

Designing a Racial Project for WAC: International Teaching Assistants and Translational Consciousness

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Abstract: This essay argues that international teaching assistants (ITAs) bring to their writing and teaching of writing a perspective shaped by translation. They occupy intercultural spaces that make them acutely sensitive to complexities of language, and by extension, to the struggle to write well. Their struggle to write across languages and cultures can and should be recognized and mobilized in the teaching of writing, not only as an effort to achieve writing competence but also as a deflection of dominant ideologies inherent in dominant languages. This essay suggests that WAC practitioners activate this between-language experience toward producing writing instruction that is culturally and racially aware by considering ITAs models of translational consciousnesses—mindsets habituated to the process of working between languages and cultures and increasingly valuable to universities where the ability to understand and discuss cultural and racial difference is central to the collegiality of the institution. As WAC practitioners, we must help our ITAs recognize the significance and value of their conditions of translation in order to begin to unpack the layers of complexity that cultural and racial difference brings to writing practices across campus.

I have become—as I’m sure everyone does who has left his or her country—someone else. Someone who has translated myself into other cultural codes. [...] And since it is a generally acknowledged idea that something is lost in translation, it should come as no surprise that we unlearn—at least partially—what we used to be, to make room for what we have become.

—Négar Djavadi, *Disoriental*, translated from the French by Tina Kover

Writing professionals (Rodrigue 2012, Simpson, et al. 2015) often remark on the great value graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) add to writing across the curriculum programs on campus. However, international graduate teaching assistants (ITAs) are not often singled out as a resource for writing programs, either for writing across the curriculum or for writing in the disciplines.¹ In fact, ITAs are often thought to be struggling with their own writing in ways that make them unreliable personnel for the assessment of good writing form and style, even as they are often extraordinary assets when it comes to content knowledge. Refuting this common perception, this essay argues, first, that ITAs bring to their writing and teaching of writing a perspective shaped by translation, including keen understandings regarding 1) translation processes, 2) the power of words to convey (and mis-convey), shape (and distort) ideas, and 3) cultural biases of language structures and use. Second, ITAs occupy intercultural spaces that make them acutely sensitive to complexities of language, and by extension, to the struggle to write well. ITAs, as speakers of other languages at universities (like my

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own large, southeastern, R1, public institution) where English is the predominant language spoken and required for academic writing, move between their “foreign” idiolect and the university’s preponderant English. I am not saying that either is a singular, monolithic entity (Hall et al., 2017, p. 88), but rather I am noting that English, in its various forms, is dominant on campus. It is the language of identification, naming teams, mascots, mottos; it is the language of policy and procedure used for everything from mission statements to elevator safety; it is the language of course delivery (except, perhaps, in the campus’s foreign language classrooms); and it is the language of the majority of campus lectures, talks, and conversations. All other languages, and their speakers, are minoritized by comparison. In considering ITAs as central to thinking about writing in ways that facilitate heightened cultural awareness, I focus on their insights stemming from their comparative lived experiences in language.

Finally, ITAs struggle to write across languages and cultures in ways that can and should be recognized and mobilized in the teaching of writing, not only as an effort to achieve writing competence but also as a deflection of dominant ideologies inherent in the dominant language itself. I propose that we, WAC practitioners, activate this between-language experience toward producing writing instruction that is culturally and racially aware. To do this, we must consider ITAs models of translational consciousnesses, that is, as students with mindsets habituated to the process of working between languages and cultures and who are increasingly valuable to universities where the ability to understand and discuss cultural and racial difference is central to the collegiality of the institution.

ITAs, I suggest, are crucial resources for WAC programs that want to broaden WAC’s purview from the basic early tenet of recognizing difference in disciplinary writing to recognizing difference in culture and race effecting that writing. Chris Anson (2012) notes that cultural difference is often avoided in WAC workshops because “the subject of race is perceived to generate layers of additional complexity over [writing] principles, theories, and pedagogies [...even when] issues of diversity are often at the center of these instructional challenges,” in teaching genre and rubrics or making effective evaluations of student writing, for example (p. 20-21). Downplaying race in favor of “communication competence” (Anson, 2012, p. 22) and grappling with what has been called “language interference,” instructors avoid these complications to teaching, particularly teaching writing (Anson, 2012, p. 23). However, I am suggesting that this very language interference, resulting from racial and cultural difference, revealed in processes of translation in which ITAs are immersed, discloses assumptions carried in language, that is, the ideologies of its dominant users.

In short, ITAs’ perspectives, positions, and practices living, working, writing between languages provide a comparative view on differing ideologies at work in language, oral or written. As WAC practitioners, we must help our ITAs recognize the significance and value of their conditions of translation in order to begin to unpack the layers of complexity that cultural and racial difference brings to writing practices across campus.

ITAs in US Classrooms

Two years ago, Austin Gorman and I began a Grad WAC Fellows² professional development program designed to assist graduate teaching assistants introduce and assess writing in their classrooms. As part of the program, we observed ITAs teach a brief lesson on some aspect of writing—formal or informal—to their lab and lecture sections. In the two classes profiled here, ITAs introduced a writing assignment into an existing syllabus and into a program that valued writing as a competence but had been largely ignored in instruction. The observed lessons covered client letter writing and rendering algorithms into plain English.

