

**Is There a Translation in This Class?:  
A Crash Course in Translation Literacy  
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Well-intentioned initiatives to globalize and diversify college curricula have put many instructors in the position of teaching literary and other key cultural texts in translation. In the absence of pedagogical guidance, however, instructors are likely to treat the translation as if it were the original, obscuring if not mystifying the intellectual labor of translators and the distinct cultural work of translated texts.<sup>1</sup> When the status of the text *as* a translation is acknowledged, it is often presented as a necessary evil, implying that translation can only be a pale copy of the original, or as Herbert Giles (1884, v) put it over one hundred and fifty years ago in his anthology *Gems of Chinese Literature*: "It must however always be borne in mind that translators are but traitors at best, and that translations may be moonlight and water while the originals are sunlight and wine." (Although, to be fair to Giles, he opens his anthology with the following epigraph from Thomas Carlyle: "What work nobler than transplanting foreign thought?")

The last twenty-five years has seen a slow but steady increase in works offering both theoretical and practical support for teaching literature in translation *as* translation (see Maier and Dingwaney 1995; Damrosch 2009; Maier and Massardier Kenney 2010; and Venuti 2017), as well as works outlining general approaches to reading translated literature (Hermans 1996; Schiavi 1996; Rose 1997; Venuti 2004; Scott 2012; and Wright 2016). This volume seeks to accelerate that trend by dedicating every chapter, including the introductions, to providing direct instructional support in the form of lesson plans, syllabi, and discussion questions, modeling a pedagogy for teaching literature in translation *as* translation in a variety of disciplinary and curricular contexts. In so doing, we hope to move translation from the periphery of literary

studies to the very center and to move literary studies beyond the insular nation-based frameworks that have organized the field for so long.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, one might legitimately ask why instructors should complicate their lives and their students' reading experience—their suspension of disbelief—by problematizing the text that lies before them, especially in those cases where neither the instructor nor the students know the source language? And so, before discussing the *how* of teaching literature in translation *as* translation, or rather, the many possible *hows*, it is perhaps wise to present the rationale for doing so as this may be helpful in convincing not only our students but also colleagues and administrators of the pedagogical benefits of such an approach.

### **Why Teach Translated Literature *as* Translation?**

In addition to cultivating a distinct set of critical reading practices, which Michelle Woods discusses below and the contributors to this volume lay out in their various chapters, teaching literature in translation *as* translation offers an excellent opportunity to expose students to the basics of translation literacy, that is, an understanding of the nature of verbal translation between natural (as opposed to artificial) languages, described by Roman Jakobson (1959, 233) as "interlingual translation." Translation literacy equips instructors of translated literature and their students with the conceptual support and the metalanguage necessary to address rather than avoid what are perhaps the most common questions students have regarding translation: How can there be so many different translations of a single text, and how can you tell which ones are good, or, more typically, which one is the best?

More generally, however, translation literacy sensitizes students to the workings of natural languages, a sensitivity that can only contribute to their development as astute readers

and effective writers. Indeed, given that so many of the texts students encounter both inside and outside the classroom are translations, and that machine translation tools are so readily available, it is time for translation literacy to be considered a key component of both information literacy and global literacy. The sensitivity to language fostered through an informed discussion of translation may also inspire students to study a foreign language—out of intellectual curiosity and/or to pursue a career in one of the fastest growing sectors of the global economy: the language industry. I use the term language industry here intentionally to underscore that the rapid growth of this sector has led to ever greater diversification, with opportunities for employment not only as in-house and freelance translators and interpreters but also as project managers, software localizers, terminologists, monolingual and bilingual editors and revisors of human and machine translations, and so on. For students interested in foreign languages but who may have thought their only career option was to become a high school language instructor, this is a revelation.

One could also argue that the need for translation literacy is especially important today, during this second great leap forward in machine translation technology. Globalization has produced an unprecedented increase in the volume of texts that need translation; in other words, new technology is not devouring a pie that is the same size it was one hundred years ago. That pie is growing exponentially, and so without computer assisted translation and judicious use of machine translation, there would be no way to keep up. Moreover, many students may not know that the recent achievements in machine translation are the result of mining huge databases of human-translated texts. Such discussions can help move students beyond the hoary opposition of humans vs. technology or nature vs. culture, which often brings more fire than light.

### **The Basics of Translation Literacy**

Translation literacy is built on a small number of key concepts, namely, that natural languages are asymmetrical or non-equivalent, that most words are polysemous, and that words, phrases and linguistic structures bear the traces of previous usage; they have historicity. These basic understandings will be discussed in detail before turning to the role of context in shaping the selection of texts for translation, the translation and packaging of those texts, and their reception.

