

## Warp Speed in Language Classes

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### Abstract

In interpreter and translator training, great emphasis is placed on the concepts of general untranslatability, linguistic relativity and dynamic equivalence. Even between closely related languages like German and English, there are formidable cultural barriers professionals must overcome. For example, an everyday word like “bread”, can mean something very different across languages and cultures. Untranslatability is magnified between linguistically distant languages such as English and Japanese or German and Japanese. Most Japanese students naively believe that there are one-on-one equivalents in English for all Japanese words. Also, they are puzzled to find quite a few Japanese “meanings” for one English word in their dictionaries. This paper seeks to highlight common phenomena of untranslatability and linguistic relativity as they manifest in elementary German classes taught at university level, and to show how language learning can be carefully designed to enable students to experience and enjoy cultural diversity or the “warp” between cultures.

### 要旨

欧州の大学・大学院レベルの通訳者・翻訳者教育では翻訳不可能性、言語相対性理論及び動的等価が重視される。ドイツ語と英語のように非常に近い言語間であっても、いざ翻訳しようとするれば異文化の高い壁がそこに立ちはだかる。日常用語である「パン」ひとつとってもその意味は文化的背景によって大きく異なる。日英や日独のように距離の遠い言語間では翻訳不可能性は増幅する。日本の学生の多くは日本語の全ての言葉に対してぴったり当てはまる英語が存在すると考えている。しかし英和辞典を引けば、一つの見出し語に対して複数の「意味」が列挙されていて彼らは困惑する。本稿では翻訳不可能性と言語相対性が大学での初級ドイツ語クラスでいかに現出するかを例示し、受講者達が異文化間のワープを実体験するための方法を提示する。

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In Japan, people frequently use the word Gamba (現場). This word is translatable neither into English nor into German. We can attempt to define the concept as “real place”, “authentic site”, “real world”, “sacred place” and so on. But one would never grasp the true meaning of the word without some real exposure to the Shinto world. In German speaking countries, people often use the word “gemütlich”. We can try to translate this word with “pleasant”, “cozy”, “relaxed” or “laid back”. But none of these English words comes close enough. A German colleague of mine said he would have to write an article of at least three pages to describe the meaning of this word. We may never understand the meaning of the word unless we have experienced German way of life. So many things in our languages are simply untranslatable. In analogy to Einstein’s theory of general relativity we translators and interpreters use the concept of *linguistic relativity* to constantly remind ourselves of immense distances between cultural universes. For our language class students, linguistic relativity reveals itself as formidable barriers. They are often confused and overwhelmed by different ways of perceiving and thinking. A systematic approach can be designed. We start with simple mathematics and natural science and then add more doses of cultural relativity little by little. Intensive recitation exercises with well written simple texts can help our students embarking on linguistic adventures into a distant universe.

### **General Untranslatability in Languages**

I commenced my training as a translator at the Department of Humanities of the University of Vienna focusing on Japanese, German and English. This department contains a Center for Translation Studies (formerly called the Institute for Interpreter and Translator Education). There, great emphasis was placed on translation theories including the concepts of *general untranslatability* (*allgemeine Unübersetzbarkeit*), linguistic relativity<sup>2</sup> and *dynamic equivalence*. These concepts are based on the understanding that even between closely related languages like German and English, French and English or even French and Spanish there are formidable, unsurmountable cultural barriers professionals must somehow overcome. For example, an everyday word like “bread” can mean something very different across European languages and cultures. “Brot” in German, in fact, triggers images totally different from “bread” in English or “le pain” in French would.

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<sup>2</sup> Also known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

## ***Dynamic Equivalence***

The term *dynamic equivalence* was coined by Eugene Nida (1964, p.166), an American Bible translator. His efforts to translate the Bible into various languages in the world gave him insights into semantic gaps translators were confronted with.

The three lines below represent translations of Matthew chapter 6 verse 11.

"Give us this day our daily bread!" (King James Version 1611)

"Give us this day our daily rice!" (James Curtis Hepburn 1815~1911)

"Give us this day our daily seal!" (Hans Egede 1686~1758)

When Hepburn (1887) translated this verse into Japanese, the word "bread" in the King James Version transformed itself into "糧 (kate) " or "some rice". So, the verse reads "Give us this day our daily rice!" And when Hans Egede, a Danish missionary to Greenland, translated the same verse into an Inuit language he is said to have used the expression "our daily seal".

