

Navigating Languages and Genres in a “Global” University

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Abstract

The reflective essay introduces the culminating project from a specific iteration of Perspectives on the Humanities, the second universally required composition course at NYU Shanghai. For this project, students investigate a self-selected term of sociocultural significance that defies smooth migration across linguistic boundaries, especially between English and Chinese. Students can convey their research and insights through one of three genres: a “traditional” argumentative essay, an extended note, or a historical narrative. Inspired in part by Raymond Williams, this assignment aims to enhance students’ rhetorical, linguistic, and cultural awareness by navigating the complexities of language and genre in a globalized context.

This reflective essay introduces the culminating project for a theme-based composition course, titled Perspectives on the Humanities, that is mandatory for all New York University Shanghai undergraduate students during their third semester. The course focuses on “untranslatables,” which the project prompt defines as socio-culturally significant terms that defy smooth migration across languages, particularly between English and Chinese. For the project, students apply content knowledge and composition skills acquired in the first half of the semester to explore a self-selected term as an untranslatable. They may choose this term from a curated wordlist or propose their own, subject to instructor approval. Their main task is to present their research findings and insights in one of the recommended writing genres that they determine to be most suitable for their topic. Additionally, they also submit a reflective essay where they explain their goals and the rationale behind their choice of genre.

As the prompt makes clear, the assignment is partly inspired by Raymond Williams’ seminal work *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Williams, 1976/2015). Unlike other scholarly endeavors that focus on the circulation of discipline-specific terminology within academia (Bal, 2002; Culler, 2000), Williams’ vocabulary is “significantly not the specialized vocabulary of a specialized discipline . . . but a general vocabulary ranging from strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday language to words, which, beginning in specialized contexts, have become quite common in descriptions of wider areas of thought and experience” (Williams, 1976/2015, p. xxvii). The suggested terms in the prompt cover a similar range. While some readily find use in specialized areas, they all retain significance as verbal vectors of general social and cultural change.

However, the assignment diverges from Williams’ project by shifting the focus from the complexity of linguistic evolution within a primary language or cultural tradition, (namely English), to the complexity of interlinguistic transfer evident in the translation of specific words (or the verbal representation of particular concepts) from English, or other European languages, to Chinese, often via Japanese in the modern era, and vice versa. Notably, the distinctions between the two approaches—interlinguistic and intralinguistic—are not always clear-cut, as the semantic complexity of terms in one language often complicates their transfer into another. Essentially, this assignment invites students to extend Williams’ efforts by bringing other

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languages into their terminological investigations in order to address the issue of translatability in intercultural studies.

Different Languages

The awareness that terms and concepts do not easily cross linguistic borders is not new. In the West, it dates back at least two centuries to German scholars such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his seminal 1813 essay “On the Different Methods of Translating,” for instance, Schleiermacher (2012) observed that in philosophy, more than in other domains,

any language . . . encompasses within itself a single system of concepts which, precisely because they are contiguous, linking and complementing one another within this language, form a single whole—whose several parts, however, do not correspond to those to be found in comparable systems in other languages, and this is scarcely excluding ‘God’ and ‘to be,’ the noun of nouns and the verb of verbs. (pp. 59-60)

This insight resonates with the mid-twentieth-century Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits a connection between linguistic structures and the worldviews of their users. Although extreme interpretations of this thesis have been largely abandoned by scholars in relevant fields, its moderate versions have gained traction in recent years (Boroditsky, 2011; Deutscher, 2010). Philosopher Charles Taylor (2016), for instance, contends that the issues raised by the thesis of linguistic relativity are “most pertinent and alive . . . when we are looking at divergent ethical or religious ways of life, or distinct political structure and social imaginaries” (p. 328), for in those cases, we are not dealing with universally shared physical realities but distinct human realities that are shaped by and reflected in the languages we use. Taylor further notes that these differences exist not only between languages but also manifest themselves among modes of diversity of discourse within languages.

The untranslatables assignment is designed, in part, to help our linguistically diverse students gain firsthand insight into the complexities of linguistic and cultural diversity. According to Barbara Cassin (2014), chief editor of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, untranslatables should not be taken literally to mean that they cannot be translated, but are

what one keeps on (not) translating . . . [because] their translation, into one language or another, creates a problem . . . [the untranslatable] is a sign of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual frameworks can simply be superimposed. (p. xvii)

The assignment also serves as a practical enactment of a translingual approach to teaching writing, one that is simultaneously more conservative and more progressive than approaches typically advocated by sociolinguists and literacy scholars (Canagarajah, 2012; Lu & Horner, 2013). It is more conservative because it invites students to explore cross-language relations without challenging the underlying monolingual orientation or questioning the independent status of individual languages. At the same time, it is more progressive in its emphasis on interlingual rather than intralingual practices. Unlike approaches that focus on varieties of English or the inherently translingual nature of communication through English, this assignment centers on the productive challenges of cross-language communication, spotlighting individual terms and expressions with sociocultural significance.

