

Intersemiotic translation of the Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to present an innovative critical pedagogy to include a unit on social justice in the curriculum. This critical approach is an intersemiotic translation of the New York bestseller book "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" by Rebecca Skoot. Intersemiotic translation is to translate from a linguistic mode to another semiotic mode or vice versa. In this paper, students translated from a linguistic code, which was their first language, to other semiotic codes, which include pictures, symbols, photos and even a linguistic code, which was their second language-Spanish. The book "The immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks", explores a wide variety of social topics such as discrimination based on gender, race and color among many others. The main purpose of having students do the multimodal translation and present it to class was to open a space for sharing students' perspectives, to disrupt, de-mystify, critique, and question the status quo and to create awareness of the worldviews of those being silenced, marginalized and oppressed.

Key words: intersemiotic, translation, social justice, oppressed, critical pedagogy.

A Critical Approach to tackle social justice and to develop communicative skills in the Spanish classroom.

A unit on Social justice can easily be part of any curriculum regardless of the discipline. It is especially appropriate in the world we live today, where many of the injustices and inequalities that existed more than fifty years ago seem to hunt us again. It is necessary to use critical pedagogies in our classroom to create awareness of the inequalities that have become more pronounced since the 2016 Presidential election. A unit on 'social justice' equips students with the knowledge and skills to talk about inequalities, discrimination- regarding race and gender, religion, power and ethics, regionally, nationally and globally. One of our goals as educators is to prepare students to become contributing global citizens capable of developing critical thinking skills, and being proactive to effect change in the places where they live.

This paper explores how an intersemiotic translation of the New York Time best seller book "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, by Rebecca Skoot can be a venue to incorporate social justice and inequality issues in an intermediate Spanish as a foreign language class. This assignment gives students the opportunity to develop Spanish communicative skills and the same time, it opens a dialogue on a wide range of topics such as access to healthcare, discrimination based on race and gender, unethical research practices and religious beliefs among others. Students can become aware of the issues; they can discuss, argue, and try to find ways to effect change in their communities to make a more equitable society.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Lacks by Skoot

The book 'The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks', is about a black woman who was only known as *the Hela cells* for many years. The book, written by Rebecca Skloot, artfully combines race,

gender, religious beliefs, class, health care and research ethics and medicine. Skloot says that Henrietta “was a poor black tobacco farmer whose cells—taken without her knowledge in 1951—became one of the most important tools in medicine, all for developing the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, in vitro fertilization, and more. Henrietta’s cells have been bought and sold by the billions, yet she remains virtually unknown, and her family can’t afford health insurance”. (2011). Henrietta lived during the years of Jim Crow Laws that mandated a separation of Blacks and Whites in The Southern United States starting in the 1890’s. The laws applied to “every aspect of daily life, mandating segregation of schools, parks, libraries, drinking fountains, restrooms, buses, trains, and restaurants. “Whites Only” and “Colored” signs were constant reminders of the enforced racial order” (2011). During those years, the John Hopkins hospital was the only health care facility that offered care for blacks, and it was at this hospital that Henrietta Lacks received the treatment for her cervical cancer, and the place where her cells were taken without her or her family’s permission. The treatment that she received was also different from the one a white woman would have received. When Henrietta’s tumor had spread all over her body, she needed constant blood transfusions since her kidneys had failed. However, one of the doctors, knowing how much Henrietta needed the transfusions, wrote a note to stop all transfusions “until her deficit with the blood bank was made up.” (p. 83, 2011, Skloot). This is a non-fiction book about social inequalities inflicted on minorities, especially Blacks, during the period of the Jim Crow Laws in the Southern United States. However, it is also a book about gender discrimination, unethical behavior in medicine, access to health care, religious beliefs, poverty and education among others.

Intersemiotic translation

Intersemiotic translation or “transmutation” (Jacobson, p.233), will be viewed, for purposes of this paper, as the process of translating from a linguistic code to another semiotic code or vice versa. Loffredo and Perterhella (2014) state that this “change in modality (from written text to image, for example), brings into play other channels in the ‘reinvention’ of, and response to, the source text: a learner can respond to an L2 poem for example with the creation of a poster – perhaps overlapping images and text – or with the production of a recording – mixing sounds and words. (p.65).

Intersemiotic translation in the language classroom can be used as a pedagogical tool to empower L2 learners and to enhance their language skills while tackling social issues such as the ones presented in the book, ‘Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks’.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The idea of introducing a unit on social justice was conceived from Freire’s (1970) “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” which according to Freire “makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation”(p.4) One of the first steps we need to take as teachers is to create awareness of the ways in which many people are silenced, especially since the 2016 presidential elections. It is necessary to infuse criticality in our courses; one way is to open a safe space for dialogue about social justice.

