

# TRANSLATION STUDIES AS A TRANSFORMING MODEL FOR THE HUMANITIES

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**Abstract:** The digital revolution that began in the twentieth century and continues today has profound and surprising implications for the role of the humanities in higher education. Three prominent characteristics of the twenty-first century — ubiquitous technology, global interaction, and relentless change — require a new approach to the education that fosters technological expertise, communication across boundaries of language and culture, and creative response to new challenges and opportunities. This situation creates new opportunities for a revitalized role of the humanities in education that combines critical with creative thought and emphasizes communication in a world connected by interactive technology. Literary translation can be a key contributor to the development and implementation of a humanities curriculum for the modern world designed to educate technologically sophisticated, innovative “citizens of the world.” This paper has two sections. The first section sets a conceptual framework; the second suggests ways to apply translation to achieve this

goal: both employing translation in a traditional manner and attempting to expand its meaning and implications.

**Key Words:** translation; interpretation; creativity; humanities; education

## **1. PART ONE: EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL WORLD**

The digital revolution that began in the twentieth century and continues today has profound and perhaps surprising implications for the role of the humanities in higher education. Despite superficial differences, from a wide range of sources — among them educators, economists, psychologists, and futurists — there has emerged a consensus of three essential characteristics of our brave new world. It is a world of ubiquitous technology, global interaction, and relentless change.

The impact of technology-driven revolution is especially evident in the realm of communication. The emergence of new media has created an international “convergence culture” (Jenkins, 2006) in which every idea is developed, product branded, and customer courted across multiple media platforms. In Shanghai and Dallas, in Munich and Mexico City, university students occupy an exciting electronic environment suffused with technology: they talk, send email, play games, even read novels on the PDAs known in a simpler era as mobile phones. From the moment they wake up until the moment they go to sleep (and perhaps beyond), they are surrounded by sophisticated messages that combine sound with images.

The second characteristic, the global nature of modern life, arises from the first. Life in an electronically interactive, interconnected world leads inevitably to encounters and engagement with others of radically different perspectives, cultures, and values. We live in a “flat” world driven by advances in science and technology where economic, political, and cultural developments transcend (or ignore) conventional national or linguistic boundaries.

Finally, our world is not only interactive and international. It is also impermanent and unpredictable: the only constant is constant change. Our existence has more in common with a game of *Doom* or *Quake*, where danger and opportunity arise suddenly and unpredictably, than with the rule-driven competition of Chess or Go.

These developments have positive implications for the humanities, for literature, and especially for those of us interested in translation studies. The new environment places a premium on two intellectual qualities long associated with the arts and humanities: interpretation and creativity.

The environment of surprise creates a need for intellectual agility and the ability to respond creatively to the new. In his influential book *The Rise of the Creative Class* and subsequent works, the economist Richard Florida has labeled this development the emergence of a “creative economy” that needs inventors, creators, and entrepreneurs. This economy is international and pervasive. Consider the following expressed goals of the world’s economic giants discussed in a recent issue of *Issues in Science and Technology*: China “pins its hopes on home-grown innovation (*zizhu chuangxin*). Its president, Hu Jintao, “has said that his country must give priority to independent innovation in science and technology.” President George W. Bush featured the same objective in his 2006 State of the Union message, stating that “government must work to help create in the United States a new generation of innovation and an atmosphere in which innovation thrives.” In Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s first policy statement to the Diet called for similar steps. The European Union Council has proposed a program designed to establish an “innovation friendly environment” in its member states. (Wolfe, 2007: 54)

The emergence of a globally connected world, moreover, has propelled us into a condition first described by an iconoclastic Greek philosopher more than 2,000 years ago. The Cynic philosopher Diogenes introduced into western thought the idea that each person was not only the citizen of a specific city/nation but also a “citizen of the world” [*kosmou polites*]. In the Greco-Roman world, the

idea of world citizenship became a humanistic centerpiece of education, embraced as an ideal by such influential Roman thinkers as Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. In this international era of the internet and the mobile phone, like it or not — whether we live in Dallas or Oslo, Shanghai or Sydney — we are all connected electronically and truly citizens of the world as well as a nation.

