

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);

[This file is supplemental material to Chen Lin, *Navigating Languages and Genres in a “Global” University*, prompt 9.2 (2025), doi: 10.31719/pjaw.v9i2.241]

- 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

Works Cited

Auvray-Assayas, Clara, et al. "To Translate." *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, edited by Barbara Cassin, translated by Steven Rendall et al., Princeton UP, 2014, pp. 1139-1155.

Hayton, Bill. "The Invention of China: *Zhongguo*-China." *The Invention of China*, Yale UP, 2020, pp. 7-34.

Liu, Lydia H. "The Birth of a Super-Sign." *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making*, Harvard UP, 2004, pp. 31-69.

Williams, Raymond. "Culture." *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, new ed., Oxford UP, 2015, pp. 49-54.

Wong, Lawrence Wang Chi. "Barbarians or Not Barbarians: Translating *Yi* in the Context of Sino-British Relations in the 18th and 19th Century." *Towards a History of Translating: In Celebration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the Research Centre for Translation*, edited by Lawrence Wang Chi Wong, vol. 3, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013, pp. 293-388.

Wu, Hui, "Lost and Found in Transnation: Modern Conceptualization of Chinese Rhetoric." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2009, pp. 148-166.