

WorldCanvass: What's In a Word? The Translator's Challenge (Part 1)

[Joan Kjaer](#) Hello. This is WorldCanvass, from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer, and we're happy to have you with us at Merge in downtown Iowa City. We've called this program What's in a Word? The Translator's Challenge, and our conversation tonight won't be an ending but a beginning. The beginning of a three-day international conference on the UI campus called Reading and Re-Translation, supported by a Major Project award from International Programs.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Our guests in the first segment are Sabine Golz, Department of German and Comparative Literature, here at the University of Iowa. Thank you, Sabine.

[Sabine Gölz:](#) Thank you.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Yes. And next to her is Adrienne Rose from the Department of Classics and the MFA Program in Literary Translation, also at the University of Iowa. Thank you, Adrienne.

[Adrienne Rose:](#) It's a pleasure to be here.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) And both Sabine and Adrienne are organizers of this rather major project for the next two days, Reading and Re-translation. And at the far end, we're pleased to welcome Laura McClure, who teaches Classical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the University of Wisconsin. Thank you for coming, Laura.

[Laura McClure:](#) Thank you for having me.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Pleasure. So, Sabine and Adrienne, when most of us pick up a book or a magazine and sit down to read, we think we understand the process. We read the words and use our intellect to comprehend what we're reading. And somehow in this magical process of the mind, we make sense of the text and its larger meaning. What might we be missing, or what subtle or not-so-subtle influences exist in the text that we aren't consciously considering when we read?

[Sabine Gölz:](#) That is the big question.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Yeah.

[Sabine Gölz:](#) I guess this is one for me.

[Adrienne Rose:](#) It sound like it. If you would like...

[Sabine Gölz:](#) Well, you're welcome to take over.

[Adrienne Rose:](#) Okay.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

Well, I guess it's true. It seems like a straightforward process, if you know the language and you know the script. But as it is with many things you do intensively and for a long time, the more closely you look at it or deal with it, the more complicated it gets. And yeah, I mean, there's many ways to approach this question, but I guess I'll go to where we were in the class already today. The reason I got really interested in thinking about reading was because I was working on women poets, and I realized that they were being read within a framework that made everything that they actually were trying to accomplish disappear. And that led to a much more ... It really led ultimately to a complete rethinking for me of what a text is, and what reading is.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

And because when we, in our everyday functioning, we think that a text contains information and stories and things, and when we read them, we take those back out. And that's not really what happens. I mean, I think the readers have a much greater share in creating the meaning, and in making the meaning happen, and in constructing what the text says, and also applying it to wherever you are at the moment. And so, it's actually a very active, transformative process, reading is.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

And it has a lot to do with power. But there are readers who are more empowered than others, and that can speak with greater authority. Also, this goes somewhere else. Maybe I shouldn't go there right now. Well, I mean, okay, I will. Basically, if you function in a given cultural context, it means you read things a certain way. You connect them to other things you've already read, that you know how people talk about things, and you kind of apply those. And that has the effect that you don't have to argue very much. You can make things understandable to everyone else very quickly, because it's sort of a shorthand, because there's a lot implied and a lot that people already know.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

And when you want to go against that, and you want to actually sort of make something else readable that actually happens in the text, and that is different from what is already around, then it's almost like you have to go against the gravitational pull. It takes a lot more explanation, it takes a lot of rethinking. It takes, you really have to kind of engage the minds of your interlocutors, and try to make them see things differently.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

And that kind of struggle I see when I work on women poets, for example, because that's what they're up to. They need to ... they are being read, and they need to find a way to actually get access to the point where you get to be the reader, and that's a very complicated struggle, and it has to do with power and with imagination. They just see things differently.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

So, in really simple terms, if somebody says, "Just read it. Just read the text. It's all there." You can't just say it speaks for itself, right?

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

No, it doesn't. Yeah. It's sort of, when you do that, then you are likely to end up with the way people usually read, which is not neutral. It's a certain way of looking at things.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) A-ha. Adrienne, how do you come at this whole process?

[Adrienne Rose:](#) How do I come at it?

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[Adrienne Rose:](#) I guess I am more the re-translation component of the reading and re-translation topics of this colloquium, and of this conversation. And I guess I should just start by defining what re-translation is.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Yeah.