It was these observations that first brought to my attention the possibilities for greatly increased global cultural awareness available through writing instruction by non-writing experts. That is, the

very model of WAC mission was being staged in these classrooms, with the additional benefit of addressing the lack that Anson (2012) detected. These ITA writing lessons revealed two starkly different outcomes in working with STEM undergraduates on writing—the first a cultural addition, the second a negative detraction. In different ways, both lessons highlighted ways that cultural and racial awareness could have produced richer outcomes had they been noted and acted upon. At the end of each scenario, I speculate on the possibilities for making more of these scenes of teaching, which I came to in post-observation reflection. These examples demonstrate what I mean when I suggest WAC programs could recognize ITA linguistic capacities that could help writing and writing instruction become more culturally and racially aware.

Sababa, a Civil Engineering doctoral student from Bangladesh, led an assignment on letter writing; the letter from student project teams was directed to an imagined client. The most egregious errors that Sababa found in first drafts all concerned common courtesies. Her students' letters tended to barrel into the project discussion without considering the niceties of address. They also tended to end abruptly with a list of names without salutation. For Sababa, the most important part of the letter was its potential for other-orientation, for stepping into the shoes of the addressee. American instructors would likely address letter structure as genre or custom; addressing the client would become a matter of "proper form."

Indeed, Sababa presented students an example from her US advisor.³ Such modeling reminds us of Rosa & Flores's (2015) concept of "appropriateness," which argues that "appropriateness-based approaches to language education are implicated in the reproduction of racial normativity by expecting language-minoritized students to model their linguistic practices after the white speaking subject" (p. 151). Further, they suggest the White listener hears the minoritized-language speaker in racialized ways, no matter how good the quality of the dominant language. While appropriate Standard English use operates as the demonstrated standard, Sababa also presents an unspoken cultural standard—the language of "courtesy and grace." This potential for other-orientation is, I suggest, an opportunity missed when we do not recognize the ITAs facility in working across languages and cultures.

Still we might ask ourselves: did the language of courtesy or the language of appropriateness persuade students, and does it matter which discourse achieves success? The final letters met the requirements for a good letter, so why consider at all the operative terms for making the value judgment of good writing? Does such a consideration of standard language appropriateness versus minority cultural consideration belong in an engineering classroom? I suggest that we miss important cultural dimensions if we ignore the conditions of instruction. Sababa's view gives voice not only to audience, but a particular take on audience—not simply a client with the power of decision-making about the project, but a client deserving empathy. Such an ethics of letter-writing might be undone by the professor's model that shores up the notion of appropriateness, which, in turn, potentially reinforces American undergraduate perspectives that they inhabit positions of dominance, vis-à-vis the ITA, in terms of language superiority. In short, if the cultural underpinnings of Sababa's view were noted, students could consider the global circumstances in which engineering projects are decided.

Farhad, an industrial engineer from Iran, was teaching a Statistics course for Engineers, covering algorithmic formulas, among other mathematical topics. In his class, a discourse of objectivity was operating similarly, I suggest, to the discourse of appropriateness in Sababa's class: scientific reason and rationality function as Western standards of objectivity, often considered unbiased (Sharma, 2018, p. 31). Farhad planned an in-class writing assignment that asked students to convert an algorithm, expressed numerically, into plain English. The algorithm was designed to predict the time available for free swimming at a local pool based on the number of planned swim lesson times, anticipated swim lesson participants, number of instructors, and hours the pool was open. Once the

algorithm was composed mathematically, Farhad asked students to write out in a series of sentences the steps coded in the algorithms. The students set about the work with enthusiasm. I asked a nearby group if they were clear on what to do; a female student answered yes, adding that they all liked to work for Farhad because “he was so cute.” The characterization was, as Fitch & Morgan (2003) put it in other circumstances, both endearing, but also demeaning (p. 301); the writing lesson, while valuable, was also reduced to a certain romanticism of the exoticized individual.

The lesson called for a translation from one mode (numbers) to another (words), from formulas to sentences in English, and even this premise for the lesson could have interrogated the seemingly objective algorithm (Spielkamp, 2017⁴). Although it was not discussed at the time of the writing lesson, plain English versions could have revealed unexplored social aspects of the algorithm: there are no considerations for individual circumstances, including special needs, just as there are no economic or class considerations of pool location and access. More importantly to my mind is the raciolinguistic bias (Rosa & Flores, 2017) that aligns English with scientific rationality operating as an ideology in the female student’s comment. That is, she works hard for the foreign graduate student not because he is highly intelligent and articulate, but because he is handsome and exotic. Implied in her comment is that other languages and cultures are not as rational as American English.

None of the discussions of cultural difference happened in these two classrooms. But this is my point: ITAs are resources for racially and culturally aware writing instruction that we are not yet recognizing.

Contexts for Anti-Racial Projects

Although we often think of international students as bringing cultural diversity into the classroom, and indeed graduate schools often wax eloquent about the ways that undergraduate students will learn about other cultures from interacting with their international graduate TAs in labs and classrooms, few ITAs I have encountered⁵ would agree with this proclamation, even though it sounds like it should be a natural consequence of having an instructor from another country. A primary reason for this stems from two strands of US history that displaced Native American populations and enslaved African bodies as part of the violent acquisition of territory in the earliest colonial period. As Omi & Winant (2015) put it: “From the very inception of the American nation, race has provided a *template* for other sociopolitical cleavages and conflicts” (p. 246, ital. in orig.). They identify race as a principal strategy of “‘othering’ and marginalization” (p. 263) based on visibility and corporeality consisting in the “‘fact of blackness,’ and in numerous ways, of ‘brownness,’ ‘redness,’ ‘yellowness,’ and indeed ‘whiteness’” that constitutes a kind of “‘phenomenology’ of race” (p. 248). Race operates in the United States as a “master category” (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 246); racialization becomes a factor in US classrooms, and cultural difference gets rewritten as racial difference.

