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The Political Promise of Translation

Abstract. Changing global circumstances have led foreign language educators to reconsider the use of translation in language study. But this does not mean a return to the old grammar/translation method. In this article, we explore how the practice of literary translation might be reframed and implemented in the language classroom as a means of furthering the translingual and transcultural competence advocated by the Modern Language Association in 2007.

1. Introduction: The MLA Report – A political and educational manifesto

In May of 2007, the Modern Language Association issued a Report of its Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages titled “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World”. The Report was in response to the language crisis that had occurred in the U.S. as a result of 9/11 and to efforts by the U.S. government to instrumentalize foreign language study in the service of national security and economic competitiveness. The MLA Report calls upon the higher education community “both to engage the security imperative and to insist on the value of a more broadly conceived public investment in foreign language education” (in press). It calls for embracing a constitutive view of language that acknowledges its role in constituting thought and cognitive mindsets, cultural and literary traditions, and social and historical knowledge. In short, it exhorts the profession to get out of its ivory tower and to actively prepare American students for the globalized world of tomorrow.

The MLA Report has spawned much discussion in academic circles in the U.S. and the Modern Language Journal (MLA Ad Hoc Committee in press) is publishing a collection of responses. The challenges the Report presents to existing foreign language and literature programs is well captured by the following statements:

The goal [of college and university foreign language majors]: translingual and transcultural competence. Advanced language training often seeks to replicate the competence of an educated

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native speaker, a goal that postadolescent learners rarely reach. The idea of translingual and transcultural competence places value on the ability to operate between languages. Students are educated to function as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers of the target language. . . . In the course of acquiring functional language abilities, students are taught critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception. (MLA 2007; authors’ emphases)

As one of its concrete recommendations, the MLA Report advocates developing programs in translation and interpretation. “There is a great unmet demand for educated translators and interpreters, and translation is an ideal context for developing translingual and transcultural abilities as an organizing principle of the language curriculum” (ibid.).

The shorter version of the Report ends with a reminder that the study of foreign languages needs to be ‘revitalized’, i.e., considered in much broader perspective than as a purely instrumental or a purely aesthetic enterprise.

We hope the dialogue [elicited by our Report] will help produce a focused, sustained collaborative effort to revitalize the study of languages and cultures in U.S. colleges, universities and community colleges. The goal of such a revitalization would be not simply to produce graduates better prepared to meet a range of identified national or societal needs, though this alone would be of significant value. Our goal is a higher education system that embraces the distinctive educational benefits of studying foreign languages and cultures in developing the powers of the intellect and the imagination, the ability to reflect upon one’s place in the world with depth and complexity, and an understanding of the degree to which culture and society are created in language. (MLA in press; authors’ emphasis)

However individual FL departments end up redesigning their programs, the goal should be to create coherent four-year curricula that situate language study in cultural, historical, geographical, and cross-cultural frames, that systematically incorporate transcultural and translingual reflection at every level, and organize the major programs around explicit, principled, educational goals. In the end, such curricula transcend a language/content division, for language is learned as content and content as language. Imaginative literature remains an irreplaceable source for imparting the ability to enter and powerfully experience unfamiliar worlds (ibid.; authors’ emphasis)

This Report has been rightly perceived as a wake-up call that exhorts foreign language educators to redefine language study as engagement with the real, global world of tomorrow. This engagement can take various forms. By becoming aware of language as a social and symbolic system and the ways “culture and society are created in language,” students are exhorted to engage with the world in a social and cultural manner (KRAMSCH 2006; KRAMSCH/WHITESIDE). By benefiting from “the irreplaceable source” of insight played by literature in “imparting the ability to enter and powerfully experience unfamiliar worlds”, they are invited to engage with the world stylistically and symbolically (ibid.). These forms of engagement are encapsulated in the intriguing notion of “translingual/transcultural competence”, which seems to go beyond “communicative competence” of the transactional, instrumental kind, toward a kind of competence that has been defined as “symbolic competence” (ibid.). We return to these challenges and to the notion of symbolic competence in section 5 of this paper.
Following up on the Report’s recommendation to make greater use of translation in language study, Michael Huffmaster devised an activity to explore how American learners of German at the intermediate college level could use literary translation to develop an understanding of the nature of language and enhance their aesthetic sensibility. It was hoped that such an activity would shed light on the notion of translanguaging and transcultural competence advocated by the MLA. In the next two sections, we describe the activity and the students’ evaluations of it. We then discuss in section 4 why this activity did not seem to yield the expected learning outcomes and in section 5 how it could be redesigned to foster students’ “ability to operate between languages” (cf. MLA Ad Hoc Committee in press).

