Breaking the Language Barrier

Text Alignment

This document aims to explain the process and uses of text alignment in the Perseids editing environment. It outlines the types of alignments and their potential uses, how to sign up with Perseids, the steps for completing an alignment, the benefits of alignment, and suggestions for potential class activities. The focus of the document is on Greek and Latin texts with English translations but the same methods are easily applied to other languages.

Types and Uses

The text alignment activity can serve a number of purposes, depending on what a user aligns.

* Same Language Alignment (English to English)
  + Useful for highlighting differences between two translations of an original text.
  + Comparing translators’ choices can find potential “problem” words; words that are difficult to translate or that could have multiple meanings.
  + Illustrates effect of language, how phrasing impacts feeling/meaning.
  + Can also be useful for comparing versions of a story across space and/or time.
* Different Language Alignment (Greek/Latin to English)
  + Illustrates broadly how a dictionary definition might not match the translator’s word choice, making it a sort of word study on a larger scale.
  + Can highlight syntactic differences in Greek or Latin that have meaning but aren’t preserved in a translation. For example, word order in the poetry of Catullus.

Additionally, comparing an English to English alignment to a Greek/Latin to English alignment, where the English is one of the previously aligned translations, can allow for discussion of which translation is closer to the original.

Set-up

The text alignment editor was developed by the Alpheios Project[[1]](#footnote-0) and is now a feature of Perseids.[[2]](#footnote-1) Potential users must create an account by logging in with one of their existing OpenIDs. There are many services that use OpenID such as Google, Yahoo!, WordPress, etc. The Perseids sign in page provides directions on how to create an account.

There is a set of tools, also developed by the Alpheios Project, in the form of a Firefox browser plug-in that could be helpful for beginning users. The Alpheios tools give users the ability to access vocabulary information for Greek, Latin, and Arabic on any web page by double clicking or mousing over a word. There are also several other functions for more advanced language students. The plug-in can be downloaded directly from the Alpheios website.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Process

Aligning texts in Perseids is a simple process. The following walks through the steps of creating an alignment from the very beginning. This description is illustrated in the Text Alignment presentation included with this guide.[[4]](#footnote-3)

1. Locate the texts to align.
2. From the Perseids user dashboard, select the link for “New Text Alignment.”
3. Give the alignment a title, copy and paste the texts into the two text boxes, and select the appropriate language for each text from the drop-down menu.

**\*\* NB: Passages of text should be short. The text boxes can accept long, multi-sentence passages, but were originally designed for sentence by sentence chunks. Due to this, long passages will be cut off at the bottom of the user’s browser window, there is no option to scroll and access the rest of the text. \*\***

1. Click the “Align” button.
2. Align the texts. The actions to do so are as follows.
   1. Click on a word in either text.
   2. In the other text, click on the corresponding word or words to the previously selected text.
   3. Click again on the word in the first text to finalize the selections.
   4. All selections can be changed by clicking on any of the words of the selection. This is especially helpful if multiple words in both texts correspond to each other.
3. Save the work by clicking on the “Save Sentence” button.
4. To exit out of the editor, click the “Sentence List” button.
5. The saved alignments are located on the user’s home page.

Benefits

Viewing and completing text alignments provides students with a greater understanding of texts in a foreign language. The process of alignment gives students a more tractable introduction to those texts. The selections are small, so they do not overwhelm students with a lot of unfamiliar words, and the translation is also visible, giving an anchor of ideas to look for when defining words. Matching words between the original text and translation as well as having the students look up the original text words can give a concrete illustration of how ideas become lost in translation. This can easily transition into discussion of cultural differences and subtexts that are unable to be translated and conscious decisions on the part of the translator. Even if students only work with translations, by actively linking words and concepts between texts, students can better see the different choices made by translators.

Suggestions

The suggestions for class activities below are largely things that many educators already do. The addition of the text alignment to the activity gives the students and instructor a visual resource to further highlight the intent of the assignment. The physical act of linking words increases the students’ engagement with the text, hopefully causing them to read more closely.

* Literature classes
  + Comparison of versions of a story
    - Example: Greek and Roman mythology is preserved in several different resources that are spread across time and the Ancient Mediterranean and can differ in their events and details. Have students compare sections of translations of two texts about the same myth where they align similar concepts and words. Students should then be able to analyze how the time, place, and author might be influencing the myth.
  + Translation comparison
    - Example: Have students align sections of two translations of an ancient text with each other and then one of the translations with the original. Students should be able to discuss how the translators’ word choices impact their understanding of the text, keeping in mind the translation’s time period, and how those word choices relate to the corresponding word in the original text.
  + Poetry analysis
    - Example: Either present the students with a poem aligned with its translation or have them do the alignment. For poets such as Catullus, the location of words in a line can add meaning which is typically lost in translation. With the help of the alignments the students should be able to analyze the placement of words and gain that extra layer of meaning, usually reserved for higher level language students.
* History classes
  + Compare accounts of the same event
    - Example: Have students align translations of histories that cover the same event, especially with a focus on similar concepts and language that might indicate a root source used by both historians. Students should also be able to identify differences in the texts and then analyze the reasons for those differences.

1. <http://alpheios.net/> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. An online, collaborative editing environment, see: <http://sosol.perseids.org/sosol/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. <http://alpheios.net/content/installation> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/19XMpogNk1g0v1JjtQXNk3VXUq1RQ5TksKTWl_T9fQRo> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)