The idea of opening spaces for dialogue, for question the inequalities and oppression of certain groups, is motivated by the idea of critical multiculturalism described by Kubota (2012). It is important to recognize cultural differences but we need to do it from a critical perspective that allows learning and transformation at the same time. It is a way to empower our students to become agents that can effect changes within their communities; “critical multiculturalism problematizes, rather than presupposes, difference and explores a critical understanding of culture as diverse, dynamic, and socially, politically, and discursively constructed.” (Kubota,

2012 p.39). The incorporation of a social or critical multicultural unit in our syllabi is a way to view our institutions of learning as venues to create a more equitable and just society.

Description of the assignment

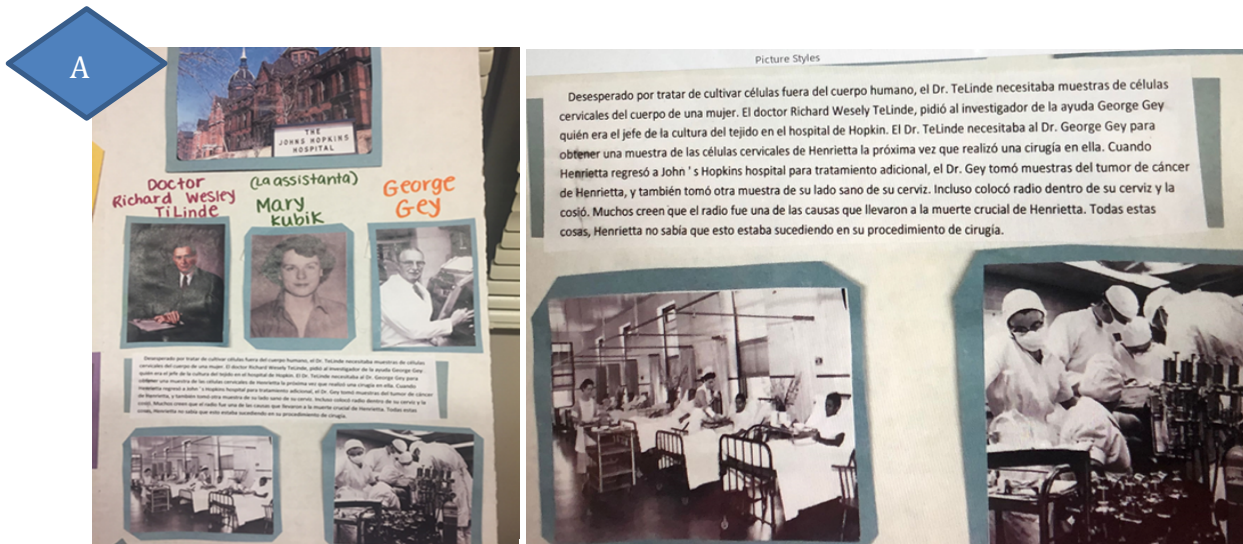
Students read the book individually, and they met a few times outside the classroom to share the main ideas and the issues they wanted to communicate through various modes. Each group had to present the result of their transmutations of the book and use the target language to communicate, explain and share their ideas with the rest of the class. The use of pictures, photos, and objects helped the rest of the class understand the messages other peers were trying to convey. Students used the book as the source text and they transferred the main ideas through the creation of a poster, a collage or a power point. The source text was a combination of linguistic and visual modes, the written words were in the student's first language, and some of the words were combined with pictures and photos of Henrietta's family and relatives.

The multimodality of the translation from students' first language to the second language, allowed students to digitally create their product, or manually construct it by using diverse materials, colors, fonts, pictures, drawings and objects. Students printed or cut out from newspapers and magazines pictures to illustrate the ideas they needed to convey. Furthermore, multimodality provided an opportunity for the learner to use his/her creativity, imagination, background knowledge to transpose a message from one sign system to another. Students' creations resulted in a combination of images, text, sounds and words.

