

## **Translation as critical perspective on adult education in the context of migration**

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### **Introduction**

We take our starting point in the SciFi Star Trek universe. In one episode<sup>1</sup> of *The Next Generation*, the Enterprise is once again on its way into the infinite expanse of space. This time, under the command of Captain Picard, it flies into an unknown area where an encounter with a species known as "The Children of Tama" lies ahead. So far, we learn from the briefings on the bridge of the Enterprise, "formal relations were not established because communication was not possible". Their language has so far been described by Starfleet as "incomprehensible". We see Captain Picard in close-up, encouraging his crew: "Are they truly incomprehensible? In my experience, communication is a matter of patience, imagination." Cut. In the next shot we see the Enterprise's communications screen, showing Dathon, the Tamarian captain. What he says is: „Rai and Jiri at Lungha. Rai of Lowani. Lowani under two moons. Jiri of Ubaya. Ubaya of crossed roads at Lungha.” etc. Perplexed looks from the Enterprise crew. What happens then is summarised as follows: the two captains are beamed to a remote planet by the Tamarians, where they are to fight together against a beast in order to develop their cooperation and bonding. Captain Picard does not understand what it is all about at first, despite efforts on both sides. By the time he finally understands, the beast has gained an advantage and kills Dathon. Only then can Picard return to the Enterprise and share his insight: the key to the language is its figurativeness, it works with metaphors from their Tamarian mythology.

What we see here, is a process in which translation becomes a theme: the failure of translation, the common struggle for its success and finally its success. In his

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<sup>1</sup> Star Trek: The Next Generation, season 5, episode 2, "Darmok," directed by Winrich Kolbe, written by Joe Menosky and Phillip LaZebnik, aired September 30, 1991 (Paramount)

work, David Roddenberg, the author of Star Trek, sketches the future as one in which everything will have gone as well as possible (cf. Dietmar Dath). Some of the great problems of humanity and the United Federation of Planets, are considered solved or have become irrelevant. In contrast to other species and planetary inhabitants understood as backward, neither money nor prisons play a role in the advanced community. The problem of translation also seems to have been overcome. (At the same time, making the plot possible; flying around in the infinite far reaches of the galaxy and then not being able to interact with other species would probably not be very rewarding to watch.) Being able to communicate with others without hurdles not only enables the plot of a spaceship venturing into alien galaxies, it also proves to be a dream of humanity.

In Star Trek, the solution is a technical one. With a device, the universal translator, at least that dimension of translation can be covered, which means the transfer of units of meaning from one language to another. But it also becomes clear that translation is more than transferring words from one language to another. Questions of context, situatedness and historicity also come into play. As of course those of power relations.

In my paper, I make the argument that translation theory approaches can be useful in thinking critically about adult education and its pedagogical foundations. I refer to formal education for adults in the context of (forced) migration. As an example, I discuss the conditions in Austria, which is pushing similar tendencies in the entanglements of language courses and residence rights as other European nation states. Approaches to translation theory as elaborated in postcolonial traditions of thought can, I argue, provide an offer for critical reflection on and within adult education. The most obvious meaning of translation, the linguistic transfer from one (national) language to another, is thus extended. It can also, I argue further, reflect on the relationship between teachers and learners and the historical and geopolitical location of adult education formats themselves.

### **Adult education in the context of (forced) migration through the example of Austria**

Drawing on the example of Austria, I would like to introduce my focus on adult education in the "Age of Migration" (Castles 2000). The brief historical classification shows that formal formats of adult education tended to pursue emancipatory goals at the time of their origin, whereas today numerous formats are linked to the constraints of migration regimes. Austria is not alone in the latter. This migration policy as manifested in language policy followed a

trend that became apparent especially in European countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, but also the UK (Kurvers and Spotti 2015; Khan 2016; Heinemann and Monzó 2021). Adult education in Austria has experienced change in the course of its history. In its institutionalisation, adult education in Austria is closely linked to the history of the "Volkshochschulen". These emerged at the end of the 19th century from educational initiatives, which were founded as craftsmen's or workers' education associations. The Volkshochschulen stood in the tradition of workers' education, which saw knowledge as empowering, and wanted to be places of political interest and democratic education. At the time of their foundation the Volkshochschulen were intended to be places of education for those excluded from the education system, like male workers but also women, and their aim was to realize the demand for "education for all" ("Bildung für alle") (Vater and Zwieler 2018). Today, however, the picture is a different one. Despite their proclaimed accessibility, the Volkshochschulen with their diverse range of courses, such as foreign languages, creative activities, etc., hardly reach their initial target group anymore. Instead, it can be observed that causes like the middle-class orientation of the educational culture, as well as the lack of resources, lead to a clear overrepresentation of people with middle and higher formal education among the participants (ibid.).

