

SHOULD LITERARY TRANSLATION BE TAUGHT AS A SEPARATE COURSE?

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While “Foreign Literature in Translation” is a course commonly offered to students enrolled in majors or minors other than foreign language, in most Modern Languages and Literatures departments translation often belongs to the list of options suggested in a “Seminar in Language” designed to allow students to explore special topics, related but not necessarily significant to their main field of interest. “Literary Translation” would then be a sub-category of the main “Translation” area, next to specific fields such as “Technical Translation,” “Medical and Scientific Translation,” and “Foreign Language for the Professions,” or along with procedure oriented courses, such as “Methodology of Translation” or “Technology Assisted Translation.” In a time when translation is becoming more and more specialized (legal, medical, technical, etc.), should we not focus a little more on that part of the discipline dedicated to literary works? The requirements, objectives and strategies are distinct from the ones that characterize the other areas of translation. And since the management of Computer Aided Translation (CAT) tools has transformed the translator’s training and performance, literary translation is now facing new challenges. As pedagogues, we must also accept a new challenge – conceiving and successfully teaching an innovative literary translation course, with specific teaching approaches, requirements, goals and technological involvement.

Literary Translation As a Separate Discipline

In the early 1970’s, when I was completing the BA in Spanish at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, each year everyone had to complete at least two translation courses – one in Spanish to French translation

and one in French to Spanish translation.¹ In this case, the courses could not be compared with professional translators' training – focusing primarily on grammar acquisition and vocabulary development. The variety of texts was quite substantial and included a varied selection of literary excerpts, mostly from 19th and 20th century Hispanic and French authors, including general interest selections from current newspapers or magazines.

In the third year, a course of Translation of Spanish Classical Literature (Spanish to French) was added to the two previously mentioned. For that specific task, the volume of texts was complemented by a thematic wordbook of classical Spanish. Santa Teresa, Lope de Vega, El Duque de Rivas and Mateo Alemán became part of our daily translation practice, confronting us with basic, yet extremely challenging issues: What was the meaning of a particular word, and what concept did it convey at the time it was written? How can I handle metaphors and cultural references? Should I try to keep the rhymes, even if it might detract from the accuracy of my translation? In any case, an undergraduate student enrolled as a Spanish major in a French university would have to take three translation courses, which represent about a fourth of the total number of credit hours required for that year.

This was and continues to be feasible there, because French students already hold a solid knowledge of at least two foreign languages acquired in junior and senior high school (between 5 and 7 years of study, 3 hours a week) before they enter college. Students planning to pursue a degree in Modern Languages, Classics and/or Literature, would frequently add either a third modern or classic language (Greek, or more frequently Latin, which is a requirement for a degree in any Latin language or in French literature).

In addition, the teaching of translation and, more recently, the utilization of new technologies to produce innovative pedagogical approaches have long had a greater impact among the European community than in the United States: the diversity of languages used in Europe made the topic crucial for professionals, businessmen and politicians, and called for quick, efficient solutions. If we consider that

during the last decades, in many European countries, foreign languages have been introduced in kindergarten and elementary school programs, it becomes understandable that the beginning level student is virtually nonexistent among college students – at least for the most commonly taught languages. As a student begins his/her university program, the typical European student specializing in Modern Languages can begin immediately with courses that would be considered as “advanced level” in the American universities, such as Western Civilization, Literature, Advanced Grammar, Linguistics and, of course, Translation, with a wide variety of texts, including literary excerpts. But the reality we are facing in this country is sensibly different, which implies that the teaching of translation requires fresh, invigorating strategies.

Integrating Translation at the Undergraduate Level

If we examine the translation studies offered by American universities, we notice that most schools include in their catalog only isolated courses designed, in most cases, to serve practical purposes. This is understandable. If the ability to accurately translate a text from one language into another is a skill needed by students of foreign languages all over the world, it has also become, over the last decades, a training that can fill specific needs, confer additional expertise, promote flexibility, and offer new alternatives and professional opportunities. Some American schools actually specialize in this type of instruction, offering significant programs which focus on non-literary translation, for example, La Salle University in Philadelphia (technical), the Division of Interpretation and Translation at Georgetown University in Washington D.C., and the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation at the renowned Monterey Institute of International Studies.