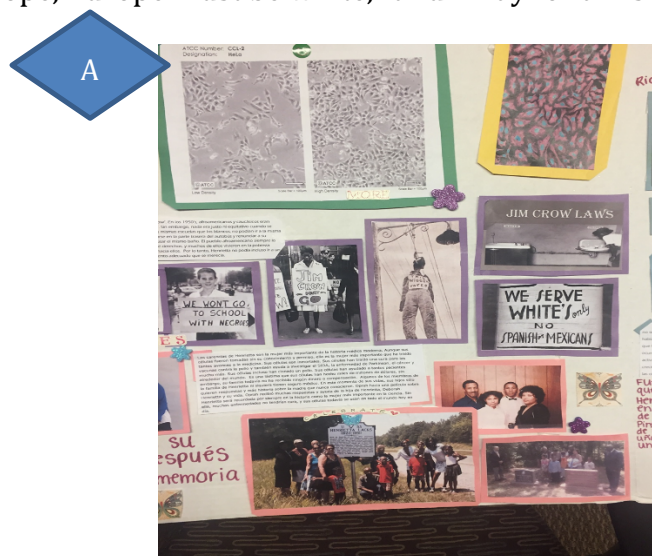
Themes tackled by students' multimodal translations.

Access to healthcare and ethics regarding oppressed minorities

In the poster below- A1- students focused on the John Hopkins Hospital, the only place that offered health care to black patients during the Jim Crow Laws. This was an opportunity to talk about access to health care, which was an issue at the time of Henrietta's cancer treatment. It was also a chance to talk about concerns related to health care nowadays, and the fight in Congress with the Obama Care Health Program. This group also used photographs of Doctor George Gey, who was the director of the tissue research at John Hopkins hospital - where Henrietta received the treatment for her cervical cancer. Gey was also the person who developed the techniques used to grow the Hella cells. Students also displayed a photo of Mary Kubicek, who was Gey's assistant at the time, and she cultured the cells taken from Henrietta's cervix for the first time. Students talked about Henrietta's autopsy, and how her "body lay on a stainless-steel table in the cavernous basement morgue, and Gey's assistant, Mary, stood in the doorway" (p. 90) It was also part of the discussion how samples from various parts of Henrietta's body were collected by the pathologist as Mary held the dishes where the samples were placed. Almost all the groups mentioned how Mary Kubicek felt when she looked at Henrietta toenails: "I thought, Oh jeez, she's a real person. I started imagining her sitting in her bathroom painting those toenails, and it hit me for the first time that those cells we'd been working with all this time and sending all over the world, they came from a live woman. I'd never thought of it that way." (p.91). The issue of unequal treatment based on race and gender, the unethical behavior, greed and fame on the part of the doctors and specialists that came in contact with the Hella cells were issues that all students mentioned in their presentations.



In poster A-2, students focused on Jim Crow Laws and the effects they had on Black people everyday life. Other minorities such as Latin Americans and other minorities were also targets of Jim Crow laws. One of the pictures in the poster reads: "We serve only white people. No blacks or Mexicans allowed. Another picture shows the lynching of black people during those times. This was an aspect they thought important to tackle in their poster. According to a report by Equal Justice Initiative 'By the end of the nineteenth century, Southern lynching had become a tool of racial control that terrorized and targeted African Americans. Through lynching, Southern white communities asserted their racial dominance over the region's political and economic resources _ a dominance first achieved through slavery would be restored through terror". (2015, p.10) This an aspect that can also be linked to the Charlottesville, Virginia white nationalist protest rally on August 12, 2017. The white nationalists were protesting the removal a confederate statue that was built to honor General Robert E. Lee. This topic can certainly open a civil and respectful dialogue about current events that have provoked violence and division in the United States. This issue is as relevant today as it was during the time Henrietta grew up and die. One of the students brought up a news report, [Sunday, August 12, 2017] by the television network CNN, about White nationalists protesters disrupt the events during Independence Day in Poland with "banners that read, "White Europe, Europe must be white," and "Pray for an Islamic Holocaust."



Power Point Slides

The power point slide B1 below represents a message from Chapter 17 of the book, which is called 'Illegal, Immoral, and Deplorable, p. 127. This slide opened a discussion of greed, fame, and unethical professional behavior. Dr. Southam, a cancer researcher, started injecting patients with Hella cells in the 1950's, he had obtained the cancer cells from Gey's lab. However, he had injected them on people that were sick, and he wanted to see how healthy patients would react after being injected with the cancerous Hella cells. "Southam began injecting prisoners in June 1956 using Hela cells that his colleague, Alice Moore, carried from New York to Ohio in a hand-bag. Sixty-five prisoners – murderers, embezzlers, robbers, and forgers, lined up on wooden benches for their injections" (Skoot, p. 129). The reason these prisoners accepted to be injected with cancerous cells was, according to some of them, a redemption, or forgiveness for the crimes they had committed. This example open a space to discuss the role of spirituality and religious beliefs. Students also referred to the Nuremberg Code which was the result of a trial by American prosecutors against Nazi physicians "who had subjected Jews and others to a murderous regime of medical research. The "doctors' trial" was the first of the war crimes trials; one of its outcomes was the famous Nuremberg Code, a set of ethical guidelines for human experimentation." (Williams, 2012, p.1)

