CHAPTER 26. RECLAIMING AGENCY: AI HALLUCINATIONS AND TRANSLINGUAL INTERROGATIONS IN THE CITY TECH WRITING CENTER

Joseph Franklin and Anna Laura Falvey
CUNY City Tech

Marcellous (pseudonym) is a regular at the City University of New York (CUNY) City Tech writing center. "Regular," for us, can mean anything from twice a week to every week to twice per assignment per semester. For Marcellous, it means the latter. In the spring semester of his first year at City Tech, Marcellous was still in the process of learning English. Marcellous' first language is Haitian-Creole, and he learned English primarily from his neighborhood and schooling in the Bronx. In previous writing assignments he had brought to work on in tutoring sessions, Marcellous' professor had encouraged his multilingual and culturally specific writing patterns: he'd been praised when he used African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and incorporated Creole words into his academic work, used them to describe his community, his friends, and his experiences in Bronx public schools.

He had written the first draft of his annotated bibliography, the second of the three major writing assignments that make up our first-year English curriculum, the way that came naturally to him: in the same voice he had written his narrative essays and short stories, the voice which his professor had positively reinforced. After handing in his first draft of the annotated bibliography, his professor informed him that his colloquialisms and grammatical inconsistencies were no longer "appropriate." Confused and frustrated, while relaying his story to us in the writing center, Marcellous told us he had run the draft through Grammarly to "fix it," both grammatically, as well as in "tone appropriateness." When he gave his professor the revision, devoid of all previous "error," she plugged it into an AI detection website, which found Marcellous' paper to be over 90 percent AI generated, an accusation Marcellous vehemently denied.

In this chapter, we will work to unpack how we make sense of stories like Marcellous' as a tangle of technology and language ideology. We will offer a way

of thinking about these tangled technological threads through a translingual perspective, which can articulate how GenAI is continuing to homogenize and reify a particular constructed variety of "correct" language. However far we might get with these tools over time, we want to recall stories like Marcellous' for the complex ways his sense of ownership and voice were always already complicated—especially for first-generation and second language writers and even with the instructors *trying* to empower them. In seeing risks posed by GenAI's influence in contextualizing standards and linguistic power positioning, we wonder whether we can flip the concept of "hallucinations" and their detection to help address, with nuance and care, the issues surrounding authenticity posed by GenAI.

WHERE ARE WE?

Marcellous worked with Anna, an adjunct professor and our lead tutor, in the writing center, which Joe directs along with his role as faculty in the English Department. New York City College of Technology (City Tech) is the designated senior college of technology for the CUNY system, serving around 14,000 students who come to City Tech from 127 different countries of origin, speaking 86 different languages. An urban commuter school, City Tech is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI), which focuses most strongly on STEM, Health Sciences, and vocational programs. Two-thirds of our students are full-time, while one-third are part-time; demographically, our students are 34 percent Hispanic, 27 percent Black (non-Hispanic), 21 percent Asian, 11 percent White, 2 percent other, and 4 percent non-resident (whatever that means) ("CUNY City Tech"). Our students are often in the process of learning English, or are at least novice as users of an Academic English *very different* from what is useful in their homes and got them through high school; they are full-time students with full time jobs; caretakers, either of their own children or of other family members; they act as live-in translators, navigators, lawyers, and interpreters, responsible not only for their own survival but for the survival of their families. If not recent immigrants, our students are more often than not life-long New Yorkers—they grew up tossed around the New York City public school system, a system which, even before the catastrophic disruption of the pandemic, suffers from massive socio-economic disparity (Gennetian).

What sets our writing center apart from many others in the United States is that this level of diversity is our everyday; our success in serving students depends on our ability to act in dynamic ways that honor differences. We agree with Thais Rodrigues Cons et al., arguing from a Brazilian writing center context, deeply involved in translation and digital tools, that "writing centers worldwide

might consider adopting multilingual frameworks that engage tutors in critical dialogue about linguistic hierarchies." For us, such an approach is required as we encounter, every day, acts of brilliance and perseverance and heart that our students are rarely recognized for in their academic (and writing) lives.

