

WorldCanvass: What's in a Word? The Translator's Challenge (Part 2)

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Hello and welcome to WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer, and we're coming to you from Merge in downtown Iowa City. Our topic tonight is What's in a Word? The Translator's Challenge, and I have the pleasure of bringing three new guests into our conversation. They are just next to me. Kaisa Koskinen, from the faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences at Tampere University in Finland. Thank you for being here, Kaisa.

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#) Thank you for having me.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Next to her is Michelle Woods, associate professor of English at the State University of New York in New Paltz. Thank you, Michelle, for joining us. In fact, especially on late notice, because a guest we had hoped would be here was held up, and we're especially pleased that you could join us, so thank you.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) And next to her is Laura Moser, a graduate student and teaching assistant in the UI Department of Classics. She recently completed her MFA in literary translation, so congratulations on that, and thank you, Laura.

[Laura Moser:](#) Thanks for inviting me.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) So, we're going to continue with what we were talking about in the first segment, and focus on some of the complexities encountered in re-translations. And if I may, I'd like to start with you, Kaisa. What are your main considerations, as you take on a text?

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#) As a re ...

[Joan Kjaer:](#) As a re-translator.

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#) As a re-translator. Actually, I would need to approach this from a researcher perspective, because I am not primarily a translator, let alone a re-translator. But if I think of what would be the complexities that I've encountered, having studied re-translators and re-translating for almost two decades, I might have to sum up with the fact that as a re-translator, you enter the preexisting network of text and translators, so you are not able to make the first impression, because that has already been made, so you need to somehow accommodate yourself into a situation where your readers already have an idea of the text. They may have a preference for a particular translation that already exists. They may hate and dislike a particular translation that already exists. And you, yourself, have probably read one or several of the existing texts, and now entering the scene, or re-entering the scene as a re-translator, you need to somehow come to terms with who you are in the process, and how you fit in the picture.

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#)

The answers, the solutions, can be varied and translators, re-translators, may find they are very, among predecessors in different phases, some are very antagonistic. Some are rebellious. They say that I'm going to make the best ever translation, and I'm going to outshine everybody else. But that's only one way to go. Others may decide to very actively ignore all previous versions, not even look in that direction, and trying to sort of distance themselves as well as they can, and that's one way to go. Others might, perhaps, want to embellish an existing translation, sort of start from what they already think is pretty good, but making it somehow more adequate to the times, more contemporary, whatever. So, you can choose your path, but you can't ignore the fact that there's others who have been there before you. This would be for the re-translator, I think, the most important element in the process.

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#)

For the readers, there's plenty of others, and for the publishers, there are still others. And for examples, money issues come into play a lot, and re-translation often is linked through issues like copyright. That might be an issue. The decisions you have, a new translator might depend on, that costs or not, what the publisher. Or for example, a re-translation itself is favorably reviewed, so it's good news for the publisher. It's good publicity, and also for the re-translator, actually. So, if you are a re-translator of a well-known classic, for example, if you are selected into that role, it's a career move. It's a very good thing for you, and you will get praise. In a normal state of affairs, you will be praised for your accomplishment. That's how the reviews function.

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#)

We have, Sabine was talking about programmed readings, and definitely in re-translations, we are culturally programmed to expect improvement. So, we tend to see improvement, and so whatever the re-translation is like, it's probably going to be reviewed as an accomplishment, as a cultural achievement, as finally a contemporary, finally a faithful rendering of a classic. So, definitely, for the re-translator, it is a good place to be.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Well, in an earlier message we shared, you said there is a double-bind of 'newness' and 'remembering' that each translator needs to negotiate. I guess that's sort of what you were just talking about.

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#)

Yeah, to an extent. But also, what I meant with that, this is actually the topic of my paper on Saturday, so I might not go too deep into this now. But the thing is that there's the temporal distance. It could be long in the case of classics, or it might be shorter for more contemporary texts. But still, the fact that you are reinterpreting a non-contemporary text forces you to take into account that the original is not contemporary. Somehow, your translation needs to reflect the fact that it is from a different period, from a different era.

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#)

At the same time, because there's also this older translation, or several of them, your translation needs to signal the newness of your translation, so that it stands out from the previous ones. So, you need to negotiate the necessity to be new, fresh, contemporary, and also somehow reflect on the oldness, the non-newness of the source text. And this can be quite complex.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) And you said there's something called the anxiety of influence. So, what does that mean?

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#) Anxiety of influence is that, those who are into literary theory will recognize the reference, but together with my colleague [inaudible 00:34:11], who I've been talking together with in terms of re-translation, we use this phrase actually to explain the necessity to take into account that there is somebody there before you, the predecessor. So, you get, there's always the anxiety of not being different enough, or following in the footsteps, or copying the earlier version, and the willingness to break new ground, to somehow achieve a completely different version. So, anxiety of influence would link to what I started with, the necessity to accept your role in a chain of translators, and all the anxieties that come with it.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Thank you, that's so interesting. And Michelle, you are a re-translator, if I understand correctly.