Race never operates in isolation; theories of intersectionality recall a broad range of overlapping factors involved in defining groups as “other”: “Gender, class, sexuality, religion, culture, language, nationality, and age,” are just as often used “to justify structures of inequality, differential treatment, subordinate status” (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 105). Significantly for our purposes, one of the factors of discrimination subsumed under the category of race includes language.

A matrix of linguistic theories appearing in academic discourse has been usefully indexed in Li Wei (2018): “polylinguaging, polylingual, languaging, multilinguaging, heteroglossia, hybrid language practices, translanguing practice, flexible bilingualism, and metrolinguism,” are, in his opinion, capped by the term “translanguaging,” possibly replacing terms “such as code-switching, code-mixing, code-meshing, and crossing” (p. 9). Although it would be difficult to detail the full range of influences on my thinking, I’d like to point to three key theories in practice useful for translational consciousness: 1) code-meshing identifies a productive medial and mediating positionality, 2)

translingualism sees writing both as an exploration across languages and as a situated practice, and 3) translanguaging uses the concept of linguistic borders to think beyond them. Advocates of code-meshing, translingualism, translanguaging see them, on the one hand, working to erode the dominance of Standard English as a monolingual singularity. On the other hand, these same advocates understand these strategies as also aware of power differentials expressed through language use. I suggest ITAs might develop translational consciousness as a function of not only working across languages but also noting how each language situates them differently.

Vershawn Ashanti Young (2014) presents code-meshing as a remedy for translation of a sort: code-switching. Although I see translation as a promising strategy, particularly in its ability to raise consciousnesses of other language practices, Young convincingly details in *Other People's English* the daily burden for many African American students created by the societal demand to switch from a home language (African American English (AAE)) to a "school" language (Standard English) demanded for academic purposes. Young advocates persuasively for the blending of these two language styles (AAE and Standard English) into a new practice, code-meshing, having a clear anti-racist focus in offering teachers "a route that integrates academic English with their own dialects [i.e., of African American English] and that simultaneously seeks to end discrimination" (p. 56).

One of the most influential parts of Young's book is the chapter written by his sister, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, who demonstrates code-meshing as a translational mode to her elementary classroom. Standing on one side of the room, she tells students she must speak one way here; running quickly to the other side, she says she must speak another way there. Going to the middle of the room, she gestures to the left and to the right taking something from each and then clasps her hands to illustrate the mixing and meshing that can happen in the middle. The outcome is clear: "Code-meshing doesn't want you to feel like you can only talk or speak a certain way when you're in a certain place. Code-meshing wants you to be able to mesh (clasping [her] hands together) different dialects; to use them both, for the best form of communicating" (Young-Rivera, 2014, p. 105). She emphasizes the synthesizing of languages that happens in code-meshing, but she also demonstrates that meshing happens in between two languages. Middle positioning allows access to an expanded linguistic repertoire; it also puts students in situations where they still might notice the demands of the dominant language vis-à-vis the minoritized language.

Canagarajah (2013) identifies translingualism as an alternative approach, distinct from code-meshing, but similarly understanding multiple languages operating in a single theater of language use. Translingual environments foster multiple languages working interdependently; they are not simply static similes for one another, but rather where "languages [are] always in contact and mutually influencing each other, with emergent meanings and grammars" (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 41).⁶ Translingualism theorizes languages as fluid and creolized, but also as etching mental maps of identity and position in transition. Canagarajah suggests writing is an act of exploring and using ideas and thoughts rather than a bin for storing them, even though it starts from a location. That is, as his Literacy Autobiography (LA) assignment for a graduate-level linguistic course, demonstrates: "students could learn about teaching by writing (and reading, responding, and revising) themselves" (Canagarajah, 2013, 47); the LA grants agency to his students over their narratives of writing and over the languages they use to express that life. As a particular case in point, Canagarajah cites the experience of one of his graduate students, Fawzia, who realized that ESL students like herself "should use the English standard of writing in terms of grammar, punctuation, organization, rhetoric, etc. However, that does not mean that they should use English cultural background in order to develop their ideas" (qtd. in Canagarajah, 2013, p. 51). In other words, Fawzia (working in the field of linguistics) recognizes the dominance of English as a standard for academic writing, while understanding her native language as thought-productive. This kind of recognition stemming from

work between languages creates what I'm calling translational consciousness, a mindset that realizes language as having power and ideology.

Li Wei (2018) advocates translanguaging, which he defines as a way to “think beyond the boundaries of named languages and language varieties including the geography-, social class-, age-, or gender-based varieties” (p. 19). Li Wei conceives translanguaging not only as an integrative language practice operating in a dynamic environment but also he understands it as “*a process of knowledge construction that goes beyond language(s) [...taking] us beyond the linguistics of systems and speakers to a linguistics of participation*” (p. 15). Importantly, for translational consciousness, he invokes the multilingual individual as attentive to the active forces of autonomous languages: “someone who is aware of the existence of the political entities of named languages,” who “has acquired some of their structural features” (p. 25); someone who can resolve “differences, discrepancies, inconsistencies, and ambiguities” presented by named languages, and “manipulate them for strategic gains” (p. 19). That is, while negotiating linguistic borders, even if surpassing them (in Li Wei’s model), multilingual students compare languages, detecting attitudes of cultural superiority or inferiority, including racial and ethnic valorization or denigration and other national biases.

