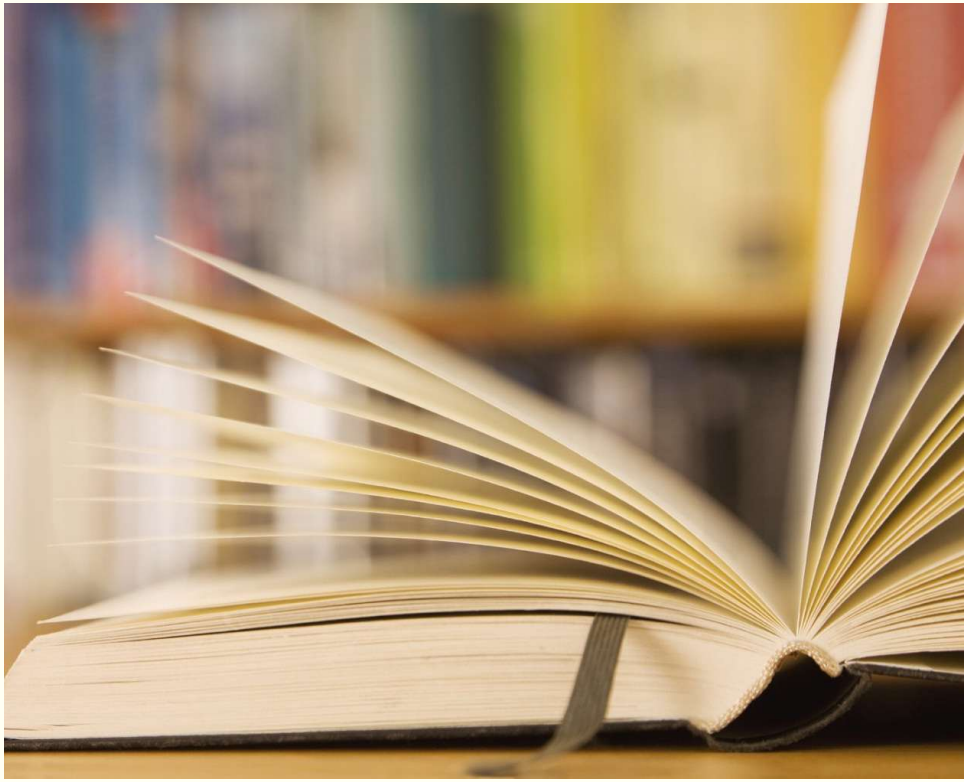
ILL Conference, November 11, 2026

FROM CHARLES DICKENS TO GEORGE ORWELL

--- Translational Techniques and Cultures in the German Democratic Republic

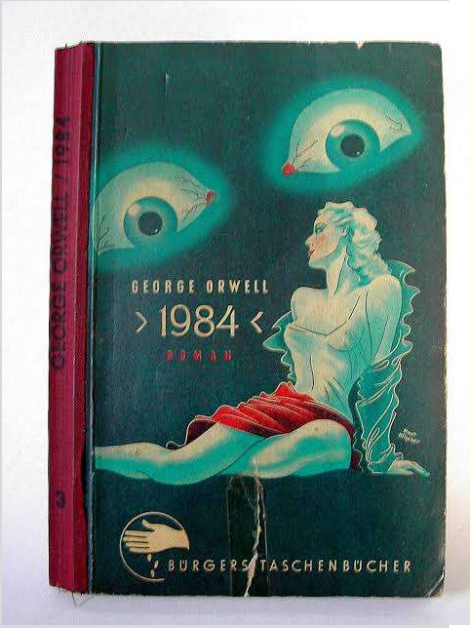


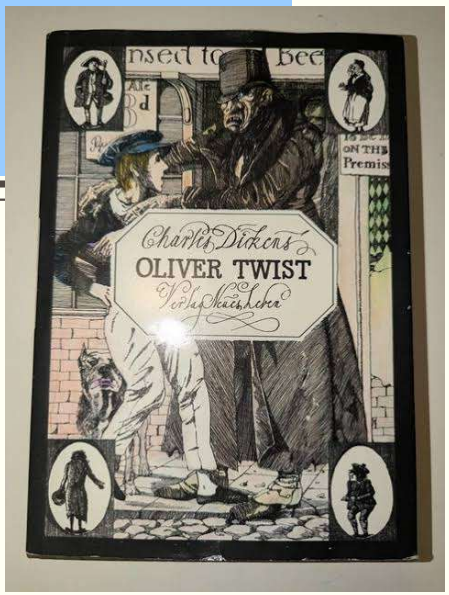
Dr. Martina Jauch, Trier University of Applied Sciences, Germany

