

## Translingual Adventures

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Heather O'Leary explores the ways we can encounter translingualism within the English language. She looks to her own experiences in Australia and the UK to share some examples.

You may have read other *Grassroots* articles about translingualism or talked about the term in class. You may have thought about the ways in which English interacts with other languages and how this can affect your own writing. If you are bilingual or multilingual, you probably have firsthand experience with how languages intertwine in your own writing and in everyday life. But, if you are a monolingual speaker of English, you may be wondering, how does this apply to me? Fear not! Even monolingual speakers (that is, people who speak only one language) can experience translingualism through different dialects. Think about it: What do you call a sweet carbonated beverage? A pop, soda, or coke? When you address a group of your friends, do you call them you all, y'all, or you guys? Each of these differences in word choice depends on your **dialect**, defined by Merriam-Webster as “a regional variety of language distinguished by features of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation from other regional varieties and constituting together with them a single language” (“Dialect”). Your dialect is based on the places you've lived, your family, and possibly other factors, such as race, class, and gender.

So, what exactly is **translingualism** and how can we use it to think about the ways we interact with English? Suresh Canagarajah, a linguistics professor and translingual expert, focuses first on the prefix “trans” to show how communication can move beyond a single language (“Negotiating” 41). Think about other words that start with “trans,” like transport, transform, transgress. In each case, some space is being crossed, something is moving or changing. In the case of translingualism, language is crossing borders and changing over time and through interaction with other languages. But wait, I thought we were talking about English here?

In another article, Canagarajah addresses translingualism *within* the English language. He argues that English has always been diverse and that we each belong to different communities with different versions of English (*Translingual Practices* 57). As we interact within these communities over time, we develop shared terms and concepts that might not be familiar to outsiders. You are probably engaging in translingual practices every day without even thinking about it. For example, do you speak the same way at home as you do when you’re out with your friends? What about when you e-mail a professor? Or talk to your grandparents? I bet you change some of the words you use in each setting.

Canagarajah also suggests that translingualism is about:

synergy, treating languages as always in contact and mutually influencing each other, with emergent meanings and grammars. Translingual literacy is an understanding of the production, circulation, and reception of texts that are always mobile; that draw from diverse languages, symbol systems, and modalities of communication; and that involve intercommunity negotiations. (“Negotiating” 41)

Do the terms production and reception sound familiar? If you have been studying **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)**, under the framework used by the Writing Program at Illinois State University, they should! We can also talk about circulation as part of distribution. Translingualism can seem confusing at first, or maybe even intimidating. When we encounter unfamiliar words and language it can make us feel uncomfortable—but we can use CHAT as a tool to help us understand what is happening. To explore this idea, I will use CHAT to investigate some of my own translingual interactions with English while studying abroad in Australia and the UK.

According to Joyce Walker in “Just CHATting,” CHAT “refers to a set of theories about rhetorical activity (how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts), that help us

look at the how/why/what of writing practices” (71). Basically, CHAT can help us understand how texts work in the world and how texts are situated in specific contexts. What happens when we uproot ourselves and dive into a new context? How do the texts we encounter differ from what we’re used to? As I work through my own experiences with CHAT, I will look at and define four of the terms used by the ISU Writing Program to study literate activity: socialization, reception, representation, and ecology (75–76).

More information about the way ISU approaches CHAT can be found at <http://isuwriting.com/category/learning-outcomes/>.

## The Aussies (Oz-ees)

When we encounter translingual situations, one of the first terms we might think about is **socialization**, or the way we interact with different texts. Part of socialization is thinking about how a text, or the language we are using, represents a specific culture. We are each introduced to texts in our homes, schools, and communities. What we learn about texts in the world is how we expect to interact with them in the future. But people in other cultures and places will engage with texts in different ways. Despite the US, Australia, and the UK all speaking English and creating English texts, socialization in each of these countries works in a different way.

My senior year of college, I decided to study abroad for a semester at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. I figured that since they speak English there, it would be easy. While I’m quite sure it was easier than studying in a second language, I still had several translingual interactions. For starters, I had to think about my **antecedent knowledge** and my **writing research identity**. According to the ISU Writing Program, “Antecedent Knowledge is a term we use to describe all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing” (“Key Terms”). My antecedent knowledge was based on everything I knew while growing up in the US, specifically in Illinois. The way I use language is based on this background. A lot of my antecedent knowledge was useful in Australia, but I quickly realized I had a lot to learn about how English worked in this new setting.

To be aware of their writing research identity, a writer:

needs to use their knowledge flexibly in different situations and must also be able to determine when new skills and knowledge are required. Building a writing research identity means you are able to think beyond just acquiring skills and begin to understand how

all of your skills (and the skills you haven't yet acquired) change what you can and can't do as a writer. ("Key Terms")

As a student in an unfamiliar country, I had to consider not only my antecedent knowledge, but also what skills I had to acquire in order to be successful.

