

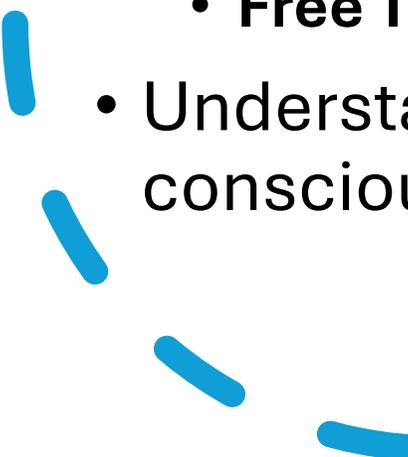
Week 2: An Introduction to Literal and Free Translation

Foundations of Translation Theory

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The Oldest Question in Translation

- Translation is as old as human communication across cultures—essential for trade, diplomacy, religion, and literature.
 - This week, we explore the earliest and most fundamental debate in our field:
 - **Literal Translation (Word-for-Word)**
 - **Free Translation (Sense-for-Sense)**
 - Understanding this debate is the first step to becoming a conscious and skilled translator.
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Learning Objectives

- **Understand** the core difference between literal and free translation.
- **Learn** about the foundational ideas of early thinkers like Cicero and St. Jerome.
- **Practice** applying these concepts to short, practical examples.



Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE)

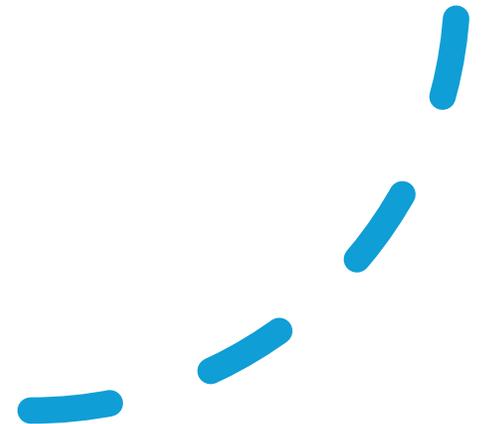
- **Who:** A Roman orator, philosopher, and translator of Greek speeches.
- **His Stance:** Argued against a strict word-for-word approach.
- **His Reasoning:**
 - A literal translation sounds foreign, unnatural, and "clumsy."
 - The goal is not to be an *interpreter* (a mere counter of words), but an *orator* who moves the audience.
- **His Method:** Preserve the ideas, the style, and the *effect* of the original, but adapt the words to flow naturally in Latin.

