

The Archivist as Translator: Representation and the Language of Context

Scott Cline

ABSTRACT

A record's context forms a complex, intricate, malleable records language that archivists are responsible for translating, including the obligation to document themselves and their own complex contexts as a form of transparency and accountability in the archival endeavor. This article suggests three principles from translation theory that are particularly important in archival representation praxis and the translation of context. These include: 1) translations by their nature are new works that, when done well, exhibit the spirit of the original text; 2) word selection and translation decisions should be justified and documented; and 3) in attempting fidelity to the original text, the goal of the translator is restitution of original meaning. Added to these principles is the argument that a critical element in archival translation activity is documenting the translator—the archivist's own context. The goals of archival translation are fairness, honesty, transparency, and ultimately justice in the representation of archives.

© Scott Cline.



KEY WORDS

Access, Archival theory, Contextual analysis, Description, Ethics,
Radical self-understanding, Translation theory

In a mere nine verses, the biblical story of Babel recounts a creation myth of astonishing proportion and cultural consequence. The chronicle describes the birth of multiple societies with their unique languages, and the linguistic separation and geographical dispersion of populations across the planet. Employing just over a hundred spare Hebrew words, it portrays a people—ostensibly the whole of the earth’s inhabitants—who, initially speaking one language, come together to build a great city and erect a tower that will reach into the heavens “to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.” The latter clause foreshadows the story’s denouement; three of the final five verses contain a repetitive trope: in negating the people’s labor, God confounded their speech and “scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”¹ Hubris and the arrogant blurring of ontological boundaries between the divine and the human are often seen as the objects of this morality tale. For some moderns, however, it expresses the conviction that difference and inclusion are human values. Arguing that Babel is a criticism of cultural imperialism, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (z”l) writes, “When a single culture is imposed on all, suppressing the diversity of languages and traditions, this is an assault on our God-given differences. . . . Diversity is what gives colour and texture to our life on earth.”²

This story raises two issues that apply in concrete ways to archives. One is the conundrum of context: its complexity and the variety of meanings that can be drawn from it. The second, with Sacks’s interpretation in mind, is that the Babel narrative signals the beginning of the need for translation as a human necessity in cross-cultural and transnational communication and as a mechanism for sharing literary and historical narrative. This article explores context as an intricate records language, the archivist’s responsibility for inclusive and equitable translation of that language, and the obligation of archivists to document themselves and their own complex contexts as a form of transparency and accountability in the archival endeavor.³

Archivists are translators, especially (though not exclusively) in the realm of descriptive practices, and they need to understand and cope with the pitfalls in translating the archival record. Writing two decades ago about archival representation, Beth Yakel argued it “more precisely captures the actual work of the archivist in (re)ordering, interpreting, creating surrogates, and designing architectures for representational systems that contain those surrogates to stand in for or represent actual archival materials.”⁴ But it should capture more because all archivists have unique representational interactions with records that have impact and consequence for archival praxis. Representation best practice should document all actions imposed on the record that add information to and, thus, change the record’s context. This is the notion of archival translation. The following pages contain a discussion of the complexity of context, a brief overview of a few important principles in translation theory and how they

relate to the archival endeavor, and what this idea of translation might mean for archival practice.

Translation

Kirsten Malmkjaer and Kevin Windle, both professors of translation studies, define translation as “an activity that aims at conveying meaning or meanings of a given linguistic discourse from one language to another. Translation can be defined in terms of sameness of meaning across languages.” However, they point out that there can be no exact correspondence between languages because each translational or linguistic contact with a text changes its meaning and makes the new product unique. Thus, they argue that the source text and the target text can never have precisely the same meaning.⁵

Translation is characterized by being both a material practice and a cultural phenomenon unconstrained by time but bound by context. Once accomplished, especially with the written word, a translation does not necessarily remain fixed. Great works are fluid; the narrative and meaning are continually subjected to new translation.⁶ This is simply to say that many translations of a work may occur over time, and the popularity of a specific translation waxes and wanes. On the other hand, some works are translated once and remain unchanged, retaining the strengths and/or weaknesses of the original translation; and still other works are never translated. Nevertheless, Malmkjaer and Windle, if read closely, surmise that all translations are different works because each translator has a unique linguistic interaction with the source.

I hope it is obvious that when I talk about the archivist as translator, I am not suggesting that they render every page, line, or word of the record from one language to another. Rather, archival translation is the conversion from one form to another, from the original record to a “new original” of that record. Stated another way, archival translation is not about a literal translation of the language of the record itself, but rather the translation of the language that surrounds the record; the language of context. The analogy is not perfect; the literary translator must exhibit fidelity to the author and the text, while the archival translator exhibits fidelity to contextual meaning and the reader. Nevertheless, archivists do engage, fundamentally, in translation throughout their work.

The Language of Context

Archivists are translators of a complex language comprised of text, circumstances, encounters, and behaviors through which the record speaks. This language is formed by the original text and meanings of the record and the constant layering of actions taken on and on behalf of the record by all parties

who touch it, and the new meanings engendered by those touchings. Any activation, whether executed by creators, users, or archivists, that has an impact on the record, changes it in some way and adds to this language. It is a kind of intricate, malleable secondary language that also includes the shifting or contested meanings of authors and users. The archivist must study and master this language—as best they can—and make it accessible and usable through archival translation.