[Adrienne Rose:](#) I think most people are familiar with the term translation, but what is re-translation? A re-translation is, in the most basic terms, a translation that is the second or later translation of a source text or an original text, in the same target language. So, for example, in, let's say, Shakespeare, sonnets of Shakespeare translated into French for the first time would be the first translation, and then any subsequent later translation that follows, translation of Shakespeare into French would be a re-translation.

[Adrienne Rose:](#) And my interest as the classicist and a translator is working with Greek and Latin poetry, and for me as a classicist, translating Greek and Latin poetry, every translation that I do is a re-translation, because these texts have been around for thousands of years, and they've been re-translated almost as soon as they've been written. So, the tradition of translation is quite long.

[Adrienne Rose:](#) If you think about it in musical terms, like sometimes there's ... Cover songs is a way to sort of analogize a re-translation. So, if you think of the song All Along the Watchtower. Bob Dylan original. Jimi Hendrix covered it in 1962 or '68, and made it his own. He redid it. He re-instrumentalized it, made it for a new audience. And then in re-translation terms, every subsequent musical artist that covers that song is performing a kind of re-translation or a re-reading.

[Adrienne Rose:](#) In literary terms, a re-translation can update the language of an older translation, offer it up to a new audience. Does that make sense?

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Oh, yeah. So, something that was in Middle English needs to have, for us to understand it today, we need some more modern language introduced in order to carry the thought.

[Laura McClure:](#) Or just to even, I'm thinking 50 years ago, English translation of a Greek tragedy, some of the language is very outdated, even though it's not that long ago.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Right, right.

[Laura McClure:](#)

And so, a new translation is going to use fresh language, and bring in maybe new interpretations of the text, and contemporary issues. Even those things can make it into a translation.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Well, in a piece that the two of you wrote for the press that appeared a couple of days ago, there was an intriguing quote, I think. You said, "Arts and humanities perspectives need to be reasserted in a digitized world where algorithms increasingly read us." And so, I take it we're talking about more than just Google Translate there. But carry your thought a little further.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

I guess I'm guilty of having written that.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Yes.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

Yeah, I mean, it really goes back to what I was saying earlier. I think reading is about power, and it's also about programming, actually. I think that there are ways in which texts program their readers. This is a little more complicated than I probably can explain here, but come to my talk tomorrow and I'll try to explain it a little bit more. And I think, the reason I think it's important to think about reading in the context of our digitized new world is because certain ... the way text processing works through algorithms is based on certain assumptions about what those texts are and how you process them.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

And when you come from literary reading, you realize very much that the texts are not about conveying information, and that they are really ... and that some literary texts, and I think the ones I'm most interested in, they require a really conscious, active reader. And conscious, somebody who knows that they're reading, and they're constructing their relationship to the text consciously. And that's the humanities aspect, is that you're a human being, a conscious, biological entity, who is dealing with the science system, and you're not just consuming the science. I mean, you have a living relationship to that, and a critical one, possibly. And that's what humanities perspectives are.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

But on the other hand, of course, when you have these days, when we leave our traces on the internet and Google already knows what we like, and knows what we feel. I mean, that's when the tables are turned in a way that I think we need to process, and maybe change a little bit. I mean, basically, reading is about power, and I think that that is very clear in these new issues, too.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Well, so, Laura, I wanted to ask you a little bit about re-translations of ancient works. In all of these various re-translations that may have occurred for Greek texts, for example, interpretations or understandings are laid out related to an entire historical epoch, right? Something you look at today, you might have a much different understanding of what was going on in that larger part of the world than perhaps someone did who was the second translator. How do you think about that when you begin to work on the texts you work on?

[Laura McClure:](#)

I think it's really important to remember that our access to the ancient world is mediated by translation, and a long legacy of translation, beginning in ... the Romans, for instance, were translating Ancient Greek, and adapting Ancient Greek, and making literary translations of Ancient Greek poetry. And so, you can't have a direct connection to the ancient world. You have to always be self-conscious about how you're understanding it, how you're accessing it. You need to know the languages. You need to know the cultural context in order to understand something about the original.

[Laura McClure:](#)

There's always a leap between the original Greek or Latin word and the translation into any other language that you'll never have an equivalency. And this is going back to, I think, Sabine's point. What humanities really offers, and what the study of language offers, is this kind of complexity that can't be simply translated word-for-word, and it helps people to think differently, think imaginatively, in ways that I don't think are offered by, say, STEM.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Yeah. In fact, when we were communicating before the program, you said, "Maybe we should just talk about the difference between the literal translation and literary translation."