### ***The Asymmetry of Languages***

The curse of Babel lies not only in the fact that languages are different, in the sense of distinct or discrete, but that they are *different*, in the sense of being "unlike in nature, form or quality" (OED); this makes them asymmetrical or non-equivalent, an understanding that should trouble the popular notion of translation as a simple linguistic matching game. The asymmetry of natural languages is manifested on virtually all levels, from that of individual words, collocations and phrases to that of syntax and even discourse organization, not to mention pragmatics, or what forms and lexis are appropriate in different communicative situations.<sup>3</sup> It is most evident, however, in the absence or presence of linguistic forms, such as articles (Russian, as well as most Asian languages do not have definite and indefinite articles), or even entire grammatical categories, such as linguistic gender. Farsi, for example, is considered genderless with the same pronouns used to refer to males and females. That being said, even when a category is present in the source and target language, there is endless variation in the way that category is manifested. English, for instance, is considered a lightly gendered language, where gender is expressed mostly in pronouns (he, she, it), while Russian is considered heavily gendered, where gender (masculine, feminine or neuter) is expressed not only in pronouns but also in nouns, adjectives, and past participles. Such a distinction, however, may not be relevant or especially challenging for a translator unless an object is anthropomorphized or allegorized, in which case its

grammatical gender may determine the biological gender of the allegory, and the grammatical gender of an object or concept may be different in different languages, e.g., *Tod* (death) in German is masculine whereas *smert'* (death) in Russian is feminine (see Jakobson 1959, 237).

Verbal systems, in particular, can vary greatly across language families. The Russian present tense of the verb "to live" (*ia zhivu*), for example, can be rendered in English as "I live," "I am living," "I do live," or "I have been living," depending on the context. Russian is also infamous among language learners for its complex system of verbs of motion. Consider this monologue from the narrator of Iris Murdoch's novel *A Word Child*, who happens to be a linguist:

Sunday had passed somehow. I went to the cinema twice and got drunk in the intervals. I also walked a good deal. There are so many kinds of walking. I walked a special kind of metaphysical sad London walking, which I had walked before, only I performed it now with an almost ritualistic intensity. In Russian there is no general word for 'go.' Going has to be specified as walking or riding, then as perfective or imperfective walking or riding, then as perfective or imperfective habitual or non-habitual walking or riding, all involving different verbs. The sort of walking which I indulged in on that Sunday deserved a special word to celebrate its conceptual peculiarity. (Murdoch 1975, 137)

Such asymmetries mean that there is often no direct or formal correspondence between a linguistic form in the target language and a form in the source language. When faced with these asymmetries, the translator may choose a solution that is formally different from the source text word or construction, for example, by translating a noun with a verb or an imperative with an infinitive, if we consider the smallest units of translator. The linguist John Catford (1965)

described these changes as shifts, noting that some shifts are more or less obligatory when translating between two specific languages while others may be optional, done to make the translation more natural sounding in the target language or to align the translation with the linguistic and discursive conventions of a specific text type, such as a recipe or a business letter. While it is true that languages that are more closely related etymologically may be less asymmetrical than languages belonging to different language families, no natural languages are entirely identical, and those that are more closely related are more likely to present the challenge of *false friends* or *false cognates*, that is, words with the same origin or root but that have different meanings, such as the Russian *aktual'nyi*, meaning 'relevant,' and the English *actual*, meaning 'currently existing.'

### ***Words are Polysemous***

Almost all words are polysemous, that is, they have multiple meanings. Moreover, the range of meanings in one language will rarely if ever align perfectly with the range of meanings in another. Therefore, the translator must not only seek out semantic matches but also foreclose possible misreadings; hence the difficulty of rendering extended repetition or plays on words that depend on the specific range of meanings of a source text word. Related to this is the notion that the specific meanings of words are activated in the complex web of meanings that makes up any given text, problematizing the simple adoption of the first entry from a bilingual dictionary without checking the meaning against the context, both the narrow context (the surrounding words in the sentence or paragraph) and the broad context (the text as a whole or even the author's entire oeuvre).<sup>4</sup> So, in English the oppositions right-left, referring to direction, and right-left, referring to political orientation, and right-wrong, all share the word *right*, but this is not the case in many other languages. So, a play on words in English of the type "The Right got it

wrong," referring to the political Right, may not be formally reproducible in languages with a different semantic mapping.

### *The Historicity of Words and Structures*

Words, however, are not only polysemous; like all linguistic forms, they have histories, and over the course of their lives in language, they acquire not only semantic connotations, but also social connotations (an archaic word, for example, may carry greater prestige value or may make someone seem pretentious or out of touch). As the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin notes:

... there are no 'neutral' words or forms—words and forms that can belong to 'no one'; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word" (Bakhtin 1984, 293).

