating new spaces for social relations, social structures, and social cognition” (2016, p. 21). It is precisely these ‘new spaces’, which have become so ubiquitous, that we wish to investigate from a transcultural perspective in order to provide both much needed empirical data and further theoretical development in this area. The aims of this paper are, thus, to investigate transcultural communication among users of ELF and the links with translingual and transmodal approaches to provide a holistic account of interactions and meaning making in contemporary social spaces of SNS.

**Methodology**

In keeping with the aims presented above the following research question was formulated to guide the data analysis presented here.

How are cultural practices constructed and negotiated in interactions through ELF among a community of international students on a SNS?

The question does not assume that transcultural approaches are necessarily relevant to answering this question but rather, as will be described below, transculturality emerged from the data as an important perspective in interpreting the interactions observed. The study adopted a digital ethnographic perspective (Varis, 2016), which, while not defined by a single set of characteristics, entails the use of ethnographic techniques such as longitudinal participant-observation with the aim of producing rich descriptions of social groups and the”[t]he complexities of the “global,” the “local,” and the “translocal,” (Varis, 2016, p.64) in online settings. Drawing specifically on discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008) this involved repeated engagement with the online environment, followed by selection of texts for analysis, then interviews with the producers of the text and finally researcher interpretation.

Five Thai international students (2 female, 3 male, aged 20-39, studying a range of subjects from undergraduate to PhD level) at a UK university who were active users of English on the currently most popular SNS, Facebook, formed the core participants. They were connected as friends or through mutual shared friends on Facebook, as well as shared status as international students at the same UK university. Following a discourse-centred online ethnography, their Facebook exchanges were observed over an 8 month period and a corpus of 139 scripts of online conversation records was collected. This contained written text from both Facebook’s wall and private messages with multimodal features surrounding the texts, such as images, news links, and descriptions of the topics posted also recorded. Additionally, field notes were taken during online observations to keep a record of the researcher’s first impressions, reflections, and additional contextual information. Semi-structured interviews of 40-80 minutes each were conducted with the participants at the beginning and end of the fieldwork, including discussion of the observed Facebook exchanges.

The rationale for this setting was, as discussed in the literature review, that SNS are a superdiverse, transcultural space *par excellence* (Varis and Wang, 2011), but also one that is common to many of us. Furthermore, SNS provide a platform where this diversity can more easily be captured for research and analysis due to the record of interactions that remain online (Varis, 2016). Moreover, in SNS English is predominantly used as a lingua franca in a multilingual environment, which previous ELF research suggests enables users to construct and negotiate fluid links between languages and cultures (Jenkins et al., 2018). Thai international students studying at a UK university were selected due to the shared linguacultural background with author B. This made her presence on Facebook as a silent participant-observer (her presence was known to participants but she did not take part in exchanges) in the SNS communities less obtrusive, aided in establishing a rapport with participants and enabled her to gain a more detailed insider perspective which is crucial in ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). While the shared cultural background of the core participants is an obvious limitation, this was a necessary limitation in order to gain the needed insider perspective for the researcher. Furthermore, participants’ interactions through ELF with friends from a range of cultural backgrounds formed the main source of data for the study.

Other aspects of validity in the research process broadly followed Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) trustworthiness criteria including data from natural settings (naturally occurring interactions on SNS), longitudinal fieldwork (12 months in total), triangulation (observations, researcher field-notes and reflections, interviews), thick description (critical incidents supported with interviews and researcher observations), member checking (participant interviews) and peer debriefing (through Author A who did not take part in the fieldwork and was not part of the SNS community). Nonetheless, the limitations of the single setting, the small group of participants, and the particular time frame must be acknowledged, alongside a number of technological limitations such as only having access to Facebook walls or private chats offered by participants (i.e. the researcher could not track interactions that might have been conducted simultaneously to the Facebook posts or messages in other online or offline settings).

