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Translinguistics and Time in Postmodern North American Poetry

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Abstract: This article takes a transdisciplinary approach to the exploration of time and temporality in postmodern American poetry. By combining new theories in the evolving framework of translinguistics with a critical analysis of prominent postmodern poets, the article aims to retrace and reverse-engineer the structural time-space and language-speech divide introduced by Saussurean linguistics of the early twentieth century and show that these categories are inextricable in translinguistic practice. By observing literary production of poetry alongside the translingual framework, we retrace the structural schism in language studies and identify poetry as a literary genre uniquely suited to remedying not just the structural division but also the temporal anxieties imposed on us by contemporary technological and economic conditions.

Keywords: Translinguistics, Time, Space, Postmodern, Poetry

Introduction

This article takes a “transdisciplinary” (Blommaert 2010) approach to the exploration of time and temporality in postmodern American poetry. By combining new theories in the evolving framework of translinguistics with a critical analysis of prominent postmodern poets, we aim to retrace and reverse-engineer the structural divide introduced by Saussurean linguistics of the early twentieth century.

The structuralist paradigm, in part inspired by the modernist conceptions of language as intrinsically tied to particular communities and spaces—known otherwise as the “Herderian triad” of language, community, and territory (Blommaert 2010)—operates on the implicit division of categories of time and space, with language understood as a spatial category and speech as a temporal event. This division has informed much of the logocentric literary and cultural work in postmodernity, including Fredric Jameson’s critique of culture and art in the same period. By taking language as the “model” through which to observe the culture of postmodernity, Jameson argues that the period is increasingly marked by space and spatial categories and that time, temporality, and history are coming to an end (1972, 1991). This approach mirrors the focus of structural linguistics on the atemporal category of “language” as the main object of scientific analysis.

However, the emerging translingual framework, which rejects both the structural divide between space and time and the conception of language as a monolithic entity, seeks to explore language as a form of semiotic and spatiotemporal practice, imbued with the private and shared histories of individual speakers. The framework draws on a variety of cross-disciplinary sources to offer a holistic account of translingual practice and to deconstruct the rigid boundaries imposed by structuralist logic. In this article, we show in what ways postmodern poetry had already anticipated the translingual framework, further illustrating how time and temporality have always been central in postmodern art, particularly as a coping mechanism for the increased temporal anxieties of late capitalism. In subverting Jameson’s “model” approach, we show that categories of time and space are connected, yet fluid, and negotiable, particularly as they emerge in the linguistic or poetic practice of postmodern poets. Through this, we advocate for a closer relationship and further transdisciplinary work between areas of language studies, including both literature and language-focused fields.

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Structural Conceptions of Time and Space

The history of modern linguistics began with the division of categories of language and speech and, by extension, of space and time. In the model of semiology developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early years of the twentieth century, language is established as a system external to its users, existing as a compound of all available signs (*langue*) that users access and deploy in linear performance (*parole*). Language as a system is fundamentally a spatial category, conceived as a network of signs whose arbitrary meaning is predicated on difference. To scientifically analyze “language,” Saussure argues, we must observe it as a synchronic, homogeneous, and atemporal system, likened to the system of “rules in chess” (Saussure [1916] 2011). A particular game of chess or “speech,” on the other hand, constitutes a diachronic event that tells us much about the ethnographic particularities of its users but little about the system of language itself. As such, a structured and scientific analysis of language is possible only if language is made ahistorical, because any meaningful discovery “will be found to be synchronic” (Buyssens 1961, 23).

This division served as the foundation for the structural linguistics of Louis Hjelmslev and Roman Jakobson, which in turn found its way into literary theory as part of the logocentrism that marked the work of figures such as Jacques Lacan and Claude Lévi-Strauss (Tallis 1995). Such mapping of linguistic models onto literary analysis was part of the larger aspirations toward a more “scientific” and objective approach to language, which persist across disciplines to this day (Lazard 2012). For Fredric Jameson, one of the most prominent critics of postmodernism, such aspirations primarily constitute a shift in perspective, as linguistics becomes another “metaphor” through which we observe the fundamentals of reality. In “The Prison-House of Language” (1972), Jameson argues that this metaphor is not justified by claims of scientific validity alone and that there is instead a fundamental similarity between the linguistic model and the dominant cultural system:

