

## Visual support in translation: group-translating Zafer Şenocak's *In deinen Worten*

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During the spring semester in May 2015, I taught a German class that required students to collaboratively translate selected literary pieces by Zafer Şenocak, who was then the writer-in-residence at the University's Department of German Studies. One of our translations was submitted for the University's *Language Mediation, Interpreting, and Translation* (LMIT) student award, and was one of the winning selections. Learning of this, Şenocak suggested that a student group be tasked to collaboratively translate his newest work, a text that he had been working on for several years since it rather intimately deals with his relationship to his father and his death a few years ago.

In July 2015, the group met for the first time for the purpose of talking about the general logistics and about how to approach this translation project. Each collaborator would be responsible for translating individual chapters. The group would meet every four weeks and the chapters would be reviewed by the whole team. We wanted to avoid "over-discussing" certain aspects as much as possible, as we had spent a lot of time doing that during the semester. Since we needed one final product, we agreed that choices could be vetoed, but that the translator of the passage in question would have the final say.

In theory, this seemed like a manageable and realistic approach, but soon the meetings began to fall short of these expectations, with lengthy debates and discussions slowing overall progress. It soon became clear that we had underestimated the sheer amount of "knotty points". The group consisted of native speakers of German and English, but due to the author's convoluted narrative style, at times it became difficult to agree on the meaning of a single sentence, even after forty-five minutes of discussion. And even when a meaning could be agreed upon, this did not get us any closer to producing a satisfactory translation. The following types of questions were raised:

- *Are we reading a passage correctly?*
- *Is a particular passage intentionally ambiguous?*
- *If so, should it be just as ambiguous in the translation?*
- *How can this ambiguity be reflected in the translation?*
- *Should we just make one choice and translate it the way we understood it?*

These questions triggered long debates, not just about specific passages, but how the interpretation of a passage impacted on an understanding of the novel as a whole. We attempted to absorb the emerging delays by inserting unscheduled meetings into the planned monthly rhythm. As the semester progressed, however, these became increasingly difficult to realize and eventually fell by the wayside.

Eventually, the use of graphic support became an extremely helpful device. During these discussions, one member of the group—sunk in their own thoughts—would often get up and start writing parts and phrases of a sentence on the board. They would then use partial translations as well as arrows or bars to visualize their understanding of the sentence and to help the others understand (their idea of) the relationships between words and phrases.

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### Example one

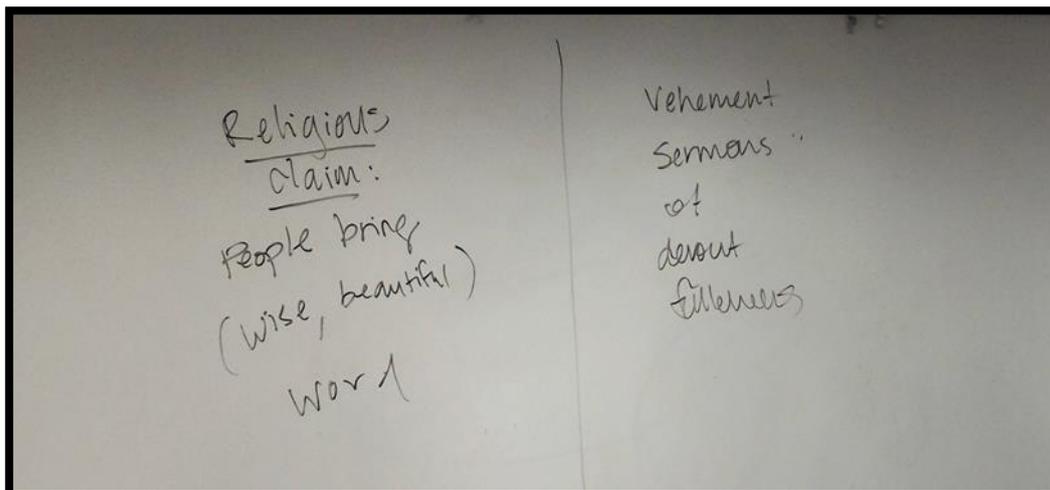
The picture below shows how we approached these visualizations. The original sentence was:

So klaffte eine Kluft zwischen dem Anspruch deiner Religion, den Menschen das weise, das schöne Wort zu bringen, und den ungestümen Predigten ihrer frommen Anhänger.

Which we finally translated as,

Thus opened a divide between the claim of your religion to bring the wise, beautiful word to the people and the vehement sermons of their devout followers.

