Overview

What difference does it make to read Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky's translation of Anna Karenina or Constance Garnett's? The King James Bible or the New English version? The fact that multiple translations exist implies that translation, like any form of writing, involves a series of choices. The goal of this course is to examine the possibilities translators face, the factors that motivate and influence their decisions, and the resulting effects of those decisions, so that you as translators can develop your language, literary and cultural skills. Readings dealing with the history and theory of the practice of translation and its political and ethical consequences will provide a framework for our discussions. Students will undertake a translation project in which they will produce an original translation and an analysis of the choices they faced.

Course requirement: students must demonstrate at least intermediate proficiency in a language other than English.

Objectives

• To identify a few major trends and themes in the history of translation theory.
• To comparatively describe the textual features and consequent effects found in multiple versions of the same translated text.
• To build on specific linguistic, literary, and cultural skills to produce a polished translation into English of a text over a series of drafts.
• To apply translation theory to your practice of translation and be able to articulate how and why this theory informs the choices you make in practice.
• To provide clear, thoughtful, constructive oral and written feedback on your peers' translations.

Materials

Translation—Theory and Practice: A Historical Reader, eds. Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinsson
Available at the Hampshire College Bookstore

All other readings will be in pdfs on the course Moodle page. We urge you to print the readings, so you can highlight and take notes as you read, and to bring them to class.

Requirements

• 6 short translation exercises
• 8 Moodle forum response papers to theoretical readings, literary translations, or talks of approx. 300 words each
• 4x2 reviews of your peers' translations of 1 page each
• One 3-page pre-translation essay outlining the problems your text presents for the translator and how the theoretical readings will help you address those problems
• One 10-12-page translation into English, written over a series of short drafts, with a final preface of 5-8 pages
Assignments

Assignment details will be posted on Moodle and/or be given to you on handouts at least one week prior to the deadline.

Attendance and Participation

Your attendance is extremely important. This is especially true for the workshops during the second half of the semester; your peers are counting on you for feedback on their work. Participation also involves coming to class with the reading and writing assignments prepared and contributing to discussions with reactions, insights, and questions.

Deadlines and Late Work

Moodle responses are due 24 hours before class—this is part of your preparation for discussion and will help you participate actively in class. Translation drafts will need to be turned in on Saturdays prior to the class in which they will be workshopped in order to give us and your peers a chance to read and comment on them. For this reason, no exceptions can be made about translation draft deadlines.

Translation lectures

We will be hosting some speakers on translation this semester, and Smith College has a weekly translation lecture series on Monday evenings (7-8:30, Seelye Hall 106, schedule on Moodle). We strongly encourage you to attend these events. You may write a Moodle response to one of the talks in lieu of the course readings.

Schedule

Jan. 28 Introduction

Feb. 4 Word for Word or Sense for Sense
Theoretical readings: “From Cicero to Caxton” (17-19); Sts. Jerome and Augustine (28-33); Douglas Robinson, “The Ascetic Foundations of Western Translatology: Jerome and Augustine” (536-45); Rita Copeland, “Roman theories of translation” (pdf)
Translation reading: Franz Kafka, The Metamorphosis (pdfs)
Translation exercise: Synonyms

Feb. 11 Breaking Bread, or Ceci n’est pas une baguette
Theoretical readings: Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (330-36); Martin Luther, “Open Letter on Translation” (57-66); Eugene Nida, Toward a Science of Translating (346-50); George Steiner, After Babel (396-405)
Translation reading: The Bhagavad Gita (pdfs)
Translation exercise: Footnote fever

Feb. 18 Context is Everything
Theoretical readings: Laura Bohannon, “Shakespeare in the Bush” (366-75); André Lefevere, “Why Waste Our Time on Rewrites?” (435-42); Talal Asad, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology” (494-501); Lawrence Venuti, “Translation as Cultural Politics” (546-57)
Translation reading: Homer, The Odyssey (97-8, 173, 187, 239-40, 255-6, 286-7)
Translation exercise: Transposing context
Feb. 25 What’s in a Name? Authority and Origins
Theoretical readings: Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (297-307); Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel” (pdf)
Translation reading: Biblical Babel story (9-10, 13-14, 43-6, 66-7, 72, 113-14, 119-20, 321-2, 351, 568)
Translation exercise: Free hand

Mar. 4 Visit from Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky
All readings pdfs

Mar. 11 Les belles infidèles: faithfulness and fidelity
Theoretical readings: “Late Tudor and Early Jacobean Translation” (81-90); “Women Translators” (128-43); Lori Chamberlain, “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation” (pdf)
Translation reading: 1001/Arabian Nights (pdfs)
Translation exercise: Rewriting allegiance
Project: Choose your text to translate