Code-meshing, translanguaging, and translanguaging offer ways of conceiving linguistic environments: as fluid, as unequal and competing language systems, as processes of knowledge construction, none of which can be undervalued. But I differ from these perspectives in wanting to preserve distinctions between languages, suggesting that knowing how a language operates, in what contexts a language has power, and how it exercises power in a particular situation is critical to wielding language effectively. These linguistic inequalities prepare ITAs to reflect on language difference, to note ideologies conveyed in language structures, and to model writing processes that are linguistically, culturally, and racially aware. ITAs thinking about language as imbued with biases, social, national, racial, and so on, might become a model for anti-racist activism.

TRANSLATION: A Method for WAC Programs

John Sturrock (1990) takes note of a mediate layer in translation; that is, the awkward, inelegant drafts the translator produces on the way to a smooth, effortless variation in the target language. This layer is often an invisible stopover between origin and destination, a working draft that never becomes public, but which is often a site that recognizes and considers the larger cultural contexts of the transfer. Sturrock observes a necessary messy disintegration that occurs in the process of translation: “Languages may converge but not merge; it is in the act of translation that their apartness manifests itself. Or it is there that it should do so. And yet we hold that act of translation the most successful which contains no evidence at all of the apartness of languages, but only of a source text flawlessly naturalized, which is to say finally occluded” (p. 1010). That is, a translator moves away from coherent expression in one language, through a medial, nonsensical, rough version (or two), on the way to rational, coherent expression in another language. Often translation is judged most successful when it proceeds seamlessly, and yet Sturrock advises us to observe the messy process: to examine the first, second, and third attempts at connection in order to analyze and interpret the social and cultural histories that contextualize discourse. This intensive attention to language is the purview of linguists and professional translators. And for this essay, it is important to remember that ITAs are not “Translation Studies experts”; they are not necessarily trained to render one language into another according to conventions of formal knowledge transfer for publication. They may never consult “terminological banks and concordancers to find terminological and phraseological equivalents across languages” (Gentil, 2018, p. 120). Nonetheless, ITAs are translating all the time in cross-comparative linguistic situations, which are vital to distinguishing attitudes inhering in

language, such as claims to superiority,⁷ the right to mock,⁸ the denigration of accents,⁹ and other attitudes that dominant languages hold towards minoritized varieties of any stripe.

Alastair Pennycook (2008) provides a useful metaphor for this mediality of translation: traffic. Finding the description in Dasgupta (2005, p. 42), Pennycook describes translation as entering traffic and encountering all the noise of the “coming and going of people, bicycles, rickshaws, cars, trucks, ferries, tuk-tuks, ships, aeroplanes, trains, [as...] traffic in meaning, a passing to and fro of ideas, concepts, symbols, discourses” (p. 33). Pennycook (2008) agrees with postcolonial scholars in finding translation a “process of meaning-construction” (Spivak, 1993), a practice taking place in “an uneven world” (R. Radhakrishnan, 2005). In this way, “communication between language presents not so much the central process of translation but rather a special case: all communication involves translation” (Pennycook, 2008, p. 40). This generalization becomes important to the argument about writing-as-translation made by Horner & Tetreault (2016), discussed below. But Pennycook draws two conclusions important to my argument regarding ITAs and the translational conditions of their lives on campus. First, he argues that “we need to take *semiodiversity* as seriously as *glossodiversity*, the possibility of a multiplicity of meanings within a language as seriously as a multiplicity of languages” (p. 42, ital. in original). And second, this attention to meaning-making is important because “translation as a broad cultural practice [...has the possibility of] unsettling common relations, not only of entering the traffic but of disrupting the traffic” (p. 44). Pennycook (2008) concludes that translation is a means to activism: an activism that confronts “the possible threats to diversity posed by English” (p. 44). In other words, as I elaborate below, ITAs’ lived experience provides opportunity for developing translational consciousness that can not only counter the monolingualism of Standard English operating on many US (and other) campuses but also actively contest the cultural and racial biases that travel within it.

Bruce Horner and Laura Tetreault (2016) make a direct connection between thinking, writing, and translation. They point to globalization’s intertwining of various cultures as impetus for considering “translation not merely as a distinct form of writing but also as a feature and outcome of all writing,” which, moreover, produces rather than erases difference (p. 14). They contend that writing is “a site of struggle,” (i.e., “labor”), revealing the “difficulty and friction” that challenges monolingualism. Furthering Pennycook (2008), Horner and Tetreault (2016) consider translation a model process for writing instruction and assessment, suggesting that translation allows teachers to help students “better engage with the productive labor on and with language difference as a feature of all writing, rather than imagining such engagement to fall outside the norm of communicative practice” (p. 13). They argue that translation recognizes difference in language use, not only across languages but also, importantly, within the same language. Thinking of writing as translation emphasizes the productive process of using language. Importantly for my argument, Horner and Tetreault find that “translation, like all writing, [...] contends with competing ideologies, resources, representations, and assumed expectations of readers, in addition to the writer’s sense of identity and desire to claim particular identities. What is important to note in this idea of writing-as-translating is the mental work required in moving an idea from one mode to another. This movement evokes a consciousness of mind, an ability to shift between the requirement of one mode of expression to another. Translation between conventionally demarcated languages thus represents not a deviation from the norm but a more intensive version of what is true of all writing” (p. 19). Struggling with language, which is a normal part of moving from one language to the next, is actually part of all writing processes.

