

Translation in Undergraduate Degree Programmes

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Translation in Undergraduate Degree Programmes

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Introduction*

Translation as an academic discipline

Kirsten Malmkjær

We are privileged, in translation studies in the early part of the twenty first century, to have (largely) made the leap from discussions of how to achieve recognition for our discipline as fit for academic study into discussions of how, as an academic discipline, it can most fruitfully be shaped and pursued. Translation studies, in this century, is a buoyant field where theorists and practitioners frequently come together (often in one person), where the mutual dependencies between research and practice are well understood, and where few doubt the need to work together to improve research, teaching and practice across the board. Of course, a certain lack of awareness of the nature of the discipline and of its actual and potential modes of interacting with its fellow academic disciplines remains in some quarters, and it is still necessary, from time to time, to arm oneself with courage, confidence and some bravado to be taken seriously as a translation scholar or translation theorist (“Goodness, I didn’t know there was a theory about that!!!”), but, by and large, translation is now firmly established as an academic discipline.

In the opening paper of this volume, Wolfram Wilss addresses some of the issues that arise from the position of translation within academia, warning against the pursuit of theoretical abstraction to the exclusion of empirical research and teaching designed with the practicalities of everyday translating in mind. This pursuit might have the unfortunate consequence that the profession for which we are preparing our students would lose confidence in the discipline, in which case pursuing translation as an academic subject would no longer be perceived as worthwhile, and the clear advantages of having translation studies firmly entrenched within academia would be lost. These advantages include the obvious image enhancement that accrues over time to academic disciplines: If translation is something you study at university, it must

be a true profession like medicine, teaching, accountancy and law. The prospect of a job in this respectable area gives people with an interest in and talent for languages a good reason to pursue them, thereby possibly raising the level of interest in languages at school, even in countries like Britain, where, as Barbour points out, there is very little interest in learning languages other than English.

One means towards avoiding a split between a profession and its academic discipline is to ensure that teaching programmes have face validity for members of those professions in which students might seek employment. For a translation programme to achieve face validity for the translation profession, the profession needs to be convinced that graduates of the programme have acquired at least some of the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the profession. For such programmes to have face validity for students, the students need to feel reasonably confident that the programmes will equip them for a career either in the translation industry itself or in related fields involving cross cultural communication and text editing. The question then is, what kind of programme would have both types of validity, and this book offers a number of models and a number of suggestions for programme content.

Mackenzie stresses the need for programme designers to understand the world of professional translation since a number of translator competencies arise directly from the roles involved in the production of high quality translations. Clearly, one way of providing students themselves with experience of professional translation is to provide placement opportunities for students, and this has the added advantage of involving the profession directly with the students and with the university.

Yet, the position of translation programmes in universities implies a strong emphasis on education as well as on training and on research application as well as professional practice, and the intimate connections between competence and skill, and education and training in translator pedagogy is clear to see in the papers in the volume which discuss these issues directly. Wilss defines translation as ‘the activation of a body of knowledge’, and Beeby points out that a programme designed to produce professional translators needs to be designed on the basis of a model of translator competence. Bernardini (“The theory behind the practice”), who reserves the term “competencies” for what may otherwise be termed “skills”, suggests that professional translators need three “capacities”, namely, awareness, reflectiveness and resourcefulness. These, she suggests in her second contribution to this volume, can be greatly enhanced by means of what she terms “discovery learning”, in her case of evidence provided by a variety of types of language corpus.

The volume addresses specifically issues that arise in connection with the teaching of translation at undergraduate level. In Britain, this practice is less common than it is in a number of countries across the world, and translator education has tended to be located at post graduate level. However, awareness is growing that a year's engagement with the theory and practice of translation, in whatever balance, is insufficient preparation for work in any branch of the profession, and that many advantages are to be gained by shaping all or part of an undergraduate degree specifically to prepare students to enter the translation profession (or other professions in which translation-related skills are required). In this volume, various models of undergraduate translation provision are described. Clearly, these are in part determined by the structures of higher education within which they are situated, so there is some international variation, and the volume introduces models from Spain (González Davies), Slovakia (Toft and Preložníková), Italy (Bernardini) and Britain (Schäffner). However, most undergraduate translation programmes include the following components in addition to the possible placement already mentioned and in addition to practice and input on language and culture:

