

Compilation of reports from the students: Vermeer Reader project SS 2012

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Similarities and differences with WS 2011/2012

As in the previous semester, we received a commission to translate a Vermeer text from German into English in a 'reader friendly' style. Although the commission was almost identical to last semester, i.e. to translate a Vermeer text from German into English, my understanding of the meaning 'reader friendly' was deepened. We were also expected, like last semester, to familiarise ourselves with the resources in ILIAS and to work together with a partner to write a summary of the assigned text to translate, Chapter Ten of *Versuch einer Intertheorie der Translation* (Vermeer 2006).

The first obvious difference was that the block format of our class, meaning we met for six hours at a time once a week for four weeks, as opposed to ninety minutes once a week for the whole semester. I expected to find the length of the class to be a rather gruelling challenge. Instead, I would say the concentrated hours were perfectly suited to translating Vermeer. We had the necessary time to understand the difficult concepts found within our text through group activities and discussion. For example, one day we spent hours reviewing the relevant points found in the complicated parallel texts concerning Luhmann's theory. In another session, we spent the entire morning teasing out Luhmann's terminology from Vermeer's terminology. Had we not had those blocks of uninterrupted time, I would not have been able to distinguish Vermeer's description of Luhmann's theory from his criticism of it in the text. In other words, I would probably have failed to complete the *skopos* of our commission because I would have missed the complexity of Vermeer's ideas.

The biggest difference for me, however, was the change of focus. Based on the experiences from the previous semester, our course leader, Marina Dudenhöfer, decided that all activities would be designed to ensure that we would truly understand the assigned text and its concepts BEFORE we began to translate. She found that many of the previous semester's translations did not achieve the *skopos* of being 'reader friendly' because the groups involved did not have a thorough grasp of text content.

Amanda Stanfield

The groundwork: glossary

This semester (as well as the previous one), I was entrusted with the task of compiling a glossary to go with our text. To this end, the German source text had to be read attentively in order to determine technical vocabulary. Even at such an early stage, this involved challenges. It is not always obvious what constitutes a translation versus a terminology problem, so deciding on which terms warrant an entry in the glossary is not an exact science. Last semester, the glossary work was divided up amongst all students. We were organised into groups and then assigned a part of the source text for the translation. It was our responsibility to go through the text as a group and determine which terms needed including in the glossary as well as which team member would research what terms. Once this initial stage had been completed, all groups forwarded their findings to me, so that I could check and improve their research where necessary and – after obtaining our commissioner's approval – add these new terms to the already existing master glossary. This semester, the glossary to go with the source text was compiled before the start of the semester. I was in charge of the initial research, which I then forwarded to our lecturer for feedback. Our commissioner Marina had already highlighted the terms she thought would most likely need further research, which meant that my task was not as difficult as it might otherwise have been: I was to read the text carefully, agree or disagree with her suggestions and add whatever terms I felt may also be needed in the glossary. Of the 39 terms we agreed on, there were 20 more that both of us felt might need some more research before making a final decision on whether or not to treat them as terminology problems. One of these was *Transubstantiation*, a concept unrelated to translation theory, yet nonetheless requiring research. In most of his work, Vermeer – an erudite and widely read scholar – refers to linguistic, neurophysiological, philosophical and generally theoretical concepts or ideas that are not part of translation theory *per se*, and frequently presupposes a similarly advanced level of sophistication of the intended audience. The expression mentioned above is an excellent example of this phenomenon. According to the Oxford Dictionary, transubstantiation is "the conversion of the substance of the Eucharistic elements into the body and blood of Christ at

consecration, only the appearances of bread and wine still remaining” (Oxford Dictionary 2012). Vermeer merely mentions this in passing to reinforce what he says in the preceding sentence about how – according to some – translating means transforming reality, as linguistic particularism states that language shapes reality and as a result, two people from separate linguistic backgrounds cannot know exactly what the respective other means when using the same word; both have different connotations according to which culture they are from. Thus, transubstantiation is not a concept Vermeer dwells on in this text; he assumes his audience will be equally familiar with the idea of transubstantiation for it to be helpful in clarifying his earlier remarks. As a result, this is more a translation problem than a terminology one and was not included in the glossary.