B1

Dr. Chester M. Southam y el código de Nuremberg

Dr. Chester Southam fue un virólogo que en los años sesenta que decidió inyectar a pacientes con las células cancerosas de Henrietta Lack sin decirles que la inyección era una célula de cáncer, similar a cómo los médicos de Hopkins habían tomado la muestra de Henrietta sin su conocimiento. Southam entonces consiguió otro hospital, el Hospital Judío de Enfermedades crónicas en Brooklyn, para continuar su investigación. En este hospital, tres doctores se negaron a inyectar a los pacientes sin su conocimiento debido a que creían que la investigación se asemejaba a la investigación durante el Holocausto y citaron el código de Nuremberg.



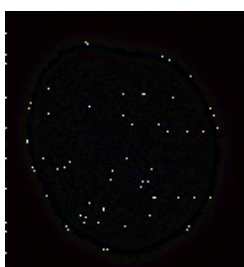
Doctor Southam

The power point slide B2 bellow is about the treatment Henrietta Lacks received at the John Hopkins Hospital. Students explained how dangerous radium is since it can also make cancerous cells to reproduce. Students opened a dialogue about whether Henrietta would have received a different at the John Hopkins for her cervical cancer if she had been white. Some students had done some research about the negative effects of using radium tube inserts for cancer and they discussed the issue with the class. They wondered whether the treatment Henrietta received would have been different if she had been a white female.

Tratamiento de Radiación de Henrietta Lacks

Henrietta Lacks era una mujer afroamericana que sufría de cáncer del cuello del útero. Durante su tratamiento, el doctor tomo muestras de tejido sin consentimiento, diferente al de lo que muchas personas creyeron cuando ellas dieron sus células. El cáncer de Henrietta fue tratado de manera diferente a como una mujer caucásica habría sido tratada porque Henrietta Lacks era negra y de pobre origen

Henrietta tuvo el elemento radioactivo (radio) en su cuello del útero. Sin embargo, el elemento de radio tenía la capacidad de matar el células cancerosas pero puede causar mutaciones que escalan y pueden hacerse cancerosas y si el paciente está expuesto a grandes dosis puede quemar la piel, como el caso de Henrietta.



La Experiencia de Henrietta Lacks después de la Radiación

Cuando le insertaron los tubos en el cuello del utero, Henrietta se quejaba y decía, “Lord, it just feels like that blackness be spreading all inside me.” [Señor, solo siento como la negrura se está propagando dentro mí.] Y es que su piel y su cuello del utero estaban siendo quemados por el elemento radio, incluso su amiga Sadie habla “they burnt you black as tar” [Ellos te quemaron tan negro como el alquitrán]. El cuerpo de Henrietta Lacks estaba siendo quemado desde su pecho a su pelvis. Irónicamente, el doctor Howard Kelly de John Hopkins Hospital, y otro que llevaba en su bolsillo los tubos con el elemento radio murieron debido por haber estado expuestos a la sustancia radioactiva. Es posible que las células cáncerosas de Henrietta murieron, pero luego se reprodujeron a un ritmo más rápido que el tratamiento que recibió en el Hospital John Hopkins.

Students' presentations

Students presented in Spanish, even though some of them had to code switch from Spanish to English or even code-mesh, which is a combination of Spanish and English – Spanglish. Canagarajah, (2006), sees code meshing as advantageous for second language learners, he states that ‘rather than teaching grammatical rules in a normative and abstract way, we should teach communicative strategies—i.e., creative ways to negotiate the norms relevant in diverse contexts. (p.593). The main goal is for students to communicate, to express themselves and critically argue and unpack the content of the book on issues of inequality, hegemony, racism, gender, access to healthcare and education among others.

The presentations opened spaces where the issues abovementioned were discussed, argued, problematize and in some case provided the setting to create what Pratt (2011) calls the contact zones. These zones are social spaces where cultures meet, cloth, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p.34). It is through these discussions that students can develop awareness, be open to dialogue, problematize and try to find solutions to social issues that have silenced and oppressed minorities in our society. It is then than pedagogy becomes a venue for students to be social agents that can effect transformation and change in their communities.