Context presents a daunting intellectual challenge. In the simplest, practical formulation, context is described as “the organizational, functional, and operational circumstances surrounding materials’ creation, receipt, storage, or use, and its relationship to other materials.”⁷ But this is too simple a construct. The complexity of context has been explored in the archival literature for more than two decades and has been reasonably conflated (I would argue rightly) with the principle of provenance. In 2002, archival educator Tom Nesmith provided an expansive view of provenance that forms a comprehensive description of archival context:

One of the key professional actions of archivists is establishing the provenance of records. Archivists have typically viewed provenance narrowly, as the single individual or family (for personal archives) or the particular office (for institutional archives) that inscribed, accumulated, and used a body of records. But the origin of records is much more complex, as many archivists have begun to conclude. It includes the societal and intellectual contexts shaping the actions of the people and institutions who made and maintained the records, the functions the records perform, the capacities of information technologies to capture and preserve information at a given time, and the custodial history of the records (which may result in many reorderings, winnowings, and even doctorings of them). A great many people, institutions, and influences (including the archives itself and its sponsors, donors, and users) may be involved in the origination of the records because their actions account for the records’ existence, preservation, and characteristics when encountered in archives. What an archivist decides to include or emphasize when constructing this provenance will help shape the meaning of the records and thus the reality they create for their readers.⁸

Nearly a decade later, Jennifer Douglas cautioned that this capacious view of the concept has a downside. She argued that “When provenance grows to include any and all type of action or relationship that impacts the nature of a record or body of records, its boundaries become infinite.”⁹ But that is precisely Nesmith’s point, one that is also asserted by Wendy Duff and Verne Harris when they note that context is not finite in its reach; indeed, it has no beginning or end.¹⁰

The attempt to explain and describe context situates the archivist in the linguistics subfield of pragmatics, the study of how meaning is derived from

an understanding of context. Pragmatics looks beyond the structural elements of grammar, vocabulary, and lexicon to determine meaning in verbal interaction by analyzing the context of the utterance, the speaker's intent, knowledge of those involved in the communication, and other factors that might affect understanding.¹¹ Rather than verbal utterance, of course, the archivist deals most often with written utterance which is generally less ephemeral. But when the utterance occurred in a distant past—that is, no one alive “heard” it or witnessed its creation—or is hidden within a larger collection, it is difficult to establish the context. This problem must be accounted for by the archival translator.

A record's context includes a multiplicity of actions imposed on it; the prejudices, biases, and experiences of the parties to those actions; and all contingent political, cultural, social, and economic influences that touch it. These interventions are dizzying—records creation, creator categorization and primary use, storage, appraisal, selection, arrangement, description, preservation, secondary use, exhibition, and more.¹² Yakel, writing about descriptive practice, notes the cascading effect of archival decisions and actions: “Each successive representation and representational system builds on its predecessors, recovering what was judged valuable in a given temporal and cultural context, incorporating or discarding what was deemed essential or not, respectively.”¹³ The archivist becomes part of the context when rendering these actions and interventions and also must be translated. I will return to this problem later in the article.

While representational tools and systems are employed to describe context, they are themselves additional sources of context imposed by the archivist. Dutch archivist Eric Ketelaar, writing in 2001, argued that “Every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation by creator, user, and archivist is an activation of the record.” He further explained that “Every activation also changes the significance of earlier activations,” profoundly affecting the nature and meaning of the record.¹⁴ The layering of context requires continual contextualization and recontextualization by the archivist who needs to be able to describe and explain this endless shaping of the record. It is this contextual maze of layer upon layer that comprises the complex and often ambiguous language that the archivist must translate. There exists an ethical responsibility to do this well and with care because, as Duff and Harris argue, “Each story we tell about our records, each description we compile, changes the meaning of the records and re-creates them.”¹⁵ The attempt to describe—to tell the story the records tell and to contextualize context—is a translation modality.

Making sense of context is about bringing order to an inherently disorderly process; archival translation is the attempt to make the contextual understandable. The archivist must be completely open to new knowledge, new understanding, new ways of thinking about archival processes, and new partnering with

allies outside of the institutional setting. And archivists must inoculate themselves against the danger of reading past the text. If archivists are responsible for interrogating the text and its contexts and for translating that to others, what, then, are the challenges they face? There are four principles—three from translation theory and one from archival description theory—that map closely to the archival endeavor; the following pages offer suggestions of how they play out in archival space. These four ideas are: 1) translations by their nature are new works that, when done well, exhibit the spirit of the original text; 2) word selection and translation decisions should be justified and documented; 3) in attempting fidelity to the original text, the goal of the translator is restitution of original meaning; and 4) a critical element in documenting translation activity is documenting the translator.

A Translation Is a New Work

Robert Fagles, for over forty years a professor of comparative literature at Princeton and a prolific translator of ancient Greek and Roman texts, observes:

A translation, if it is a really serious translation, becomes a new work of art in its own right, because it is a transplant in many ways. It can be a new interpretation, an adaptation, a revision, sometimes drastic, sometimes very slight, but it is always being carried over into a new language, a new time, a new culture, and I think that means invariably that it's never the same as the original.¹⁶

In this observation, we can hear archival echoes regarding the remaking of original texts. Verne Harris has argued over and over again that archivists are not keepers or custodians but are record-makers.¹⁷ He means that every action executed upon a record produces a new record. In a related vein, the nineteenth-century German translator of Shakespeare, August Wilhelm von Schlegel, theorizes that “a good translation is not necessarily a literal translation; the translator must be able to translate the spirit of the text.”¹⁸ The whole of a work becomes a new text, but one in which the translator attempts to capture the essence or spirit of the original.