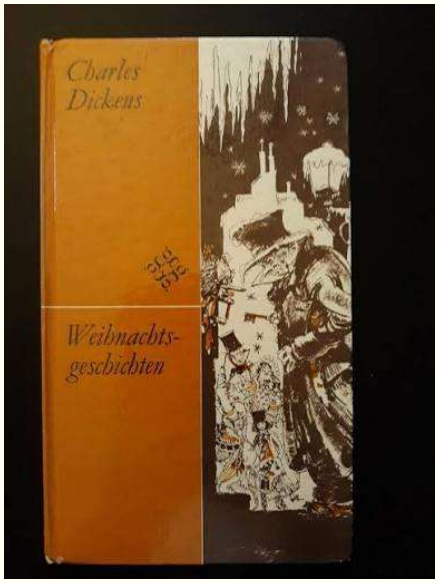
Introduction and Thesis

- 1950s and 1960s: atmosphere of competition and cooperation
- Censorship for the Socialist cause
- Downfall of Western Society as topic, higher literary cause of cultural adaptation
- "socialist sister nations", translators as "active agents"

→ *ideological tendencies of interpretation and an acceptance of translators being the "servant of the author", effects on FL curricula and pedagogy*







Translation and Foreign Language Didactics

- CLT as sociolinguistically important act of cultural transmission (Translational Turn)
- vastly popular vs. neglected authors

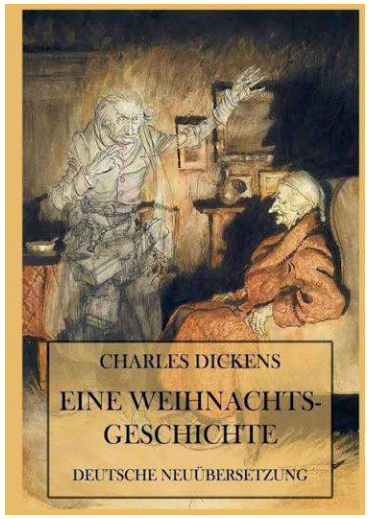


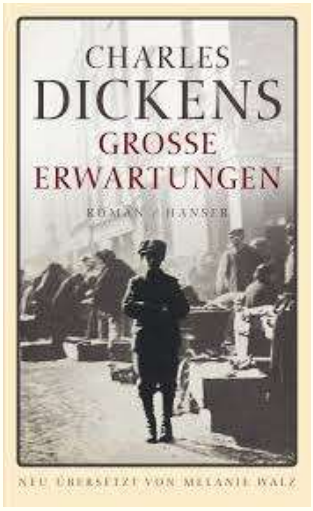
- Reliance on experts in translation
- Creating a canon
- Meta-perspective and awareness of authentic texts and translanguaging competence

- CLA to recognize regime-determined language, identify class bias and translation resistance
- How the works illustrate an (un)translatability of this political narrative

Socialist Translations of Charles Dickens

- Praised by Marx and Engels, classic school canon, “splendid brotherhood of fiction writers in England” (Marx)
- Picture of the depressing situation for the workers, avoiding American idioms and modern language, realist chronicle
- “has become a victim of capitalist conditioning”, whose “spirit and energy have been shattered by hypocritical agitation and propaganda” (Thomson-Wohlgemuth







Translation Techniques in Dickens‘ Texts

- Vocabulary emphasizing poverty and the proletariat, clear and close-to-reader language
- More satirical commentary than sentimental suffering
- Noble examples of “the resistance which lives, in spite of all the humiliation“ (Thompson-Wohlgemuth)
- Addenda and framing through afterwords or forewords to highlight the logical consequences of capitalism
- “major weapon in the ideological battle“ (Hollington)
- Publication permits centralized, power to incite reform, little interest in Christian-moralist practices of salvation
- Pilgrimage-like structure, original plates, rich metaphors, visceral grotesqueness and animal imagery, contrast to selfish consumption: universal humanism

