Capstone Projects Serve Greater Good

Picture an international student visiting the University of Illinois campus, lingering on the Quad into the evening hours and confident that the public bus system would return her to the vicinity of her accommodations. Except that due to an inadequate machine translation, she missed the important fact that the bus line she needed did not run on that particular day. She resigned herself to a bench in the growing darkness, awaiting a passerby who might be able to provide some direction—or worse, a long walk in an unfamiliar city.

“Incorrect information can put the user in danger,” said Patricia Phillips-Batoma, an instructor at U of I since 2008. “[At CTS], we argue that having access to accurate information is a human right.”

Phillips-Batoma said that the fictional scenario described is one example of the inconvenience of navigating in a culture where many public documents are available in only one language, English.

CTS student Dana Lange, a senior from Naperville, Ill., is studying the outcome of information provided through machine translation tools, such as Google Translate, that agencies often use in lieu of a human translator with an understanding of context and culture, who would likely provide a more apt lexicon. Lange is looking specifically at the website of the Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District and will submit her analysis as part of a research paper for the James Scholar Honors Program.

Lange is also translating policies and procedures document for the Springfield Public Schools into Spanish for her CTS capstone project. Phillips-Batoma is her advisor.

Phillips-Batoma fosters connections within the local communities and the state to provide translation services by CTS students when agencies do not have the resources to take on this task. In addition, she encourages students to look at sites like www.volunteermatch.com for ideas.

Students start by taking a close look at the population they will be serving when providing translations, said Phillips-Batoma. They will be referred to in future projects. Phillips-Batoma describes this system as “similar to a glossary but including much more information about the words, including their sources and examples of usage.”

“Now we’ll be able to reach out to public schools in general to offer that same type of translation on a regular basis,” she added.

Senior Patrycja Kandefer of Algonquin, Ill., is translating documents for Community Unit School District 300 from English into Polish. “I’ve looked at documents to be translated for the Springfield public schools to see what types of issues might come up so that I could anticipate problems I might have,” said Kandefer. “I look for terms that we’ve grown accustomed to here that might not be familiar to an immigrant. Then I determine how far in depth I will have to go to describe those terms—using footnotes versus context description, for example.”

Students complete their work over the course of one semester, and before anything is published, Phillips-Batoma has an appropriate professor of the target language review the translated text for accuracy. While no compensation is provided to the University or the students who tackle these real-world projects, Phillips-Batoma said there are “lots of hidden benefits for students.”

“There’s definitely been an increase in students’ involvement in service learning and other practical projects in recent years,” said Phillips-Batoma. “It’s such a great way for the advanced or intermediate student to reinforce what they’ve learned. It’s a really important part of the education process.”

Student Lange concurs. “It’s very rewarding,” she said. “Plus, I’m a hands-on person, and I learn better getting that experience.”

Kandefer said that she has learned different ways of approaching people through her work in the public schools. And knowing that she’s assuaged anxieties felt by Polish immigrants gives her pride in her translation skills. “Translating into someone’s native language just seems to show that someone cares,” she said.

“I’ve not seen so many students who want to ‘save the world’ as I’ve seen in the last five years,” said Phillips-Batoma. “There seems to be a really strong understanding of the number of people in the world who need help.”

Phillips-Batoma gives some credit to the Internet and modern technology for students’ easy connections to the growing definition of community. She cited examples of her students being quickly drawn into humanitarian aid projects around the world, as well as responding quickly to needs closer to home.

That dovetails nicely with the CTS emphasis on developing a portfolio of work before graduation.

“We turn the students’ conceptual knowledge into working, experience-based, practical knowledge,” said Phillips-Batoma.
The translator liberates the language imprisoned in a work.
Walter Benjamin

The Translation Paradox

The paradoxical nature of the translator’s task is allegorized in Jorge Luis Borges’s wonderful story about an attempt to recreate Don Quixote word for word. Borges, like Walter Benjamin before him, raises central questions regarding the task of translation: is it possible to translate at all, and if so, what is the nature of equivalence, and particularly the transfer of meaning across languages and time zones?

Benjamin, in his seminal essay “The Task of the Translator” (1934), written as a preface to his translation of Baudelaire, brings the argument to the word level, stating that there is no possible exact equivalence between words in different languages. They may express the same concept, but the form of the word and its connotation in the mind of the speaker of the language are completely different. Moreover, words are in a process of constant change as language changes and thus, through time, texts must evolve through re-translation.

Through constantly shifting contexts, translation makes possible a series of new “originals” that will acquire relevancy to new audiences. As new “originals” arise from older versions, we must consider the debate about the philosophical problem of “incommensurability,” or whether it is possible to transfer meaning across different languages.