This is an example of how fundamental untranslatability can only be overcome with an exceptional level of cultural background knowledge and creativity. In this example, "rice" or "seal" can be seen as dynamic equivalents of "bread". In other words "bread" transforms itself into "rice" or "seal" in an immense WARP leap at the moment of translation.

German and English are both West Germanic languages and are historically very closely related to each other. But once we start translating an everyday English conversation into German we face countless stumbling blocks. Translators use very frequently dynamic equivalents instead of formal equivalents. For example:

"I think she is a good leader.

She is robust.

She will take Boris for a ride quite easily."

"Ich glaube, sie ist eine ziemlich gute Regierungschefin.

Sie ist ziemlich robust.

Sie steckt unseren Boris locker in die Tasche."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel met British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in London in July 2021. The German news broadcast ARD (2021) aired a street interview with a young

(male) passer-by recorded by the NDR in downtown London. This interview may appear to be a relatively straight forward at first glance. But for a translator this interchange is by no means easy to translate. For example, there was in fact a slight pause and sign of hesitation before the interviewed person uttered the words "a good leader". At that time the translator inserted the word "ziemlich" (quite). The word "Führer" for a "leader" is, of course, very inappropriate because in German historically it has been used to refer to Adolf Hitler. Therefore, the translator used the word "Regierungschefin" , which means literally "head of government" . "Head of state" (Staatschefin) could not be used as the two functions are strictly separate in the German political system. The German head of state at this moment is not Angela Merkel but Frank-Walter Steinmeier. A common word like "a leader" in English can contain huge ambiguity depending on the target language's political or legal system. The translator also replaced the image of "taking him for a ride" with the image of "carrying him in a pocket".

### ***Linguistic Relativity***

Boroditsky (2011, pp.63-64) studied the Kuuk Thaayorre language spoken in Prompuraaw, a small aboriginal community on the western edge of Cape York in northern Australia and found that the language does not use relative spatial terms such as left and right. Rather, Kuuk Thaayorre speakers talk in terms of absolute cardinal directions (north, south, east, west and so forth). And people in Prompuraaw showed unique cognitive ability to point cardinal directions precisely without a compass. Thanks to their language, they perceive what speakers of other languages cannot perceive.

The concept of linguistic relativity is based on Humboldtian tradition. Wilhelm von Humboldt was a Prussian linguist and policy maker in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He researched many distant languages including Basque and concluded that languages are, in fact, "life forms" on their own. Every word reflects and determines the culture, the way of life and the unique way of viewing the world. According to Humboldt (1836, p.50), language is the formative organ of thought. (Sprache ist das bildende Organ des Gedanken).

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, a 18<sup>th</sup> century German writer said that a language is a "world". He translated works of Shakespeare into German and saw that cultural distance was extremely wide even between these two West Germanic languages. If Goethe had been familiar with modern astronomy, he would have said, "A language is an universe."

Even between closely related languages a translation is a space travel between different *world views* (Weltbilder). Thus, translation is certainly not about just replacing the words. Mechanical or superficial translations are not acceptable. Fundamental impossibility of translation occurs on all levels of linguistic phenomena including lexicology, syntax, and semantics. Most Japanese students naively believe that there are one-on-one equivalents in English for every Japanese word. At the same time, they are puzzled to find quite a few Japanese “meanings” for one English word in their dictionaries. They are confused by the multiplicity of the “choices” they are offered. The students must first understand that the meaning of a word is determined by the sentence. The meaning of the sentence is determined by the co-text. The meaning of the co-text is determined by the context. And the meaning of the context is determined by the unique world in which they live.

For example, the Japanese language is rich in words and expressions related to rain and fish. In fact, there are said to be about 400 different words for “rain”. These include: はるさめ (spring rain) さみだれ (recurring rain in May) ばいりゅう (rainy season rain) 麦雨 (wheat harvest season rain) はくう (sudden rain storm) ゆうだち (evening rain in summer) あきさめ (persisting rain in autumn) きりさめ (foggy rain) しぐれ (sporadic rain in late autumn and early winter) ひさめ (氷雨) (icy rain) みぞれ (sherbet like icy rain) 涙雨 (teary rain) きつねのよめいり (fox wedding rain= unexpected rain shower on a sunny day) etc.

Another example is the fish simply known as yellowtail in English. In Japanese, there is a different name for this fish depending on its size. (出世魚) The Japanese Fishery Research Agency (2021) states five names for this fish.