Writing develops the pathways of consciousness by etching roadways from one language to another by moving across cognitive cultural maps created in the very process of language use. Writing brings awareness of language hierarchies by 1) understanding Standard English as cultural frame with the potential to usurp another (e.g., when use of Standard English veils ITAs’ cultural context); 2) making visible cultural underpinning when it “pops” through the text in terms of an untranslated word in an

otherwise English text, for example, and 3) noting syntactical anomalies that defy SE generic and grammar conventions. Translation's textual basis permits us, as critics, to consider its processes theoretically and in slow motion, to note contexts, as well as content, of communications. The processes of translation reveal what Flower & Hayes (1981) call "putting ideas into visible language" (p. 373) and, following Vygotsky, the making of meaning from keywords that are "saturated with sense" (p. 373). As such, translation permits insights into the psychological construct of language ideologies, its truck in values, morals, politics, and social positions in relation to other people and other languages. Language is value-laden, a minefield of words and expressions that encapsulate explosive etymologies and hidden histories of use that critics have documented as having been employed for purposes of denigration along racial and ethnic lines (Barrett, 2006; Fitch & Morgan, 2010; Rosa & Flores, 2015, 2017). What WAC programs can help ITAs realize is this: their comparative linguistic environments provide the necessary distance from Standard English to detect and actively counter its racial and cultural biases.

TRANSLATION: Strategy for Consciousness Raising

So what is translation and how does it become an important strategy for WAC practitioners working with ITAs towards what we might come to understand as an anti-racist project? The short answer is this: translation is an operation in language that negotiates a culturally thick environment, orients keenly toward others, and makes visible what is invisible in discourse. ITAs function in translational environments at the intersection of two languages: McCarty (2018) defines a situation as "translational learning" when "students recognize that a change in words is a change in meaning as well as phrasing, [and] produces a distinct form of knowledge" (p. 55). Like McCarty's multilingual speakers, ITAs negotiate the saturated senses of language in ways that reveal layers of meaning hidden within words, structures, order, and style. That is, ITAs have an unrecognized capacity for linguistic consciousness attuned to language's subtleties, including those that operate as ideologies operating in "subtle and implicit ways" (Fairclough, 2014).

Translation is Thick.

Gayatri Spivak (2012) suggests that translation "is an active site of conflict" (p. 270), a site of struggle (aligning it with the writing process more generally, per Horner & Tetreault (2016)). Translation makes active effort to reduce one language to another, but in the process, considers the "trace of the other, trace of history, even cultural traces" (p. 270). Translation requires reflection, not simply on the meanings under exchange, but also on the entire accompanying authorial, historical, and cultural auras. Sense-making is more than content, comprising also register, texture, idiom, and sound, all of which are much less easily conveyed than the equivalent words between languages. Translation is thus an avenue for noting the effects of language, including its political, social, and racial biases.

Translation knows language's secrets—the invisible aura of cultural reference that surrounds each bare sign, the rich equipment of cultural accoutrement, Walter Benjamin's (1968) translation is like a "royal robe" that swaths an original (p. 75). The overlarge cultural wrap that envelops languages allows for what Kwame Appiah (1993) calls "thick translation." Introducing African proverbs to US university classrooms, for example, Appiah suggests, requires thick translation in order to capture the complicated, contextualized thinking of pre-industrial African proverb, to find in "the context of literary production" (pt. VI) how people really are. Appiah discusses a close reading of a proverb from one dialect of Twi (pt. I), which reads in the original: "Asem a ehia Akanfoo no na Ntafoo de goro brekete" and is translated as "A matter which troubles the Akan people, the people of Gonja take to play the brekete drum" (pt. III). As Sturrock (1990) alerts us, a word-for-word translation leaves meaning elusive. Only with "thicker contextualization" (Appiah 1993, pt. III)—an elaboration of

cultural conventions that identify the oppositions of two peoples (Akan and Gonja) and the use of the brekete drum (used for “entertainment at dances, and represents fun” (pt. III)) produces a closer meaning in less aligned vocabulary: “Different peoples have different attitudes” (pt. III). Thick translation creates the conditions for “a genuinely informed respect for others” (Appiah 1993, pt. VI) that repudiates the racism of thinking the African proverb simple or non-logical; it “challenge[s] directly the assumption of the cultural superiority of the West” (pt. VI). In other words, translation, caught as it is, in between languages, reads the rich cultural density of a language beyond a seemingly thin linguistic frame.

Translation is Negotiation.

Translation is a practical mode of cross-linguistic negotiation, which reveals the social, cultural, and racial effects that one language has in relation to another. Spivak (2012) provides an analogy from psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein: “the work of translation is an incessant shuttle that is a ‘life’” (qtd. in Spivak, p. 241)—between body and mind, between an understanding of outside-self in terms of signs, and back again. That is, a kind of shuttling translation requires “the most intimate knowledge of the rules of representation and permissible narratives which make up the substance of a culture” (Spivak 2012, p. 242), accountable both to the other and to the original. Translation is an act that puts cultures in touch with one another through its processes of understanding both other and self. This shuttling is an expanded cultural version of the shuttling between languages that Guillaume Gentil (2018) identifies and calls upon as a key rhetorical element of the writing process.

