Translating Koselleck. Challenges

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Translating Koselleck: Challenges

Translation from German into Romanian requires terminological equivalences for two national communities with different linguistic origins, heritages, and cultural landmarks, and which live in different temporalities. Since the meaning of modernity is different, translating a fundamental concept into Romanian requires contextualization and an understanding of its meaning in both languages. Translating Koselleck requires motivating the reader, inviting them to become a co-discoverer of the other’s past and present and their own, as well as to encounter the personal experience and memory of the historian. The particularity of such an approach is determined by the distinct German and Romanian cultural-historical paths. Apparently similar, the two socio-political languages also have differences that merit attention.

Koselleck observes that the temporal rhythms of history are always changing, generating discontinuities and interrupting old reflexes in favor of innovative thought and action. In the German language, if the meaning of concepts refers to a repositioning of things and people, and contemporary German history indicates accelerated transformations, then in the case of fundamental Romanian concepts and recent Romanian history, the socio-political languages indicate delayed reactions resulting in slow and partial changes. Translating Koselleck, therefore, implies an interest in the theory and philosophy of history, which is essential when the narrative of ideas transcends one’s own culture, in order to make it visible, tangible, and applicable in other cultures. This is why Koselleck’s translation into Romanian requires explanations of the meaning of the fundamental concepts in both languages, a meaning generated by asymmetrical temporal and spatial experiences. This is a challenge in itself, for it presupposes correlation and terminological equivalence, as well as interpretation. This is what I set out to do when Patrick Lavrits and I translated Koselleck’s entry on the concept of Geschichte (history).

Migratory Concepts: Different Temporalities and Meanings

Although there is high regard for conceptual history in the Romanian context and intellectual sensitivity to language issues, such research has only attracted the attention of a limited number of scholars in Romania. The problematization of
facts, the non-existence of regulatory concepts with social and political functions, is linked to the absence of re-evaluations and re-writing of national history, after both the Second World War and the fall of communism. Many of the concepts in the lexicon of the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe (GG) are migratory and important for all cultures in former communist or national-communist states. As for the concept of Geschichte, it has priority in Eastern European historiographies as soon as they are asked to rethink and rewrite history on the basis of the social-political vocabulary of the twenty-first century. Seen from the perspective of temporality and spatiality, history needs to be continually rewritten. The German concepts translated into Romanian – the examples of Geschichte (history) and Revolution (revolution) that I have dealt with – require special concern for their meanings in the two languages. I am referring to familiarization with the variable geography of Central and South-Eastern Europe; to understanding of the administrative-political languages of previous centuries; to identifying Austro-German-Magyar (Hungarian)-Romanian cultural influences in Transylvania, Banat, and Bucovina; to research on the role of the Roman Catholic and Evangelical-Lutheran religions, respectively, in their encounters with the majority Orthodox religion in today's Romanian regions. In the same sense, it is useful to know the process of language modernization in the Romanian intellectual circles of Transylvania in contact with the German-Austrian Aufklärung and the German-Prussian Sturm und Drang. As for the migratory concepts that come to meet such an approach, a few examples are enlightening: “scholar,” “enlightenment,” “discipline/order,” “continuity,” “culture,” “ethnicity,” “ethnoculture,” “cultural nation,” “state,” and “nation.”

Based on the experience of translating Koselleck, my colleague Armin Heinen of Aachen University and I produced the edited collection, Istoria României prin concepte. Perspective alternative asupra limbajelor social-politice (Key Concepts of Romanian History: Alternative Approaches to Socio-Political Languages) – a collaboration between sixteen researchers from German, American, French, Hungarian, and Romanian universities in which we analyzed how the concepts of “nation,” “people,” “progress,” “property,” “liberalism,” “education,” and “transition” are used. On several occasions we pointed out that most Romanian notions and concepts date back to the nineteenth century and that many historians, philologists, sociologists, and political scientists still use their old meanings today. In the same vein, we observed that misunderstandings, disputes, and reactions in public debates in recent decades are caused by improper terminology, ambiguities, or misunderstood meanings that are incompatible with today's social-political languages.
Translating Koselleck into Romanian, I found that the vocabulary through which we evaluate the past and the present is essential, along with how languages can influence future projects. Through the concept of Geschichte, we emphasized the role of conceptual history for post-1989 Romania, as well as the urgency of redefining Romanian historiography in the European context, i.e., enriching the vocabulary and rewriting national history from a new perspective. In a Romanian culture marked by romantic ethnonationalism and communism inspired by Stalinism and Balkanism, the history of concepts and conceptual history must become a priority. I thought of such a project when working on the translation and subsequent edited volume. The practice of history can help clarify national identity and the representations of civil society, generating a critical-rational understanding of the past and a pluralistic political culture open to the future.

