



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Proposal**

The attached document contains the narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful proposal may be crafted. Every successful proposal is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the program guidelines at [www.neh.gov/grants/education/enduring-questions](http://www.neh.gov/grants/education/enduring-questions) for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Education Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

**Project Title:** NEH Enduring Questions Course on Translation

**Institution:** Middlebury College

**Project Director:** Timothy Billings

**Grant Program:** Enduring Questions

## **What is Lost in Translation?**

Timothy Billings, Middlebury College

### **Intellectual Rationale and Teaching Value**

When in the book of Genesis (11:1–9) the Hebrew god confounds the inhabitants of Babel with a “confusion of tongues” and scatters them to the four corners of the earth for their hubris in attempting to build a tower to the heavens, it is hard not to read that etiological fable of linguistic multiplicity as anything but a tragedy for humanity. Translation is born in loss. Now, however, we value that very same linguistic and cultural diversity as the rich elaboration of what it means to be human in all its forms. To ask “What is lost in translation” is to raise questions at the very heart of the humanities: If our cultural identities are expressed in the seven thousand or so languages of the globe, in what sense are we a single humanity? How much does language shape how we understand and experience the world? What exactly is a native language if nobody is born with language? Are some cultural concepts untranslatable? Are translators traitors? Are translators artists? If a sacred text is the word of god, can a translation of it still be the word of god? Why do translations differ? And isn’t something lost in all communication? Is the bridging of languages and cultures fundamentally different from the bridging of individual minds?

This entirely new course will raise all these questions through a combination of extensive reading of historical writings about translation together with the comparative study of multiple translations of coherent sections from major works such as the Bible, the *Iliad*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, and the *Tao Te Ching*. The direct study of critical writing on translation is intended both to give students a sense of the historical span and evolving nature of the debates, and also to foreground the issues they will encounter in our study of works *in* translation. The unique value of a sustained, close, and repeated reading of a coherent section of a text by means of multiple translations is inestimable: the goals may be different from reading an epic in its

entirety, for example, but the method opens up an interpretive plurality otherwise invisible when reading a great work in a single translation and ensures a deep engagement with the text.

The new course will also satisfy an institutional need. Two years ago, our faculty voted to establish a Comparative Literature program, which we were able to do more or less overnight by organizing existing foreign language courses into a set of requirements; yet the fledgling program itself still lacks core courses in the lingua franca of English where the students of various languages—in addition to our many bilingual international students—can focus directly on the issues of translingual, transcultural study, in a truly comparative atmosphere. As a reflection of our babbling ivory tower, Middlebury even has a student-run multilingual journal devoted to writing and translation: *Translingual.org*. This course aims to harness that student interest by providing a curricular space to explore the thorny questions raised when we cross linguistic bridges, but which often take a backseat to the necessary goals of language proficiency.

### ***Envisioned Course Design***

The full-credit, 13-week semester-long course will be offered twice during the two-year grant period, in the fall terms of 2014 and 2015. The syllabus is divided roughly into six 2-week units, each of which pairs critical writing about translation with multiple translations of primary texts. Students will read about 150 to 200 pages per week and write papers for each unit (4 formal blogs of 1200 words, plus a 6-page and a 10-page essay). Both as a form of engaged learning and a means of catalyzing student expertise, one paper will analyze at least two original translations of a single short text chosen by the student. Students will meet for class 3 hours per week, plus one individual, half-hour conference per term. The pedagogy will be interactive, consisting of guided discussions framed by short lectures for explanation and synthesis. At the risk of redundancy, I want to stress that this course is not a practicum in translating or an

introduction to literary theory, but truly an exploration of how *translation* as a notorious yet necessary form of intercultural exchange raises so many questions central to the liberal arts.

**Unit 1: Is anything lost in translation?** We will begin by examining the key problems of translation related to language, cognition, and culture by reading foundational excerpts from Cicero (55 BCE), St. Jerome (395 CE), Humboldt (1816), Sapir (1929), and Whorf (1940), in addition to selected chapters from David Bellos' *Is That a Fish in Your Ear* (2011), which I will assign throughout the term as relevant, as a sort of *guide provocateur*. For our primary texts, we will start with a twist: instead of reading multiple translations of a foreign work, each student will analyze a different translation of a familiar passage from Shakespeare (such as Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy), then re-translate it literally "back" into English. Does it make a difference that most of the world knows the author renowned for his "universal humanity" through words he did not actually write? (In the unlikely event of a student with no knowledge of another language, we will experiment with modern English cribs and machine translations.)

