

# Thinking about translation – activities for the English classroom

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This document contains teaching activities around translation at high school and can be downloaded as a PDF file or read [online](#). The texts and activities are inspired by our work on the project "[Pragmatics of Fiction: Lay subtitling and online communal viewing](#)". They were compiled in connection with the [75th anniversary of the Swiss Association of University Teachers](#).

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## Translation, classrooms and the CEFR

When it comes to the English language skills taught at secondary schools, productive and receptive skills in speech and writing are central parts of education and most teachers will be familiar with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and its functional descriptors to assess or self-assess how advanced learners have become in their language proficiency. The “Rahmenlehrplan 21”, for instance, makes no specific mention that translation, an activity that requires receptive skills in one language and productive skills in another, as well as processing skills in connecting the two, is a particular aim for learners in the English classroom, yet – at least in a more informal sense, translation is a very pervasive activity that can serve as scaffolding for early-stage learners when it comes to productive skills in their target language, but is also more broadly a specific mediation skill that allows processing and designing information for particular addressees. Indeed, the CEFR’s companion volume offers mediation as a key aspect for teaching and learning and also contains specific descriptors for written as well as oral translation. For instance, the descriptor for level A1 in “Translating a written text in speech or sign” specifies that an individual on that level:

“can provide a simple, rough oral translation (into Language B) of simple everyday words/signs and phrases (written in Language A) that are encountered on signs and notices, posters, programmes, leaflets, etc.”  
([CEFR Companion volume 2020](#): 104)

Skills on level B2 in “Translating a written text in writing” include target texts that mirror “normal language usage” and are clearly organized, as well as the ability to convey main points of a target text while also staying close to its sentence and paragraph structure.

At the highest professional level, translation and interpreting are of course skills that require specific training that could not possibly be included in the curriculum of a Swiss secondary foreign language classroom. However, these examples of translation skills at earlier and less specialized stages of language learning indicate that translation is also a necessary competency for non-professionals and an activity and learning aim that could well be integrated into learning at school. This is even more true when we consider the initial premise that translation is not an independent skill, but in fact a sophisticated combination of listening/reading and writing/speaking, guided by principles like some form of structural, aesthetic or functional equivalence that also appears in the CEFR companion descriptors ([CEFR Companion volume 2020](#)).

In what follows, we will make some general observations on translation and then move to more specific information on subtitling. The text is meant for teachers who can use the suggested input and activities with their students to reflect on the challenges of translation and on introducing and reflecting on translating practices.

**Activity:**

- (1) What experience do you have with translation in the classroom/at home/between friends/when travelling?
- (2) Where would you place yourself on the CEFR scale for written-written translation?  
(see [CEFR Companion volume 2020](#): 103–104)

## Thinking about “translation”

In the classroom, translation is at times considered in terms of correct or accurate transfer of the source (or school) language (e.g. German, French, Italian) into the target language (e.g. English). However, this understanding of translation does not do justice to the complexity of translation processes. Translating is challenging not just on the lexical and syntactic level (grammatical accuracy) but also on the pragmatic level (idiomatic expressions, adequate renditions of positionings, diplomacy, politeness, etc.). The more typologically different the languages itself and the “cultures” with which they are associated, the more challenging the translation becomes.

### *Random examples of typologically remote languages:*

Korean and English

Japanese and German

Finnish and English

### *Random examples of typologically close languages:*

Dutch and German

French and Italian

English and French

### *A selection of translation challenges:*

- Syntax and morphology:  
Languages differ in how they organize sentences; French and English have Subject-Verb-Object position, while other languages put the verb last, etc.. Some languages use honorific morphemes to signal status and respect (e.g. Korean and Japanese), others make a distinction between Du/Sie, tu/Vous, tu/Lei/voi and the accompanying verbs. Some languages favor suffixes and postpositions to indicate e.g. possessives and spatial locations whereas others prefer pronouns and preposition (compare e.g. Finnish and English, *koira on sohvallamme*, ‘the dog is **on our sofa**’, which in Finnish is literally rendered as ‘the dog is **sofa-on-our**’).
- Varieties:  
People do not only speak the standard of a language (‘Hochdeutsch’; Standard English) but there are many varieties of a language that exist at the same time: for example, regional dialects, social dialects, ethnic dialects. This variation is difficult to translate, because what such a dialect says about a speaker is grounded in the context of that society. To be precise, even standards of a language are often not one single variety, but can be part of a set of standards in different countries or regions (e.g. Austrian, German, Swiss High German, etc.; American, Australian, British, English, etc.).
- Vocabulary:  
The lexicon (the vocabulary of a language) can differ according to formality, genre, jargon, in-group language, etc. This language can be very group-specific and can often not be easily translated as no direct equivalence exists.