As an illustration in class, I use Lydia Liu’s (2004) classic theorization of the super-sign yi/barbarian. The Chinese term yi was banned in a treaty signed between the Qing government and the British in the aftermath of the Second Opium War (1856-1860) due to its presumed

connotation of “barbarian,” which the British claimed insulted their honor. Liu’s argument is that regardless of the semantic complexity of *yi*, the British interpreted it narrowly and used that interpretation as a pretext for their aggression against the Qing. This imposition was so effective that it not only led to the disappearance of *yi* as a reference to foreign others, whether neutral or derogatory, but reshaped Western perceptions of traditional Chinese views on the outside world and gave rise to the “theory of Chinese xenophobia that has prevailed for so long in modern historiography” (Liu, 2004, p. 39). *Yi*/barbarian is thus a super-sign in that the meaning of one term (“barbarian”) is superimposed as the signified of the other, but in the context of the class, *yi* is also an untranslatable because of its cultural importance and its semantic richness. As we continue to talk about Chinese relations with the external world, we continue to find it difficult to capture *yi*’s full complexity through a single English word.

For the final project, the multilinguals in the class are encouraged to probe such problematic cases linking two or multiple terms from different languages, particularly Chinese and English. This is feasible in the specific demographic and linguistic context of NYU Shanghai, where English is the primary language of instruction, yet the majority of students are Chinese nationals. Non-Chinese students, on the other hand, typically complete a four-semester Chinese language program during their first two years. By the time they enroll in Perspectives on Humanities, most have gained sufficient exposure to engage with Chinese terms without undue intimidation. With such an audience, it would feel pedagogically inadequate to dwell solely on intralingual practices. Instead, I aim to strike a balance by encouraging native Chinese speakers who are all functionally competent in English and other multilinguals to shuttle productively between the languages they know well while making allowances to ensure that monolingual English speakers don’t feel disadvantaged. Through listening to peer presentations, responding thoughtfully, and reviewing each other’s work, students in such a class not only engage in serious intellectual exploration of course topics, but collaboratively create a pedagogical environment that reflects the ethos of a “global” university, as NYU brands itself (New York University, n.d.).

Multiple Genres

The second key feature of the assignment is its emphasis on specificity in the academic genres students should use to present their research and ideas. They can choose from three options: (i) a “traditional” argumentative essay; (ii) a substantial note or entry modeled after Williams’ (1976/2015) notes on keywords such as “culture” or “society”; or (iii) a narrative essay exploring the process by which a foreign concept is assimilated into another language or culture. Why these three? One way to understand the options is to see them as a means of helping students develop a more nuanced understanding of what is often vaguely referred to as “academic writing.” Gerald Graff (2004) once claimed that “all academics, despite their many differences, play a version of the same game of *persuasive argument*,” which he terms “arguespeak” (pp. 21-22). Be that as it may, it would be an oversimplification to assume that academic writing is necessarily argumentative. As Kenneth Burke’s (1974) famous parlor metaphor suggests, academics often join an ongoing conversation mid-way: then “someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally’s assistance” (pp. 110-111). Yet this is not the only mode of academic operation. Oftentimes, academics may just as well steer the conversation in a new direction by sharing new perspectives or providing new information without explicitly agreeing or disagreeing with others. In those cases, they still build on other’s ideas—otherwise there is no way of telling what is “new”—but they can do so without employing the tactics of attack or defense.

The prominence of argumentation as a mode of academic writing is no historical accident. Its origins are rooted in the classical concept of rhetoric as persuasive discourse. Although classical rhetoric emphasized speech, while contemporary academic argumentation is predominantly a matter of written or printed words, the continuities and connections remain undeniable. In contrast, modes of writing centered on information processing and sharing are relatively modern developments. Historians of rhetoric and composition trace these modes back to the early modern period, emerging alongside the rise of science, when natural philosophers, such as Thomas Sprat and John Locke, advocated for a discourse characterized by clear, accurate, and objective description and explanation rather than one that uses “encrustations of verbal ornament to try to mold mere opinions” (Connors, 1997, p. 211). Recently, the antagonistic relationship between this new discourse and the old rhetoric has been explicitly addressed by John Guillory (2022) who suggests that the decline and death of rhetoric as a form of knowledge (techne) in the modern world should be linked to the emergence of the idea of information as knowledge that has become completely detachable from the knower (pp. 150-153).

