

## **FORUM**

TRANSLATION STUDIES AND THE INTEGRATED MODERN LANGUAGES DEGREE

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of translation studies within the modern languages undergraduate degree course. It explores three possible goals that the teaching of translation might serve: as an aid to language learning, as a subject in its own right, and as a means of integrating the language learning with the cultural or area studies which make up the rest of the modern languages course. The article investigates the origins of translation as a teaching method, its fall from favour in the era of communicative language teaching in the late twentieth century, and its renaissance in the last decade due to the extraordinary recent growth in postgraduate courses in translation studies at UK higher education institutions and across anglophone academia, in order to ask what the purpose and possibilities of the subject might now be.

*Keywords:* translation, undergraduate, postgraduate, communicative language teaching, degree programme

What is the point of translation as a subject of undergraduate study? My aim in this article is to ask, firstly, whether translation forms a useful part of an integrated curriculum in the modern languages degree, and if so, which of the following three possible purposes it serves: Is translation useful as an aid to language learning? Is it a worthwhile goal in itself? Does it function as a complement to the literary, cultural or area studies elsewhere in the course? I shall be asking how the teaching and assessment of translation might be best organized to provide optimum efficacy with respect to these three aims, using on occasion policy and practice at Oxford University as a case study, and, in a final section, shall be commenting on practical implementation of these goals.

Translation, which here refers exclusively to translation into the student's native tongue (L1) from the foreign language (L2), has undergone something of a renaissance in English-



speaking universities in recent years, due to the proliferation and popularity of Masters degrees in translation studies. In the United Kingdom, Masters are currently available in translation studies at thirty-three universities, including more than half of the elite Russell Group. The United States has been slower than British academia to develop the potential of these courses: thirteen American universities currently offer Masters degrees in translation studies.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, in Australia eight institutions offer translation MAs, and six in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Despite this postgraduate flourishing, at undergraduate level the subject has seen a slow decline as a component of the language-teaching part of the course. From the central role of translation in the grammar-translation methods of the early twentieth century, by which nascent modern language departments sought to appropriate academic legitimacy for their subject by aping the established methodologies of Classics, the growth in communicative teaching methods in the second half of the century led to a corresponding loss of emphasis on translation, which began to appear something of an academic throwback. This is not the case for other national education systems: Kirsten Malmkjær comments that undergraduate translation in Britain is 'less common than it is in a number of countries across the world, and translator education [in the UK] has tended to be located at post graduate level' (2004, p. 3). The advanced-level teaching and skills fostered by academics teaching at Masters level and above are thus often put to little use in the teaching of undergraduates, arguably a serious waste of hard-won academic expertise.

Oxford University is one British institution at which translation remains a significant part of modern languages degrees, perhaps due as much to academic tradition than to an active pedagogical strategy in the nation's oldest modern languages faculty. Here, translation functions as a central feature both of language teaching and of the university's assessment of linguistic competence in examinations. In the Finals examinations in French, candidates must carry out between one and three unseen translations in their exams (depending on the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The institutions are, from the Russell Group, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Imperial College London, Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield, University College London, and Warwick, and from the UK's other universities, Aston, Bath, Bangor, City University London, Durham, Exeter, Hull, London Metropolitan, Middlesex, Portsmouth, Roehampton, Salford, SOAS, Stirling, Surrey, Swansea, Ulster, University of Central Lancashire, University of the East of England, University of the West of England, and Westminster.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> American institutions offering an MA partly or wholly in Translation Studies include Amherst, Columbia, Denver, Kent, La Salle, Milwaukee, North Carolina, the American University of Paris, Rochester, Rutgers, UTD, Wake Forest, and Wisconsin.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> In Australia, the universities are Australian National, Macquarie, Monash, New South Wales, Queensland, RMIT, Sydney, and Western Sydney. In Ireland, they are Cork, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, Dublin City University, Galway and NUI Maynooth.



course they have chosen), making translation worth between a quarter and a little under half of the total assessment for written language; an optional paper in advanced translation further increases the weighting of the subject considerably for those candidates who choose to take it. In the French Preliminary Examinations at the end of the first year, changes in the structure of the exam in the early 2000s actually increased the proportion of translation assessment from 1½ hours to 2½ hours out of a total of six hours of language exams. Language teaching arrangements vary between the colleges of the university, but the proportion of translation practice within overall language teaching reflects its proportion within the assessment, with students attending between four and twelve hours of translation classes per term, depending on the options chosen. Translation into English is clearly regarded by the faculty as a vital linguistic skill, to be given central, and even increasing, importance in its educational policy.

