

Restrictions and the Unreliable Translator: A Multi-Modal Approach

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Grade Level: High School and above

Time frame: 30 minutes to 1 hour depending on student engagement

Objectives: To help students write without fear. To show the importance of getting rid of the narrator for the first drafts of poems. Students are able to work outside of their normal writing style and look for surprising language that they may not have been able to create without the restriction of wrestling with found language created through homophonic translation.

Prior knowledge and skills: Be ready to define and break down words like: modal, translation, distillation

Required Materials: Pen, paper, copies of poems in Swedish or a projector where students can see poems

Literary Models:

Charles Bernstein's Language Machines (adapted from Bernadette Mayer):

<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/experiments.html>

“Translating the Untranslatable: Elfriede Jelinek in Translation” by Marginalized Margerine

Queen: <https://themazolafiles.blogspot.com/2007/08/translating-untranslatable-elfriede.html>

Sequence of Activities

Intro (10 minutes)

Tell students about The Koln Concert (<https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/koln-concert-keith-jarrett/>): Keith Jarrett, jazz and classically trained pianist, had everything going against him for this live concert in Cologne, Germany. The wrong piano was delivered to the concert hall. Not only was it the wrong piano but it was out of tune, the sustain pedals didn't function properly, it was tinny and the bass register was wonky. He was also suffering from back pain and had to wear a back brace for support. This concert went on to be the best-selling live piano record of all time. If time and technology allow, play them a few minutes:

<https://vimeo.com/200359565>

Talk about how sometimes having restrictions in creative output can produce unexpected results. This could lead to a conversation about form poetry and can be a nice time to transition into

talking about sonnets and iambic pentameter but that's not necessarily the focus of this lesson plan.

Then, have a short conversation about translating words from English to Spanish. For example, in El Paso and other border communities, the word *güey* is used for dude but also has many other uses and meanings, depending on how you use it. Ask students to think of words in English (or Spanish or any other language they are also familiar with) that have different meanings at different times.

Ask students to think about how you would translate these words into another language. What about jokes?

Activity (20-40 minutes):

Have students think about the following joke in Spanish that is then translated into English:

Cuáles son las vacas más perezosas? Vacaciones!

Translation: "What's the laziest type of cow? A vacation!"

Explain how puns are difficult to translate into another language and ask them to find a way to translate this joke into English so it has the same effect but tell them they are free to change the meaning, the pun.

Hopefully they come up with an inventive way to get this joke across but, undoubtedly, they will have to change the joke's meaning.

I like giving students this poem in Swedish by Eva Ström and then having them translate the poem just by the sounds of the poem back into English. Let the students know that they can add conjunctions or any other word they see fit to make the poem make (some) sense. (Here's the prompt from Charles Bernstein's "Experiments," inspired by Bernadette Mayer: "Homophonic translation: Take a poem in a foreign language that you can pronounce but not necessarily understand and translate the sound of the poem into English [e.g., French 'blanc' to blank or 'toute' to toot.] And here is a list of other possible experiments:

<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/experiments.html>)

Dödssynder åtrår ni mig ännu?

by **Eva Ström**

Dödssynder åtrår ni mig ännu?

Vrede vill du blomma i mig?
Vill du driva blodet till mina kinder
och få mitt hjärta att accelerera.
Avundets korta sting,
vill du träffa mig,
låta mig fåfängt få rasa
efter ett annat liv.
Jag vill känna högmodet och gå
med högmodets vadderade nacke,
jag vill känna den beska älskogens söta sting i min kropp,
och vila en stund på smickrarnas ockersålda mattor.
Jag vill känna hur slugheten får min hjärna att arbeta
och hur omåttligheten griper tag i mig i ett vällustigt begär.
Dödssynder åtrår ni mig?
Kan ni ännu verka i mig?

As an example the first few lines could be something like:

Did sin drive the Atari to knights annually?
Freed villains do bloom in the mic
Will you drive a bloodlet to my kindergartner?

Here are some other poems in Swedish that students could possibly use:

<https://qarrtsiluni.com/2011/02/15/three-swedish-poems-by-eva-strom-and-johanna-ekstrom/>

This exercise should be used as fodder for a future poem; it's ok if some of these lines don't make sense or are thrown away later. Tell students to try and edit toward fun (funny) or exciting language.

Wrap up by discussing what exciting, energetic language means to them.

