

# 10-Minute Tech Comm Transcript

## Dr. Laura Gonzales on Sites of Translation

Ryan Weber: Welcome to 10-Minute Tech Comm. This is Ryan Weber at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, and I'm really excited to talk with today's guest.

Laura Gonzales: Hello, my name is Laura Gonzales, and I'm an Assistant Professor in Rhetoric and Writing Studies at the University of Texas El Paso.

Ryan Weber: I've invited Dr. Gonzales on the show today to talk about her recent book, *Sites of Translation: What Multilinguals can Teach Us About Writing and Rhetoric*. The book is based on a lot of observations of professional translators and multilingual students as they write and translate. And Dr. Gonzales talks with us today about how translators make meaning, how translation is relational, how they use translation tools, and what she herself has learned doing translation work in the community of El Paso. But because her work is about translation, I wanted to do something a little different than usual. In addition to the English-language version of the episode I wanted to release a Spanish-language version of the same interview in order to give Dr. Gonzales a chance to talk about her work in multiple languages and to see what would happen when a scholar talks about her work in two languages. Unfortunately, I don't speak Spanish, so Dr. Gonzales helped me find a scholar in her field who does.

Patricia Flores: Hi, my name is Paty Flores and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Texas El Paso in the Rhetoric and Composition Studies program.

Ryan Weber: Paty recorded a Spanish language version of an interview with Dr. Gonzales based on the same questions I ask her here. I've released both episodes, the English-language version and the Spanish language version. Additionally, Laura and Paty transcribed the episode in Spanish and translated it into English. I've also transcribed this English-language episode as well. All of the transcripts are available at [uahtechcomm.com](http://uahtechcomm.com) on the podcasts page. I'll include a link in the show notes. I hope that bilingual listeners can enjoy both episodes. I hope some Spanish speakers find the episode as well and give it a listen. But whatever happens I'm really excited about this project and I really appreciate Dr. Gonzales and Paty putting in some extra work to make this possible. Whatever version you listen to, I hope you enjoy it.

Ryan Weber (Begin Interview): Welcome to the podcast Laura. I really appreciate you joining us today and I really enjoyed looking through your new book and I'm excited to ask you some questions about it. One of the things I wanted to ask you first – your book defines this concept of a translation moment. Can you tell us what is a translation moment and can you give us a couple of examples?

Laura Gonzales: Sure. Definitely. So translation moments is a concept I developed in collaboration with the participants that are showcased in the book. When you're translating, it's kind of like the writing process, you know you're just translating smoothly from one

language to another. But there's these instances where you pause because you have to make a decision about "Well, what's the best word, what's the most appropriate word for this specific context?" In translation work, because language is constantly changing, these translation moments come up a lot when we're thinking about "So, am I translating for a South American audience? Am I translating for a person from this particular region in Mexico?" So you have to think about how to best adapt information even though you might know a couple possibilities for a translation of a specific term you have to make a rhetorical decision about which word to use in a specific moment in time. So in a piece I wrote with a collaborator Rebecca Zantjer we defined translation moments as instances in time when multilingual communicators pause to make a rhetorical decision about how to transform a word from one language to another. So it's not the entire process of translation but those moments where we pause because we have to navigate certain layers of difference in order to make a decision. To give you an example, when I was working with one of the community organizations, and I was observing this presentation about healthy eating for Latino communities, the presenter, Sandra, was speaking to a Spanish-speaking audience but they were Spanish speakers from many different regions, and she was describing corn on the cob as an option for something you can feed your family. And so she was going through her presentation, and she paused when she said the word corn in Spanish. And she said "When I talked to an audience from Mexico I used the word 'mazorca' to define corn, and that's not the most appropriate term, because 'mazorca' for many people in that audience meant like a dry corn and it wasn't corn on the cob. So she paused, she kind of localized the notion of corn within that community, and then to help with her translation, she also pulled up a picture of corn on the cob. And so when I think about the rhetorical strategies that happen in translation moments, the translation moment would be signaled by Sandra's pause, and then the strategies that she used, including a story about a previous presentation when people didn't understand what 'mazorca' was, even though it was a word in Spanish and they spoke Spanish, and the use of a picture. So those are the strategies that happened within the translation moment.

Ryan Weber: That's really interesting. So you're talking about specifically those moments when you're translating and you have to stop and think "What is the right word for this audience?" That's a translation moment?

Laura Gonzales: Yes, and because I was observing so many translations, and so much is happening during translation, I needed a way to kind of ground my analysis in something that was more concrete. So when I analyzed translation I focused on the translation moments and what the translators did in those moments as a way to kind of unpack the rhetorical navigation that translators do.

