

A Recipe for Literacy: An Analysis of Translating as a Vernacular Literacy

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When discussing literacies, David Barton and Mary Hamilton specifically outline two: vernacular literacies and dominant literacies. Vernacular literacies are usually personal, rooted in everyday life, self-generated, and/or learned informally. On the contrary, dominant literacies are typically taught and used in more “formal” settings, such as school and work. In this essay, Eldredge will argue how translating her grandmother’s recipes is a vernacular literacy because of the way these recipes have personal value to her, are a part of her everyday life, are self-generated, include a network of exchange, and are informally learned.

Introduction

Every day we are faced with a vast variety of texts, of which we interact with differently. Some we use in the moment when they are needed and immediately discard them after they have fulfilled their purpose. Others we refer to every now and then and store them somewhere accessible for future reference. Some are made for formal organizations, while others are made for personal convenience. In any case, each text is produced and used differently, depending on the function and environment of the text.

One example of an everyday text being produced is a recipe, like the ones my grandmother made for our family. My grandmother is hands down the best cook on my dad’s side of the family. Whenever she makes anything, it is always from scratch and absolutely delicious. She cooks everything with lots of love and puts so much effort into everything she makes. I remember watching her when I was a kid and seeing her manage so many different side dishes, preparations, and the main dish itself with awe. Quite a few times she would make up a random meal using only ingredients that she had and without the help of the Internet. My favorite side dish would be her avocado

salad, or what I referred to as the “yummy stuff” when I was nine. It has corn, jalapeños, avocado, and beans, all topped with lime juice. I couldn’t even tell you what my favorite main dish is because everything is so wonderful, delicious, and unique in its own way. Asking me to make such a choice is about as easy as being asked to pick the best-looking blade of grass out of an entire field. When I became older, my grandmother would explain to me what she was doing and give some bits of advice. At some point in time, she decided to type out her most beloved recipes—everything from soups to empanadas to meats to seafood—into Word documents so that she could send them to her children and anyone else who may want them. Because her first language is Spanish, and it is the language she’s most comfortable with, she typed all of her recipes in Spanish. That’s not to say she’s incapable of speaking English, because quite frankly her English isn’t bad at all. In fact, my family often likes to speak a combination of English and Spanish—a language called Spanglish. However, if my grandmother is able to communicate in her native language, then more often than not she will. Writing the recipes in Spanish was not a problem for her children because they all know Spanish, too, but it was a problem for me because I am not quite fluent yet.

Let’s take a look at my grandmother’s cooking recipes. I might argue that they’re a **vernacular literacy** because of the personal, informal, and

Vernacular Literacies

Using Barton and Hamilton’s definition, vernacular literacies are literate practices that are rooted in everyday lives, self-generated by people in response to situations, and learned informally through emotional and material interactions in the world (251–255).

self-generated nature of her typing the recipes herself in Spanish and then handing them down to me, which I must translate to English also via personal, informal, and self-generated means. However, by observing the function and environment (namely, the vernacular nature) of my grandmother’s cooking recipes, we can also analyze the work I’ve done to translate them as another kind of vernacular literacy, according to David Barton and Mary Hamilton’s definition.

Defining Vernacular Literacies

Before I begin my analysis of vernacular literacies, it’s important to establish Barton and Hamilton’s definition of this concept. According to their analysis, vernacular literacies can be summarized into three main points:

- Vernacular literacies are rooted in everyday lives
- They are self-generated
- They are learned informally

First, they identify vernacular literacies as being “rooted in everyday experience and serve everyday purposes” (251). By this, they mean that vernacular literacies are not usually made by big institutions that serve a formal purpose but rather are more personal to the creator and are made to suit the creator’s everyday needs. With this personal aspect in mind, a deeper definition unfolds for Barton and Hamilton “[vernacular literacies] are entwined in people’s emotional lives” (255). Thus, what this indicates is that the particularly personal nature of vernacular texts is what makes them vulnerable to attaching themselves closely to people’s emotions. This is especially the case with my grandmother’s recipes, for they have a profoundly personal value to me.