Data analysis involved a two stage process. Initially content coding was used to categorise the online observational data. This consisted of a mixture of a priori, top down codes, which were used to explore the data from the perspective of the initial research aims around cultural representation and construction in intercultural communication[[1]](#endnote-1), and inductive data driven codes (Miles et al., 2014) from which the transcultural focus emerged. These codes were combined to form core themes of transcultural communication online, the role of culture (including fluidity and complexity), the role of English as a lingua franca and other languages online (including translanguaging), and multimodality/transmodality. A number of critical incidents, in the sense of everyday interactions which “are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures” often related to ‘deeper culture’ (Tripp, 1993/1994 cited in Angelides, 2001, p. 431), were then identified which offered especially interesting or insightful illustrations of these core themes.

**Data analysis**

Three critical incidents which directly address the aims of this paper are presented here. These are all taken from Facebook exchanges involving two of the participants Ken (male, aged 30-39) and North (female, aged 30-39) and their interlocutors.

***Example 1: Cowboy iPhone[[2]](#endnote-2)***

The first example has been chosen to illustrate the core themes of transculturality through ELF and the links to translanguaging and transmodality. Ken posted a YouTube clip on his Facebook wall of an ironic music video made on the launch of the latest iPhone in Thailand. The music video playfully mocks the excitement around the iPhone through both visual jokes (the actions and images in the music video) and a number of linguistic puns and jokes. The video is primarily in Thai and, as Ken explained in an interview, was posted for his Thai friends. However, due to the audience design of SNS with interactions typically going to a wide network (Androutsopoulos, 2014) the video also draws a response from Ken’s friend Symeon (Greek), who finds the video funny but does not understand Thai and so asks for further explanation.

*Extract 1*

ไหนพี่น้อง ขอดูโทรศัพท์หน่อยซิ ?

See translation



(คาวบอย - ไอโฟน Official MV) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6Mmp8K86TQ>

Like · · Share · Saturday at 17:15 ·

Woraluck likes this.

1. Symeon: I'm not so sure for the purpose of this video...but it makes me
2. laugh...What does he say?

Saturday at 17:42 · Edited · Like · 1

1. Toh: give me one pls.

Saturday at 17:42 · Like · 1

1. Ken: Symeon This guy names himself 'cowboy'. He is trying to mimic one of the
2. most famous Thai band named 'Carabao'. The word 'Carabao' means 'water
3. buffalo' in Tagalog language widely used in Philippine. Moreover, 'buffalo' is
4. closely pronounced like 'fine' so 'I'm fine' has the close meaning to 'You are a
5. buffalo' in Thai. That's the reason why you can see a lot of buffaloes in the
6. music video.

Saturday at 17:47 · Edited · Like · 1

Symeon

Saturday at 17:49 · Like

1. Ken: Are you fine?

Saturday at 17:49 · Like

1. Symeon: I'm flying on Wednesday and perhaps I'll come to the Uni...So,
2. I'll see you then

Saturday at 17:50 · Like · 1

1. Ken: 'you are fine' means 'you are a buffalo'

Saturday at 17:51 · Like · 1

1. Symeon: haha...and what's the relation to the iphone?

Saturday at 17:54 · Like

1. Ken: The name of this music is iPhone. The similarity of the
2. pronunciation is played 'I-Phone' -> 'I-Fine'. The meaning of this music
3. is pretty ironic. It's saying that 'Everyone has iPhone. if I don't have
4. iPhone I will look like I-Fine (buffalo)'. ha ha