Ryan Weber: Great, and you mention translators have to make all these rhetorical decisions when multilingual speakers are writing or speaking. What kinds of decisions do they have to make? You alluded to some about audience and localization, but can you talk about what kinds of decisions have to be made and how they affect the translation process?

Laura Gonzales: Definitely, and I think many of the decisions are maybe pretty simple grammatical decisions, like “What verb tense should I use?” But one of the things I noticed working really closely with translators and being a part of the community is that a lot of the decisions that translators have to make are maybe not even conscious ones, so there’s this other example of another translator who was doing a verbal interpretation during a birth because a patient of hers was giving birth and she was translating communication between the patient and the doctor who spoke English and the patient who was giving birth spoke Spanish. She was interpreting during a birth and the doctor said “We’re going to get the labor started.” And the sort of textbook translation of labor into Spanish would be “labor.” But in that moment she decided to say “We’re going to start the nacimiento” which is the birth. So not really labor but birth. And in having a conversation with this interpreter later, she said “You know, I’m a mom, and I know how stressed out moms are in that moment. If I said ‘labor,’ ‘labor’ could mean many different things in Spanish. It could mean, like, people laboring outside, like working in construction or something. And so because I related to that situation of being a mom and being stressful, I decided to deviate from what might be the textbook translation and go with something that I know would make the most sense. So when I think about decisions that translators make in the moment, it’s those decisions that are influenced by both who it is that they’re translating for but also their translator’s own experiences, what they’ve lived in the past, their training, of course. But I think in those moments all of those elements kind of come together.

Ryan Weber: One of the things you argue is that translation is, so three things: translation is situated, cyclical, and creative. Can you talk about why you emphasized these characteristics of translation?

Laura Gonzales: There are many reasons why these three particular elements of translation really popped up during my analysis. I think part of it is the fact that many of the translations that I observed and traced took place in digital environments, and so I noted a connection between technology design and digital composing and translation. So, thinking about user experience design for example, and web design being iterative, which means you constantly have to go back and get feedback and make adjustments in order to have an effective product. Translation is very similar. Just like a website needs an update translations need updates all the time because language is alive, it changes all the time, and so you can’t just have a one and done translation. The notion of creativity was also very interesting to me as a way to fight back against this deficit framework that is often used toward multilingual communicators as not having the right words or not knowing the right words in a specific language, especially when we’re thinking about English. But really what I noticed is in those moments where we don’t have the right words is where we have to get creative and do something else to communicate whether it’s like draw a picture or gesture or tell a story. And so the creativity came up as a way to speak back to those deficit-based frameworks but also to think about all the different creative elements that go into digital composing and then when you throw in the translation element on top of that I think the creativity is even more enhanced. And the notion of

situatedness and culture situatedness just illustrated to me the fact that translation is always contextualized within a specific cultural moment and cultural practice within a community, at least for the participants that I was working with. I know that for automated translation and different translation projects, that may not always be the case, but for this type of translation work that happened in community contexts, the notion of being situated in the community was really important. And so those three elements kind of came up throughout the analysis.

Ryan Weber: Great, well and let's talk about that some more because I know as part of your research you observed and you interviewed professional translators who work at the Language Services Department at the Hispanic Services Center of Western Michigan. What did you learn when you observed these translators at work?

Laura Gonzales: I learned many things, but I think one of the things that sticks out to me the most is just the community driven notion of translation. Translation oftentimes is perceived as this one and done event, like you pull up Google translate, you put in a word, you hit "translate," it comes out a different word. But in these community contexts, that's not how it functioned. How it functioned was a community came together, the whole language services department came together to help immigrants who are coming into the United States do things like enroll in school, seek medical counsel, seek legal help. And this office began because Spanish speakers with training in translation wanted to help their community, and they did so by coming up with these mechanisms and getting training to be professional translators who then could like notarize and certify translations of medical documents, legal documents and things like that. And so what I learned from working with this particular organization is that translation is for the community and it's done by the community, at least in this context. So it's the same people who live in the neighborhood who then got training to become professional translators who then eventually went back to serve their community by completing the translation. So it's kind of this recursive model that sustains this community that I had the pleasure to work with. And I think that's one of the most powerful things I learned.

Ryan Weber: Yeah, it seems like one of the themes in your book, coming up over and over again, is this idea that sort of translation is relational in a sense, that it involves sort of relationships between people and that that seems to push against, like you said, that Google translate model of I pop the word in, it pops out as something else, and here's the word that you need. Is that an accurate assessment?