Words are not scrubbed clean after every usage but accumulate all kinds of semantic residue, which will be different in different languages. This is also why attempts to avoid this historicity by coining new terms is not semantically neutral or free of connotation, for while those neologisms may be free of historical residue, they may carry a valence of modernity or science.

A special instance of such residue involves citations. The association of a given word or phrase with a citation endows these words with the capacity to conjure whole narratives or moral judgements. Consider the difference between: "I'm not responsible for my brother's behavior" and "I'm not my brother's keeper." The latter invokes the authority of Scriptures to present the speaker's point as self-evidently true. Those citational histories, however, may be different in different languages; for example, in non-Western cultures the Biblical passage mentioned above may not be sufficiently recognizable to serve as a citation. (If a citation is not recognized as such, is it a citation at all?) Or consider the German title of the memoir of the East German transvestite Charlotte von Mahldorf's: *Ich bin Meine Eigene Frau* [I am my own Frau], which is discussed at greater length in Chapter 21. The German word *Frau* can mean either 'woman' or 'wife.' English doesn't have a single word with both those meanings and so the translator must choose one of the other. That selection, however, involves not only semantics, in the narrow sense, but citationality. Translating *woman* in the titles suggests an analogy with the English expression "to be one's own person," thus conjuring notions of independence and self-assurance. The other option—I am my own *wife*—sounds more like a riddle, as in the novelty song "I Am My Own Grandpa." Having students consider and discuss the different valences attached to the two solutions is a simple and effective way to sensitize them to the lexical challenges faced by translators, challenges that often cannot be assessed as simply right or wrong. Indeed, there is perhaps no better way to instill in students an appreciation for semantic nuance than to discuss translatorial decision making of this kind. (For rich discussions of translator decision making, see Boase-Beier and Holman 1998; Wechsler 1998; and Allen and Bernofsky 2013.)

For all these reasons, the translator's task is an incredibly challenging one, involving complex and creative decision making at every level of the text. The translator must decide from



among a number of possible, that is, viable renderings, none of which is necessarily right or wrong but each of which may enable certain interpretations while foreclosing others—perhaps not individually but in their concatenation. The goal of translation literacy is therefore to transform students' understanding of translation as a linguistic matching game or search for formal equivalents and, instead, to see it as a complex negotiation of linguistic and cultural asymmetries that takes place within a specific socio-political and aesthetic context.<sup>5</sup> The practice of what Marilyn Gaddis-Rose (1997) termed "stereoscopic reading"—the comparative analysis of multiple translations of a short work or of a key passage of a longer work—is especially effective in driving home many of these basic concepts of translation literacy through what Carol Maier describes as, "the pleasure of awakening to the strangeness of language that is often revealed strikingly by variations, even small ones, among multiple versions of a given text" (Maier 2011, 16). This is so whether the translations are close in time or distant, although translations that are more temporally distant may better highlight differences in context, including differences in literary norms and conventions, which I discuss below. Stereoscopic reading of translations can also be used in the second language classroom to introduce basic concepts of comparative stylistics and comparative grammar by having students isolate significant divergences in two or more translations of the same text or passage and then determine what features of the source text are responsible for those divergences.

### **Contexts of Translation**

Once the groundwork is laid and students begin to develop an appreciation for the complex nature of translation between natural languages, instructors can turn students' attention to actual translators and the contexts that shape individual translation projects. Both the broad context, understood as the historical relationship between two languages and cultures that may extend

across centuries, as well as the more immediate context or contexts of a given translation, be they socio-political, cultural, aesthetic, will shape but not determine every aspect of translatorial activity, from what texts are selected for translation, to the translation and packaging of those texts, as well as their reception. To take a very broad, historical view, translators work in a language pair that may have a long or short history of translation, which is itself a reflection of the degree and nature of the historical contacts between the two languages/cultures involved. Robert Irwin, for example, in *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies*. (2006) discusses the development of Middle Eastern Studies in Western Europe, noting that when the first translations of Arabic texts were done in the Middle Ages, translators worked without the aid of grammars or dictionaries (bilingual dictionaries are extremely labor intensive and are often a product of deep and sustained cultural contact), which necessarily effected the quality of the translations. Translators working within a long-established translation tradition, such as English translators of French, German or Spanish, on the other hand, have access not only to a wealth of resources but also to the example of accomplished forebears.

