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What Historians Can Learn from Translators

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Collaborating with a scholar of translation has changed how I conduct historical research. For a few years now, I have been working with Viktorija Bilic of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee to edit and translate a collection of nineteenth-century letters to and from the remarkable German-American abolitionist and feminist Mathilde Franziska Anneke.[1] As the historian of the partnership, my research informed Viktorija's translation decisions and my feedback affected her revisions. Her work as translator exposed me to theories and practices that now influence my work beyond this particular project. As a historian of immigration to the United States, I often translate quotations from non-English texts or read translated sources. Translation scholarship has given me new ways to approach portraying the experience of non-English speakers.

Even when historians do not cross linguistic divides, our work overlaps with that of translators. We are interpreters of the past. We seek to understand historical communities and development to communicate their essence to a present-day audience, quite aware that the act of communication necessitates decisions about tone, emphasis, and narrative and argumentative structure. We know that writing history is not a neutral act.

Translating a text from one language to another is not a neutral act, either. When a translator renders a text in a different language, she must fully understand the original “source text,” establish the purpose that the new “target text” will serve, determine a translation strategy, and decide how to implement her priorities in writing from sentence to sentence, word to word. A literal translation would create a stilted text that suggested that the original author was a poor writer. Translators consider such “translationese” a professional affront for the very reason that it overlooks the complexity of their work.

For centuries, scholars of translation have been refining alternatives to translationese by proposing theories that address the goals of translation and how to manifest them. The early nineteenth-century work of Prussian theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher was foundational for the modern study of translation. Schleiermacher believed language was inextricable from national spirit, a premise that led to his preoccupation with the translator’s role as a mediator between national communities. He viewed the text as a national artefact and maintained that the translator must understand the source text within its original historical and cultural context before deciding how to bridge the gap between the author and the new audience. Schleiermacher saw two main options: “Either the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him.”[2]

Translators often use the metaphor of bridge building. They decide whether to lead readers over the bridge to the original text by preserving a sense of difference or to carry the text over the bridge to the new readers by using vocabulary, idiom, and diction familiar to readers of the target language. Schleiermacher preferred taking readers over the bridge to the original text because he so highly valued the work of sharing the differences among national communities. He therefore advocated a form of what translators now call *foreignized* translation, which attempts to convey some of the peculiarities of the language of the source text.[3] To achieve this goal, a translator might do something as simple as retaining *realia* such as “Mama” and “Papa” instead of using “Mom” and “Dad.” Or she might resist making the text less taxing for new readers by smoothing it and incorporating clarifying word choices. Perhaps she would replicate a long-winded style to evoke the cultural norms manifested in the source text.

Domesticated translations have their strengths, too. It often makes sense to obscure the fact that the target text is in fact a translation by making it sound as natural as possible in the new language. Even Schleiermacher would have been thrown by a foreignized instruction manual. Domesticating also has less practical consequences. When translators minimize linguistic differences, they remove barriers, accentuate commonalities, and, potentially, foster feelings of closeness. It makes a difference whether the Arabic “inshallah” is translated as “if Allah wills it,” “God willing,” or simply, “I hope so.”

Viktorija’s approach to our project was largely foreignizing. Mathilde Anneke was steeped in the idea that language was attached to cultural difference, having participated in the nationalistic German revolutions of 1848 and struggled to learn English as a newcomer to the United States. Anneke showed how conscious she was of linguistic and cultural differences in speeches, short stories, and articles advocating women’s rights and the abolition of slavery. We cover the years from 1859 to 1865, when Anneke partnered with the Anglo-American abolitionist Mary Booth in a passionate collaborative

relationship. With three of their children, the two women traveled from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Zurich, Switzerland, where they lived together for four years.

In our book, foreignizing elements capture Anneke's liminal cultural position. Examples appear in Anneke's description of celebrations for her son's tenth birthday, which occurred while she and Mary were in Bremen en route to Zurich. She wrote to her husband in 1860:

"Marien gefiel die deutsche Gemüthlichkeit auf deutschem Boden sehr. Wir beschenkten Percy mit einer kleinen Kanone u. einer Harmonika, die er sich wünschte. Nach dem Festdiner ließ ich eine hübsche Droschke kommen und fuhr mit der kleinen Gesellschaft für 12. Grote durch die eigenthümliche Stadt und ihre reizenden Promenaden. Das wundervolle Grün hat uns doch so erquikt und die prächtige Blumenflor so sehr erfreut, daß die Kinder fortwährend gejubelt haben."[4]

"Maria very much enjoyed German Gemüthlichkeit on German soil. We gave Percy a little canon and the harmonica that he had wished for. After our celebratory meal I ordered a nice carriage for 12 groats and took the little group to see the unique city and its lovely promenades. We were so happy to see the wonderful green spaces and the gorgeous flowers, and the children were continuously rejoicing."