Education must change to meet this new circumstance by developing new approaches that respond to the challenges in order to prepare our students not only to survive but also to thrive in the global, technologically saturated, and change-intensive world of the twenty-first century. The three characteristics — technology, globalism, and relentless change — require corresponding qualities of mind:

- To navigate the technological environment, *expertise and the ability to employ* the current and yet to be invented *technologies of inquiry and communication*
- To navigate in a global environment, a capacity for *empathic understanding* of the other and the ability to collaborate and *communicate across barriers of language and culture*
- To respond adequately to change and surprise, intellectual flexibility and creativity — that is, *applied imagination*.

One pervasive educational response has been an understandable emphasis on responding to this first challenge by educating engineers and scientists. Response to the second and third is the domain of the humanities. We know how to nourish understanding, communication, and the imagination. This paper, then, focuses on the two goals: nourishing cross-cultural communication and enhancing creativity in order to enhance the likelihood of our students' becoming "world citizens" able to understand, appreciate, and interact productively with other cultures and peoples.

We take as our starting point the eloquent justification of the role of literature in fostering qualities associated with being an effective "citizen of the world" that Martha Nussbaum articulates in her thoughtful book *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*.

(Nussbaum 1999) Translation can play a major role in this effort. Nussbaum looks carefully at

implications for the modern world of the Stoic “cosmopolitan” ideal. Realization of this ideal required the would-be world citizen to become “a sensitive and empathic interpreter” of others’ perspectives, values and behavior. Nussbaum argues for the study of literature as a uniquely appropriate and effective means of developing the “narrative imagination” that enables interpretation that is sympathetic but not uncritical. (Nussbaum, 1999: 63) The Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski asserts that “we are human because we recount stories and myths...that is what separates us from the animals. Shared histories and legends strengthen community, and man can exist only as part of a community, only by virtue of it.” (Kapuscinski 2007: 269–70) Citing Walt Whitman’s poetic assertion “I am he attesting sympathy” and his argument that “literary art develops capacities for perception and judgment” that are essential for citizenship, Nussbaum concludes “that it is essential to put the study of literature at the heart of a curriculum for citizenship, because it develops arts of interpretation that are essential” for civic participation on a local or global scale. (Nussbaum 1999: 97)

Nussbaum’s argument is compelling but lacks one essential element: in what ways integrated into a curriculum and in what ways taught? It must be admitted that much of literary education is under attack as diminishing rather than expanding students’ ability for reading that is at once sensitive, sympathetic, and intellectually rigorous. The emergence of ism-directed teaching, coupled with perceived political and cultural biases permeating higher education, have nourished skepticism rather than appreciation for the role of literature in education. We propose an approach that employs the insights and attitudes of the translator as one solution to this challenge. Integrating the study and practice of translation into the humanities curriculum can serve as a catalyst for fostering citizens capable of critical but empathic understanding of the “other.” Concurrently, since translation requires the recreation of the work of art rather than just the analysis of it, its use in humanistic education can hone the imagination as well as the intellect.

## **2. PART TWO: EMPLOYING TRANSLATION**

## 2.1. Reading as a Translator

In a 2007 report on the international situation of literary translation entitled *To Be Translated or Not To Be*, editor Esther Allen writes that “language is generally acknowledged to be humankind’s greatest achievement, and each language embodies a human community’s unique perception and experience of the world, all...lost forever when the language is lost”. (Allen, 2007: 21) Allen observes that fully half of the world’s six thousand languages are “terrifyingly imperiled” at a time when English, behaving “more like an invasive species than a lingua franca, [is] resisting and supplanting whatever is not written in itself, [and] speaking in the loudest of voices while failing to pay much attention...to anything said in any other language” (Allen, 2007: 20–21). Literary translators, however, help counter this world domination by English, Allen writes, by “using the global lingua franca as a medium to connect different languages rather than [as] a replacement for all other languages.” (Allen 2007: 24) The great German thinker and writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, among others, regarded the circulation among languages via translation as the very lifeblood of literature. “Left to itself,” Goethe in 1827 told his amanuensis Johann Peter Eckermann, “every literature will exhaust its vitality if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one.” (Allen, 2007: 22) A lingua franca impermeable to other languages becomes “common” in another way, as noted by translator Michael Henry Heim. Deprived of vital linguistic exchange, it atrophies to “the lowest common denominator” in human communication (Allen, 2007: 19).