This point is illustrated graphically in Daniel Kahn’s translation of the Leonard Cohen song, “Hallelujah,” into Yiddish. Figure 1 includes one stanza from the song in “back translation,” a translation from one language to another and then back into the source language.

Leonard Cohen's Lyrics ¹⁹	Daniel Kahn's Yiddish Translation (Transliterated) ²⁰
You say I took the name in vain I don't even know the name But if I did, well really, what's it to you? There's a blaze of light in every word It doesn't matter which you heard The holy or the broken Hallelujah.	An apikoyres rufstu mikh Mit shem havaye lester ikh Iz meyle ikh dervart nisht keyn geule Nor s/brent zikh heys in yedn os Fun alef beys gor bizn sof Di heylike un kalye haleluye.
Daniel Kahn's Back Translation to English ²¹	
You call me an apostate I blaspheme with the Holy Name No matter, I'm not expecting the messianic age But it burns hot in every letter From alef-beys all the way to the end The holy and ruined Hallelujah.	

FIGURE 1. Translation of Hallelujah

Thus, Kahn has translated Cohen’s lyrics to Yiddish (presented in transliteration) and then his Yiddish text back to English. We can see that his translation is a new song, but one that maintains the spirit of the original. Kahn notes, “You always lose something and gain something in translation. I call it tradaptation: adaptation and translation. I try to approximate the gesture of the original.”²² In the case of “Hallelujah,” the gesture was complex, resulting in Kahn, despite his attempt to maintain the spirit of the source material, creating a new work that is a more explicitly Jewish and religious version than Cohen’s original lyrics, but still conveys the spirit of Cohen’s text.

Just as Kahn made a new song, the archivist makes a new record with every action imposed on that record. In fact, Nesmith goes even further with the disquieting and humbling contention that the “archives may actually make a greater contribution to the creation of the record than the [original] inscriber.”²³ Nesmith is speaking specifically about the privileging of records with long-term retention, the transmission of records value that archivists impart to successive generations, and the evolving and changing merit conferred on records in different time periods as society grapples with and tries to understand shifting cultural, social, and political ideas and movements. This is all a part of the process of demonstrating meaning to an audience while still attempting to capture the spirit of the original text. Capturing the spirit of the original text and accurately conveying a narrative is complicated by the problems of word choice and the construction of meaning.

Documenting Decisions

Returning to biblical texts, an example of word choice that intensifies meaning (which is also, by degree, a change in meaning) appears in Genesis chapter 48, verse 7. Jacob tells his son Joseph about the death of Joseph's mother, Rachel. Jacob's avowal of love for Rachel hinges on the Hebrew word *alai*, which literally translated means "on me," and on the tense used in the sentence construction. A traditional translation is "when I came from Paddan, Rachel died on me."²⁴ A modern translation by Robert Alter reads, "when I was coming from Paddan, Rachel died to my grief."²⁵ Alter chooses "to my grief" because Rachel's death "is . . . a loss to which he [Jacob] has never been reconciled. . . . His vivid sense of anguish, after all these decades, is registered in a single word *alai*."²⁶ The use of the past progressive tense ("I was coming") indicates Jacob's ongoing pain. Alter freely admits that his translation is not literal but argues that it conveys what he believes to be the real meaning of the text. What is important, here, is that Alter explains his choice, which is a best practice in translation.

The Kahn and Alter examples are translations that both represent and transform. The writing about traditional archival descriptive practice understandably gives more attention to representation. Representation is the process through which archivists most clearly translate the language of context by creating instruments and an assortment of forms that can include "Abstracts, calendars, inventories, repository guides, accession records, biographical sketches, authority files, and a host of other descriptive tools. . . ." ²⁷ Establishing access points to records through the application of controlled vocabularies and writing useful scope and content notes are essential components in constructing modern finding aids. This raises the important issue of word choice for access and its impact on meaning, as well as what can be accessed. Choice is a subjective matter, even when made through the application of reason. Schlegel contends that choosing well means selecting neutral terms with similar meanings to the original.²⁸ However, as many modern archivists argue, there are no neutral terms.

Archival description, more than any other function in the archives, lends itself to standardization and structure. Heather MacNeil points out that even (maybe especially) in a hypertext world, standards provide a predictability "which offers a necessary corrective to the associative and serendipitous potential of hypertext. . . . [A] standards-based description offers the user a stable point of departure and return."²⁹ Standards and data structures facilitate information sharing and the development of online access tools, but they also can restrict and confine modes of expression.³⁰ Navigating this restrict-confine duality and making choices about description can have a profound impact on access to the record—what can be accessed and, as important, who has access to it. Word

authorities, and the archivist's selection of words from those authorities, can privilege one group or point of view while abandoning or silencing another.³¹ To some degree, this may be an inevitable consequence of descriptive practice in a stratified society, but archivists need to take great care in developing decision procedures that guard against or overthrow this form of privileging.