Gentil (2018) identifies the day-to-day “‘crosslingual’ work” that ITAs engage in as a state of “constant shuttling between language, within and across modes” (p. 115). As Gentil describes it, shuttling involves ITAs in, for example, reading source materials in their native language, but producing dissertations in English, or translating part of an English-language dissertation chapter into a native-language conference paper. This practice of working across languages, from a document in one language to a document in another, not only creates a linguistic territory where two or more languages are engaged and examined for their interaction, but also points to connections between languages, creating a productive cross-hatching among vocabularies, similar to code-meshing (discussed above), but retaining the cultural resonances from their source languages.¹⁰ ITAs have a practical expertise in language shuttling; they develop what Gentil calls biliteracy, which “requires not only the ability to read and write in two languages but also rhetorical flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and brokering skill in negotiating texts, [that is, learning what] may count as skillful writing in a given context” (p. 122). Shuttling between languages is, as Spivak notes, a life[long] process, not one to master, but one to practice.

Translation is Other-Oriented.

Translation is an ethical entanglement in languages, requiring, as Spivak (2012) often says, “the most intimate knowledge of the rules of representation and permissible narratives which make up the substance of a culture” (p. 242). The best translators, Walter Benjamin finds, following Rudolf Pannwitz, “allow [their] language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (p. 81). Négar Djavadi gives us an example of such effect. In the brief excerpt from *Disoriental* that I have quoted in the epigraph, she talks of losing the person she was, but making space for the new person she has become. To make space requires her “to unlearn—at least partially” that old self; that is, to unsettle existing knowledge about herself to make room for an other. These definitions are useful for thinking about the conditions in which ITAs find themselves when they come to the United States to study and teach: they are unsettled by language, conscious of its effects in living and working in-between. On the one hand, they are conscious of English’s insufficiency to fully express their experiences as bilingual and multilingual speakers. As Cuban poet Gustavo Pérez Firmat puts it, in the epigraph to

Junot Diaz: “writing to you / in English / already falsifies what I / wanted to tell you” (1996). On the other hand, ITAs are continually striving to produce acceptable versions of English in their academic lives, toward and for others.

Translation is Attuned to Ideology.

The ITAs that I am working with, primarily from STEM fields and teaching in science and engineering classrooms, are exposed to “linguistic ideology”¹¹ resident in a dominant Standard English, which carries the rationalizations, expressions, ideas, and commonsense understandings of the community’s (i.e., the academy’s) attitudes towards gender, race, nationality, age, and other social issues (Woolard and Schiefflin, 1994). One of those ideologies involves what Ghanashyam Sharma (2018) identifies “[i]n the STEM fields [...as] the dominant belief about writing [...] it should generally use a simple, clear, and universal standard English” (p. 26). Sharma suggests the actual use of English in the wide variety of scientific forums, including “at academic conferences, in academic-industry partnerships, when communicating science to the local public, in emerging modes of electronic communication that are open to global audiences, and in transnational academic and professional communication” (p. 26) would dispel myths of a universal Standard English. Importantly for this argument, Sharma argues

[W]riting education for students in these [STEM] fields needs to counter the dominant discourses that are reductive and monolingualist in order to help promote the understanding that like all discourse, scientific communication is rhetorically contingent on different contextual factors, as well as linguistically varied across societies and cultures. (p. 26)

In other words, Sharma, too, sees the need to counter “dominant discourses” that do continue to operate, even with evidence to the contrary. I agree with Sharma’s assessment that writing educators, particularly in WAC programs, might help ITAs recognize and dismantle the cultural arrogance and racism of Standard English. What I am arguing is that ITAs have the opportunity to compare ideological difference in language. Among those ideologies are attitudes toward race, ethnicities, gender, sexuality, and other social aspects, often hidden behind jokes, euphemisms, and unquestioned assumptions, constructions in language that might be recognized and critiqued. These linguistic ideologies are what WAC programs must recognize and help ITAs see: their particular translational perspectives allow intervention that achieves not only more fluent, internationalized writing, but also a more culturally and racially aware teaching situations.

Translational Consciousness to Racial Consciousness

Translation is, perhaps obviously, the foundation of translational consciousness. But we might ask after its formation. In large part, colonial legacies are responsible for White, Western bias behind language standards. As Woolard and Schiefflin (1994) observe: the “[p]erceived linguistic structure can always have political meaning in the colonial encounter. Functional or formal inadequacy of indigenous languages and, therefore, of indigenous mind or civilization was often alleged to justify European tutelage” (p. 68). Martinican psychologist and activist, Frantz Fanon (1967) clearly identifies the formation of a consciousness in the comparative environment of the colony; there is no question in the minds of the colonized of the superiority of the colonizer’s Standard French compared to Creole spoken in Martinique:

The middle class in the Antilles never speak Creole except to their servants. In school the children of Martinique are taught to scorn the dialect. One avoids Creolisms. Some

families completely forbid the use of Creole, and mothers ridicule their children for using it. [...] Yes, I must take great pains with my speech, because I will be more or less judged by it. With great contempt they will say of me, 'He doesn't even know how to speak French' (p. 20)