The activity of translation, then, becomes a means of renewing one’s own language as well as a way of preserving other languages. My focus, however, is less on the direct activity of translation than on the ways that translation opens and extends learning in other contexts. Let me start with the most obvious and direct way, that is, with *close textual reading*. Among translators, it’s a commonplace that translation involves the closest reading a text is likely to get, a reading that goes deeply into the text linguistically and culturally to become permeated with its meaning. As translator Margaret Sayers Peden has noted, the original text for the translator is like an ice cube that must be melted and refrozen into a *different* ice cube in the new language — same water, different cube — requiring that the

translator have solid linguistic knowledge, empathetic alertness, and cultural insight. (Peden, 1989: 13) Reading in this translational way, which becomes a dialogue between the reader and the text, can be employed by translators whether they are actively translating or teaching works translated by others. This kind of close and imaginatively involved reading differs markedly from the intellectually detached analysis championed by many other forms of literary scholarship, which tend to focus on the text primarily as object. Reading like a translator means approaching the text the way an artist would, with a surge that drives from the *inside out*. When joined with a refined knowledge of other languages and cultures, this way of reading allows the translator to teach with linguistic precision and cultural sensitivity while remaining aware of a global perspective.

To offer one simple illustration of the preceding point, I'll mention an honors class in humanities I taught this last spring at my university in which we read, in English translation, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Some students in the class, in spite of my urging that they use the translation by Walter Kaufmann, showed up with other translations of the text. The situation turned into a teaching opportunity, because at least one of the other translators had rendered Nietzsche's problematic *Übermensch* as *Superman*, a word that to Americans calls to mind comic-book capes, storm-the-ramparts music, and cartoonish behavior. The students quickly picked up on the way that the English *Superman* got in the way of Nietzsche's message. One of the students who had studied German even grasped the probable reason Kaufmann chose the word *Overman*, and that is, for the way it echoes Nietzsche's many cyclic images of *undergoing* in order to *overcome*. While *Superman* connotes the kind of genetically engineered supremacy that Hitler had in mind, *Overman* focuses, more aptly for Nietzsche's message, on the psychic and philosophic struggles involved with overcoming self. The students were surprised and impressed by something all translators know: the difference a single word can make in the meaning of a text.

A second and related way that translation provides a model for teaching in the humanities relates to the journey the translator regularly makes into *the otherness of the world*—an activity that

Renaissance humanist Pico della Mirandola called being an “*explorator*” (spy) of knowledge and what Maurice Blanchot saw as the translator being the “secret master of the difference of languages.” The translator, deeply respectful of otherness, doesn’t want to abolish it but wants to put it to use by “awakening within [the translation] the presence of that which is at origin different in the original.” (Venuti, 1995: 307) The goal is not to rob otherness of its distinctiveness but to acknowledge, preserve, and extend its existence. This respect for the other, far from pushing the reader away from the text, is a way to revitalize the receiving culture with fresh knowledge. One of the greatest errors in reading is to assume, through ignorance or indifference, similarities between cultures that don’t exist.