Combating the "restrict and confine" norm created by the use of traditional standards and praxis requires a democratization of representation, including a deep examination of bias in descriptive language, the development of culturally appropriate authorities, and opening all the processes of description to affected communities. Samantha Winn asks who is doing archival description and notes that it is largely "younger, white-presenting, gender-normative, academic archivists of middle or upper-middle class" who are often responsible for interpreting the records of diverse cultural communities not their own. She argues for inclusive and community-driven description.³² An example of a resource that mirrors Winn's call is the work of the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia, an association of archivists and allied professionals in the greater Philadelphia area. One of its working groups, the Anti-Racist Description Working Group, made up of archivists from predominantly white institutions, has produced metadata recommendations and a bibliography aimed at anti-oppressive description practices. "The metadata recommendations and bibliography are tools the working group hopes will help deepen understanding of the complex issue of describing marginalized communities and groups." There has been (and continues to be) a wealth of antiracist description work focused on decentering neutrality and objectivity in archival practice. It is an iterative process that requires detailed analysis, review and input from many sources; and cross-cultural trust and cooperation.³³

Schlegel argues that "each text requires a different procedure for its translation." But common to all good translation work is detailed analysis of the original text, along with all existing translations. During the translation procedure, the translator should create a history of the process, but with the knowledge that the history and commentary are works in progress that will be analyzed and very likely modified by future translators.³⁴ The archivist, too, is under the same obligation. Crafting a finding aid is no less complex: it requires analyzing the text's original language for meaning and context. Documenting context and all archival actions is necessary to assure accountability and transparency about archival decisions, to provide future archival translators with a history and justifications for decisions regarding description and other functions that affect and remake the record, and to ensure the authenticity of the record. Developing a procedure, making decisions, and taking action all add dialects and accents to the language of the record. These decisions and actions, and identifying those who perform them, need to be documented.³⁵

Restitution of Original Meaning

If translation creates a new text, so too does the act of reading. The literary critic Nicholas Basbanes argues that a text becomes a new and different work when a new reader encounters it. The words in their original language are fixed and immutable, but the reception of them is subject to multiple interpretations, especially as the reader discovers and grapples with the interlinear meanings in the text.³⁶ The possibilities for new meanings expand when those words are translated. Still, the goal for translation, Basbanes says, is maintaining the naturalness of the original, to provide the reader access to an authentic reading of the work.³⁷ Philosopher Walter Benjamin contends that the translator has a mission, defined in terms of commitment, duty, debt, and responsibility to both author and reader. The object of translation is “to render that which must have been given.” And what was first given was the original meaning.³⁸ That is to say that the author or creator imbued the text with a particular meaning, and the burden of translation is no less than the attempt at restitution of that meaning.

But this argument is confounded by at least two thorny issues. First, does the original text equate to original meaning? Returning to Robert Alter’s translation of the word *alai*, the reader is confronted with what Alter admits is not a direct or exact translation, but one that he argues is the original meaning of the text. In this case, the translator faced the hard choice of fidelity to the original text or fidelity to what he believed was the original meaning, a translation filled with emotion and empathy. This, then, foregrounds questions about emotion in archival records as posed by Marika Cifor and Anne Gilliland:

In what ways, and to what extent, do records, and the holdings of our archives capture or contain emotions and other forms of affect that were experienced by the creators or others engaged or present in the making of the records? How should the archivist represent such affect to potential users, and how should the archivist anticipate and respond to affective responses and reactions on the part of those users? What kinds of affect are experienced by the archivist?³⁹

The second more fundamental question asks what is original and how does answering that question impact the translator’s obligation to the reader? The experience of Barbara Mowat, the long-time literary editor of Shakespeare for the Folger Library, is instructive. Her discipline was editing rather than translation, but there is some crossover that is useful to consider. Mowat notes that there are no written manuscripts from Shakespeare, only various early printed versions of the plays that often conflict with one another in some way or contain errors. A simple example is the name of Hamlet’s mother. In a 1604 version, she is called Gertrard; in a 1623 text, her name is Gertrude, the name audiences are familiar with today. In another example, most of what audiences have long

considered the definitive Shakespeare was created by eighteenth-century dramatist Nicholas Rowe, who codified the name Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* despite an earlier printing with the character's name as Robin Goodfellow.⁴⁰

An editor (and translator) tilts toward accuracy and consistency, but Mowat was also concerned with what she called readers' rights. She notes that the Shakespearean text created by Rowe sometimes differs from the earliest versions, but it is what is "known and loved and is alive onstage and in people's imaginations." She and her coeditor decided that Gertrude is alive today and that to reintroduce the original name Gertrard "would do too much violence to readers' (and audiences') rights. Almost every play presents the editor today with comparable decisions, each one of which must be decided individually and with as much wisdom as one can muster."⁴¹ In a sense, Mowat's experience calls into question how we decide what is original, what influences should be considered? On the other hand, an editor probably has greater leeway in decision-making than a translator. Yet, in Mowat's case, she engaged in the best practice of documenting why a decision was made.