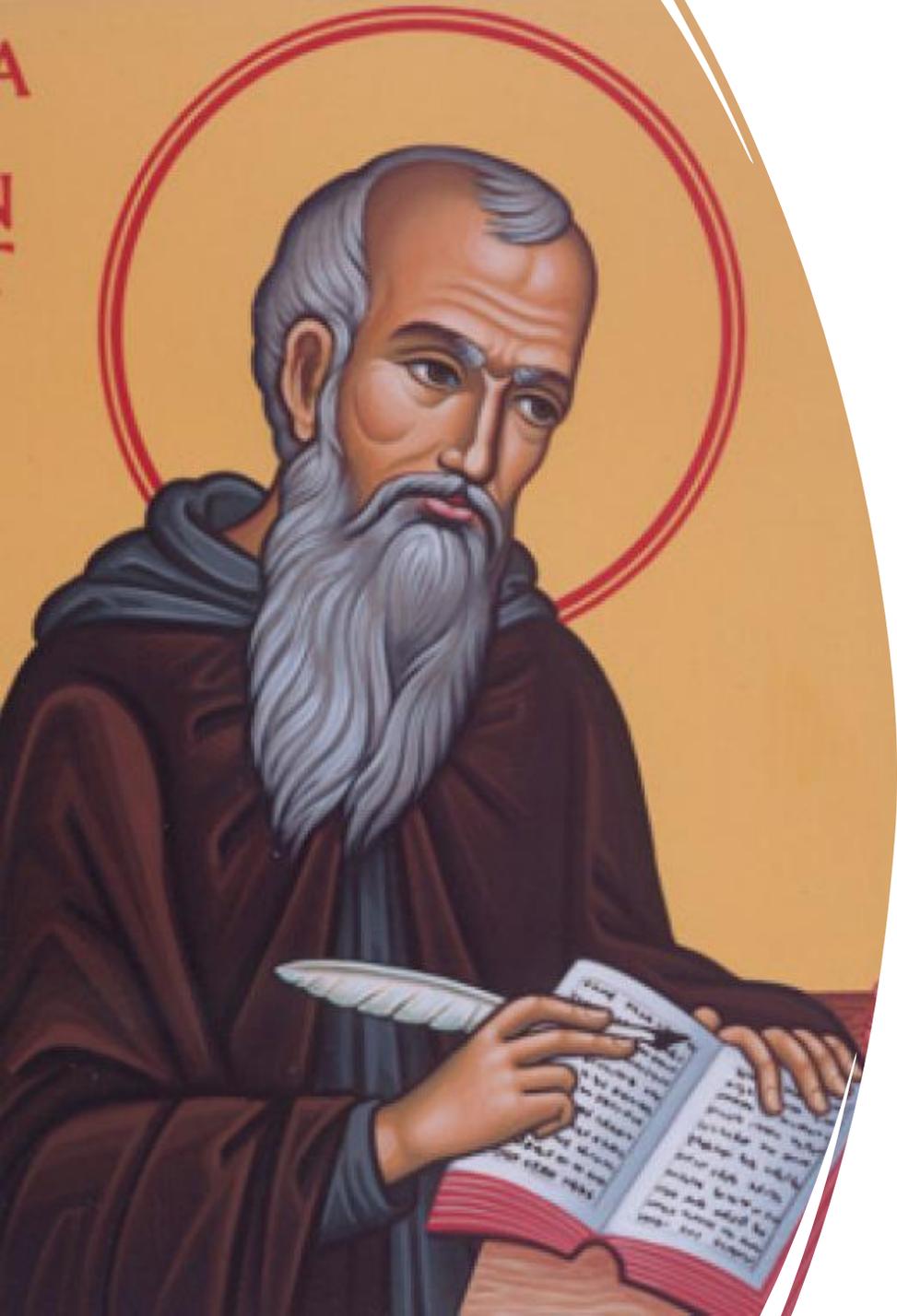


Not as an
Interpreter,
but as an
Orator

- "I did not translate them as an interpreter but as an orator, preserving the ideas and style, but making the words flow naturally in Latin."

— Cicero, *De Optimo Genere Oratorum* (as cited in Bassnett, 2014)





St. Jerome (347–420 CE)

- **Who:** Translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible, one of history's most influential translations.
- **His Famous Declaration:** “I translate not word-for-word but sense-for-sense.”
- **The Complication:** In practice, Jerome was more cautious with sacred texts.
- **His Fear:** Changing the wording of the Holy Scripture might be seen as changing the word of God itself—a heresy.

A Dual Approach Based on Text Type

- **For Sacred Texts:** A more **literal** approach is often required to preserve every nuance of the divine message.
 - *Priority: Fidelity to the Source.*
- **For Everyday or Literary Texts:** A **freer** approach is better to ensure the text is clear, natural, and effective for readers.
 - *Priority: Clarity for the Target Audience.*

The Core Questions for Every Translator



- From Cicero to Jerome to today, the fundamental questions remain:
- **Should I stay as close as possible to the words and structure of the original?** (Focus on Form)
- **Or should I prioritize conveying the meaning and achieving the same effect, even if the words and structure must change?** (Focus on Function)
- This debate is the bedrock of translation theory.

Key Concepts

- **Literal Translation (Word-for-Word):** Translating each source word directly. It preserves form but can often lose meaning, naturalness, or create nonsense.
 - *Example:* “It is raining cats and dogs” → سهگ و پشيله دهباريت (Nonsensical).
- **Free Translation (Sense-for-Sense):** Translating the overall meaning and effect. It adapts form to be natural and clear in the target language.
 - *Example:* “It is raining cats and dogs” → “باران ابه خور دهباريت” (It is raining heavily).