Second, Barton and Hamilton make a key point that “Because of their relative freedom from formal institutional control, vernacular practices are more likely to be voluntary and self-generated, rather than being imposed externally” (253). Essentially, what the authors are saying here is that vernacular practices are not explicitly taught but rather are self-generated. For example, no one had to teach a young girl how to write in her diary, and no one had to teach an adult how to write reminders on sticky notes; both individuals self-generated their own vernacular texts. However, just because a text is self-generated does not necessarily imply that the maker had absolutely no help at all when creating it. In fact, Barton and Hamilton include in their analysis that, “Much of people’s reading and writing involved other people and was located in reciprocal networks of exchange” (254). They later clarify that these networks were typically people who are close to the maker of text, such as friends, neighbors, and family. For me, family definitely plays a role as a network when it comes to receiving and translating the texts.

Lastly, Barton and Hamilton regard vernacular activities as being “learned informally” (252). This draws particular attention to the fact that vernacular literacies are, more often than not, learned from an individual’s home and upbringing. In other words, the individual was not specifically taught how to do a particular activity and what to write; instead, they learned from observing others or by testing out their creative ideas. In addition to vernacular literacies being learned informally, they also don’t have a set role between the “student” and the “teacher.” Barton and Hamilton bring up this point when they state, “The roles of novice and learner are not fixed, but shift from context to context” (252). In other words, vernacular literacies do not require a strict learning setting where one person is the teacher and holder of knowledge, while a student is there solely to obtain the knowledge from the teacher; this is oftentimes the case for literacies in school or workplace settings. Rather, vernacular literacies not only lack the strict roles of teacher or student but also have an interchangeable nature of the

roles. To illustrate, imagine two friends, each with a different game on their phones. They both taught themselves how to play their respective game. When they come together and show each other how to play their games, one person is the “teacher” while the other is the “student.” But, right after that, the friend that was previously the “student” is now the “teacher” and the friend that was previously the “teacher” is now the “student.” This example demonstrates the interchangeable roles of “novice to learner” in which they “shift from context to context to context,” as mentioned by Barton and Hamilton.

Translating as Being Rooted in My Everyday Life

Now that I’ve established a clear definition, I can make a coherent argument about my recipe translations, as both a **translingual writing** activity and as a kind of vernacular literacy. Let’s begin with the first premise of

Translingual Writing

According to linguistics scholar Suresh Canagarajah, “While the term *multilingual* perceives the relationship between languages in an additive manner (i.e., combination of separate languages), *translingual* addresses the synergy, treating languages as always in contact and mutually influencing each other, with emergent meanings and grammars” (41).

the definition of vernacular literacies being rooted in everyday lives. Whether it be an official work document, a love letter, or a written conversation, translating texts is an everyday experience that most people are familiar with. And translingual writing doesn’t necessarily mean only moving between established languages, such as from Spanish to English. People also move from formal to informal modes within a language, or blend languages together, like my family’s use of Spanglish. Therefore, it’s a given to

say that translating a recipe is a kind of translingual writing that passes the first aspect of vernacular literacies. However, the production of the translated text and how that text is used may not be vernacular. Examine Figure 1 and Figure 2. Figure 1 shows the original recipe, while Figure 2 shows my altered version of the recipe. As you can see, not only has the text been translated, but the way that I produced the text also reflects my everyday life. In other words, I changed the aesthetic appeal of the recipe to mimic those that I see written in published cookbooks or online. For instance, the big center-aligned name of the recipe, the subheadings, the neatly justified list, etc. I made these changes because I wanted to be able to use it more easily. In essence, because it is produced to look like the way that I am typically accustomed to looking at recipes, I am able to use it more comfortably.

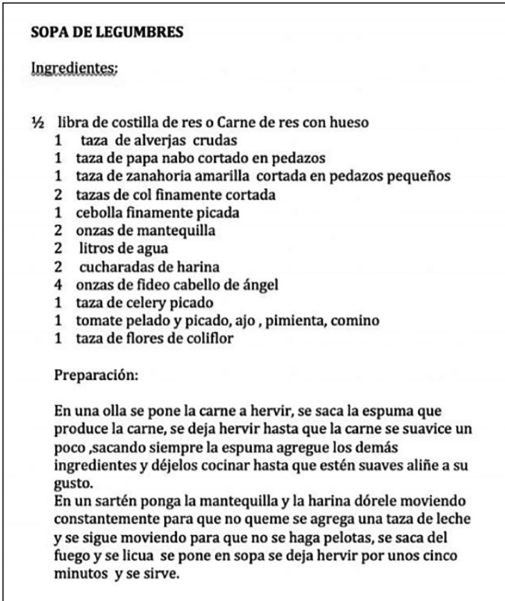


Figure 1: Image of my grandmother's original recipe.