- Input on the history and theory of translation, on the assumption that any programme of education with an applied element should provide some understanding of the concepts and concerns that have entertained thinkers who are interested in the phenomenon and which underlie its practice, and of the history of the development of both the practice and the theory that informs it. It is difficult to understand the way things are unless you know something of the processes and influences that have worked to create the present state. Having such knowledge helps people to feel part of a tradition.
- Input on the sociology of translation. It is constantly surprising to find how few people, including those who come to university to study translation, are aware of how widespread translation is and how essential a part it plays and has played in intercultural communication and in the shaping of cultures. They seem unaware of how many of the texts that surround and influence us would not have been so readily and widely available but for the mediating intervention of a translator, and this means that they have rarely, if ever, given a thought to the nature of mediated texts. For example, as Schäffner emphasises: that a mediated text is affected by the mediator's interpretation of the original; that the purpose of the mediation affects the outcome of the process (the translation); that the purpose the translation is intended to serve may differ from the purpose the original text was

intended to serve; and that the audience for a translation is almost always different from the audience for the original text, which, again, affects the translation.

- Input on translation as a profession.

Interestingly, given the prominence in translating of language skills, relatively little has been written about language teaching for translators. Translation pedagogy can obviously not be equated with or subsumed under language pedagogy, but it is equally obvious that success in translation is predicated upon an ability to operate literately in more than one language; and that most people, whatever their language acquisition histories, need to be exposed to language education and training in order to become literate in *any* language. If it is possible to mold language teaching in such a way that the needs of prospective translators are catered for directly, then, as Berenguer (1996; quoted here by Beeby) remarks, time may be saved in the translation class. Beeby argues for a translation-aware language classroom for potential trainee translators, with a clear orientation towards text and discourse study and practice. She advocates a syllabus based on a model in which translation competence is broken down into six sub-competencies which can be developed on the basis of tasks derived from a number of aspects of discourse and which also relate directly to rhetorical and genre conventions. In similar vein, Bernardini (“The theory behind the practice”) suggests that the idea that a prospective translator should first learn language and then learn to translate is unsound; as she puts it, ‘one learns the language in order to become a translator’ and language and translation learning are maximally beneficial, and most economically undertaken, when they are mutually reinforcing.

The question of whether translation learning and language learning are, in fact, mutually reinforcing is usually asked from the point of view of translation as a method of language teaching and testing. In some countries, as Schjoldager points out, translation remains in widespread use in these areas, whereas the English-speaking world has tended to shun it since the mid-twentieth century. One of the reasons often held up for this is that translation is a difficult task, and Toft and Preložníková provide some support for this view. They suggest that student demotivation may be diminished through a dialogic approach to teaching where students come to understand that they are not alone in finding the translation task difficult or in making mistakes.

On the other hand, some language students clearly enjoy translation classes, and in her contribution, Sewell suggests that probing this enjoyment

can provide clues to what may be wrong with communicative language classes, at least in the eyes of some groups of learners.

But enjoyment alone does not guarantee the efficacy of a teaching and testing methodology, and Schjoldager and Källkvist both point to the urgent need for well designed and controlled research projects aimed at establishing whether foreign language learners taught and tested (partly) through translation tasks learn and respond as efficiently as learners taught and tested without the use of translation tasks.

Although a connection would be hard to establish, it is interesting that the reluctance to introduce translation into the language classroom is most acutely felt in Britain and the United States where, also, enrolment in language classes is notoriously low in both secondary and tertiary education. In his contribution, which closes the volume, Stephen Barbour addresses a number of translation-related problems that arise from this situation.

The first problem, that much is simply not translated, so that monolinguals do not have access to it, might at first be considered a potential advantage for translators: there is plenty of work that awaits them. However, some texts, such as asides in business negotiations, which Barbour mentions, are simply not intended for translation, quite the reverse. Secondly, a monolingual may encounter problems understanding translated texts or texts written in English by non-native speakers, since they will not know how the syntax and semantics of a given source language or of the writer's native language may have influenced a given (translated) text. This puts monolingual speakers of English at a considerable disadvantage as more and more varieties of English develop: Monolinguals may in principle end up without access to a number of varieties of English – perhaps to English as an international language as such – and find themselves unable to communicate satisfactorily at international gatherings where English is used. According to Barbour, people with translator awareness constitute a body of informed people who could help to understand and explain the potential pitfalls which the use of English as an international language presents.

The future of any profession depends, like the future of a species, on many things including the environment, which, in the case of a profession means mainly markets and the public perception of the profession. In Britain, beyond a relatively small number of regular users of translation services and an even smaller number of academics, the translation profession suffers *at best* from a lack of image. In spite of the prominence the profession achieved in the early 2000s in the popular radio-soap, *The Archers*, translation remains largely overlooked among the population as a whole, except when it goes badly wrong,

in which case we are all happy to enjoy the traditional howlers about ladies not having babies in the bar, and so on. *At worst*, then, the image of translation is negative.