***Monday Mar. 17 pre-translation essay due

***Spring break***

Mar. 25 “Poetry is What’s Lost in Translation”
Theoretical readings: Sir John Denham “Preface” (122-23); Anne Dacier (160-65); Ezra Pound “Notes” and “Cavalcanti” (274-79); “Translation of Verse Form” (460-69); Vladimir Nabokov on Pushkin (376, 382-91)
Translation reading: Alexander Pushkin, Eugene Onegin (pdfs)
Translation exercise: Onegin from literal to verse
Project: First two pages of your translation by Thursday

Apr. 1 Full-class workshop of first two pages

***Saturday April 5: post revised first two pages plus additional page on Moodle

Apr. 8 Visit from Sebastian Schulman
Readings TBA
Project: Small-group workshop of revised first three pages; hand in peer reviews

***Saturday April 12: post pages 4-6 on Moodle

Apr. 15 ***Time change: Attend Gayatri Spivak lecture (4-6 p.m.), workshop 6-7
Theoretical readings: Gayatri Spivak (486-93)
Project: Small-group workshop of pages 4-6; hand in peer reviews

***Saturday April 19: post pages 7-9 on Moodle

Apr. 22 Translation and Power + discussion of Spivak lecture
Theoretical readings: Tymoczko and Gentzler, Translation and Power (pdf); Suzanne Jill Levine, The Subversive Scribe (512-520)
Project: Small-group workshop of pages 7-9; hand in peer reviews

***Saturday April 26: post full translation (10-12 pages total) on Moodle

Apr. 29 Project: Small-group workshop of full translation project; hand in peer reviews

May 2 Full revised translation and preface due by 4 p.m.
Translation exercise 1: Synonyms

In translation, as in any form of writing, each word presents a choice. Has Gregor Samsa been transformed overnight into an insect, a dung beetle, or a cockroach? What difference does that make to Gregor, to the people around him, and to the reader? The subtest distinctions in word choice can convey a particular attitude in regards to a character or a situation. This exercise will develop skills to help you choose among various possibilities in English to translate a word or words from another language.

In this exercise, you’ll be translating an excerpt from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* by replacing Fitzgerald’s words with synonyms. The goal here is to pay special attention to lexis (individual words), and to manipulate lexical choices toward a defined end. In this case, I ask that you leave the syntax (the sentence structure) alone as much as possible in order to focus on the words themselves. Your separate word choices should be informed by an overarching effect of your choice that you are aiming for, one that shifts the text in terms of characterization, attitude, etc.

For example, we could take Nick’s description of Miss Baker:

“Her gray, sun-strained eyes looked back at me with polite reciprocal curiosity out of a wan, charming, discontented face.”

And translate so that she seems ugly and disagreeable to him:

“Her dull, squinty eyes peered back at me with civil reciprocal consideration out of an ashy, striking, disgruntled face.”

Or so that she seems aggressive and a little scary:

“Her fog-toned, beady eyes stared back at me with respectful mutual concentration out of a pallid, beguiling, aggravated face.”

The idea here is not to look for “equivalences”; a shift of some sort is going to occur. Valuable resources for this exercise will be your word processor’s thesaurus (if it has one), a print thesaurus, or an online thesaurus such as thesaurus.com. Don’t feel limited by the words you find in these resources, however, and feel free to stretch the meaning of the corresponding words you choose in order to arrive at your desired effect.

It’s not necessary to translate the “little” words (prepositions, articles, pronouns), unless you feel that it would add something to your desired effect. You also don’t need to translate some other words if you feel they already match the effect you’re going for. In the end, though, the translation should feel more like your text than Fitzgerald’s, so you’ll want to translate at least three-fourths of the “big” words.

Preface your translation with a paragraph that describes your desired effect and the process by which you went about choosing words to attain it. As illustration, you’ll want to refer to a few specific examples of your decisions.
Translation Exercise 2: Footnote Fever!

This week we are challenging the idea of linguistic equivalence, that brod and pain and bread are interchangeable. Instead, the speaker of each of these languages may not only imagine a different object in each of these cases but also have different culturally based associations with that object. How much of that difference can be conveyed to the reader of a translation? To what extent is that culturally and linguistically contextual information useful to the reader’s understanding and interpretation of the translation? That is, how much does it matter that brod and bread are not equivalent? This exercise will allow you to consider how seemingly common objects or practices are culturally specific and then explore the importance of and possibilities for conveying this difference to your reader.

A related secondary goal of this exercise is to rethink the dichotomy between “the West and the Rest,” where what is Western is considered universal and easily accessible and what is non-Western is considered foreign, unknown, unfamiliar. Translations into English from cultures outside of Europe tend to include more footnotes or cultural background. But are Western texts actually any less culturally specific? The text you will be footnoting in this exercise is The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt (2013), currently #1 on the New York Times bestseller fiction list. It has already been translated into Danish, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish. The Dutch translation actually preceded the English publication! This would seem to suggest that the American bestseller, heavily marketed for a foreign audience, is “easier” to translate than “high” literature. This exercise will allow you to consider the ways even bestselling popular fiction is deeply embedded in its culture of origin and presents problems for translation.