Laura Gonzales: Yeah definitely. It is relational on so many levels, like the relationship between the translators and their languages, the relationships between translators and each other within that context, and the relationships between translators and their community. I think it's all connected, and that's one of the biggest things that came out of this project is to find ways to highlight those connections, because a lot of times they're not visible. You walk in and it's a very professional office. You don't think they're necessarily a family but they are in all of the different levels of translation, so the people that take in the document, the people who analyze

it, the people who then proofread it. All of those people have to be constant relation in order to complete a successful translation project.

Ryan Weber: And you do, you know, you mention these translation tools in your book, you know, Google translate and others. How are people using these digital tools in the process of translation? How do they factor in, if at all?

Laura Gonzales: I think one of the really interesting things that I learned is that no translation tool is perfect and does all the things that a translator would do to successfully translate. But they do provide, this is what one of my participants said, that digital translation tools are sites of creativity. So when the translators could not immediately think of the most specific translation, they might put a term into Google Translate, or Linguee, an online dictionary, Word Reference, there's a bunch of different tools. But when they can't think of a word right away, or maybe when they just want some options for translations, they'll input a term into the digital translation tool and come up with options. And then it's up to the translators themselves to negotiate meaning and figure out which of those options works best. And that's the really tough thing that a digital translation tool, at least as we have them now, are not very good at doing, is figuring out how this one term that you're asking me to translate now fitting into the context of a sentence, paragraph, entire monograph that you're translating. For the translators that I work with, the digital translation tools were really helpful in coming up with initial options for translation, but the work of localizing and getting that translation to be the most effective was the rhetorical navigation done by the translators themselves. But I think human translators and the machine translators are in constant conversation too.

Ryan Weber: Well that's interesting because the translation tool like you said as it exists right now it can't do that rhetorical work that you're talking about of figuring out who is in front of me, what do they know, what specific aspect of the language do they need to understand? Sort of the translation moment work that you mentioned earlier. But I like that idea of it being kind of an inventional tool to help you do that work as a human translator.

Laura Gonzales: Right, an inventional tool. I think that's a really good descriptor.

Ryan Weber: Well and you do multilingual work yourself at the Site of Translation User Experience Center at the University of Texas El Paso where you work. What have you learned about translation from your own experience?

Laura Gonzales: Great question. So the work that I did with translators for my book project was in the Midwest and in Florida. And so those are very different communities of Spanish speakers than the communities of Spanish speakers that I've had the privilege to work with here in El Paso. And so one of the things that I learned immediately, and this is something where Paty is probably like "Yes, of course. You should have known that." But one of the things I learned immediately is that here in the border people use what they call a border language, and so my notion of Spanish being totally separate from English, especially as a professional translator, you want to choose English or Spanish, that kind of goes out the window here. And people are

blending all the languages in professional contexts. I knew that people of course do that in home contexts or day to day conversation everyday. But here in professional contexts if you have what might be deemed a traditionally translated Spanish flier, for instance, it's not going to be effective with the local community because of the complex history that people have with Spanish and the violence that people experienced trying to speak Spanish and preserve their Spanish on the borderland. And so one of the things I have learned is figuring out ways to work with the community to localize translations to sort of echo that border language more directly so that it is effective for the community while at the same time kind of pushing back on the notion that we still need to use traditional Spanish here in El Paso which is kind of something that is still upheld as something that we need to do. So more institutional, professional organizations might say "Yes, we need to do everything in formal Spanish" but if you talk with the community, that formal Spanish is not that Spanish that is going to get them to come to the meeting or show up at the event, if that makes sense. So it's a negotiation of stakeholders with our translation work here in El Paso, I think.

Ryan Weber: That's really interesting. So it really is about the need of those particular users and speakers. You know we might want, it's kind of like professors might want a very particular type of language, but it may not resonate with students. And here you're saying it's the same kind of thing where, or technical communicators may want a very particular type of language that may not resonate with users. You're saying it's the same type of thing here. It's a particular way of speaking a particular type of Spanish and English that's really going to resonate with the people you're trying to reach. Is that right?

Laura Gonzales: Yeah, exactly. Language ideologies are so complicated. And I think scholars who do work in African American languages, when you're talking about English and English variations, have been telling us this for a very long time. And so language ideologies are so embedded into the history of our community, but it's really hard to fight back against those notions and ideals, and say "No, actually, the Spanish that the community uses is the one that we need to use in these professional contexts because we're still trying to communicate with people. And so when we do that we need to use the language that is most effective in those contexts. But that doesn't always work. And so I think our job at the research center is to be that in-between space where we can talk with the community and also talk with professional organizations to come up with tools and technologies and systems that are usable for both stakeholders within this local context.

Ryan Weber: Well thanks very much Laura. I really enjoyed talking about this with you, and keep up the great work.

Laura Gonzales: Oh thank you so much for inviting me. This is great!