The French colonial attitudes that Fanon (1967) sees as hegemonic, so much so that Caribbean elite buy into the linguistic structures of inferiority to which they are subject, invoke those that Rosa & Flores (2017) identify as “position[ing] indigenous American and enslaved populations as subhuman” (p. 150). As Fanon (1967) continues, “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (p. 17-18). Inextricable relations between language and race (Flores & Rosa, 2015) license “raciolinguistic ideologies” that “produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant” (p. 150) no matter the proficiency with which minorities succeed in mastering standard languages. These attitudes continue today, “framing racialized subjects’ language practices as inadequate for the complex thinking processes needed to navigate the global economy” (Rosa & Flores 2017, p. 627). They are not part of any contemporary reality, as Rosa & Flores assert, but rather stem from entrenched historical legacy that allocates racial inferiority and language inadequacy to minoritized individuals.

Spivak (2012) suggests that comparative environments¹² invoke “translation before translation” meaning attending not simply to the content needing interpretation, “but the very moves of languaging” (p. 471). Her description of translation recognizes a consciousness of mind necessary to acts of translation, a consciousness that comingles others’ beliefs and assumptions with one’s own. Unlike DuBois’s concept of double consciousness, the conception of a translational consciousness might perceive the dominance of Standard English, for example, based on ubiquity of use, but understand the parity of Standard English with other languages when considered from the perspective of sociohistorical effects on languages in use.

Translational consciousness, as I am calling the mindset underlying comparative language practice, has resonances with the critical pedagogy of the Linguistic Profiling Project at Stanford University (LPP) founded by John Baugh. According to Samy Alim (2005), this “pedagogy aims to educate linguistically profiled and marginalized students about how language is used and, importantly, how language can be used against them” (p. 28).¹³ The LPP asks not only how language can “be used to maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate existing power relations,” but also how can it “resist, redefine and possibly reverse these relations?” (p. 28). Importantly for this discussion, the LPP “approach engages in the process of consciousness-raising, that is, the process of actively becoming aware of one’s own position in the world and what to do about it” (Alim 2005, p. 28). The LPP asks students to conduct “ethnographic and sociolinguistic analyses of their own communicative behavior” (Alim, 2005, p. 28), and thereby, come to understand linguistic profiling, a social identification system working like racial profiling, that detects biases towards certain accents, dialects, voicings.

As the LPP suggests, and as Fairclough (2014) confirms, the exercise of power in social situations has become less explicit, more implicit, primarily through the “common-sense routines of language practices (e.g., classroom language, or the language of medical consultations)” (p. 3); in other words, ideology has become a more potent factor in the “functioning of power in modern societies” (p. 3). The implicitness of the operation of power through language suggests a need for research along the lines of the work being done by New Literacy Studies, which Alim (2005) characterizes as research that “attempts to make the *invisible visible*,” in order to understand “how White ways of speaking and seeing the word/world” become normative (p. 28). As is perhaps now clear, this essay hopes to make visible a capacity that ITAs have by virtue of their bilingual circumstances to observe and analyze the

effects of language so that they can be brought into classrooms not traditionally thought of as linguistically oriented.

Many classes in American universities taught by ITAs can be conceived as sites of racial formation, a *“sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed”* (Omi & Winant 2015, p. 109, ital. in orig.). Campuses, like my own, which are racially homogeneous and operating predominantly in English, often assign international students of color to teach classes comprised of a majority of White American students in engineering, science, mathematics and other STEM fields. Undergraduates not only make judgments about their ITAs based on their race and their accents but also they come to ITA-led classes with preconceived notions about them.

Fitch & Morgan (2003) examine undergraduate narratives about ITA-led classrooms and discover a common notion in circulation on campuses: “[v]irtually every person who has attended a university employing ITAs has at least heard tales of incompetent international teaching assistants who lack basic English-language skills [...that manifests as student] difficulty understanding an ITA’s spoken English” (p. 309). Such an understanding frames student responses—one protests that she is not like those other “horrible” students that have maligned the ITA, she stood up for him (or her); another professes “feeling sorry” for the ITA when a number of classmates dropped the class after finding out it was taught by an ITA; another recounts her parents’ dismay that her education will suffer with yet another ITA teaching a class (Fitch & Morgan, 2003, p. 302-303). Animosity towards ITAs as group increases in the very circulation of these negative narratives, but the researchers find that narratives are exacerbated by ITA facelessness: “undergraduates show a remarkably shallow knowledge regarding the personal backgrounds of their own ITA or of ITAs generally” (Fitch & Morgan, 2003, p. 307). Lumping ITAs into a group of “others” that are not known or knowable subjects them to a discrimination that has been around since the colonial period.

A historical legacy of discrimination informs perceptions on campuses today. Undergraduates anticipate, even before they fully know, that diction, accent, unexpected syllabic stress (i.e., language “opacity”— usage that gets in the way of communication) will cause them distress and unease. Subtirelu (2015) suggests undergraduate students expect language transparency, complete ease of understanding without effort on their part; he categorizes this as an “ideology of nativeness” that valorizes the native English speaker (NES) above non-native English speakers (NNES). He agrees with Lippi-Green (1994) that “when undergraduate students complain about their instructors’ accents [...] ‘they also reject the identity of the person speaking: his or her race, ethnic heritage, national origin, regional affiliation, or economic class” (qtd. in Subtirelu, p. 36). Subtirelu (2015) concludes that undergraduate complaints about NNES are potentially about a larger “form of racialized exclusion, in which NES construct their instructors as incomprehensible Others with whom they bear no responsibility for ensuring successful communication” (p. 38). It is clear that miscommunication, whatever the cause, creates a certain panic given the pressures on all students—international and local, graduate and undergraduate—to comply with disciplinary knowledge and conventions. This can mean that undergraduates, perceiving accents, unusual syntax, or unclear speech, even when ITAs are speaking a standard form of English, blame the ITA for obstructing their ability to obtain crucial information.