It had become necessary to understand what exactly the *Kluft* (“divide”) is between—and what is being divided. In this case, the individual parts of the sentence had already been translated and discussed. In the picture, a bar represents the “divide” in the sentence between the two ideas, namely the *claim* and the *sermons*. This bar became a visual rallying point through which we were able to clarify our understanding of the sentence’s meaning, and to agree on a common interpretation.



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## Example two

Here, you can see the representation of the German sentence:

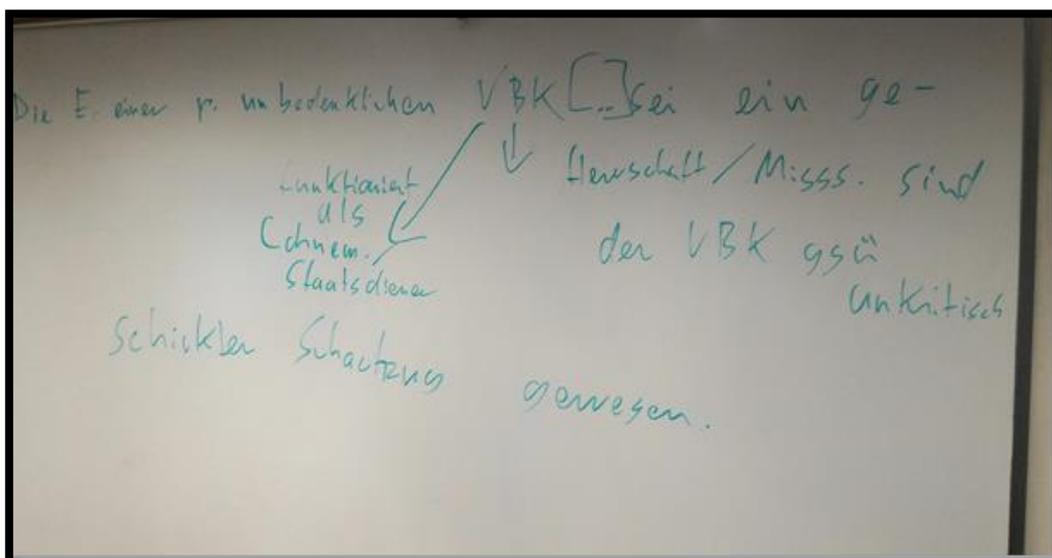
Die Etablierung einer politisch unbedenklichen, der weltlichen Herrschaft und sozialen Missständen gegenüber unkritischen Vorbeterkaste, die als Lohnempfänger und Staatsdiener funktionieren, sei ein geschickter Schachzug korrupter Herrscher gewesen.

We eventually agreed on:

The establishment of a politically harmless caste of prayer leaders, who were uncritical of the secular political leadership and social injustice, function as wage earners and social servants.

In hindsight, the sentence might not seem unreasonably difficult, but a ninety-minute discussion established no less than five different interpretations of the meaning of the German, and at least five more opinions on how it should be translated.

The first step in the visual reading was to separate the main clause from the several subordinate clauses to extract the basic statement of the sentence. As can be seen in the first line, the phrase *Die Etablierung einer [...] Vorbeterkaste, [...] sei ein geschickter Schachzug [...] gewesen.* was initially identified as the main clause.



At first, the group had trouble correctly assigning the prepositional phrase *politisch unbedenklichen, der weltlichen Herrschaft und sozialen Missständen gegenüber unkritischen* as such a phrase and connecting it to the correct noun, leading to uncertainty about the fact who was uncritical towards whom or what. After several attempts of finding the correct meaning of the sentence, we had adjourned the meeting due to time constraints, without a satisfactory solution.

In hindsight, the group proposed that working in pairs could have been a more efficient way of workshopping the respective members' translations. Instead of having the whole group discuss—and at times get lost in nitpicking—it could have been more helpful to have two people of the group work together on a designated part of the book. Ideally, these partners would have been one native speaker of English and German respectively, so that a good and encompassing approach could have been made from “both sides”, from native and non-native perspectives of each language. At any rate, it seems that finding a solution that two people are satisfied with would be a much simpler endeavor. Whether this may have taken just as long as the group discussions is debatable.

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**Questions for discussion:**

1. What do you think about the group's approach? What do you (dis)like, and what would you have done similarly / differently? Do you see any unused resources within the group? What would you do when you're stuck?
2. In the group's situation, how would you have dealt with individual preferences on the one hand and general problems in translation on the other? Please refer to the questions in italics on the bottom of page 1.
3. What other ways could there have been to grasp the meaning of a convoluted sentence? When does language fail the translator, and vice versa? How can a group of translators deal with that? Is there a good (intralingual / extralingual) way to communicate way semantics?
4. How do you feel about the alternate approach of splitting the group up into pairs of one (non-)native speakers each? Do you think it would have been helpful? How and to what extent?