REALITIES IN AI HALLUCINATIONS

Much can, and has, been said about a range of concerns with artificial intelligence in education, but we want to focus on how it impacts our diverse student body in this particular institutional context. CUNY is a large complex system, and centralized policy is slow and often vague about implementation, which also means local divergent policies pop up as well—often complicating more than clarifying practice. As of the spring 2024 semester, there are over 85 adjunct faculty members in the City Tech English department alone, which makes aligning around a curriculum tricky. Despite the recent formation of the City Tech "AI Task Force," our writing center has yet to see evidence of a systemic, effective way to address it. So, in our tutoring sessions, we've seen a dizzying range of differing faculty responses: from openness and conscientious transparency to complete denial regarding both the perils and promises of AI, leading to uncritical policing and punishment.

In cases at the furthest end of the denial spectrum, such as in Marcellous' story, students can be falsely accused of plagiarism due to the implicit linguistic biases in the tools that are meant to keep GenAI out of the classroom. A study measuring biases in AI detection platforms against non-native English speakers yielded staggering results: the seven commonly used AI detection platforms studied unanimously flagged nearly 20 percent of ESL student writing assignments as partially AI-produced, while 97 percent were flagged by at least one of the detectors (Liang). In the writing of English learners or multilingual writers, these AI-powered detection platforms are likely responding to detected "hallucinations," and low levels of "perplexity" (Liang). A piece of writing with a high level of perplexity—what the algorithm decides is sophistication and complexity—would not at all look like the writing that instructors often expect English learners to produce, and yet, this is what the detectors are searching for. So, what English is it aiming for, and from where did that expectation come?

Recall that, oddly, Marcellous' false accusation came from the same instructor who praised his non-standard linguistic choices previously. In a 2024 study, researchers found that ChatGPT both created and critiqued global dialects of English with "increased stereotyping, demeaning content, condescension, and lack of comprehension" (Fleisig et al.13548). Researchers concluded that these tools "can perpetuate harmful language ideologies" and "risk reinforcing power dynamics that harm minoritized language communities" (Fleisig et al.13549).

To us, Marcellous isn't a "lazy" student but rather a student for whom the expectations (of language *and* GenAI usage) have not been well-communicated. His instructors are also, while well-intentioned, echoing the troubling inputs that perpetuate power monolingualist hierarchies in GenAI tools. So, Marcellous is a student for whom the ultimate accusation of plagiarism was a well-laid trap based on many biases and ambiguities. We find this perspective to be crucial in understanding how we work through AI's challenges.

At City Tech, students in intro English composition courses are often asked to write in specific, templated formats. When they show signs of ongoing linguistic development and take risks expanding their language use, they could be and often are chided for making *errors*—even by the same instructors who have encouraged this in other assignments. If their work seems too grammatically crisp, they may be accused of plagiarism, even if their correct usage might signify actual learning. To our writing tutors, who are almost all instructors themselves, it is easy to see how excessive use of GenAI tools is often a corner students are backed into. What all schools might be facing as we come to terms with AI and language difference, we see potentially at a macroscale with our larger diversity and contingent labor.

At the writing center, we see all of these varying responses baked into essay prompts, into feedback on student work, into attempts at policy. We see, not just in our conversations about schoolwork, but in our conversations with students about their own lives, how and why a quick pass through QuillBot or even an entire GenAI essay seems like the best solution for many reasons *besides* laziness or moral turpitude: when professors want such drastically different things; when they are not available to answer questions; when students' financial and familial responsibilities outside the classroom leave them on the brink of exhaustion. Making sense of that mess by being well-informed and open to our students' perspectives is our challenge.

Marcellous' situation is not unique—the various inconsistencies illustrated by his story are becoming more and more commonplace. Many students share Marcellous' use of "non-standard" English, find their professors' praise of it in *some* cases but not in others, frustratingly realize that even when they thought they had "fixed" their papers ethically, there remained a core mistrust between them and their professors. So, why bother not "cheating"? While not always happening on the larger institutional stage, these intersectional complexities are constantly being detangled by our tutors: with students, in the classroom, and in staff meetings with other tutors. We are always in the market for models of how to address these issues with an expansive, nuanced understanding of different forces at work, rather than a single position to be defended. As such, we explore the connections with language ideologies.

TRANSLINGUAL PARALLELS

Given the sprawling demographic, disciplinary, and pedagogical diversities that our students and writing center navigate at City Tech, our everyday work keeps ideologies about language ever-present. We see in it a rich kind of laboratory for testing many questions with the goal of understanding language differences in practice: how they act and are acted upon in the world. While the kind of linguistic justice that informs our approach also connects with older and ongoing conversations about writing pedagogy and writing centers—questions of error, identity, and power—we find that the discursive tools of translingualism help to articulate complexities in powerful ways we need in order to function (see also Bouza et al.; Peña et al.).