The deeper justification for the use of the linguistic model or metaphor...lies in the concrete character of the social life of the so-called advanced countries today...whose intricate commodity network may be seen as the very prototype of a system of signs. There is therefore a profound consonance between linguistics as a method and that systematized and disembodied nightmare which is our culture today. (Jameson 1972, ix)

This argument, which posits a similarity between the model of structural linguistics and the dominant forms of culture in Western societies, marks much of Jameson’s later work, culminating in his 1991 magnum opus, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, where a categorical separation of space and time as informed by the Saussurean division takes center stage in the account of postmodern culture. For Jameson (1991, 29), a Marxist philosopher, there is an apparent crisis of historicity in postmodernism that manifests in the loss of temporality so that everyday life is “increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic” and art is characterized by a lack of depth, a waning of affect, and the commodification and repurposing of history in the form of pastiche.

Focusing primarily on examples taken from cinema and architecture, Jameson (1991) argues that the postmodern hyperspace, as the rapidly evolving multinational and decentered communicational network, transcends an individual’s ability to position and orient themselves as a physical body in relation to their built environment and cognitively process and map their surroundings. Such spatial anxiety is the product of waning temporal categories, which are the collateral of the postmodern departure from the modernist “myth of producing a radically new Utopian space capable of transforming the world itself” (Jameson 1991, 104). In other words, individuals are inhabiting synchronic spaces, outside of the temporal flow and at the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1989).

Even without reference to the shifts in spatiotemporal awareness brought on by technological developments of the past three decades, Jameson’s insistence on the dominance of spatial categories in postmodernity and, conversely, temporal categories in modernity is, at a minimum, counterintuitive.

For one, modernism is highly marked by the category of space, ranging from geographically specific locations in prose, which often function to situate characters or to re-locate historical narratives, to spatially determined art forms such as cubism and postimpressionism. Furthermore, the modernist aspiration of establishing literary superstructures, or autonomous artworks independent of the creator, speak of a tendency to favor the form, or the systems of elements that constitute such forms—analogue to Saussure’s *langue*. Stream of consciousness, arguably the most prominent device of modernist authors, relies on the synchrony of experience, where the individual narrates events in isolation from their temporal context, in the mental space of their thoughts. Time is significant insofar as it is used as a repository of styles and texts that can be refurbished and “made new.”

Additionally, even from a Marxist perspective, the postmodern condition signifies an intensification of temporal anxieties in the experience of everyday life. The organization and quantification of labor in reference to objective time reifies the “time is money” metaphor in the postmodern workplace. The advent of smartphones and the internet has detached postmodern labor from the traditional clock, producing workers who are always on call, whose weekends bleed into the work week because the boss’s emails can come at any time, and also producing gig workers who do not have a set work time but flit from one task to another. The continuous developments in technology have also shortened the time needed to perform labor, increasing the quota that a worker is expected to fulfill within an allocated period, thus generating both “overtime” and the imminent threat of unemployment. In other words, postmodernism aggravates preexisting temporal tendencies in capitalism rather than dissolving them in spatial forms of culture.

Finally, from the point of view of language practice, time and history have always been part of what individuals “do” with language. The recent shifts in linguistics toward a view of language that transcends the Saussurean tradition and its theoretical extensions, look at language as a fluid and mobile practice, generated from semiotic repertoires drawn from an individual’s lived, temporal experience and emerging in situated practice (Lee 2019; Canagarajah 2013; Pennycook 2010; Blommaert 2010). Linguists, philosophers, and theorists writing within the translingual framework recognize that the traditional divisions of language and speech, and time and space, do not reflect the reality of language practice, attempting to remedy the gap that emerged as a result of such bifurcated logic. As such, in order to heal the rifts created by what Jameson would call a “linguistic model of thinking,” language scholars are retracing the structuralist models of the past and reinterpreting the dominant narratives of language, speech, and linguistic practice.

Although such efforts are worthwhile and necessary (if not long overdue), we argue that the literary practice of postmodernism, particularly in poetry, has long since attempted to bridge the gap created by structuralist interpretations of language. Poetry of postmodernism, as we aim to show, has always questioned the dichotomy of language and speech and has drawn on temporal and spatial categories, as well as personal histories, in the construction of multimodal literary works. The oversight of such endeavors on the part of not just language scholars but also cultural theorists such as Jameson arises as a result of contrastive structuralist thought: even while attempting to deconstruct structuralist models of language and culture, scholars like Jameson inadvertently reify the same.