ワカナ<20cm ツバス<40cm ハマチ<60cm メジロ<cm80 ブリ>80cm

Words also change according to the status and gender of the speaker and the situation. There are many first person singular personal pronouns in Japanese. わたくし、わたし、あたし、うち、ぼく、おれ、小生、わし etc. These must be used properly as their usage can indicate the level of formality inherent in the given situation and as well as indicate gender. Japanese is a so-called high context language. There are often no subjects. And the message in an utterance is conveyed by reading the air as well as understanding the words. There is generally no distinction between singular and plural. Furthermore, there are highly complex rules governing the use of particles. It is a whole new universe governed by totally different sets of laws of physics.

But people do not see the uniqueness of their own language unless you encounter another. We can only see a language's unique beauty when we begin to contrast it with another linguistic universe.

From the perspective of translators, untranslatability, linguistic relativity and dynamic equivalence are three aspects of one reality. Untranslatability must necessarily result from linguistic relativity. And the only solutions available to translators are dynamic equivalents generated by cultural experience, insights and intuitions.

### Practical Applications of the Theory of Linguistic Relativity

In Japan, most university students are Japanese natives and have never had deep contact with western cultures. Thus, where should we start the teaching of the basics of German language? Is there any common ground? How can we systematically introduce them into a new world?

**Mathematics**, for instance, is an example of a common ground, or a bridge between cultures. In the fields of mathematics and natural sciences we use artificial languages specially designed to minimize cultural differences and ambiguity. In order to avoid confronting the students with untranslatability right from the beginning, we start our elementary German classes with *numerals*.

null, eins, zwei, drei, vier, fünf, sechs, sieben, acht, neun, zehn, elf, zwölf etc.

These numerals from 0 to 12 contain already, as you might recognize, a majority of the German consonants<sup>3</sup> as well as most of the German vowels including *Umlaut /ö/ and /ü/*. They also contain two of the three German diphthongs.

This means that our students can, through intensive phonetical exercises using numerals in April, acquire basic German sounds in the first few weeks of the first semester. Systematic and intensive trainings in phonetics right at the beginning is crucial.

As soon as our students have become familiar with basic German numerals, we start rolling a dice in small groups. (This can be done also online using a virtual dice). One of the students throw a dice and others say the number in unison. At the beginning, even

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<sup>3</sup> 15 of 24 Standard German consonants.

pronouncing numbers from 1 to 6 is a challenge. But very soon we start using formulas like this:

$$n(n-1)$$

$$n^2$$

$$10^3 n^2$$

$$10^3 n^2 - 1$$

$$10^6 n^2$$

$$10^6 n^2 - 1$$

$$10^9 n^2$$

$$10^9 n^2 - 2$$

The last formula may, for instance, result in: 35,999,999,998.-

In this way, we can combine language training with a training in mathematics. Some of our students are preparing to become Certified Public Accountants (CPAs) and are already highly skilled in mathematics. So they come up with their own creative formulas. And they become fluent in large numbers in German within a few weeks.

**Astronomy** offers a common ground to start with as well. Let me give you an example:

*Original text in German:*

Das Wort von Galileo Galilei (geboren im Jahr 1564 in Pisa/Italien)

*(geschrieben von Kensuke Yoshimura)*

Ich habe ein Teleskop. Das Teleskop ist sehr stark.

Mit dem Teleskop sehe ich das Sonnensystem.

Kopernicus hat doch recht! Die Erde ist nicht das Zentrum des Universums!

Der Jupiter, der Mars, der Saturn und die Venus.

Das sind die Planeten der Sonne. Sie kreisen um die Sonne.

Die Erde ist auch ein Planet und kreist einmal im Jahr um die Sonne.

Die Erde dreht sich auch. Sie dreht sich einmal in 24 Stunden.

Die Erde ist klein. Der Mensch ist klein.

Und das Universum ist unendlich groß.

English translation:

The words of Galileo Galilee (born in Pisa/Italy in 1564)

(written by Kensuke Yoshimura)

I have a telescope. The telescope is very powerful.  
With the telescope I see the solar system.  
Copernicus was right. The Earth is not the center of the universe.  
The Jupiter the Mars, the Saturn, and the Venus.  
They are the planets of the Sun. They circle around the Sun.  
The Earth is also a planet and circles around the Sun once a year.  
The Earth rotates on its axis as well. She rotates once in 24 hours.  
The Earth is small. A man is small. And the Universe is endlessly big.

### **Entering a Different Universe**

But already in May, we start using texts with relatively high cultural content like this.

Original German Dialog

Im Restaurant

(geschrieben von Kensuke Yoshimura)

Kellner: Guten Tag!

Gast: Guten Tag!