On the other hand, a number of universities regularly offer workshops and seminars in literary translation in general, or even centered on the translation of poetry, such as Antioch University in Yellow Spring, Ohio; Barnard College at Columbia University; Bowling Green State University, Ohio; Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts; the Creative Writing Program offered by the City

that College of New York; Stanford University, California; the University of Georgia in Athens; the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and the University of Puerto Rico – which also has seminars and workshops specializing in technical, legal and medical translation. Finally, some schools offer a certification in Literary Translation: Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh; Indiana University at Bloomington; SUNY at Binghamton; the University of California at Santa Cruz – host of two NEH Summer Institutes on literary translation, one in French and one in Spanish; the University of Texas at Austin; and Washington University in St. Louis – which accepts translation as Master's thesis.²

Considering these facts, the first pertinent issue for our study is: why should undergraduates in American universities spend time in a translation course at the expense of other topics, considering that they arrive in college with a relatively low level of second language proficiency? Primarily, because there is a demand that often is not met. An informal survey conducted among students enrolled in second and third year Spanish courses at Ball State University during the spring semester 2001 revealed a genuine interest in the possible contents, modalities and applications of a translation course. Surveyed students majored in a variety of fields, but most of them specialized in telecommunications, journalism, elementary education, special education, and criminal justice. Some of them had already undertaken professional duties in these fields and were even more aware of a need for such a course to help them improve their performance, communicate on the job site, and enhance their credentials. To respond to that demand, we offered a general translation course during the first summer session of 2001. Besides providing an upper division option to fulfill requirements for Spanish majors, the course was designed to give students additional, marketable preparation, whether they planned to develop a career in business, industry, communication, nursing, environmental management, criminal justice, or social work. It also supplied some basic training in new technologies (Computer Aided Translation tools) to improve their performance; help them find quick, efficient solutions; and provide resources for future professional

development.

The second issue focuses on language acquisition at large: how could a translation course, particular a literary translation course, help undergraduate students build proficiency in a language? Primarily, because it will require an in-depth study of grammatical usage at all levels, in particular – and in no two-language area is this truer than between English and Spanish – the use of verbal moods and tenses, which is probably one of the most challenging classroom issues for students as well as instructors. Proficiency would also be enhanced because learners working on literary texts would be expected to seek not just equivalencies of meanings – something that can be provided by any good dictionary – but equivalencies of concepts, a learning process that includes culture and civilization of the countries where the source and target languages are used. While fighting for lexical precision and accuracy, students would focus on the social and ethnic contents of the text to be translated.

Literary Translation As a Distinct Pedagogical Objective

We have already emphasized the fact that the purpose of translation as well as its pedagogical approach vary greatly according to the nature of the texts. In other words, technical, medical, or legal translations usually have a strictly utilitarian and practical purpose, which is to make the content of a text written in the source language understandable to people using the target language. On the other hand, translation is frequently meant to broaden the audience targeted by a written material. The translator's job would not then be limited to a transmission of contents, but would imply the identification of signs understandable to different groups of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds and systems of references.

That is why, not only the translation of traditional literary pieces, but also the translation of movie scripts and opera librettos require different approaches, skills and strategy. For the same reason, the translation of a title, in the case of a book or a movie, can turn into a tricky procedure. In a former work about Literature in Translation, we had analyzed the titles of two bestsellers turned into movies – Colleen

McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* (1977) and Nicholas Evans' *The Horse Whisperer* (1995) – and their translation to Spanish and French, reaching the conclusion that in both cases the cultural content was lacking. While the English title, in its conciseness, was completely self-sufficient, the target languages tried to express, through a long paraphrase, the legends and traditions that lay behind the stories, yet were not successful in their attempt.³

Literary translation is a complex topic, thus challenging study content. In the last decades of the 20th century, these issues have become crucial for specialized publications. Most of them dedicate separate sections, or even volumes, to each branch of the discipline. Literary translation is not left behind and holds a noticeable place in prominent publications: for example, *Translation Review*, a journal covering translation theory and criticism as well as reviews, published by the Center for Translation Studies of the University of Texas at Dallas, which also accommodates the national offices of the American Literary Translators Association; *Beacons*, published by the American Translators Association's Literary Division; and, to a lesser extent, the *ATA Chronicle*, the main publication of the American Translators Association, which occasionally focuses on literary translation as a technique, emphasizing the process of transplanting a text from one culture to another while maintaining ethical behavior and professional standards.

