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## OUTLINE FOR THE NYU SEMINAR A PRACTICAL VIEW OF TRANSLATION HISTORY

### I. RECURRENT IDEAS ABOUT TRANSLATION Over The Last 2,500 Years

1. The never-ending battle between "translating words" vs. "translating ideas," AKA "Literalism" vs. "Liberalism."
  - 1A. Translating ideas is better than translating words.
  - 1B. Translating words is better than translating ideas.
2. Translation is virtually or ultimately impossible because no two languages are alike.
  - 2A. Only fools, scoundrels, or traitors translate.
  - 2B. Translation violates natural or divine law.
  - 2C. Translation can never work because Language A (your language) is inferior to Language B (my language).
  - 2D. No humans can possibly do it, so let's have humans invent a machine that can do it
3. Perhaps translation is possible, but most translations are bad, and most translators are just as bad (or at best poorly trained).
  - 3A. To improve matters, all translators must be carefully trained and strict rules must be followed. The training method and rules are usually provided by the person or persons making this statement.
4. Academics--including even translation scholars--have no real knowledge of practical translation problems. This position is held even by a number of academics and translation scholars.
5. Whatever problems may exist, translation is nonetheless of great value to society.
6. There must be some great and majestic theory of universal knowledge or universal grammar to account for all the aforementioned problems and contradictions.

- 6A. There can be no such theory.
7. The art and craft of translation are greatly misunderstood, and translators are largely ignored.
8. It is nonetheless possible to provide general advice and specific tips to help translators improve their translations.
- 8A. Most such advice and/or tips is (are) contradictory or mutually exclusive.

## **II: Major Periods in the History of Translation and Interpreting**

As this seminar makes clear, truly major periods in the history of translation tend to coincide with eras when a major differential or inequality exists—or is perceived to exist—between two cultures or two peoples employing different languages. One of these peoples perceives the need to absorb greater or higher or more detailed knowledge from another, whether this knowledge is conceived in political, religious, or scientific terms.

*[NOTE: In preparing this list, a number of "national" translation movements have been omitted (Russian, German, Hungarian, etc.)—the ones included are those which in the presenter's opinion occupy what we currently interpret as the main developmental path in world culture.]*

1. Prehistory: predominance of interpreting and "mediating" (by "marriage-brokers," "go-betweens," "deal-makers," "peace-seekers," all of these subsidiary meanings of the earliest words for "interpreters").
2. Sumerians, Akadians, Assyrians: the need to make laws, creation tales and other scriptures, and economic norms known among peoples using different languages.
3. Egyptians: the need to communicate with peoples in Southern Egypt and with the Hittites.
4. Greeks: the need to understand Egyptian civilization.
5. Romans: the need to understand Greek civilization.
6. Chinese (Seventh Century A.D.): the need to understand Indian civilization, especially Sanskrit and Pali scriptures.
7. Arab and Persian World (Jundishapur and Baghdad, Eighth to Tenth Centuries): the need to absorb and integrate Sanskrit, Hebrew, Syriac, and Greek knowledge into Persian and Arabic cultures.

8. Japanese, (Heian Period, Ninth to Tenth Centuries): the need to understand and absorb Chinese culture, with Korea as an important intermediary.
9. Western Middle Ages: the need to reabsorb and integrate Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek knowledge in medieval Europe.
10. Renaissance: reintegration of Ancient Greek culture in the West.
- 10A. Conquest and colonization: the need to understand American, African, and Asian languages and dialects.
11. Enlightenment and Nineteenth Centuries: decline of Latin, emergence of modern national languages as the measure of human knowledge.
12. Modern Times: many competing major and minor national languages.

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Reference: <http://language.home.sprynet.com/trandex.htm#tranhist>