If translation is always interpretation and meaning is not stable, then it is difficult to accept the notion of shared meaning. Given the holistic nature of interpretation (we interpret parts in terms of the whole), it is not clear how it is possible to translate across cultural, historical and linguistic divides.

The solution to this conundrum lies in part in realizing that translation is prevalent within languages, an idea introduced in an essay by Roman Jakobson, who distinguished three modes of translation: inter-lingual (from one language to another), intra-lingual (within the same language), and inter-semiotic (when a novel is made into a film).

Scott Montgomery, author of Translation in Science, suggests that if translation is a “means of creating an embrace between languages, the producing of offspring,” that the issue of “commensurability” can be viewed in perspective. He proposes that we “accept incommensurability as a given,” freeing us from allowing the notion of “equivalence” to distract us from the reality of translation as a transformative process (291). Knowledge, Montgomery observes, is “a mobile form of culture” (2).

Human endeavor, whether literary or scientific, has passed through the filter of translation as it has traveled through wars, commerce, religion, immigration and discovery. In fact, the “transfer of learning” is the essential building block of culture, not only passing on concepts and methods, but ways of expressing knowledge. In the broadest sense, translation is defined “as a process of communication every bit as varied as writing itself and no less central to what we commonly call ‘civilization,’ built by movements of knowledge from one people to another” (Montgomery 5). So in spite of presenting a paradox, and perhaps because of it, the act of translation is central to human endeavor.
**Faculty News and Publications**

David Cooper translated a chapter by the Czech translation scholar Jiří Levý, entitled “Classicism and Romanticism in European Translation,” that will be published this spring in *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, the journal of the American Translation and Interpreting Studies Association, under the rubric of Translation Studies in Translation.

Wail S. Hassan has published *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Naguib Mahfouz*, co-edited with Susan Muaddi-Darraj (MLA publications, 2012), as well as an article on “Edward Said and Memoirs of Palestinian Exile” in *Revista Litteris* no. 8 (September 2011). He also presented two papers at the MLA convention in Seattle: “Lebanon in Brazil” and “Intercontinental American Literature.”

Elizabeth Lowe was elected vice president of the American Literary Translators Association for a two-year term (2011-2013). In 2013 she will become president of the association.

Lowe participated with Joyce Tolliver in a panel chaired by Alan Melby at the Modern Language Association’s conference (Seattle, January 2012) on “Translation in the Foreign Language Curriculum.”

Lowe will be a visiting professor at the Université Paris Denis Diderot, as part of the exchange agreement between the Center for Translation Studies at the University of Illinois and the Diderot Center for Translation Studies, from May 15 to June 15, 2012.

**MEET A CTS STUDENT**

CTS student Ben Aaron, 34, was looking forward to wrapping up the semester when we met recently at the Intermezzo Café in the lobby of Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. In May he will obtain his Certificate in Translation Studies and begin packing for a move cross-country with his wife and infant son.

Aaron will begin doctoral studies in Japanese Art History at the University of California at Irvine this autumn.

Aaron’s education (AB History, University of Florida; AM East Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Illinois; completion of program at Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies; fellowship at Tokyo University) has nurtured a growing interest in post-World War II, Japanese visual arts. He will focus on the artist Kazuki Yasuo (1911-1974) for his CTS capstone project.

Kazuki is a Japanese painter whose work is said to have radically changed after his prisoner-of-war experience in Siberia towards the end of World War II. Aaron discovered Kazuki’s works at a small museum while living in Japan. The unique compositions and techniques rendered by Kazuki, as well as the pieces’ tremendous scale, intrigued Aaron. Translating catalogs of Kazuki’s artwork, as well as articles written about the artist, became Aaron’s goals.

“There’s a good bit written about Kazuki in Japanese—but almost nothing in English,” said Aaron.

“He is a fantastic artist, unduly overlooked.”

Aaron plans to take part in the 2014 retrospective exhibit of Kazuki’s work in Japan and hopes his English translation of a memoir/commentary of the artist, which Aaron is polishing through various CTS courses, will be included.

**What We’re Reading**

*Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* by David Bellos (Faber & Faber, 2011): Bellos has composed an introduction to translation concepts and challenges for those interested in the profession or simply for the curious, who will find common misconceptions addressed. One of his key points? “Language and culture are so closely bound together as to be one and the same thing.”
Call for Papers

“TRANSLATION AS INNOVATION: Bridging the Sciences and the Humanities,” a conference for scholars and practitioners to present research on translation’s role in communicating scientific findings, will be held in Paris, Dec. 13-15, 2012. Scholars and practitioners will convene to present state-of-the-art research on translation as a factor for spreading innovation across the sciences and the humanities. For more information and for paper submission (in English or French), please visit http://www.univ-paris-diderot.fr/TransInov/page.php?np=welcome&nm=16.

