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HEINZELMÄNNCHEN ODER SCHOKO-KUCHEN?
PRACTICING THE (NEARLY)
LOST ART OF TRANSLATION
IN THE BUSINESS GERMAN CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT:

In today's foreign language curriculum, translation exercises—once a staple of language instruction—have been neglected, if not completely dropped. However, German employers who hire American interns expect them to regularly translate business correspondence or even interpret for visitors. In this article I make a case for reincorporating translation training into the business language curriculum and offer suggestions and examples on how to enhance lesson plans with effective exercises.

KEYWORDS: German language, translation, interpretation, German business, Google translator, LEO online dictionary

Translation exercises, once a staple of foreign language instruction, have fallen out of favor and vanished from college lesson plans. As a representative of the German-American Chamber of Commerce in North Carolina, however, I have learned that German companies in the US expect their American employees to be competent in translating business correspondence, manuals, articles, or other texts from and into English. Furthermore, the native English speaker working for an international company will likely be asked to interpret for visitors; chances are that they are woefully ill-equipped for the task.

Since one of the most important roles of the business language instructor is to prepare students for the international job market, translation practice should be an integral part of business language instruction. In the following pages, I make the case for incorporating translation training into business language lesson plans and curricula. I survey some of the new technological aids for translators and comment on advantages and disadvantages of their usage. Finally, I offer suggestions on how to enhance lesson plans with effective translation and interpretation exercises.

As a professional translator and business language instructor, I find it pedagogically unwise that the general foreign language curriculum not only

excludes training in the art of translation, but specifically discourages any form of translation exercises. The author of the popular textbook *Teaching Language in Context* goes so far as to “strictly forbid” translation in the classroom. Teachers are urged to explain all new vocabulary through “paraphrases or miming the action or manipulating objects to get the meaning across” (Omaggio Hadley 92).

As business language courses are usually offered within foreign language departments and not business schools, they are treated like any other intermediate language course, that is, instructors are required to adhere to the immersion method of language teaching. A non-tenured instructor is regularly observed by the language program director. Usage of English terminology required for translation during such a classroom observation results in a negative comment from the observer. For a variety of reasons, though, a more flexible instructional and pedagogical strategy would yield a superior outcome. Indeed, the target language should be used predominantly, and whenever possible, to improve the general comprehension and linguistic production abilities of the foreign language learner. However, Omaggio Hadley’s advice to “mime” new vocabulary is quickly revealed as useless in the business language classroom. How does one act out the terms “letter of credit,” or “production process”? Even if the teacher is a gifted mime, the effort would result in confusion and a waste of precious instructional time.

In today’s job market, failing to train students to quickly switch between two languages, both in verbal communication and in writing, is counterproductive. As noted, German companies who hire Americans expect them to be capable of translating business correspondence from and into the English language. These bilingual employees need to be capable of functioning as simultaneous or consecutive interpreters when the situation requires it. Simultaneous interpretation happens within a five-second delay, while consecutive interpretation occurs after the person whose speech is interpreted pauses or concludes. To prepare for this reality of global work life, translation and interpretation practice must become an integral part of the foreign language curriculum. It cannot be assumed that language learners “automatically” know how to interpret and translate, solely (and erroneously) based on the fact that they can communicate in two languages. Translation and interpretation are professional skills that need to be taught, practiced, and developed.

Without any introduction to translation theory or, as John Biguenet calls it, “the complex and at times frustrating process of transferring situations from a source language text” (Bigenet and Schulte vii), novice translators are ignorant of what is expected of them when they begin translating; they

just do not know what constitutes a good, proper translation. They wonder, for example, how close they need to stay to the vocabulary and syntactical structure of the original. Are they “allowed” to shorten German run-on sentences in their English translation or must the number of sentences in the translation correspond to that in the original text? How should they deal with idiomatic expressions—should they be left untranslated in quotations, be translated as literally as possible, or is the translator supposed to find an equivalent expression in English? Should the exact word order of the original language be preserved or changed to fit common usage in the target language? Once novice translators, with guidance and practice, get a feel for the act of translating/interpreting, they acquire the appropriate instinct, that is, they realize that translating is an art and a process. There are no definitive answers for the initial questions asked above. They “learn by doing,” in the controlled environment of the classroom. As an additional benefit, they improve the vocabulary and the writing skills of their native tongue, since an excellent way to acquire superior foreign and native language skills is by translating.

Another strong argument for incorporating translation into the business language curriculum is that it furthers inter-cultural competence. The term *translation* derives from the Latin *trans-fero*, meaning “to carry across.” The communication of meaning occurs through carrying signification across the cultural divide, from a source language to a target language. Translation is an act of transformation, of change, and of conversion. Translating entails a sequence of decisions, the process of transferring situations from one language and one cultural framework to another. Hence, regular practice of translation is not only a matter of improving one’s vocabulary and knowledge of syntax, but of comparing and contrasting key cultural understandings. Translating practice in the classroom improves intercultural communication skills, which are at the top of the list of skills that employers seek for workers in the global market.