2. Wandrs Nachtlied in California

A sequence of two lessons centered on the translation of a poetic text from German into English was designed and implemented in a fourth-semester college-level German course for the purpose of increasing the students’ “translingual competence”. The poem chosen for translation was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s “Ein Gleiches”, also known as “Wandrs Nachtlied II”. The first activity was inspired by communicative approaches to literature in the language classroom. Subsequent phases, inspired by research in literary stylistics (e.g. Jakobson 1960; Widdowson 1975/1992), were designed specifically with the aim of developing students’ understanding of lexical and grammatical form as a way of making meaning while exploring the semiotic potential of linguistic signs across languages.
Phase I: Noticing the symbolic gap
As an introduction to the process of translation, students were shown the image *Aussicht vom Kickelhahn*¹ and asked to describe the scene in German, brainstorming as a class to come up with as much lexis as possible, including any associations, impressions, or feelings that came to mind when they looked at the image. Although drawn from communicative language pedagogy (e.g., MALEY / DUFF 1989), this exercise was not meant primarily to encourage student talk or to fire up their imaginations, nor was the purpose to have them guess correctly the content of the poem they were about to read (the historical-biographical connection between the image and the poem was not even mentioned at this stage). The point, rather, was to foster a deeper understanding of the nature of meaning by allowing students to experience the symbolic gap between signifier and signified. By evoking in their minds concepts that matched the image, students were not merely translating visual input into verbal form, they were recreating in their minds the link between a visual signifier and a verbal signified or concept. The arbitrary nature of that link became apparent when students compared the various concepts they associated with the image: Some saw clouds (*die Wolken*) or fog (*der Nebel*), where others saw smoke (*der Rauch*), Some saw rain (*der Regen*), others snow (*der Schnee*) or light (*das Licht*). Some saw mountains (*die Berge*), others hills (*die Hügel*). Some saw a mysterious landscape (*geheimnisvoll*), others a peaceful one (*friedlich*). All suggestions were accepted as valid potential signifieds. The list produced was compiled on the board. After students had generated various verbal signs for the same image, the instructor focused their attention on the grammatical ‘glue’ necessary to juxtapose those signs into meaningful combinations, e.g., the gender as well as the plural and singular forms of the nouns listed on the board. The next two phases of the lesson, which also took place in German, consisted of a series of steps aimed at helping students understand how a poem makes meaning through processes of selection and combination (JAKOBSON 1960).

Phase II: Focus on the signified
In order for students to have a first general perceptual impression of the poem, they were asked simply to listen to the poem as the instructor recited it and to note their impressions, which were elicited in a brief follow-up discussion.

Über allen Gipfeln
ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhe du auch.

¹ Source: http://www.goethezeitportal.de/fileadmin/Images/db/wiss/goethe/schnellkurs_goethe/k_4/kickelhahn ilmenau.jpg
It became clear that the sounds and cadences of the poem were already part of its meaning. Students were asked to listen to the poem again while trying to remember as much of it as possible with the goal of then reconstructing the text from memory as best they could, often relying on their memory of the rhythm to decide on format and layout. After listening a few more times and completing as much as they could on their own, students compared their versions with a partner and helped each other complete the poem. Finally, the class as a whole worked to reconstruct the poem line by line on the board. The resulting text is reproduced verbatim below:

Über allen Gipfeln gibt es/ist Ruhe
In einem Wipfeln spürest du kaum hauch
Die Volgelein schweigen in Walde Warten nur Balde
Ruhest du auch

Once the poem was reconstructed (the uncertainty over gibt es versus ist was left standing) and any remaining unclear lexical items had been explained by the instructor, a brief discussion followed on the activity itself. Students identified words or phrases they found more difficult to remember, which were ones they were either unfamiliar with and were not pre-taught, such as Hauch or spüren, or which they did not recognize in altered, as it were, ‘poetic’ form, namely, balde. But the aim of the activity was not primarily accuracy, nor was it meant as a dictation exercise. Rather it was a way to have the students enter the poetic logic of the text and experience the cumulative and recursive unfolding of meaning which is part of a poem’s significance (WIDDOWSON 1992). As a final step before seeing the original poem, students were asked to suggest a fitting title. They produced the following: ”Der ruhige Wald”, ”Das Ende”, ”Gipfel und Wipfel”. This last title showed a particular sensitivity to the alliterative meaning of form, i.e., to the poetic function of language (JAKOBSON 1960), which would be the focus of the next phase of the activity. That phase focused more specifically on how the propositional content of the poem gets enacted on a variety of structural levels in the text.