- **Pragmatics:**  
Differences in how to perform speech acts (e.g., thanking, greeting, addressing each other, doing phone calls, etc.) and activities in general have to do with how language is used idiomatically in the source and target languages. Since such practices can differ, translators have to make a decision with respect to whether they orient more towards the source language or the target language.

When translators make decisions as to how to transfer the source text into a target text, it is inevitable that they change the text and thus rewrite it. The reason for this is that there is no easy equivalence and automatic transfer from one language into another and as a consequence, translators are co-creators of a text. Research has described two general orientations, which are described here in Nisticó's words:

"The translators' task is to make the source text available to a target audience with a different socio-cultural background than the author's, by oscillating between an adaptation of a text to its target linguaculture and readers (**domestication**) and an orientation to the source language (**foreignization**). In this sense, they mediate between different languages, cultures, communities, social norms, and behaviors." (Nisticó, under review)

*A selection of translation practices/tendencies (based on Mauranen 2007):*

- **explicitation:**  
"translations are more explicit than source texts" (p. 38)
- **simplification:**  
"translated language is 'simplified' as compared to non-translated language", e.g. in vocabulary (p. 39)
- **conventionalisation:**  
"a tendency towards conventionality, or 'normalisation' [...]. It is akin to a general conservatism or caution, often attributed to translations, which means that translations are supposed to avoid margins or periphery and remain safely within the mainstream." (p. 40)
- **under-representation of unique target-language items:**  
"[F]eatures which tend to be 'untranslatable', unique to the target language, or in any case do not occur in the source language, tend to be proportionally under-represented in translations", for example discourse markers or morphemes that only occur in one of the languages (p. 42).
- **untypical collocations:**  
The target texts shows collocations that are not typical of comparable texts in the same language (p. 44).
- **source-language interference:**  
"[B]oth the source text and the source language system" can be expected to influence the translation. (p. 43)

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**Activities:**

- (1) How would you translate a Swiss German/French/Italian movie with characters that speak many different regional dialects into English? Would the characters all speak in the same way or would you create a difference among them? What changes depending on your decision?
  - (2) How would you translate a British movie with many characters who speak regional dialects (e.g. Scottish and Standard British English) and class varieties of English (e.g. working class English and upper-class English) into German/Italian/French? What changes depending on your decision?
  - (3) You are a fan of Korean TV drama and you translate the Korean original into fan subtitles online. When doing so, you use a lot of Korean borrowings. What translation practice is this?
  - (4) You are asked to translate a Swiss children's book into English. What translation practices will you adopt in order to ensure that the English speaking children will understand the story that plays in Switzerland?
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## Subtitles as an example of translation

If we ask ourselves how we can integrate translation in the classroom and what enriching mediation activities can be offered to secondary school students, we may think only of translanguaging by teachers and learners, e.g. offering chunks from the L1 as a facilitator for understanding or expression in the L2. However, given the pervasiveness of audiovisually translated multimodal content that learners have at their disposal in this day and age, it may be useful to look further and discover subtitles as useful text genre for English teachers and learners. Most learners in the classroom will of course be broadly familiar with subtitles, in English or their L1, as a tool that can make it possible for them to understand parts of films and TV shows as well as shorter formats like Youtube and Tiktok videos to which they would otherwise have no or more limited access. This is to say that learners will already be familiar with some very pragmatic benefits of making use of subtitles as a tool, even though they may have spent little time actually considering what is and is not communicated through the subtitles they engage with.

When we look at research on subtitling, we find good descriptions of the particularities of subtitles as the product of a specific translational practice as well as of the specific differences to other types of audiovisual translation, of which dubbing is the most widely discussed example. Especially that latter comparison between subtitled and dubbed films has been discussed in different academic, but also in everyday public discourses, and its real-world impact is manifest in every decision when going to the movies or turning on the next Netflix episode in the form of a choice: What audiotrack and what subtitles do I pick?

### Activities:

- (1) To what degree do each of the following aspects influence subtitling and dubbing? What might be the particular difficulties for each of the two types of translation?