The business language learner and aspiring translator is confronted with the reality that conveying meaning is not as easy as looking up a corresponding lexeme in the dictionary. One quickly learns that there is actually no such thing as a corresponding lexeme. A general example of this is the deceptively simple translation of the German word *Mondschein* into English. Of course, the most direct translation, “moon shine,” carries a specific connotation, along with the original, explicit meaning of “light of the moon.” Since the German word *Mondschein* never designates a product, specifically unlawfully distilled whiskey, a good translation avoids the unwanted double-entendre. Another such example, more closely tied to business German in that it relates to the

topic of sustainability, would be the German word *Landlust*. This uniquely German term may not be translated as “land lust,” which would be understood as the pejorative concept of rapacity, but actually denotes the innocent pleasure of a green environment, the joy of the great unspoiled outdoors.

As outlined above, the old-fashioned translation helper, the bilingual dictionary, is to be used with great care and discernment. The same rule applies to the much newer digital translation assistants: Google Translator (<http://translate.google.com>) and the online dictionary LEO (<http://leo.org>). For experienced translators fluent in both the source language and the target language, the Google Translator is an excellent tool. Unlike conventional dictionaries, it is continually updated and improved. Its vast database holds new technological terminology found only in the newest print editions of technical dictionaries, which are extremely expensive and become outdated within a few years. When I experimented with standard business communication phrasing, I found that Google Translator generally works well. The phrase: “Anliegend finden Sie ein Schreiben...” Google Translator renders correctly with “Enclosed find a letter...” However, when rephrased, using the equally common expression “Bitte, nehmen Sie das anliegende Schreiben zur Kenntnis” Google Translator produces an inadequate outcome: “Please take note of the *incoming* letter.”

Nonetheless, the continual upgrades and improvements make Google Translator an exciting, convenient, and productive tool. The title of this article, for example, is based on my early experimentations with the online program, when the phrase “I eat brownies,” was rendered by the program as “Ich esse Heinzelmännchen,” clearly choosing the wrong denotation of brownies: the wood sprite instead of the chocolate cake. When I retried the same online translation recently, the result was different. An upgrade in the program triggered the translation “cake” instead of “wood sprite,” perhaps prompted by the verb *essen*. I am impressed with the rapid improvements to the program, since it is getting better, more intuitive and “intelligent” all the time. My assessment is that Google Translator constitutes a serviceable tool for experienced translators but it is dangerous and counterproductive when used by language learners who cannot discern what does, and what does not, make sense in the target language.

The online German-English dictionary LEO is, with some guidance, a useful tool even for novice translators. The service is free, constantly upgraded, and a great resource for current IT terminology. Users should know that the listing of words is alphabetical, that is, translations do not, like in traditional print dictionaries, appear in order of most common usage. For example, if the

English word *nut* is typed into the LEO search engine, the most likely translation choice of *Nuss* is only number nine on the generated list that reads as follows: “Buchse, Druckmutter, Gegenmutter, Gewindebüchse, Gewindemutter, Hammermutter, Klemmteil, Mutter, Nuss, Radhemmung, Sattel...” All in all, novice translators should be encouraged to use LEO, ideally, if possible, along with a monolingual German dictionary (print or digital) such as the Duden or the Wahrig, to confirm that the word chosen from the extensive list communicates the desired meaning.

When teaching translation, the instructor should ensure that the following simple guidelines are clearly conveyed and understood by the students: First, when approaching a text with the goal of translating it, one must begin by reading it in its entirety to determine purpose, tone, thesis, register, and intended audience. One cannot translate what one does not understand. Second, the student translator should craft a “rough” word-for-word translation of the text. In the next step, the literal draft translation must be transformed into a transfer-of-ideas translation in which the original intent is completely preserved, while creating the impression that the text is written in the target language, by a native speaker. A great translation never sounds like a translation. Mastering the conflicting goals of staying faithful to the source text while crafting a new original document in the target language is what defines a great translation. It is also what makes translating such a time-consuming enterprise.

At the beginning of the semester, the business language instructor should assign one-sentence translations, such as newspaper headlines, slogans, or idiomatic expressions. Soon, short non-literary texts such as product descriptions, excerpts of manuals, or business letters should be tackled as homework. They can be compared in class, and students can discuss translation challenges and difficulties. They are surprised at the variances; 20 students produce 20 different versions of the same source language text. At that point, a common problem often needs to be addressed. Young American college students are not familiar with their own conventions of business correspondence, and this presents a major roadblock to achieving a convincing translation from foreign language source texts. The instructor may wish to give a short introduction to students on how to write a proper American business letter.

Teaching language learners the art of translation cannot be done in a day, and takes extensive planning and rewriting of lesson plans. However, it yields benefits beyond a deeper knowledge of the second language and the English language. Students gain practical, marketable skills better equipping them to compete in today’s global economy.

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