As is generally the case in modern languages at Oxford, no official aims or objectives are set for translation studies, and there are no set courses or teaching guidelines for the subject. While assessment is designed and carried out centrally by the sub-faculty, individual tutors at college level are free to design and teach whatever course they see fit, provided that it offers suitable preparation for the kinds of assessment students face at the end of their first and fourth years, which primarily takes the form of an unseen passage of authentic French text, to be translated in timed conditions without the benefit of dictionaries or other aids, in addition to which, certain candidates must additionally tackle the translation of a passage of medieval or early-modern French. In the first-year Examinations, a shorter, less complex unseen passage from post-1945 literature on non-fiction is set for the first translation test; for the second, longer test, the passage chosen is taken from one of the three novels prescribed for the students' literature exams. While teaching methods vary between the colleges of the university, translation teaching typically takes the form of small-group classes meeting every two weeks to discuss their prepared translations of texts, often taken from previous examinations, perhaps with limited exploration of translation theory and comparative stylistics included in the class.

Translation has always formed part of modern language teaching at university level, since the subject began in the early twentieth century. An interesting insight into the ideology behind the original conception of the translation class is provided in an article by L. Arthur and J. Klapper:



The emerging university discipline of 'modern languages' subordinated pragmatic thoughts of language as a means of communication to the need to gain academic respectability. The key approach was the grammar-translation method. This assumed that language consisted of a collection of rules and words, which could be readily described and listed. It was the role of teaching to exemplify the rules, to present them deductively, to encourage memorization and to provide practice with a conscious focus on form. Typically, the deductive presentation of a point of grammar used sample sentences which had been artificially constructed for that purpose. 'La plume de ma tante' characterized much traditional school-based teaching. It is surprising how influential and durable the grammar-translation method has proved to be. Until well into the 1960s it continued to be the standard method of teaching in most British secondary schools and to this day shapes the practice of some modern language departments in British higher education. (2000, pp. 96-97)

Arthur and Klapper's assertion that linguistic competence was not the main aim of the grammar/translation method is supported by M. Rogers, who replaces 'academic respectability' with a 'mind-training objective' as the primary goal, citing as evidence a midtwentieth-century schoolteachers' manual which claims that language study 'will help to form habits of careful thought which will serve [the student] all his life' (quoted in Rogers 1996, p. 23). Language learning is thus seen as an exercise – in all senses of the word – for the mind, where intellectual stimulation is the aim with little concern for application of the skills developed.

Since that period, of course, communicative language teaching has revolutionized the subject in secondary education, and, to a lesser extent, at university level. While its influence may now be on the wane, it remains a dominant methodology in language teaching today. P. Lightbown and N. Spada define the communicative approach as follows:

Designers of communicative language teaching programs have sought to replace some of the characteristics of traditional instruction with those more typical of natural acquisition contexts. The communicative approach is based on innatist and interactionist theories of language learning and emphasizes the communication of meaning both between teacher and students and among the students themselves in group or pair work. Grammatical forms are focused on only in order to clarify meaning.



The assumption is that learners can and must do the grammatical development on their own. (1999, p. 95)<sup>4</sup>

With the advent of a more learner-centred approach, emphasizing meaning and creativity in language, using authentic materials, learner interaction and as much target language as possible in the classroom, the presence of the learner's own language in the course is minimized. Any attempt to create a target-language environment within the classroom would seem to exclude translation outright as a learning activity. Indeed, Arthur and Klapper note a decline in the importance of translation in higher education courses over the last forty years, as the goal of communicative competence becomes ever more of a priority (2000, p. 102). It is significant that Lightbown and Spada's influential 1999 book, *How Languages are Learned*, makes no reference to translation as a tool for language learning.

There is general agreement among education theorists, backed up by experimental data, that the communicative approach produces more effective language learning than traditional approaches, as well as performing better at stimulating interest in the subject (see Lightbown and Spada 1999, pp. 149-53; Rogers 2000, p. 38). However, both Rogers and Lightbown/Spada express concern that the balance may have tipped too far in favour of the communicative approach, and still envisage a useful role to be played by such traditionalist techniques as explicit discussion of grammar and correction of learners' errors (Lightbown and Spada 1999, p.150; Rogers, 2000, pp. 37-38). Anne Schjoldager suggests that, while translation is often seen as 'an inadequate, even harmful, teaching and testing tool' (2004, p. 127), the failure of 'direct method' learning, in which the students' L1 is entirely banished from the learning environment, might lead to a reappraisal of translation's usefulness. Few theorists, it must be said, express dismay at the decline in translation teaching as the teaching paradigm has shifted.