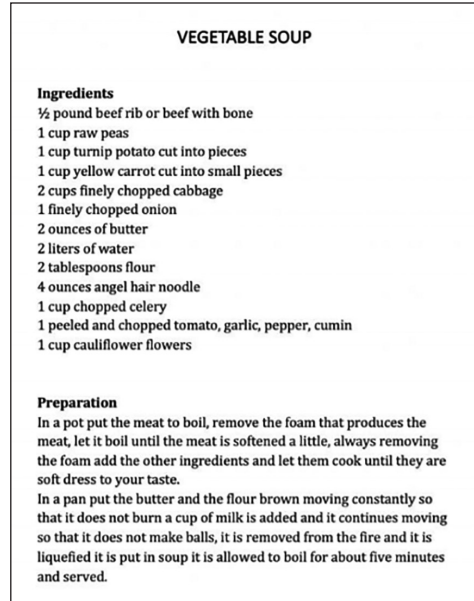


Figure 2: Image of my translated and altered version of the recipe from Figure 1.

Next comes the aspect of vernacular literacies as being part of my emotional life. This is definitely deemed true for a variety of reasons. First, these recipes were all handmade by my grandmother. She is an extremely good cook, for she not only knows how to make food taste delicious, but she can also feed any number of people who show up to eat it. This very fact alone already has a high emotional value to me because of the personal and loving nature of a home-cooked meal from my family. Second, it's something that will keep my grandmother's memory alive, even after she passes away. This is a unique characteristic of a vernacular literacy, as opposed to other literacies, for the intrinsic personal meaning that is attached to vernacular texts is nearly impossible to replicate in legal or professional texts. Lastly, one recipe in particular, called *fanesca*, is made at a particular time of the year as part of a religious practice since my family is Catholic. This meal is a soup that contains fish, vegetables, and lots of beans. It is traditional for Ecuadorians to eat this on Good Friday (the Friday before Easter Sunday), which is a Christian holiday that commemorates Jesus' death by not eating any meat; hence, the fish and vegetables. This recipe is particularly significant to me because my grandmother is the one that makes it every year. Nevertheless, the religious and emotional aspect that is tied to this recipe fits in perfectly with common examples of vernacular texts because they are personal to everyone.

My Self-Generated Recipes

The second premise to Barton and Hamilton's definition of vernacular literacies refers to being self-generated. This is especially applicable in my case because, quite frankly, no one instructed me to do this. This was done entirely out of self-interest, rather than being imposed upon me by an outside institution. Simply put, translating these recipes was ultimately my decision so that they can be used for my personal benefit, rather than being a mandatory task required for an institution. Additionally, these vernacular texts reflect my own originality in terms of how I chose to set them up. Simple choices behind this process of production include bold or underline, center or left aligned, numbered or not numbered. As mundane as it sounds, these texts were created carefully, in terms of how I want my altered documents to look. Although I had the freedom to do a lot more with it, I also had the freedom to leave it how my grandmother originally typed it. For example, I deliberately didn't number the "Preparation" section (as seen in Figure 2) because I wanted to keep some of the original structure that my grandmother made, in case it becomes handy when the texts are used. In other words, it appeared that my grandmother chunked certain sequences of steps together, so in order to maintain those sequences while cooking, I left it this way.

Although I am creating these texts myself, that doesn't mean I don't have any help. I do have some networks that are available to me. These networks, as previously mentioned, can be friends, neighbors or family; but in my case it is primarily family. Whenever I get stuck on something that isn't translating nicely, I would ask my dad to help me since he is fluent in Spanish. Aside from that, I could also reach out to my aunts, if need be, because they are also fluent in Spanish and have the original recipes from my grandmother. All of this points to two things about my vernacular literacy: (1) I have a whole web of family members available to me who can help me with the task of translating, and (2) this particular translingual vernacular literacy is travelling across three generations! From my grandmother, to my dad and aunts, to me, these recipes are being handed down. This, again, is a very unique quality of vernacular literacies that isn't the same with other literacies. For instance, how often do you see something that was made under more formal circumstances, like an essay written for school, being passed down from generation to generation? Probably not often, if even at all, which is what makes the personal aspect behind vernacular literacies so admirable.