Phase III: Focus on the textual signifiers
Next, with copies of the original, students read the poem silently once more and were asked to brainstorm both the denotations and the connotations of the words on the page. No longer faced with a picture but with words, what referential and associative meanings did they give these words? The instructor asked: ”Was für eine Tageszeit wird hier dargestellt? Woher wissen Sie das? Ist es möglich, eine Jahreszeit zu bestimmen? Was für Geräusche gibt es in dieser Szene? Welche Assoziationen haben Sie mit diesen Aspekten des Gedichts?”

Through their responses to these questions, the students were led to examine the change of perspective in the text. Generations of readers have noted in the poem a movement of perspective from high to low and from far to near in the succession of images evoked with mountaintops, then treetops, then birds in the wood, and finally the second-person addressee. By drawing their attention to the dynamic structure of the poem, the instructor invited students to consider other possible logics and their meaning. The notion
of the Great Chain of Being was raised, as well as the suggestion of natural evolution, and the instructor pointed out that the up-down movement in the poem inverts the way we typically imagine such hierarchical systems. In every case, it was clear that the value of, say, Wipfel is not to be found only in its relation to “treetops,” but in its phonological relation to Gipfel. As SAUSSURE noted (1916/1959: 10), “linguistic signs function not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position” in the sentence and in the text as a whole.

Following these considerations evoked by the poem’s salient imagery, the discussion turned to two of its salient grammatical features: prepositions and verb tenses, as a way of showing students how selection and combination operate to make meaning in language (SAUSSURE 1916/1959:122 ff). First, students were asked to locate the prepositions and say whether they could recognize any pattern or commonalities among them. The three occurrences in the poem are Über, in, and im, which students easily identified, and an obvious commonality is that they are all combined with nouns in the dative case. Attention was drawn to the formal grammatical markers of the dative plural in the prepositional objects Gipfeln and Wipfeln and the corresponding adjective ending in allen. Since both in and über belong to the class of two-way prepositions, taking either the accusative or the dative case depending, in most cases, on whether or not movement is involved, the choice of the dative here could be seen to be significant. The sense of non-movement, or stasis, in the poem instantiated through the dative case is reinforced by the static verbs of being (sein) and perception (spüren), along with intransitive verbs of cessation (schweigen and ruhen) or duration (warten). Yet this would seem to contradict the dynamic structure of the poem noted and discussed earlier. Students were asked to consider whether there was in fact any contradiction and if so, what the effect and significance of this might be.

The second grammatical feature discussed was verb tenses. Again, students were asked to begin by pointing out the verbs in the poem and identifying the tense they occur in, which they had no problem doing. Students were then asked whether this class of words, though all in the simple present, referred to the present time. A distinction was drawn between the first three verbs, sein, spüren, and schweigen, which do seem to refer to the present time of the discourse world, and the last two, warten and ruhen, which, the one as an imperative and the other in conjunction with the temporal adverb bald, refer rather to an immediate, imminent future. The instructor reminded students of the frequent conventional usage of the present tense with future meaning in everyday German discourse, typically involving plans or intentions, and gave some examples such as, “Wir sehen uns morgen um 8, dann. Tschüss!” and “Ich gehe nachher einkaufen. Kommst du mit?” Might the present tense in this poem serve a different purpose? Students suggested that the first three verbs, while referring on one level to the time when the poem was written, seemed simultaneously to evoke a sense of eternal presence. Indeed, the last two verbs seemed to collapse future and present to effect a sense of immediacy rather than express future plans and intentions. The instructor then proposed that perhaps the poem was trying to convey, at least on some level, the experience of the passage of time itself – an experience it was inviting readers to take part in through the slow, recursive reading they were undertaking in the course of this lesson.
Finally, after thorough examination of key textual features as described above, the two received titles of the poem, “Ein Gleiches” and “Wandrers Nachtlied II”, were revealed along with some brief biographical and textual history to explain them\(^2\), and students were invited to comment on how this new information perhaps altered or reinforced their initial impressions and associations.