In this exercise, you will imagine that you are presenting this “exotic” text to an audience completely unfamiliar with American culture. You will write a footnote for everything your audience may not understand: What objects and practices may not exist in their culture? Or might be used/performed differently? Or might exist in different manifestations? Don’t stop at denotative meanings, however. You will also address the connotative associations of these words, objects, and practices in American culture. That is, what else do you “hear” behind these words? What literary or cultural allusions? What cultural baggage? The idea is to have “footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers,” in the words of Vladimir Nabokov.

Translation Exercise 3: Rewriting context

This week we will be looking at the way changing the context of a text can also change cultural norms, values, expectations, characterizations, etc. You will be rewriting a short excerpt of an ancient text into a contemporary context. The goal is to transfer the text to the contemporary “universe of discourse,” to use Lefevere’s term, reflecting both the current ideology and poetics. Your translation will be an extreme example of domestication—you will be changing everything that seems foreign or “out of place” in the contemporary cultural context: the way people speak, the cultural referents, etc.
Your source text will be the excerpt from Seneca’s *Oedipus* on page 524-6 of the *Reader* (there are three versions). You don’t need to follow this excerpt word for word, or even sentence by sentence.

In your translation, you will explore how changing the context from ancient Greece to the present day can inscribe different ideas not only about what happened but about justice, family, violence—about what is considered important in society, what is considered right and wrong. Feel free to add details that situate your translation more clearly in the contemporary context.

Preface your translation with a paragraph describing the values, norms, and cultural practices you wanted to reflect and what choices you made in order to reflect those things in your translation.

**Translation Exercise 4: Free hand**

This week, we will experimenting with ways to destabilize the authority of the “original” source text. What might it mean to not treat the source text as the authoritative origin of the text? What freedoms does that enable you as a translator?

In this exercise, you will be writing your own version of the Babel story, freeing yourself from all constraints of the source story: its form, content, meaning, context, etc. Do to the text what you will; you’re in control. Your version, however, should express a viewpoint about the nature and practice of translation, using the Babel story as an allegory.

Preface your translation with a paragraph describing what it is you want your Babel story to say about translation and the choices you made to enact your vision.

**Translation Exercise 5: *Onegin* from literal to verse**

This week, you will be balancing the considerations of “form” versus “content.” You will be choosing one stanza of *Eugene Onegin* in Nabokov’s heavily annotated literal translation and putting it into verse form. You can decide what formal constraints to give your poem, but once selected, you should aim to follow the formal constraints as closely as possible. That is, you may choose to try to reproduce the formal characteristics of what is known as the *Onegin* stanza, as outlined by Nabokov (available on Moodle). Or you may choose a different poetic form (sonnet, haiku, ghazal, free verse, sound poetry, heroic couplets, OULIPO snowball, limerick, etc.). In this exercise, you will see how you play with the “meaning” of the poem in order to follow the form, which will allow you to explore the divided loyalties of the translator and the question about to whom or what s/he is faithful in creating a translation. It is also intended to muddy the notions about where or in what the so-called “essence” of a poem resides, as if it could be positively and objectively identified. You are not required to write a preface for this assignment.
Guide to peer reviews

In the peer reviews, you are responding to the translations as potential, yet informed, readers. You will be describing the translations and their effect on you/your interpretation of them. You need to be as precise as possible rather than fall back on vague praise or critique.

Avoid speculating on the intentions of either the author or translator; instead focus on the texts and their differing or similar function and effects (if you can read the original). You can describe things like: tone, style, register, characterization, literary devices, imagery, sentence structure and syntax. For example, you might say that the translation has a formal tone or an ornate style, then describe what gives you that impression. If the translator knows what is creating your interpretation, then they will know how to either enhance or change that, based on their intentions.

The peer reviews should address global issues of the translation. This is not the place to say that there is a comma missing on page 2; simply mark those on the translation itself, either electronically or on a hard copy. You can and should, however, be specific about what contributes to your global impression of the text. For example, you might say that the imagery used is not very vivid and does not give you a good sense of the local setting of the story, and then say that you’ve used an “I” for imagery to mark the places in the text where you felt this. You don’t need to propose solutions, but you should be as specific as you can in providing feedback to help the translator arrive at solutions.

You are also encouraged to refer to the theoretical readings, to say, for example, that this translation appears to be foreignizing for x reasons or that in y places it seems to be making use of dynamic equivalents.

The peer reviews should be one page for each translation, double-spaced 12-point Times New Roman with one-inch margins. For the first full-class workshop, you will not be writing peer reviews but simply making marginal comments with perhaps a few sentences of summary comments.