Despite the early formation of translingualism around 20 years ago, Bruce Horner and Sara Alvarez's 2019 article, "Defining Translingualism," traces the various and in some ways conflicting uptake of concepts. They resist a single definition and assert translingualism as a "way to interrogate and unveil" the terms and social relations surrounding and informing "language user agency" through ideology and practice (1). Rather than seeing particular effects on the page (like informal registers or multiple languages together), this definition forwards a critical tool/approach for sensemaking and, as we understand it, promoting writer agency rather than a particular *use* of language. Horner et al. claimed that difference in language is not a "barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning" (303). In light of the view that language is "heterogeneous, fluid, and negotiable," the authors clarify that "a translingual approach directly counters demands that writers must conform to fixed, uniform standards" (305). But agency is a hard thing to measure, and articulating the standards of writing while also communicating that students must not conform to them is a tricky proposition.

One north star for our understanding of translingualism comes from Min-Zhan Lu and Horner's "Translingual Literacy, Language Difference, and Matters of Agency," a reassessment of the infamous "White Shoes" essay used by Bartholomae to describe the cliched and stilted rhetorical moves of novice student writers who are inventing the university. Lu and Horner read nuances in a much more expansive set of contexts to find novelty and invention within those lines and assert that translingualism "recognizes difference as the norm, to be found not only in utterances that dominant ideology has marked as different but also in utterances that dominant definitions of language, language relations, and language users would identify as 'standard'" (585). We do not see translingualism as tied to particular language practices or identities—it is actually the uncoupling of those assumptions we start with. We also do not see it as a new requisite to

reject assessment, rules, or policies that may be practiced by other stakeholders. More than celebrating radical language mixing, translingualism also reminds us that it's more than the product; it's the *agency* that matters. Translingualism asserts the importance of writers possessing enough knowledge and power to act with agency, to view their work as their own choices in a complex set of considerations, not as attempts to strive for some unquestionable, singular, stable version of correct (i.e., monolingualism).

Along with the ethics of authorship and authenticity clearly conflicted by GenAI tools, we feel we must assert the value of translingualist ideas in understanding how second language writers like Marcellous are navigating what it means to make choices in this academic landscape. Students like ours remind us that underneath all the concerns of authorship lie ideologies about language. GenAI tools are simultaneously enabling the ability to translate/generate texts while also deeply complicating the choices writers must practice making in order to obtain and act with agency over their use of language. These challenges are also clearly impacting and increasing the level of ambiguity coming even from well-meaning instructors who try to empower diverse writers to express themselves. To assess and assign value in these moves requires us to understand the instability at the heart of our enterprise—from all sides.

So, to the Marcellouses who are feeling the vertigo of expectation and error, we offer what knowledge we can to make sense of this in an attempt to recover the agency to make choices with their own voices. It is easy to see writing instructors' encouragement of more linguistic variety in word choice or register as well-intentioned, but if it lacks the context a student needs to make decisions about audience and genre, we're clearly missing something crucial. If our role is to interrogate and unveil assumptions in order to broaden a writer's understanding of their options, can we do the same thing when it comes to AI's potentially problematic *and* productive uses?

BRIDGING AI AND TRANSLINGUALISM

We've noticed that many of our writers have been unjustly targeted for their linguistic differences by lack of clear communication regarding academic expectations *and* the AI-detectors deployed to catch them plagiarizing. Since we already used translingualism to make sense of the assumptions woven into assessment and standard language ideology before GenAI joined the chat, we looked for possible applications of these sensemaking tools to help us approach the concerns around AI and at the same time articulate some translingual awareness. We found that, yes, it does appear that GenAI models trained on a limited set of texts does mean they powerfully reify—through production

and detection—a narrow standard for "correct" academic writing (the homogenization of monolinguistic standards). We also found that the concept of a hallucination by GenAI (merely presenting an incorrect fact by the algorithm) could also describe assumptions of monolingualism itself (the reproduction of unchallenged misunderstandings about language). We can say this with confidence: GenAI has opened up a new frontier to articulate and critique the impact and instability of language standards.

