

Research Article

Teaching Translation Theory and Practice

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Key words: Latin, Greek, translation, pedagogy, university, assessment

It is safe to say that, across the globe, translation is still heavily relied on as a tool for teaching classical languages and texts that are written in them, both in secondary and higher education.¹ Indeed, translation exercises are perhaps the most common method to train and evaluate Greek and Latin text comprehension, grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Some teachers and textbooks also make use of existing translations to complement and supplement the (more or less) original texts that they are tackling in class.² Given that translation plays such a prominent role in Classics, is it not remarkable, then, that students generally spend very little time reflecting on the act of translation itself, not just as a shift between different languages, but as a transfer and transformation of meaning and form between different cultures?

Translations completed by Latin and Greek students in class are not usually meant to be read or heard by anyone but their teachers (red pen in hand!) and fellow students. Typically, they tend towards what scholars and professional translators call ‘calque translations’ or ‘translationese’: a more or less word-for-word rendering of the syntactical structures and turns of phrase of the source text that relies on basic dictionaries or word lists, frequently resulting in an awkward, unidiomatic and sometimes even incomprehensible prose that few people would ever read for their pleasure (Claes, 2018, pp. 7–9 and 169–71; Heltai, 2004). Classroom translation might be a handy didactic tool, but its results rarely do justice to the text under scrutiny (Luger, 2020).

Such is often the background in translation of the Latinists and Hellenists who are responsible for most published translations of Latin and Greek texts. Due to the general absence of specialised programmes and courses that focus on *literary* translation from classical languages, it is often the only institutional training which they will ever receive. Those that are nonetheless able to produce enjoyable translations for a broader audience usually do not have their youthful experiences as classroom translators to thank. This is the situation in the Low Countries, at least – although we do not have the impression that things are very different elsewhere.

This article will present a description of a longstanding BA course at Ghent University (Belgium) that tries to serve as a modest

counterweight to the circumstances indicated above, tailored more specifically to the Dutch-speaking linguistic area of Flanders and the Netherlands. The course in question is entitled ‘Translation Theory and Practice: The Classics’ / ‘Vertaaltheorie en –praktijk: de klassieken’ (2.5 contact hours X 12 weeks + written assignments). For the past 20 years, it has been co-taught by different pairs of instructors made up of a Hellenist and a Latinist.³ It is compulsory for all the Ghent Latin students and, due to logistic matters that are not of relevance here, optional for Greek students, although we personally feel it should be compulsory for the latter as well. To our knowledge, this course is unique in the Low Countries.⁴

While ‘Translation Theory and Practice’ is taught in Dutch and also focuses on translation into that language and its target cultures, much of its contents and assignments could easily be adapted to other linguistic and cultural contexts. By outlining the teaching goals, general set-up and assignments for the course as it is currently taught by the authors of this article, we would like to offer some inspiration to other teachers of Latin and Greek at all educational levels.⁵

Student Profile and Teaching Goals

First, however, we need to establish the educational profile of our students. Almost all Belgian students who take Latin and/or Greek in higher education have already had five or six years of one or both of these languages in secondary school. Most of our students are in their second year of a BA in ‘Linguistics and Literature’, a programme in which they combine two distinct languages and literary traditions in addition to a more general, common curriculum in linguistics, literary studies and cultural history. Not all of our students are classicists in the traditional sense. In fact, while some of them do take both Latin and Greek, the majority of them combine a classical language with a modern one. We find that this diversity in educational backgrounds is quite beneficial to our course, especially in terms of group dynamics and peer-learning.

By the time students get to our course, they should already have a decent working knowledge not just of Latin and/or Greek, but also of broader literary history and analysis. We should also mention that the Latin and Greek programmes at Ghent University both strongly subscribe to a diachronic perspective that goes beyond the literatures and cultures of antiquity, something that is also clearly reflected in this particular course (see below). In this

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Cite this article: Praet S and Verhelst B (2020). Teaching Translation Theory and Practice. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 21, 31–35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631020000392>

way we can also expect our students to have a basic literary-historical framework for and interest in working on classical and non-classical Latin and/or Greek texts alike.