At this point it needs to be said that the Vermeer Reader Glossary is certainly one of a kind: not only is it without doubt a true translator’s glossary, or unique in its consisting of nothing but terms related to Vermeer and translation theory, it is also fairly unusual in that it cites the source and target language terms, and, instead of a definition, it works with context. This means, rather than trying to find straightforward explanations of the terms in question, my task was to find passages in texts dealing with similar content that mention the English term and give an idea of what it encompasses. This does not mean that the final entries do not also read like explanations in some cases; it does, however, mean that the information that ultimately ends up in the glossary is not to be found in (online) dictionaries, as frequently is the case with technical translations. Instead, as the terminologist, it is my responsibility to find these terms in texts written by other translation scholars. As our translations are of Vermeer texts, it has helped to have at least a couple of samples of Vermeer writing in English; his discussion of *Luhmann’s “Social Systems” Theory: Preliminary Fragments for a Theory of Translation* has been invaluable in providing context for many of the terms included in the glossary: for this source text alone, I was able to find pertinent information for 14 of 28 terms using this particular resource. Once the research had been completed, Marina and Anna Bubenheim reread what I had found and, after debating some terms more closely, we arrived at a final version after four weeks. This was then included in the master glossary, which encompasses the research of four semesters. It is a testimony to the usefulness of the glossary that it was not only the newly added terms that were important for the translation of the current text, previously researched terms were still more than relevant to this semester’s translation. Confusion was avoided narrowly last semester over the term ‘stimulus’. In German, Vermeer uses two terms where in English there is only one; after ascertaining that he does so advisedly, we then had to find a way to make the distinction clear in English as well. This research also found its way into this semester’s text and we applied the same solution in this case.

Anna Steilen

The groundwork: introducing *skopos* and Hans J. Vermeer to the newcomers

For the first of these meetings, Marina asked Amanda Stanfield and me to prepare a short presentation of *skopos* for the others in the group, who until then had not dealt with *skopos* theory or Vermeer. In this presentation, she asked us to include a brief discussion of our mission statement. We originally believed this to be a straightforward task and only when going through the mission statement together, did we realise just how misled we had been. The mission statement is a document prepared by Vermeer in German describing the role and the task of the translator. It had also been part of the previous semester’s class and we thought we had understood it well enough then, which we did to a point, but the moment we started trying to make sense of “gewusstes [*sic*] exemplifizierend auf andere fälle [*sic*] hin generalisieren” (Vermeer 1990), we had to revise our earlier opinion.

Anna Steilen

Preparing to translate

During our first session, we were directed to read through the text at least two to three times before we even took notes to write our summaries. This directive was not only hard for me because I am a note-taking fiend, it was also challenging because I am used to understanding what I have read without having to complete multiple re-reads. It was a truly new and uncomfortable experience in those terms,

but she was correct — by the third re-read, I had a much better grasp of the content because I only focused on the text, not on which notes to take or how I would organize my summary.

The process of writing the text summary also followed a different path. In the previous semester, each team wrote a rough draft of their summary, received feedback from Mrs. Dudenhöfer on the changes needed, and then a final draft was submitted. This time, we were required to re-work our rough drafts until it was clear that we understood all the ideas within it. I was fortunate to be paired with a particularly adept partner, Bobbye Abney. We worked well together and the feedback we received on our first draft was good – we had understood everything well. However, we had failed to consider *what* Vermeer was trying to say about Luhmann and *why*. These less obvious aspects were much harder to identify than we expected and we spent hours re-examining the text to uncover the answers. This experience of re-working the text summary helped me to understand the meaning of *skopos* more than if I had read one hundred texts on the topic, as the summary was a concrete, hands-on example of the differences between an equivalent translation (i.e. our first draft basically translated Vermeer's words into English) and a translation that was functional and adequate, i.e. our fourth and final draft communicated Vermeer's ideas about Luhmann's theory and its applicability to translation theory).

In addition to the summary, we were also asked to complete presentations on *skopos*, Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems and Vermeer's understanding and use of Luhmann's theory. Anna Steilen and I were assigned the task of explaining Vermeer's understanding and use of Luhmann's theory in the assigned text. This assignment was challenging in that we had to once again separate Vermeer's thoughts and ideas from Luhmann's. In addition, we needed to put together a presentation that would explain Vermeer's position on Luhmann's ideas in way that would be clear and meaningful to our listeners. After first ensuring that we ourselves understood the information we were to present, we spent a long time debating how we could best convey our information. We decided on an experiential approach to demonstrate how a communicative act between two closed systems worked according to Luhmann, and then to discuss and draw pictures of what Vermeer felt was missing from the theory in regard to the translator and the process of translating. The positive feedback from the rest of the class proved we were able to present our information effectively. The other presentations were excellent, especially the presentation on Luhmann's theory. All of these activities were challenging, but they gave me a much clearer understanding of Vermeer and his discussion of Luhmann, which made the process of translating my assigned text that much easier.