Heather MacNeil, making an analogy of textual criticism to archival description, argues compellingly:

... the critical apparatus that supports and frames the authority and meaning of the text is analogous to the archival description of a fonds, which supports and frames the meaning of the fonds by documenting the origins, history, and custody of the records, the activities they reflect, and their substance. In the same way that the critical apparatus provides the grounds for trusting the editor's representation of a text, archival description provides the grounds for trusting the archivist's representation of a fonds through arrangement.⁴²

Her point about representing the authenticity of the original text, as far as she takes it, seems unassailable. I am taking the next step, arguing that archivists must "represent" by archival translation all of the surrounding context, including their role in changing the record and, through that work of translation, maintaining the authenticity of the record and expanding user trust that the meaning of the text can be discerned.

As noted earlier, the record has original meaning that is ascribed to it at the point of initial creation. However, the meaning of the record can be interpreted, reinterpreted, and manipulated as records are used in different ways resulting in multiple meanings that all become part of its context. "In this latter scenario," according to Yakel, "archivists should not only be reorganizing collections and revisiting poor descriptions, but completing periodic redescrptions of entire archives to accommodate these changing meanings."⁴³ The archival attempt to capture the interlinear meanings, produce an authentic gesture of the original, and document all subsequent activations, is fraught and daunting, but necessary.

Walter Benjamin argues that fidelity to the text and freedom to approximate original meaning must be reconciled in good translation.⁴⁴ He is stipulating that fidelity and license must illuminate the text, allowing one to retrieve the sense of meaning in the original text. Archival description and redescription, likewise, must shine a light on original meaning, reveal the complexity of multiple meanings, and, if allowed to shine properly, illuminate previously hidden, lost, or silenced meanings.

Translating the Translator

Archivists undeniably exert a profound impact on the records they maintain. Certainly, the representational actions they take influence what people outside the archives think is kept inside the archives. The archivist, as a purveyor of context, wields a selective and descriptive power that has the capacity “to privilege or to marginalize, to construct knowledge, [and] to exercise control.”⁴⁵ Indeed, Nesmith argues that archivists exert “enormous power and discretion over societal memory, deeply masked behind a public image of denial and self-effacement.”⁴⁶ The particular power that Nesmith identifies is largely hidden. This leaves archivists with the obligation to move beyond just documenting decisions and procedures and making their actions transparent. There is a necessary incumbency for archivists to document the personal contexts of those who make the decisions and implement the procedures in an attempt to fully daylight the deeper context of archival records.

Archivists provide commentary on and interpretation of the meaning of records from the moment of first contact through all the processes leading to making records available to those who can use the evidence and information for a multiplicity of purposes. Nesmith refers to this commentary as “invisible ink, since the integral and formative relationship of the commentary with the records is usually not seen and, indeed, is typically considered to be quite separate from them.”⁴⁷

Records context is in constant flux as ideas of value, worth, and meaning are influenced by social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in a world (and profession) undergoing tumultuous change.⁴⁸ The point is that not only are the layered contexts of the record missing from the archivist’s public face; but the context of the archivist is also hidden. The archivist—as record-maker, as cocreator, as author of the historical record—is a shaper of knowledge and, to some degree, of what the future might know of the past and the brief present. Here, the archivist’s life experience in a complex world will inevitably bias decision-making. A recent observation by author Leslie Jamison resonates with these archival sensibilities: “The fantasy of objectivity creates a pressure to maintain the veneer of impartiality and omniscience. . . . I bring the specifically

deforming influence of my own history, my hobbyhorse theories, and my fascinations. Feelings, prejudices, and interpretations will always show up at the party, whether or not you send them a printed invitation.”⁴⁹

Archivists’ social and cultural backgrounds, education, and affiliations, their religious and political beliefs, all the things that make them human and the humans they are, shape their perceptions, their understanding of their surroundings, and how they are in the world and in the profession. Archivists necessarily come to everything they do with prejudgments, biases, and preconceived notions of realities. As Cook observes, “Archivists inevitably will inject their own values into all [archival] activities. . . .”⁵⁰ Jennifer Douglas cautions: “Inevitably, certain contextual factors will be privileged and others will be left out, depending on the point of view, motives, and position of the archivist doing the describing.”⁵¹

This raises the fourth concern in archival translation: documenting the context of the archivist. It is not enough to record decisions and procedures, nor to simply document who made them. If archivists are translators of context—of that secondary language—then archivists, too, are part of the grammar of that language; they are contextual elements through their activations of the record, creating the necessity of translating themselves. Michelle Light and Tom Hyry suggest this in a 2002 article about adding colophons and annotations to traditional finding aids to include a wide array of information that does not fall within specific data elements of the various descriptive standards. Noting that Helen Samuels recorded “her perspective, methods, bias, and decisions for later scrutiny,” Light and Hyry go on to suggest that a “colophon could also be used to record biographical information about a processor, as well as any perspective they would like to contribute to the finding aid.”⁵² The authors provide an example of such a colophon; it includes information on decisions made and actions taken during the processing of a collection. Also included is an example of a brief biographical note about the lead processor:

Tom Hyry has worked as a professional archivist in Manuscripts and Archives for over four years and currently is the head of arrangement and description activities for the department. He also performs reference and collection development activities. He holds a B.A. in U.S. History from Carleton College and an M.I.L.S. with a concentration on Archival Studies from the University of Michigan.⁵³

I propose a far more detailed autobiographical sketch that exposes the archivist’s personal context, that can shed light on experiences, prejudgments, or biases that are surfaced through radical self-understanding and values clarification. To be sure, I am not suggesting creation of a psychoanalytic note, nor should archivists divulge information that is inappropriate or violates their personal privacy. But, as an example, there could be value for researchers and

future institutional employees knowing that I grew up in a white, working-class neighborhood, that neither parent had a college education, that I was a Vietnam War protester, that I believe in big government, and so on.⁵⁴ Archivists write extensive biographical notes about donors; why not about themselves? Consideration would need to be given to what elements comprise such a note, whether standards should be developed and what language authorities used. Indeed, existing information management systems such as ArchivesSpace and description standards such as EAC-CPF include data elements that would accommodate extended translator biographical notes. As every collection is touched by many hands, multiple biographical notes should be available. And, of course, they would need to be updated as archivists' personal contexts change.