To cite a brief example here of otherness made accessible through translation, let me return to my honors humanities class of last semester. In addition to Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, we also read a novel by Mexican author Carlos Fuentes, *Aura*, which has, among other noteworthy features, the distinction of being the only novel I know of written entirely in second-person narration. What became one of the most compelling discussions of the semester occurred in reference to the novel’s prefatory statement that the universe of the male narrator was being entirely controlled and even fated by mysterious, omnipotent female forces that seemed some sort of crossbreed between the *magna mater* of European antiquity and the voodoo priestesses of the New World. For those familiar with Earth Goddess cultures, Fuentes’s matriarchal context was not alien, and his fusion of the Great Mother with the voodoo priestess was intellectually intriguing, since the novel hovers in an allegorical way between Mexico’s hybrid Old World–New World matriarchal identities. However, for most American undergraduates, even very bright ones, this *magna mater cum gris-gris* seemed a concept so *other* as to be inaccessible. Their own patriarchal and puritanical tradition led them to regard Fuentes’s earth-mother force as the archetypal and biblical abomination, in which case the novel became a kind of morality play pitting good (the male) against evil (the female). Such a reading of *Aura*, however, not only disrespects the otherness of Fuentes’s ideas; it also leads to a serious misreading. The book’s conclusion (remember, it’s written in the second person) explodes to involve the reader (the *other* “*you*”) in a spiraling, multi-dimensional, even cosmic joining of past to present to future. The female

force, in Fuentes's treatment, is not evil; it's the primordial mystery of life. I hope that our discussion of *Aura* led these students to a clearer understanding of how their culture compares and contrasts with at least one facet of Latin America. "I don't think this novel could have been written by an American," one student, who happened to be from Africa, observed.

Being intensely *relational* in nature, translation involves a perpetual linking of self to word to world. Yet it links with a keen respect for the distinctive otherness among languages, peoples, and places. In closing, I'd like to make a final linkage of my own. When we use translation as a model for teaching in the humanities, let us remember the fundamental relationship between translation and the other arts, which, even by conservative standards, have spanned forty thousand years of human creativity and have abundantly demonstrated their survival value to the human species. Far from being an expendable luxury, the arts — including the art of translation — can teach us how to extend the meaning, value, and possibilities of living in and with our world.

## **2.2. The Conceptual Frame of Translation**

In the context of a globalized world in the 21st century, translation takes on an expanded importance to promote intercultural communication and to revitalize the study of literature and the humanities. Whether we deal with literary or humanistic texts, we are always concerned with the act of translation and interpretation. The word "text" should here be seen in the larger context of encompassing verbal, visual, and musical texts. Whenever we are interacting with a text, we have to translate the textual situation into our own sensibility. In all probability, the text gains its existence because it has been translated into the sensibility of the reader, the viewer, or the listener. In that sense, a person creates the communication with the text through the act of translation. A first contact with the word "translation" immediately suggests that we are dealing with the translation of words from one language into another. However, the digital age has intensified and enlarged the power of communication through the interaction of the various media.

The initial process of translating a literary work starts with the word as a visual entity on the page. Literary texts are complex structures in which words interact on several levels: the word as sound, the word as semantic unit, the word in its etymological and philological tradition, the word in its cultural and historical setting, the word as the building block of contextual thinking. The word exists as an isolated entity in the dictionary, it changes connotations as it is linked to other words in the structure of sentences and paragraphs, and it becomes the tool for the poet who creates new meanings that explode the boundaries of its previous semantic fields. Each word is surrounded by a certain ambiguity, because hardly any word can be reduced to one specific meaning. If a word has several connotations already established in a language, then the more specific meaning that a writer intends to realize in a text can be derived only from its context.

All of these elements build a complex situation in a text, especially a literary text that the translator has to decipher and interpret before the actual translation can take place. In that sense, translation is the carrying over of situations that display a complex web of interactions. Within the verbal text, all translational considerations begin with the exploration of the word on the page. The translator is continuously involved in the activity of finding corresponding words from one language to the other. To understand the fragile nature of words, it is appropriate to contemplate on the relationship of words within the same language. No word can fully replace another within the same language. Each synonym draws its own border around its proper fields of meanings. As there are no synonyms that are exactly identical in their delineation of meaning, there are no two words from one language to another that denote exactly the same meaning. The words in the source language carry with them the baggage of their cultural and historical tradition, which might be totally foreign to the language into which the text is being translated.

