

Translating Vermeer: a daring venture?

When it was suggested a while ago that we should put together two Vermeer Readers, one in German and another in English, we were very excited. We welcomed the idea of a book which would bring together some of this thinker's seminal texts on translation theory and we leapt at the chance to be a part of this project. Although we were aware from the beginning of the sheer size of this project, especially for the Reader in English where more than three-quarters of the texts written by Hans J. Vermeer would need to be translated from German into English, we only became aware of the broader implications of such a project later, i.e. how important these Readers will be for the academic world and the responsibility this entails. The Reader in German will, for the first time ever, offer academics and students the opportunity to learn a great deal about the issues that were important to Vermeer during his lifetime, as well as giving them a fascinating insight into this remarkable mind. Our responsibility for the reader in English is even greater. As Vermeer published mainly in German, many of his texts are not well-known in the English-speaking world. Vermeer holds an important position in German-speaking academic circles but not really in English-speaking circles. We gradually came to the conclusion that our Reader in English will be of paramount importance for the field of Translation Studies. Our translations will mean that many readers who cannot read the original texts in German will now be introduced to Vermeer and his ideas in English. We must make sure that our translations are of a high standard.

We met this challenge head on and it has been a real pleasure to be involved in this project as it is so much more than simply putting words on paper. Our work with Vermeer's texts has led us on an exploration of uncharted territory in Translation Studies and we would like to share with you what we have learned in our travels so far.

A desire to translate Vermeer (Marina Dudenhöfer)

A recent experience made me realise that some people may find our project to translate German Vermeer texts into English (and vice versa) a bit daring. The only major translation of a German Vermeer text into English so far is Andrew Chesterman's translation of "Skopos and commission in translational action" (in *The Translation Studies Reader* (2000/2004), Lawrence Venuti (ed.), second edition, New York/London: Routledge, 227-238). This begs the question why.

The answer in my opinion is simply that translating Vermeer is hard. Translating German academic texts into English is difficult at the best of times due to the differences between an English "essay" and a German *wissenschaftliche Arbeit* [academic piece of writing]. An English essay does not aim to be comprehensive, keeps technical terms to a minimum and is very opinion-driven; a German *wissenschaftliche Arbeit* aims to be comprehensive, is full of technical terms and places itself in the existing academic discussion on the subject (as one of my German colleagues summarised nicely). In addition, there is the very different syntax and vocabulary used in German academic writing, which is often full of long and/or dense sentences. Recently, there seems to have been a trend in English academic writing that academic texts should be written in such a way that they are intelligible to the layman. I do

not think that Vermeer worried very much about being understood by the layman. Nor is his style completely typical for a German academic (especially in his later texts, where he can be playful with his reader). His style reflects his holistic approach to translation: it is somewhere between philosophy, history, literature and translation theory.

Anna and I recently discussed what our translation (and rereading) approach was. Despite our differences in age, culture and life experiences, we both share a similar approach to our work with Vermeer texts. Firstly, we both “desire” to translate his work (as Venuti tells us about his translation work regarding a text by Jacques Derrida); secondly, we are both willing to take a bit of a risk whilst being aware of the limits. By limits, I refer to the *skopos* we consciously set at the beginning of this project: to produce reader-friendly texts which do justice to Vermeer’s complex ideas. In concrete terms, we have tried to make the style of the English translation clear and accessible to our intended readers (with regard to decisions at word and sentence level). However, we drew the line at changing the structure of Vermeer’s texts to bring them more into line with what would be expected of an English essay. For example, I realised when translating Vermeer’s foundational 1978 text that the structure of the text and the rhythm of the sentences were a crucial part of his train of thought. To change them would interfere with that train of thought: it would obscure his ideas.

We have also let ourselves be guided by Vermeer’s own approach to translation in that we have sometimes replaced cultural examples with examples that would make more sense to an English-speaking reader. In addition, we have sometimes clarified cross-references either in the body of the translation or in footnotes (although only when we deemed this really necessary). Such clarification is only possible with some understanding of the academic culture Vermeer came from, which Anna and I both have (although we have different standpoints, with Anna from the inside looking out and myself from the outside looking in). Moreover, we know that two more experienced academic thinkers, Dilek and Şebnem, will be rereading our work and jumping on any references we may have missed. Vermeer does show a Borges-like breadth of reading and no one person can spot all his cross-references.

Rereading Anna’s German translation was an interesting task. As I knew Anna’s German was excellent, I did not worry about grammar and syntax but focused on the ideas she was translating. Most of my comments/queries were about omissions or changes of emphasis in her text and very few were about her choice of words. The question running through my head at each stage of the way was – does the German reflect my understanding of the English? When rereading each other’s work in Word, we swapped many “comments” in track-change mode and discussed possible solutions until we were both happy that they worked.

