

# Every Word is a Decision

By Alta L. Price

I translate into a language that came to dominate parts of the globe after being imported here. Today, I write from the ancestral lands of the Kiikaapoi, Peoria, Bodéwadmikiwen, and Myaamia. My linguistic work pays for my physical existence in a place stolen from its inhabitants a couple of centuries before my arrival and, according to family lore, a few centuries after my ancestors fled their homes in places now called Cymru, Éire, Deutschland, and France. The peoples who were here before the United States of America are still here, and the peoples who were in the lands my ancestors fled are both here and still there. I grew up surrounded by, and am the product of, a series of violations. My thoughts on *Berührungssängste*, fears of contact—physical contact—therefore focus less on the fear, and more on the resulting tensions.

Fear can paralyze, tension can catalyze. Translating, I'm accustomed to taking certain pages of text and transforming them into other pages of text. The blank page is not my home turf; it can be uncomfortable. And by "pages of text," I mean "worlds of experience."

Discussing language and culture with Wiktor Osiatyński, Noam Chomsky noted our species' use of language "to place itself in interactions with other people." Much information is transmitted, not just the content of what is said. Sociolinguistics has flourished since their conversation in the 1980s, but it doesn't ease the impossibility of translation. And, in 2020, unless they're on the page or screen, at a safe distance, such interactions can transmit a lethal virus.

While certain populations have always been aware of both the importance and danger of interpersonal contact, the coronavirus pandemic has made them more real for many people. Mass media where I live often use the words *consumer* and *citizen* interchangeably—a twist I expect no reputable translator would make, and an important consideration for those reading my words in cultures less dominated by capitalist consumption. Back in the spring, newspapers and radio programs seemed to report as much on economic fears as they did on biological ones. Here, racial discrimination, financial inequality, and the lack of an effective health-care system undergird everything.

Thinking about the chasms translators navigate—be it to build bridges, make the gaps more visible, or both—brings code-switching to mind. In its broader sense, this practice has moved from the realm of linguistics to the more mainstream discussions of race, ethnicity, and culture. In many ways, code-switching is my job, and it is controversial. Perhaps I am stating the obvious; for me, a translator working into the hegemonic English language, 2020 has been a year of stating, debating, and reiterating obvious things many humans forget, out of fear or just exhaustion.

The pandemic has brought me into a different kind of contact with authors, as readings and other events went virtual. When my fellow translator Tess Lewis and I, current co-curators of New York's annual Festival Neue Literatur, learned just a month

before the planned April launch that it would be canceled, we pivoted as much as possible into online readings, as everyone hunkered down in their homes. I felt solidarity and closeness with colleagues in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy, but none of those feelings replace the depth of in-person exchanges while strolling the streets or woods, seeing, gesturing, savoring food together, and exploring the nuances of a particular word. Then I began hearing from fellow translators working on pieces that had suddenly become posthumous publications, their authors no longer here to query. And then I heard a stellar colleague had died.

I also want to address the figurative sense of *überwundene Berührungsängste*, the initial reservations one has overcome, or has to overcome before proceeding with the task at hand. The controversial nature of translation itself is compounded by the often latent problematic aspects of any given source text. All translators I know grapple with gender, especially in pronouns. I've translated books on religion, and had to prevent an editor from switching one author's childhood faith from one denomination to another in the US edition. The editing process always reminds me of another type of contact: touch. For centuries, people's words were only spoken, then they were written by hand, then set in moveable type, all processes involving certain types of labor and limitation. Only recently have pixels swept in to make all this communication both easier and slipperier. English is rapidly changing in an attempt to address some of its users' historic -isms: sexism, racism, ablism, ageism, monolingualism.

My first response to the term *Berührungsangst* or *haphephobia* is to think of *violation*. Some consider translation a violation—perhaps necessary, but also fraught. In this time of physical isolation, it's worth remembering that the process of translation can be uncomfortable, but it's also the only way for some work to reach readers who may never learn the language in which it was written.



Ivna Žic »Die Nachkommende«

Examples from projects I've translated over the past couple of years will help illustrate a few challenges. I've categorized them below, but note that they are all, almost always, also political.

- **Typography.** Ivna Žic's novel *Die Nachkommende* was selected for the Festival Neue Literatur. It is written in High German, but features occasional phrases in Swiss-inflected German and Croatian. Preparing the excerpt, I had adhered to the US editorial norm of italicizing non-English terms—in this case, the Swiss and Croatian. Ivna rightly pointed out that the original was set entirely in roman, an intentional choice aimed at equalizing the various languages. I corrected my translation, so if the rights to this powerful book are acquired by a US or UK publisher and the copy editor questions the decision to negate this particular linguistic hierarchy, I'm now ready to step into Ivna's shoes.

