# 37. Translation

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The word *translation* has long roots in Latin, and the act of translation goes back centuries further, with equivalent terms in other ancient languages. In their book *Found in Translation*, Nataly Kelly and Jost Zetzsche (2012) observe that "*Translation* comes from the Latin *translatus*, which means 'to carry over,' as across a river . . . " (p. 41). Noting the same in its etymology of the word, *The Oxford Etymological Dictionary* offers two definitions of *translate*: "A. remove from one place to another; B. turn from one language to another" (Onions, 1966, p. 937). Drawing likewise on river imagery, Kirk St.Amant (2019) describes translation as "Transfers of meaning [which] often involve bridging different systems of conveying ideas" (p. 5). While the Latin word, and its anglicized form, are rooted in a crossing, the equivalent words in English's close Germanic cousin languages provide a slightly different image, e.g., *übersetzen* in German, *oversette* in Norwegian, in both cases meaning literally to "overset" or, more idiomatically, set over.

Translation studies, as a discipline, is a relatively recent development of mainly the past half century. Drawing on earlier theorists, James Melton (2008) identifies three types of translation: 1) intra-lingual ("within a single language or sign system"), 2) inter-lingual ("from one language into another"), and 3) inter-semiotic ("from verbal signs into non-verbal sign systems"; pp. 189-190). Federica Scarpa (2019) incorporates these three types within the discipline's more expansive and comprehensive taxonomy:

> *Translation* refers to
>
> - The process of transferring meaning from an original text written in a source language to another language according to the specific socio-cultural context of that language
> - The product resulting from that process: The target (i.e., final, translated) text that should address the socio-cultural context of the intended audience reading in the target language
>
> The word *translation* can also refer to other activities and products based on criteria such as
>
> - Medium: Written, oral, audiovisual, etc.
> - Mode: Conversion of a text from one language to another including
>   - Intralingual translation: Within the same language
>   - Interlingual translation: Between different languages

　　　∘ Intersemiotic translation: Between different verbal/
　　　　non-verbal systems, such as from a novel to the medi-
　　　　um of film. (pp. 19-20)

Because this volume focuses on keywords as technical communicators are likely to encounter them, the rest of this essay dwells on the most common types of translation, interlingual and intralingual.

Throughout *history*, translation has generally and most commonly been understood to refer to transferring meaning from one human language to another, especially when written. (In the translation industry, translators work with written texts while interpreters convey oral renderings between languages.) Translation as an occupation has its earliest roots in religious texts, especially in the West, where translation focused on fidelity or faithfulness of Latin translated from Greek (Windle & Pym, 2011, pp. 8-9). In parallel, Scott Montgomery (2013) demonstrates how crucial a role translation has played in spreading scientific *knowledge* throughout the centuries by allowing the transfer of ideas from Greek into Syriac, Latin, and Arabic; from Arabic into Latin; from Latin into Chinese and European vernaculars (including English); and from Chinese into Japanese and other East Asian languages (p. 158). In time, as the industrial revolution took place, translation historically became viewed, especially before the era of globalization, as Jeremy Munday (2016) describes it:

> The process of translation between two different written languages involves the changing of an original written text (the source text or ST) in the original verbal language (the source language or SL) into a written text (the target text or TT) in a different verbal language (the target language or TL). (p. 8)

Demand for translation of technical documents has soared since the late 20th century as global trade surged in the wake of such trade pacts as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, now replaced by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement [USMCA]) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). As technical *documentation* has increasingly involved translation, many technical communicators have taken on the role of translation project managers. Some have sought cross-training as translators, while even more translators have sought cross-training as technical communicators (Gnecchi et al., 2011). Thus, over time, "Technical communication researchers are increasingly pushing for a move away from thinking of translation as an afterthought to content design and development" (Gonzales, 2017, p. 96).

Simultaneously, translation theory has moved from conceptions of faithfulness of the target text to the source text and instead emphasized equivalency of meaning. Examining the history of translation studies, Sandra Halvorson (2010) notes that this move transpired by the mid-20th century. Birthe Mousten and Dan Riordan (2019) credit this move to the theorist Ernst-August Gutt, who

"switches *translation* from meaning 'two language versions of the same text' to meaning 'two texts with similar purpose and understanding'" (p. 160). Thus, as Patricia Minacori (2019) puts it, "Translation is a process that relates first and foremost to meaning, as opposed to words. In that regard it is fundamentally a process focused on comprehension" (p. 39). Among the best known of translation theorists, Lawrence Venuti (2008) sums up the current theoretical stance in this way: "Translation is a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the foreign text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in translating language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation" (p. 13).

In focusing on equivalencies of meaning, translation theorists have also increasingly acknowledged the importance of accounting for culture: "The apparent division between cultural and linguistic approaches to translation that characterized much translation research until the 1980s is disappearing," observes Susan Bassnett (2014, p. 3), "for translation is not just the transfer of texts from one language to another, it is now rightly seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures" (p. 6). This new view, of translation as ***intercultural communication***, has begun to seep into the thinking of the technical communication community as well. As Josephine Walwema (2018) observes, "At its most basic level, language is intertwined with culture, which itself comes with a set of values and belief systems" (p. 24). Or, as international technical communication specialist Timothy Weiss (1997) has put it, "translation, in the broadest sense of the term . . . is the fundamental process by which we interpret and express our reading of reality" (p. 322).