In the reciprocal relationship between this AI discourse and translingualism, we take the position that Standard Written English as a singular, stable force is often itself a hallucination—a very human one that precedes and informs these algorithms. Monolingualist hallucinations by instructors *and* AI-detection software falsely accuse students who deviate as plagiarists or failures, thus showing they share the same faulty inputs about writing. But AI is not all hallucination, just like all academic writing that adopts commonplaces are not necessarily uncritical products of monolingualism. So, that means we could also make the same allowances for the challenges and potentials raised by GenAI if we approach sessions with a *process of interrogation* (thank you, Horner and Alvarez) and *enough room for nuance*.

Students now come to us somewhat often with drafts, or pieces of drafts, that we know are written by GenAI. And, we know that many more who don't come to us are submitting—to some degree—unethical, wholesale artificial documents to their instructors. Even if they are informed about alternatives, when they feel backed into a corner, they may turn to AI. Even instructors who are assigning some translingual-ish work can still be backed into a corner, feeling they have no option but to assign failing grades to transgressive students who use AI. We think there's common ground here; both students and instructors can become unwitting monolingualists *when they lack the agency and room for nuance to enable better, more informed choices*. As such, there may be an opportunity to build a discourse that interrogates the ideological assumptions of the digitally artificial versus the analog authentic in the same interconnected ways that linguistic assumptions were interrogated through the ideological concepts of monolingualism versus translingualism. So, how can we begin to act in alignment with that opportunity?

Finding Agency in a Process of Interrogation with GenAI

Seeing writing as a product is a bad place to start if we're looking to make room for agency. Parsing the writing process, crafted from a bundle of skills in which we aim for proficiency piece by piece, allows us room to make smaller judgments. Each skill or step can be an opportunity for agency. Asking GenAI to

write your whole essay? Bummer. No room at all to build core proficiencies. Asking GenAI to find articles? Okay, maybe that saves time or finds better stuff, but one still needs to critique outputs. Asking GenAI to write a summary of the articles? Well, there's often already an abstract which is just as good. Also, AI might not find the actual quote you *need* for your paper. So, maybe AI helps you find some resources, but curating your evidence after that, and finding the competing voices? The tools will be less reliable. Maybe see what it comes up with, but then do your own version of that. Using AI to proofread? Sure thing, not a replacement for your own skill, though. Again, outputs all need to be critiqued. The litmus test here becomes whether these tools are empowering agency and building skills or whether they are taking over one's voice and choice.

So, you still need to know how to take notes, find quotes, summarize for a particular purpose, tweak for a particular audience, make choices about tone/style, align with the prompt—those were the same skills we needed before, and those remain necessary to manage AI so it doesn't sabotage your work with hallucinations or homogenization. This kind of approach embraces the reality of GenAI while also promoting nuance/agency for writers based on the skills they need to practice and also staying critical in the places GenAI falls short. It is also allowing a conversation to parse these specifics and why a writer might feel like they *need* AI to get better grades, which is what you need a writing center to do, because we offer individual attention and we don't assess their work officially. At least at our institution, *where else are students going to get that?*

In our center, we seek ways of asking students to invest in their own work; we want to be a place where "students are guided toward how to critically evaluate and use all of the writing resources available to them," even GenAI (Fledderjohann and Perkins). One example of this is an exercise that Anna did with Marcellous, which entreats students to utilize GenAI programs as tools for reflection. The tutor and student will go through an early draft of their paper, taking each Grammarly suggestion one at a time. Together, they talk through *why* the program is making that suggestion, what (sometimes arbitrary) box of grammar and perplexity it might be trying to shove the paper into. When asked, one by one, if the student wants to accept the suggestion, there will always be *at least* one suggestion that the student does not agree with—the student then must defend the choices they made in their writing. This is an agency baby step. The key, for us, is to create that space for agency—this is our north star for language difference and the new territory of writer authenticity driven by GenAI.

By starting as small as finding AI hallucinations themselves, students can prove that their voice matters, that their work is theirs. We can build up from there. For Marcellous, the immediate result of this exercise was his ability to point to and defend all of the decisions he made in his own revision work to

his professor. On a deeper level, he expressed how good it was to really feel like he understood and owned his work; to point to each sentence and say, "Here, look, this is mine." The more this space for agency is made, the more students are called to care about the details of their writing, to grapple with and question these platforms instead of automatically accepting their apparent expertise. We must trace the complex ways that a hierarchical system preserves a certain standard for English through a winding road of inputs and outputs in a tangle of human, institutional, and algorithmic codes if we're going to reclaim the space for people to learn how to write. If not, we're the lazy ones who aren't leaving room for students to learn.

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