What becomes fascinating to the student of translation is not necessarily the recognition that the words are different in their cultural make-up between two languages, but that the very difference engages the

student in thinking out and defining the nature of that difference, which ultimately contributes to a better understanding of cultural dissimilarities.

For a moment, it might be helpful to comment on the visual image that the German word for translation generates in the reader's mind: "über-setzen" indicates that something is being transported from one side of a river to the other side. The immediate assumption is that the landscape on the other side of the river is similar to that on the one we started from. Our initial impulse is to assume that our expectations from this side of the river are the same on the other side of the river. As we have learned, this is rarely the case. Translation has to prepare us for the possibility that the expected will be confronted with the unexpected. We like to assume that the situation in the source language will meet with a corresponding reality in the new language. Translation, however, introduces us to situations of ambiguity in which the expected meets the unexpected, and a new dialogue has to be envisioned.

### **2.3. Multiple Translations**

The relationship between translation and interpretation can be further illuminated through a discussion of multiple translations of the same work. The reasons for having a work translated by various translators are numerous: changes in language are a daily occurrence; words expand and retract the boundaries of their semantic fields throughout decades and centuries. Often, scholars and translators believe that they can improve on an existing translation. Thus, the practice of retranslating works from the past and the present is nothing new. However, what appears to be new on the horizon is the sudden discovery of multiple translations as an important pedagogical tool to revitalize the act of reading and interpreting, to reconnect students and readers with the internal workings of a text. No translation will ever replace the original source-language text, but the various interpretive perspectives that multiple translations bring to the text will engage the reader to actively participate in the re-creation of a text rather than describing the text.

A short comparison with music will further clarify the function of multiple interpretations. The performance of the Italian Concerto of J.S. Bach by several pianists will reconfirm that there is no definitive interpretation of a musical piece. All the pianists play the same notes, yet each performance is distinctly different from the other. Each pianist brings his or her own interpretive perspective to the performance. One does not need to have a musical training to detect the differences in the various performances. In each case, the excitement of the re-interpretation lies in the unpredictability and innovation of the pianist's interpretive approach, which attracts the attention of the listener.

A similar observation can be made about the reading of multiple translations: there is no such thing as the only definitive interpretation of any given poem, novel, short story, or play. There are only ways of thinking through a text. As language itself is a way of thinking, each translation is the translator's way of making a specific interpretation transparent. No two translations will ever produce an identical final version of the same original source-language document. The juxtaposition of several translations of the same poem will prompt the reader to ask questions about the poem that would not have been generated by a single translation. The opening of Rainer Maria Rilke's well-known poem "The Panther" reads "*Sein Blick is vom Vorübergehen der Stäbe so müd geworden, dass er nichts mehr hält.*" The poem is one of the most frequently retranslated poems from the German language. The translation of the second word of the poem, "*Blick*," demonstrates the possibilities of interpretive perceptions inherent in a word. "*Blick*" has been rendered by gaze, seeing, sight, glance, and vision. All these translated words are connected with some activity of the eye, yet each one of them creates in the reader a different semantic movement of visualization. An examination of the nuances inherent in gaze, seeing, sight, glance, and vision reveals the movement of thinking that was present in the translator's mind. The delicate variations of meanings in these words could be characterized in the following manner: "glance" projects a somewhat swift and sudden movement; "gaze" suggests an act of looking intently, perhaps more directed than glance. "Vision" enlarges the act of looking by suggesting that something other than the action of seeing with the bodily eye might be involved. "Sight" opens up even further connotations beyond the semantic parameters of glance, gaze, and

vision. “Seeing” exhibits the least focused of all the chosen translations to recreate the power of the German “*Blick*.” All the translators were keenly aware of the problem: that the German word projects several semantic activities at the same time that cannot be rendered by one single word in English. The magnetic field of “*Blick*” includes both an outgoing movement — the act of focusing on something — and also the recording of what the panther sees. “*Blick*” creates movement and stasis at the same time. Some translators focused more on the outgoing activity of seeing and others on the taking in of what the panther might be storing in his memory. Other translators in the future might think of transferring “*Blick*” with look, glimpse, view, and even eye. Every time the reader or student is confronted with a different translation of the word “*Blick*,” a new relationship between reader and text will be established.