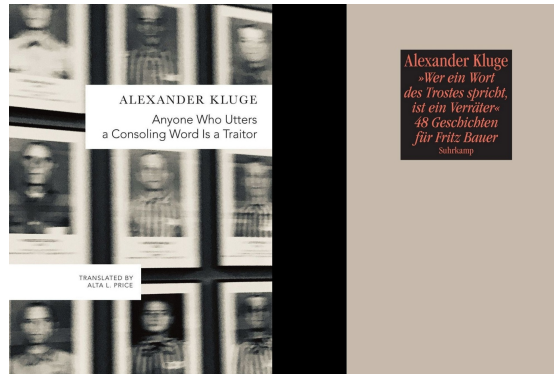
- *Possessive perspectives.* In the same book, Ivna avoided possessive pronouns when referring to numerous acquaintances, relations, and ancestors, so although the reader might presume a “man” or “grandmother” is indeed the narrator’s—“my man” or “my grandmother”—the text never says this. It’s generally less noticeable in German, so English required some creative solutions in order to maintain this important detail.
- *Political correctness.* Because much of Dana Grigorcea’s novel *Das primäre Gefühl der Schuldlosigkeit* is set in Bucharest, *Zigeuner* and *Zigeunerinnen* figure into the story. My understanding is that *gypsy* is currently considered more offensive in English than its equivalent in other languages, although that’s changing. It would have been a violation to “clean” this up by using *Romani* or any other word, because choosing a less loaded term would’ve negated the essential social tensions of the source text. I was grateful the author, editor, and publisher all agreed that, in this particular case, the politically correct choice would’ve been incorrect. We’ll have to save the treatment of gendered suffixes between German and English for another time.



Dana Grigorcea »Das primäre Gefühl der Schuldlosigkeit«

- *Gender.* Entire books are being written about how different languages construct gender, how terminology is shifting, and how a speaker’s words shape their world. (Did you notice my use of the singular *they* there? Hooray, we’re no longer expected to say “his world” or “her world” or the dreadful “his or her world”! Although this option has been available for over six centuries, it became *Merriam-Webster’s* word of the year in 2019 because of a 313% increase in lookups.) The preface to Alexander Kluge’s »*Wer ein Wort des Trostes spricht, ist ein Verräter*«. 48 Geschichten für Fritz Bauer mentions *ein Kind*, *das Kind*, and *es hatte*—which I translated as “a child,” “the child,” and “they had,” respectively. The child is five and, thanks to the neuter noun and pronoun, we never learn this child’s gender. Using “the child” in English is perfectly fine up until the sentence that some English-language editors, even two years ago, would’ve expected to use a gendered pronoun. In English, a child generally cannot be “it,” but thanks to activists pushing English out of the narrow gender binary, it’s now perfectly acceptable for a child—or anyone, of any age—to be “he,” “she,” or “they.” The gender-neutral singular pronoun *they* and the nonbinary personal pronoun *they* are somewhat

different, yet interrelated. Some of this is news to my colleagues and clients, and is a welcome way in which contemporary English is resolving what used to be, unnecessarily, a quandary.



Alexander Kluge »Wer ein Wort des Trostes spricht, ist ein Verräter«

Finally, three projects I have not translated, but have consulted on. Pardon the vagueness—all parties involved deserve anonymity.

- *Who writes what, and how, part I.* A US publisher commissioned a reader's report on a contemporary German-language novel set a couple of centuries ago, in a foreign empire's colony. The main character and principal narrator was a teenager presumed to be indigenous until a major turning point in the story. The entire book was rigorously researched, the writing beautifully crafted. I dutifully gave a detailed synopsis and reported on the potential market and target demographics, how this book fit within the author's broader work, and how his other books had been received by German-language readers. I was surprised by how positive my report was—it was critical, too, but the text had won me over. The publisher ultimately declined to acquire the rights, citing the fact that they focus primarily on books that deal with the contemporary world. They never said the book was so long as to be cost prohibitive, or that their readership would be skeptical of any book originally written in German, by a white man, and set in this particular colonial territory, or that they'd hesitate to publish a book with almost exclusively male characters. Might all those concerns have factored into their decision?
- *Who writes what, and how, part II.* If you take the above description and just replace the words "teenager presumed to be indigenous" with "young European missionary," it almost perfectly covers another, completely different novel a German publisher commissioned a sample translation of for the Frankfurt Book Fair the year before. English-language rights are still available, but rights have already sold to a publisher in one of the foreign empire's former enemy territories. US publishing isn't known for its risk taking, especially when translation adds a line of expense to the profit and loss statement; as one huge publisher after another (after another) merges, will it become more adventurous?
- *Who translates what, and how.* A US publisher acquired the rights to a riveting contemporary novel written in German by a Black woman, likely based on the sample prepared by a translator who does not identify as a Black woman. Would I be the ideal translator for it? I don't know. Can an author of one particular background trust a

translator of another particular background not to misunderstand or cross (or erase) uncomfortable lines? It depends on the text—and the author, and the translator. Could such an arrangement be considered a form of cultural appropriation? Perhaps all translation falls somewhere on a spectrum ranging from appropriation to empowerment. Might these just be new terms for translation theory's extant approaches of domestication and foreignization? I'm not great with dichotomies, but I could offer you several near synonyms that might get us closer to the core of the question—largely dependent on who you think "I," "you," and "us" are—that's what we translators do.



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**Alta L. Price** runs a publishing consultancy specialized in literature and nonfiction texts on art, architecture, design, and culture. A recipient of the Gutekunst Prize, she translates from Italian and German into English. Her work has appeared on BBC Radio 4, Words Without Borders, and elsewhere. Her latest publications include books by Martin Mosebach, Dana Grigorcea, Anna Goldenberg, and Alexander Kluge

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