

Tentative Title: Translating Multilingualism: An Autoethnographic Inquiry into Translating German Writing Center Spaces to Their US Contemporaries

Situating Translation and the Transnational Writing Center

I often joke that my interest lies in transnational writing center research. This journey started with a supposed mispronunciation incident when I was finding my footing in the U.S. academic world as an international student from India. During my first semester as a writing center tutor in the U.S. South, a local student asked for help with his lab report about aluminum. I pronounced the word differently (as in al-u-MIN-i-um instead of a-LU-min-um) with my Indian accent, and the student casually corrected me. I remember smiling, nodding, and moving on, but something stayed with me: how sound, accent, and linguistic rhythm quietly influence authority in academic spaces. Years later, in a writing center in Germany, I mispronounced Wissenschaft while explaining my research, and this time a German tutor gently corrected me. Between those two moments lies the terrain of my project: translation as a space of humility, reciprocity, and knowledge-making.

This project is rooted in my experiences as a South Asian immigrant, multilingual writer, writing center tutor, and doctoral researcher in the US (specializing in writing studies). I spent the summer of 2024 in Germany on a DAAD-funded grant. My goal for this work is to examine how translation, both as a process and a product, can shape transnational writing center research and affect how we communicate across linguistic borders, while also exploring the epistemologies of global writing center work through my personal experiences. Since my project idea mainly inspired these research travel experiences, I use autoethnography as my method because it best combines personal narrative with theoretical reflection to demonstrate how my movement between

US and German contexts uncovers the dynamics and politics of multilingualism-centered writing center studies.

The US writing center scholarship has increasingly advocated for global and translingual approaches that challenge monolingual norms. Scholars like Donahue (2023) and Hotson & Bell (2023) remind us that writing centers are not just teaching spaces but also contact zones where languages, beyond English and local literacies- especially outside the US- can interact, thrive, and are just as valid as English. However, much of this research still flows outward from the U.S., viewing international writing centers as extensions or adaptations of U.S. models. My experience in Germany complicates this one-way flow. Therefore, in this project, I aim to explore two questions: *1) What happens when the US writing center researcher becomes the linguistic outsider, learning to translate across different academic and linguistic landscapes? 2) What types of knowledge emerge when we listen to, instead of about, multilingual contexts?*

For my project, I utilize translation throughout. First, I use translation literally (as movement between English and German), whereas methodologically too, as in movement between knowledge systems. Translation studies scholars such as Venuti (2021) have long discussed translation as an act of negotiation that makes visible the power relations embedded in language. In Writing Studies, too, Horner and Tetreault (2016) similarly recognize translation as a rhetorical praxis central to translingualism. In her book, building on Ayash's (2019) notion of translation as method, I treat translation not as a secondary activity but as a central mode of inquiry of writing mentorship that is imagined and negotiated in the writing center context, as it is a subfield within writing studies. Through this project, I aim to think of translation as an epistemological tool that shapes how I observe, analyze, and narrate my experiences observing writing center spaces in Germany to see what pedagogical possibilities are adaptable in the US writing center context.

Vignette 1: Arrival

When I arrived in Germany, the first thing I noticed was the soundscape of languages. On the Bahn, conversations wove between German and English. The city I lived in and visited had graffiti in Turkish and Arabic. At my writing colleagues' places, I often met people from around the world across various disciplines where our shared language was neither English nor German but a fluctuating blend of both. My German was intermediate, my English fluent, and yet, I often found myself grasping for words, pausing mid-sentence to translate in my head. This linguistic in-betweenness became the foundation of my fieldwork. Such experiences reminded me that translation is a lived experience, not a task performed after writing. The first writing center I visited was tucked next to the library at a technical university in Southwest Germany. The director greeted me in German, quickly switching to English when she sensed my hesitation. She introduced me to tutors who worked with German, Turkish, Polish, French, Irish, and Tamil. I remember one tutor colleague describing to me how some international students bring German essays but discuss them in English. Responding to my colleague, I said, "It looks like y'all translate ideas, not just sentences." My own phrase stayed with me and the very ethos I sought to study.

