

Week 1 - Translatability and Untranslatability

“The specification of the translation environment is certainly complex. The wide range of extra-textual factors, including the socio-cultural, political and ideological (in its wide cognitive sense of “a special type of socially shared mental representations”), are far from easy to differentiate...” (Munday 2012, 43).

Jeremy Munday makes the argument that fully understanding or objectively evaluating translations is difficult because of the complexity of the contexts in which individual translators produce their work. I argue that while contexts can seem complicated, in reality most of the factors that Munday cites are unimportant for making sense of a translation. Post-modern navel-gazing only ends up artificially manufacturing political conflict where none exists.

First, although Munday cites several specific examples of translations that were influenced by politics, his focus is on the tiny, tiny percentage of words and concepts that were at all shaped by contextual considerations. In a text of 100,000 words or more, one or two small choices do not amount to a radical transformation of the overall meaning of the text. For most average readers, this won't change the meaning they take from the text as a whole. For most kinds of text, too, these things are unimportant. The vast majority of what is translated around the world is either technical in nature (think electronics instruction manuals) or artistic (novels and poetry). Philosophical translation is a tiny sliver of the market.

Second, Translation words, for all intents and purposes, work as equivalents in the vast majority of situations. Despite the arguments of people like Emily Apter (Apter 2015, xvii), “cat” is in fact identical with *neko* in Japanese in all but the most abstruse philosophical cases. While I agree that people in different cultures might make somewhat different associations when they hear certain words, these are secondary or tertiary phenomena that obscure the fact that a cat is a cute mammal with four legs that catches mice for both English and Japanese speakers.

Third, Munday's examples are the exceptions that prove the rule. The fact that we need this pointed out to us shows that in the majority of cases, political or cultural considerations are minor. Take, for example, the decision to translate the title of the first Harry Potter novel, (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in the UK), slightly differently for the American market. Did calling the text *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* radically change the reading experience of American children? Harry Potter is arguably more beloved in the United States than in his home country, but this has nothing to do with the content of the translation itself. Yes, contextual factors and publisher's decisions factored into the change, but it was the text's core meaning that made it popular. This essence comes through regardless of the small translations sprinkled throughout the work. Even if it was totally translated from another language the result would have been the same. Just look at Harry Potter's success worldwide.

Ultimately, Munday's search for possible contextual influences only works to divide people. We have much more in common than Munday gives us credit for. While there are cases where contextual factors change translations, this only highlights the small (and I would argue irrelevant) ways that we are different. Constantly being reminded of how we are manipulating one another, how our ideas are incommensurable, and how we can never fully understand one another only encourages distrust. Munday's argument casts doubt on the validity of all translations. A world in which we can't trust what others say in translation is scary as there's no basis for transcultural political community.

(555 Words)

Works Cited

Apter, Emily. 2015. "Introduction." In *The Dictionary of Untranslatables*, edited by Barbara Cassin, i-ivii. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Munday, Jeremy. 2012. "A Translation Studies Perspective." In *Why Concepts Matter* edited by Martin Burke and Melvin Richter, 20-43. Boston: Brill.