

## **Report written by a German native speaker – Anna-Lena Bubenheim**

### **Introduction: Translating Vermeer – a short description of the translation project**

The Vermeer Reader project is not just an attempt to apply theory to translation; it also involves the translation of various texts for the Reader, some of which are being carried out by students as part of the translation class run by Marina Dudenhöfer. During his lifetime, Hans J. Vermeer argued on several occasions that translation processes should be made visible and studied in a context where theory and practice work together. That is why we have decided to document the translation work that we are carrying out for this project on this web page [in English and in German].

Marina Dudenhöfer's translation class is one of the courses offered by the German and Intercultural Studies Department and is aimed mainly at students with English as their mother tongue. Thus, all the information on this web page, including the project description and the reports from this class, were first written in English and then translated into German for our web page. Last semester [winter semester 2010-11], I carried out the translation work for our web page based on Marina Dudenhöfer's description of the project. This semester, however, I had first-hand knowledge of the translation class because I took part in it. As I was the only native German speaker in the group, my experiences were sometimes very different from those of the other students. Therefore, this report aims to offer an 'outside' point of view.

### **A member of Vermeer's 'speech community': being close to the source text**

As a German native speaker and therefore member of the same speech community as Hans J. Vermeer, I held a special place in the group, as, from the very beginning, I belonged to the cultural group in which Vermeer's thoughts in our text, "*Übersetzen als kultuereller Transfer*" [Translation as a cultural transfer], were rooted. In Vermeer's own words: "Actions and behaviour are linked to the practices, conventions and standards of a culture; the people who live in such a cultural community are 'encultured' beings" (Vermeer 1994: 32). Moreover, before taking part in this project, I had already worked a great deal with various Vermeer texts and was more familiar with his ideas than most of the other students taking part in Marina Dudenhöfer's translation class. Marina stressed this at the beginning of the semester and encouraged the other students to consult me whenever they had problems understanding the text, which, after overcoming their initial reserve, most of them did. I found this type of team work very productive and the other team members agreed with me when I discussed this point with them. My 'special status' as a member of Vermeer's speech community meant that I was much closer to the source text than the other team members. As German is my mother tongue, I was able to understand the text well right from the start and could often gain an overview of the concepts in the text faster than the team members whose mother tongue was not German. My team mates clearly felt that this was a great advantage, as, in comparison to them, I had far fewer problems understanding the source text.

Over the course of the semester, however, I came to the conclusion that having an ‘outside’ view of the text can be more helpful with regard to the translation process than being culturally close to the text. Although I faced fewer problems understanding the German text than the English native speakers in our team, I often found it harder to apply the *skopos*, in particular translating into reader-friendly English. I would like to stress that this was not simply a linguistic issue. I had the feeling that it was hard for me to translate certain sections of the text into coherent English precisely because I was so [culturally] close to the source text. For example, a straightforward German sentence such as “*Was soll eine Theorie?*” [What should a theory do?] (Vermeer 1994: 32) was difficult for me to translate because I was initially uncertain that I could bring over all the nuances of the German verb ‘*sollen*’. Thus, being close to the source text raised a whole host of questions for me that were not immediately apparent to the English native speakers. Although this made the translation process slower, everyone felt that it was a good thing, as it led to a ‘more thorough’ translation.

### **Translation as intercultural cooperation: working together with English native speakers**

To ease us into the translation project, Marina Dudenhöfer asked us to translate certain passages in small groups. Through this activity, I had the opportunity to work with an English native speaker, Elizabeth du Preez. We both found working together to be very fruitful, especially as we quickly discovered that our ways of working complemented each other. It was far more than just working together at a linguistic level, i.e. it was not just a case of me explaining difficult sections of the German text to Elizabeth, or Elizabeth helping me with the wording in English. Due to the fact that we each had a very different approach to translation, we were able to support each other with translation decisions. I myself tend to go quite far away from the source text and to translate in a rather free manner, whereas Elizabeth often sticks closer to the source text. Particularly as I was translating OUT OF my mother tongue, I found it very helpful as Elizabeth could tell me if my translation was too far away from the source text. Working together so well made it possible for us to put Vermeer’s often very complex sentences into clear and coherent English, for example, we translated “*Dass sich Theorie ‘unmittelbar’ in Praxis umsetzen lassen sollte, ist wieder eine unsaubere Ausdrucksweise. Die Umsetzung könnte erst selbst wieder auf dem Umweg über eine Theorie erfolgen*” (Vermeer 1994: 32) with “To claim that theory cannot be directly put into practice is just a matter of clumsy wording, as you cannot do anything in practice without theory”.

### **“Translation as a cultural transfer”: some conclusions and food for thought**

Vermeer describes “the overall aim of [the] discussion” in “*Übersetzen als kultureller Transfer*” as follows: “translation is a very complex transcultural action, which is worth reflecting upon” (1994: 35). With regard to my experiences in the translation project I have described here, I would like to draw a similar conclusion: translation is a very complex action, which is worth sharing and discussing with others.

I learned a great deal about the individual steps involved in the translation process in Marina Dudenhöfer's translation class – both research and rereading were part of our translation brief and, at each step of the way, Marina Dudenhöfer explained how far the procedures we were following in class corresponded with professional life. Moreover, I experienced first-hand what Vermeer means when he calls translation a cultural transfer. Due to my special status as the only German native speaker in the group, I could not avoid being in the middle of a cultural transfer at all times. I did not have linguistic problems, rather, my difficulties stemmed from the fact that I am bound to my culture and that my wording in English was affected by the dominant beliefs and assumptions present in my culture. My biggest aid came not from dictionaries but from students who belong to another culture, i.e. the target culture, and who could explain to me how something could best be understood by their cultural group.

To conclude, I would say that my experiences as a German native speaker taking part in this project were very positive. I was given the opportunity not just to translate “*Übersetzen als kultureller transfer*” into another language, but also to apply the theory discussed in the text in practice. I consciously worked with the group to go beyond linguistic and cultural barriers and I now feel more able to translate the project description on our “Translating Vermeer” web page.

*Translated by Marina Dudenhöfer*