2023 CCCC

International Research Consortium (IRC) Writing Research Workshop

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**Brief Institutional and Programmatic Description:**

The University of Washington in Seattleis a public world-class research university in Pacific Northwestern region of the U.S. It is largely a commuter school with 79% of its students coming from diverse areas within Washington State. Nearly three fourths of its graduates remain in the state. About 57% of SU’s undergraduates receive some form of financial aid, and 27% of its freshman student population are the first in their generation to attend college. Like most large university campuses in the U.S., along with the presence of U.S. resident language minority students, there is a considerable and quickly growing population of newly arrived international students from 80 countries, mostly from China, Korea, India, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia.

UW’s writing program, Program for Writing and Rhetoric (PWR), offers an array of writing courses. The intermediate expository writing course, which this paper is based on, is a very popular one and helps student address two of the university’s general education requirements: [English Composition (C)](https://www.washington.edu/uaa/advising/degree-overview/general-education/english-composition/) and [Writing (W)](https://www.washington.edu/uaa/advising/degree-overview/general-education/additional-writing/). As described in the course catalogue, this writing course provides students with opportunities to learn the knots and bolts of “communicating information and opinion to develop accurate, competent, and effective expression.” In designing the specific course section that I discuss more thoroughly in the paper below, I chose the special theme of writing, translation and foodways. My goal behind choosing that theme was to denaturalize the omnipresence of food in students’ daily lives and investigate its close connections to language, both spoken and written, through exploring various writing genres on food, and the hierarchy of its contemporary production and consumption. More specifically, through a linguistic and social justice lens, this course invited investigations of how some of our strongest values and beliefs – about the universe, the world, other individuals and communities, cultures, ourselves and others – are expressed, whether consciously or not, in the ways we prepare, consume, think about, and talk about food.

**Land Acknowledgement**

I am a grateful but uninvited visitor to the ancestral homelands of the Coast Salish people past and present, including the Suquamish, Tulalip and Muckleshoot nations and the Duwamish peoples. I acknowledge the land occupied by the University of Washington, Seattle, and the land on which I think, live, learn, and practice, as Coast Salish land. I recognize this land acknowledgement to be only one small act in an ongoing process of understanding and opposing the systematic oppression and historic and contemporary erasure of indigeneity and Indigenous Peoples.

**Glossary of Key Concepts**

* Language: In this paper, I move away from views of languages involved in translation practice as belonging to distinct, fixed, and definable spheres, and support perspectives in critical language studies that argue that the wide array of languages or texts involved in the act of translation are in fact themselves traversed, interlocked, and constantly transformed by heterogeneity (for more, see Blommaert; Pennycook; Pennycook and Makoni; Canagarajah).
* Translation: This alternative understanding and reworking of language necessitates rethinking current conceptualizations and applications of translation. In contrast to uncomplicated views of translation as a mechanical, unidirectional transposition of texts from the source language into a target language, I align my view of translation in this project with oppositional approaches in translation studies that challenge traditional notions of transparency, neutrality, equivalence and correctness in any translation process.

**Digest of Key Theorists and Analytical Frameworks**

* Critical approaches in translation studies as put forward by Lefevere; Bassnett and Trivedi; Venuti; Dingwaney and Maier, Cronin; and among many others), which theorize translation as a rhetorical act of “re-writing” and challenge traditional views of translation as a mechanical, unidirectional transposition of texts from the source/original language text into a target language text.
* Work advancing a feminist food translation framework, which calls for an intersectional perspective recognizing and highlighting the agency intrinsic to all communication and translation practice involving food as a site of resistance to forms of erasure and oppression by marginalized and racialized women (for instance, see Cantelli and Shringarpure; Shringarpure)

**Edible Literacies: Foregrounding Translingual, Transnational and Antiracist Connections**

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I’m sharing here some of my preliminary reflections on how critical perspectives in the interdisciplinary fields of translation studies and food studies can guide translingual and transnational writing education toward linguistic, racial, and social justice. These reflections are based on teaching two different sections of an intermediate expository writing course in the summers of 2020 and 2021 on the theme of writing and food memories. I will only offer snippets from teaching moments that will help advance my view that to truly move translingual and transnational writing education toward a social justice agenda, translation generally, and food translation specifically, has to become central to our work.