Kellner: Was möchten Sie gern trinken?

Gast: Ein Glas Riesling bitte!

Kellner: Sehr gerne!

Kellner: Wissen Sie schon, was Sie gern essen möchten?

Gast: Ja, ich hätte gerne eine Gulaschsuppe und ein Wienerschnitzel mit Bratkartoffeln.

Kellner: Möchten Sie einen Salat dazu?

Gast: Ja, einen gemischten Salat, bitte.

Kellner: Bitte sehr! Guten Appetit!

Gast: Danke schön!

Kellner: Hat es Ihnen geschmeckt?

Gast: Ja, sehr gut. Danke!

Kellner: Möchten Sie vielleicht ein Dessert?

Gast: Ja, Ich hätte gerne einen Espresso und ein gemischtes Eis mit Schlagsahne.

Kellner: Sehr gerne!

Gast: Zahlen, bitte!

Kellner: Jawohl! Ein Glas Riesling, eine Gulaschsuppe, ein Wienerschnitzel mit Bratkartoffeln, ein gemischter Salat, ein Espresso und ein gemischtes Eis mit Schlagsahne. Das macht 22 Euro, bitte.

Gast: Auf 25 Euro, bitte!

Kellner: Vielen Dank! Auf Wiedersehen!

Gast: Auf Wiedersehen!

*English "translation" using formal equivalents*

At a restaurant

*(written by Kensuke Yoshimura)*

Server: Good afternoon!

Customer: Good afternoon!

Server: What would you like to drink?

Customer: A glass of Riesling, please!

Server: Very well! Do you already know what you would like to eat?

Customer: Yes, I would like a goulash soup and a Vienna schnitzel with fried potatoes.

Server: Would you like a salad too?

Customer: Yes, a mixed salad please!

Server: Here you go! Bon appetit!

Customer: Thank you!

Server: Did they taste good to you/How was your meal?

Customer: Yes, very good!

Server: Would you like a dessert?

Customer: Yes, I would like an espresso and a mixed ice cream with whipped cream.

Server: Very well!

Customer: Check, please!

Server: All right! One glass of Riesling, one goulash soup, one Vienna schnitzel with fried potatoes, one mixed salad, one espresso and one mixed ice cream with whipped cream. That makes €22, please!

Customer: Take €25 please!

Server: Many thanks! Goodbye!

Customer: Goodbye!

This is a typical dialogue between a customer and a server in a restaurant in Germany. I underlined some of the words and phrases that would be unthinkable in a comparable setting in Japan. A Japanese server would never directly ask the customer if he or she liked the dish. And a Japanese server would not understand the meaning of "Take €25 please!". And a dialogue, if any, would be much more formal and never be so lively and interactive, at least not in the Tokyo area.

In late May or early June, our students start *reciting* a text like this. By reciting and acting they get immersed in a different world. They recite with emotion, they act with expressions and they play their roles using eye contact and body language. They experience a different way of thinking and interacting.

To be freed from written texts gives us several advantages. We have more eye contact with our partners, which is very important especially in European cultures. Interactions with others will suddenly become speedier and livelier. And this gives the students more confidence in their new world. A language class becomes a performing arts class with an audience.

### ***Reciting Out Loud***

Reciting texts has a very long tradition in human culture. Educated Britons took pride in their ability to recite Shakespeare. Educated Germans took pride in their ability to recite Homer or Goethe. Lorenz (1981, p. 87), a well-known Austrian researcher of animal behaviors, said that slightest hints in conversations could stimulate him into reciting the entire "Faust (Part1)" of Goethe and in fact he had difficulties suppressing this urge. Also in Jewish tradition, reciting the Tora and singing psalms was an essential part of education. And Quran literally means "recitation". The *Yukar* sagas from the Ainu in Hokkaido are another example of how a long rich tradition of oral literature has kept a unique culture alive.

Recitation practice for the purpose of acquiring L2, L3, L4 or more was proposed by Heinrich Schliemann (1822~1890), a German archaeologist who discovered ancient Troy. According to a biography written by Bölke (2000, pp.37-39), Schliemann only started learning foreign languages when he was 19 or 20 years old, well after the onset of puberty. Furthermore, the early 19th century Mecklenburg-Vorpommern area he lived in was not very rich in offering everyday interactions with native speakers of the languages he wished to learn. Even in Amsterdam, he had to learn languages in relative isolation. This is

comparable to the situation many students in Japan are faced with today, especially if they live in rural areas. However, through intensive recitation practice Schliemann became fluent in English in six months. He mastered French in another six months. And then, as his memory grew more and more powerful, he needed no more than six weeks each to become able to speak and write Dutch, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese fluently.

