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# From Theory to Application: Teaching Theatre Translation

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## 1 Introduction

This paper presents an experiment in teaching theatre translation from theory to application in a French-English translation workshop for twenty-one fourth-year undergraduate students in the Department of Translation and Interpretation in the School of Applied Languages (SAL) at Bilkent University (BU) in Ankara, Turkey. The year long course, taught in a computer lab, is divided into two fifteen-week semesters, meeting for three hours a week for a total of forty-five contact hours per semester. Theatre translation has been taught in the first semester of the workshop for the past three years and comprises two theatre translation projects (see appendices for project guidelines.) In this study, however, I will only discuss the first semester of the most recent course, which started in September 2006 and ended in January 2007.

An important aspect of the course is that the SAL is unique because it is the only school in Turkey to train undergraduates to translate into Turkish from French and English. Therefore students must know enough English and French to pass entrance exams to get into the four-year program. Otherwise they must attend preparatory programs in either or both languages. Another unusual facet of the course is that the students are translating between two non-mother tongues, French and English, for the first time. Before a description of the students and the course, however, some methodological concerns are discussed such as the reasons behind incorporating theory into the class, teaching translation into non-mother tongues, materials suggested for such classes, teaching translation criticism and theatre translation.

## 2 Methodological Concerns

### 2.1 Why Incorporate Theory into a Class?

Aubin indicates that there is a common cliché about translation programs: “On apprend la théorie à l’université et ce n’est qu’après avoir quitté l’université qu’on apprend la pratique de métier.” She then goes on to say that if we believe such a cliché then there must be two worlds, one of theory at the university and the other one of practice when becoming professional. (Aubin 2003: 439) At Bilkent University School of Applied Languages (SAL), however, theory has not been integrated in the curriculum until recently. In fact, a graduate of our Department of Translation and Interpretation four years ago commented that she had to learn translation theory in order to complete her master’s thesis on a criticism of a Turkish translation of Shakespeare. So it appears as if the above cliché is reversed in our case and it might be a good reason to incorporate theory into lessons. But what kind of theory?

Theory is defined in several ways but the definition of the type of theory used in the above-mentioned course is: “Idea or ideas that explain a group of facts or phenomena; hypothesis that has been confirmed or proved by observation experiment or reasoning”. (Macmillan, 1979) Although “Less has been written on problems of translating theatre texts than on translating any other text type.” (Bassnett et al., 1998: 90), I compiled a bibliography of the articles that gave students access to analyses of theatre as a genre, various methods for how theatre translation is done and information on translations of specific plays, among other topics.

Henry Widdowson explains that “The theoretical dimension of teaching comes in not as an application of somebody else’s research but as an application of procedures for conducting research of one’s own, suggested by these findings no doubt but related to classroom activities, and part of the pedagogic process.” (Widdowson 1984: 32) Therefore, another reason for using theory was to apply proper procedures to experiment with theatre translation.

To sum up, students studied theory because:

1. It was something new and was not part of their regular curriculum.
2. It provided rationale for the classroom activities they performed.
3. It gave them confidence because they had read experts’ articles about correct procedures to follow while translating.
4. It increased their general knowledge (Collombat, 2006)

Finally “The effectiveness of practice depends on relevant theory: the relevance of theory depends on effective practice. The two are in complementary relationship, each sustaining the other...” (Widdowson 1984. 36)

### 2.2 Teaching Translation into Non-mother Tongues

The pros and cons of translating into a non-mother tongue have been explored by many authors (Arntz, 1999; Campbell 1998; Hatim 2001; MacAlester 1991; Pokorn, 2005; Grosman et al., 2000; Roiss et al. 1995) who have indicated that although the practice is frowned upon and results in ‘hilarity’ (Newmark 1988:3), it is often done in such countries as Denmark (Pedersen 2000, 109; Roiss et al. 1995), Germany, Finland (MacAlester 1991: 292) Spain (Roiss 1995, 213), Australia (Campell 1996, 22) and Slovenia (Pokorn 2005). But what about translating between two non-mother tongues?

Nintai (1994) indicates that this practice is “common in many places in Africa, especially in ... (his) .. own country, Cameroon, where French and English are the primary languages of published literature. (Nintai 1994, 42). Non-mother tongue translation also appears to be prevalent in places where native speakers are scarce in non-major languages: “...in a number of small countries there is a tradition for translating into L2, simply because, traditionally, relatively few foreigners have been available who were capable of translating from the language of the country into their own, perhaps more extensively used language.” (Pedersen, 2000, 109). So if this unconventional mode of translation is a reality, how is it taught? How should it be taught?