Autoethnography as Translation

Autoethnography scholars such as Adams et al. (2017), Chawla (2021), and Ellis (1999) urge autoethnographers to move between self and system, attempting to theorize lived experiences. These movements are inherently translational in my research context and theme. Each reflection I observed interacts with my experiences living, researching, and working in India, Germany, and the US, requiring a translation between lived experience and scholarly language. When I write about German writing centers in English, I am translating not only words but also institutional values, pedagogical traditions, and cultural assumptions of my own, as well as those of others.

When I review my fieldnotes, I often find them soaked in translational residue: German phrases left untranslated, my English sentences interrupted mid-sentence, and notes from conversations that capture the rhythm of multilingual life. Following Canagarajah's (2013) call to negotiate translingual realities, I deliberately leave these linguistic traces visible in notes and in this piece. I do so because such acts oppose the traditional US academic tendency to smooth over linguistic differences and instead highlight what scholar Benthien & Klein (2010) call

Zwischenräume, i.e., in-between spaces across languages and literacies where meaning is co-created.

In a similar project direction, German writing center research traditions (Girgensohn, 2018; Scott, 2016) emphasize collaboration and institutional integration, where the focus often shifts away from writers to supporting disciplinary literacy development among multilingual writers. During my engagement with German writing centers, I realized that translation (Farsi, 2019) also happens epistemically because the US's writing center concepts, such as peer tutoring, do not always perfectly align with German contexts. Thus, the act of comparison itself becomes an interpretive translation, revealing the cultural embeddedness of pedagogical language. Therefore, through this piece, I do not aim to describe Germany for a US audience, at least for now, but to translate my positional experience within German contexts into an understanding that challenges and could expand U.S. frameworks.

The U.S. Writing Center and Its Linguistic Imaginaries

Before visiting Germany, I spent years working as a tutor and assistant director at a R1 university writing center in the US South. Although the center was a lively and discipline-diverse space, our consultants mainly tutored in English, specifically Standard American English, which remained the institutional lingua franca. Each semester, I co-trained new tutors to work with multilingual writers, often focusing sessions on the ideas of clarity and audience awareness. However, I started to notice how these terms, despite good intentions, carried implicit monolingual expectations. To be clear meant aligning with certain syntactic and rhetorical norms. Yet, these norms are often linked to whiteness and academic privilege, especially in the US higher education context (Anand, 2024).

In staff meetings, discussions about multilingual students frequently revolved around how to support them. For example, rarely did we, as the admin team, ask what international multilingual writers might teach us about global language or writing. **Such writing asymmetry echoes what Faison and Trevino (2017) describe as the deficit framing of diverse and minority writers (multilingualism in my topic context) in writing center discourse.** Even as the field advocates for inclusion, institutional structures, training manuals, assessment rubrics, and administrative policies often reinforce English monolingualism as the default mode of academic legitimacy (Alvarez, 2019; Garcia, 2017).

In contrast, scholars like Rifo (2015) and Jordan (2012) have emphasized translanguaging as an act of resistance as a valid way for multilingual writers to draw upon their full linguistic repertoires. Hence, when I saw writers in German writing centers working across languages with their tutors in the writing center space, I began to see such tutoring sessions as sites of translation as moments where I, too, was translating between institutional expectations and the writer's own rhetorical world. In the vignette below, I aim to encapsulate my multilingual labor of multilingual tutoring, which Jackson and McKinney (2016) call "relational work" (para 10). Here, one could see how, as a multilingual tutor, I am constantly translating between writers' first languages and English, between institutional discourses and personal expression, between belonging and estrangement. I argue that these translations are not mundane and hence rarely neutral; they reflect power dynamics that determine whose writerly voices are legible in the global academia.

Vignette 2: Tutoring in Translation

One afternoon, I met with a graduate student from India working on a sociology paper. Her draft alternated between English and Hindi idioms. At one point, she described community resilience using a Hindi proverb that, when translated literally, made little sense in English. I asked her to explain its meaning. She smiled and said, "It means: even if one hand is weak, together they can lift a mountain." We talked about how she might integrate that metaphor into her argument rather than replacing it with a more "academic" phrase. Later that night, I wrote in my reflective log: Tutoring as translation, which often requires lifting mountains of meaning with shared hands.