[Michelle Woods:](#) I'm not, unfortunately.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) You're not?

[Michelle Woods:](#) No, I'm not a re-translator, but I've written about re-translation.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) You've written about it. Okay. So, you write about re-translations of Kafka and Tolstoy?

[Michelle Woods:](#) And Tolstoy, yeah.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) And others. So, tell us about that. What have you discovered?

[Michelle Woods:](#) Well, it really speaks to, actually, some things you were talking about in the earlier panel, and that Kaisa is talking about here, which is that with Kafka, it was an issue of copyright. Schocken Books, who were the main translators, publishers of Kafka's work wanted to renew their copyright, or to be still the primary publishers of his work, and so they brought out new translations which were based on re-editing of Kafka's work, which had been edited by his friend Max Brod after his death.

[Michelle Woods:](#) But the texts were much more experimental. Brod, to get them translated into English, he wanted them to be readable, not to be odd, and not to finish mid-sentence or have this strange punctuation. And so, he changed sentences, he left chapters out. And so, in the '80s, there was this project to produce these editions in German which were more comparable to what Kafka left in manuscript form. And so, in the '90s, Schocken Books started to produce these re-translations that were translations based on these new editions, basically.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

And so, for instance, the Castle, it has chapters that weren't in it. It also ends, it does end mid-sentence. And that's controversial to some, but the translator, who's Irish, he's lived in America for years. He said, "Well, we now live in a postmodern age where we're used to strange length of sentences, and things finishing that way, and we can read it because we're more used to this kind of experimental fiction." So, that was interesting.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

But also, Mark Harman, this translator, his way of establishing himself as a re-translator was to really attack the earlier translation by Muirs, which was the first translation in the '30s. And it was a very ... he took it apart, he took them apart. Which in some ways, some of the blame is really on Max Brod and his editing. But I got really interested, because they were a translation couple. They were married to each other, and when you read any essays about this couple, they kept talking about the man, and the husband, and he was a poet and a critic, and he was very religious, and he hated modernist writing, or didn't like it. And I thought, well, what about Willa Muir? And everyone said she was the literal translator. She just translated it, and then he poeticized it.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

But she, in her memoir, said no, it was 50/50. And she kept coming back, 50/50, we split the work down the line. But then when I went to her archive, it turned out that she was the translator, full stop. And she said, in a diary entry in the '50s, she says, she literally calls it the patriarchy. She says, "They will never come face to face with the fact that I am the translator, and that will be lost to literary history. The legacy will all be my husband." And so, that for me as a scholar was really important and really moving. She was really emotional in this diary entry. And I thought, that has to be known. And also, she hated the church. She wasn't religious like her husband. Which she thought was a patriarchal institution. She was a very devoutly feminist.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

And the other thing I discovered was that they were both soft speakers. They'd grown up on tiny islands off the Scottish mainland, and English was really their second language. Because people kept talking about how formal their English was in the translation, but they knew that to actually be published, and to be taken seriously by the literary establishment at the time, they had to write in a certain English, and so they kind of suppressed their Scots accents.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

But she had writings in her archives of her speaking in Scots, and talking back at a radio program where these two Englishmen were speaking like this, and she says it's the rat-tat-tat of the military colonial masters, basically. And she does this in Scots, and with real humor, because she was seen in literary history as this very dour, Calvinist woman, but very funny. And she talks about having orgasm, from dream of cream fingers and orgasms when she was in her 60s in her journal. Just a totally different person. And yet, that was very suppressed in her literary writing and her memoir.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

But she was, yeah, really overseen by literary history, and seen as kind of a bad translator in some ways. Out of date. She wasn't the real translator. She wasn't the creative one in the couple. So, I think things like that are really important.

Because we often, we laugh at mistakes and certain choices that translators have made, but in some ways, there's reasons for that. It might be choices they've made, but there might be reasons behind those choices, and the more you get into that, the more interesting thinking about both the translators and the text becomes, I think.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

How much do translators or re-translators explain themselves in footnotes and whatnot?

