

Session Plan: The Role of Culture and Ideology in Translating Political Texts

Learning outcomes

Theoretical: 1, 2, 3, 4

Stage: III

The session requires that the students have already acquired skills of information mining, strategies for identifying and translating realia and allusions. If the session is integrated into a translation course, it could provide the opportunity for an additional focus on the Interpersonal and Textual Dimensions as the students translate the text suggested below (or any politically sensitive text) and discuss the choices and the strategies they have applied.

The session is oriented towards developing sensitivity towards the translator's position in mediating politically sensitive topics by drawing the students' attention to the role of internalised beliefs and images in interpreting the Other. The activities are meant to highlight the inevitable engagement of the translator with his or her ethnic or class identity, with the role of stereotyping of nationality, race and gender and its impact on the choices and strategies for translating political discourse. Special attention should be given to the translation of evaluative language and of allusions that are used in the ST to create a particular ideological perspective. Instead of the text suggested here for the follow-up activity, the teacher can select any other, preferably an analytical one on a current political topic, that has relevance within the students' own culture.

Preparation needed

Multimedia with overhead projector and screen or PCs. If these are lacking, the teacher should be ready with clippings from print sources showing media reports on protests and demonstrations currently taking place.

Home assignments:

The students should find and bring in reports and visual material on street protests, in their country or abroad. Depending on the material they have chosen, they should translate the slogans raised by the protesters in the SL or the TL.

Text for analysis and translation: "The Inkblot Protests": *The Economist*, online edition

<http://www.economist.com/node/21531481>

Groups

For the lead-in: Pairs in smaller classes; Groups of 3 or 4 in larger classes. One participant should be assigned the role of presenter for stage 2.

Time (total suggested time)

1.5 hours for a stand-alone module; another 1.5-hour session if incorporated in a translation course.

Background for lecturer (bibliography, anticipated difficulties)

Reading: Tymoczko, Maria. "Ideology and the Position of the Translator - In What Sense is a Translator 'In Between'?" In Calzada Pérez, Maria (ed.). *Apropos of Ideology: Translation Studies on Ideology - Ideologies in Translation*. St. Jerome's Publishing, 2003, pp 181-201.

Theory:

In her influential article Maria Tymoczko sets out to problematise the trope of "in-betweenness" which has gained currency as a way of defining the translator's location vis-à-vis the source and target texts and audiences. She argues that this is by no means a space clear of ideological presuppositions and that it is charged with the translator's cultural and political allegiances. In this sense the translation is never innocent and does not accord its author a privileged position above or outside the frictions and the conflicts inherent in any cultural dynamics. Culture, she points out, is a construct embracing heterogeneous, varied and diverse phenomena and events to which the translator is inextricably bound through his or her ethnic, political or ideological allegiances. It is therefore at best misleading to imagine that the product of the translator's activity will emerge and exist in a state of absolute neutrality, as a free-floating signifier of disengagement. Finally, Tymoczko emphasizes that by admitting engagement as the translator's defining characteristic, translation theory and practice place into focus the need for an informed ethics and the responsibility for collective action in the name of social change.

The title "The Inkblot Protests" is an allusion to the Rorschach test. It is a method of personality evaluation once enjoying great popularity among psychologists. In it, the patient is shown a series of cards, each with an inkblot inside. The cards have been folded in two so that the inkblot is doubled with its mirror image. The patient describes what he or she sees in the image and in doing so allows the psychologist to gain access to his or her thinking, emotions and attitudes. The test has been widely criticised for being unreliable, lacking scientific validity and giving rise to interpretations that involve the analyst's own unconscious preconceptions and even prejudices.

The title refers to the varying and even contradictory demands raised by the participants in the "Occupy Wall Street" protests and their subjective interpretation and evaluation of the problems that aroused political action in the US and elsewhere in the world.

It is advisable to ask the students to read Tymoczko's article in advance.

Activities

1. Lead-in: 30 minutes

Each student is asked to imagine that they are communicating with a visitor from abroad and to describe what is happening in the material they have prepared.

The other student(s) in the pair or group note down how the political issue is formulated and the evaluative language used in its presentation and in the description of the protesters.

2. Presentation to the whole class and discussion, time: 60 minutes

The presenters summarise to the whole class the results of the lead-in activity. Words and phrases signalling engagement with or disengagement from the issue at the heart of the protests should be written on the board or typed in and shown on screen. The teacher puts forward the problem of the translator's "in-betweenness" and his or her supposed externality with regard to both the source and the target culture. In a whole class discussion the students analyse the corpus, focusing on its cultural perspective and the conscious and unconscious cultural projections it indicates.

3. Follow-up, time 90 minutes

1. The students debate the ethical issues resulting from their engagement, or its absence, with the issues that have triggered the political action. It might be useful to ask them to imagine (or remember) taking part in students' protests. They should then debate their responsibility as translators, into or from their first language.
2. The students write a brief report on the event first, for a newspaper or website in their country, and then for one using their target language. It is important at this point to emphasise that the second text should NOT be a translation of the first one.
3. The students read "The Inkblot Protests" and discuss such points as the use of ironical or overtly negative statements in the text. It might be useful to discuss how they would have commented on the events presented in the original text.

Adaptations for an integrated approach

This material is well suited for an advanced practical course in translation of journalistic texts or a course in text and discourse analysis for translation purposes. In this case, the students should be assigned the translation of the text for homework. In addition, they can be asked to discuss questions such as:

- What magazine or journal in your country is a translation of this text likely to appear in? What are its linguistic and stylistic norms? What changes might need to be made in order to bring the text into conformity with these norms?
- Do you think these changes might involve the use of or the departure from the clichés constructing the cultural myths about the USA and Western Europe? How would you deal with the language of stereotyping?
- What image of you as a translator does your translation build? Where would you put the line dividing the translator's professional and ethical choices?