From the US to Germany

When I began preparing for my German research trip, I carried the above and many other U.S.-based assumptions with me, as I had been working in the US context for almost 6 years. For example, in the writing center context, I expected writing centers to discuss non-native English speakers as a primary concern, just as we often do in the US. Instead, I found that multilingualism in Germany was not a special category as in the US; it was a given, as universities there are often intrinsically multilingual. German writing centers routinely serve students writing in English, German, or both, and other languages. This difference unsettled me. I realized that the U.S. writing center's persistent labeling of multilingual students as other reflects deeper ideological commitments that the German context, at least partially, disrupts. In such scenarios, translation, in the above sense, became my intellectual mirror and research praxis. It allowed me to see my own US institution through the lens of another, to notice how monolingual assumptions shape what counts as writing, tutoring, and learning. As Donahue and Horner (2022) argues, transnational writing research should aim not for comparison but for reciprocity; a reciprocity that is manifested in willingness to let other writing contexts teach us something about our own.

Vignette 3: Reflecting Back

After returning to the U.S., I talked with my colleagues and shared stories from the 10 writing centers I visited in Germany. I explained how German tutors worked across languages without framing it as remediation. One of my colleagues asked, "But how do they manage if a student's English is really weak? Listening to this question, I hesitated at first before responding, realizing that the question itself carried the very assumptions my research had started to challenge. I answered, They don't see weakness. They see communication. The room went silent for a moment. That silence, I think, was the sound of translation happening. However, that translation was not across languages this time, but across ideologies.

Bridging Two Traditions

Experiencing the US and German writing center contexts required navigating two distinct yet overlapping writing traditions. The US model, grounded in peer tutoring and expressivist

pedagogies, often emphasizes individualized feedback and process-oriented writing. The German model, by contrast, relies heavily on genre, disciplinary discourse, and viewing writing as a social practice. I later realized that these writing practices could be shaped by the history of rhetoric and disciplinary writing traditions in those places (Kampka & Kobylska, 2023). Translating between these frameworks was, for me, a methodological act. In this oscillation, I find resonance with translation theorists like Benjamin and Rendall (2021), who describe translation as an afterlife of the original—something that transforms rather than simply replicates meaning. My work, too, is an afterlife of multiple contexts: Indian, American, and German. Through autoethnography, I aim to honor that multiplicity by writing not from a fixed center but from what Homi Bhabha calls the third space of cultural translation—a space of negotiation, hybridity, and productive tension—as Wolf (2008) describes.

Germany as a Translational Writing Center Research Site

Germany welcomed me with both warmth and distance, especially in Darmstadt, the city where I spent most of my time. Its architecture, language, and rhythms reflected its layered history, serving as a fitting metaphor for my research on writing centers as multilingual, layered spaces. I visited ten writing centers in total, where English-language writing was sometimes integrated into STEM programs, alongside one center focused on the humanities. Despite differences in structure or organization, these spaces shared a pedagogical dedication to viewing multilingualism as a normal condition rather than an exception.

In my first week, I observed a writing consultation between a first-generation Somali-German tutor and a student from Syria. They communicated in English, with the student occasionally switching to Arabic to clarify a concept, and the tutor translating it back into German to show her understanding. At one point, the tutor laughed and said, "Sometimes my English thinks faster than

my German," to which the student replied, "Mine, too, but in Arabic, ha!" The shared laughter felt like a multilingual truce, recognizing that language itself is fluid, humorous, and beautifully imperfect.

Vignette 4: Translating a Consultation

Later at another writing center, I was invited to co-observe a writing workshop for international graduate students writing in English. I took notes in both German and English, scribbling phrases as they were spoken:

Tutor: Wie sagt man academic writing auf Deutsch?

Student: Wissenschaftlich schreiben or Scientific writing?

Tutor: Ja! Genau.

I found myself translating silently between both languages, realizing that even conceptual categories like the vocabulary for the writings shift across contexts. Another example, in German academic writing, concepts such as Argumentation carry a collective weight less about persuasion, more about logical unfolding within disciplinary conventions. My US writing center training had conditioned me to see argument as an individual act of rhetorical agency; here, it was communal, methodical, almost architectural.

The above realizations echoed Bromley's (2023) observation that German writing centers draw from Schreibwissenschaft, a field that conceptualizes writing as both cognitive and social practice. Translation, then, was not only about finding equivalent words but about tracing the epistemological architecture that those words inhabit.

