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Web Design Spring 2025

Project 1, Digital Translation

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Reflection Paper

For this project I wanted to try to digitally represent the usual mental workflow of both interpreting and trying to “decode” a document in a foreign language, in a foreign script, and a non-standardized orthography. I also wanted to try to capture the creative nature of translation, how it is not a simple one-to-one change from one language to another, but a creative process where the translator will necessarily have to make judgement calls and creative decisions on how to translate one language to another. By nature, a translation cannot be entirely faithful to the original. I wanted to showcase this with an extreme example by using the case study of poetry.

Translation of poetry naturally necessitates certain creative license to the translator, not only is the original intention of the author often illusive, but the need to preserve some form of poetic framework, that will work in the new linguistic and cultural context–along with a literal foreign audience, is one that is inherently a destructive and creative process. One cannot just translate word for word, just for meaning, nor only in rhyme–all the layers of a poem, the etymological, the lyrical, the semantic, the emotional, and often even the graphic, all have to be “translated” to be comprehensive on all levels to the novel audience. A good translation requires the translator to take apart the original work to its most basic elements and try to hobble together the changed pieces into what is basically a newer work, an interpretation that is legible for a new audience and more than the sum of its parts. Poetry forms a good case study of these processes as the constraints of poetry, the heavy load of meaning, and the interrelatedness of its components makes it already something that is more than the sum of its parts.

Interpreting a translation, especially of poetry, often necessitates deep knowledge and linguistics background. It is often that one has to retrace backwards the end result of the translation of the poem to the original poem in order to fully comprehend the meaning of what is there, and what was lost. To fully understand the original, from the translation, is detective work that assumes motive for decisions and uses circumstantial assumptions to recreate the original.

With my webpage, I tried to visually represent the mental steps one goes through in order to try to evaluate the nature of translation. I chose a Russian poem by Pushkin, that was translated into Dungan, a Chinese language spoken by Chinese Muslims in Central Asia and written in Cyrillic and tried to illustrate what one might do mentally, or with annotations using pen and paper, in order to evaluate the translation. This job necessarily requires one to be able to evaluate Russian, Chinese, and combine the two to decode the Dungan. The border between Russian and Chinese is blurred by Dungan, as it uses many Russian words in its colloquial Chinese syntax. I have further tried to illustrate the process of interpreting this translation by including English romanizations of all three languages throughout the page in order to help the reader process the vocal and lyrical processes of reading each step.

In order to understand the Dungan, a language I have not studied, I needed to look towards that Russian original for comparison, and with that, try to interpret the Dungan text, which by the nature of the orthography is a cyrillization of a colloquial Gansu Mandarin dialect of Chinese spoken by the Dungans, by trying to convert the Dungan text into something more similar to standard Chinese. With this, the colloquial nature of the Dungan language, one that eschews the classical and literary style of Chinese poetry, not only reveals the geographic origin of the Dungans within China, but the fact that they are outside of the Chinese literary world. The Dungan, once converted to Chinese, reads less like that of a poem than a dialogue of northern Chinese farmers.

I was inspired by the following two pieces from the HTML Review, around language and translation, as well as the Drucker piece on diagrammatic writing. With this I tried to visually represent the schizophrenic mental workout I did when first encountering this poem, the peeling back of the rhymes to reveal not only the meaning of the work itself but the sociopolitical context it was translated into. Readers with knowledge of Russian, Chinese, or even Dungan, can use their knowledge to decode more of the mental gymnastics needed for this work.

It is only in the end that we find a comprehensible English language interpretation of the Russian original. One that can be digested and understood easily, but by the nature of the journey we know is incomplete. It is only at the end that we have the satisfaction of being able to comprehend what all the text above us meant.

The organizing of the frenetic thought process of interpreting a poetic translation was an interesting one, and one that is necessary for conversion into a digital form. While the physical work was simple, a page in a collection of works, the digital work tried to incorporate the steps of interpretation, the incorporation of a thought process into a visible is messy in print, annotations in margins, highlights, scribbles on the page, but in the digital format it takes the same level of representation as the text itself. It becomes part of the work, not easily ignored as superfluous or extraneous. The main benefit of digitization beyond just scanning is the accessibility of working with foreign non-Latin script materials for an Anglophone audience. My webpage is easily copy-and-paste-able, scribbles on the page become unicode units that, while possibly unintelligible, become usable.