Saturday at 18:01 · Edited · Like

1. Symeon: Anyway...it seems hilarious

In terms of culture, we can begin from a traditional approach by noting the intercultural dimension of the interaction with the communication taking places between a Thai and Greek speaker. Thai is brought up as a reference by Ken (lines 4-9), alongside other national cultural associations with the Philippines (lines 5-6) and arguably the US through the iPhone. However, national cultures are just one of a range of scales drawn on. The iPhone is as much a global phenomenon as an American one with a global cultural meaning as a symbol of progress and prosperity. There is also the regional South and South East Asian cultural image of the backwards, slow and obedient buffalo which forms a central part of the humour (lines 4-9; 13-19) and the irony that those who slavishly follow the iPhone are actually the buffaloes. Moreover, class and alternative cultural discourses are referenced through the Thai folk/rock singer Carabao (lines 4-5) whose music is associated with rural working class and political protest. Additionally, there is a reference to Thai youth with the pun between the similar sound of iPhone and I-Fine (meaning a Buffalo in contemporary Thai slang) (lines 15-18 and the original video). Finally, there is a reference to a local setting shared by the participants ‘the Uni’ (line 11). Thus, we have multiple, overlapping cultural scales simultaneously present ranging from the global scales (iPhone), regional (Asian images of buffaloes) and national (Thai, Philippines) and local (University), as well as, less geographical defined groups such as working class, political protest music (Carabao), and youth cultures (Thai slang ‘I-Fine). Describing these cultural groupings as transnational or translocal as previous research has done (e.g. Seargeant et al., 2012; Canagarajah, 2013; Androutsopoulos, 2014), does not fully account for all the scales present here which do not easily fit either local or national scales. More relevant, we argue, is a transcultural perspective that recognises multiple cultural groupings without fixity to any one particular group and movement through, rather than between, scales as seen here.

Furthermore, to fully understand the interaction we need to examine the use of English and other languages and modes. The images of the buffaloes, the singer dressing like a well-known Thai singer ‘Carabao’, who is associated with buffaloes, and the music in the song, all contribute to the construction of the joke as well as attracting Symeon’s attention and starting the exchange. Again the boundaries between modes and languages are blurred and transcended. Although, the majority of the extract represented here is text based, the text is in reference to this music video. Indeed, it is possible that the video alone carries meaning, as Symeon in line 1 writes that “I'm not so sure for the purpose of this video...but it makes me laugh”, but the text would make little sense without the video. Thus, the mutual relationship between the different modes in the construction of meaning in the interaction is crucial. The majority of the written exchange is through English or more precisely ELF, as neither participant is a native speaker of English and the English is fluid in the sense of non-conformity to ‘standard’ English, for example the use of the preposition ‘for’ in line 1. Additionally, in-line with contemporary ELF perspectives it is English as part of a translanguaging process. There is Thai in the original video, in the screen shot and in text surrounding it, as well as ‘I-Fine’ in the comments and the use of the Tagalog word, ‘Carabao’, highlighting the multilingual nature of ELF use. However, the distinctions between languages are not clearly maintained. While there is English text in the screen shot, it is not clear to what extent this represents different languages or different orthographies. The use of English orthography for Thai in online interactions has been documented in previous research (Seargeant et al., 2012) and while words such as ‘like’ clearly have an English origin, there extensive use in multilingual SNS interactions problematizes ascription to any one language. Furthermore, the familiarity of many young Thais with the ‘English’ term iPhone and the ‘Tagalog’ Carabao, make it unhelpful to assign them to these separate languages.

A full and nuanced understanding of the humour in the example requires a transcultural, translingual and transmodal competence that both combines the different cultural references, modes and languages and crucially transcends the boundaries between them. Yet, as Symeon’s responses suggest partial understanding is possible both through watching the video (line 1) and through explanation and translation from Ken (lines 4-9; 13-18).There is some misunderstanding on Symeon’s part in line 11 and, despite Ken’s explanation, it is not clear that Symeon grasps the significance of the buffalo joke by the end of this exchange with the rather ambiguous reply “Anyway…it seems hilarious” (line 19). Although Symeon’s and Ken’s understanding of the joke may not be identical, some difference in interpretation of cultural references is not unusual in ELF, or any intercultural exchange, and indeed it is these tensions that have the potential to create new emergent cultural practices and meanings (Baker, 2015). Nonetheless, this interaction is predominantly successful in that humour resulting from a degree of understanding of these emergent transcultural references is shared between the participants as indicated by Symeon’s initial interest and the extended exchange. Such a flexible and cooperative approach to understanding meaning and cultural references and practices in intercultural and transcultural communication through ELF has been highlighted in much previous ELF research (Jenkins et al., 2018). Significantly, this example illustrates not passive acceptance of all these linguistic categories, cultural references and associations, but rather the participants being consciously transgressive in this playful critique of the iPhone and its socio-cultural meanings, as well as, playing with and transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries.