Teaching translation, then, seems to be comprehensively discredited as a tool for increasing proficiency in the target language by current orthodoxy. Why, then, do higher education institutions like Oxford teach it to their undergraduates? The university describes its first-year translation exam as 'testing accuracy in negotiating common grammatical and syntactic structures and some appropriately challenging vocabulary, but also requiring imagination

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Innatist theories regard humans as 'hard-wired' from birth with a template for language and its acquisition. Interactionist theories focus on the relationship between innate language capacities and the environment of acquisition.



and fluency in English expression', and informs students that 'developing your skills in translation will also encourage you to write accurately and acquire a feel for style and register'.<sup>5</sup>

In assessment, then, it seems that testing linguistic competence is indeed one of the goals of the translation exams, checking the student's vocabulary range, comprehension of linguistic structures and sensitivity to nuances of register. And here the important point must be made that, in terms of assessment at least, translation is in fact a practical, fair and efficient method of evaluating student competence in these areas. What better way to discover if students understand the meaning of the French word, sansonnet, than to see if they can give the English equivalent, starling? How can one more accurately check that students appreciate the colloquial register of 'sale clébard' than by evaluating their choice of an English equivalent register, 'sullied hound' or 'filthy mutt'? Not all commentators would agree, of course. Christine Klein-Braley's experiments to measure translation assessment against a number of other tests of linguistic competence concluded that translation 'appears to be the least satisfactory and least economical of the tests examined in determining L2 proficiency' (Klein-Braley, 1987: pp. 128–9). Her conclusion that translation assessment is 'two-dimensional', contaminating the measure of linguistic competence by simultaneously testing other factors, perhaps takes an overly restrictive view of what linguistic competence entails: understanding of cultural context and sensitivity to stylistic nuance, for instance, are more prominent in translation than in many other forms of linguistic assessment, and it is by no means clear that they are of marginal importance in gaining effective command of a language.

Even if we accept the usefulness of translation as an assessment of linguistic comprehension, this need not imply that translation practice is a good learning activity. Could it be the case that translation exams need not necessarily imply translation classes to prepare students? One can readily imagine other methods whereby the skills assessed in translation exams might be taught to students, perhaps more effectively. A sensitivity to style and register, for instance, can be taught by having students actively produce texts of varying styles in the foreign language, perhaps being asked to rewrite a piece of formal journalistic language in colloquial register, or to produce other such stylistic transformations; grammar and vocabulary can be, and are already, taught through more active and communicative

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Oxford University student handbooks in modern languages.



methods. Certain techniques of translation are best taught through translation itself, of course, such as the 'imagination and fluency in English expression' referred to in the students' handbook, and to entirely abolish translation classes would be to unhelpfully misalign teaching from assessment. However, the percentage of summative assessment that takes the form of translation examinations need not be matched by an equal percentage of translation practice in students' day-to-day language learning. Those language skills which may be assessed by translation, but which are not specifically limited to translation, might better be taught by an increase in the proportion of other kinds of language teaching.

What of the second possible purpose of translation teaching, to develop skills in translation as a subject in its own right? Translation is a practical, even vocational skill, and is unique in this respect out of all skills and subjects taught on the modern languages degree. The recent spectacular growth in postgraduate translation courses, alluded to at the start of this article, is clear evidence. In Oxford, the Advanced Translation undergraduate course is consistently the most popular of the special subjects available to students in French. Like many such courses, it combines practical exercises in creating and critiquing translations with study of translation theory, a discipline that has similarly burgeoned over the last decade. Translation on this and similar courses differs substantially from the traditional practice outlined by Arthur and Klapper. In Advanced Translation the assessment takes the form of a portfolio rather than an exam, giving students the freedom to choose their particular area of study, which may include subtitling or translations of graphic novels. Students will often focus on contemporary French, exploring the language as it is currently spoken and written, and the range of styles and registers tackled, often far removed from the conventionally literary. Such courses expand students' translation competencies, and can offer useful grounding for translation work as part or whole of their professional career, or as a basis for moving on to more detailed study at a postgraduate level. As high tuition fees and ongoing economic difficulties concentrate students' minds ever more on the increased employability and workplace skills which might be gained from their studies, it is likely that courses with clear practical applications will continue to grow in popularity.