Another strand of adult education is to be understood in the context of migration. In 2011, an already existing link between "integration" and language policy was tightened by law in Austria. The so-called external integration measurement model "German before Immigration" was implemented, which requires a certificate of German at the level of A1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) before the first application for a residence title by third-country residents.<sup>2</sup> After immigration the language level A2 in German is required and must be achieved within two years. Financial support can only be obtained in the context of family reunification; in this case, however, the language level must be proven within 18 months. Failure to complete this module can be sanctioned with administrative fines or expulsion. For the application for a permanent residence status the language level B1 has to be obtained within five years (Gatt 2013, 162 f.). While informed that it is "foundational knowledge of German at the most basic level"<sup>3</sup>, it is forgotten that this can be a major hurdle for people – frequently women – with little experience in formal education, especially if they must make a living in already precarious conditions. At the end of 2015,

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<sup>2</sup> However, this does not apply to key workers as well as "highly qualified" workers, i.e. those who serve the Austrian market.

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[https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/en/themen/leben\\_in\\_oesterreich/aufenthalt/3/Seite.120260.html](https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/en/themen/leben_in_oesterreich/aufenthalt/3/Seite.120260.html) Sept. 6<sup>th</sup> 2022

compulsory "values courses" were added to the language courses, the testing of which also became an integral part of the exams. This is certainly being discussed critically:

„Migrant learners talk about their 'cultural peculiarities' and learn what constitutes 'the Austrian' and what norms of coexistence apply here. A normative and educational impetus that exposes itself as a continuity of colonial practices was and still is characteristic of the field.“ (Mineva and Salgado 2019, 196, translation NK)

These links between the right of residence and obligatory language and value courses go hand in hand with a branch of adult education formats that address their participants as those who need to be integrated, and which presumes their culturalized otherness, even backwardness.

Translations become prevalent in this context on at least two levels. On the one hand, because the teaching of German is explicitly a linguistic transfer service at the centre of many courses. On the other hand, because “European values” – whatever they may be – are constructed as such while they are to be brought closer to "the others". This is a process that we are already familiar with from postcolonial discussions about education. In the following, I pick out a translation-theoretical approach from such a discussion context.

### **Translation-theoretical approach**

Despite their diversity, recent debates on translation theory have in common that they do not understand translation as a purely technical transfer of words from one language to another. Rather, it is argued that translation is a historically and geopolitically situated practice in which relations of dominance become apparent. Especially in the postcolonial context, translation theory approaches have been productively elaborated. Tejaswini Niranjana makes this point:

“In a post-colonial context the problematic of *translation* becomes a significant site for raising questions of representation, power, and historicity. The context is one of contesting and contested stories attempting to account for, to recount, the asymmetry and inequality of relations between peoples, races, languages.” (Niranjana 1992, 1)

Niranjana sees translation as a site where the struggles for the negotiation of colonial subjects take place. The practice of translations "shapes and takes shapes within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under

colonialism" (Niranjana 1992, p. 2). She argues that a conventional understanding of translation in Western philosophy is based on the assumptions that there is an undisputed reality that can be transparently depicted. She counters this with the epistemological rationale that "in presenting particular versions of the colonized, translation brings into overarching concepts of reality and representation" (Niranjana 1992, p. 2). One of the effects of translation is to produce coherent texts and subjects. Thus, translation participates "in the fixing of colonized cultures, making them seem static and unchanging rather than historically constructed" (Niranjana 1992, p. 3). In the postcolonial context, English education is an example of how dominant representations are circulated through translation, still legitimizing ruling-class power in formerly colonized countries (cf. Niranjana 1992, p. 4). The fact that the practice of translation always raises questions about the relationship between the original and the translation has also been pointed out elsewhere. Walter Benjamin, for example, points out in his essay "The Task of the Translator" ("Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" 1923) that in the course of translation processes, both the original and its translation are not fixed, but are in a dynamic process within the framework of translation. Antonio Gramsci has not only repeatedly produced translations himself, such as Grimm's Fairy Tales during his imprisonment. He has also thought about translation itself. For him, translation is a "political act" (Ives 2004, 98). Characteristic of his understanding, similar to current discourses on translation theory, is to refrain from "the usual opposition between the creative production of an original and a secondary, parasitic transposition of translation" (Ives 2004, 98f.). Here too, the historical context in which Gramsci thinks is central. He introduces the concept of translation in one of his translations of Lenin into Italian. For him, the central question is "how to 'translate' the Russian Revolution into Italy" (Ives 2004, 99) or anywhere else. This opens up an understanding of translation that sees it as a historically situated practice that mediates between contexts much more than it transmits. "The task of translation requires and enables a comprehensive analysis of both languages and societies involved in translation, plus historical judgment" (Ives 2004: 102f.).

This perspective goes hand in hand with a specific conception of language in which language itself is understood as a political practice, as Gramsci discusses in the question of language for the mezzogiorno. What is already established in Niranjana's postcolonial perspective is currently elaborated by Rey Chow for (post)colonial subjectivation in the context of linguistic practices and racialisation:

„the intellectually sophisticated ways of coming to terms with language as known to some of us – with their stresses on error,

failure, defacement, disappointment, nonarrival, and so forth – have a vital parallel in the process of racialization, the shadowy tones of which are typically borne by those who are deemed inferior.” (2014, 15)

As we have discussed elsewhere, it is precisely those intersections of language and racism that need to be explored for a political education in which a critical and collective appropriation of language is to be understood as an important aspect of democratization (Castro Varela and Khakpour 2018).