The point is that the never-ending process of record-making and the layering of context upon context requires archivists to document themselves.⁵⁵ Verne Harris, cognizant of his own personal perspective forged in his South African milieu, writes: "My actions—more precisely, my attempts to take ethical action—have been shaped by my perceptions of my contexts."⁵⁶ Read closely, Harris supposes the archivist is required to employ some ethical standard when taking any action. One obviously could interpret this to mean all archivists need to face up to the challenge of authority gone off the rails, just as Harris did in South Africa. But, at the more elementary archival level, Harris is talking about considering the ethical implications of actions involving selection of records or construction of finding aids. Read that way, then the second point he makes is fundamental. Whatever actions archivists take are shaped by their contexts, their experiences, and their own perceptions of those contexts. Harris is not suggesting that archivists do not have free will, nor that their decision-making is deterministic. What he is saying—at least what my reading overlaid with the context of my career is surmising—is that they must be able to wrestle with their experiences, biases, and prejudgments to make the best decisions and take the best actions possible. Accepting that neutrality and objectivity are misplaced ideals is liberating, but also requires embracing the autobiographical moment—inward analysis, research, tracing, understanding, reporting the experiences that shape one's life, and embracing the effort toward fairness.

Translating Forward

This is all well and good, but what does the translation lens mean for the archivist whose responsibility is the representation of the record? What does this theoretical frame mean in the day-to-day, hurly-burly of archival work? The answer will be different for different archivists and different archival institutions. Two points are to be made here. First, to undertake archival translation in a meaningful way and to ensure some possibility of doing it well, archivists

must engage in the cognitive exercise of radical self-understanding. Theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel defines radical self-understanding as an individual's deep examination and introspection about the self in an effort to discover the content and meaning and root of one's thinking, and to remind themselves of what they stand for. It is an internal effort to distinguish between principles and opinions and to reveal ultimate political, social, and cultural claims about the world and, then, to look outward, and to establish their moral and ethical place in it.⁵⁷ This introspection then, must be turned outward in an attempt to overcome our biases. Philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer claims that we may overcome biases through the process of historical understanding. Writing about the historical ideal, Gadamer argues (and this could be aimed at archivists):

The historian is denied and limited by belonging to particular moral spheres: his native land, and his political and religious persuasions. But his participation depends precisely on this insuperable one-sidedness. Within the concrete conditions of his own historical existence—not from some position suspended above things—he sets himself the task of being fair. “This is his fairness, namely that he tries to understand.”⁵⁸

Gadamer's assertion about fairness is a claim on honesty.

When Samantha Winn asks, “can description be honest?,” she is asking precisely the right question. The answer to her question may be “no, not entirely,” but it must be tempered with the knowledge that archivists can strive for the ideals of fairness and honesty. Indeed, Winn makes the trenchant point: “Any ambitions we have of handling the historic record with fairness or equity must be shored up by continual self-examination, humility, and scholarly engagement.”⁵⁹ Fairness and honesty in this reading are assertions about justice and the archivist's ability to better represent archives to a broader public. After all, the end goal of archival work, as with translation, is to improve access to the text.

My second point, made with the understanding that everything discussed above folds into justice theory, is that archival translation demands a great deal of practical work. My purpose in this article is not to delve deeply into the consequences of translation, but I do want to briefly suggest a few of the implications of taking the idea seriously:

1. If we accept, as Nesmith and Harris argue, that context is endless, archivists must take on the impossible task of translating it by engaging in even greater research about the subject and content of collections and everything surrounding the activations of the records. Compiling and translating or representing as much of that information and evidence as possible will be a daunting task.
2. A new and ever-growing wealth of material covering description and redescription focuses on inclusive language, cultural competency, and

conscientious and reparative description, and many case studies of innovative projects address justice in representation. Archivists must throw off the idea that they are too busy to read the professional literature, including that which appears in nontraditional sources, and meaningfully engage the literature.