'Translation Theory and Practice' has two overarching goals: firstly, we want to enable students to reflect theoretically and programmatically on the act of translation itself and to provide them with the critical tools needed to analyse, describe and assess a given translation. Secondly, we want them to be able to set up and conduct a literary translation project of their own. To that end, we have them take a step back from the 'automatic' classroom translations to which they have been made accustomed. Instead, we train them to read, re-read, analyse, isolate the text's particularities and translation challenges, formulate their own translational intent, and only *then* translate, as the final step of a well-considered analytic and creative process (Levý 1967; Reiss 1981). Clearly, these two goals are complementary: while theory informs the students' individual translation practice, the practice also renders the theory much more tangible to them.

Course Set-Up

Contents

One of the first things we do in our introductory class is to question the notion that every translational 'shift' away from the source text must necessarily constitute some sort of nefarious *betrayal*. Instead, we emphasise the agency of the translator, who reads and interprets the text and, for their own readers, will effectively wind up replacing the original author. In line with recent scholarship in the field of descriptive translation studies (see, for example, Toury, 1995 as a foundational contribution), we propose that every translation is, in fact, a *selective adaptation* that tries to engage with certain, but never all, aspects of a given source text in terms of contents, subtext, form, style, generic set-up, aesthetic value, original function and pragmatic effect.

Seeing as different translators may have different priorities and aims, one single source text can result in a variety of translations that are all valid in their own way. Thus, for instance, one translator of Statius' *Achilleid* might prefer a novelistic prose rendering in order to focus on its story; another might wish to convey that we are dealing here with metrically bound poetry and thus resort to the tried and tested iambic verse of modern poetic traditions; a third might argue that Statius in his day was very much a modernist whose use of style, syntax and metre creates a strong sense of disjunction, something which might be more aptly achieved today in units of free verse.

Also, in our opening class, we problematise the notion of translational equivalence itself, setting up the translator as a pragmatic mediator between the mutually far-removed literary and more broadly cultural systems in which the source and target texts are respectively embedded. For many of our students, this requires a drastic change in their intuitive outlook on what can be understood under the term 'translation' – not infrequently without some initial reluctance. For the purpose of our course, we subscribe to Toury's inclusive definition of translation as 'all utterances which are presented or regarded as such within the target culture, on no matter what grounds' (Toury, 1995, pp. 32-3), upholding only the minimal criteria of the existence of a source text, a transfer of certain source text features to the target text, and consequently, a set of relations that associate the translated text with its source text.

We continue the course with a survey of the history of translation practices from antiquity to the recent past, paying special attention to the changing standards regarding the shaping of trans-

lations to comply with contemporary literary forms and tastes (Van den Broeck, 1999). An important benchmark here is the 18th century, in which the birth of modern classical scholarship brought out a distinctly 'foreignising' and academic tendency in translations from Greek and Latin: that is, rather than 'domesticising' the source text by *adapting* it to contemporaneous literary taste, translators more commonly sought to *imitate* its formal traits and poetics, regardless of how out of place the results might be within the broader literary field of the day (Carne-Ross, 2010, pp. 110-116 and 152-164). This persistent view was later challenged, among others, by Ezra Pound, whose domesticising approach ('Make it new!') continues to serve as inspiration to translators of Latin and Greek (Pound 1935; Claes, 1997 and 2016; Sullivan, 1964).

Next, we devote a session to the impact of the implied reader on the translation process (Schmid, 2013). Here, we have students reflect on the importance of clearly determining their target audience and, with it, their translational intent. To illustrate how this may deeply influence their translation choices, we focus on one elaborate, compound case study, namely recent translations and adaptations of classical myths aimed at children, more specifically within the parameters of the contemporary field of Flemish and Dutch children's literature, that is, the literary target culture (Geerts 2014; Ghesquière, Joosen and Van Lierop-Debrauwer, 2014).

In the following four sessions, we highlight different translational and transcultural aspects of the translation act itself: one that presents them with the analytical tools and terminology to describe translation shifts formally (Holmes, 1988; Popovic, 1976; Van den Broeck, 1999); one that hones in on formal challenges in the translation of poetry (Bronzwaer, 1993; De Roy van Zuydewijn, 2005; Hunink, 2003); one that focuses on dealing with what today is broadly regarded as sensitive topics, such as racism, sexism and sexual violence; and a workshop near the end of the course in which students present their own final projects from the point of view of transcultural translation challenges.