As people were living under lockdown, quarantine, or self-isolation for most of 2020 with much of the food service industry being temporarily shut down, we’ve witnessed an explosive growth in cooking videos or other food-related content created at home through diverse social media platforms with the emergence of hashtags such as #coronaviruscooking, #quarantinebaking, or #stressbaking. As one freelance food writer described, sharing recipes and “talking about cooking [became] the new online support group…while we all [were trying] to get through this strange, scary time together”. On top of a global pandemic, we have been living through a national crisis of exacerbated xenophobia and bigotry toward Asian and Pacific Islander communities, ongoing anti-Black violence and inequality, and heightened anti-immigrant/refugee/asylum seeker sentiments. This unfortunate state of affair prompted my course design with its commitment to critical explorations of the strong but increasingly vexed connections between food, language, race, and power across diverse transnational writing contexts and communities.

The course theme of writing about food, discourses and memories of its preparation, consumption, reception and interpretation is definitely not new. As John Schilb describes in his editorial introduction to the 2008 *College English* special issue on “Food”, the field of rhetoric and composition has always shown interest in the “many places that [food and] cookery might have at a college English table”, and this is further demonstrated in the multiple contributions to the journal’s special issue. However, some of these contributions appear to strictly adhere to monolingual nationalism through the singularity and exclusivity they ascribe to the concepts of native language and native cuisine. For instance, in her essay “Consuming Prose”, Lynn Bloom claims that (quote) “native eaters [“steeped in their own culture”], like native speakers, learn from birth the cultural grammars of the language and employ it automatically in a host of contexts determined, in part, by when they live (Jello-salad vs. tabbouleh), where they live (grits vs. baked beans), how much they can spend (fresh heritage tomatoes vs. canned generics)” (unquote). From this perspective, individuals and their social formations are staged as possessing one “true” language, one “authentic” way of cooking or eating and through this possession to be organically linked to a clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture and nation. I’ll revisit what’s at stake in such dominant orientations later on.

More recently and of direct relevance to this workshop’s focus on transnational writing education, Steven Alvarez’s publicly celebrated course design on Mexican foodway literacies has shed a new light onto the term “foodways”, that has been used in food studies since the 1980’s to broaden understandings of the powerful ways in which food and food practices have shaped “group and individual identities and the economic, political, and social organization of society”. Reflecting on the successes and weaknesses in his teaching, Alvarez urges all writing instructors to more deeply learn about “how food relates to activism and local communities” because, as he puts it, “the prism of food” can help “probe” complex sociopolitical issues related to “immigration and citizenship in ways that are welcoming, significant, and human”. After all, as Astrid Fellner observes in *Culinary Linguistics*, food, especially in non-white foodways,“figures as a powerful symbol of [race and] ethnicity, becoming a significant site where identity construction [and reconstruction], community building and social critique can take place”.

The current course design is inspired by that of Alvarez, but it deviates from the pre-dominant focus on the transnational and demonstrates a parallel focus on translingual and anti-racist relations in explorations of the foodways of linguistically and ethno-racially marginalized communities in the following ways: (1) first of all, it puts a more explicit and direct emphasis on disambiguating and deliberately disrupting the “concrete and consequential ways that ideologies of language, race and nation” are at work whether explicitly or implicitly in food-related communication; (2) and secondly, rather than the marginal role attributed to translation, the current course design adds layer upon layer of complexity to a mundane activity like eating or cooking through engaging the sociocultural politics and problematics of translation.

In doing so, the course takes up an expansive understanding of translation first established by linguist Roman Jakobson through his three-fold translation model as interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic I will not delve into the specifics of this model, but loosely defined: interlingual translation is translation proper or movement across distinct named languages in the conventional sense; intralingual translation involves the movement of meaning *within* the same language; and intersemiotic translation occurs “between different semiotic systems and their materialities”. Of course, it goes without saying that the distinction here between these categories is only for the sake of illustration as it is not as clear-cut and these categories frequently overlap. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that translation practice is inherently a form of translingual meaning-making when negotiating differences both across languages *and* within the same language; And Laura Gonzales’s work with multilingual communities has asserted how translation in both academic and professional writing spaces is “inherently a multimodal practice”.