### *Writing Paras at Uni*

My first weeks there, I picked up a lot of east coast Australian slang. Their favorite linguistic practice seems to be shortening words as much as possible—why use three syllables when you can get away with two! Here's a quick run-down of some of my favorites:

- Afternoon → arvo
- Barbeque → barbie
- Breakfast → brekky
- McDonald's → Maccas
- Paragraph → para
- Sunglasses → sunnies
- University → uni

As an English major, I decided to take a creative writing class. I had done some creative writing in high school, so I had some antecedent knowledge going in. What I didn't think about was the socialization of my writing and how it had only ever been read by an audience of people who were, in many ways, like me. As part of the creative writing class, we would read each other's stories and share feedback. This meant that I had to think about my classmates' **reception**, or how they would interpret and react to my writing. I realized that I had some choices to make as I wrote in this translingual environment—I could use my Americanisms and depend on my audience to take those up or I could do some research and try to make my writing more Australian. I did a bit of both.

In one story, I wrote about a couple at a carnival. Growing up in Illinois, I would often get cotton candy at carnivals, but Australians call it "fairy floss," so, in the story, the couple picked up some fairy floss. I also referenced places that I had been to in Australia—my characters went to the beach in Surfer's Paradise, partied in Fortitude Valley, and sat under acacia trees instead of maples or oaks. Because I was thinking of how my writing would be received in a new context, I changed my **representation**—the way I thought about

and planned my stories. Instead of writing from my antecedent knowledge alone, I did some research to adjust my representation to a new context.

## The Brits

After I graduated from college, I spent a year working the nine-to-five grind and decided I wasn't ready for the cubicle life. I applied and got accepted to a Master's program in London. I spent a year in Europe studying at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and interacting with a diverse group of people on a regular basis. Even though I met people from all over the world, many of the translingual interactions I had were with other native English speakers.

### *When the Rubber Hits the Road/When Antecedent Knowledge Fails Spectacularly*

While in London, I decided I needed a job to supplement my student loans. I had worked for a time at the Body Shop at home, so I was quickly hired at a Body Shop on Oxford Street, one of the main shopping districts in London. I worked with people from all over the UK and Europe, and we were constantly encountering translingual interactions in the shop. They would ask me to say, "take out the trash" with my Chicago nasal "a," and I would ask my British coworkers to say "Harry Potter" in their own accent. Most of the time it was all in good fun, but occasionally I'd run into an awkward misunderstanding—one of those translingual interactions that can make us feel uncomfortable.

During a performance review, my boss was asking me questions and taking notes. Part of the way through, without looking up from her notebook, she asked, "Could you hand me a rubber?" Now, to my midwestern American sensibility, this was a surprising and probably inappropriate question for a boss to ask their employee—to me, a rubber is slang for a condom! I looked around on her desk but didn't see any condoms or understand why she would need one, so I just sat silently, beginning to turn red. After an awkward pause, she finally looked up at me and asked again for a rubber. I must have stared at her blankly, because she pointed to an eraser near me on the desk and said, "The rubber, hand it to me please?" Suddenly, all became clear! A rubber was an eraser! But it was too late, I was too red, and the pause had been too long, so I had to explain my misunderstanding. She laughed so loud that the assistant manager came in to investigate.

This is a great example of when one person's reception can be very different from another person's! When translingualism is involved, it can lead

to misunderstanding and even embarrassment. But, by thinking about how language is culturally situated, we can learn to recognize when our words may be received in ways that we didn't expect and, hopefully, have a good laugh about it.

### ***Football vs. Soccer***

Another of ISU's CHAT terms that might be useful in considering translingual interactions is **ecology**, or the effects of the environment in which we are creating a text or encountering language. For example, I decided to join my school's football team. Now you might be thinking, football? Do they play that in London? And the answer is yes! Americans just call it soccer. Part of being on a sports team means learning all the terms that go along with that sport—a sort of language within a language. I found myself in a new environment, which meant I had to adjust my language to feel like I fit in with the team. Here are some terms that are different between American soccer and British football:

- Uniform → kit
- Cleats → boots
- Shin Guards → shin pads
- Field → pitch
- Game → match
- Team → “FC” for football club
- Forward → attacker

I think the only thing we really agreed on was socks. But, by recognizing the change in ecology, I was able to adjust my representation and make sure that my teammates were receiving my words correctly—see how CHAT pulls it all together? This made me better able to communicate with my team and more successful on the field (erm . . . I mean pitch).

### **Creating Positive Translingual Interactions**

Having different cultural experiences allows us to see the world in ways we never thought of before. As we both create and interpret language and text, we should always be thinking about how these interactions are situated. I was lucky to have good friends, colleagues, and professors to help me navigate these differences in Australia and the UK, but not all translingual interactions

work out that way. Sometimes people have an idea of what they think the “correct” version of a language is and disregard language variation. Even within the US, some people may make assumptions about those who speak a different dialect and not recognize that some dialects are just different.

By acknowledging your own antecedent knowledge and being flexible when you encounter something new, you can successfully navigate these situations. We each interact with texts in different ways, based on our own cultural backgrounds, and this will affect the socialization of texts we produce and share in unfamiliar places. When you aren't sure how your text may be received by a new audience, do some research on your genre and adjust your representation—being aware of the situation you're walking into can help to make translingual interactions more comfortable for everyone involved.

As I mentioned at the start of this article, we do this every day as we move between different contexts in our lives. Even if you don't speak a second language, you are experiencing translingualism all the time. For example, you might ask your grandma “How are you?” but ask your best friend “What's the tea, sis?” As you go out and produce texts in the world, remember that there are many versions of English out there and think about the ways you use your own.

## Works Cited

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