We then take a closer look at the contemporary market surrounding translations of Greek and Latin texts. How do such texts eventually reach the bookstore? In the first half of this session, we discuss general market dynamics from a sociological, field-theoretical perspective and apply it to data pertaining to translations from Latin and Greek (Sapiro 2016; Index Translationum, n.d.). In the second half, we take a closer look at the specific market conditions in Flanders and the Netherlands, with a focus on publishers, translator profiles (mostly white male academics in their sixties), source text selection, financing, dominant translational approaches and public reviewing (Menkvelde & Lesmeister, 2019; Pieters 2001).

Each year, we conclude our course hosting an interactive guest panel for which we invite experts from varying professional backgrounds who also work with Greek or Latin materials, including published translators, dramaturges, educational professionals and reception study specialists, to discuss a central issue with reference to one or two case studies. In recent years, we have addressed translation and adaptation for children and young adults (with a case study featuring Ovid's tale of Daedalus and Icarus), the translation of socially sensitive texts (including case studies about eugenics in Plato's *Republic* and sexual violence in Ovid's tale of Leucothoë), and the translation of technical and philosophical texts and terminology (including a case study on Aristotle's *Poetics*).

Course materials

We present our students with a modest syllabus (c. 25 pages in total) which outlines a theoretical framework for translation studies,

illustrated with examples from Latin and Greek translations into Dutch. This syllabus is supplemented with an extensive online reader, which includes theoretical articles and book chapters, programmatic reflections by translated authors and translators, book reviews and news columns. For some classes, we have some obligatory reading. Most of the reader, however, is there for the students to browse through freely, depending on personal interests and the particular challenges they are facing in their own translation assignments. During classes, we also discuss plenty of samples from published translations and share experiences from our own translation practice with the students when relevant.

Assignments

Instead of an exam, we give our students three assignments through which they are to achieve the course goals: 1) a couple of introductory start-up exercises; 2) a critical analysis of a recent Dutch translation of a Greek or Latin text; and 3) a multi-faceted personal final project that entails both theoretical reflection and creative translation practice. These are detailed below:

1) **Start-up exercises.** These are the students' first proper encounter with some of the typical challenges posed to the literary translator of historical texts. At the very start of the course, they are given little more than a week to translate a short piece of prose and poetry in Latin and/or Greek from a short list of options that all share a humorous nature (such as a joke from the *Philogelos* or by Poggio Bracciolini, a bawdy epigram from the *Carmina Priapea* or the *Anthologia Graeca*). We ask them to also add a couple of paragraphs (250 words per translation) that sketch out a basic analysis of the source texts (genre, style, translational challenges), a description of their implied reader, and an indication of which aspects of the source texts the students want to convey and how they have tried to achieve this.

Apart from being a light-hearted way into the course that also encourages students to step out of their translational comfort zones – more than, say, translating passages from canonical authors such as Homer or Vergil –, these exercises confront them with the sorts of questions that will keep returning throughout the semester: Who I am translating for? Will I adopt a culturally foreignising or domesticating approach to my materials? How do I deal with ethically questionable contents and sensitive topics? What to do with historical *realia* and intertextual references?

In our experience, many students find it hard at this early stage fully to let go of the illusionary 'safety' of what we have referred to above as calque translations and translationese, let alone make bold domesticising choices in their own work. That is why, halfway through the course, after a round of individual feedback from us, they have to hand in a second, revised version of one of their initial translations. This time, we also require them to neatly formulate their translational intent, argue its merits, and highlight a couple of significant translational choices and shifts (c. 1500 words). They also have to attach at least one so-called 'reference text', meaning an existing (literary) text originally written in the target language, which they have used as a formal and stylistic point of reference/source of inspiration. After another round of feedback, this time by one of their peers, they submit a third and final version, which is often rather far removed from their first attempts.