Approaching all-too familiar topics like food and translation in this course from a linguistic and social justice lens meant that some fundamental rethinking of both constructs was required in the first week of classes. It was crucial to help students recognize that food is not just a matter of nutrition and sustenance—or their lack thereof, but it is rather imbued with both material and ideological significance. And to achieve this goal, the course offered opportunities to explore the multiple ways in which “people index and negotiate identities and ideologies” related to social class, race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and religion through food discourses, both written and spoken. The same applied to translation, which commonly rests on monolingual ideologies of language use and hegemonic “native” speaker norms and is approached as a neutral, transparent and technical activity of transposing a text in one named language, and hence culture, into another. As postcolonial translation scholars Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi assert, “translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors,” readers, or conventions. In fact, translations “are always embedded in cultural and political systems, and in history”.

In light of this critical take on food and translation, it was opportune to problematize dominant ways of talking and writing about food or translation which have become “commonplaces of irenic pronouncements on [their] global importance”, such as frequently used metaphors of food or translation as “a bridge”, chefs or professional translators as “bridge-builders”. These popular images that are often intended to capture the labor of cooking or translating can camouflage the social and linguistic injustices that curtail, disqualify and stigmatize such labor, thereby leaving them relatively unarticulated. As translation studies scholar Michael Cronin suggests, it is far more productive to “look under the bridge and see what is swirling down below”. From this perspective, translations and food translations in particular should be treated not only as bridges between languages, cultures, communities, nation-states and the foodways tied to these, bridges “suspended in the air”, but also and more importantly as “caught up in the living currents” of meanings, interpretations, and knowledges that continue to flow sometimes through very small spaces of agency.

To further the goal of making visible and credible “counterhegemonic understandings and uses” of terms, we took a close look at the etymology of the English word “translation” itself, which originates “in the Latin *translatus*, the past participle of *transferre* or to carry across”. This underlying spatial metaphor in the English/Latin word translation— to carry *across*, has been a characterizing feature of Western-centric approaches to translation, which put emphasis on a translation’s close fidelity, faithfulness, and semantic equivalence to an original. This was an opportunity for the class to reflect on the prevailing concept of authorship in the English/Latin sense of translation that acknowledges the agency and creativity of “an original writer” and relegates the labor of the translator to the margins as derivative, a copy or imitation of a prior text. At the same time, the texts we read on postcolonial and feminist translation referenced the word for translation in Sanskrit and in most modern Indian languages, which is “*anuvad*, meaning ‘saying after or again,’ or reiteration with corroboration or illustration, explanatory reference to anything already said”. Based on this alternative temporal sense of the word *anuvad,* translation in the Indian literary tradition has been theorized as after life, a new life, or ‘new writing’. In this sense, “the intents and effects of translation…must be understood within the long tradition of rewriting, which gives translations the authority and legitimacy of original texts”.

This led to a productive conversation on what it would really mean for the class to approach translation—which is already a translated concept— from this counterhegemonic perspective as an attempted reworking, revitalization, and transformation of food-related written texts, materials, and memories. To add more nuance and depth to these deliberations, the class read a wide selection of transnational food memoirs and cookbooks in which migrants and refugees from Syria, Somalia, West Sahara, and Eritrea positioned themselves as social justice activists in the various ways in which they translated their recipes, food habits and practices using every resource at hand— linguistic, cultural and semiotic— to reach an audience beyond their immediate local communities.

Weaving recipes with images, photographs, biographies, and testimonial narratives, these hybrid texts were ideal for exploring the complicated and sometimes troubled relations between migration, refugeedom, food, and language and, of course, the process of translation that made such projects and their circulation possible in the first place. In our discussions of these texts, we mainly focused on how the recipes that traveled across real and imagined borders with their “unofficial, oral and memorized nature” offered a point of entry into refugee and migrant lives and experiences to create a new ethos of collective action through the medium of translation. It became obvious as Cantelli and Shringarpure argue that these refugee and migrant translated recipes became “sites of resistance” of the “normalization of uprooted-ness”, of the linguistic and “psychological violence of being forgotten” or actively erased, and “of becoming victims of racist othering” and unjustly treatments.