[Laura McClure:](#)

So, literal is trying to capture, as closely as it can, the original meaning of the text, to the extent that that's possible. And so, this might be more of an academic translation if you're talking about literary texts. And a literary translation is really creating a new text, using the original as sort of a springboard. And so, it doesn't follow closely word-for-word or line-for-line, but it's actually creating something new that's an artwork unto itself.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Tell us a little bit about the speakers who are going to be here. I'll turn to Adrienne and Sabine for a second. In this next couple of days at Reading and Re-Translation, the full colloquium, what are some of the topics you're going to be delving into?

[Adrienne Rose:](#)

You want to start?

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

Well, we have people from different countries, working in different languages, and part of the idea for the colloquium was actually to do something comparative, that is what we would call comparative literature and translation together, and really put together a program with speakers with vastly different backgrounds, and talk about reading and translation, because it doesn't matter what language you work in, that's something that concerns all of us. And I think the more perspectives we have, the richer that conversation will be. So, I don't know. We have Nassima Sahraoui. How would you pronounce your last name?

[Nassima Sahraoui:](#)

Sahraoui.

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

Sahraoui. She's a philosopher from Frankfurt in Germany. We have ... now, see, I can never ... Michelle Woods, who will be on the program later, who has written

a book about re-translations of Kafka. We have Kaisa Koskinen from Finland. We have ... Help me, I can't think.

[Adrienne Rose:](#)

Madeleine Campbell from Scotland, who one of her specialties is intersemiotic translation, translating between media. So, translating not just text to text, but text to painting, or dance, or music.

[Sabine Gözl:](#)

And Martin Klebes is from Oregon, who will be talking all about [inaudible 00:16:03]. And a very interesting Swiss writer. Who else do we have? I should have brought the program.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

No, no. No problem.

[Sabine Gözl:](#)

We have, actually, two of the presentations will be by former or current graduate students. Nils Seiler translating from Sanskrit, who will be talking about Sanskrit philosophy into English, where you have to bridge not just the language and the huge historical distance, but also deal with the fact that you have completely different philosophical traditions, each with their different terminologies, and that's a very interesting program.

[Sabine Gözl:](#)

And then, another, Tyler Fyotek and Laura Moser will be talking about Greek poetry by women, and gender in Greek poetry. So, I'm very excited about all of those presentations.

[Adrienne Rose:](#)

I just wanted to say that, we said this in the class, but this particular colloquium, Reading and Re-Translation, is the second in what we hope is a continued sort of gathering of these diverse languages and approaches around the topic of reading. The first colloquium was at the University of Oregon, which Sabine co-organized with one of her colleagues out there, Rethinking Reading ... No, Rethinking Gender in Reading. And some of the participants from that conference are here, and we hope ... Ours is Reading and Re-Translation, and we hope that we can continue the thread of reading at future colloquium.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Well, and Laura, when we were communicating ahead of time, you said that perhaps we should talk about translations by women, which earlier there has been referenced to, work by women. How have translations by women shaped how we understand the classical past?

[Laura McClure:](#)

There have been very few women translators, believe it or not, in the classics. Currently, Emily Wilson is getting a lot of press for her translations of the Odyssey, and she very much practices from a feminist perspective. I'm interested in, actually, a much earlier period, the beginning of the 20th century, when popular translations were being made available of Greek and Latin texts, and this allowed a more general audience access to classical antiquity, especially the less-educated. People like women, who were not yet admitted to the university, in the US and abroad. And so, their access, they used translation to learn about Greek and Roman texts, and then they used it as a springboard for

their own literary creations. And in doing so, they shaped, reshaped how we look at the classical past through their own adaptations and translations.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Well, what are the things that stand out as being different from translations that were done for centuries by men?

[Laura McClure:](#) So, what's the difference between ...

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Yeah. I mean, what does one notice when comparing these translations?

[Laura McClure:](#) So, a male translator is more likely to take a male perspective, and maybe to not see certain issues, or just the way a term might be translated. For example, a word that connotes sexual violence in an Ancient Greek epic might be downplayed, the violent aspect taken out and kind of whitewashed, sort of erasing this female experience that was not uncommon in the ancient world. That's one way you could see it operating.