In this, Britain compares unfavourably with northern Europe, and the British attitude is no doubt connected to the low value placed on multilingualism here. But it is quite out of step with the need for translation between English and other languages, as most of the rest of the world discovered long ago, and if the status quo remains, Britain is likely to see its translation services becoming, so to speak, “Brewed in the UK by Danes, Chinese, etc.,” or perhaps imported, like cars. There is obviously nothing intrinsically wrong with importing services or with offering employment to people of many and varied nationalities, a practice which enriches a culture greatly. Nevertheless, if the trend continues, it is fairly obvious that the number of translators with English as their main language will fall, leading to the interesting scenario where English would be virtually unavailable as an L1 in translation and most translation into English would be undertaken by non-native speakers. This trend is already clear to see on the undergraduate programme on which I myself teach. At the time of writing, the first final year of this four year long undergraduate translation honours degree is about to begin. To date, the student intake has not included more than a handful of students with English as their native language and only a handful of students permanently domiciled in the UK. This situation is mirrored in staffing: only one member of the team of people regularly involved in translation teaching is a native speaker of English. I think that these patterns are not unusual in other translation programmes in Britain at both undergraduate and post graduate level.

This situation implies that the syllabus for translation students in Britain might need to differ in one or two respects from those described in this book. For example, when Berenguer (1996; referred to by Beeby this volume) mentions the need to provide exercises to develop students’ expertise in the foreign culture, she means by ‘foreign culture’ a culture other than that in which the students live and study. Clearly, for non-British students studying in the UK, it is more likely to mean the culture in which they live while studying. The period abroad, for these students, often means a period back home with far less concentration on acculturation and language enhancement than on supplementing their learning with courses in topics not available in their British “home” institution.

These are early days, but indications are that these non-British students, who live and learn in the UK, leave us – and in the case of many, join us – with very high English skills, so that the question of directionality of translation is

less of an issue for them and for us than is often implied, and joint classes on text analysis and translation enjoy the added dimension of cross linguistic comparisons and much lively discussion of cross cultural comparative text and genre analysis. In spite of the potential disadvantages of this situation for Britain, mentioned above, all this bodes very well for translation pedagogy in a world of closer educational cooperation and integration.

Note

* The lecture that formed the basis of Stephen Barbour's contribution to this volume was one of a series known as the Sue Myles Memorial Lectures, established in memory of Susan Myles, who moved to Middlesex University (then Middlesex Polytechnic) in 1991, having been Head of German at Haberdasher's Aske's School for Girls. Susan Myles died in November 1997.

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Translation studies*

A didactic approach

Wolfram Wilss

One lesson we may learn from modern translation studies is that an effective concern for translation shows itself not in the uttering of grand generalities with their often high-sounding verbiage, but in the specific, the concrete, and the immediate. Obviously, in discussing translation studies issues in general and translation teaching issues in particular, one should be as precise and as down-to-earth as possible.

Why is translation suitable as a subject-matter of academic study, or to raise this question in a somewhat different and perhaps more challenging form: What distinguishes everyday, intralingual communication from interlingual, “exceptional” communication? And, going on from this basically theoretically-oriented question to methodological issues: should we discuss translation at a high or very high level of abstraction, apt to make vital practical questions disappear, or should we give preference to empirical matter? I think it is the latter which the world of translation demands of the world of academic learning and which should furnish the criteria for what academic institutions should properly teach. In proceeding along this line, we can point to something real, definite, and valuable in the sense that we discover the so-called “underlying assumptions” about translation, or, less artfully expressed, about the principles which guide the translator in accomplishing more or less intricate translation tasks and understand translational task-specifications.

Of course, questions like this can also be treated – at least to some extent – outside the academic world. Hence, we have to ask ourselves: What does care for translation in the university environment amount to? What is the cash-value of academically-based translator training? What does translation mean in terms of such seemingly prosaic realities as the standards of translation-teaching, the achievement standards for undergraduates and graduates and

their functioning in the academic community, the content of syllabus, the role of lectures as compared with that of seminars, the advantages and disadvantages of autonomous learning, the value of standard methods of examining?