Writing Center Philosophies in Motion

During my stay, I met with German writing center directors who described their pedagogical philosophies. Many referenced the work of Otto Kruse, Andrea Frank, and Katrin Girgensohn. These are the scholars who have shaped the German Schreibdidaktik movement (Scott & Bromley, 2019). Their approaches emphasized reflective writing, collaboration with faculty, and research-based tutoring practices that resonated with but did not largely replicate the traditional US models.

What struck me most was the absence of a remedial discourse. German writing centers weren't viewed as places to fix writing but as spaces for academic discussion. When I mentioned that U.S. centers sometimes struggle to be seen as remedial, a German director responded, 'We have to fight other battles, proving that writing is a scientific practice, not a soft skill.' That comment revealed to me how translation operates on both institutional and linguistic levels, and how each academic system legitimizes writing differently around the world. One example of such intra-disciplinary variation in writing centers is the observations by Freise & Hoffmann (2025).

Translating Observation

While I analyzed my observation notes of writing consultancies, I often encountered moments that resisted translation altogether. Words like *Wissenschaftlichkeit* (academic) and *Schreibberatung* (writing advice) have no precise English equivalents. To translate these words literally would risk flattening their cultural meaning, but to leave them untranslated would also risk alienating them for English readers. I followed Bassnett's (1998) advice to treat translation as an act of negotiation rather than equivalence.

For example, *Schreibberatung* evokes a professionalized, dialogic form of academic guidance in Germany that differs from the US tutoring model in its institutional embeddedness. I chose to keep such German terms in my analysis to let them act as linguistic witnesses to their own epistemic traditions. This decision became a small scientific act of resistance against what Venuti (2017) describes as "the translator's invisibility" and its repercussions. As an example of such acts of linguistic and epistemic translation mentioned above, I started to see Germany not just as a research site but as a translational space. In Germany, where I conducted my research, I found that languages, pedagogies, and ideologies of writing collide and merge.

Autoethnography as Transnational Practice

The more I write about my research trip in Germany, the more I realize that my research methods themselves need translation. Autoethnography, born out of US qualitative traditions emphasizing self-narrative and reflexivity, carries cultural assumptions about the self, narrative authority, and knowledge-making (Gannon, 2017). When applied in the German academic context, where scholarly writing privileges impersonal tone and collective evidence, autoethnography risked seeming self-indulgent. During one of my meetings with a German writing researcher, I described my method as autoethnographic. She paused and said, “*Ah, you mean a narrative reflection? We call that Selbstreflexion.*” That moment of linguistic negotiation revealed a methodological translation in action: I wasn’t simply adopting a method; I was rearticulating it across traditions.

Vignette 5: Writing the Self in Translation

In my Gottingen hotel room, I drafted early notes for this piece based on notes I observed at a writing center there. The sentences shifted between English and German, sometimes mid-thought: Today, ich habe bemerkt, dass translation doesn’t just happen between texts; it happens within me. The sentence above is messy and hybrid. It shows how thinking about my non-English-centric project itself became translational. The movement between languages was not confusion, but evidence of my engagement as a researcher for whom interaction across languages and literacies and navigating immigration is a second nature; something many international and generational writers do who are often multilingual too. This experience reminded me of Ayash’s (2019) argument that translation within global writing studies is a methodology that refuses closure, inviting the researcher to dwell in the tension between languages and epistemes.

My deliberate choice to adopt an autoethnographic writing style for this project became an experiment in dwelling; a dwelling that allows German terms to coexist with English analysis, refusing to smooth over the discomfort of linguistic hybridity. This approach enables my writing and scholarly identity to be continually reshaped through negotiation.

German and US Writing Center Perspectives

Given the tenure of German writing center research, it has a relatively long tradition of employing qualitative case studies and institutional ethnographies, focusing on collective (Scott, 2017). US writing center research, conversely, has a stronger tradition of narrative inquiry and critical

reflection (Babcock, 2023). Translating between these traditions demanded ethical attentiveness, and as part of this journey, one thing I had to be intention about was that I had to avoid imposing US narrative-centric expectations on German collaborators, while also honoring the affective and political dimensions of my own story, experiences, and research.