**Phase IV: Focus on the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified: Negotiating the symbolic gap**

The activities described thus far took up one fifty-minute lesson. For homework students were asked to translate the poem into English and to come to class the next day prepared to justify and defend the choices they had made in their translations. It was hoped that in the process of translation students would enter the ‘gap’ between signifier and signified when confronting several alternatives to any given item in the original. The next day students were put into three smaller groups of five to six and assigned the task of composing a translation together as a group. They were instructed to use the individual versions they had composed for homework as a basis for discussing and arguing the merits or drawbacks of the various possible English renderings of the German. Once each group had appointed a scribe, students were given twenty minutes to complete the task. They were left the choice of whether to use English or German in their discussions.

Students became quite engaged as they discussed a myriad of nuances in meaning. The first word of the poem, über, provoked some discussion. For rendering its literal, spatial sense, most bilingual dictionaries would include such possible English translations as above, across, atop, beyond, or over. Some of these, like across and beyond, did not come into question; atop was briefly considered in one group, but did not garner much support. Above and over were the two serious candidates, with above eventually winning out in all three groups. The first substantive in the poem, Gipfel, had a few contenders during the discussions, including peak, summit, and mountaintop. Others, like acme, apex, pinnacle, or vertex, never came into serious consideration. Much more than just denotation and connotation influenced students’ decisions – among other things, the sound and length of the alternatives as compared to the original. Again it was clear that the students were paying attention not only to the referential meaning of words, but also to their form. Their decision to select one word over another had to do with the shape of the German word or the rhythm of the English line and not only with the dictionary meaning of a given word. It was noted, for example, that summit has the same number of syllables as Gipfel, and in comparison mountaintop seemed too long, and peak perhaps too brief, though peak did have one particularly persuasive supporter in one group and so ended up in that group’s final version, albeit in the form of a hybrid compromise (mountain peak). Another group opted nearly unanimously for mountaintop, while the remaining one took more time before agreeing on the same choice. Numerous other elements underwent similar consideration, evoking varying degrees of debate, and resulting in various specific resolutions.

\(^2\) An accessible summary of this history as well as a concise analysis of the poem is provided in Vogt (1999: 120 ff).
In all cases, the students had to think hard about what meaning they understood the item under consideration to convey, and how that meaning was realized on the paradigmatic axis of selection or on the syntagmatic axis of combination (SAUSSURE 1916/1959: 123; JAKOBSON 1960).

After twenty minutes of animated discussion, when each group had composed its common version, these were put on the board alongside one another for comparison. The final group translations are reproduced below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP I</th>
<th>GROUP II</th>
<th>GROUP III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wanderer’s Nightsong II</td>
<td>Wanderer’s Nightsong II</td>
<td>Wanderer’s Nightsong II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above all the mountaintops is silence</td>
<td>Above all mountain peaks it is still</td>
<td>Above all the mountaintops is still</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In all the treetops</td>
<td>in all treetops</td>
<td>In all the treetops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You hardly sense</td>
<td>you hardly</td>
<td>you sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a breath</td>
<td>sense a Breath.</td>
<td>scarcely a breath,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The little birds are silent in the forest</td>
<td>The little birds are silent in the forest</td>
<td>The little birds in the forest keep silent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just wait, soon</td>
<td>Only wait, soon</td>
<td>Just wait soon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You too will be at rest</td>
<td>You will be quiet as well.</td>
<td>you too will be at rest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It did not seem to bother anyone that the word *nightsong* does not actually exist in English; students were quite happy to exploit the arbitrary potential of the two words *night* and *song* and to coin a non-arbitrary neologism to suit their purposes. Students were invited to comment on the different effects of having the definite article or not, e.g., in “above all the mountaintops” vs. “above all mountain peaks”. They noted that the definite article gave an impression of immediacy and presence to the panorama unfolding before the poet’s (or reader’s) eye, as opposed to the more universal or general landscape evoked by the indefinite plural. The different effects of *silence*, as a substantive, and *still*, an adjective, were also considered, together with the different effects of *is* as opposed to *it is*. Differences between the versions were explored in like fashion from beginning to end, the ultimate goal being to bring to light their negotiation of the symbolic gap between the arbitrary resources of the language and their non-arbitrary use in the translation process.