3. I recognize that archivists cannot be content experts in the same manner as literary translators who might focus on just one work or genre. Therefore, they must go outside the archives to build partnerships and collaborations with creators and communities of people who know their history and records firsthand. They can help create authorities and thesauri that will assist in creating good archival translations. In turn, archivists can support those communities in their own archival translation work.
4. Archival institutions need to determine whether existing collections suffer from poor or outdated translations. It will be necessary to conduct internal surveys to reevaluate and eventually redescribe previously processed collections. Although not all collections need to be redescribed, such work is necessary to daylight hidden materials and give voice to those who have been silenced by traditional practices.
5. Good archival translators must always have their readers in mind. This requires that archivists be humble in their work, look beyond trauma and document joy where it is found, build affective relationships, prioritize their users/readers, and learn to ask better questions in the present.⁶⁰

There is no doubt that precious time will be expended taking on these tasks. In an archival era in which More Product, Less Process (in its many forms and applications) has dominated approaches to processing, it might seem counterproductive from an efficiency perspective to engage in these tasks. Nevertheless, archivists are grappling with ways to employ MPLP and serve the needs of justice through archival translation as I have described it.⁶¹

I believe archival descriptive practice (or archival translation) is at an inflection point that requires archivists to approach the translation/representation of records in new ways and obliges practitioners to revisit previously described collections. This work must be undertaken with care and caring, and an understanding of the cultural and spiritual nature of the archival endeavor. Theologian Michael Fishbane, writing about the spirituality of text, cautions us to be humble in assuming what we think we know. He observes:

Martin Buber once said that the task of the biblical translator is to overcome “the leprosy of fluency,” a disease of the spirit that can lead us to imagine that we already know what we are reading, causing us blithely and triumphantly to read past the text. The effective translator must, therefore, reformulate the

word or the words of the text to produce a new encounter with its language and thus facilitate a new hearing and a new understanding.⁶²

If archivists substitute “ourselves” for “text” in this passage, I can imagine a process of radical self-understanding that includes an encounter with themselves in which they embrace “a new hearing and a new understanding” of their own context.

Verne Harris, wrapping archival justice in a Derridian blanket, argues: “An archivist, . . . while striving to do the possible to the best of her ability, is always aware of the impossible demand facing her. An archivist who (in the face of the strangers haunting her) is reaching for an impossible hospitality, is attempting always to give strangers welcome, is striving to make the archive a home.”⁶³ Through archival translation that quests for fairness and an honest effort at autobiographical understanding, the archivist has a credible possibility of making the archive a home.

NOTES

- ¹ The Babel story is found in Genesis 11:1–9. The passages quoted are from *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 58–60.
- ² Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 193–94. See also Sacks, “Interfaith Respect Is Vital,” <http://rabbisacks.org/credo-interfaith-respect-is-vital>, captured at <https://perma.cc/4M3Y-WP84>; and *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002).
- ³ My argument recalls, and in some respects, parallels, Heather MacNeil’s important comparative analysis of textual criticism/editing and archival description. See MacNeil, “Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor,” *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 264–78, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.68.2.01u65t6435700337>.
- ⁴ Elizabeth Yakel, “Archival Representation,” *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02438926>.
- ⁵ Kirsten Malmkjaer and Kevin Windle, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ⁶ For example, Andrew R. MacAndrew’s popular translation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* was an essential read when I was in college. Before MacAndrew’s translation, the popular standard was rendered in 1918 by the most admired translator of Russian literature, Constance Garnett. And, while there are many translations of *Notes*, the current best-selling version is the 1994 work by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. My personal copy is the nineteenth printing. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground, White Nights, The Dream of a Ridiculous Man and Selections from The House of the Dead*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet, Mentor, and Plume Books, 1961). *White Nights, and Other Stories*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1918); *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).
- ⁷ *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, s.v. “context,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/context.html>, captured at <https://perma.cc/T4MJ-EKEH>.
- ⁸ Tom Nesmith, “Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives,” *American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 24–41, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.65.1.r48450509r0712u>. The quote is from page 35. For another excellent discussion of context, see Verne Harris, “Ethics and the Archive,” in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions*, ed. Terry Cook (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011) 345–62.

- ⁹ Jennifer Douglas, "Origins: Evolving Ideas about the Principle of Provenance," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC CLIO, 2010), 37.
- ¹⁰ Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meaning," in Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007), 133. They couch these assertions as questions raised by postmodern analysis.
- ¹¹ William Ladusaw, "Meaning (Semantics and Pragmatics)," Linguistic Society of America, <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/meaning-semantics-and-pragmatics>, captured at <https://perma.cc/E8HF-ZVDD>.
- ¹² These ideas are fully developed in a number of articles but are particularly well presented in Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 131–56; Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," 24–41; and Douglas, "Origins," 23–43.
- ¹³ Yakel, "Archival Representation," 24–25.
- ¹⁴ Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2001): 136–38, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/41812>; Douglas, "Origins," 33.
- ¹⁵ Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 139.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Nicholas A. Basbanes, *Every Book Its Reader: The Power of the Printed Word to Stir the World* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2004), 152–53.
- ¹⁷ Harris presents the concept of record-making in several essays in *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007).
- ¹⁸ Katia D. Hay, "August Wilhelm von Schlegel," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2010), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/schlegel-aw>, captured at <https://perma.cc/VM66-4D99>.
- ¹⁹ Leonard Cohen, "Hallelujah," Columbia Records, 1984.
- ²⁰ This transliteration is found in *The Yiddish Daily Forward*, November 23, 2016, <http://yiddish.forward.com/articles/200434/leonard-cohens-hallelujah-in-yiddish>, captured at <https://perma.cc/cc/78QX-BKJ7>.
- ²¹ The English back translation appears as subtitles while Kahn is singing at *Schmooze: Your Yiddish Pop Culture Fix*, November 10, 2016, <https://forward.com/schmooze/354094/watch-amazing-yiddish-rendition-of-leonard-cohens-hallelujah/>, captured at <https://perma.cc/K39V-QNFH>.
- ²² Larry Yudelson, "A New and Very Yiddish Hallelujah," *The [New Jersey] Jewish Standard*, November 17, 2016, <https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/a-new-and-very-yiddish-hallelujah>.
- ²³ Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," 35.
- ²⁴ This quote is from *The Chumash: The Art Scroll Series/Stone Edition* (Brooklyn: Mesoarah Publications, Ltd., 1993), 271.
- ²⁵ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company), 278.
- ²⁶ Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 278.
- ²⁷ Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 134.
- ²⁸ Hay, "August Wilhelm von Schlegel."
- ²⁹ MacNeil, "Picking Our Text," 277.
- ³⁰ Geoffrey Yeo, "Debates about Description," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, 99.
- ³¹ Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 148. See also Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).
- ³² Samantha Winn, "The Hubris of Neutrality in Archives," Medium: On Archivy, April 24, 2017, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/the-hubris-of-neutrality-in-archives-8df6b523fe9f>, captured at <https://perma.cc/62C6-VVAV>.
- ³³ Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Working Group, *Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources*, October 2019, captured at <https://perma.cc/CW4Z-YW8N>. Just a small sample of anti-oppression and antiracist projects and resources include creation of the Umbra Search African American History database, development of the