All languages display a continuum of formal to informal registers—with the latter sometimes interpreted as "***plain language***"—between which speakers and writers sometimes "translate" intralingually (Lanham, 1983). However, native English speakers—so many of whom have never bothered to learn other languages—are often unaware that English is unique among major languages in the extent to which its vocabulary is largely two languages merged into one: Germanic (Anglo-Saxon/Old English) and Latinate (Latin and its offspring Romance languages, including French), a result of the Norman Conquest. (For parallels, only a few minor languages exhibit extensive dual-language vocabularies, e.g., Luxembourgish, with German and French; Maltese, with Arabic and Italian; Romansch, with German and Latin.) The result has been frequent intralingual translation between Latinate and Germanic vocabularies. In the centuries since 1066, Latinate vocabulary, typifying the jargon of the educated professions, has been translated into Germanic "everyday English" or "plain language" for the masses (Crystal, 2004). As David Corson (1985, 1995) has shown in depth, such intralingual translation is necessary because the Latinate vocabulary in English remains foreign to so many native English speakers. They encounter what he calls a "lexical bar," resulting in "lexical avoidance" and "lexical apartheid," even though Latinate vocabulary is the most accessible lexicon for English language learners whose first language is Spanish or another Romance language (Maylath, 1997, 2000; Thrush, 2001).

Lexical apartheid in English-language cultures, and the history of French being required in the *public* affairs of England, has held staying power much longer than the vast majority of English speakers realize. Debate in England's parliament was conducted chiefly in French for hundreds of years post-Conquest. Furthermore, cases in common-law courts were argued in French until 1731, when parliament required that they be pleaded in English (albeit with many stock French terms incorporated wholesale in the proceedings; Fisher, 1992, p. 1169). Even as late as 1892, when delivering his "Introductory Lecture" at University College, London, A. E. Housman "translated" by repeating each point twice, once in Latinate English and once in Germanic English (Lanham, 1983). In our own time, a student's use of highly Latinate vs. highly Germanic English predictably can yield highly different *assessments* from college-level writing instructors of the quality of students' writing (Maylath, 1996).

The Plain Language Movement, as it exists in English, rests largely on the presumption of a dual vocabulary that requires intralingual translation. In fact, the U.S. government's current plain language guidelines webpage ("Choose Your Words Carefully," 2011) quotes H. W. Fowler's 1906 rule, "Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance word." The rise of scientific and technical communication as a *profession*, especially in English-speaking lands, can be seen as a response to the need to provide users of new technologies with intralingual translation. Carol Barnum and Saul Carliner (1993) stated so plainly as the *profession* blossomed:

> Technical communication is translation. Technical communicators must take complicated subject matter, easily understood by subject-matter experts, and "translate" it into a language, a format, a style, and a tone that can be easily understood by non-specialists. . . . It requires recognizing jargon—the specialized vocabulary of one group—and reducing it to terms and expressions that can be understood by those outside the group. (pp. 3-4)

We see a similar view taken toward *science* communicators/journalists, when Kira Dreher (2020) writes,

> the scientific paper has traditionally had a gatekeeping function, inaccessible both in terms of language, rhetoric, and restricted access (via paid journals). In the past, the public has relied primarily on translators—science communicators and journalists—to bridge this gap.

When encountering or using the term *translation*, technical communicators, especially in the United States, need to be aware that in some subfields, such as *risk communication*, the intended meaning is intralingual, or even intersemiotic, rather than interlingual, as one can see in such risk communication literature as "Translating Risk Management Knowledge" (Maule, 2004) or *Social Media in Disaster Response* (Potts, 2014). Indeed, the meaning of the term can go well

beyond language and culture in this subfield of technical communication. Such usage is especially apparent in Liza Potts' work (2014), where "participants in the social web" become "'translators' who perform 'translations'" (p. 28), as defined by Michael Callon (1986), across four stages:

1.  Problematization: Establishing and defining the event

2.  Interessement: Encouraging participants to accept the network definition of the event

3.  Enrollment: Actors align themselves with anchor actors and accept definition of the network.

4.  Mobilization: Actors assemble across the network and mobilize to validate and distribute content. (paraphrased and summarized from Potts, 2014, pp. 28-29)

Language seems to be at some remove in this rendering of translation. Language can certainly be employed in "defining an event," but even there, defining can occur through still or moving images, thus falling into intersemiotic translation. At no point is there clear reference to interlingual translation.

Employing multiple meanings of *translation* might seem innocuous, but without explicit operational definitions, their use can halt communication. Such became apparent in 2015 during technical communication conferences held in quick succession. The first, in Austria, drew participants mainly from Europe. During the concluding session, winners of a European Union grant announced that they had just received the funds to carry out groundbreaking **research** on translating **social media** messages during disasters. They explained that such messages are typically transmitted in the national language, without regard for speakers of other languages in the disaster locale. The next week, during a conference in Ireland that drew mainly Americans, a participant in the conference in Austria relayed the prior week's news. American participants objected, saying that translation had long been addressed in risk communication, as evident in Potts' recent book. Europeans in the **audience** were surprised but held their tongues. Sadly, not until after the conferences did anyone realize that the Americans were using a far different definition of *translation* than Europeans were accustomed to—*intra*lingual, or perhaps even intersemiotic, instead of *inter*lingual. Without explication, what could have been a fruitful discussion was squandered and lost without translation.

Will *translation* take on new meanings in the future, perhaps especially as artificial intelligence develops and spreads? Only time will tell. However, as linguists since Ferdinand de Saussure are fond of pointing out, 1) the sign is arbitrary, and 2) language is in a constant state of flux. As words are signs, their meanings are unfixed and almost inevitably evolve and multiply as living speakers alter living languages, making translation necessary even between older versions of a language (e.g., Old English, Middle English) and newer versions (e.g., Modern English, in its many varieties around the world).

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