### 3. Students evaluate the activity

The instructor was satisfied with the way the two lessons had gone, but had a nagging feeling that the students had not grasped the purpose of the activity. Indeed, the evaluations collected afterwards showed that the students had found the activity interesting and to some extent challenging, but they had understood it as being one more communicative activity designed to make them talk amongst each other about what the poet was trying to communicate and how that message could be conveyed in another language. They did not
seem to have acquired any insights into the process of translation or the symbolic nature of language.

**Phase I: Noticing the symbolic gap between signifier and signified**

Student responses to this phase of the lesson, though varied, indicated that most understood it simply as a warm-up or pre-teaching phase for the ‘real’ lesson, a view likely conditioned by previous experience in communicative classrooms. For example:

“This activity helped set up the mood of the poem.”

“I thought it set the scene & put us all in the right mindset for the poem.”

“I thought this was challenging as the picture had so much potential and to a certain degree was rather vague.”

“I thought this was kind of pointless, or at least I didn’t understand what was supposed to be achieved.”

**Phase II: Focus on the signified**

A clear majority of the students correctly perceived the first step of this phase (listening to the instructor recite the poem) as having a primarily aesthetic purpose, likely due to the instructor’s explicit instructions to this effect:

“It was good to hear the poem recited before seeing it written, that way the form wouldn’t overpower the harmony of sound of the poem.”

However, several felt a tension between the poetic and the referential dimensions of the poem, which they found difficult to deal with:

“I was so busy listening to the sound of the poem that I forgot to listen for words at times.”

“Sounded pleasant but difficult to understand at first without knowing the vocabulary.”

“A little difficult to understand as there were words I did not know.”

Though the main point of having students reconstruct the poem from memory in successive stages – individually, in pairs, and then as a class – was to give them a recursive experience of the text, the majority took it as an exercise in memory and accuracy or as a way of displaying the diversity of students’ renditions within the competitive environment of the classroom:

“Trying to remember it in German was harder than I anticipated, could only get a few words and maybe two whole lines.”

“It was interesting because I got only certain parts and he got certain parts.”

“It was good, we got pretty close.”

“It was awesome to hear all of the different versions of the same poem.”

When it came to giving an appropriate title to the poem, student responses were split about evenly between those who saw it as a chance to express an understanding of the poem’s general meaning and those who saw it as a matter of correct guessing:

“It was really interesting to see what titles people came up with because it really showed what we understood the poem to be before discussion and translation.”

“Interesting to hear what others thought it should be called, especially because they were all pretty far off from the actual title.”
Phase III: Focus on the signifier
The analysis and discussion of the poem as a class, during which the impressions and associations it evoked were considered along with its imagery and grammatical features, proved to be one of the most successful parts of the lesson. The intention was to underscore the multivalent nature of poetic meaning, and the clear majority of students got precisely that point out of the activity, but one fifth of the respondents insisted that the meaning of the text resided in the intention of its author and that the task was to find out what the author had meant to say:

“Best part of the activity. We had a lot of different ideas, very fun and informative.”
“It was interesting because I got to hear about different aspects of the poem that I hadn’t previously so closely considered.”
“Interesting because everyone sees the poem through a different lens.”
“Helped to get a feeling of what the author was talking about and what he was trying to convey.”

Similarly, student responses to the homework translation assignment show that they saw translation as a tension between what the German author intended to say and what the English language allowed them to translate. For many, both writing and translating a poem was a matter of putting ideas into words:

“The translation was tricky because many of the words have multiple English translations. You really had to try and guess what the author was trying to say.”
“I really liked this because it challenged me to see the difficulties in translation and to decide what effect I wanted to achieve. I also liked that I could use whatever word I wanted (like summit) without having to get someone else’s consent.”
“It was interesting to see how ideas differ between languages & how hard it is to translate, like trying to decide between literal and the idea.”

Phase IV: Negotiating the symbolic gap
The first stage of the second lesson, during which students worked in small groups to compose a common translation together, elicited conflicting responses. Half the students viewed the differences in interpretation negatively, focusing on the sacrifices entailed in group compromise, while half of them viewed such differences as instructive:

“Really difficult. Probably has to do with people’s stubbornness but really hard to come to consensus view.”
“I thought it was interesting to debate our reasons for what we put, because it made me think more about why I chose certain words.”