Events

The Center for Translation Studies hosted a bilingual reading and discussion with João Ubaldo Ribeiro, a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, on March 29.

João Ubaldo Ribeiro is a well-known Brazilian journalist and novelist from Salvador, Bahia, whose interests in Brazilian social and political concerns are imbued with an avant-garde approach to style. He has written a number of novels, some of which have been translated to the screen in Brazil.

Some of his notable works include his first novel, Setembro não tem sentido (1968: September Makes No Sense), about young intellectuals seeking identity in pre-dictatorship Brazil. Sargento Getulio (1971: Sergeant Getulio) represents the cultural conundrum of the dictatorship years when writers had to resort to literary techniques such as allegory and symbolism to dodge censorship, exile, or imprisonment. Ubaldo takes a somewhat striking and controversial approach to lust in House of the Fortunate Buddahs, written as part of a series of novels on the seven deadly sins. The book was translated into English by Cliff Landers and published by Dalkey Archive Press in 2011.

Time to Register for Fall 2012

LAS 490: Translation Tools and Practice
TRST 201: Introduction to Translation Studies
TRST 406: Translation for Professions
TRST 407: Terminology and Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT)
TRST 440: Translation Studies Capstone
Translation Per Se

New York-based writer and literary translator Ezra Fitz (http://www.ezrafitz.com), based in Nashville, Tenn., is a specialist in the translation of contemporary Latin American literature and an affiliate of CTS, mentoring students in the online program in applied literary translation. Fitz offers here an excerpt from his as-yet-unpublished novel, *The Morning Side of the Hill*:

The name of the bar was “Siempre Amigos,” but it might as well have been “Siempre Abatidos.” It was the same men every time, short and stocky both in stature and temperament, who spent as much time as possible at the bar, leaving only to eat or sleep before returning again to sit at the bar and wait for fight night to arrive. It was not faith that they had, it was a stoicism, and it hung over them with the permanence of gravity. From time to time, one of them would stand up with a grimace, make his way over to the juke box, and punch in some bachata or merengue. But no matter how loudly it blared out over the speakers, it forced no joy into that tiny place.

The bar sold Presidente beer and only Presidente beer, and once, while Elvis Crespo was singing about soft kisses, Willie bought a round of beers, which elicited a muted cheer from the patrons. The matriarch thanked him by mixing a special drink: a margarita made with damiana instead of triple sec.

Eso fue una buena cosa hacer, she said, leaning across the bar. Es una canción alegre. Solo pensé que mereció un poquito más alegría. Es todo.

Alegria? No hay mucho de esa aquí.

Meet a CTS Faculty Member

Wail Hassan, a professor in the Program in Comparative and World Literature since 2004, is teaching, for the first time, one of the CTS’s foundation courses, “Translation Theory and Practice” (TRST 410). Professor Hassan, a literary translator with fluency in four languages and the author of two books, meets weekly with his class of 10 graduate and 16 undergraduate students.

Most of the students are pursuing a Certificate in Translation Studies and already possess a commitment to a specific language and literary genre. This makes Hassan’s job a little easier. “They come to class with excellent language skills,” said Hassan.

The class is not designed to be a standard lecture and discussion but instead integrates philosophy with actual practice. Professor Hassan guides his students in examining the theory of literary translation. Then students spend almost half of class time in a workshop-type environment, sharing their independent translation project.

“Each student chooses a text to translate in their language—fiction, memoir, poetry, or essay—that has not previously been translated, and they give weekly reports on their progress,” said Hassan. Students must state reasons for interest in selected text, explain the challenges they expect to face, and also read aloud portions of their translations, he said.

“The particularities of each student’s work differ, but everyone is confronting the same handful of challenges and conflicts,” said Hassan. His students, mired in translations of smaller works from a variety of historically obscure or contemporary writers, learn from and relate to their classmates’ challenges, as well as those of their teacher, who is presently at work on the translation of a Brazilian novel.

She went on to tell him how one of the regulars had grown up in Flatbush in the 1950s, watching Roy Campanella, El Duque Snider, and Yaqui Robinson play ball at Ebbets Field. She told him how he would sit in the bleachers and cheer for Los Bums and even boo the great Mays, who played for their rivals, Los Gigantes. And she told him that he no longer believed in Heaven. Fue derribado en 1960, he said.