***Example 2: Mooncake***

Example 2 has been selected as it illustrates the close links between transculturality and translanguaging. It is taken from a private message exchange on Facebook between North and Ling (Chinese), in which they discuss the upcoming mid-autumn festival.

*Extract 2*

North

1. My lovely daughter

2. Thank you for your moon cake

3. It's really delicious

4. I gave P'Sa and P'Yui already

5. and I'll give P'Beau on this Sat

Ling

6. U r welcome, and the mid-autumn festival is this Sunday, enjoy~

7. Can u tell P'Sa , she can get her bag back now~

This provides a clear example of ELF use, since neither participant shares a first language, and, following current ELF perspectives, while the majority of the text is English, it is English as an aspect of a translanguaging processes in which the language is part of a multilingual repertoire, most clearly through the use of ‘P’ to preface names (lines 4, 5 and 7). In Thai culture(s), ‘P’ (พี่), which translates as ‘older sibling’, needs to be used when speaking to an older person in an informal situation in order to show respect. Also the intonation marker from Thai (‘) is retained in the English orthography. This was a feature noted by Seargeant et al. (2012) which they suggested was an emerging feature of multilingual Thai/English SNS communication but which may be a more established convention given its repetition here some years later. The practice is also taken up by her interlocutor, Ling (line 7). Although Ling is unfamiliar with Thai, in interviews North reported that they often used this expression together. Additionally, in line 1 North refers to Ling as her ‘daughter’ following a Thai cultural practice of addressing a much younger friend as a daughter or son but this time translating it into English rather than adopting the Thai term ‘ลูกสาว’, most likely as Ling is unfamiliar with this more complex term. This also links to transculturality since we have cultural practices (intimate terms of address) associated with Thai culture, taken up by a Chinese interlocutor who is unfamiliar with Thai culture, and expressed through English; underscoring the complex links between culture, identity and language.

The subject of the exchange, the mid-autumn festival, further adds to the transcultural character with references crossing multiple scales. The festival is traditionally Chinese but is also familiar to many Thais, adding a regional scale, while the events referred to are taking place in the UK (line 6), adding a diasporic or global scale, and finally the exchange occurs in the virtual space of a SNS (Facebook) which transcends geographical borders. Furthermore, there are also direct references to local offline activities in eating mooncake (lines 2-3) and returning a bag (line 7). As with example 1, while the majority of the exchange takes place through ELF this highlights how the English in ELF is embedded in transcultural and translingual practices. We again see the multiple and complex links between languages and cultural practices and references which transcend fixed essentialist associations between particular languages (English, Thai), cultural practices (the mid-autumn festival, terms of address) and national cultures (China, Thailand).

***Example 3: Jet Lee***

Example 3 illustrates how transcultural, translingual and transmodal communication creates spaces for new identities. Ken edited and posted a photo combining an image of martial arts film star Jet Li and text attributed to another martial arts film star Bruce Lee, with additional editing, on his friend Hessam’s (Iranian) Facebook wall. As Ken explained in the interviews, the aim was to tease because Ken knew that Hessam was a fan of Jet Li and hated Bruce Lee.

*Extract 3*

Ken to Hessam



1. Ken: Hope you like it. Good night …

Like · Share · 9 hours ago ·

SM likes this.

1. Hessam: you are a bastard Ken! I am gone kill you! :)

9 hours ago · Like · 1

1. Ken: You are very welcome ;)

9 hours ago · Like · 1

1. Hessam: the family name is also need correction! it should read "Li" instead of
2. "Lee"

9 hours ago · Like

1. Ken: OK Thanks That's gonna be the next version

9 hours ago · Like · 1

1. Hessam: bastard! I really like this guy! and he was the true champion
2. of china from the age of 11 to 19 for 8 consecutive years winning gold
3. medals! now you are making joke with him... I am gone show you the
4. cannon feast punch tomorrow!