The third possible aim of a translation course views it not as an end in itself, nor as a contribution to the language-teaching of the course, but as contributing to the modern languages course as a whole, including the literary and cultural studies on the 'other side' of the modern languages degree. Modern languages degrees can manifest a split between



language learning on one side, and literary, cultural or area studies on the other, with the two halves poorly integrated, and the language side under-valued in comparison with the other. This is due to a number of factors. Cultural and area studies teaching is generally carried out by research-active staff on academic contracts, often permanent faculty members, while language teaching may be carried out in part by staff on non-academic contracts, including visiting graduate-student lectors, who may have little participation in faculty decision-making and course design. Students may be offered a wider choice of courses or modules in cultural and area studies than in language-related work, or graded only for form rather than content in language-based papers. Lastly, in four-year modern languages degrees, which are the norm in the UK, the third year abroad is assumed to fulfil a function of improving students' language performance in general, and thus renders the faculty-based language teaching less important.

Translation study is uniquely placed in the modern languages course as a potential bridge of this divide, combining as it does aspects of the linguistic and the cultural. What uses might it have in aiding students' learning in the non-linguistic elements of the degree, and thereby drawing the degree together into a more integrated whole? One answer comes from P. Sewell, whose analysis of her own translation teaching identifies twelve non-linguistic transferable skills developed by translation studies:

- 1. Read accurately.
- 2. Operate effectively socio-linguistically: be aware of register, text-type.
- 3. Understand a theory of communication and see one's role as a link in a chain of communication.
- 4. Use contextual knowledge effectively.
- 5. Work to a brief, carry out instructions, i.e. adopt the attitude of a professional.
- 6. See when extra research is needed, and do it, i.e. act autonomously.
- 7. Prioritise work, pace oneself, manage one's time have work ready early if possible.
- 8. Produce reader-friendly documents, work on lay-out.
- 9. Step back from one's work and evaluate it with objectivity.
- 10. Post-edit one's own and other people's work (requires considerable language-awareness).
- 11. Understand what makes the two languages tick.



12. Articulate unspoken assumptions (translation strategies, and reasons for translation decisions). (Sewell, 2002)

It is not hard to take issue with the particulars of Sewell's list, several of which seem tangential, over-general, or imprecisely formulated. Of particular interest, though, are her first, second and fourth skills (accurate reading, awareness of register and text-type, use of contextual knowledge), which together amount to skills of engagement with the text. Proper and sufficient engagement with the source text is the most vital element in a successful translation, and this means engagement with the passage not just as a linguistic sample, but as a repository of meaning to be interpreted, and as the product of its cultural, social and historical context. The former of these aspects is self-evident, and can be amply demonstrated by the failings of electronic translators unable to engage on the level of meaning, such as the online translator, Babel Fish. On the latter, Hervey and Higgins emphasize that 'translating involves not just two languages, but a transfer from one whole culture to another, claiming that cultural differences 'are sometimes bigger obstacles to successful translation than linguistic ones'. They approvingly note Katan's suggestion that translators should be considered as 'cultural mediators' (2002, p. 31, emphasis in original). Both interpretative and contextual aspects of the translation process – they are in any case inseparable – must be a central concern of the translator's if an adequate rendition of the sense and tone of the French is to be recreated in the English. Sewell's sixth translation skill - identifying the need for further research and carrying it out autonomously - is also brought into play here.

We are now in areas of learning which seem very distant from the grammar and vocabulary with which we started out. However, these are issues which closely resemble those with which students are concerned in literary study in particular, where it forms part of the modern languages degree. To illustrate with some brief examples: a recent examiner's report on Oxford's most widely studied literature paper in French commented:

examines it in detail in Bellos: 2011, pp. 256-67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The above sentence, for instance, when translated into French by Babel Fish, returns to English as: 'The old one of these aspects is art of car-portrait-obvious, and can be amply shown by the failings of the electronic translators unable to engage on the level of the significance, such as the translator in line, fish of Babel.' Babel Fish is to be found at http://babelfish.altavista.com/. Google Translate has recently improved upon the service with the help of an extensive database of existing translations produced by human translators. David Bellos



This paper was generally well done, with a good proportion of Firsts and high 2.1s, with a small handful of really impressive scripts that displayed not just an understanding of authors but a sense of context, genre and period that shows the period paper at its best.

Here too, interpretation and context are key elements in the student's engagement with the subject. The critical commentary, in which the student must analyse a short passage taken from a previously studied text, provides an even closer parallel. Grading descriptors define a low pass as follows:

Commentaries fall short of a thorough understanding of the passage and knowledge of its context but nevertheless comment helpfully on some of its aspects. Overall they are bitty and partial, perhaps failing to recognize the background or context of the passage accurately or misunderstanding aspects which are analysed.

In the commentary, understanding of the passage and intelligent use of its context are allied to close reading and analysis of writing style, all of which elements are equally important in producing a translation.

It seems clear, then, that translation study fosters not only linguistic skills, but also skills very much akin to those used in critical analysis elsewhere in the modern languages course. Both teaching and assessment might be adapted to encourage this approach, thereby not only aiding students' development of their critical faculties, but also connecting the two halves of the degree course together into a more unified learning experience.