2) **Critical analysis of a recently published translation.** Following our session on the description of translation shifts, we divide the

students into small groups for a group assignment in which they will put to use their newly acquired skills. Each group is assigned a recently published Dutch translation of a Greek or Latin text which they have to analyse and evaluate from a translational point of view. They start out with a preliminary analysis (c. 750 words) of the source text, both on a macro- and a micro-level. In the former, they identify formal and substantial features that are characteristic of the author and the genre, as well as the original function and target audience of the text. For the latter, they select and discuss a representative text sample in terms of style, semantics, interpretation and translational challenges. Only then do they turn to the Dutch translation. First (c. 500 words), they describe its explicit and implicit translational philosophy/intent, distilled from paratextual statements from the translator (Introduction, Comments, Translator's Note), as well as inferred from the edition (publishing house and font, visual and material presentation, academic, popularising or religious set-up, etc.) and from the translator's professional background (main profession, other published translations, literary prizes, etc.). Next (c. 1,000 words), the students give us their general impression of the quality of the Dutch translation as a literary text *in its own right*, before comparing the Greek or Latin text sample from their preliminary micro-analysis to its Dutch counterpart. Using the proper terminology, they list conspicuous translational shifts and take note of their effect on the translation. Finally (c. 500 words), they arrive at a concluding evaluation in which they focus on two central questions: How does the translation compare to the explicit and implicit translational philosophy/intent? Would you recommend it to other readers, and, if so, to what specific purpose?

At the end of this group assignment, the students should be better equipped to formally analyse and comment on literary translations. In addition to honing their analytical and academic writing skills, exercises like this may also aid the future teachers among them in their selection of translations for classroom use and give them something to fall back on when they find themselves invited to review newly published translations.

3) **Individual final project.** This is meant to be the culmination of the entire course, in which the students bring together what they have learnt during classes, through other assignments, and in their additional reading. The project consists of three parts: first of all, a well-considered and executed translation of a piece of Latin or Greek prose or poetry (respectively around five pages of a text edition or 30 verses) which has never been translated into Dutch before, or at least not in a very long time. The students choose from a list of texts in a great variety of genres and dating from every century from the fourth BC to the 18th AD, Straton of Athens and pseudo-Ovid to *Digenis Akritis* and Ludvig Holberg. In their translational approaches, students may assume a variety of positions on the spectrum between what is traditionally conceived of as translation and adaptation. At the time of writing, we have students working on, for instance, a fairly typical epic Alexandrine rendering of an excerpt from Girolamo Vida's *Christias*; a novelistic translation of Curtius Rufus' *Historia Alexandri* for (young) adults who do not necessarily have a classical education; an illustrated rhymed version of Babrios' fables for children; an online, typographically dynamic, free verse take on Nonnos of Panoplis' *Metabolè*; and a faithful dramatisation of one of Peter Abelard's philosophical dialogues fit for television.

Secondly, the students are asked to write an accompanying text (c. 2000 words) for their translation in which they provide an implied readership of interested laypeople with contextual

and interpretational information to better understand and appreciate their work. This might include, among other things, some relevant notes on the author, a discussion of the source text's contents, genre, original function, and position within an encompassing work or collection, etc. This accompanying text will typically take the shape of a popularising scientific article, though we have also had students who, for instance, took it upon themselves to build informational or literary websites or who created mock-ups for poetry collections or children's books.

Thirdly, we require students to write an academic essay (c. 3000 words) in which they demonstrate their ability to conceptualise and substantiate a translation project of their own. This includes: an elaboration of their personal poetical view on the translation of historical Greek or Latin texts in general; a translationally relevant analysis of their source text; a motivated statement of translational intent, illustrated with Dutch reference texts; a critical self-evaluation of their translation, also discussing a number of interesting translational shifts; and a bibliography of all the primary and secondary literature they have consulted while working on the project.

Evaluation

When evaluating student assignments, we are faced with challenges that are quite particular to this course. Concerning the descriptive analysis of source texts, translations and translation shifts, we can uphold relatively objective criteria. The same holds true, albeit to a slightly lesser extent, of academic/popular text composition and general quality of argumentation. Incorrect or non-idiomatic language use is likewise out of the question – unless the translator has a good reason for it, for instance when they wish to use substandard language for the kind of conversations found in Petronius' *Satyricon*. However, both the start-up exercises and the final project also incorporate a strong creative, even artistic component. This is where the personal taste of the evaluator may come into play. To try and counteract this, we make sure that each project is graded separately by more than one person. Moreover, one of the more important criteria that we uphold in the evaluation of translations is to what degree they correspond to the translator's explicit statements of translational intent. If a student wants to argue that the tone and functionality of a given medieval ballad ideally lends itself to be rendered into contemporary cabaret, the resulting translation should answer to the conventions of that target genre; if they set out to do a more traditional verse translation of a heavily culturally-specific epic for readers who have experience with historical literatures, they need to make their choices accordingly. As such, it is the individual students themselves who get to determine part of our evaluative frameworks.

