

The Pros and Cons of Teaching German Literature in Translation

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It seems that the times when translation was anathema to foreign language instruction in the U.S. have passed, and we, instructors, have deactivated the mental link between translation and the old, discarded teaching methodologies. However, resistance to teaching in translation among my colleagues is sometimes still remarkable. Although the topic is anything but new, based on my recent teaching experience I would like to make a case for offering courses in translation by foreign language departments.

First I would like to make one point clear -- teaching in the language of the original *is* better. It is preferable because no matter how good and professional a translation is, it is still a translation, and, as such, it betrays the original -- traduttore -- traditore. Besides the obvious systemic disadvantaging of poetry, even the best translation has its inadequacies: simple mistranslations; inaccuracies; a loss in tone, rhythm, or image. Translation, as we all know, is interpretation and, often, misinterpretation (although so is any reading). Thus, under the right conditions, that is given we have students with enough language proficiency, I would always teach in the original. The question is whether we have the right conditions.

Considering the drastically dropping enrollments in all foreign languages but Spanish (and Spanish enrollments are growing mostly on beginners' level), our options have shrunk dramatically. In fact, most often it is not about teaching in the original or in translation; it is about teaching in translation or not teaching at all -- or, worse than not teaching, trying to teach in the original and turning students off because they are unable to perform at the required level (McCarthy 3).

To many instructors the thought of having to abandon the original tongue is still frightening: they might as well be reminded that most world literature would not be accessible to most people but for translations. To use the obvious and overused example, no one would read the Bible except for the selected few unless we read it in translation (Bugliani 2). So what are the objections? The three that readily come to mind are: 1) we are depriving our students of the pleasures of reading the original works; 2) we are undermining foreign language programs since anybody (that is to say English faculty) can teach in translation; 3) we are not teaching students the foreign language if we teach in translation.

I am not disputing the obvious pleasure and overall value of reading the original work. However, very often the linguistic competence of our undergraduate students does not allow them to read and understand the works that I would like to teach because of their significance for the literature and the culture of the language, be it German or French or Russian. So the dilemma is reduced to teaching literature in translation or limiting ourselves to simple texts and focusing mostly on the simple understanding of the basic vocabulary and straightforward meaning of the story. (The problem exists also in English literature classes. Of late, more and more often I have realized that before addressing literary issues in my English classes, I need to make sure the students really

understood the basic story line. Who went where and who died -- that is where instructors have to start. You would be surprised how difficult this simple task is for many students.)

Can anybody, that is to say any professor of English, teach in translation? Of course my colleagues in English are qualified to read a work of literature in translation and teach it to their students. However, many of them realize that unless they are familiar with the language, culture, and the specifics of the national literature in question, their teaching will lack depth. Not surprisingly, Comparative Literature programs, although they offer comparative literature courses in translation, require their faculty to be proficient in several foreign languages. To feel that I am qualified to teach a work in translation, most often I have to have read it myself in the original.

Concerning language acquisition: literature and language are inalienably connected. However, it is possible to learn a language well enough to communicate in it without any knowledge of the national literature(s) of that language. If we want to focus on teaching the language, we should do so. We should also be aware, however, that by focusing on language/culture with the exclusion of literature from departments of Language and Literature, we will inevitably turn into "mere departments for language acquisition" (McCarthy 4). Surprisingly enough, while we have gradually come to a common understanding that we cannot/should not teach language without teaching the culture, teaching literature was moved to the periphery: as if literature were not part of culture; as if we could teach culture and ignore literature; as if fighting the canon, we arrived at eliminating values completely.

Some of us still see teaching literature as a must in teaching languages and culture, however. In that case, we need to assess students' language proficiency and decide whether teaching in the original will be of any use and, if needed, teach in translation. This brings me to the very concrete example of my experience with teaching a German Literature Survey class in translation in the Spring of 2005.

It was a 300-level three-credit course, "German Literature in Translation," taught to twelve students majoring or minoring in German. Although the course is included in our course offerings, it had never been taught before. I had to start from scratch, to choose what to teach and how to teach. I decided a survey would include books both important within the German literature and culture and hard to read in the original without sufficient language proficiency. Since I expected most students in class to have at least a basic proficiency in German, I also provided bilingual readings whenever possible, so that those preferring to read the original works could read them; those who wanted to try reading them could try and see if they could take the challenge; and I, as instructor, could assess the results and also compare students' understanding of the text, its appreciation, and the time spent on reading the original and in translation.

One of the most obvious difficulties, not surprisingly, was providing bilingual texts. The four that I eventually chose were *Five Great German Stories: A Dual Language Book -- Stories by Kleist, Hoffmann, Schnitzler, Mann and Kafka in the original German and a new English translation* (Dover Publications); *German Short Stories 2/Deutsche Kurzgeschichten* (Penguin); *Deutsche Erzählungen/German Stories: A Bilingual Anthology* (University of California Press); and *103 Great Poems: A Dual-Language Book* (Dover). The other books, mostly classics (Theodor Fontane, Goethe, Mann, Plenzdorf) were readily available from the library, both in the original and in translation.

Only two students in my class were both willing and able to read the original German texts consistently throughout the semester. That was predictable: these two students had high language proficiency to start with and took the course to fulfill requirements of the program (since no other 300-level course was offered at the time). These students might be the ones who would have profited more from the course language-wise if the discussions, too, were in German. However, they read a lot in German and, upon my suggestion, submitted their essays in German too. In the final course survey, they were the only two people who said that they would have learned as much about German literature if the course had been taught in German. I agree. However, they never said they would have learned more. In addition, I should explain that both these students had a year of experience living in Germany and a level of language proficiency atypical for an undergraduate student. In fact, they could easily manage in a graduate-level course, which is not the norm for our undergraduates.