How might this integration practically be encouraged? Most obviously, it will depend on the nature of the non-language-learning elements of the modern languages course. Courses that focus on area studies might complement historical and sociological study in the translation class with related texts, and translation issues that focus on the problems involved in translating politically sensitive or culturally specific information. The translation class can also be a complementary resource to film studies, through subtitling exercises that require students to winnow and simplify the original dialogue, and to exploit visual cues to ensure the comprehension of a foreign audience. And transferable skills for literary analysis can evidently be fostered in the translation class by encouraging students to develop close-reading skills, a sensitivity to style and register, and careful discourse analysis to infer



matters of culture and period, class, politics or gender, from a given text. Here, the importance of contextual knowledge, and strategies for inferring it from the text itself, can be explored by studying passages with and without contextual information, either by dividing classes into two groups or by analysing the same passage before and after important contextual information is divulged. Comparative study of different passages by the same writer, or by different writers in the same genre or of the same period, can also focus attention on the analytical aspects of translation studies, as can the use of published professional translations, which can be compared for what they betray of the translator's own period, culture, stylistic preferences and ideology. Direct connections could also be made with the students' literary studies, through the use of translation passages by writers studied elsewhere in the course by one or more of the students, who could then be asked to present to the class a contextual and interpretative analysis of the translation issues involved. With the wealth of the students' diverse literary studies to draw on, many opportunities exist to integrate translation work into the non-linguistic curriculum.

To conclude: we have looked at the three possible aims of translation study – as an aid to language learning, as an end in itself, or as a complement to literary analysis – and discovered that for each, the subject functions to some extent towards the achievement of that aim, but alterations in the system of teaching and assessment could improve performance in all three cases: In language learning, translation is an effective form of assessment to measure comprehension and sensitivity to style and register. However, it is a relatively poor tool for teaching such matters, and ought therefore, according to this criterion alone, to occupy a lower proportion of language teaching than the proportion of the assessment it takes up. More communicative teaching methods, and more active production of target-language texts, might replace some percentage of translation practice in language teaching, while still providing the students with useful preparation for a translation examination.

As a goal in itself, proficiency in translation is a useful skill, popular among students, many of whom will go on to use it in their professional lives or at postgraduate level. For such students, it is doing them a disservice to restrict translation study to a narrow range of text types, for instance, only studying unseen prose extracts from literary fiction. It is equally unhelpful in this regard to treat translation as a purely linguistic exercise, aimed primarily at expanding comprehension of vocabulary and grammatical structures, with some increased



sensitivity to register. Rather, a broad range of texts might be studied, including contemporary source texts from business, journalism, science, law and other fields. Analysis might go beyond the purely linguistic into areas of comparative stylistics, and beyond that to the more advanced theoretical issues that preoccupy translators, such as criticism of implied power-relations in the language of translated post-colonial writing, or the debate between 'domesticating' and 'foreignizing' approaches to the text.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, as we have seen, translation can indeed foster critical skills transferable to other parts of the degree, and, of course, vice versa. The close-reading required by translation study, with the semantic and stylistic analysis this entails, makes it a practice that in many ways has more in common with a literary commentary than a grammar exercise. The potential of the translation class to complement literary, film, or area studies elsewhere on the course is very significant, and often unrecognized. Furthermore, integration between the linguistic and cultural sides of the course is in itself beneficial: students find themselves studying a unified course with cross-currents of learning, rather than two largely unrelated streams of language and cultural study, and language study in particular is valued as being a central element of the degree course as a whole.

These three possible aims of translation study are not perfectly aligned, it is clear, and to some extent they are even in competition with one another. For instance, an aim of fostering closer links between students' translation work and literary study is to some extent in conflict with the aim of building students' proficiency as translators by a broadening of the translation syllabus into non-literary texts. Equally, the aim of assessing linguistic proficiency through translation exams is not entirely in harmony with either of the other two aims, both of which would introduce a measure of other, non-linguistic criteria into assessment. There is a balance to be struck between these aims, and where it lies will differ for each modern languages department, according to the structure of the degree course more generally. What I hope to have shown here, though, is that translation studies need not be a minor and unloved aspect of language teaching, still less an antiquated throwback to the study of dead languages. With a little thought, translation studies can become the heart of the modern languages degree course, a point of connection where all the students' skills are brought together at once.

<sup>7</sup> On post-colonial critiques of translation, see Cheyfitz, 1991; on domesticating and foreignizing approaches, see Venuti. 2004.



## **Biodata**

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