The research essay assignment encourages students to engage with the inherent multimodality of academic writing by prompting them to reflect on the distinctions between different academic genres. A key aspect of this reflection is understanding the crucial difference between modes and genres; at risk of excessive reduction, modes are logical constructs whereas genres, as understood in writing studies over recent decades, are rhetorical forms. Bawarshi and Reiff (2010), for instance, define genres as “a typified rhetorical way of recognizing, responding to, acting meaningfully and consequentially within, and thus participating in the reproduction of, recurring situations” (p. 213). Notably, there is no one-to-one correspondence between modes and genres. A single genre can incorporate multiple modes, while each mode can appear across various genres. For example, an argument essay is rarely purely argumentative. It may have an argumentative framework but feature analytical or informational content in its main body. Similarly, a research-based narrative essay might well contain elements of argumentation without losing its primary status as a narrative essay. In a writing class, students need knowledge of the discursive modes in order to better conceive of and execute the genres they want to work within.

This goal explains why, in describing the three genres in the prompt, I am reluctant to prescribe rigid rules or narrowly define what each should look like but prefer to proceed inductively by redirecting students’ attention to the generic features of course readings that can serve as models for imitation. In doing so, I follow the advice of scholars like Amy Devitt (2004) who advises teaching genres as “both constraint and choice so that individual awareness can lead to individual creativity” (p. 191). In other words, in handling any genre, writing instructors should address both its governing norms and its inherent flexibility, and strike a balance between recognizing constraints and empowering writers to adapt the genre to their content and rhetorical goals. Take, for example, the relatively well-defined genre of the dictionary entry. Students should understand that they must remain invisible throughout, avoiding the first person as an unwelcome intrusion, and strive to convey information fairly and in an unbiased tone, following guidelines such as Wikipedia’s policy on neutrality, which states that writers may “describe disputes, but not engage in them” (“Wikipedia,” 2025, para. 4). Yet, even within these boundaries, there is still significant room for creativity and variation, particularly in deciding how to frame the entry’s focus or emphasize specific details.

Two Illustrations

To conclude, I will briefly examine two successful student projects that demonstrate how the themes of translation and genre intersect in the translingual practices fostered by this

assignment, projects I actively engaged with as a co-participant throughout their research and drafting processes. The first project focused on the frequently used Chinese term *yuan* 缘, which has its roots in Buddhist philosophy but has evolved to signify the idea of a preordained connection between people, events, or circumstances, often imbued with a sense of inevitability. Commonly translated as “fate,” “destiny,” or “serendipity,” the term, however, fits the category of “simple untranslatables” named in the assignment prompt, as it lacks a near equivalent in English. While the student was very aware of the translational gap surrounding this word, and hence her word choice, she initially struggled to identify the thesis of her essay, a challenge many students face when rethinking their rigid yet vague notions of what academic writing ought to be. It is only through the examples provided by Williams (1976/2015) and Cassin (2014), which she learned to approach as writings belonging to a distinct genre, that she recognized that an encyclopedia-style entry does not necessitate a traditional thesis statement in the same way an argumentative essay does. Instead of looking for an argument in the narrow sense, she decided eventually to concentrate her writerly energies on addressing key factual questions: What did *yuan* originally mean as a Buddhist term? What factors contributed to its evolution into an everyday term? How do contemporary conditions further complicate its use and understanding especially among today’s youth, with their growing sense of control and individualism on the one hand and their passivity in an increasingly competitive urban environment on the other? It turns out that these questions served as a foundation for her inquiry and helped her identify a logical structure for her entry.

The second student chose the contemporary Chinese term for democracy, *minzhu* 民主, and was keen to explore the tensions surrounding the nature of the Chinese regime. He initially framed his inquiry as a response to a polarized debate: Is China’s regime authoritarian and therefore bad, as Western critics argue, or is it meritocratic and more authentically democratic, as its defenders claim, given the government’s professed mission to “serve the people”? Yet he was held back from pursuing this topic for two reasons: his lack of confidence in his ability to tackle such a politically charged topic persuasively, and his struggle to connect it to the theme of translation. He ultimately overcame these challenges by shifting focus from the polemical aspects of the topic to its factual and translational dimensions. Recognizing that China’s discourse on *minzhu* has been shaped by Western ideas of democracy, he reframed his project around critical questions: How did *minzhu* become the accepted translation of democracy? Who introduced the concept into Chinese political thought? How did they understand it? How was the term instrumental in driving political transformation in China? These questions, he realized, were critical prerequisites for any substantive discussion of the contemporary Chinese political system, and addressing them would constitute his contribution to the conversation. And since his writerly focus was not primarily on the evolving meanings of a term, but on the figures from the late Qing to the early twentieth century (W. A. P. Martin, Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen, and Mao Zedong) and on how their ideas, aspirations, and struggles shaped the term’s trajectory, it was natural for him to adopt the historical narrative as his genre.