Amanda Stanfield

Translation problems

After all groups had held their respective presentations, we were then allowed to start with the actual translation. I had been assigned the first part of the text, which immediately brought with it the problem of having to decide whether or not to keep Vermeer's opening paragraph. In this paragraph, he refers to what he explained on previous pages of the same book. As we were only translating this chapter, the reference to what went before in the book was not helpful for our purposes (to some extent because it is not yet clear where in the Reader this text will be published). After discussing this with Marina, we decided it would be best to leave it out. This, then, also obliged us to change some of the following paragraph, in order to make it read like a first paragraph. [...] Another, similar problem was that Vermeer's title for the text, as one chapter of many in the book, was simply "10. Kapitel" (Vermeer 2006: 367). For the Reader, this title had to be adapted, as the nine preceding chapters are not going to be published alongside this one. The source text has two subheadings, *Die Aporie des Translators* and *Die Freiheit des Translators*, so Marina assigned me the task of either creating an entirely new title for the translation or combining the two titles we already had. I chose to do the latter, as I thought it was important to give the reader some idea as to the content of what he or she is about to read. Thus, the English title now reads: *The translator's aporia and freedom*. Within the text, we kept both subheadings, identifying the two parts as separate units in line with the source text.

Anna Steilen

The most common problem I encountered was complex structure of Vermeer's sentences. The first challenge I faced was the following sentence in the first paragraph of my assigned text:

Wie bringt man die beiden Hälften des letzten Endes organismisch wohl unbestreitbar einen Translators trotz doppelter Kontingenz, nämlich der auf jeder Seite, in doppelter Bindung zusammen. (Vermeer 2006: 371)

Had I translated the sentence in the German style, the connection of the two concepts, double contingency and double bind, would have been confused and would have included wording about bringing both *sides together despite double contingency and on the other side, in a double bind*. For Vermeer and *skopos* theory, double contingency (to consider how a communication will be received) and double bind (a translation is both original and secondary) are elements that have to be considered during every translation. After consulting the glossary and my re-reader, we (I and my rereaders, Marina Dudenhöfer and Anna-Lena Bubenheim) chose to translate the sentence as follows:

The question is how we can ultimately connect the separate halves of an incontrovertibly single organism, i.e. the translator, despite the double binds and double contingencies that occur in each half?

My choice was a departure from the careful translation I tended towards last semester, but I felt confident about making the changes based on my understanding of the glossary, *skopos* theory, and the *skopos* of the commission.

Also in the first paragraph was a sentence that was difficult even for our German native-speakers, Anna Steilen and Silke Knieling:

Anders sind sie keine Systeme, mit denen Luhmann und wir im Anschluß an ihn zu arbeiten versuchen. (Vermeer 2006: 371).

I had done my level best with this sentence. I looked up every word in my dictionary and I read and re-read the sentences and paragraphs preceding and following the sentence. I understood the sentence to mean that there were no systems with which we could work under the conditions established by Luhmann. I spoke with Marina Dudenhöfer, who believed Vermeer was not saying there were no systems that would work under Luhmann's theory, but rather he meant the problems inherent in the theory needed to be solved. I discussed Marina's solution with Anna Steilen, who agreed. Finally, I discussed the sentence with my re-reader, Silke Knieling, who agreed with the others. After consulting three different sources, I felt confident translating the sentence as follows:

Until we address this problem, we cannot treat them as systems or as the starting point for Luhmann and for us in our attempt to work with this theory.

Amanda Stanfield

The problem that took me longest to resolve, however, was a different one. In the German ST, Vermeer states:

Damit müßte sich der Streit um äquivalente, adäquate usw. Strategien auf fallspezifische Ausführung (Realisierung) von Translationen verlagern und dort als klärende Diskussion über Evaluierungen von Translaten als Recht, anders zu sein, verspäteter Aufklärung dienen, wären (gerade memetische) Traditionen und Konventionen nicht so ungemein zählebig (und manchmal mutationsfreudig) wie Viren und Bakterien. (Vermeer 2006: 368)

To begin with, this sentence is extremely long. It does not make for easy reading or comprehension, as I found out when trying to translate it. Before even attempting this herculean feat, good understanding is a must, yet despite being fluent in German and knowing what each word means taken on its own, I had no idea what the sentence meant as a whole. Up until "Translaten als Recht, anders zu sein", I was

able to decipher Vermeer's meaning. The last part of the sentence, starting with "wären (gerade memetische) Traditionen", was also fairly easy to understand. What left me dumbfounded, however, was the part in the middle. To try and clear up my confusion, I resorted to a technique I have not used in years: when learning Latin at school, my teacher at the time was very keen on explaining grammar to us in a way that we (a group of 15-year-old girls) would be able to understand and apply ourselves. Part of this involved drawing sketches showing how different parts of a sentence interact with each other, i.e. in what relation the subject connects to the verb and connects to the object, if necessary, how attributes function within the sentence, etc. It was only by means of one of these sketches, that I was able to dissect the sentence and derive meaning from it. So as not to oblige the reader of the English sentence to do the same, I decided that the sentence would have to be split up. Although I was concerned that I might be attaching too much importance to the last part ("wären gerade ..."), I chose to keep it separate from the rest of the sentence. Thus, I arrived at the following solution:

The discussion centring on equivalent, adequate etc. strategies should ideally focus on case-specific translations and serve as a belated explanation in the shape of a discussion about the evaluation of *translata* and their right to be different. This, though, is counteracted by (especially memetic) traditions and conventions being as exceptionally persistent (and in some cases, prone to mutating) as viruses and bacteria.