As for my own experience, I learned English for 10 years in a traditional Japanese educational style and never actually knew whether my English pronunciation was correct. In fact, I couldn't understand English nor speak it. I started learning German at the age of 22 by reciting German texts every day, and I became fluent in German in six months.

By starting to recite carefully selected texts we can challenge the established "letter based and silent language classes" in this country and launch a "sound based interactive language training".

The strategy for recitation suggested by Schliemann focuses on three areas. Recitation practice should be highly intensive (Schumann practiced all day long as long as he was **awake**)<sup>4</sup>, be done in short spurts and passages should never be translated.<sup>5</sup>

One of the advantages of recitation practice is, as we noted, that you become free from written texts. And this freedom enables you to practice anywhere and anytime. When I ask my students when and where they practice their recitations, frequent answers include:

- When I am taking a shower.
- When I relax in a bathtub.
- When I am making instant noodles.

Warp speed, in a sense of high velocity leap or rapid progress, can be attained on three levels of language learning.

- 1) Enable travelling from one cultural universe to another.
- 2) Acquiring a second or third language within a short period of time. (For example six month vs. 10 years)
- 3) Acquiring near native listening, speaking, reading and writing *speed*.

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<sup>4</sup> Modern brain science has proven that hippocampus in our brain processes the data when we are asleep and enhances the memory during the night.

<sup>5</sup> At this stage, attempts to translate would make grasp of the true meaning impossible due to the fundamental untranslatability.

### ***Time-Based Recitation Exercises***

Speed is a crucial element. Many foreign language teachers in Japan experience frustration because of the *slowness* of their students' oral output.

This may be due to the following reasons:

- They are mentally *dependent* on written texts and want to cling to them.
- They are *afraid* of making grammatical errors.
- They are *uncertain* about pronunciation.
- They think in Japanese first and struggle to *translate*.<sup>6</sup>

Students need to gain speed, fluency and accuracy at the same time. They must start thinking in German or English. They need to start speaking without missing a beat. Output exercises in our classes are, therefore, time based. We measure our recitation performances with a stopwatch.

In April they need about two and a half minutes on average to recite a 13 line beginners' text in German. They have poor pronunciation. Every sound is a struggle to them. There are a lot of interjections, ramblings and pauses between words and sentences. But after a few weeks of intensive trainings, they begin to show a remarkable acceleration. After a month of daily practice, they needed less than 20 seconds, in average, for the same text. This represents a 7.5 times acceleration in one month. The oral outputs were accurate, smooth and effortless. We add a new text every week. And the texts get longer and more advanced every time. Within three months we have stored a whole repertoire of German expressions in our bodies. We can access and use them anytime with modifications to fit real world situations.

In a survey conducted by the author in July 2021, four out of the six students in a recitation-based class felt that their overall competence in German improved significantly within six months. A more detailed survey conducted in September 2021 showed that four of the six students felt that recitations helped improve their German pronunciation significantly; all six students felt that recitations helped improve the rhythm and melody (prosody) in their output significantly. Furthermore, all students felt that recitation practice enabled them to get used to German syntactical structures subconsciously, that is without a conscious effort to learn the complex rules.

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<sup>6</sup> Linguistic relativity makes such attempts futile.

### ***Possible Pitfalls***

Our students may sometimes fall into mechanical, mantra-like reciting. This can be avoided by introducing them into substitution and modification exercises and different dialogue settings.

“Native Language Gravity” may pull our students back to their native tongue structures and affect their performance in their second or third language. This can happen on several linguistic levels including phonetics, prosody and syntax. Their German output may start sounding like Japanese and they start omitting, for example, plural endings of nouns. Native language gravity is strong and can be overcome only by constant, intensive and focused training.

### **Conclusion**

In beginner L2 or L3 classes, a systematic introduction into cultural diversity can be designed based on the concepts of fundamental untranslatability, linguistic relativity and dynamic equivalence. These concepts underline the uniqueness of languages and the universes they represent. Language learning can be a first exciting step into a whole new universe. Intensive recitation trainings can help our students gain confidence, accuracy and speed in their second and third languages.

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## Author's Biography

Kensuke Yoshimura studied interpreting and translation at the University of Vienna and has approximately 4000 days of experience as a conference interpreter for international organizations like the OECD and the European Commission. He teaches German, linguistics and intercultural communication at Chuo University.