Viktorija's translation preserves Anneke's use of "Maria" (Marien in the dative case) instead of "Mary" for her partner's name and the German word "Gemüt[h]lichkeit" (cozy good cheer) to convey national difference. We explain these *realia* in annotations. The stylistic foreignization is less obvious. Viktorija chose "Maria very much enjoyed German *Geüthlichkeit*" over "Maria really enjoyed German *Gemüthlichkeit*," which would have sounded more natural to twenty-first-century Americans. Translating "die er sich wünschte" as "that he had wished for" likewise demands that readers recognize Anneke's difference and come over the bridge to her. The last sentence sounds somewhat more effusive in German, but in this case a more literal translation would have confused readers. Weighing her different responsibilities, Viktorija decided that translating "erquickt" as "refreshed" would misrepresent Anneke's usage of the word. Other choices adequately conveyed Anneke's enthusiasm.

Schleiermacher's prescriptions and the binary of foreignized/domesticated translation misleadingly suggest that translators must only decide how intrusive to be. In reality, the intricacy of language—here in both the source and target texts—demands a whole web of choices. Hans J. Vermeer, another German scholar, has provided a broader understanding of translation. In the 1970s, Vermeer developed *skopos* theory, which urges translators to consider the purpose (*skopos*) of the translation.[5] The source text had its own function. In our case, Anneke wrote to her husband and others to maintain relationships, to consult on money and the children, to advance her career and political priorities, and for the solace of sharing sorrows and frustrations. The target text serves a new purpose. Our book is designed to introduce Anneke to twenty-first-century historians and students of history. Some Anglophone readers will get to know Anneke almost entirely through Viktorija's English-language text.

The *skopos* of our translation obliges us to consider the fact that historians will be using letters in our book as primary sources, *interpreting* Viktorija's translations. We have to balance the goal of presenting accessible texts against the challenge of reproducing the distinctive style, specific

references, and sometimes ambiguity of the originals. Viktorija translated the informal yet literary and sometimes florid German of Anneke's letters into an uneven nineteenth-century U.S. English complete with flights of poeticism, references to centuries of European literature, and lapses into the rushed diction of someone who sometimes wrote hurriedly to communicate practical information. The work of translation included analyzing the German letters comprehensively in light of our joint historical research and creating a corpus of "parallel" English and German texts that shared some of the characteristics of Anneke's writing. While Viktorija retained some of the spontaneous quality of the original letters, it would have been difficult to replicate misspellings and grammatical slips, so the process of translation standardized the text.

Although relatively few historians of the United States will publish their own translations, a larger group could benefit from reflecting on translation. Historians conduct research in multiple languages and translate quotations to insert in English-language books and articles. We sometime use translated texts, either in our own work or with students. Increasing translation awareness would improve this work. A basic first step would be to listen to translators and read translation scholarship. Translators' expertise and the body of scholarship behind their work deserve respect.

A basic familiarity with translation equips historians to think about what distinguishes a translated text from the original. I am now in the habit of considering the *skopos* or purpose whenever I read a translated document or even watch a subtitled television series. I cannot always compare the text to the original, but I am attuned to the fact that the translation's own *raison d'être* guided decisions about vocabulary and syntax. *Skopos* theory helps me identify and understand patterns in translated texts.

When I translate portions of non-English sources to quote in my own work, I am now highly conscious of how the choice to domesticate or foreignize affects how I represent national and ethnic difference. Taken to an extreme, a domesticated translation could strip a source of evidence of its original context. But a foreignized translation could mark the original author as alien. There is a risk of "foreignizing" people who do not speak English. The stakes can be high, especially for historians who study non-English speakers in the United States. Rosina Lozano's award-winning book *An American Language: The History of Spanish in the United States* shows how clearly identity and power have shaped the politics of language.[6] Lozano's analysis of the past affects how she quotes Spanish sources. She includes the original in her text followed by "crowd-sourced" English translations in parentheses. This strategy asserts that Spanish is an American language that deserves a place in U.S. scholarship. It also reflects her reluctance to choose one translation and deny readers of Spanish the opportunity to "judge the sentiment and meaning for themselves." [7] She acknowledges the dilemmas of translation in historical scholarship—and then sidesteps them.

Translators do not offer historians easy answers to the question of whether to foreignize or domesticate, let alone supply an algorithm to do our work for us. More than anything, they teach us that translation is complicated. Their first lesson to historians is that we should appreciate the challenge of translation. Although there are no formulas, they have developed strategies for grappling with their cross-cutting responsibilities. Considering *skopos* and the implications of foreignizing or domesticating are useful examples. Translators have already put significant thought into a sort of bridge building that is integral to the work of many historians. I recommend we learn from them.

Author

Alison Clark Efford teaches immigration history at Marquette University. Research for her first book, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (2013), inspired her interest in Mathilde Franziska Anneke's correspondence. She is also at work on a project examining immigrant suicide between the 1880s and the 1920s.

Notes

- [1]To learn about Anneke's life during the Civil War era, see Mischa Honeck, *We Are the Revolutionists: German-Speaking Immigrants and American Abolitionists after 1848* (2011), 104–36.
- [2]Friedrich Schleiermacher, trans. Susan Bernofsky, "On the Different Methods of Translating," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (2012), 49.
- [3]Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995).
- [4]Mathilde Franziska Anneke to Fritz Anneke, August 20, 1860, Folder 5, Box 3, Fritz Anneke and Mathilde Franziska Anneke Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
- [5]Hans J. Vermeer, trans. Andrew Chesterman, "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Venuti, 191–202.
- [6]Rosina Lozano, *An American Language: The History of Spanish in the United States* (2018).
- [7]*Ibid.*, 13.