**Unit 2: What is lost when we translate sacred texts?** Biblical translation set the terms of the debates for centuries in Europe, and this unit surveys that history while highlighting the linguistic, spiritual, and political stakes involved. Students will read the *Letter of Aristeas* (2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE), Purvey's prologue to the Wycliffe Bible (1395), Aretino (1420), Luther (1530), Dolet (1540), the translators' preface to the King James Bible (1611), and Benjamin (1923), as well as excerpts from Eugene Nida's seminal work on "dynamic equivalence" (1964). We will then read books 1 and 11 of Genesis (covering the cosmogony and the tower of Babel story) in over a dozen versions from the Coverdale (1535) to the Revised Standard Catholic (1966). We will also discuss early modern polyglot bibles, the quest for a universal language, and the massive translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Pāli into Chinese during the Tang Dynasty.

**Unit 3: What is lost when we translate poetry?** Bellos argues eloquently that the answer cannot be “poetry” itself, and we will see how this idea is contradicted and confirmed by famous translators in the critical prefaces by Chapman (1611), Dryden (1680, 1697), Cowley (1640), Rossetti (1861), and Arnold (1896), and in Nabokov’s provocative essay on translating Pushkin (1955). We will then test these perspectives by reading book one of *The Iliad* in a dozen translations from Hall (1581) and Chapman (1603) to Fagles (1990) and Mitchell (2011).

**Unit 4: What is lost when we translate “exotic” languages?** In order to explore how the assumptions translators make about other cultures can affect their decisions while translating, we will read excerpts from a number of (mostly nineteenth-century) German philosophers such as Herder (1767-8), Schopenhauer (1800), Schleiermacher (1813), Goethe (1819), and Nietzsche (1882), and then read “The Tale of the Ensorcelled Prince” from *One Thousand and One Nights* in a dozen translations from the Victorian period to the present. We will also discuss the preservation of lost Greek texts in Arabic translation during the ‘Abbāssid Dynasty.

**Unit 5: What is lost when we translate texts we can’t understand?** The classic of Daoism known as the *Tao Te Ching* is extremely difficult to understand by any measure, and yet its translation has been attempted probably more than any other text in history by people who cannot read the language in which it was written, including Crowley (1918), Bynner (1944), Miles (1992), Le Guin (1997), and Mitchell (2000). This unit explores the implications of translation as a creative personal process while continuing to examine the assumptions made in the face of extreme cultural, linguistic, and historical differences. Students will prepare by reading Tytler (1790), Ortega y Gasset (1937), an excerpt from Paz (1971), and Jakobson (1959), as well as Eliot Weinberger’s short and sweet *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (1987).

**Unit 6: What is gained when we translate?** The final unit will explore new paradigms

to see what modernist, postmodernist, and postcolonial ideas may contribute to our understanding of the enduring question while delving further into the creative potential of translation as a form of translingual artistic collaboration. Students will read excerpts from the seminal work by Pound on “ideogrammic” translation, Lefevere on translation as “re-writing,” De Campos on translation as “cannibalism,” Liu on neologisms in “translingual practice,” Niranjana on translation as “Orientalism,” and Bassnett and Bellos on translation “hegemonies” and the global market. Students will then read Zukofsky’s homophonic poetic translations of Catullus (1969) alongside a few orthodox translations, as well as Stalling’s “sinophonic” poetry (2011), both of which create a new poetic substance from the sounds of the originals with a flagrant disregard for conventional meaning. We will ask how our faith in—or our suspicion of—translation may affect our judgments about such political topics and poetic values. In the final hours of the course, we will ask: Do all the differences make a difference?

Assessment of course objectives will be achieved with a specially designed student questionnaire that includes both quantitative and subjective measures, plus a 1200-word assessment by the instructor after each course iteration. Revisions to the course after the first iteration will be considered typical faculty work not included separately in the budget. Grades will be based on pre-established rubrics for six papers (90%), plus class participation (10%).

### **Course Preparation**

Having published two books of translations (one of them funded by the NEH), I have spent many hours cudgeling my brains over the process, but my ignorance about the history of, and recent trends in translation theory is truly embarrassing. The professional benefit to me will be gaining the competence to join the scholarly conversation and also to share my intellectual passion for translation as partly art and partly philosophy, in a pedagogically responsible way.

This course is, by design, ambitious, and I expect to spend the entire summer of 2014 preparing it. But even before our spring term ends, in early May I will convene a working group of faculty from all foreign language departments to discuss the unique translation challenges faced in their classrooms and to offer suggestions for the new course. (I hope this will be the beginning of a faculty “translation studies group” that will continue to meet long after the grant period.) The timeline for course preparation is as follows: May 16<sup>th</sup>-June 15<sup>th</sup>, read broadly and deeply in the history and theory of translation for a true foundation; June 16<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>, establish the definitive list of critical readings and prepare highlights and questions for each work; July 1<sup>st</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, acquire and study the texts in translation; August 1<sup>st</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>, study background criticism for those texts in order to discuss them knowledgably with students; August 23<sup>rd</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, write syllabus; September 1<sup>st</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>, set up course website on Moodle; September 8<sup>th</sup>, begin course.