Translation is often wrongly seen as a lone-ranger task. Actually, at least in this case, it is more like being part of the Starship Enterprise, with a captain and a team for each text being translated, as we boldly go where no translator has gone before.

Translating Vermeer (back) into German – what I learned from this experience (Anna-Lena Bubenheim)

As Hans J. Vermeer published mostly only texts in German, it was rather unusual to be asked to translate a Vermeer text from English into German. However, from the 1990s onwards, Vermeer held several lectures in English and, as we wish to present a wide cross-section of his texts in our Vermeer Reader in German (planned for 2012), it is only right that we include a couple of his lectures which were originally held in English. This is why I found myself translating the manuscript from one of these lectures into German this summer.

Due to the fact that Vermeer's native tongue was German and that he developed the bulk of his fundamental ideas on translation theory in this language, it felt to me almost as if I were translating Vermeer's text 'back into' German, despite the original text being in English. By this, I most certainly do not mean that I was able to capture and 'translate' the exact thoughts that Vermeer may well initially have pondered over in German when producing his original text in English. Every translator knows that a (back-)translation can never exactly reproduce the structure or the content of the source text. You cannot translate a text without first having interpreted the ideas in it, thus, my translation into German of Vermeer's text is my interpretation of his words on paper. The text was written in Vermeer's inimitable style, which anyone having read his texts in German will be familiar with and which he brought with him to his lectures/texts in English – this made me think yet again of a back-translation, as it really feels like he first put his thoughts into order in German and then translated them into English.

The main challenge for me was that Vermeer's style is so much his own: it diverges greatly not only from what is expected in English academic texts but also partly from what is expected in German academic texts. It was important for me to translate his ideas in a reader-friendly manner whilst also doing justice to the complexity of his ideas. Although it was not my aim to (re)produce the 'German Vermeer', I was inspired by Vermeer's style in his other texts written in German. The 'typical' Vermeer style involves writing very logically and concisely, with dense sentences crammed with information, including cross-references to other works and authors with little or no explanation. Vermeer's audience may perhaps have understood all of Vermeer's cross-references in his lectures but the intended readers of our Vermeer Reader (which will include students) will find it more difficult to follow them all. It was therefore necessary to clarify such cross-references in my translation, but without falling into the trap of over-explaining so that the message of the text becomes obscured in over-translation.

In a similar fashion, an unusual translation situation led to an unusual rereading situation. Marina Dudenhöfer, my first re-reader (and a translator in her own right of texts for the Vermeer Reader in English), was an English native speaker revising my translation into German. In exchange, I was her first re-reader for her translation into English this summer. This may seem to go against the unspoken code of our profession that translators should only reread texts translated INTO their mother tongue and not OUT OF it. However, we can now say with conviction that this worked well in this project, as it is actually an advantage with

texts as complex as those of Vermeer if the re-reader understands the source text better than the target text. Naturally, these initial rereads are just that, one of the many checks that each translation will undergo before being published, as it probably would not be a good idea to rely only on the judgement of a non-native speaker. This unconventional approach has, however, proved to be invaluable, as it is vital to understand the most complex details in the original Vermeer texts. This may well indicate that it is not necessary to decide on a single approach for a translation, i.e. it need not be a purely retrospective (source-text oriented) or prospective (target-text oriented) approach in each case. A competent team undertaking such a project is well within its rights to combine the best of both worlds.

A holistic adventure trail

This project has shown us that translating can be like an adventure trail where we challenge ourselves constantly. In his texts, Vermeer allowed us a glimpse of his world, in particular what he thought about translation amongst many other things. You could say that we became familiar with Vermeer in his many guises: Vermeer the translation theorist, Vermeer the holistic thinker and Vermeer the human being. By reading and translating his texts, we had direct experience of the relevance of his theoretical musings: we experienced in person how complex translation is and that it is much more than finding solutions for linguistic problems. Translation is a holistic action which cannot be entered into half-heartedly – we bring with us our language, our culture and our personality.

Translating Vermeer is a real challenge and, by meeting this challenge head on, we also learned a great deal about ourselves. For example, we learned that it pays to spend time taking on board complex ideas, as it can enrich us. Moreover, it made us more aware of our own motivation: it brought our thoughts and feelings about translation to the surface and made us question them. Without being fully aware of it, at least initially, we applied Vermeer's own theories. Our personal experience showed us that translating Vermeer texts is a happy marriage of theory and practice. Vermeer's texts are like a bridge between two worlds and you just have to have the courage to walk across this bridge, perhaps tarrying a while in the middle or hopping back and forth between the two sides and taking the best of both worlds with you.

Anna-Lena Bubenheim and Marina Dudenhöfer