Numerous other practical problems beset anyone involved in translation-teaching aimed at the development of translation skills and translation habits of mind. Skills and habits are based on a “genuine body of knowledge”. No one interested in translation as an academic subject-matter can fail to see how it impinges on, and interlocks with, a great many issues which have not traditionally been considered to fall within the scope of translation studies. Nevertheless, we should not be in too great a haste to define translation studies as an interdisciplinary field of study – a “composite” subject of the type that tends from time to time to achieve temporary fashionable status. One reason we should hesitate to do so is that most composite subject-matters seem to be insufficiently closely related to the needs and contours of reality.

What is desirable is that a university course in translation-teaching, in however limited and sketchy a way, should make students immune to recalcitrance towards their subject-matter, by helping them discover for themselves the manner in which the learning of translation relates to translation in the real world. To say this is only to draw out the implication of the phrase “a genuine body of knowledge”. To put it in terms immediately relevant to translation teaching: translation teaching has to aim at the clarification of the relationship between the contents and patterns of translation on the one hand and the wider fields of linguistic behaviour and practical translation experience on the other.

Thus, translation teaching must in the final analysis be directed towards the day-to-day purposes of translation work, the communicative targets of translation and the systematization of translation teaching and translation learning. To deal with translation without allowing for the obstinate, the individual, the unmappable and incalculable quality of texts-to-be-translated is unacceptable in translation teaching. There is no point in basing a course in translation on some carefully selected textual highlights, e.g. exclusively on literary texts or on any other, single domain or sub-domain of specific text-type translation. What translation teachers must do is to introduce students to a plurality of related or unrelated fields to prevent premature over-specialization. Finding in their classes no self-evident principle of order, students might be debarred by the vastness of the textual material from working out a principled approach to their professional activities and from recognizing “the contours of reality”.

The notion of “contours of reality” reminds us that when we translate, we deal with textual matter which is difficult to cope with because of the absence

of interplay between the mind of the source text sender, the translator, and the target text reader(ship). Exceptions confirm the rule. Normally, it is impossible for the intentions of the source text sender and the expectations of the target-text client to be chalked up on a blackboard, or schematized in a textbook. Rather, what the client wants or is in need of must be grasped by individual translators themselves, however imperfectly, and with what has been called “the courage of enormous incompleteness”.

Having been involved in translation teaching for more than twenty five years, I sometimes wonder if it is always possible to realize what one is committed to do in regard to pedagogical principles and the nature of the subject matter. We are often told (mostly by people who do not know the first thing about translation) that translation teaching must be improved, but do and can we always realize the full scale of the implications of such a demand? And if we do and can, should we try to reach for the impossible? No one can know or be aware of the whole problem battery we are faced with in classroom teaching. There can be no fixed canon of translation teaching methods, no series of certified and unquestionable teaching values. We may pride ourselves on being free, nowadays, from the methodological prejudice illustrated by the old-fashioned dichotomy of literal *versus* free translation which required of the student – or for that matter, the professional translator – that, faced by a specific translation task, they should do no more and no less than choose either the one or the other approach.

The perspective of translation activities is bound to change from one text situation to the next. The achievement of the right perspective is not (always) possible by an exercise of individual judgment, but by the knowledge of the context of translation, however fragmentary and imperfect this knowledge may be – fragmentary and imperfect for the reason that as a rule there is no dialogue (interaction), or not enough dialogue, between the source text sender and the translator on the one side and between the translator and the target text recipient on the other. If translators simply impose their own interpretation and evaluation on the source text, without tacitly listening to what the text-to-be-translated says, they are not *translating*; they are *teaching* the source text sender and/or the target text reader. That is why I uncompromisingly reject the frequent assertion that a given source text is inadequate for translation. One aspect of dealing with translation from an academic view-point is to pay scrupulous attention both to the message of the source text and the message of the target text – with all the linguistic and sociocultural implications involved in going from source text to target text. The source text provides the basic guidelines for the translator. The individual text, especially in the field of

literary translation, has its own profile, is itself a fact of language use and history, and to assume that we have at least some access to that profile, that we are not fabricating illusions (or visions) about it, seems to be entailed by the source text, its coherence, its function, its cultural aspects which commit us to behave in a certain manner when we translate.

To speak of translation as the activation of a body of knowledge at once stirs up the controversy into which the discussion of knowledge has in the past so frequently turned. Is it more sensible to speak of a core of knowledge and peripheral layers of knowledge, or should we try, in analogy to training in two or more foreign languages, to teach a number of domains, possibly at the cost of depth of understanding of one field? In other words: Should there be a sovereign discipline and several fringe subjects, or should we spread our teaching to cover a number of domains at equal rank? And should students whose interests are primarily or exclusively scientific and technical, who are likely to be the great majority in view of professional demands, be compelled to spend part of their notoriously restricted time acquiring knowledge of what may be no more than a smattering of literature?