[Michelle Woods:](#)

Footnotes are interesting. I think mainly, in what we call para text, which are introductions ... and it used to be that they just, it would be almost an apology. It would be kind of like, well, this isn't perfect. And I think now it's more interesting. I think we're getting more of the personality of the translator. Publishers realize that this is actually, they don't want to hide the translator. They won't want to pretend it's not a translation. And there's some [inaudible 00:40:51], or they have a famous translator translating.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

I think what's great about the digital age is the ability to have more presence of the translator. So, often if I've read a translation, I'll go, who's So-and-so that translated it? And I'll go online, and they've done interviews with the Paris Review, or with Words Without Borders. They're so ... because translators are great readers of the text. They've spent hours of blood, sweat and toil going over it, and they really know that text intimately. So, I love reading what translators have to say, because they're a way into the text, they're a portal into it, and they're a great mind. Not only about the characters and themes, but the form, and how that relates to the themes and the characters.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

And I think what's unfortunate about translation reviewing in this country, and in English-speaking, in England and Ireland, where I'm from, is that you'll get a reviewer saying, So-and-So, they translated this excellently, well, nicely. Whatever, they use one term. And you realize that the reviewers haven't even tried to go online and try to kind of listen to what the translators have said, and yet they're the real guide into what's interesting about this book, how should I get into this book.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

So, I say to anyone who's interested, if you've picked up Knausgård, or Elena Ferrante, or any of these bestselling translated writers, is to go online, and you'll see a ton of interviews and writing by their translators. I just saw Ann Goldstein give a talk, who actually translated Elena Ferrante. And no one knows who Elena Ferrante is, right? She's this reclusive Italian author. So, Ann Goldstein, the translator, has become the kind of face of this author in America. She's fascinating, talk about the form of the books, and so on.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Well, can we talk just a little bit about the Tolstoy translations, too?

[Michelle Woods:](#)

Yeah.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) You said you've been studying Anna Karenina.

[Michelle Woods:](#) Yeah, yeah. No, I got interested in that partly from, I was in the archive of a woman called Isabel Hapgood, who she was an American translator, one of the first Tolstoy translators in the 1870s, 1880s. Her archive is at the New York Public Library, and she hated the first Anna Karenina translation, by Nathan Haskell Dole, and wrote this public denunciation of it. And she was right. It was from an abridged French version. It was a mess.

[Michelle Woods:](#) But she was fascinating, because she visited Tolstoy and wrote an article for the Atlantic in 1891. And she goes to [inaudible 00:43:36], and she hates Tolstoy. She can't stand him. She's annoyed by his misogynistic views, and she spends the entire time there baiting him about his terrible ideas about women. And then, slightly falling in love with his wife Sophia. And so, that got me really interested, because Sophia is the model for Anna, but also Kitty and Dolly, in the novel.

[Michelle Woods:](#) And that got me interested in going back to the earlier translations of Anna Karenina into English, which were all by women. And this was 1901, Constance Garnett, and then Louise Maude with her husband. But Constance Garnett, there was a famous article, Socks, I don't know if anyone read it here, in 2016 in the New York review of books. And Janet Malcolm, the famous writer, says, "We've got to forget the new translations. Let's go back to Constance Garnett." Which she said because she's Victorian, and she spoke the language that Tolstoy would have spoken if he'd spoken English. And in fact, he did speak English. He was quite fluent in English.

[Michelle Woods:](#) But in fact, Constance Garnett, in 1901, was living in an open marriage. Her husband was living with another woman that she was friends with. And she was a socialist. She dated George Bernard Shaw. She traveled to Russia on her own. She was this fabulous and very radical woman. Her sister was friends with Eleanor Marx, and so on.

[Michelle Woods:](#) So, thinking about women who, at this time, were meeting Tolstoy and translating Anna Karenina, I think it makes us rethink the female characters in the book. Because often it's seen as this very misogynist thing. He kills off Anna when she starts to come into her own. But actually, they're really interesting portrayals of women in the book, and I think the translators kind of respond to that. And of course, in translating it into English, our thinking about the role of women in 1870s Russia, as the woman question is becoming a big question, and that's talked about in the book. But also, in the early 1900s, as women were going to college for the first time, becoming involved in the socialist movement and the trade union movement, as well. So, it's really interesting, I think, and it allows us to think about rereading the book in a different way.

[Joan Kjaer:](#) Yeah. That's so interesting. Thank you.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

So, Laura, let's move to you. You are, if I'm not mistaken, a translator of Greek and Latin literature?

[Laura Moser:](#)

Yeah.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

And you had said to me earlier that you have a recurring question about the justification of doing re-translations of works that have been translated and re-translated so many times.

[Laura Moser:](#)

Yeah, I guess it's something that I think about a lot. I think because if I tell somebody that I study translation, or that I translate these Greek and Roman texts which were written thousands of years ago, that is usually the first question maybe that someone would have for me, which is, well, have they not been translated before, or enough? Is there anything out there that hasn't been translated, and does the lack of that mean that there's not really sort of the space for a new translation in the same kind of way?

[Laura Moser:](#)

And I guess, to me, that always makes me feel like I need to come up for a justification for why I do what I do. Which maybe isn't really quite fair. And I think there are answers I go to quickly, like I say, sure, the Odyssey has been translated a million times, but yeah, Emily Wilson's translation into English is the first translation to English published by a woman. And it was, I don't know, a few years ago? That's a big deal. So, that's an easy justification that I feel like I can point to. So, even though the text is old, and the text has been re-translated so many times, who the translator is really matters, and it informs sort of the translation as a new text and as a creative act.