Mukurtu open-source content management system, the work of the South Asian American Digital Archive, the various publications found in the SAA Description Section's Descriptive Notes Inclusive Description Series, National Museum of the American Indian Cultural Terms Thesaurus. A listing of publications, professional papers, projects, webinars, institutions, and archivists committed to this work is far too extensive to include in these pages.

³⁴ Hay, "August Wilhelm von Schlegel."

³⁵ Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 138.

³⁶ Basbanes, *Every Book Its Reader*, 151–52.

³⁷ Hay, "August Wilhelm von Schlegel."

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 255–59. The essay was originally published in 1921. Jacques Derrida analyzes this important essay by Benjamin in "Des Tours de Babel," *PSYCHE: Inventions of the Other, Volume 1* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

³⁹ Marika Cifor and Anne J. Gilliland, "Affect and the Archive, Archives and Their Affects: An Introduction to the Special Issue," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2015): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9263-3>.

⁴⁰ "Barbara Mowat on Editing Shakespeare," *Shakespeare & Beyond* (blog), November 28, 2017, <https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2017/11/28/editing-shakespeare-barbara-mowat>, captured at <https://perma.cc/3J6J-H3UG>.

⁴¹ "Barbara Mowat on Editing Shakespeare."

⁴² MacNeil, "Picking Our Text," 269.

⁴³ Yakel, "Archival Representation," 4. See also, Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives," 131–41.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 255–59.

⁴⁵ Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 144.

⁴⁶ Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," 28–31.

⁴⁷ Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," 37.

⁴⁸ Ciaran B. Trace has a very fine discussion of this very issue in relation to appraisal in "On or Off the Record? Notions of Value in the Archive," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, 47–68.

⁴⁹ Leslie Jamison, "Is it Possible for a Writer to Be Objective," *The New York Times Book Review*, January 8, 2017, 31.

⁵⁰ Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 132, 142.

⁵¹ Douglas, "Origins," 37.

⁵² Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 65, no. 2 (2002): 222–24, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.65.2.13h27j5x8716586q>.

⁵³ Light and Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations," 230.

⁵⁴ Similar to this proposal, Jessica Tai recently included a positionality statement at the beginning of her article "Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3 (2020).

⁵⁵ Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 144. They explicitly state this: "Just as archivists document the background and biases of record creators, they need also to highlight their own preconceptions that influence and shape the description and consequently the meanings of the records they represent."

⁵⁶ Harris, "Ethics and the Archives," 347.

⁵⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1987), 6–8. For the role of radical self-understanding in archives and the notion of *archival being*, see Scott Cline, *Archival Virtue: Relationship, Obligation, and the Just Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2021), 19–34, especially pages 25–28.

⁵⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), 215. Originally published in 1960.

⁵⁹ Winn, "The Hubris of Neutrality in Archives."

- ⁶⁰ Reed College archivist and Blackivist cofounder Tracy Drake suggested most of the ideas in bullet no. 5 in her Northwest Archivists keynote address, “We Are Each Other’s Business: Archiving with Intention in Ever Changing Times,” May 10, 2021.
- ⁶¹ See for example, the session at the Society of American Archivists 2021 Annual Meeting titled “Making Product Less Problematic: Considerations of MPLP and Conscientious Description.”
- ⁶² Michael Fishbane, “A Note on the Spirituality of Texts,” *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, 1504.
- ⁶³ Harris, “Ethics and Archive,” 360. Hospitality is a recurring theme in Harris’s work. See several essays in *Archives and Justice*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Scott Cline is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and author of *Archival Virtue: Relationship, Obligation, and the Just Archives* (Chicago: SAA, 2021). He is two-time winner of the SAA Fellows’ Ernst Posner Award and a recipient of the Society’s C.F.W. Coker Prize. His scholarly interests are in the areas of personal values, ethics, and moral order in the archival setting. He was the founding archivist and director of the Seattle Municipal Archives from 1986 to 2016. He was a lecturer at the University of Washington’s Information School for two decades. Cline is a former member of SAA Council and past president of both the Academy of Certified Archivists and Northwest Archivists. He currently serves on the SAA Foundation Board and recently completed three terms as board president.