Concluding remarks

So how do students react to this course? Before answering that question, we should point out that Flemish universities generally do not include anything akin to creative writing in their literary studies curricula. In fact, it is only students who pursue a BA or MA degree in professional translation and interpreting – that is, in *modern* languages – who at one point or another may find themselves in a position where they are required to produce literary texts themselves.

Not our students, though: for many of them, 'Translation Theory and Practice: The Classics' comes as a jolting push out of their educational comfort zones, at the very least where translation

practice is concerned. This is not just because they are asked to do something that demands artistic creativity, but also because it forces them to acquaint themselves better with their own mother tongue/primary language and its literary range and heritage. Over the years, we have found that few of our Latin and Greek students are also avid readers of literature originally written in Dutch, with the main exception, of course, of those who in their curriculum combine the latter with a classical language. In a course that also entails literary translation, this can be as large an obstacle as the distance to the source languages and cultures, especially in terms of finding and applying the right styles and registers. One side-effect of the course's unusual nature is that students with a record for obtaining high grades might suddenly feel less certain about themselves, while those with a more modest profile beautifully rise to the occasion. We try to put all of them at ease right from the start, stressing that we do not expect everyone in the group to turn into a first-rate literary translator and that it is satisfactory to 'simply' try out things, as long as they can convincingly motivate it. Typically, we see students gain confidence throughout the different stages of their assignments and display noticeable growth both as translators and critical thinkers. As for the course as a whole, students frequently tell us, both through official course evaluations and in less formal conversations, how it has changed their outlook on and appreciation of translation, explicitly affirming its aptness and value within the curriculum. Each year, we have students who go on to write their BA and/or MA dissertation on a translation-related topic. Several graduates of this long-running course even wound up publishing the translations they first started working on there, while others still occasionally write journal reviews of other translators' work.

While it may not always be feasible to introduce courses like the one we have described here to existing programmes in Greek and Latin at other universities, or to devote that kind of attention to its concerns in secondary schools, there are other ways through which educators may explore the workings and implications of translation with their students – through workshops, general lectures, discussions with translators, writing assignments comparing different translations of the same text, etc. (see for instance Found, 2017). We believe this could help turn new generations of Latinists and Hellenists into more critical consumers of published translations and, potentially, more thoughtful and culturally fluent translators themselves. Not only can translation serve as a lens through which students get to scrutinise a Greek or Latin text with a rare thoroughness, they might even learn something about their own languages and associated literatures in the process.

Notes

1 For the history of language teaching and the role of translation therein, see Richards and Rodgers (2009, pp. 3-7), and Cook (2010, pp. 1-19). The more recent history of teaching methods in modern languages shows a distinct move away from the so-called 'grammar translation method', which is now widely deemed outdated and ineffective, and towards practical application (speaking, listening, direct comprehension). The fact that translation exercises are still such a big part of Latin and Greek education seems due in part to its central (and natural) occupation with reading and text comprehension.

2 One example of this from the Flemish context would be the *Pegasus* Latin textbook series (Hillewaere, Ackerman and De Paep, 2019).

3 Our sincere gratitude goes to our Ghent colleagues who taught this course before us and on whose solid work we have been able to build: Kristoffel Demoen and Katja De Herdt, who first created this course in connection to the latter's doctoral research project, as well as Wim Verbaal, Wannes Ghyselincx and Tim Noens, all of who added their own theoretical and practical expertise, approaches and teaching methods to the mix.

4 We are very interested to find out if courses like this exist elsewhere and how they approach the matter.

5 Also see Demoen and De Herdt (1999; 2000), mostly aimed at secondary school teachers in Classics in Belgium and the Netherlands, but also more broadly applicable.

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