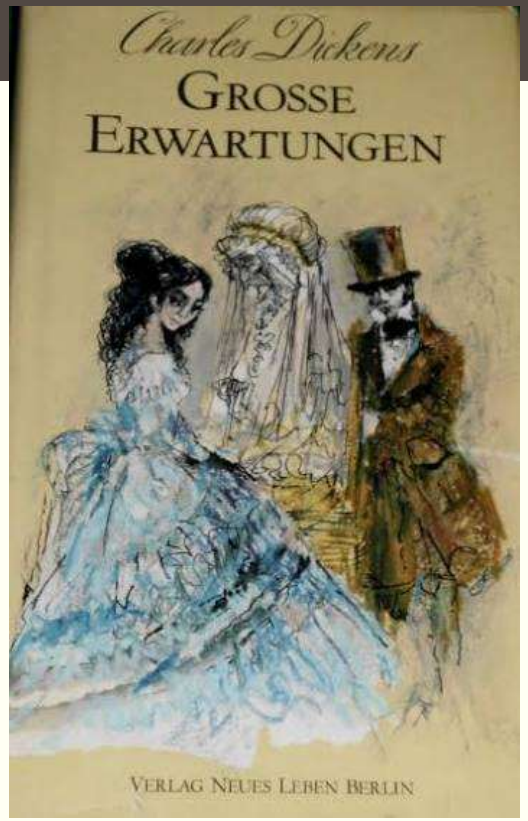
Illustrations and Translations



Klaus Ensikat, *Oliver Twist*

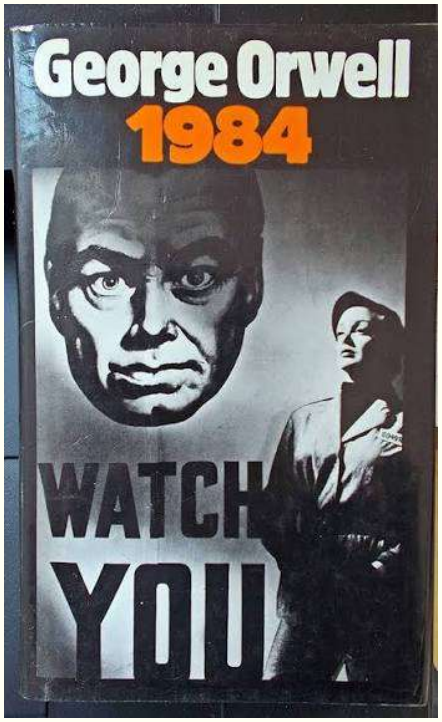


Ruth Knorr, *Eine Weihnachtsgeschichte*



Gerhard Goßmann, *Grosse Erwartungen*

Kurt Wagenseil from 1950, *1984*

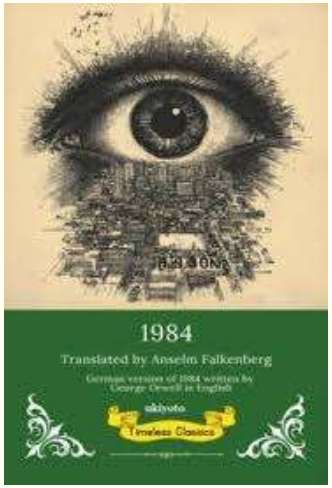


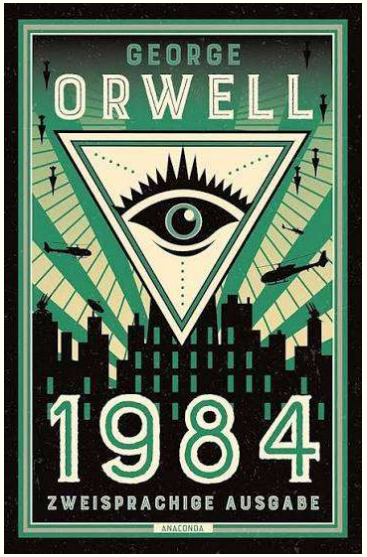
The Linguistic Liquidation of George Orwell in the GDR

- Illegal copies only, English terms not taught in the GDR
- “wished to identify himself with the poverty-stricken people“ (Rizwan)
- Internal discussions about change in the 1980s
- Dangerous linguistic mechanisms, democracy is rebranded as “anti-fascist protective wall“ (Wengst), similar slogans

- Long explanations of terms, use of paratexts and footnotes
- Translated as a critic of left-wing authoritarianism instead

- Less subversive translations, over-correction and dramatic style
- Cold power of Big Brother emphasized, new technologies





Implications for Language Learning and Foreign Language Acquisition

Control of the printing press, curricula and foreign languages

- “enemy languages“, taught to critique Western culture not to assimilate
- Anachronistic instruction, systematic erasure of cultural studies
- Input-oriented education, student translations and readings
- No practical language production

Dickens vs. Orwell

- Missing out on new vocabulary, outdated texts (19th century), formal historical English
- Semantic blind spot, suppression of linguistic criticism, rote memorization and fixed translation
- Used to reading between the lines
- Restricted English teachers skip decades of knowledge

CONCLUDING REMARKS



1. Peculiar translation style in the GDR still mirrors Orwell‘s themes
2. No preparation for Twentieth-Century communication skills
3. Creative agency of translators was not uninhibited
4. State still determined the culture of translation and teaching
5. BUT: It allows for greater awareness of today‘s students and the role of translations in teaching and society.