This multimodality allows students to develop skills to communicate through the various modes that have evolved in today's linguistically and culturally diverse world. Furthermore, multimodality provides an opportunity for the learner to use his/her creativity, imagination, background knowledge to transpose a message from one sign system to another. This is certainly a way to empower and emancipate L2 learners.

The poem by Pat Mora, *Legal Immigrant*, mentioned in the interlingual translation section, can also be an example to do an intersemiotic translation. Students can decode the poem using micro and macro skills and transpose the ideas into a poster, or a picture that will represent the main ideas in the poem. Once they do a bottom up and top down analysis of the poem, they can transmute the feelings expressed in the poem, which are shared by many immigrants who may be legal or who may have been born in the United States, but still feel a sense of being caught up between two worlds, two cultures, and two languages. The student's creativity, and the decisions they make as they decide how to transpose the ideas into a visual mode is what empowers and gives them voice.

EMPOWERING L2 LEARNERS THROUGH TRANSLATION

Translation can be a powerful pedagogical tool to empower and emancipate L2 learners. With the sociocultural turn in translation in the late 1980's and early 1990's, we have seen scholars reevaluating the benefits of using translation in the language classroom. For many years, and in a strong response to the Grammar Translation Method, the use of the mother tongue was basically banned from the classroom by the emergence of communicative approaches that advocated for the use of the target language only in order to maximize the L2 proficiency and to prevent negative interference from L1. However, with the new interdisciplinary approach of translation studies, some scholars have started to see the banning of the mother tongue from the language classroom as counterproductive. According to Cook (2012), prohibiting students to use their mother tongue is to ask "students to artificially give up their identity and adopt a new one. It turns the adult back into a child, makes the wise appear ignorant, and the articulate suddenly lost for words" (p.29).

Accordingly, translation is the result of multiple processes of mediation and negotiation of cultural differences. Being in contact with the mother tongue is a way to empower L2 learners who feel a loss of their voices and identity. As Spiro (2014) states in her article "Learner and Writer voices: "Distancing from the mother tongue can lead to a profound sense that "the inner voice" is lost (p.23). Translation is a pedagogical tool that validates the learner's identity and prevents feelings of displacement due to the prescriptivism that characterizes the monolingual approaches to language learning. In fact, learner's L1 becomes an authentic, meaningful input to learn the target language. In addition, translation, interlingual or intersemiotic, is a creative student-centered task, and it is precisely the creativity involved in the translation process that emancipates L2 learners. It is this condition of otherness that allows the translator to find ways to convey a message from the ST to the TT when there are no equivalents between the two languages. Jakobson, in his article on Linguistic Aspects of Translation, states that "Whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loanwords or loan-translations, neologism or semantic shifts, and finally by circumlocutions" (p.234). Therefore, the L2 learner as translator has a very active role in the translation process, s/he is a creative and dynamic interpreter who is able to take charge of the learning process by becoming a decision maker about how to best interpret and transfer the message from the TS to the TL. The translator actively participates in the process to make meaning and knowledge as they produce a final product from L1 to L2. This process is emancipatory and gives agency to the L2 learner. According to Witte et al, (2012) in the introduction of the book "Translation in Second Language Learning and Teaching" translation exercises "do not only have positive

effects on the improvement of language skills, but also have emancipatory functions, as students will, ideally, become masters of the language and not feel mastered by it” (p. 9)

In addition, translation in L2 learning can be seen ‘as a contact zone’, (Pratt, p. 3, 1991), where different languages, cultures and community discourses meet, and the student is able to work with the voice of others as well as his/her own voice in a truly authentic context. The student needs to make choices, which can be subjective as s/he chooses from the linguistic and sociocultural conventions of the TS to give the best and most accurate representation into the TL by means a semiotic mode, which can be through gestures, visual, verbal, and written among others. In general, translation can be an empowering tool in the second language classroom because it is a student-centered activity. The focus is shifted from the teacher to the students, who actively participate in the learning process. Furthermore, the use of the L2 learner’s mother tongue in the classroom emancipates since they do not have to assume a new culture and language at the expense of denying their own identities.

Furthermore, students need to negotiate, make choices when there is not a direct equivalent between the two languages. This freedom to make a choice is liberating and empowering. It also gives L2 learners agency. Translation is also a process that develops critical thinking skills, which are necessary to make learners more independent and in control of their own learning. Independence and autonomy also empower second L2 learners. Overall, translation is a tool that helps L2 learners to develop lifelong solving problem skills.

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Nationalist protesters disrupt Poland independence day events

By Matthew Day, for CNN

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<http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/12/europe/poland-warsaw-nationalist-march/index.html>