

Jürgen Stowasser: Mistranslations as a Source of Intercultural Analysis. Interlingual and Intersemiotic Translations in Early Colonial New Spain

- Translation errors rarely occur at random. They rather originate from specific misconceptions of the Other. Source texts and their translations may even produce two distinct discourses.
- Instead of choosing the wrong (i.e. non-equivalent) word, translations may also fail by omitting and obliterating elements of discourses.
- Intersemiotic translations as a special case

1) Translating and Interpreting as Colonial Practice

Translating and interpreting played a major role in the conquest of Central Mexico (and, of course, an interpreter became a key figure in the military campaign conducted by a Spanish-indigenous alliance, finally resulting in the defeat of the Aztecs: Doña Marina „La Malinche“, till this day a contested icon in Mexican history). In his Castilian grammar (1492) Antonio de Nebrija put in a nutshell what would become the language policy of the Spanish colonial empire: „[...] que siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio“. However, in the early colonial period the empire was bilingual: The colonial policies promoted the use of Nahuatl as a lingua franca (though at the expense of other indigenous languages). As a result, the corpus of colonial sources comprises texts in Spanish, Latin and, in a significant number, Nahuatl. Many of these texts, authored by Spanish missionaries or members of the indigenous upper-class, were results of extensive translation activities. Needless to say, these practitioners did not have any systematic approach, useful methodology, or specific formation to rely on.

In my paper I will focus on translation as social practice. By taking this approach, I aim to consider a cultural and political context deeply affected by the experience of colonialization—at once to avoid the pitfalls of a simplistic dialectic of colonial master-colonial subject. I am particularly interested in cases in which the “colonialized subjects” are exploring their options to act, and making decisions (e.g., resist, collaborate, retreat). By researching sources in Nahuatl and in the Tlahcuilolli-system (see below), the “colonialized people” are becoming visible as active agents, with quite distinct interests, possibilities and strategies. Instead of a single “indigenous perspective” we should thus rather speak of heterogenous identities and practices.

2) The many ways a translation could go wrong

Wilhelm von Humboldt, who composed the first Nahuatl grammar, that tried to grasp the specific properties of the language, was also the first to point out the weak points of the colonial grammars and dictionaries compiled by missionaries: They used Latin as a model to describe the grammatical structures of non-Indo-European languages and their vocabularies are all heavily influenced by the goal of evangelization. Humboldt’s criticism emphasizes a common reason for mistranslations in the colonial context: The attempt to translate religious, political or social notions which lack equivalence in the target language. Nonetheless, these errors provide an important insight into intercultural perceptions:

- Reinterpretation of Mesoamerican religious concepts e.g., applying the idea of “repentance” to rituals based on the concept of a reciprocal exchange between human beings and deities, or the erroneous translation of “teonanacatl” (“the divine mushroom”) to “flesh of god”; similar

effects are to be observed in the opposite direction: Christian notions losing their specific meaning in the Nahuatl translations.

- Omissions e.g., translating only the masculine form while the original sentence in Nahuatl explicitly refers to both genders.

- Ontological divergences e.g., a grammatical category in Nahuatl to refer to animate entities (to which belong mountains or celestial bodies as well)

- Misunderstanding of metaphors such as color terms used in a religious or political context

- Translation strategies: The “strategy”, i.e. the decision whether to translate in a literal mode (closer to the source language, with a “foreignizing” effect on the reader of the translated text) or in a free mode (oriented towards the target language, producing a “domesticating” effect)

3) Tlahcuilolli - Intersemiotic Translation

Modernity means not only the conquest of the world as picture, as Heidegger states (GA 5: 94); the European expansion results as well in the spread of a specific European notion of the image. This semiotic colonialism had an enduring impact on the academic use of the Mesoamerican writing system “tlahcuilolli“. Spanish authors of the early colonial period clearly regarded tlahcuilolli as a kind of writing; but eventually it was considered as “image-like”, and indigenous manuscripts were handled as visual sources (with far-reaching implications: no written sources = no history).

The colonial indigenous manuscripts (“Amoxtin”, i.e. “paper + resin/glue”) offer a wide range of possibilities for intercultural research questions: Mesoamerican and European spatial and historiographical concepts, adapted from specific epistemological and ontological assumptions, are confronted and redefined. The process of translation was not confined to languages and cultures, but involved also “intersemiotic translations”, i.e. translations between sign systems (Roman Jakobson): Missionaries and indigenous writers together translated the catechism first into Nahuatl and subsequently into a colonial hybridization of the tlahcuilolli-system, producing a true polyphonic ensemble of texts. The result is a form of Christianity reinterpreted in Mesoamerican thought pattern as it can be observed in today’s Mexico.

4) Décalage

In Translation Studies, “décalage” is the time difference between a speaker's saying something and its reproduction by an interpreter. By applying this notion to (written) translations and their publication date, the time span of the decalage sheds light on the process of reception within an academic community: How long does it take get sources translated? Years, decades, or—as mostly in case of indigenous languages—even centuries? How about the extent, are most of the sources made accessible by translations, or just a fraction? Fragmentary and insufficient translations of a corpus of sources may result in a selective and distorted perception. An example are the sources on the Conquista: Usually the “Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España” by Bernardino de Sahagún, OFM, is characterized as representing the “Aztec point of view”. The “Historia general” is—thanks to translations into several languages—the best-known indigenous account on the conquest. However, it is neither the only and nor the first indigenous account of the conquest: there exist further sources written in Nahuatl (both in Latin alphabet and in the Tlahcuilolli-system). By taking into account other Aztec sources, such as the „Anales de Tlatelolco“, we get a different picture: What seemed to be “the Aztec voice” turns out be the perspective of a certain fraction within the Aztec elite, and what might have been interpreted as a “cultural” discourse, resembles a political narrative.

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The examined sources contain a significant number of mistranslations. Oftentimes these errors are the result of an ethnocentric perception of the “Other”, and they reinforce and continue these perceptions. Thus—and by privileging Spanish sources in the historiographical research—certain topoi and stereotypes regarding the Conquista or Aztec culture are effective to date. Conversely these translation mistakes may serve as a starting point for intercultural analytic approaches (e.g. to deconstruct colonial discourses, see Kwasi Wiredu’s call for „conceptual decolonizing“).