What do we draw from the exposure to multiple translations? First, a different way of thinking about a text and its interpretation. The text loses its objectivity, in the sense of an object that can be clearly described and understood. The existence of the text becomes a dynamic one that needs to be approached and studied as a process. The reader is inside the poem rather than an observer of the poem. The study of multiple translations can be considered yet another technique to stimulate a student’s associative thinking, one of the fundamental abilities for a meaningful interpretation of texts and complex situations. One translation of “*Blick*” is always seen in relation to another.

If multiple translations of a work have occurred over the course of several centuries, then they could become another means to define the aesthetic and cultural forces that shaped the *Zeitgeist* at that time. That idea has not yet attracted much scholarly attention, even though it could become an interesting topic for doctoral dissertations.

The faculty of associative thinking that can be derived from the study of multiple translations can also serve as a successful technique for the expansion and intensification of the interpretive process. The term that best describes this method could be called “horizontal reading.” As the translator begins to

approach a particular literary work, whether it be a poem, a novel, or a short story, a first step would be to identify those words in the text that indicate a similar direction of thinking to determine the overall aesthetic atmosphere of the piece. To put this idea into a concrete context, one might want to take Stephane Mallarmé's poem "*Saint*." If one were to examine the nouns in that poem, it would become clear that Mallarmé has chosen a number of nouns that all suggest a state of oldness. This kind of horizontal and associative walking through the poems provides the reader and translator with a signpost toward the overall effect and artistic intention of the poem.

Similarly, it is conceivable that the reader of a short story might focus on those words, images, and expressions that are repeated throughout the work. Repetitions are essential for the creation of any artistic work; however, in a successful fictional work, a repetition is always a little different from the previous one. In defining the nuances that happen from one repetition to the next, the reader will undergo a refinement of perception. Each time a repetition occurs, the boundaries of insight and perception have been expanded for the reader. It often can happen that a writer repeats the same word several times throughout the work. Each time the word recurs, the reader has to associate the previous magnetic field of the word with the expanded nuance of meaning that the writer has created within the context and the progression of the work. Investigating the interaction of words within a text refines the associative abilities of the reader, which in turn intensifies and expands the interpretation and the understanding of a work. The reader/translator is an active participant in the text and not an observer of the text. Translation and its ability to train associative thinking becomes a new paradigm for the revitalization of interpretation in literature and the humanities.

With the innovations created by digital and electronic technology, the study of multiple translations can be carried to another level of interpretation and comprehension. Digital technology can transfer a verbal text into corresponding visual images, and electronic technology can transfer words into corresponding sounds, a practice that has been particularly successful in the area of poetry. It is now possible to create visual and tonal correspondences of a source-language text, e.g., Arthur Rimbaud's

“*Le bateau ivre*.” Then the various translations of that poem into English can also be translated into visual and tonal correspondences. The comparison of the transformation between the original source language and the translations elevates our understanding and experience of the work to another level, which might become attractive to students, whose reading attention span is declining. However, the experience of a verbal text through the visual and tonal realities, which in themselves might produce a new genre of artistic expression, could be instrumental in reconnecting students with the verbal text to intensify the act of reading.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As poets seek to expand the possibilities of the word and as visual artists seek to expand the possibilities of the image, so this collaborative paper is intended to expand the way that translators and educators think about translation. It is designed to introduce (and accompany) a demonstration of the application of translation to the teaching of literature and the humanities. The examples include, in addition to those discussed above, multiple translations of *Aeneid* II.721–25 that reflect significantly different interpretations of the text and approaches to translation; the challenge of translating (hence understanding) the Confucian word “*ren*”; a demonstration of how translating can foster disciplined “creative” thinking; and the value of translation as a conceptual model for approaching the visual and multi-media texts that figure so prominently in the lives of today’s students. As the translation of a great work inevitably invites more translations, we invite further thoughts, examples, and conversation.

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