From the remaining ten with insufficient language proficiency, who present most interest as a case in study because the course was targeting such students, three were neutral when asked if they would have learned more about German literature if the course had been taught in German, but they were equally neutral when asked if their interest to German literature increased, if they learned much, if they enjoyed the movies shown in class, and, finally, if in-class discussions were of help. Personally, I see them as students basically neutral to the learning process in general or, simply put, not caring one way or another. The remaining seven students said they would not have learned as much about German literature if the course had been taught in German, that they would not have developed the same appreciation of it, that they would not have been able to contribute to class discussions in the way they did, and that they would, mostly likely, have not been able to cope with the course at all.

In the course of the semester I conducted an experiment, asking students to read certain stories from the bilingual books first in German and then in English, both in and out of class, and mark the time they needed for reading. On average, reading in German took them two to three times as long, but the problem was not only the time. When asked how much they understood from the German version, two students said about 10%, five students said about 30%, and three said about a half. So, even if they had spent two or three times more time on reading at home, which would probably never have happened, it would hardly have been of much use since most people in class would still have understood less than a half of the readings assigned. They would certainly not have been able to conduct a discussion in German in class, but even with discussions conducted in English, our efforts would have most likely been focused on trying to figure out the plot.

Although taught in English, the course was different from an all-English course. Even if the works were read and discussed in translation, I would use the original and then compare it to one or two translations, trying to help students develop an awareness of the translation and sensitivity to it. Students really enjoyed that work because it allowed them to understand limitations of any translation, no matter how good it was, and appreciation of the language of the original. As instructor, I would try to use specific examples to express my own enthusiasm for the language of the original. I specifically tried to draw students' attention to the untranslatability of certain words and phrases and to the numerous differences between the way German and English language function. Such approach certainly awakened students' intellectual curiosity and inspired them to offer their own translation or at least choose the best one from the ones I offered.

Without specifically studying the art of translation, we focused on the multiple layers of meaning behind each phrase in the original and on the practically limitless possibilities for interpretation. With poems, one of the assignments was to look for three to four translations, compare and contrast them, discussing pros and cons of each one in detail. Students seemed to profit a lot from this assignment, looking for multiple translations, meticulously comparing them, and presenting their research in class.

Although I said earlier that it was a literature, not a language, course, focus on translation as a process actually helped to foster German language acquisition, develop a better sense for the German as well as for the English language, and understand cultural differences rooted in these two languages. Solutions such as using monolingual dictionaries, parallel texts, and electronic reserves seemed obvious but sometimes amazingly effective (Maier 3).

There are other translation related activities that might be effectively used in a course taught in translation, such as studies of the receptions of published translations, analyzing the historical context of translations (Maier 4), or comparing British and American translations. We never got that far in my course due to time limitations, but I can see how these can be wonderful exercises.

Related to translation-interpretation was my approach to treating the films that we watched in the course. We discussed the efforts of filmmakers to translate novels into movies, focusing on how faithful the director remained to the original text, what prompted changes, and whether anything was gained/lost in the interpretation. The change from one medium to another presents additional and different challenges to the filmmakers, and students were fascinated to see how different their perception of the novels was from their perception of the film. Watching the movies was inevitably followed by heated discussions about how right/wrong the director interpreted the author's ostensible intentions and the original text.

My selection of movies allowed us to raise yet another "translation" question: translation into a different medium and, simultaneously, into a different culture. Thus, while Fassbinder's *Effi Briest* is clearly a very German film, casting German actors such as Hanna Schygulla and Wolfgang Schenck, *Elective Affinities* is an Italian adaptation of Goethe's famous novel, directed by the Italian directors Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, starring Isabelle Huppert and Jean-Hugues Anglade. In this version, not only the setting is moved to Italy, but even the heroine's name is Italianized from Charlotte to Carlotta. *Three Comrades*, based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's script, although considered "one of 1938's best ten" by *The New York Times*, presents clearly a very Americanized, Hollywood view of Remarque's famous novel. Discussing translations from German culture into Italian and American ones certainly spurred students' critical thinking.

One problem with the class, as with all upper-level language classes, was low enrollment. This was partially my fault. The class should have been advertised as a literature class fulfilling the requirement for English majors in literature, so that it could attract students from other disciplines too. Since our programs are increasingly becoming interdisciplinary and interdepartmental with emphasis on internationalization and globalization, literature in translation courses could and should be targeting students from various areas of international studies.

The question of who should be teaching such courses -- foreign languages teachers, English department faculty, or comparative literature instructors -- has been asked and answered. Treating

this as a multiple-choice question, Michael Katz offers what seems to be the only correct answer: "all of the above" (4). However, foreign language instructors have invaluable expertise in the original language and in the national literature and culture. They are experts (Bugliani 2). Their teaching of courses such as comparative literature, national literatures, special topics, special themes, and so forth can attract more students into concrete programs with international focus but, ideally, into language programs as well. Rather than diminishing students' motivation for learning another language, taking a course in translation can actually inspire them to master a language that will allow them to read and reread what they had only read in translation. And finally, seen pragmatically, foreign language professors can benefit from the guaranteed enrollments in required literature courses. In fact "many language teachers believe that offering translation courses is the only viable way of ensuring the future of their disciplines and even their jobs," says Herbert Lindenberger from Stanford (3). And if this is true for Stanford, it is probably even more so for more modest programs.

My brief experience with teaching a literature in translation course turned out to be rewarding and fascinating: rewarding because there is nothing as joyful and intellectually pleasing as sharing the best works of literature from languages and cultures we love with other people; fascinating because it allowed me to transform an experience that I first thought would be by definition reductive into a thought-provoking and intellectually challenging enterprise.

Works Cited

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