[Laura McClure:](#) A female translator might pick out something to emphasize, or might emphasize something a little bit differently, a detail about everyday life, maybe, that a male translator would not find important.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Yeah. So, we're going to be talking about this in other segments as well, but how ... it seems to me, just as a casual observer, that there are certain edited versions, or certain translations of various works that seem to be favored. You read the foreword to the book, you read the little preamble, and there is a credit, perhaps, given to an earlier translator. And this is the one I always thought was the perfect translation, but I've decided to make another on my own for whatever reason. What kind of respect is paid to the earlier translators of these various works as one approaches it? You may have disagreements with the way they've done things, but what kind of reflection is made on earlier translations when one begins a new one?

[Laura McClure:](#) I'm not a translator. I do think that that's a good point, that translators engage with other translators. I think that's encapsulated in the idea of re-translation. And sometimes these are very deliberate responses to standards. So, for example, Emily Wilson's translation of the Odyssey is a response to standard, probably the latter most translation of the Odyssey, and the kind of classic, no pun intended. But there are certain standard translations that have been used in the classroom and read by the general audience that a new translator might, in addition to providing a fresh language that's more contemporary, might be taking issue with just the rhythm, how the line is translated, how long the line is, these stylistic issues, and it isn't just content-based issues. And sometimes, I assume people take up the challenge of translating just because they're interested in it. Even though there already are many good translations of the Odyssey, that's not going to stop people from continuing to translate.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

So, Sabine, you mentioned the gender issue. I guess you must be teaching a class on poetry and gender this semester.

[Sabine Gözl:](#)

Actually, this semester, I'm teaching a class on this event, pretty much. We've spent the semester preparing and reading the papers by the participants ahead of time, and reading other scholarly literature on the topics. And so, this is the culmination of our seminar. Yeah, but gender is everywhere, so we don't have to teach a special class on it.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Yeah, but I think it is true, isn't it, that within the last, what, 40, 50 years, gender studies have become important in a way that they were not before in higher ed institutions, and thinking about things like, was this translated by a male, and may that have affected the way we've learned about this text, or this history, or whatever?

[Sabine Gözl:](#)

I mean, and I think, as maybe Adrienne will speak to that too just briefly, I think it's just another one of those instances that, I mean, perceptions do ... First of all, I would say that our literary tradition that we've inherited is a male tradition it's centered around, and that affects it in so many different ways, and that means if you are a woman writer entering it and trying to write in it, you are being read in the context that doesn't fit you. And it's not just because men and women think differently, which I wouldn't even say necessarily, but because the language and the metaphoric and the whole literary discourse is already using gender to control and steer reading. But now, I kind of got sidetracked a little bit, but basically, every translation is a reading, and so everything I've said about reading applies to translations, and maybe at that point I can ...

[Adrienne Rose:](#)

I guess, I wanted to pick up on your comment about the rise or the popularity of gender studies in academia, or as a topic of study. And there's something timely about certain translations, and when they can be made, like for example, Emily Wilson's translation seems to be, she talks about it as a kind of feminist intervention in the male translation history of the Odyssey, by changing some of the misogynistic and other views deliberately. I feel like there's something, there's a connection between our reading readiness, culturally, for the kind of translation that she's done. No one even really thought about gender in translation. I mean, I work on gender, and I've been working on it for three or four decades, and no one even really thought about the gender of the translator. We, as a field, have never really even thought about translation, even though from the very first Latin class, you're translating on a daily basis. But we never think about that as a process, as a tool, a skill.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Well, before we wrap up this segment, is there any ... You've already talked about one outcome that you hope will follow this particular colloquium, that in fact there will be another one and another one and another one. But are there other particular goals you have, or hopes that you have for this particular gathering?



[Sabine Gölz:](#)

Yes. We have lots. But what I'm hoping for, and I think Adrienne too, is just to have a productive and pleasant exchange, and a stimulating discussion over those two days, and people are welcome to join us. It's a public event. And eventually, we will try to, as we did with the last conference, publish a volume of the papers that were presented, and maybe some of the graduate student papers that were in the seminar. But, yeah, for now, we're just looking forward to our live interaction.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Yeah, and I suppose there's a desire that all of us will think critically when we read, that we will try to look beyond just the word on the page, and figure out what larger context there might be to anything we're reading?

[Sabine Gölz:](#)

Yep. And be aware that you're reading, and that as you read, you actually shape the text.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Yeah, yeah. Well, thank you for starting off. Sabine Golz, Adrienne Rose, and Laura McClure, thank you very much. I appreciate it. And we'll go to our next up panel in just a moment here. Please thank our guests.