Key Concepts: Equivalence

- **Equivalence:** The principle that the translation should achieve the same *meaning* or *effect* as the original.
- This is the goal that both literal and free translation strive for, just via different paths.
 - Literal translation seeks equivalence at the word level.
 - Free translation seeks equivalence at the message or impact level.

A Spectrum of Translation

Word-for-Word (Literal)	Sense-for-Sense (Free)
<p>Focus on original words</p> <p>Keeps form</p> <p>Risks unnaturalness</p> <p>Ex: He kicked the bucket.</p> <p>شەقیکی لە سەتڵەکه دا</p> <p>nonsense</p>	<p>Focus on target meaning & culture</p> <p>Adapts form for clarity & effect</p> <p>Risks drifting from original</p> <p>Ex: “He kicked the bucket”</p> <p>ئەو مرد</p> <p>he died</p>

Most real-world translations exist somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

Let's Apply the Theory

- We will now look at three texts. For each, we will consider both a literal and a free translation and discuss which is more effective.
- A Proverb
- A News Headline
- A Poetic Line

Practice Text A: Proverb

"Don't count your chickens before they hatch."

Discussion Questions:

1. Which version would make sense to a Kurdish reader who has never heard this English idiom?
2. Could you find a Kurdish proverb that teaches a similar lesson, even if it doesn't mention chickens? (This is called a cultural equivalent).

- **Literal Attempt:** Count chickens before hatching.
((وهرگيرانی وشه به وشه))
- **Free Attempt:** Do not trust something before it happens.
(وهرگيرانی به مانا)

Practice Text B: News Headline

 **ALJAZEERA** News ▾ Middle East Explained Opin

↗ **Trending** > War on Gaza Dc

🕒 LIVE UPDATES

- 2m ago: Arab Parliament hails recognition of Palestine by UK, Australia and Canada
- 17m ago: Gaza City invasion unlikely to achieve war goals, Israeli media says
- 32m ago: Israel's UN ambassador says Palestinian recognition moves 'empty declarations'
- 42m ago: 'Two-state solution only path to just and lasting peace,' says Portugal's foreign minister

Practice

"Hope is the thing with feathers"
(Emily Dickinson)

- **Literal Attention**
thing that has
- **Free Attention**
bird.

This is a metaphor. Which translation best captures the poetic *effect* and imagery? Does simplifying it to "like a bird" lose some of the mystery of the original?

هيووا

له كتيبي: ناوينه بچكولهكان

به رهه مئ: شيركو بئكهس (2013-1940)

1505 بينين  1 خولهك 

ئه گهر ئه وينت باران بين
وا له بهريا راوه ستاوم.
ئه گهر ئه وينت ئاگر بين
وا له ناويا هه لكوپ ماوم.
ئه ي ئه وينى كوردستانم
شيعرم ئه لئ:

تا باران و ئاگر ماين
منيش

Summary of Our Learning

- The debate between **literal (word-for-word)** and **free (sense-for-sense)** translation dates back to ancient Rome.
- Early thinkers like **Cicero** (advocating for freedom) and **St. Jerome** (balancing freedom with fidelity to sacred texts) shaped the conversation.
- The best translation approach often depends on the **text type**, the **purpose** of the translation, and the **audience**.
- **Translation is a process of making choices.** There is no single perfect translation.

In-Class Worksheet – You Do

There is no single 'correct' answer, but there are well-defended and poorly-defended choices.

Your main task is not just to translate, but to be able to *justify* your final choice in the last box.

Think like a professional.



Questions & Next Steps

- Any questions about today's concepts?
- For next week, please read the assigned text for Next Week's Topic. Think about how the ideas we discussed today might apply to it.

References (APA 7th)

- Bassnett, S. (2014). *Translation studies* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Cicero. (46 BCE/1996). *De Optimo Genere Oratorum* [On the Best Kind of Orator]. (H. M. Hubbell, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Jerome, St. (395/1997). Letter to Pammachius. In L. Venuti (Ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (pp. 21–30). Routledge.