	Subtitling	Dubbing
<b>Actor/character lip movements</b>		
<b>Aligning with source text register</b>		
<b>Body movement of actors/characters</b>		
<b>Concise target text</b>		
<b>Constraints in terms of space and time</b>		
<b>Film music</b>		
<b>Film sounds</b>		
<b>Intelligibility of the target text</b>		
<b>Non-standard language</b>		
<b>omitting information present in the dialogue</b>		
<b>Synchrony with the spoken dialogue</b>		
<b>Synchrony with visual aspects of the film</b>		

(Source: Guillot 2017)

- (2) Do you prefer watching movies/TV series in the original language with subtitles or do you prefer watching them with dubbed audio-track?
- (3) What changes when you watch in either form, what remains the same?
- (4) When you look at the list of features in the activity just above and compare it to written translation, how do these different translation types differ? How does interpreting (i.e. oral translation) compare?

## Passive reading and active writing of subtitles

One interesting development in the last few decades is that subtitles are no longer exclusively made by professional subtitlers. In what has sometimes be called the fansubbing-phenomenon, individuals and groups of ardent expert fans have taken it upon themselves to share their time and expertise with other members of the same community who want to access newly produced audiovisual content quickly, for instance before a dubbed version has made it to an Italian television channel. But those fan subtitles are not only made faster than would be the case for other translations, they are also often informed by other aims. Researchers have found that in contrast to professional subtitles, fan subtitles are less demanding when it comes to phrasing the target text in optimally idiomatic sentences in the target language and instead favor access to the source text and source culture. This includes that fan subtitles do not only translate spoken words from the dialogue to written words in a different language, but include comments with additional explanations to provide additional insights. Moreover, fan subtitlers often assume that their readers and viewers are also themselves fans of what they are watching and therefore create common ground.

### Activity:

- (1) Which translations do you like (A) based on the information they contain, and (B) based on how they sound in English. Where could they be from?
  - a. What is that car doing?!  
Step on the pedal, please! PLEASE!  
It's not like you're driving a tractor! Hey, to the left. Step on it!
  - b. Isn't it furnished?  
Ah, well, the old manager left with it  
But why did he leave with the furniture?
  - c. Isn't it furnished?  
The ex-manager took it.  
Why?
  - d. What are they doing?  
Come on, faster!  
This is as slow as a tractor. Go left.  
Go faster.
  - e. It's not furnished!  
The last director took the furniture with him  
Why did he leave with the furniture?

**Solution: see references**

(Source: Messerli & Locher submitted.; Wilcock 2013)

## Current research at the University of Basel:

### *Pragmatic of Fiction - Lay subtitling and online communal viewing*

The project **Pragmatics of Fiction: Lay subtitling and online communal viewing** offers a new pragmatic perspective onto processes and products of subtitling. Its central foci are the role of English in making televised Korean dramas accessible to a global audience; the changing paradigms of subtitle production and reception towards more participatory and collaborative practices; the dynamic participation structures of translated artefacts and their effects on cross-cultural communication. While the project draws on research in translation, it is grounded in English linguistics, the pragmatics of fiction and computer-mediated communication. Our aim is to bring linguistic questions about language in use to this research interface. If you are interested in exploring this research further, please consult our publications:

Dayter, Daria, Locher, Miriam A., & Messerli, Thomas C. (in press 2023). *Pragmatics of Translation: Negotiating Relational Work and Participation Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Locher, Miriam A. (2020). Moments of relational work in English fan translations of Korean TV drama. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 170, 139-155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.08.002> (open access)

Locher, Miriam A., & Messerli, Thomas C. (2020). Translating the other: Communal TV watching of Korean TV drama. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 170, 20-36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.07.002> (open access)

Messerli, Thomas C., & Locher, Miriam A. (2021). Humour support and emotive stance in comments on K-Drama. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 178, 408-425. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.03.001> (open access)

#### *In preparation or under review*

Locher, Miriam A., & Messerli, Thomas C. (under review). "what does hyung mean please?": Moments of teaching and learning about Korean im/politeness on an online streaming platform of Korean TV drama. In Mary Shin Kim (Ed.), *Politeness in Korean (t.b.a.)*: Springer.

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## Recommended sources for pragmatics and translation

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- Tipton, Rebecca, & Desilla, Louisa (Eds.). (2019). *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Pragmatics*. London: Routledge.

## Source for CEFR framework

- CEFR Companion volume. (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion volume*.  
<https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>

## Solution Activity Passive reading and active writing of subtitles

(a) and (d) are fansubtitles and professional subtitles in an action scene from a Korean TV-Drama

(b), (c), and (e) are the back translation the professional subtitles and the fan subtitles from *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*