Still not convinced I had done the right thing, I asked Marina for feedback. Certain elements that bothered me were 'case-specific', as it seemed like too much of a literal translation from German, 'belated', as it inspired associations of birthday cards or wishes, 'explanation', as the German term 'Aufklärung' literally means 'enlightment', and 'mutating', as I had an inkling 'mutation' might be better. Marina's input was invaluable, as she found a way to circumvent 'case-specific' and to do away with 'belated'. She also reconfirmed my first solution for 'Aufklärung', as she, too, felt 'enlightment' did not fit well in this case. Furthermore, she pointed out to me that 'though' is very spoken and not suitable for an academic text, such as this one, which was something I was blithely unaware of. She also felt that 'counteracted' may be too strong a word for my translation, and that it achieved what I had been hoping to avoid, namely attaching too much weight to this second part of the original sentence. At her suggestion, I then changed it to 'compounded' and Marina herself then broke it down further to "made more complicated". Thanks must also go to my re-reader Kristopher Brame for casting the deciding vote on the mutating vs. mutation issue; I went along with his suggestion and changed it to 'mutation'. The final version (after further discussion with my rereaders) now reads:

Thus the discussion on equivalent, adequate etc. translation strategies should ideally shift towards (the production of) specific translations, on a case-by-case basis, and subsequently serve as an explanation in the form of a discussion about the evaluation of *translata* and their right to be different. This, however, is still not the case because (particularly memetic) traditions and conventions are exceptionally persistent (and, in some cases, prone to mutation), just like viruses and bacteria.

Anna Steilen

Conclusion

It has been interesting for me to compare my experiences with the previous semester. On the one hand, the supportive atmosphere, encouragement and expectations were familiar, not to mention the subject matter: *skopos* theory and Hans J. Vermeer. On the other hand, the course I attended this semester had many new elements, most notably the focus on understanding the text. I believe this particular aspect was the key to my success in translating a particularly difficult Vermeer text. I am still a relative newcomer to the field of translation, but the lesson of taking the time to understand a text before beginning a translation (even if it means re-reading it a dozen times) is something I will not forget.

Nor will I forget to remain focused on the *skopos* of the text to be translated. These two things, which I have learned 'gründlich' in this course, will stand me well in my future endeavours.

Amanda Stanfield

In the two semesters I have now been involved with this project, I feel I have learnt a great deal. Last semester, what left the most lasting impression were all the aspects that determine professionalism. I had not really considered how vital a role good communication has to play in professional environments before and I think this, in particular, is a lesson worth learning, and one I will be grateful to have learnt at university, a relatively protected environment, rather than on the job, maybe even at the cost of one. This semester, I think the most significant lesson for me was that it is a good thing to be able to rely on your teammates and co-workers. In many instances, I was grateful for the support and input I received from them and I think I can say without a doubt that their feedback helped me improve my translation. Despite the fact we all had our individual sections to translate, it felt like a team effort, something I did not expect when we started with our first meeting in April. I also value the dialogue we were able to establish with Marina very much. It is not common to be given the opportunity to learn so much from someone else's past experience in a classroom setting, which is why I am all the more grateful to Marina for letting us delve into life as a professional translator through her. At the end of these two semesters, I find myself becoming strangely wistful. The previous semester, the first few weeks were mostly a struggle to come to grips with the way Vermeer writes. His *skopos* theory is something I feel is a very pragmatic approach to translating, and yet the impression remains that Vermeer (maybe even wilfully) disguises its practicability with grandiose rhetoric and arcane words. Having battled with his style and discovered the meaning behind his obscure words, and having done so more than once, I have come to appreciate the challenge of translating Vermeer. Testing one's own German vocabulary, adapting to his mathematical logic and trying to recreate a similarly (if not quite equally) impressive masterpiece, rich in expression and highly sophisticated in thought in English requires comprehension, patience and skill, which is where we (as mere translation students) frequently fall short. Translating Vermeer is an education in every sense of the word, one I have discovered I will miss.

Anna Steilen

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