The selection of these student samples is deliberate, not random. They illustrate, albeit implicitly, as many students have come to realize in completing their projects, that the traditional argumentative essay is neither the sole nor necessarily the most prevalent form of academic writing, contrary to their long-held assumptions. These projects also prompt students to see English not as a frictionless vehicle for global communication, but as a site of complexity shaped by cultural and linguistic particularities. While such insights may not really surprise multilingual students in a diverse writing classroom, they are particularly striking in an era saturated with news and hands-on experiences of artificial intelligence’s linguistic prowess. In a moment when AI appears capable of delivering seamless, fully automated translation, these reflections on the

generative potential of untranslatability offer a timely reminder of the enduring importance of cultural difference in an ostensibly flattened world.

ASSIGNMENT

Untranslatables

The task for the final project is to investigate an untranslatable of your choice: i.e. a socially or culturally significant term or concept that does not easily migrate across linguistic boundaries without undergoing significant changes or transformations. They are “keywords” in Raymond Williams’ sense, and should be approached as such.

However, our focus is not on the history of conceptual evolution within one language or cultural tradition, but on the complexity or difficulty of interlinguistic transfer. This is where Lydia Liu’s notion of super-signs becomes relevant, for in many cases, what you will be dealing with are hetero-linguistic signs that are thought to be semantically equivalent or interchangeable, and yet whose equivalence or interchangeability, upon closer examination, is established on problematic grounds. The three compound terms God/Shangdi, yi/barbarian, and China/Zhongguo all belong in this category. We can easily expand this list to include others that are equally complex and worth investigating: art/yishu 艺术, economy/jingji 经济, feudal/fengjian 封建, humor/youmo 幽默, logic/luoji 逻辑, nature/ziran 自然, race/zhong or zhongzu 种族, right/quanli 权利, romantic/langman 浪漫, science/kexue 科学. . . If you have no particular word in mind, feel free to choose from this list. However, these are not the only possibilities for the project. Simple untranslatables, words that present difficulties in translation from one language into another, do exist. For example, gender or sexuality does not have an easily recognizable “equivalent” in Chinese while Chinese concepts such as *guanxi* or *minzu* have entered English untranslated. These are no less suitable for the project than the “super-signs” mentioned above.

If English is the only language you are proficient enough in to explore linguistic nuances, you can instead investigate how everyday words take on specialized meanings, how these meanings vary across different fields of knowledge, and how they, in turn, influence common usage. For instance, the word “romantic” in everyday language may differ significantly from its meaning during the “Romantic” period; “realism” conveys one set of ideas in literature and the arts but something quite different in business or politics; in philosophy, “identity” holds meanings that are often far removed from its current everyday usage. Can you clarify these differences through the perspective of historical semantics, as Williams does in *Keywords*?

Genre

This is again your choice, which should depend on your writerly goal, your target audience, and the information you are able to gather through your research. You may do any of the following:

- Craft an argumentative essay on a super-sign, aiming to expose the underlying issues in equating the terms that form this super-sign (Liu/Wong);
- Develop a substantial note/entry on a keyword or a cluster of words used across multiple areas or contexts, with the goal to explicate their semantic differences (Williams/Auvray-Assayas);
- Write a historical narrative detailing how a foreign concept was first introduced into another language or culture and how it eventually found a semantic “equivalent” there (Hayton/Wu).

The final submission will include both the main project and a reflection in which you discuss your

goals and the rationale behind your choice of genre. In the reflection, explain what motivated you to select this particular genre over the other options, why it is an effective medium for presenting your research findings, and how your choice of genre influenced the content or structure of your writing.

Basic Requirements

- Main text: 5-10 pages
- Reflection: 2-5 pages
- Research: Use a minimum of 5 academic sources
- Format: MLA or Chicago

Please note: The total page count, including both the main text and reflection, should be at least 10 pages.

GenAI use

You can NOT use GenAI to compose any part of the essay. While you may seek limited language support such as asking for an alternative word choice, you must never use it to revise or polish your essay. You will not receive a higher grade for sentence-level fluency if it is suspected that GenAI was used. More importantly, copy-pasting AI-generated content or language constitutes academic dishonesty. Any suspected instance of GenAI-related plagiarism will be reported, and depending on the severity of the violation, may result in penalties ranging from grade deductions to failure of the essay or course.

Evaluation Criteria

- Goal-Genre-Audience fitness
- Depth of understanding and critical insight
- Organization and paragraph development
- Use of research findings
- Clarity and effectiveness of language
- Citation and format

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Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v9i2.241>.

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