To reconcile these approaches, I developed what I call translational autoethnography: an iterative method that highlights both self-reflexivity and linguistic diversity while engaging in autoethnography. Each narrative episode I share in this piece—serving as examples—is not only a story but also an act of translation. These nuances of translation function as a way of re-encoding cross-cultural knowledge through lived experience. Responding with Canagarajah (2020), I see my writing not as a transparent window onto experience but as a space of negotiation among languages, identities, and disciplinary conventions. Every paragraph in this piece is, in one way or another, a multilingual conversation and exchange of professional, personal, and academic linguistic negotiations and their various forms.

Vignette 6: A Workshop in Two Languages

Near the end of my stay, I was invited to present my overall research to a small group of writing center staff and graduate students (many of latter were tutors too). The session was advertised auf Englisch, mit deutscher Diskussion möglich (in English, with discussion possible in German). True to this announcement, my engagement with my audience moved fluidly between the two languages. When I spoke about how what I had been finding in my research largely involved translation and a German to English translation project I was co-translating at that time, one tutor asked me, “Do you ever feel lost in translation?”

I replied: All the time. But I’ve started to think that being lost is where the learning begins! Later, over lunch, a writing center colleague said, “You are not only writing about translation, but you are also translating us to your readers.” Her comment encapsulated the initial ethical stakes of my project. I realized that translation is never innocent! Instead, it involves choice, voice, and power; such is similar to writing and writing consultation. My task as a translator, multilingual and writing center tutor, and research mushroomed into not just representing German writing centers but to translating my encounters with them in ways that preserved their writing complexity.

From the experiences above, I was able to notice three concrete methodological insights for those who are multilingual writers and interested in crosslinguistic global writing center research:

1. Translation as reflexivity emphasizes the researcher's positionality, revealing the boundaries of their linguistic and epistemic scope.
2. Translation as reciprocity, as in engaging with other writing center traditions, requires listening and giving back, not just borrowing.
3. Translation as Method wherein writing itself transforms into an act of translation, creating new hybrid forms of academic expression.

These experiential translation-related principles I mentioned above could reshape global writing center research by challenging the monolingual epistemologies that often govern our scholarly practices.

This piece, my autoethnographic inquiry into translating German writing center spaces, has shown that translation functions both as a research method and a pedagogical approach. My exploration of reciprocal and global knowledge exchange has involved many moments of my willingness to misunderstand, to be corrected, and to linger in uncertainty. Yet, these moments also foster reciprocity as a way of learning from and with others, not just about them.

Vignette 7: Returning

After returning to the US, I walk into our writing center and hear the familiar buzz of students typing, chatting, and waiting. A student comes in and asks for help with a paper written partly in German. In those moments, I think of my German tutor colleagues' ease with linguistic fluidity and their willingness to work with both languages. I happened to be at the welcome desk and volunteered to help, saying I know both languages. The student looks relieved. As I began working with the student, in that small act, I realized the translation had already begun across space, pedagogy, and the institutional imagination of what writing centers can be.

So, what now moving forward now?

In the field of Writing Studies, translation, as argued by Horner and Tetreault (2016), destabilizes the binary between native and non-native speakers, local and global contexts. In writing centers, it serves as a pedagogical ethic rooted in openness, negotiation, and mutual

transformation within the US writing center community, echoing the calls of writing scholars advocating for transformation in writing contexts outside the US. Drawing from Scott's (2025) call for equitable global collaboration and Ayash's (2019) articulation of translation as a method, I propose that writing center studies must regard multilingual and transnational work not as peripheral curiosities but as central epistemological foundations, where each writing center context can teach one another. German writing center research offers US scholars a model of institutional multilingualism, where writing is inherently embedded in diverse linguistic ecologies. Conversely, US writing center practices contribute a rich vocabulary of reflective, relational pedagogy. All of such research observations and interactions led me to reaffirm that translation (be it literal or methodological, or epistemic) has the capacity to foster internationalization and interlinguistic dialogues between global writing perspectives. Yes, to translate is to risk. At times, it could include cultural appropriation and mistranslation. However, with proper training and scholarly interaction, translation could also become a professional act to accept that something will always be lost and something new will always be created, providing scholars in a field a volatile space to learn from their global contemporaries. My research has been an exercise in embracing that loss and creation where writing to myself about my travel to writing centers, which came along with interstices of languages, institutions, and identities, made me push the boundaries of what I already know and could know about my field I care so much about.

