

# Small Cat Small Home

LITR0110D Digital Language Art I Final Project - Ivy Wong

## Artist's Statement

My final project is called *Small Cat Small Home*, and is an exploration and showcase of the difficulties of translation, both technically and conceptually. The vehicle of this project is a small personal website that the reader can explore and interact with by various means of "translation", and the title of the project comes from a "machine translation" of the website's actual title, which translates roughly to "Kitty's Den".

My motivations in choosing this project were due to several reasons, stemming from the challenges and experiences I've had while learning Mandarin and other languages. Firstly, I am interested in the idea of language as communication, and how it is inextricably intertwined with the culture that uses it. With the exception of constructed languages such as Esperanto, learning a foreign language does not just involve learning vocabulary and grammar, but the cultural context behind it. Without this cultural context, it is difficult to truly understand and translate to and from said language.

Secondly, I am interested in the use of linguistics and culture in storytelling – not necessarily to the extent of Tolkien, who built a world around his languages and wrote *The Lord of the Rings* and other works just to showcase them, but in smaller things, whether it be how you address others, speak about topics, or even tell stories in said language. Do characters address each other using familial titles? First names? Something else? What do people write about in their poems? Their stories? What and how do they use writing and language? These tidbits may give the reader a small window into another world.

Thirdly, I am interested in the intersection between human and machine in the context of language and translation. There is no one "universal grammar", and as such, there are inherent limitations of machine-aided translation. Also, current machine translation methods involve learning from huge corpuses of data, which may not be available for languages with limited or inaccessible literary traditions. For these reasons, as well as the use of English as a central "hub language", I hope to use this project as a way to explore and contrast what happens when a machine translator ultimately fails, versus the comparatively faithful "human" translation.

## **Documentation**

I went through three iterations of this project before settling on my final version. The first iteration – a Google Chrome extension that altered the text on a webpage – was too unstructured, and the second iteration – an extension that simulated learning a foreign language – resulted in some technical difficulties. Consequentially, I moved away from the idea of disrupting the reader's own space, and towards the idea of the reader and the translation themselves being the disruption.

My third and final version of my final project is a mock personal website of a fictional person from a fictional culture somewhere on Earth. The premise is that the reader has stumbled upon this website while wandering around the internet. From there, the reader has several options: look through the original website, in its fictional language; look at the website's machine translation; or "manually translate" the website via the button in the translate bar.

The website is here: <https://ivywong.me/dlarts/remo/>

And the source code is here: <https://github.com/ivywong/dlarts/tree/gh-pages/remo>

The language itself was generated using Vulgar: <https://www.vulgarlang.com/generator/>

Unfortunately, my notes for the language and the culture are scattered around in various places. However, here's a brief overview of the backstory I decided on:

Kitty lives in a mountain town somewhere in South America, and her country recently went through an upheaval. Her town is relatively poor. Kitty shares computers with her cousins; there are no smartphones nor signal up in the mountains. Computers are more available because businesses need them.

The site grew out of the website owner ("Kitty")'s sister moving to America and Kitty therefore losing her closest support network. She has her friends and family but they're all busy with work (older) and she really misses being able to talk to her sister any time. She's not the best at English and is rebelling against it and the idea of America through her website, in which she writes in her language. She also hopes to keep in touch with her sister through the website.

Some aspects of the culture that may or may not be visible in the website: an emphasis on knowing the relationships between people, positive or negative, and the idea that knowing and describing these relationships is not a breach of privacy or condemnation, but simple fact. An emphasis on community over the self – differences in the individual are valued, but for the role they play for the community. An idea of "home" being small, cozy, a place of belonging – such that the word for "website" is technically the diminutive of "home".

My process for creating this language and the subsequent pieces is as follows: First, I decided on basic grammatical rules. Then, I generated the vocabulary using Vulgar. Finally, I decided on the machine translation rules.

Basic aspects of the language:

- verb-subject-object
- pro subject-dropping
- two tenses: past and non-past

- all modifiers follow the thing modified, with some exceptions for time
- adjectives can technically act as verbs

Basic machine translation rules:

- "knows" about VSO
- sort of knows how prepositions work
- cannot handle subject dropping
- translates idioms literally
- translates vocabulary from a dictionary
- cannot handle repetition-as-emphasis and ambiguity

To create a piece, I first wrote a draft of it in English, using basic grammar rules and idioms. I then converted it word by word to the fictional language, tweaking idioms and sentence patterns as I went. Finally (and these two steps are interchangeable), I wrote the piece in proper English ("manual translation") and translated more literally from the fictional language to English ("machine translation").