The final activity in this set of lessons, comparing the three different group versions, also elicited mixed responses. Some understood the activity as a competition whereas others understood it as an exercise in democratic compromise:

“I felt like our version was clearly the best.”
“Felt very sort of competitive. Defending one’s choices, explaining the conflict. It seems to get very emotional.”
“This for me was the most fascinating part. I had my own interpretations, but trying to free my mind of the chains of my own gut instincts – and open up to unfamiliar interpretations – was not easy. I kept stumbling over certain things I had taken for granted – which forced me to keep letting go of my own conception of the poem.”
4. Discussion

Looking back on this activity and on the students’ responses, we are struck by the high degree of motivation of the students and their willingness to engage with the poem’s multiple meaning potential. However, their interpretation of the activity itself points to a more fundamental misapprehension of the nature of language and of symbolic mediation. The students’ fixation on authorial intention and their frustration at not being able to get a single, clearly enunciated idea of what the poet intended to say, let alone to translate that idea into English words, makes evident a language ideology that underlies much of language teaching today. By language ideology we mean either “a set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein, quoted in Schieffelin [et al.] 2005: 4) or “self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of [its] members” (Heath, quoted in ibid.). In language learning and teaching, this ideology is the prevalent conduit metaphor (Reddy 1993), which sees language as a transparent conduit for the transmission of information, itself believed to be ‘contained’ in the brain in the form of ideas. The efforts made by proponents of communicative language teaching (CLT) to impart usable skills, ones that can be evaluated and measured on scales of proficiency and compared to the skills of others, have been based on this ideology. Even though originally CLT was by no means restricted to the transactional exchange of information in everyday encounters (see the work of CLT theorists like Widdowson, Carter, Cook, Kramsch and others), many communicatively oriented textbooks in the U.S. have either done away with poetry altogether in an effort to teach ‘usable skills’, or they feature poems as opportunities to get the students to talk (Sprech- anlässe) about the ideas or feelings ‘contained’ in the poem. We find some of this ideology in the students’ responses above.

In the translation activity, all students experienced the differently located “exuberances” and “deficiencies” of each language (Ortega y Gasset, quoted in Kramsch 1993: 105) and the tension between the non-arbitrary conventions of grammatical and lexical usage and the creativity made possible by the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. However, within a CLT ideology that strives to teach the students accuracy, fluency, and appropriateness within clearly established benchmarks pegged to the ideal native speaker, the students interpreted the act of translation as one of ‘getting it right’ or even ‘getting it better’ than the others. What they believed they had to ‘get right’ was some ideational content that the German author had intended to convey prior to writing the poem and that the translator had to reconstruct in another language. This content, they believed, is what the translator wanted to convey but what they could not find the right English words to fit. Both the intentional and the ideational fallacy led the students to evaluate the activity according to criteria of communicative competence, i.e.: To what extent did Goethe’s poem communicate its message effectively? And: How did my translation capture accurately the author’s communicative intention?

By contrast, the translingual competence advocated by the MLA Report, which envisions students as able to operate between languages, draws on quite a different view of
Language. Language is here a highly reflexive symbolic system that, like other symbolic systems (e.g., music or painting), can reflect upon itself, focusing at once on the world it refers to and on the world it creates within itself. Puns, humor, irony, parody, language play, double-voicings, quotes, polysemy, double-entendre, as well as the elusive meanings of code-switchings, borrowings and imitations of prior language, intertextual allusions, parallelisms, equivalences, are translations all. They all play with and draw additional meaning from the symbolic gap between languages. Precisely because of that gap, language always means more than it says and says more than the speaker intended.

5. Reframing the activity to foster translingual competence

How can we reframe this activity to make it less a communicative activity and more a reflexive experience on the nature of language as translation? How can the students become aware of the fact that grammar is not just gratuitous harassment but the pattern which connects elements of a context or “contextual shaping” (BATESON 1979: 18)? That vocabulary does not refer to objects in the world as much as it evokes a world the reader agrees to believe in (BECKER 2000: 414)? That texts do not express the intentions of their authors as much as they point to potential meanings to be discovered by their readers, and that this pointing is always already a point of view (SIMPSON 1993)? That, ultimately, all understanding is an act of translation (STEINER 1975: Ch.1)?