As I continue this work, I am guided by a question I often hear from my German colleagues:

“When you translate us, do you also translate yourself?”

The answer is, I believe I do! Every word I write in this piece carries traces of Hindi, German, and English and of the places that have made me a multilingual writer and a transnational researcher.

Translation, then, is not only my method; it is my becoming.

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Supporting Information

In this piece, based on my experience, I aim to develop a new methodological auto-ethnographical framework that I call translational autoethnography. This approach attempts to combine self-narrative, linguistic reflexivity, transnational writing research inquiry, and cross-institutional translation.

Key Theorists and Methodological Frameworks

Translation (both as a research method and theory)

Mona Baker – Advocates for translation as a mode of narrative knowledge production that shapes both local and global epistemes (Baker, 2022).

Lydia H. Liu – Frames translation as translingual negotiation embedded in power and colonial histories (Liu, 1999).

José M. Dávila-Montes, J. M. (2017). – Argues that translation, rather than representation, should anchor global rhetorical research; offers “translation as method” as a paradigm for rhetorical inquiry (Dávila-Montes, 2017).

Lawrence Venuti emphasizes the ethical responsibility of the translator to preserve linguistic alterity (Venuti, 2002).

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Glossary of Key Terms

Autoethnography: A qualitative method combining personal narrative and cultural analysis to explore how lived experience intersects with larger sociocultural systems.

Schreibwissenschaft: Literally “writing science”; a German academic field that studies writing as a researchable, cognitive, and social phenomenon, distinct from composition studies.

Schreibdidaktik: The didactics (teaching methodology) of writing; in Germany, a field focusing on teaching writing as a reflective and epistemic process rather than a remedial skill.

Schreibberatung: Writing consultation or tutoring session, emphasizing collaborative, dialogic, and process-oriented engagement with writers.

Translingualism: A theoretical approach that views language difference not as error but as evidence of rhetorical adaptability and linguistic creativity.

Wissenschaftlichkeit: The quality of being scholarly or scientific; in German academia, it signals intellectual rigor and methodical grounding, often distinct from “academic writing” in English.

Domestication: A concept from translation studies (Venuti) describing the process of making translated texts conform to target-language norms, often erasing linguistic and cultural difference.

Writing Center Ecologies: A metaphor for the interrelated systems—pedagogical, institutional, linguistic—that shape writing center work globally.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity Statement

My interactions in German writing centers were conducted with participants as their volunteer and service to the profession, following ethical standards for narrative inquiry and institutional research. I have not used any names or identifying to the inclusion of my travel and research experience in Germany.

As a multilingual researcher situated between the Global South (India) and the Global North (U.S./Germany), I acknowledge that my interpretations are context-dependent and partial. This project does not seek to definitively represent German or U.S. writing centers but to translate encounters. Instead, the goal is to foster a reciprocal, dialogic understanding of writing center contexts across transnational settings. My autoethnographic approach aligns with Canagarajah’s call for ethical reflexivity in global writing research, emphasizing the positional and linguistic contingencies involved in all scholarly knowledge production.

Institutional Description

The University of Georgia (UGA) is the first US public university. Its writing center serves undergraduate and graduate writers across disciplines. Housed in the English department, the UGA writing center’s pedagogy draws from US writing center traditions emphasizing collaborative learning, reflection, and writer agency. At research-intensive institutions like the UGA, its writing center data shows that from 2021 to 2023, we assisted multilingual college writers speaking 42 distinct languages. This reflects just a portion of the linguistic diversity on campus, as it only includes those who used the services. As Assistant Director and tutor associated with the writing center for four and a half years, I work with tutors to design workshops that bridge reflective and rhetorical approaches to writing, particularly for international and L2 students.

As part of my admin focus, which is also my phd. Focus, I went to the German writing center to witness contrasting but complementary writing cultures, as German universities are intrinsically multilingual. So far in my research, I noticed the US writing center model’s emphasis on inclusivity and reflection, and the German model’s emphasis on epistemic writing and institutional legitimacy. Hence, my project situates itself in the translational space between these traditions.