### **Dissemination**

This course will have a robust and conspicuous online presence on Middlebury College’s servers using Moodle linked to Wordpress, including freely available syllabi, blogs, student translations, multimedia projects, and all primary texts allowable by copyright. I will announce it on the comparative literature and culture listserv *CLCWeb* and send posters to major centers for translation studies (Barnard, Illinois, Monterey, Texas, and UMass). Middlebury is a tech-savvy place where students are eager to present their thinking in digitally creative ways, and my students will be encouraged to substitute a critical multimedia piece in place of one of the blogs. I also plan to build bridges with the *Translingual.org* community by encouraging students to submit their original translation assignment for publication there. I hope to continue teaching this course long after the grant period ends, and from my experience using the Moodle and Wordpress platforms, I know that it will be easy to keep the site updated.

## Core Reading List

- Bible, Genesis 1 and 11, versions: Coverdale (1535), Matthew's (1537), Great (1539), Geneva (1560), Bishop's (1568), Douay-Rheims (1609), King James (1611), Quaker (1764), Concordant Literal (1926), Revised Standard Catholic (1966); Polyglot bibles: Complutesian (1522), Antwerp (1572), London (1568)
- Iliad*, book 1, trans. Arthur Hall (1581), George Chapman (1603), John Ogilby (1656), Alexander Pope (1715), William Cowper (1791), William Munford (1846), William George Thomas Barter (1854), Richmond Lattimore (1951), Robert Graves (1960), Robert Fagles (1990), Stephen Mitchell (2011)
- One Thousand and One Nights (Kitāb alf laylah wa-laylah)*, "The Tale of the Ensorcelled Prince," trans. "Grub Street" (1706), Edward Lane (1840), John Payne (1882), Richard Burton (1885), Joseph Charles Mardrus (1898) Powys Mathers (1923), Husain Haddawy (1990), Malcolm and Ursula Lyons (2008)
- The Book of the Way and of Virtue (Daode jing 道德經)* trans. James Legge (1891), Aleister Crowley (1918), Arthur Waley (1934), Witter Bynner (1944), R. B. Blakney (1955), Wing-Tsit Chan (1963), Victor H. Mair (1990), Thomas Miles (1992), Ursula K. Le Guin (1997), Stephen Mitchell (2000)
- Anonymous [Josephus], *Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates* (2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE)
- Cicero, *De oratore* (55 BCE), & St. Jerome, *Letter to Pammachius* (395 CE)
- John Purvey, prologue to the Wycliffe Bible, ch. 15 (1395)
- Leonardo Bruni Aretino, *On Correct Translation [De interpretatione recta]* (1420)
- Martin Luther, *Open Letter on Translation [Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen]* (1530)
- Etienne Dolet, *How to Translate Well . . . [De la manière de bien traduire . . .]* (1540)
- "The Translators to the Reader" of the King James Bible (1611)
- George Chapman, preface to *The Iliads of Homer Prince of Poets* (1611)
- Abraham Cowley, preface to *Pindaric Odes* (1640)
- John Dryden, preface to *Ovid's Epistles* (1680) and *Virgil's Aeneid* (1697)
- Fraser Tytler, *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (1790)
- Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Language and Words" ["Über Sprache und Worte"] (1800)
- Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translating" (1813)
- Wilhelm Humboldt, preface to *Aeschylus Translated in Verse* (1816)
- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Translations" ["Übersetzungen"] (1819)
- Dante Gabriel Rossetti, preface to *The Early Italian Poets* (1861)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Problem of Translation" ["Übersetzungen"] (1882)
- Matthew Arnold, "On Translating Homer" (1896)
- Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" [Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers] (1923)
- Vladimir Nabokov, "Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English" (1955)
- Edward Sapir, "The Status of Linguistics as a Science" (1929)
- Benjamin Whorf, "Science and Linguistics" (1940)
- Eliot Weinberger, *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (1987)
- José Ortega y Gasset, "La Miseria y el esplendor de la traducción" (1937)
- Octavio Paz, *Traducción: Literatura y Literalidad* (1971)
- Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" (1959)
- Louis Zukofsky, *Catullus* (1969), & Jonathan Stalling, *Yingelishi 吟歌丽诗* (2011)
- David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear* (2011)

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