9 hours ago · Like · 1

1. Hessam: just kidding of course! no need to move away from
2. Southampton mate!

9 hours ago · Like · 1

The topic of this exchange, martial arts and two martial arts stars, involves multiple scales simultaneously present, as while martial arts and these film stars are culturally associated with China (lines 7-8), they are also globally familiar and not confined to China. The exchange also contains local links to the geographical place the participants currently occupy, Southampton (lines 11-12). As with example 1, we see the connections between the transcultural and transmodal with the use of images, text and emoticons (lines 2-3) all intertwined to create an exchange. Moreover, the interaction/teasing relies on an interplay of image and text through the juxtaposition of an image of an admired person with text from a hated person put next to each other and then explicitly altered through the crossing out of ‘Bruce’ and replacement with ‘Jet’.

This is also a prototypical ELF exchange involving speakers of different first languages and a subsequently fluid use of English and other languages which are embedded in a seemingly English only exchange. It can be further argued that the use of English here alongside other languages and modes in reference to multiple scales opens up a translanguaging space where “language users break down the ideologically laden dichotomies” and the manner in which this process “generates new identities, values and practices” (Li, 2018, p.23). Neither participant is associated with the ‘origin’ of martial arts but Hessam positions himself as a cultural and linguistic expert through his martial arts knowledge. This is demonstrated in the discussion of Jet Li’s achievements (lines 7-9), the ‘correct’ spelling of his name (Lee/Li ,lines 4-5) and English translation of the Chinese martial arts terms ‘cannon feast punch’ (line 10)[[3]](#endnote-3). Hessam thus adopts a position of power and expertise in this interaction that would not be available through a priori attributions of cultural knowledge and practices to national scales of cultures, identities, and languages. In sum, extract 3 highlights the manner in which communication through ELF needs to be understood as a translingual practice, with other languages typically present in one way or another (the discussion of spelling of Chinese names and translation of martial arts terms) and transcultural with English and other linguistic and multimodal resources used to reference and construct a range of cultural scales, practices and identities highlighting the fluidity and complexity of connections between languages and cultures.

**Discussion**

In answer to the research question the examples presented demonstrate a complex range of cultural practices, references and resources occurring at multiple scales simultaneously among interactions in this SNS. While English is the predominant language in these interactions, it is the highly fluid and variable use of English associated with ELF. Furthermore, this is within a translanguaging space with other languages and modes also present and integral to the interactions. We see this in the blurring of cultures, languages and modes that is central for the humour in example 1, both through the original music video and the subsequent discussion, in which cultural references cannot be attributed to any one particular setting or understood without transcending boundaries. In example 2 we have the intimate and familiar use of a range of linguistic and cultural practices in relations to terms of address and the references to mooncake and mid-autumn festival associated with multiple places and spaces. Example 3, again involves a blurring of cultures, modes and languages in the original multimodal post and following interaction. Furthermore, it also contains an example of positioning or identifying as the role of expert (cultural and linguistic) and the adoption of ‘others’ cultural practices which are made possible through these fluid spaces.

Examples such as these, we argue, support the need for a transcultural perspective to communication, involving a shift away from viewing communication as *in-between* particular cultures and languages or even as hybrid aspects of different identifiable cultural practices and references. In the types of interactions in the open transcultural virtual spaces provided by SNS, like Facebook, it may not be possible or relevant to identify the ‘origin’ of particular linguistic and cultural forms or practices. Likewise, participants are not in-between any space or place in these interactions. Rather, as the data here suggests, participants are able to draw on a range of cultural and linguistic resources in whatever manner is most appropriate to the interaction and community and make use of and construct multiple meanings and perspective simultaneously. Previous research that has made use of notions of transnational and translocal have pushed thinking forward in employing a trans- metaphor and moving away from reifying cultures as some*thing* people are in-between (e.g. Blommaert, 2010; Canagarajah, 2013; Tagg and Seargeant, 2014; Hawkins, 2018). However, as Canagarajah argues, we need to be more open to “the possibility that language norms may be renegotiated, or that spaces can be reconstructed by people in communicative situations” (2013, p.156), fully recognising the multiplicity and complexity of scales present in cultural practices, references and identities that may not be ‘local’ or ‘national’. Of course this is not to suggest there is complete freedom and there are still material and social constraints on interactions in SNS, as in all aspects of social life (Dovchin et al., 2016). Neither does it deny the role of intercultural communication or even cross-cultural communication frameworks (Scollon and Scollon, 2001). Indeed, contemporary critical approaches to intercultural communication have addressed more emergent and fluid links between culture and language (e.g. Holliday, 2011; Jenks et al., 2013: Zhu, 2014; Dooly and Vallejo Rubinstein, 2018). However, this paper shows how transcultural approaches draw critical perspectives together and provides alternative perspectives that open up new avenues for research in which *the starting point* becomes emergent connections and relationships between languages, cultures and communities; transcending, transgressing and transforming pre-existing categories, scales and boundaries.