By transposing the poem into another key, so to speak, the students were focusing explicitly on what JAKOBSON called “the message” itself, i.e., the poetic function of language, not just on its content (the referential function of language) or on its code (the metalinguistic function). This poetic function is based on such well-known features as parallelism and repetition – structures echoing one another across the lines of the poem: Über allen Gipfeln/in allen Wipfeln, ist Ruh/spürest du, Walde/balde, sounds ricocheting from one end of the poem to the other: Ruh/du/nur/ruhest du. Such parallelism can be found not only in poetry but in everyday conversation (TANNEN 1989; SWANN / MAYBIN 2007), in marketing jingles and political rhetoric, newspaper headlines and rap lyrics. Teaching translingual competence means teaching about the uses of language across various linguistic codes, styles, registers and social contexts.

After having experienced the way the German language makes meaning in this poem, the students could be asked to go and collect other examples of parallelism in their everyday environment. Comparing such features of language in English and German or in any other languages represented in the class can give the students insight into how language wields emotional and political power and why Plato wanted to ban poets from his Republic. It shows them that translation, or transposition from poetry into prose, from monologue into dialogue, from second to third person addressee, from poetry to painting or music or acting, from German into English or French, is the essence of creativity. Power comes not from inventing new ideas, but from recombining existing forms: a statement into a commentary, a text into its interpretation, a word into its definition, a short story into its summary, an utterance into its rephrasing (for examples, see KRAMSCH.
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1993: Ch. 5 and 6(2000). Translingual competence is the ability to play with and across symbolic forms, to re-signify images and concepts (BUTLER 1997), and re-accentuate other people’s words (BAKHTIN 1981) by applying them to different contexts and by manipulating the various dimensions of the context itself (e.g., addressee, content, code, style).

Ultimately, the study of any foreign language at the college level should aim at helping students to understand something about language itself. As Michael HOLQUIST, the former President of the MLA, stated eloquently:

Language is not only the MLA’s middle name. It is the iron necessity to bind sound and meaning that motivates the triune nature of the sign as it brings the two together in any performed utterance... My purpose for adducing the central role of language in all that we do in both English and foreign language departments is to particularize the category that unites us as a profession by setting us apart as a discipline. Another way to specify this thirdness at the heart of language is to think of it — as most do in everyday life — as ‘meaning’. The close reading of grammar, syntax, and extrasentential forms in language textbooks or difficult poems and novels is always an exercise in the pursuit of meaning. (HOLQUIST 2007: 3)

A pedagogy of translation from German to English should be supplemented by readings that introduce the students to the field of literary stylistics (e.g. JAKOBSON 1960; WIDDOWSON 1975/1992; SHORT / SHORT 1989/1996; SIMPSON 1993/1996/2004; FOWLER 1996), sociolinguistics (TANNEN 1989) or anthropological linguistics (BECKER 2000). These readings might not be part of the syllabus of foreign language classes, but they can profitably be part of the syllabus of applied linguistics courses offered for foreign language majors in foreign language departments, as the MLA Report recommends.

6. Conclusion

Critical reflection on a translation activity in a fourth-semester German class and how it was perceived by the participants has revealed that any attempt to teach students how to “operate between languages” has to take into account the current dominant discourse of efficiency and instrumentality in second language acquisition. That discourse is inimical to translation of any kind, as it is predicated on the notion that we understand each other perfectly if only we learn each other’s code. The call by the MLA to broaden the goals of language study cannot be achieved through attractive, student-centered activities alone. It has to be accompanied by an explicit reflection of the multifaceted nature of language and the intercultural conditions under which language makes meaning. Translation ceases to be one pedagogic activity among many, but comes to be seen as the very essence of meaning making and a privileged clue to the relation between language and power.

The ability to translate is a symbolic ability that KRAMSCH has called “symbolic competence” and that forms the core of translingual competence. It is not just the (academic) ability to read and explicate poems and other texts; rather, it entails the ability to take symbolic action, i.e., to decide which language to use with whom and in which situation, which style to adopt and how to style oneself in order to position oneself and others in the
most appropriate way. Translation can be seen as the “traffic in meaning” (PRATT 2002) or the “translingual activism” (PENNYCOOK 2008) that global times require (see also ZARATE 2008). As PENNYCOOK eloquently states: “If students are to enter the global traffic of meaning, translation needs to become central to what we do” (2008: 33). Indeed, translation is political action insofar as it breaks down the myth of national languages “operat[ing] only in [their] own presence” (ibid.). In teaching German, it is important to remember that the meanings expressed in the German language only exist in relation to other meanings, constructed in other codes in other places at other times. Translation as a pedagogic principle can fulfill the political promise of diversity that is essential to an understanding of the German language itself.

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