An example of the process for the poem "Leaves":

| first draft   | fictional language  | manual translation   | machine translation  |
|---|---|--|--|
| walk school to,<br>walk leaves with,<br>walk home to,<br>walk leaves with | ra memaho manho<br>ra liw motu<br>ra wod manho<br>ra liw motu | When I walk to school,<br>leaves walk with me.<br>When I walk back home,<br>leaves walk with me. | Go to school<br>Go with leaf<br>Go to home<br>Go with leaf |
| green (blue),<br>yellow, red, ah!   | umiku, tsinhanta,<br>boshti, ro!                              | Green, yellow, red, oh!  | Green, yellow, red,<br>oh!                                 |
| ask leaf to,<br>too have school?<br>too have home?                        | tu liw wetyu --<br>tu'ip yuud memaho?<br>tu'ip yuud wod?      | I ask the leaves:<br>Do you, too, have school?<br>Do you, too, have homes?                       | Ask to leaf<br>same exist school?<br>same exist home?      |

I did not manage to create as much content as I would have liked, so I don't think the cultural context comes through as much, but I did like the contrast I ended up with between this

language and English.

## **Discussion/Reflections**

### **Conceptual**

On the whole, I think that the core concept of my project – the comparison between three versions of a language (original, machine translation, and manual translation) – turned out fairly well. I was able to implement it in a way that allows the reader to switch between each version without losing progress in the manual translation. Also, by having the "manual translation" start from the original text, it made it more clear to the reader what language the reader was translating *from* – directly from the original language, not simply a clean up of the machine translation.

In addition, I think the juxtaposition of the original language and the two translations was fairly successful as well. While creating the fictional language, I took into consideration the "distance" between it and English, and ways I could exploit the dissimilarities between languages to emphasize the limitations of the machine. By adding in more ambiguities and reliance on context, either cultural or textual, I could show the gulf between translations fairly easily.

However, I do think I could have taken this concept further by adding more content and creating a more concrete culture behind the scenes, so that it could shine through even more. In that way, this project could not only be an exploration of translation, but an exploration of the way we perceive other societies through their language and culture, while emphasizing that in we are all, in the end, just human.

## Artistic

While working on this final version, I decided to go for a "handmade web" feel – something simple, relatively unstyled, and a little whimsical. To do this, I drew the drawings on the main page by hand, added little animations on hover, and kept each page simple (text and images). I also added color to the website, both in the background and in the image links. Finally, I chose a handwriting font because serif and sans-serif fonts seemed too impersonal.

In contrast, the translate bar is intruding on the webpage, and I picked "boring" and "corporate" colors for those: the background is white and the buttons are gray. The font: sans-serif.

As for the translation experience, I had a few options. My original plan was to have the manual translation work by hovering over each paragraph and waiting, but I received feedback that it would be too "easy" – and there was an element of something that was missing. I realized that the point of the manual translation was to simulate the *reader* translating the text, rather than simply "uncovering" the manual translation, and so I added a more active mechanism for manual translation – a button in the translate bar that simulated the same actions one would take if one were actually translating a text.

I think I could have increased the feeling of the "handmade web" some more, by adding the feeling of images pasted on the site, rather than simply uploaded. I also could have increased the contrast between the website and the translation bar by jazzing up the bar some more, making it shiny and more intrusive.

Finally, I definitely could have added more content, illustrations, links, and so on, to make the project more visually appealing and closer to what a real personal website would look like. In its current state, I focus more on the language aspect than the cultural aspect, and so

the world the owner of the website belongs to is less defined, which may make the reader's experience feel less real.

Artistically speaking, while my project implementation served its purpose, I do think that I could have reached a little further, creating something that was more literary than technical, more abstract than concrete. I could have taken a more exploratory angle, rather than interactive, and created, for example, a "notebook" of found texts and their translations, with notes and all, or even scrapped the "given translation" angle and left the reader with a journal full of code-switching, a la Mezengelle. Of course, the concepts behind *these* ideas would have fairly different focuses, but they were options that I didn't give due consideration.

## **Technical**

In the course of making this final project, I learned a fair amount about DOM manipulation and CSS. This wasn't too difficult, as I had prior experience with HTML/CSS/Javascript, but it definitely could have went faster had I worked with those languages recently, rather than a few years ago. Code-quality-wise, the project is rather hacked together, as I didn't have too much time to get it working, and there are definitely ways I could have cleaned up the code (for example, fix the duplicate IDs, not mix HTML and Javascript, and so on). The way I implemented it also discourages me from using inline links and such, so that was rather limiting. However, it does what it's supposed to, so I consider that a success.

Had I more time, ambition, and inclination towards intentional sadism, I would have implemented the manual translation a different way, via an additional sidebar that contained all the information the reader needed to understand the text itself – a dictionary, cultural notes, and so on – but not the translation itself, and the reader would have to piece everything together. Implementing *this* in a way that does not marginalize the source culture would have been a

challenge in its own right, but it might have been able to explore the difficulties in translation and cultural differences in a more extensive manner.

As a final note, I find it somewhat fitting concept-wise that the addition of the translation code made the actual website source code messy and difficult to read. Of course, it's always better to *not* have messy code in the first place, if that isn't the intention.