As for the history of European languages, it remains a desideratum to research and identify migratory concepts that receive new meanings according to language, histories, and geographies of place. GG translations contribute to the continental and transcontinental extensions of the history of fundamental concepts. In the case of Europe, the concepts explain multi- and interculturality, exploiting both the diversity and shared meaning of local, regional, and national heritages. Finally, references to Koselleck and the Lexikon become useful to many other cultures, overcoming the meaning of old socio-political languages and stimulating their renewal.

Koselleck’s Translation: Stimulus for the Ongoing Research and (Re)writing of History

Tensions between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations explain the need for a contextualized, historical interpretation of the language used in each case. This is what applies, for example, to employees of the Romanian communist security service (Securitate). They were not obliged to prove the accuracy of their information and could not be contradicted by anyone (a characteristic of totalitarian regimes). There were no state institutions to control the facts, notes, and messages of the Securitate, so documents from the archives of this institution require linguistic analysis by historians, humanists, and social-political professionals. Examination of the linguistic logic specific to the secretive security apparatus of the Romanian national-communist state reveals major differences between the language of its employees and the language of society. In order to understand these differences even more precisely, the role played by the
language of the party must also be analyzed, requiring research into three “languages.” It can be argued that during the national-communist regime in Romania there was no common discourse. Statements like “X said such and such about such and such a person” or “X said this and that...” are disconnected from reality, as they do not come from a certain social environment or the everyday language of the time. It is an artificial language, particularizing an institution in the service of power, implementing the ideas and laws of the totalitarian state that punished or excluded differences of any kind. This is a logic of language (the space of experience, the horizon of expectation) constructed by the totalitarian institution itself. In other words, the archive of the national-communist Securitate – transferred after 1989 to a newly created institution with its own legal status, the National Council for the Study of Security Archives, under management appointed by the political parties – does not help to diagnose the social-political reality because the information in its documents is erroneous. As for the conceptual overlaps identified in the vocabulary of the archived documents, they indicate incomplete state modernization. This is another reason to encourage further competent research, as it can contribute to a nuanced understanding of people and facts and the realities of a time when obsession with secrecy, bans, and manipulation through lies were part of official doctrine. Totalitarian regimes create spaces of experience and horizons of expectation that need to be examined through the prism of their own linguistic-political context, especially as institutional languages become the main instrument of coercion, undermining the development of inter-human relations. This is also why translating Koselleck into Romanian opens new perspectives on the history of Romania and the time of modernity in Romania. I am convinced that this will make it easier to examine the superficial transition from one administrative and legal system to another that took place during the formation of the nation-state, as well as the ideological orientations during the twentieth century that led to the establishment of two totalitarian political regimes one after the other.

While Reinhart Koselleck was particularly interested in the linguistic transformation of the transitional period of the German world between 1750 and 1850, he was attentive to concepts reflecting modern thought such as Aufklärung (Enlightenment) as cultural theory, “reform,” “progress,” “revolution,” “romanticism,” “idealism,” “privilege,” “freedom,” “future,” etc. The approach I have found most useful for Romanian historiography pertains to concepts that describe the unfinished process of modernization in a space where social contradictions go hand in hand with the asymmetry of political thought and action and the way they
are mirrored in linguistic forms. In conclusion, a key point: in translating Koselleck, I have taken into account the historian’s idea that rewriting and reconstructing the past must take into account different contexts, but also the “experience of history,” “historical semantics,” “horizon of expectation,” and “regime of historicity.” Starting from these and also considering the personal biography of the historian, the scientific interpretation of history is made from the present, including human actions transmitted by social and temporal structures. In this way, the resulting historical knowledge becomes relevant to our contemporaries.


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4 Otherwise, the dichotomous approach will continue with Eastern Europe using its own understanding of the past.