But these moments of potential unease—when language vacates its condition of aural and visual transparency, when communication proceeds, but its mode is noticed, when communication fails to follow normative order, sound, and stress—should actually produce moments of marvel. That is, the noticeability is noteworthy; it calls attention to communication as an active, legible mode. The opportunity for commenting on language difference is difficult for ITAs given the possibility that undergraduates are already reading both the embodied ITA and his/her slips of tongue as deficient. But this racialized situation might be undone, in part, through a focus on translation. McCarty (2018) states the possibility and problem of translation succinctly: “[multilingual] students negotiate across

a range of resources [in order] to be more successful in particular contexts; however, the insights that they develop while moving across languages—indeed, the negotiations themselves—often go unnoticed. The problem, then, is how the productive nature of such translations could be made visible and thus be more effectively built upon” (p. 68). The productive nature of translations ties into the project of noticing race that Omi & Winant (2015) urge as key to the development of “race-consciousness” (p. 260). That is, noticing the different demands of language that emerge in translation processes—understanding which is dominant, which subordinate; which provides advantage, which confers disadvantage; which language gives its speakers the right to criticize accent, syntax, mispronunciations, malapropisms, and which language suggests its speakers take the blame for error; in short which provides power, which powerlessness—then ideologies come into focus in ways similar to “noticing race” produces “race-consciousness” that might be mobilized in an anti-racist project (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 260-61). Acknowledging linguistic difference through translational consciousness partakes of the same pragmatic work of race-consciousness: “it acknowledges the social structures of race and racism” (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 261), as they occur and operate in the realm of language. In other words, translational capabilities like the ones ITAs demonstrate everyday produce insights about language, and, I suggest, the ideologies invested in languages. WAC programs helping ITAs access these insights as they write, and especially as they teach writing, might usefully highlight cultural and racial difference that allows WAC to become a site for anti-racist activism.

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Notes

- ¹ Sharma is an exception. While Sharma (2018) does not focus on ITAs as writing instructors per se, he strongly argues in favor of “fostering translingual and cross-cultural competencies among future STEM professionals,” which will allow for “more complex views of language and global communica[tion]” (p. 35).
- ² Bushnell & Gorman (2018). My current co-directors for this program are Jennifer Hagen Forsberg and Katalin Beck.
- ³ Rosa & Flores (2015) identify the discourse of “appropriateness” as operating within a monolingual standard of language use; seen through a lens of Whiteness: despite the fact that the White listening subject continues to perceive these students’ language use in racialized ways” (p. 151)..
- ⁴ Spielkamp suggests that ADM (automatic decision-making) “systems make choices on the basis of underlying assumptions that are not clear even to the systems’ designers, it’s not necessarily possible to determine which algorithms are biased and which ones are not.”
- ⁵ For a complete description of the program, see Bushnell & Gorman.
- ⁶ See also Horner, B., NeCamp, S., & Donahue, C. (2011). Toward a multilingual composition scholarship: From english only to a translingual norm. *College Composition and Communication*, 63(2), 269-300.
- ⁷ Woolard and Schiefflin (1994) observe about the colonial legacy: the “[p]erceived linguistic structure can always have political meaning in the colonial encounter. Functional or formal inadequacy of indigenous languages and, therefore, of indigenous mind or civilization was often alleged to justify European tutelage” (p. 68).
- ⁸ Rusty Barrett (2006) writes of a specific case on the US-Mexico border that underscores the violence inflicted on Mexican workers through White English speakers purposefully misusing and distorting the Spanish language spoken by workers at a border-town café. These distortions, first documented by Hill (1998), occur in the form, for example, of hyperanglicization (e.g., *Fleas Navidad* on a Christmas card) or of semantic perjoration (*peso* to convey “cheap”), among others, that are supposedly funny to the Anglo-Americans (p. 164). The same sort of “just joking” attitude informs the language tags Whites use, such as “el” prefixes or “da-formations” to mock Spanish and African American English (AAE) languages, as in the words “el hobo” or “da cheese” (p. 167).
- ⁹ Li, Mazur, & Ju (2011) formulate language incompetence to include “foreign accents, poor grammar, and confusing lectures” (p. 462).
- ¹⁰ Gentil, following Garcia and Li (2014) also advocates translanguaging to refer to “an approach to the use of language [...] that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as have been traditionally the case, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to separate languages” (p. 125).
- ¹¹ Woolard and Schiefflin (1994) offer views comprising: 1) “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use”; 2) “self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group”; 3) “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests”; and 4) ‘most broadly as ‘shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world’” (p. 57).
- ¹² She is speaking particularly of the environment of Comparative Literature.

¹³ Alim first discussed the LPP in a 2004 conference paper, “Combat, consciousness, and the cultural politics of communication: Reversing the *dominating* discourse on language by empowering linguistically profiled and marginalized groups,” presented at the American Dialect Society, Boston

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