In the meantime, some pedagogues expressed their interest in finding alternatives to teach literary translation more effectively, such as Mary Snell-Hornby, from the University of Vienna, who developed concepts and methods that could be applied to the study, practice, and teaching of literary translation. Her research seeks out ways to make the translation methodologies, mechanisms and procedures more intelligible, while analyzing the problems linked to creativity and neuropsychological facts. She also examines the connection between translation and linguistics – semantic models, stylistics, terminology and differential linguistics and explores the roles of native and foreign language competency as well as the intercultural dimension. Last, but not least, she provides information on control of quality and techniques

of evaluation and revision, which are particularly valuable when translations are used for comparative literature. The entire procedure is based on the concepts of “prototype semantics” and “gestalt,” a structure having properties not derivable from the sum of its parts, while translation is presented as a holistic process.⁴

Although we often stand as an advocate of technology in the practice and teaching of translation, we must admit that CAT (Computer Aided Translation) tools provide a very limited help for literary works. They are designed to improve the professional translator’s production cycle and to provide business usable translations in a rather neutral style – not to handle metaphoric phrases. In its homepage, *Language Partners International* reiterates that the most sophisticated software can only improve the process, not eliminate the translator, and clearly states the limits of Machine Translation (MT) systems when it comes to any complex documents, among which are literary pieces:

As opposed to technical documents, documents that are written in more dramatic styles with complex sentence structures are less ideal candidates for use with CAT tools. Poetry and verse, the Bible, opera lyrics and other documents written using more advanced forms of metaphor and analogy generally prove difficult for MT programs. Since MT translations tend to be more literal, translations of these types of documents can actually be quite comical at times. And although the complex sentence structure poses no problems with MT programs, these documents do tend to be less repetitive and therefore less benefit is derived from re-use. The exception to this would be a revision of a complex document where a MT tool would provide value.⁵

Students who plan to become professional translators should be familiarized with all the technological supports currently available on the market, which also means that they should be able to evaluate their limitations, when, for example, they are applied to literary translation. These elements could be effectively presented in contrast and

comparison, like all the other components of a literary translation course. Even though technological translation tools could be helpful to guarantee accuracy and coherence, they will not provide any real assistance when it comes to working out cross-cultural communication.

Literary Translation in the New Millenium

We are living in an age of rapid migrations, with developing demand for translating and interpreting services in increasingly diversified environments, which means that translation instructors cannot restrict themselves to the delivery of contents. Part of our responsibility is to broaden our students' perspective regarding the evolution of languages and the growing diversity of contexts in which they will have to perform. We should also do our best to make them aware of the necessity to update their knowledge on a regular basis and to maintain their flexibility, regardless of their area of specialization.

It is clear that the "translation" inherited from the humanities pedagogy, and limited during centuries to Latin and Greek, has evolved and is becoming more diversified. The needs linked to augmenting communication demand between human groups have modified translation's mission and diversified its techniques. Literary translation follows the same stream, and its performers will have to become more adaptable in order to increase their celerity while maintaining effectiveness. In addition to looking for equivalence of signification, the literary translator will always have to seek similarities in the signifiers of different cultures: an additional challenge for a new era of translation.

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NOTES

¹ The French university system functions on a full-year basis, not on semester or quarterly terms, which means that a course usually stands for a section 1/section 2 combination, in terms of time and contents.

² A complete and detailed listing of the programs and departments

in Literary Translation all over the United States can be found in the web page of ALTA, whose headquarters are located in the University of Texas at Dallas: <http://www.utdallas.edu/research/cts/alnavigation_bar.htm>

⁵ *The Thorn Birds* was translated in Spanish as “El Pájaro canta hasta morir” (The Bird Sings Until it Dies), and in French as “Les oiseaux se cachent pour mourir” (Birds Hide to Die). *The Horse Whisperer* ended up, in Spanish, as “El señor de los caballos” (The Man of the Horses), and in French as “L’homme qui murmurait à l’oreille des chevaux” (The Man Who Used to Whisper in the Horses Ears). A full analysis of that procedure can be found in Moulin, Sylvie. “Literature in Translation: Options, Limits and Alternatives in the Selection of Referents.” *Language and Literature*. Vol. XXIV. Trinity University, English Department. San Antonio, TX. Sept 1999: 4-6.

⁶ A complete analysis of these methods and concepts can be found in Snell-Hornby, Mary. *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 1988/1995. Second revised edition.

⁷ Language Partner International – Translation Productivity Software. Sept 2000. <<http://www.languagepartners.com/reference-center>>

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