### **Migration and adult education through the lens of translational theory**

If we understand translation as “methods of crossing boundaries with an awareness of differences” (Bachmann-Medick and Buden 2008), how can we relate it to adult education?

Translation-theoretical perspectives for reflecting on relations of representation have long been used and elaborated in ethnography and cultural and social anthropology (Sturge 2007; Leavitt 2014). Genuine interdisciplinarity is central (Italiano 2020).

Translation-theoretical perspectives were also taken up for the field of educational science (Engel 2016; Fritzsche 2021; Fritzsche and Khakpour 2022). Many of the approaches mentioned draw on translation theory to address methodological issues and reflect on the process of how knowledge translates from one context to another. However, I think that the processual, context-relational and mediating use of translation theory perspectives can lend itself to thinking about adult education in the context of migration itself. An inspiring example is Monika Mokre's conception of solidarity as translation. She refers to The Refugee Protest Camp Vienna, a movement that started in 2013, in which refugees, activists and people of different political attitudes/positions fought together against an inhumane asylum system.

She described this as an attempt at translation. On the one hand, this is because life stories had to be translated into legal paragraphs to prove legitimate reasons for flight. On the other hand, she also uses the concept of translation to reflect on processes within the movement itself, between different political standpoints, such as between „refugees and supporters, between people with highly precarious status and people with a secure residence” (Mokre 2015, 211, translation NK). Another example of translation between different social groups is described by Peter Mayo with his concept of “misplaced alliances” (2016). Referring to Gramsci's “‘internal’ national migratory context” (2016,

136) in (post) WWI Italy, as he does in the question of the South, he discusses an ideology, „that obfuscates the reality that both immigrants and ‘autochthonous’ workers are members of an international class exploited by international capital“ (2016, 135). He discusses this division as the result of racialisation processes (2016, 144). While Mayo does not work with the concept of translation, one could understand the process in which group interests are mediated and eventually lead to misplaced alliances as hegemonic translation processes.

This brings me back to adult education in the context of migration and what kind of reflection on adult education is enabled by such translation theory approaches.

- a) Language as a medium of mediation is always an important topic in adult education courses. But, as shown above, in courses addressing adults as migrants, language as learning the locally dominant or official language becomes an explicit subject, and even a tool of repressive tendencies in migration management. Critical perspectives on translation as a linguistic procedure in this context thus focus not only on the content, but also on the methods of translation and teaching themselves. This has a longer tradition in ELT (English Language Teaching) (Holliday 2005; Canagarajah 1999).
- b) Particularly in the context of (forced) migration, there is also a very strong notion, beyond linguistic translation, that one must translate practices and views in the sense of cultural translation. The notion of “cultural translation” also suggests a perspective on translation that is not limited to transfers from one (national) language to another (national) language but is also understood as a form of differential action between different cultures and symbol systems. While this is of course true on the one hand, in practice culturalizations often take place in which assumptions are generalised and, in the end, a racialised image of “the migrants” emerges.
- c) Finally, the aspect of translation can also be related to the interpersonal level. Teacher-student relationships are hierarchical and embedded in state-imposed courses. In any critical education there is a need for thinking about authority and hierarchies (in a particular manner) (Niggemann 2021). To think about the relation of teachers and learners and the processes between them as translation neither unquestioningly reproduces hierarchies nor ignores differences and different group belonging.

I consider that a more pronounced adoption of a translation-theoretical approach, also in the international debate, cannot only provide an opportunity

to reflect on adult education as such. It would also enable us to learn from different fields in a context-sensitive way.

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## Translation as critical perspective on adult education in the context of migration

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### Abstract

The article discusses a translation-theoretical approach to adult education in the context of flight and migration. In formal adult education, language courses and so-called value mediation are increasingly linked to residence rights. Translation can be

an approach to think critically about the design of courses and the relationship between learners and teachers.

### **Key words**

Translation; forced Migration, Second-language course

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## **Traduction comme perspective critique de l'éducation des adultes dans le contexte de migration**

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### **Résumé**

L'article aborde une approche théorique de la traduction de l'éducation des adultes dans le contexte de fuite et de migration. Dans l'éducation formelle des adultes, les cours de langue et ce que l'on appelle la médiation des valeurs sont de plus en plus liés aux droits de séjour. La traduction peut être une approche permettant de réfléchir de manière critique à la conception des cours et à la relation entre les apprenants et les enseignants.

### **Mots clés**

traduction ; migration (forcée), éducation des adultes, apprentissage d'une seconde langue, relations de pouvoir

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## **La traducción como perspectiva crítica sobre la educación de adultos en el contexto de la migración**

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### **Resumen**

El artículo discute un enfoque teórico de la traducción de la educación de adultos en el contexto de la huida y la migración. En la educación formal de adultos, los cursos de idiomas y la llamada mediación de valores están cada vez más relacionados con los derechos de residencia. La traducción puede ser un enfoque para pensar críticamente sobre el diseño de cursos y la relación entre alumnos y profesores.

### **Palabras clave**

traducción; migración (forzada), educación de adultos, aprendizaje de un segundo idioma, relaciones de poder