Translating as Being Informally Learned

The last premise of vernacular literacies refers to being learned informally. No one taught me how to organize a recipe to my liking, and no one informed me of a strict guideline as to how this text “should” look when I have finished producing it. Rather, I informally learned over the years what I find to be aesthetically pleasing when it comes to recipe layouts, and I have informally taught myself how to utilize Microsoft Word. I also know how to do other things such as upload the files onto my Google Drive, flash drive, or any other means to ensure that these precious files don’t get lost. Likewise, when it comes to actually translating the recipes, I taught myself how to use translating websites to help me. An important takeaway here is that learning something informally doesn’t mean a person doesn’t have any resources, for people don’t necessarily learn in isolation. We’re all influenced by so many things when we’re learning something new, and we use tools for our learning. But informal *can* mean that a person picks and chooses freely among the resources they have available to them, without explicit guidelines from others.

Another aspect of informal learning includes the aforementioned networks, such as my dad. Whenever I have a question, I can just simply ask him. This doesn’t mean that he is a professor in the subject in Spanish, like many formal institutions have, nor does it mean that he is teaching me everything about it. Rather, he can just help answer a quick question and help me informally learn a little bit more about Spanish. Although he is helpful, it is ultimately up to me how I decide to translate into English. For example, I could ask him what a phrase means, and he could provide me with a directly-translated, choppy-sounding English phrase, but how I warp it to flow smoothly into my own writing is what makes translating these recipes my own personal literacy.

In regard to having family members teach me, there is another aspect to consider. Recall that my grandmother would teach me a little bit of how she would make her recipes. She would show me what she’s doing and how it might help something cook better or have more flavor. So, in this context, she is the “teacher” and I am the “student.” However, when the time came for her to email them to me, she had a bit of trouble. Therefore, I switched into the “teacher” role and she switched into the “student” role when I showed

Re-Thinking Genre Research

The ISU Writing Program tends to describe the concept of doing **genre research** as something a writer does when they need to produce a genre that already exists. But genre research also includes using knowledge about genres (such as recipes) that exist in the world to produce something personally meaningful, which might not match the genre conventions.

her how to upload Word documents into Gmail, so that she sends them. With reference to Barton and Hamilton saying that the roles of novice and expert are not set in place, but rather shift from context to context, we can further argue that these recipes are a vernacular literacy in terms of how they are used.

Conclusion

All in all, it's clear to see how translating my grandmother's recipes can be seen as a strictly vernacular literacy. The aspects that translating entails, including the personal value, the networks, and the self-generated aspect of it, would definitely qualify this translanguing literacy activity as a vernacular one. This contrasts greatly from Barton and Hamilton's view of recipes, for they argue that they are "part vernacular and part institutional" (257). Their view is that they are written at home or self-generated (vernacular) but are published in cookbooks or demonstrated on public television (dominant/institutional). I would like to counter their argument because through my analysis, we saw that my recipes involve unique features that their view does not include, such as the variety of networks I used and the interchangeable roles of teacher and student that occurred. In addition, my grandmother's recipes are not publicly advertised, for they are personal to the family. Therefore, according to my view of recipes, I argue that they are strictly vernacular as opposed to being both vernacular and dominant.

Nonetheless, the big question still remains: What do we gain by examining people's use of vernacular literacies? To answer this, I would argue that we gain a whole new perspective of the things that are seemingly mundane or less valuable. For example, in the rebuttal above, we see that two different perspectives of the same literate activity (in this case, writing recipes) can offer different views on whether they are vernacular or institutional. If we were to only acknowledge Barton and Hamilton's view of recipes as being self-generated and publicly advertised, then we would completely miss out on the personal and complex view that I hold for my recipes that others may not be aware about. In other words, by examining my use of recipes as a vernacular activity, others may gain a new perspective of recipes that they may not have even thought about before. Thus, they gain more of an open mind towards different activities as being unique in their own ways.

Works Cited

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