In light of this, it must be made clear that we do not mount this critique against Jameson to reverse the polarity of time and space and posit time as the dominant category in postmodernism. Our goal is to show that time has always been there, as has history. In doing so, we aim to transcend the linguistic division of time and space, as well as of structuralist thinking, and illustrate how deeply interconnected and interdependent the two are, particularly as they intersect within a speaker. To this end, this article combines the emerging translingual perspective in linguistics, with a review of postmodern poetry in the context of North America, with the understanding that “in any trans-perspective on language theories and practices, a post-structuralist focus on Space must be supplemented by a post-modern concern with Time” (Kramsch 2018, 114). By observing literary production of poetry alongside the translinguistic model, we retrace the structural schism between language and speech and identify poetry as a literary genre uniquely suited to remedying not just the structural division but also the temporal anxieties imposed on us by contemporary technological and economic conditions.

The Translingual Turn and Its Precursors

Much has changed in linguistics since Saussure, and much has stayed the same. Chomskyan linguistics of the late 1950s delineated language as a property unique to human cognition, replacing “*langue*” and “*parole*” with “competence” and “performance” (Chomsky 1957). The meaning-focused language theories created in response to Chomsky’s formal system focused on the performative and functional aspect of language, thus keeping the initial division intact. Despite their opposing perspectives, both formal and functional linguistics maintained the emphasis on a synchronic analysis of data with the aim of illuminating the underlying system of language.

The recent translingual turn in the field of language studies, however, initiated an “epistemic upheaval” (Lee 2019) in terms of how language is conceived. The stable dichotomy of form and function, of system and its application, of competence and performance, was effectively dissolved with the realization that when individuals “practice” language (Pennycook 2010), they do so in negotiated spatiotemporal and social frames, drawing on sets of semiotic resources which transcend any one monolithic formal language. In translingualism, language is seen as a generative and profoundly local practice, which draws on and draws out individuals’ personal histories, life trajectories, and ideological orientations, whereas language as a formal system is little more than the sedimentation of such practice over time. This radical departure from structural interpretations of language also represents a departure from modernist conceptions of stable, atemporal, and nation-state bound “languages” that marked much of the twentieth-century language studies (Canagarajah 2013), toward postmodern conceptions of fragmented, relative, and emergent constructs, imbued with categories of space, time, and voice. Language scholars writing as part of the translingual paradigm argue that such categories become essential to understanding postmodern realities given the increased mobility of texts and contexts, and the blurring of the boundaries between real and constructed linguistic and spatiotemporal frames. In this sense, they also diverge from similar integrative language theories, such as holistic bi/multilingualism, or poly/plurilingualism, which continue to implicitly promote an enumerative approach to “languages,” as if they are separate, bounded entities that happen to be deployed in “parallel” (Heller 1999).

In many ways, this translingual turn has been anticipated by literary scholarship. The Bakhtinian conception of chronotopes informs much of the spatiotemporal translingual theory (Blommaert 2010), as do the notions of heteroglossia and polyphony. The acknowledgment of creative repetition in translingual practice—what Homi Bhabha (1985) calls “fertile mimesis”—mirrors that aspect of literary scholarship stretching from Quintilian through T.S. Eliot to Harold Bloom, which has always been concerned with how a writer’s spatiotemporal setting and their individual voice fit into a particular tradition, into the sedimented practices of their precursors. At the same time, the multimodality and the stratified nature of these voices, as well as the semiotic complexities that constitute them, also anticipate the newfound translingual awareness of language as a practiced compound of varied and always expanding semiotic repertoires. Finally, there is a clear Marxist, and perhaps even Jamesonian, influence in the translingual aim to “historicize” language once more, by becoming sensitized to the intrinsic historicity of seemingly synchronic language objects—an aim that Blommaert (2010) attributes to Voloshinov (1973).

This return to the temporality of language, or, more precisely, to speech, is also anticipated in the postmodern poetry from the 1950s onwards, manifesting as a revived interest in oral performance, particularly among North American poetry communities. One of the most innovative digital poets, Jim Rosenberg (2015, 98), has gone so far as to characterize US poetry as a speech-based culture, where his radical form of spatial hypertext can gain little traction:

The culture of contemporary American poetry is an oral one. Those who care about their poetry expect to be able to hear a poet recite it. Believe me: to have work which cannot be recited—because of its intrinsic structure—is a severe handicap. It means virtually renouncing ‘the scene.’

