

Reprinted from Thinking Arabic Translation, by James Dickins, Sándor Hervey, and Ian Higgins (pub. by Routledge: London and New York, 2002). Pp. 1-4.

Introduction

This book is a practical course in translation from Arabic to English. It has grown out of a course piloted at the University of Durham, and has its origins in *Thinking Translation*, a course in French-English translation by Sándor Hervey and Ian Higgins, first published in 1992. The approach is essentially the same as in that book, but a number of key concepts, notably cultural transposition, compensation and genre, have been considerably redefined and clarified in the light of a decade's experience in teaching all five versions of the course – German, Spanish and Italian, as well as French and Arabic. This book also contains topics not found in the versions for European languages, dealing with various forms of repetition and semantic parallelism in Arabic, as well as a chapter on metaphor, which poses specific challenges in Arabic-English translation.

'Can translation be taught?' The question is asked surprisingly often – sometimes even by good translators, whom one would expect to know better. Certainly, as teachers of translation know, some people are naturally better at it than others. In this, aptitude for translation is no different from aptitude for any other activity: teaching and practice help anyone, including the most gifted, to perform at a higher level. Even Mozart had music lessons.

Most of us, however, are not geniuses. Here again, anyone who has taught the subject knows that a structured course will help most students to become significantly better at translation – sometimes good enough to earn their living at it. This book offers just such a course. Its progressive exposition of different sorts of translation problem is accompanied with plenty of practice in developing a rationale for solving them. It is a course not in translation theory, but in translation method, encouraging thoughtful consideration of possible solutions to practical problems. Theoretical issues do inevitably arise, but the aim of the course is to develop proficiency in the method, not to investigate its theoretical implications. The theoretical notions that we apply are borrowed eclectically from translation theory and linguistics, solely with this practical aim in mind.

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If this is not a course in translation theory or linguistics, it is not a language-teaching course either. The focus is on how to translate. It is assumed that the student already has a good command of Arabic and is familiar with the proper use of dictionaries and, where appropriate, databases. The course is therefore aimed at final-year undergraduates, and at postgraduates or others seeking an academic or professional qualification in translation. That said, the analytical attention given to a wide variety of texts means that students do learn a lot of Arabic – and probably a fair bit of English too.

This last point is important. While our main aim is to improve quality in translation, it must be remembered that this quality requires the translator to have an adequate command of English as well as Arabic. Assuming that this is the case, translator training normally focuses on translation into the mother tongue, because higher quality is achieved in that direction than in translating into a foreign language. Hence the almost exclusive focus on translation into English in this course. By its very nature, however, the course is also useful for Arab students seeking to improve their skills in translation into English: this is a staple part of English studies throughout the Arab world, and *Thinking Arabic Translation* offers a new methodology and plenty of practical work in this area.

The course has a progressive structure, with an overall movement from general genre-independent issues to specific genre-dependent ones. Chapters 1–4 deal with the fundamental issues, options and alternatives of which a translator must be aware: translation as process, translation as product, cultural issues in translation, and the nature and crucial importance of compensation in translation. Chapters 5–11 deal with translation issues relating to key linguistic notions: semantics (denotative and connotative meaning, and metaphor), and the formal properties of text (considered on six levels of textual variables from the phonic to the intertextual). Chapters 12 and 13 deal with stylistic issues (register, sociolect, dialect), and genre. Chapters 14–16 focus on specific genres in which Arabic>English translators might do professional work: technical (scientific) translation, constitutional translation, and consumer-oriented translation. Finally, Chapter 17 deals with revision and editing.

Chapter by chapter, then, the student is progressively trained to ask, and to answer, a series of questions that apply to any text given for translation. Pre-eminent among these are: ‘What is the purpose of my translation, and what are the salient features of this text?’ No translation is produced in a vacuum, and we stress throughout the course that the needs of the target audience and the requirements of the person commissioning the translation are primary factors in translation decisions. For this same reason, we always include a translation brief in the assignment. As for the salient features of the text, these are what add up to its specificity as typical or atypical of a particular genre or genres. Once its genre-membership, and therefore its purpose, has been pinned down, the translator can decide on a strategy for meeting the translation brief. The student’s attention is kept focused on this issue by the wide variety of genres found in the practicals: in addition to

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technical, legal and consumer-oriented texts, students are asked to work on various sorts of journalistic, literary, and academic texts, political speeches, tourist brochures, etc.