For such activism against injustices and dominant strategies of de-voicing to rise to the surface, it was important to put a critical food translation framework into motion in student writing as well. The major writing project in this course continued the critical work of making “sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and intellectual differences” and inequalities apparent and approaching these interrogatively. For this group project, students were required to collaboratively design an academic food blog in which they researched, translated, documented, and curated the sociocultural and linguistic aspects of foodways outside the white and Western canon. Guided by the various theoretical and practical texts on translation, the class took as a given that their food translations were not neutral acts of “disinterested mediation but important means of constructing [individual and collective] identities”, of exercising agency even in the narrowest spaces, and of “negotiat[ing] the conditions of [power and] history within which we find ourselves”.

One of the blog post prompts required a translation of a written or memorized recipe to an anticipated transnational audience, while moving beyond a traditional, coherent listing of ingredients and preparation methods and instead embracing the true character of recipes brought to life in the reading selections for this class, that is as sites of collective action. In other words, they were asked to fold into their translations detailed descriptions of the genesis and transformation of the recipe, the specific sociopolitical, economic or sociocultural forces and material conditions that might have shaped its current form or various adaptations of it, its significance in archiving historical memories of transnational communities and their foodways. In a separate translation commentary, they were asked to discuss at length and justify their specific translation choices, analyze instances of problematic translations or even untranslatability, and reflect on ensuing challenges to dominant understandings of authenticity and nationalism in the diaspora.

Much time, effort and research went into choosing what to translate, deciding on the appropriate translations for culinary terminology and phraseology, exploring the multi-valent meanings and significance of food practices and how these have changed over time and across space, testing and carefully reflecting on the resulting appearances, textures, sounds, smells, tastes or feelings, but also consulting a range of available ecological resources from language brokers, online bilingual dictionaries, machine translation and other forms of technology. What became apparent to students in the range and intensity of deliberations over their translations was that the practice of translating foodways from a linguistic and social justice agenda not only conveys and creates personal and communal solidarities, but also “accomplishes [critical] social and ideological work”. Aside from making us all hungry, of course, this sustained engagement with food translation helped my students recognize how the rich tapestry of the transnational foodways of racialized minorities in the U.S. has been indelibly created through a series of difficult yet productive translations and retranslations, all of which necessarily demanded the “decelaration of attention, the slow-down of immersive understanding”.

It is precisely this “ecological necessity of time, care, and attentiveness in doing justice” to the complexity of translingual, transnational, and anti-racist work that makes “translational understanding and competence” essential for the success of such work. One of the pedagogical goals of translingual and transnational writing education has to be teaching that produces readers and writers of translations, who are “critically aware, not predisposed toward norms that exclude the heterogeneity of language”, culture, sociocultural identity, and the foodways associated with them, but more importantly, teaching that openly brings linguistic, racial, and social inequities to the translation table. Translation teacher-scholar Carol Maier has argued that even students who consider themselves monolingual in their language proficiency can be effectively drawn into the activity of translation through coursework that “foregrounds the use of inequality between languages”, cultures, racialized subjectivities, nation-states and their ways of knowing as “a strategy for provoking translation”. Lu and Horner remind us that “translation is by definition always fraught with possibilities for miscommunication, misunderstanding and failure as well as cooperation, edification, and communion”. Embracing this full spectrum of realities about the complex labor of translation becomes especially necessary as we continue to confront the linguistic, social and institutional hierarchies that are deeply and sometimes invisibly shaping the teaching and learning of college writing.

The COVID-19 crisis might have created a unique culinary moment that developed and connected transnational community food literacies and made our precarious relationship to food much more visible, but it has also normalized immobilities, uncertainties, and moments of untranslatability, all of which are a way of life for the linguistically, ethnically and racially marginalized. Jan Blommaert observed in personal reflections on lessons learned during this global pandemic that “the public has experienced the rigors of a heavily sanctioned and policed life of immobility” usually inflicted on “the Other, the unwanted Other, and cannot any longer fake ignorance about how it feels, how it reduces all of us as human beings”. To remain in pursuit of language plurality, racial and social justice in transnational writing education, constantly tapping into precisely this part of our and our students’ social imaginary as we interrogate, challenge and rewrite the deeply embedded notions of normative eating, languaging, ways of being and ways of knowing that have tight connections (even if only subtly) to Whiteness is a major responsibility for all.

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