It has not always been like this: in the modernist period, public recitations of poems were infrequent, but “late in the fifties, poetry readings erupted in the United States suddenly and numerously” (Hall 2012). Although poets have been reciting poems since the time of the Homeric bards, and though major modernists like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot made some recordings, “the poetry reading” only came to dominate Anglophone poetry circles early in the postmodern era. In an oral performance, poetry becomes a predominantly temporal experience. In speaking, the private and cognitive experience of reading becomes the translingual “envoicement,” with the reader imbuing the text with their own identity and history through linear voicing, creating in turn “entextualized” spatiotemporal frames (Canagarajah 2013). The multimodality of this experience—the written text, the spoken word, the semiotic and paralinguistic frames of gestures, tones, and expressions—create a translingual experience, where the historical trajectory of a person becomes embodied in the synchronic here-and-now, bridging the gap between space and time, between language and speech. What remains is practice, not as a contrast to a model, a system, or a theory (Pennycook 2010) but as generative “actions with a history” (Bourdieu 1977).

This is not to say that the silent reading of poetry is a less temporal experience. Much has been written about the cognitive experience of reading poetry and how it affects processing times (Gavins 2020), and studies have even shown that memory retention rates are higher for poetry than for any other literary genre (Tillman and Dowling 2007). The visual dimension of poetry and its spatial arrangement participate in the temporal experience of reading. The rhythmic patterns, lexical choices, and punctuation all contribute to how a reader reads a poem in the synchronic and ephemeral moment of reading and how they diachronically link it through the semiotic repertoire of their lived experience. Poetry in this sense has the ability to manipulate time and space and transport the reader from their immediate surroundings to the internal world of the text, or, rather, to the internal world of their mind. In this manner, the temporal anxieties of the outside world are circumvented, and time once more becomes an intrinsic, sensory phenomenon.

Although Jameson’s claim about the dominance of spatial categories in postmodernism might hold true for architecture and cinema (although continued advancements in both seem to prove otherwise), postmodern poetry has always been marked by a deep awareness of temporality. In what follows, we trace the various semiotic, linguistic, and technological resources postmodern poets from Olson to bpNichol used to insert time, and history, into their poetic practice.

Temporal Translinguistic Practice in Postmodern Poetry

If the Beats were more responsible than anyone else for popularizing the practice of poetry reading, Charles Olson was the one who generated the most influential justification for a poetics of performance. Olson’s major precursor, Pound, famously used the typewriter to control the spatial arrangement of his verse. Olson took up this technique, but he developed it in a temporal way so that the page of the poem became a musical score, on which empty spaces marked longer or shorter pauses. In his manifesto, “Projective Verse,” Olson (2003, 1055) declares that the only worthwhile verse is that “in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath.” The spatial control afforded by the typewriter paradoxically becomes, for Olson (2003, 1059), a way of (re)enacting the temporal experience of poetry as oral performance:

What I want to emphasize here, by this emphasis on the typewriter as the personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet’s work, is the already projective nature of verse as the sons of Pound and Williams are practicing it...as though verse was to have the reading its writing involved, as though not the eye but the ear was to be its measurer, as though the intervals of its composition could be so carefully put down as to be precisely the intervals of its registration.

Even if we read Olson's masterwork, *The Maximus Poems*, silently, it compels us to experience time in unusual ways. Olson's projective verse results in highly variable pages, some of which are densely covered with words, others almost empty, so the speed of reading, the frequency with which one turns the pages of this massive book, varies enormously, making the reader aware of time itself—an effect that, for example, the conventionally (that is, predictably) lineated verses of Eliot's *Four Quartets* or Stevens's long poems cannot achieve.

Another influential poet to emerge from the era of Olson and the Beats was Amiri Baraka, who developed a mode of performance that attempted to endow poetry with the musical richness of jazz and to overcome the supposed rigidity of white-dominated print culture. Baraka's recordings, with and without instrumental accompaniment, are politically engaged manifestations of "speech musicked, a tone/time signature that the colony of the page often eclipses" (Holiday 2014, 534). The multimodality of Baraka's performances draws attention to the inherent temporality of speech and the histories particular modalities carry with them, subverting the prescriptive and normative dimensions of language through the performative, semiotic, and vocally rich experience of speech.