The sorts of question that need to be asked in determining the salient features of any text are listed in the schema of textual matrices at the end of this Introduction. The schema amounts to a check-list of potentially relevant kinds of textual feature. On the whole, the features in the schema of textual matrices are presented in the order in which they arise in the course. However, there are two exceptions. Firstly, metaphor is included within the semantic matrix, where it most coherently belongs (its placing at Chapter 11, after the chapters on the formal properties of text, is motivated by the fact that metaphor is a complex issue, with a bearing on stylistic and generic issues, discussed in Chapters 12 and 13, as well as semantic ones). Secondly, as a reminder of the prime importance of purpose and genre, the genre matrix is placed at the top of the schema.

There are two reasons for keeping discussion of genre as such until Chapter 13, even though its decisive importance is stressed throughout. The first is that the genre-membership of a text cannot be finally decided until the other salient features have been isolated. The second is that we have found that students are more confident and successful in responding to genre requirements after working on semantic and formal properties of texts and on language variety than before. This is particularly true of texts with hybrid genre-features. Apart from genre, the schema of textual matrices outlines the investigation, in Chapters 3 and 5–11, of translation issues raised by textual features. (Compensation, the subject of Chapter 4, is not a textual feature, and so does not figure in the schema.) Students are advised to refer to the schema whenever they tackle a practical: it is a progressive reminder of what questions to ask of the text set for translation.

While the course systematically builds up a methodological approach, we are not trying to 'mechanize' translation by offering some inflexible rule or recipe. Very much the opposite: translation is a creative activity, and the translator's personal responsibility is paramount. We therefore emphasize the need to recognize options and alternatives, the need for rational discussion, and the need for decision-making. Each chapter is intended for class discussion at the start of the corresponding seminar, and a lot of the practicals are best done by students working in small groups. This is to help students keep in mind that, whatever approach the translator adopts, it should be self-aware and methodical.

The course is intended to fit into an academic timetable lasting one year. Each chapter needs at least 2 hours of seminar time. It is vital that each student should have the necessary reference books in class: a comprehensive Arabic-English dictionary (we recommend Wehr), a similar-sized English-Arabic dictionary, a monolingual Arabic dictionary (such as المنجد في اللغة والإعلام 1996), an English dictionary and an English thesaurus. Some of the practical work will be done at home – sometimes individually, sometimes in groups – and handed in for assessment by the tutor. How often this is done will be decided by tutors and students between them. Full suggestions for

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teaching and assessment can be found in James Dickins, Sándor Hervey and Ian Higgins, *Thinking Arabic Translation: Tutor's Handbook* (Routledge 2002), which can be obtained from the address given on the opening page of this book.

Further materials relating to this course can be obtained directly from James Dickins at the following address: J.Dickins@leeds.ac.uk). These materials include additional discussion of Arabic>English translation issues, additional practical materials, and further handouts which considerations of space precluded us from including in the Tutor's Handbook. The materials are particularly suitable for tutors teaching more intensive Arabic>English translation courses of three or more class hours per week. Any comments on this book are welcome, particularly those relating to possible improvements. These can be sent direct to James Dickins at the above address.

We have used a number of symbols throughout this book, as follows:

- { } Indicates key elements in ST and/or TT where these might not otherwise be clear.
- ∅ Indicates zero elements in translation (translation by omission).
- bold** When technical or theoretical terms first occur, they are set out in bold type; they are also listed in the Glossary.
- Ch. Section reference to section in another chapter (e.g. Ch. 9.2.2 means 'Section 9.2.2').
- § Section reference to section in the same chapter.