Lost (and Found) in Translation: From Texts to Films and Music

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In this course, we want students to become aware of the intrinsic element of interpretation that is embedded in the concept of translation. Translation, broadly construed, could be said to be an adaptation, a version, of a certain X that we want to translate: thoughts into words; texts into other texts (often in different languages); and texts into other media, also known as transmediation (e.g., adaptations of texts to films).

If this provisional definition of “translation” as interpretation is accepted, we have to give up on the idea of a unique, normative (i.e., complete and/or perfect) translation. However, we cannot deny, let alone reject, the claim that translations do exert a certain authority or power over the way we conceptualize our lives and our world—and most prominently, the lives and environments of people living in cultures other than our own. Because we recognize this authority, we believe it is important to assess how this authority is built and legitimized. In other words, a certain translation can be invested with authority provided it has been critically compared with both the original text and other translations of the said text. That is to say, accepting that translation is best understood as interpretation does not entail that “anything goes;” rather, it entails that the source of authority of a given translation is to be “checked” against the background of other interpretations/translations of the same text. There is, then, a tension between the quest for “faithfulness” to the source-text on the one hand, and the inherent openness and richness of translations on the other.

One of the main aims of this course is to make students aware of these complexities in a very concrete way, thus helping them steer away from a misguided notion of translation (again, as a “unique,” “perfect” rendition of the source-text), which tends to obscure the political, social, and richly multicultural nuances of the phenomenon of translation. Three main ways in which we’ll attempt to put these theoretical claims into practice are the following:

1) Responding to translations: written responses to different translations of the same text. Students will write short essays in which they assess different translations, emphasizing, among other issues, points of conflicting “meanings,” stylistic choices, etc. This critical work will help students reject the (usually uncritical) reception of a given translation. We will use a variety of translated texts—religious texts (e.g. the Bible, The Koran), political texts, journalistic pieces, poetry, essays, short fiction, etc.
2) **Writing (and rewriting) one’s own version of a given text: Translation as revision.** Using existing translations of a given text, students will craft their own version of the text. It is important to highlight that knowledge of other languages is not necessary to do these exercises. The emphasis will be put on the semantic and stylistic choices students themselves make when “reassembling” or “meshing” existing translations in order to come up with a new version of the text—a version that they deem in some sense or another “better” than the existing translations. These choices mirror those ones of “actual” translators and interpreters, and thus help students explore the tensions that lie in the meaning- and authority-making processes involved in the practice of translation.

3) **Transmediation: Responding to translations from different media: music, film, and “adaptations” within the same language.** Students and instructors will analyze a range of operations that occur among different media, from the adaptation of literary texts to film (e.g., Nikita Mikhalkov’s filmic adaptation of Chekhov’s “Lady with a Lapdog” in his film *Dark Eyes*, a Russian/Italian co-production involving two different languages, which in turn had to be translated into English) to different filmic versions of the same script (e.g., James Cameron’s *Vanilla Sky* as a “translation” of Spanish film-maker Alejandro Amenabar’s script for *Abre los ojos*) to different versions of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (including the latest Indian version, *Bride and Prejudice*) to films about the very act of translation-as-adaptation (e.g., Charlie Kaufmann’s *Adaptation*) to the analysis of foreign music and foreign lyrics (e.g., what is one’s reaction to a song sung in a different language? What assumptions are confirmed, and which ones rectified, when faced with a translation of the song’s lyrics?) to the “translation” of the same piece, in the same language, in the same medium (e.g., the TV show “The Office” in its British and American versions).

We would like to emphasize that this course does not require knowledge of languages other than English. Although knowledge of foreign languages would certainly bring a most valuable perspective to the course and is most welcome, the theoretical and practical work that we envision for this course does not require that knowledge—although it will hopefully stimulate the desire to acquire it, i.e., to learn languages. Learning foreign languages is undoubtedly a very apt way to start understanding different cultures, but the grim reality is that we Americans, for the most part, take in different cultures in our own language, that is, through translations. Our aim, therefore, is to take a realistic approach, while incorporating a critical and multicultural perspective in the very analysis of “received” translations.
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We’ll explore films, music, and texts (literary, journalistic, political, and religious writings) in multiple, multicultural versions. How do you “translate” your thoughts into words? Is there a sense of loss? Of gain? How about translations of texts, or adaptations of texts into movies? What influence do translations have in our lives? (Knowledge of foreign languages is not required)