While some poets tried to make poetry musical, some musicians made powerful interventions in postmodern poetry. The composer John Cage's "mesostics" are visually striking. Consider the opening stanzas of "Writing through Finnegans wake":

wroth with twone nathandJoe
A
Malt
jhEm
Shen
pftJschute
Of finnegan
that the humptYhillhead of humself
is at the knoCkout
in thE park (Cage 1978, 3)

These poems spell words, often authors' names, in capital letters vertically down the middle of the page; the lowercase letters to the left and the right are fragments of source texts, culled through painstaking reading or, later, by means of a computer program (Perloff 1991). The mesostics Cage derived from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* were the basis for "Roaratorio," one of the most ambitious of his later musical projects (Perloff 1991, 150). Of particular interest is the series of mesostics he wrote and performed as lectures at Harvard. Published as I–VI, these six pieces were for Cage "a kind of poetry" (Cage 1990, 403–404). Their poetic quality is largely a function of a vocal music that emerges in their recitation, "in the way of the breathing and the sound the changing or not changing of sounds" (Cage 1990, 405). Indeed, Cage's mesostics violate normative syntax so much that they defy any critical effort to map their rhetorical or narrative structure. One of Cage's innovations is the use of the apostrophe to designate the speaker's exhalation (1990); consequently, in reading the poem aloud, one is more aware of the temporal process of one's own breathing than one is aware of Cage's meaning. Cage continues Olson's tradition of emphasizing breath, although he does so in a way that tries to avoid the self-expression in which Olson indulged. Such suprasegmental focus on the qualities of speech serves as a prime example of translanguaging creativity (Lee and Dovchin 2020), surpassing the constraints of script, text, and space, in favor of the embodied and temporal experience of poetry.

Cage's music provided a major inspiration to John Ashbery at an early stage in his career (Shoptaw 1994). Perhaps the most critically renowned of postmodern US poets, Ashbery devoted much of his imaginative effort to the theme of time. In an often-cited interview, Ashbery (1972, 20–21) argues that music is important because of its temporal development and hopes his own

poetry develops “in the framework of time.” Ben Lerner has drawn attention to “the specific experience of temporality” that reading Ashbery (2010, 203–204) induces: “Part of the bizarre power of Ashbery’s best poetry is that it seems to narrate what it’s like to read Ashbery’s best poetry, and when his work manages to describe the time of its own reading in the time of its own reading, we experience mediacy immediately.” Ashbery’s preoccupation with representing the feeling of temporality perhaps achieves its best expression in “Clepsydra,” composed in 1965 (Ashbery 2008). According to Annette Gilson (1998, 492), this poem

anticipates this idea of poem-as- journey-as-cure, only here the journey is not simply that of the speaker and of the poem traveling through the narrative moment, but of the poem traveling backward and forward in time to render up, both as point of departure and destination, the prior time (poetic and personal) from which poem and speaker set out.

In other words, the poem suspends the notion of constructed and structured time, of the sort counted in seconds and minutes, in favor of time as a repository of identity, personal and world history, and lived experience.

Poetry is capable of such temporal manipulation and displacement in part owing to the intrinsic historicity of language—a notion well understood by language poets, an avant-garde group of predominantly North American poets whose work often takes a critical stance toward language as a system. Language poets emphasized the presence of language by exposing its structures and its idiosyncrasies, or otherwise reassembled its elements to challenge conventional forms. Some of the Language poets produced poems so unpronounceable and semantically opaque that they foreground the graphic dimension of writing and partially confirm Jameson’s contention that postmodernism is largely spatial.² At the same time, there is clear semiotic awareness at play here. The ability to dislocate text from the formal system of meaning points to the arbitrariness of the process whereby lexical items are assigned meaning. The indexical value of words, based on sets of associations built between strings of sounds and the (non)material world, is a product of temporal sedimentation, of actions repeated over time. Breaking this link splits lexical items from their linguistic meaning, but it leaves us with a greater awareness of the process of semiosis through which words gain meaning in the first place. In other words, it points toward the centrality of time in the construction of meaning.

Among the Language poets, Charles Bernstein emerges as the leading avant-garde US poet in the generation after Ashbery. Bernstein is not only a remarkable oral performer of his poems but a champion of poetry performance, and his extensive collection of recordings provided the raw material for the creation of such online archives as PennSound. Bernstein has probably done more than any other poet-scholar to make poetic performance a respectable academic study. He notes that

since the 1950s, the poetry reading has become one of the most important sites for the dissemination of poetic works in North America, yet studies of the distinctive features of the poem-in-performance have been rare (even full-length studies of a poet’s work routinely ignore the audiotext), and readings—no matter how well attended—are never reviewed by newspapers or magazines. (Bernstein 1999, 280)

Jameson’s influential theory of postmodernism, which aligns it with space, may have contributed to the scholarly neglect of cultural practices such as the poetry reading, which are predominantly temporal experiences.