These are questions which, so far as translation teaching is concerned, are focussed on the techno-scientific pressure exerted on the translation profession. I see no reason to exclude literature from translation teaching as a complementary programme; but the “language for specific purposes formula”, in its manifold ramifications, is today receiving more consideration than previously, a development which is due, mainly, to the arrival of the computer; and I do not see rational grounds for opposing the setting up of a strongly modern(ised), computer-oriented course in translation either, focusing not only on machine translation and machine-assisted translation, but also on artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology.

At any rate, the continuation of completely parochial courses is of no help to translation teaching institutes, because it would render them strangely remote from practical professional work. This itself is an indication of the degree to which translation teaching and translator training have developed and, as a result, travelled away from the shadow of traditional “hard-copy” teaching targets and moved to new targets which have become known as “desktop publishing” and “human/machine interaction”, requiring a would-be translator to be equipped with all the knowledge and skills necessary for combining speed (“Fast is smart”) and the maintenance of an acceptable degree of quality. Student translators must feel that the impact of the “new age” is reflected in their programmes.

These are, of course, grand aims, and we must ask ourselves whether we can be confident of reaching them. What we can say is that translation teaching has found, or is *en route* towards finding, its own characteristics, in the sense in which history or philology or other traditional academic disciplines have established theirs. Any academic field must have its own characteristic features, and one of the marks of a body of knowledge genuinely related to translation teaching is that it makes it incumbent on us to offer some paramount coordinating effort which will give translation teaching its own unmistakably academic profile.

One of the characteristic features of translation teaching is the combination of knowledge and skills. A discipline such as translation teaching shows that translational information processing in the long run should offer a way of turning the notorious “black box” of the translator into a “white box”, more amenable to systematized translation teaching than the analytically almost impenetrable black box. It is interlingual and intercultural information-processing which is the typical, the identifying centre of translation teaching.

The proposition that translation is based on a genuine body of knowledge and skills and that the appropriate discipline for its study is translation teaching seems to be coupled and to move together. It is the nature of translation which determines what translation teaching should be. Translation teaching is a multifarious subject-matter. Take, e.g., the well-known fact that it is difficult, indeed almost impossible to draw a hard-and-fast line around the domain of translation. One has only to mention some great names in translation studies – say Luther, Schleiermacher, Benjamin, Nida, Mounin, the representatives of *Stylistique Comparée* – to remember how many and how various are the interests into which the student translator, in pursuing the relevant study of any of these and many other authors, is likely to be led. Those who remind us of this – whether they know it or not – are in fact strengthening the case for translation teaching as the umbrella discipline of translation studies. This must be a discipline which is flexible enough, of sufficiently general application, and sensitive enough in its touch, its impact and appeal, to be able to take into account, and set in some sort of order, everything that may turn out to be relevant to the study of translation, thereby providing principles for translator behaviour which are spacious enough to accommodate them all.

As said before, there may well be no *single* approach to translation teaching which is, even theoretically, capable of organizing this vast plurality of concerns and specializations. There are simply too many problem areas. To add to the difficulties already noted, the problems are interlocking, so that to dwell on one or two of them, to the exclusion of others, is artificial, and distorts them.

There is the danger of such a multiplication of misconceptions that no amount of dialogical simplification can guarantee the possibility of a dialogue between the various “schools” of translation studies.

The most salient misconception is, as should be clear by now, the belief that there is a royal way in translation teaching methodology. As a reference to creative problem-solving or routine aspects of translation shows, there is no such thing. We must be wary of the danger of translation studies becoming a world of undisciplined and subjective whims and fancies, where every researcher does what is right in his or her own eyes, and where order is imposed not by the strongest arguments, but by the loudest voice. Either/or dichotomies have done translation studies a great deal of harm. What we should strive for is a body of established results which the next generation of researchers and students can build on.

The next stage in translation teaching is probably a concerted effort at the evaluation of translations (not “translation criticism” which seems for the most part to be wayward and largely undisciplined). Common sense takes it for granted that evaluations must be personal. There may be some truth in this, but all the same it is surprising how easily – e.g. in the evaluation of the German translation of Lemprière’s dictionary by Lawrence Norfolk – people can say, in a rather dogmatic way, that they agree or disagree with the translation. Agreement and disagreement are presumably no longer appropriate terms. I think there is a good deal of evidence at this juncture that translation studies – and in its wake translation teaching – will have to be more flexible than has been the case in the past.

Note

* This article touches on a selection of issues which I have dealt with extensively in the following books:

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