Furthermore, multiple languages are also present in the data presented, and although English is predominant in the examples chosen, and provides a rationale for an ELF perspective, it is used in a variable and dynamic manner alongside and in conjunction with other languages as a multilingua franca, as highlighted in current ELF research (e.g. Jenkins, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2018). This results in a fluid approach to language whereby meanings are open to negotiation and change, thereby, connecting the transcultural examples here to discussions of translanguaging (e.g. Canagarajah, 2013; Li, 2018). Like other ‘trans- theory’ approaches, transcultural communication goes beyond boundaries in which linguistic, modal and cultural borders are transgressed, transcended and in the process, as previously argued, transformed. Moreover, the complexity of the links between languages (English and others) and cultures demonstrated here add further support to approaches that eschew taking these links for granted and making assumptions about cultural practices and identities before investigating the interaction (Zhu, 2014; Baker, 2015). Therefore, as with translanguaging theories in applied linguistics in general (Hawkins and Mori, 2018; Li, 2018), intercultural communication research will be enhanced by transcultural perspectives that account for multiple scales and modes and the complex, constantly evolving connections between language and culture.

**Conclusion**

It must be noted that the ideas presented in this study are still at the exploratory stage. It is also not possible to generalise to other communities on SNS based on the data from one small group of users and even less from the three examples presented here. Furthermore, while the data is drawn from a longitudinal study, the focus here has been on a detailed analysis of three examples which illustrated the core themes but at the expense of being able to explore how transculturality and any associated identities develop over time and in different online settings (Dooly, 2017). Moreover, while we have drawn briefly on interview data to help explain examples, participants’ own voices and perspectives are largely missing. Nonetheless, in this paper we have argued that a transcultural approach has important implications for research in intercultural communication. Firstly, we suggest that the virtual social spaces documented here have become ubiquitous for many and provide a productive starting point for research into contemporary forms of intercultural communication, especially through English as a multilingual franca given its prominent role. Secondly, a key feature of these virtual spaces, and hence in need of further research, is the manner in which cultural, linguistic and modal boundaries and scales are moved through and across, and eroded and transformed in the process. Thirdly, investigations from a transcultural perspective, as illustrated here, provide valuable empirical data and further theoretical development in understanding language, identity, community, and culture in communication through a multilingua franca across multiple scales. We have attempted to highlight the value of transcultural, translanguaging and transmodal approaches that do not artificially isolate aspects of the phenomena under investigation. It is only by looking at the complexity of the whole that we can understand the interactions between different features that we choose to focus on. In this paper we suggest how transcultural perspectives can further a more integrated understanding of language, communication and culture in intercultural communication.

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1. Other aims included the development of intercultural competence/ awareness as well as perceptions of English and other languages in SNS but are not the focus here (Sangiamchit, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The example texts are presented as they appeared on Facebook following the original spelling, punctuation and line spacing as well as multimodal features such as emoticons and images; although, the positioning is sometimes slightly altered. Due to the length of the exchanges during data collection and issues of anonymity screenshots were not used. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Feast’ is presumably an unintentional misspelling of ‘fist’ although we were unable to interview Hessam to confirm this. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)