Although he has criticized Olson’s poetics of breath (2013), Bernstein’s poems continue the postmodern tendency to emphasize the diachronic modality of verse, its development in time—albeit a time that, for Bernstein, is usually disjunctive. Most of Bernstein’s poems play with the

² Consider, for example, the work of P. Inman or Bernstein’s poem “Liftoff” (2010, 36–37).

temporality of performance. They are often humorous in nature, as he decomposes the hermeneutics of the reader (or listener), the author, and the text. Bernstein always seems to indicate that a poem has a certain meaning, a semiotic value but that that value is not encapsulated in the language itself. A prominent example is “Thank You for Saying Thank You,” where the denotative and the connotative meaning of the poem are comically juxtaposed, drawing the audience’s attention to the arbitrary relationship between linguistic form and associated meanings. In all the recordings of Bernstein’s live performances, this dissonance results in laughter, with lines such as “it [the poem] is / purely emotional. / It fully expresses / the feelings of the / author” (Bernstein 2003, 28), where the literal meaning of the verse is in high contrast to its implications, and even more to the tone of Bernstein’s delivery. The metanarrative Bernstein creates blurs the hermeneutic lines, leaving space for what translanguistics calls “negotiated literacy,” where text is “negotiated and co-constructed in time and space, with parity for readers and writers in shaping the meaning and form, thus performed rather than preconstructed, making the material and multisensory dimensions of the text fully functional” (Canagarajah 2013, 132).

Such “negotiated literacy” is often self-referential. “Thank You for Saying Thank You” draws attention to its structure, announcing that it has 90 lines and 269 words, and so subverting the temporal experience once more: is this a case of a self-fulfilling prophecy, or is the poem self-aware, or is time cyclical in the realm of poetry? Verses are short, containing four words at most, which considerably affects the reading flow by continuously breaking collocational phrases and, in turn, the well-trodden cognitive pathways between words. In doing so, Bernstein reminds us that such paths are the result of repeated practice—a notion that echoes the findings of translanguaging, one of whose practitioners, Pennycook, refers to paths as “sedimented walks” that can make sheep trails into major highways (2010, 138).

Bernstein’s poetry, and, particularly, “Thank You for Saying Thank You,” is highly metasemiotic and, as such, forces the reader to analyze not just the language of everyday life, but also similarly automatized thought patterns. “Thank You for Saying Thank You” challenges the most basic cognitive processes as it forces us to reconsider the face value of words, and, by extension, the habit of interpreting meaning based on surface information. Almost like a riddle, the poem slows down our cognition both structurally and semantically and forces us to abandon the cognitive patterns that are generally used in the interpretation of input. As such, we are forced to undertake more complex, temporally demanding semantic analyses, which in turn interrupt the flow of objectively measured time. By displacing the reader’s cognition from commonly used neural pathways of spatial analysis, the poem asserts a new kind of rhythm that, at least in the case of “Thank You for Saying Thank You,” is certainly not easy to adjust to.

This is the quality that all poems possess to a certain degree, regardless of the modality they are presented in. Printed books, as the medium in which poetry is mostly consumed, change the temporal perception of individuals by default, as they replace a highly information-laden stream of linear input in the form of speech with a seemingly static equivalent. However, poets like Bernstein show us how despite the inherent restrictions on modality in written form, alternative resources can be used to achieve similar results. When read aloud, “Thank You for Saying Thank You” naturally enforces a staccato rhythm, with the descending accentuation of the sentence often clashing with the ascending transitional accent in, for example, noun phrases such as “the / triumph and the / human imagination.” Although such breaks are felt most clearly in speech, the placement of the verses on the page results in a similar process when read silently, supplementing for a lack of overt audio input with a visual alternative. Bernstein’s poetry is, of course, available in other modalities and media, including the digital format, but even in that space its representation as text has the same effect as the printed version.