In cases where there is not established contact sufficient to produce a cadre of qualified translators (proficient in both the target language and culture), target cultures may resort to indirect or relay translation, that is when the source text is translated through an intermediate language for which there are available translators in the target culture. Students are often surprised to know how common this practice was and that it continues to this day. (I was commissioned a few years ago to translate a Russian translation of a prison memoir originally written in Georgian.) Heekyoung Cho's *Translation's Forgotten History* offers a very rich discussion of relay translation and its role in the creation of modern Korean literature, documenting the interest of Korean writers and translators in modern Russian literature, which

they translated from the Japanese at a time when Japan occupied the Korean peninsula. Those Japanese translations of Russian works were themselves often relay translations from French, English, or German.

The more immediate socio-political and cultural context will also shape the translator's decision making. To return to von Mahldorf's memoir, one might ask why the title of the first English translation of 1995 translated *Frau* as "woman" and the second edition, in 2004, as "wife." A close reading of the passage in the memoir where the statement appears suggests "wife" as the more accurate choice as von Mahlsdorf is responding to her mother's suggestion that, approaching forty, she should consider marrying. And so, one might ask whether the choice of woman was intended, consciously or unconsciously, to align von Mahlsdorf's memoir with the triumphant discourse of emancipation that followed the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, referred to in the anglophone world as the "transition"? Did the revised title reflect western disenchantment with the trajectory taken by that translation? As evident from this one example, translations do not take place in a vacuum.

The ways in which the immediate context shape a translation may also be evident in the packaging of the translation and in the paratextual material, such as the images, introductions, prefaces and notes, that accompany it. One might deduce from that material whether the translation is meant to appeal to a wide reading audience or a more elite audience, or whether it is intended to be read in high schools and colleges? Introductions in particular say a lot about the marketing of a translation: Is the introduction written by a scholar of the source language literature or culture or is it written by an author? Is the reader being asked to read the work for its ethnographic or aesthetic value? Does this differ based on the origin of the source text (see Alzahrani's chapter in this volume)? And what does the presence of glossaries and translator

notes say about the translator's (or publisher's) perception of the source language text or culture? In the event there is also a translator's preface, how does it compare in terms of size and placement with the introduction? What does this say about the status of translators and their work as textual interpreters? Students might also be made aware that not all decision-making is in the hands of the translator. Publishers, editors, book designers, and marketers also play a role in creating the final product. In fact, translators might sign a contract with a working title for the translation provided by the publisher in consultation with the author's agent, which they might have difficulty changing at a later date.

When present, a translator's preface can offer interesting insights into what Antoine Berman refers to as the translator's "project." These prefaces typically discuss the translator's general approach to the translation and the specific problems posed by the given text. Once the foundations of translation literacy have been laid, classroom discussion of translator prefaces can be very fruitful. I often distribute a selection of translator prefaces to students and ask them to describe the different roles played by these translators: exegete, advocate or promoter (of a text, an author or an entire literary tradition), cultural mediator, and so on. I also ask them to consider whether those roles are different or distributed differently based on the nature of the translated text. For example, an experimental or avant-garde text may warrant greater exegesis than the retranslation of a classic work while an ancient text may warrant greater historical background. Some other easy ways to bring attention to the translator in the classroom is to assign one student or group of students to prepare a presentation on the translator of a text before classroom discussion of the text takes place. Another student or groups of students could be asked to find reviews of the translation to see whether the translator is named and/or whether the text is discussed as a translation. If so, what is the nature of that translation criticism? What does it tell

us about the reviewer's level of translation literacy, that is, their assumptions about the nature of translation? And does the reviewer know the source language of the translation they are reviewing or are they themselves translators? In this way, the class can begin to accumulate information about the reception of translated texts and the treatment of translators, which can be brought together at the end of the course to draw some conclusions about the general state of translation criticism and the status of translators.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this introduction alludes to Stanley Fish's classic work of literary theory *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), which challenges traditional views regarding the interpretive stability of canonical literary texts.

<sup>2</sup> Many of the contributors to this volume participated in the NEH Summer Seminar "What Is Gained in Translation," held at Kent State University in 2015 and 2017, where, over the course of the seminar, they developed lesson plans that they have since had the opportunity to try out in their classrooms. Their chapters, therefore, offer not only practical guidance but guidance that has been empirically tested and refined.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the linguistic asymmetries faced by translators across languages that is very accessible to undergraduates with little or no background in linguistics, see Mona Baker's *In Other Words* (2018).

<sup>4</sup> The concept of a narrow and broad concept was introduced by Andrei Fedorov in his 1953 *Vvedenie v teoriuu perevoda* [Introduction to Translation Theory], which came out in English translation in 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Wechsler's *Performing without a State: The Art of Literary Translation* (1998), David Bellos's *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (2012), and Lydia Davis's essay "Eleven Pleasures of Translating" (2017) offer detailed discussions of translator decision making that are engaging and comprehensible for both undergraduate and graduate students.