[Laura Moser:](#)

But I guess the other reason why I think about it is because I wonder, do I have to justify this? Is there a world, maybe, where, I don't know, if I said I was a painter, would somebody say, "So, why do you make paintings, though? Haven't people been making paintings for a long time?" I don't know. It's not a perfect analogy, I know. But if we really do believe, as I think many of us in this room do, that literary translation, translation as a creative act, then I wonder about that justification question a lot.

[Laura Moser:](#)

And I think I think about some of the things that Kaisa, you were talking about, with the kind of concerns of the translator, and as someone who works with the so-called classics, and when I use that word, I mean Greek and Roman classics, Greek and Latin classics, that's a weighty tradition to be working under, and it can feel a little oppressive. Not only in just this long history of how things have been read, and who was doing the reading, and who was doing the sort of defining of this ancient world, which is really so far away from my current moment. But also just even my own training in that field, and it's a discipline with a long history and a long tradition of things being done a certain way, and even words being translated a certain way. And it can feel, yeah, just hard to even think about what it would look like to do something that pushes the boundaries of that tradition a little bit.

[Laura Moser:](#)

But I do think that is what new translations can do in classics, right, is push those boundaries, and kind of, I think this has come up a couple times today, but this idea that especially in a discipline that is so traditional in so many ways, how can translation be a tool for opening that up, and opening up the conversation about these texts that people might think have kind of been solved, right? We know how to read that. We've been reading it for a long time. We know what it means. And I think, of course, that isn't true about any text, but pushing that boundary in classics is sort of, I guess, what makes me happy, so that's where I find myself.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Yeah. Well, another thing you mentioned was the audience. You're thinking about today's audience, rather than ... You can't put yourself back 500 years, 700 years, into what that reading audience might have perceived from your translation.

[Laura Moser:](#)

Right. Yeah, absolutely. I think audience matters to any translator, and I think thinking about, I guess, who the audience of my translation might be is a ... How can I approach this question? It's such a big question, the question of audience, I guess. I think about it because, as a student, my translations might be for an audience of a workshop, for in some cases a classroom of peers, or an audience at a colloquium or a conference.

[Laura Moser:](#)

And I think, depending on who we're translating for, we might translate in a very different way. And I think something Laura McClure mentioned in the last session was, as a classicist, we are, from day one in Latin I, we're translating. We're asked to translate ... I know in audio recording, you can't see the quotes that I'm putting around the word translate, but it is sort of this version of translation that we teach our students to do, and it's translation with a certain goal, and with a certain scope, and for a certain audience, which is the classroom and your teacher, and showing what you know.

[Laura Moser:](#)

And that's the tradition I was trained to translate in. So, when I came to the University of Iowa and was studying an MFA for literary translation, I was really asked to think about translation in a different way, and it wasn't to show what I know to the instructors who had taught me how to read Ancient Greek. It was to bring a text to an audience who might not have ever read that text before in some cases, because some of these classics are very well-known, but some of them aren't, right? And some of these classical poets might be read for the first time in translation. So, I guess those are some of the things that come up for me with the audience question, if that gets at that question a little bit.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Yeah. Is there any wrap up thought any of you would like to make regarding your understanding of re-translations?

[Michelle Woods:](#)

I think it's a great way to read. If you have a chance to compare, certainly with Kafka, Tolstoy, or the classics, to compare even a stanza, say, of the Odyssey, in different translations. I start a class each semester looking at Alexander Pope's



18th-century opening, and then in a more recent one, I've actually just included Emily Wilson's.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

So, it's the first stanza, and it tells us about Odysseus, but there's such a different picture of Odysseus. He's a real hero in Alexander Pope's one. Very different in Robert Fagles's one, and even different in Emily Wilson's. So, from the very first stanza, the students understand that they can choose to read Odysseus in whatever way they choose to read him, that different translators have seen him as a different person. And a complicated person, but complicated in different ways.

[Michelle Woods:](#)

And in fact, Emily Wilson has used the term, it's complicated, which has become such a Facebook term. And so, now the students, they're immediately like, yeah, I get that in a way that, of course, 10 years ago, who would have got that? So, I think it's so important. It's such a great way to become a reader, is look at different, even tiny elements of different re-translations.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

Yeah. Well, thank you all so much. This has been really wonderful, fun. So, Kaisa Koskinen, thank you.

[Kaisa Koskinen:](#)

Thank you.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

And thank you very much, Michelle Woods, and thank you, Laura Moser.

[Laura Moser:](#)

Thank you.

[Joan Kjaer:](#)

I so appreciate you being here. Please thank our guests.