Bernstein’s contemporary, bpNichol, was one of the first poets who demonstrated the multimodal adaptability of poetry, by placing it into the digital realm of early computer technology. Whereas Nichol’s poetry is often classified as a form of visual or “concrete” poetry (Borkent 2009), implying a focus on form and space, the modalities of his poetic practice were

deeply temporal and grounded in what Reis (1996, 295) calls “intersemiotic practice” but in our framework clearly falls under translingual practice. Nichol himself refers to his poetry as a “borderblur” (Nichol 2002, 134), which operates beyond stable structures and exists as a purely emergent and generative activity. Through his poetry, Nichol attempted to avoid the “language trap,” which operates on “stifling language” (Billingham 2000, 44), mirroring the ongoing efforts of translingualism to transcend traditional structuralist conceptions of stable languages.

One of Nichol’s first ventures in the field of digital poetry is the 1984 collection of poems entitled *First Screening*. The collection consists of a series of animated concrete poems that, through the process of digitizing, transform from synchronic icons into diachronic processes. The most dramatic enactment of this process occurs in “Construction One,” which appears at the 2:37 mark of the nine-minute video version of the series (Nichol 1984). The poem opens with a simple title in white letters on a black background, like all the other poems in the series. The poem consists of the words TOWER and BABEL. The poem begins with the word TOWER stacked repeatedly and with increasing speed until it forms a visual tower (Figure 1, left). The construction is interrupted by the words BABEL appearing in an inverse color scheme on the screen and moving at the same speed over the outline of the tower (Figure 1, right). During the transition, a machine-generated sound is heard, which apparently had a melodic quality when played on the original device on which the poem was written, but which turned into static in the translation of the work to the Hypercard format (Wooler 2013). The poem ends abruptly, and a black background appears on the screen once more.



Figure 1: “Construction One”
Source: Nichol 1984

“Construction One” foregrounds the constructive nature of language, showing how language emerges through increments of human practice, and sediments over time into a seemingly stable structure. This autochthonous construct is an assemblage of human practice over time, whose stability is an illusion that dissolves as soon as we begin questioning the concreteness of its building blocks. The denotational parable of the Biblical “Tower of Babel” exists only in the mind of the reader, intertextually conceived through TOWER and BABEL. But the poem itself is a binary construct, conceived from a language of zeroes and ones, which surfaces in the interface as the equally binary colors and signs. The interpretation of the poem, then, is not the work of language analysis, because the minimal input would scarcely provide much to work with. Rather, it is the product of the observers’ semiotic repertoires—of their vast repository of texts, stories, narratives, experiences, and references down to the smallest bit of information gleaned subconsciously from a childhood show when they were young. In other words, the language, or, better said, the meaning, comes from “actions with a history,” from the observers’ lifelong practice of interacting with the world.

Such practice is guided by the temporality afforded to the poem by its own unique medium. Where “Thank You for Saying Thank You” interrupts the reader’s automatic flow of information processing, “Construction One” temporally regulates the observer’s interpretation, from one-word-per-second increments to faster and more erratic episodes, such as the flickering of BABEL in the second half. The poem asserts its own tempo, beyond the digital time of the device, forcing the observer to conform to the playback through the content. “Reverie,” the poem preceding

“Construction One,” for example, does the same in reverse, by tracking the slow movement of the word HOE over the span of 45 seconds, keeping the same tempo until the end. Such temporal manipulation shows that even though “Construction One” operates within the digital context, it is capable of manipulating time even more rigorously than printed poetry.

At the same time, “Construction One” struggles against its own delimited temporality, having appeared in a medium that is nowadays in some ways more outdated than poetry in print. Whereas print poetry may provide the illusion of escaping time, of achieving canonical eternity, digital poetry, which only becomes possible in the postmodern era, submits the poem to the obsolescence of the technology it relies on. To write digital poetry is to submit—ruefully, joyfully, or naively—to the ephemeral nature of computer hardware and software.³ Nonetheless, Nichol’s “Construction One” shows that the ability to manipulate temporal settings is a quality engendered not by the technological medium but by poetry itself. Poetry, as the form that is by nature translingual, imposes obstacles and establishes boundaries within the temporal flow of interpretation, which is often mediated by automatic conceptions of practice; these obstacles and boundaries force the attentive reader to slow down. As one of the few literary genres that is able to do so in the twenty-first century, poetry should be an indispensable part of human life.

Conclusion

In his 2019 book, *The Politics of Translingualism*, Jerry Won Lee reaffirms the notion that translingual practice is not a new or modern invention but the way individuals have always “done” language. The translingual framework, in fact, asks us “to look to the present and the past to see what we have been neglecting all along” (Lee 2019, 4). We should recognize the historicity of language practice both as an emic event emerging from an individual’s history and as an etic activity sedimented in spatiotemporal frames of local “histories.” In other words, we should understand the big and small temporalities, the micro and macro histories, by looking at language practice from the “meso” level (Pennycook 2010).

This does not mean that spatial categories are downplayed, because space and locality are the direct product of situated language practice (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). The historicization of language unfolds on the axis of horizontal space, which flows alongside time, and is reconceptualized and resemiotized through language practice. Unlike the stable spatial categories Jameson attempts to outline in the art of postmodernism, translocal spaces are understood as always negotiable and changing, both in terms of how they are interpreted and, given the modern developments in technology, also in terms of their physical appearance. Space remains inextricable from time, and the structural division that separates them remains an artifact of attempts at generalizing, simplifying, and categorizing the experience of reality in the name of science.

What the continued overlap between fields in language studies and literature in fact tells us about science is that there is an increased need for “transdisciplinary” research. If we are to capture the complex realities of modern-day life, the methods and approaches we use must be equally complex and varied. What poets, writers, critics, linguists, translators, and philosophers all have in common is a sensitivity to language and to the diverse sociocultural and political entanglements that arise as part of language practice. Such sensitivity, when amplified through transdisciplinary work, could produce more holistic and accurate interpretations of what language is and what it does. Translingualism serves as a useful springboard for this sort of work, precisely because it does not purport to be a “model,” but a flexible, descriptive, and powerful framework for looking at reality. If, as Jameson (1972, v) tells us, “the history of thought is the history of its models,” then we need to continue to historicize our scientific approaches and, in doing so, understand their epistemology as performed, rather than preformed.

³ The leading historian of digital poetry, Chris Funkhouser, admits that digital poetry often entails obsolescence but argues that most digital poets do not aspire to “permanence” (2012, 215).

This, in a roundabout way, brings us back to poetry. As the form of art closest to the pulse of the immediate, lived reality, poetry remains an invaluable source of the human experience, with all its spatial, temporal, and microhistorical idiosyncrasies. Although postmodern poetry may not adequately represent postmodernism as a whole, and although the North American poets discussed here may not adequately represent postmodern poetry as a whole, we have at least demonstrated that time dominates many significant works of postmodern poetry. A theory of postmodernism should patiently reckon with such poems before it declares the predominance of space,⁴ or indeed any other dominant category, particularly given that poetry embodies translanguing practice. The production of poetry is an attempt at concretizing the fleeting moments of meaning making that in their complexity often evade us. The act of writing poetry shows translanguing practice at its most inventive, spectacular, and transcendental, and yet for the poets, always “natural,” because it is a reflection of their everyday experience of life. This holds true both for the literary greats and for middle school students trying to explicate their identities to the world (Seltzer 2020).

The latter, in particular, carries significant implications for the use of poetry in fostering translanguing education. The ongoing attempts to curricularize translanguing practice in the form of “translanguaging” (Garcia and Li 2014), and thus institutionally recognize the translanguing nature of the repertoires students bring to the classroom, have been impeded by extant linguistic policies, but also the materials and instruments used in language teaching. Using poetry not just to foster students’ creativity but also to develop their translanguing expression could assist in changing attitudes toward different language practices and legitimize said difference on account of the institutional credibility inherently awarded to poetry.

As a mode of artistic expression that has survived millennia, poetry is constantly reinvented, presented across different modalities, and given new life and meaning. Because of its ability to modulate the experience of time, poetry remains a shelter from the temporal anxieties imposed by the increasingly fast rhythm of life. The translanguing practice that goes into making a poem reminds us that the structures we believe to be indestructible, including language, are ultimately human-made and therefore malleable. This realization is in equal measure a source of comfort and concern, and it is with such complex questions of what should be preserved and what should be disposed of that future research will have to wrestle. This realization is perhaps also the reason why structuralist models of thought persist—it is much easier to believe the world makes sense than to commit yourself to the chaotic and often nonsensical reality that great art gives us a glimpse of. And of this, no art more so than poetry.

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⁴ The only postmodern poem discussed in detail by Jameson in *Postmodernism*, Bob Perelman’s “China,” suffers misreading. Whereas Jameson interprets the poem as schizophrenically fragmented, Perelman shows, in a response to Jameson’s reading, that the poem can just as well be read for the temporal experience of narrative continuity (1993, 314).

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