This is the problem I faced when suddenly asked to teach a French-English Translation Workshop six years ago. Not only was I confronted with the task of teaching translation between two non-mother tongues, but I was also challenged by the prospect of teaching translation for the first time. Moreover, I was told that I could conduct the course however I wished as long as I had the students translate from French to English and vice versa.

Many years of experience as a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) teacher trainer and administrator, equipped me with an accumulation of methodological alternatives to choose from to teach the course. The most important transfers from TEFL methodology were that I wanted to teach a student-centered, creative class through individual and group projects that would motivate students who were faced with the daunting task of translating between two non-mother tongues. Another important element that I wanted to include from my teacher training experience was that such a course should have a sound theoretical basis for all projects and tasks undertaken. Last but not least, I wanted to teach the course in the computer lab, which was bizarre since all translation classes in SAL are taught in classrooms. Also, because I myself do translations using a computer, the Internet, online dictionaries and parallel texts, (but not translation software) I thought classes in the computer lab would save time, allow the students to work independently, at their own pace and would facilitate their learning of online resources. The computer lab would also allow me to look at assignments easily and provide immediate feedback to students during class time.

However, were teachers of translation into non-mother tongues doing this? What did the professional literature say about such a method? It appears as if teaching a student-centered class through projects is important in non-mother tongue translation teaching because Kiraly (2000: 120) says that students should be “active participants, not passive consumers” and he adds that such classes should also involve “the management and processing of authentic translation products” (op.cit.:121). Group work seems to be another integral part of non-mother tongue translation methodology according to McAlester, who encourages teachers to “initiate students into techniques of cooperation with a language reviser and in collaborative groups” (McAlester 1991, 296). In addition, Mackenzie et al describe a course in which “cooperative activity is practiced. Students are encouraged to work in groups and share the results of their research.” (Mackenzie 2000: 130) As far as theory is concerned Nintai explains that “Theoretical insights could enable students to become aware of their task, available translation options and of factors involved in decisions and choices.” (Nintai : 42). Next, regarding the computer lab, Kiraly claims that “they (translators) must be skilled users of state-of-the-art computer-based tools and on-line resources. They must know how to systematically research and manage terminology. They must be fast, with ever-increasing turnover times due to advances in communications technology”. (Kiraly 2000:119) Moreover, Davies also emphasizes that a translator must know “ 4. Resourcing skills: paper, electronic and human. 5. Computer skills: familiarization with a translators workbench, computer-assisted translation, human-assisted automatic translation, acquisition of electronic resourcing skills: databases and access to digital sources, unidirectional (e.g. Web pages) bi-directional (e.g. e-mail) distance communication” (Davies 2005: 162).

## **2.3 Materials**

The next problem I faced in designing such a course was materials. What materials are supposed to be studied in such courses? McAlester says what such a course should not include: “if it is to be limited to purely routine tasks like business correspondence, technical specifications and the like...then the course is going to be extremely dull and will pose severe motivational problems for both student and teacher”. (McAlester 1991: 294) He then suggests that tourism brochures might be appropriate because “the amount of tourist literature translated into a foreign language far exceeds that translated from it” (op.cit: 296). Roiss et al, also indicate that tourist brochures are suitable texts to consider ( Roiss 1995: 216). Pederson suggests using “Authentic material in class, museum catalogues, scholarly articles, textbooks” (Pedersen 2000, 113) while Mackenzie, et al recommend the “translation of contracts and patents, technical documentation, “for information only” translation, promotional material, customer magazines” (op.cit.:129) and “washing instructions, recipes, simple technical instructions, tourist brochures, annual reports, environmental progress reports” (op.cit.:125). On the other hand, Arntz writes that “Non-fictional texts of varying degrees of difficulty and from different subject areas are read, analyzed and translated” in the third module of the Hildesheim Third Language Model for advanced translation students. ( Arntz 1999, 70). Moreover, Arntz (op.cit.: 71) and Mackenzie et al. (2000:126) recommend using parallel texts

## **2.4 Teaching Theatre Translation**

### **2.4.1 Theatre Translation Criticism**

During the first year of the workshop, I used some of the above-mentioned materials but later, I wanted to change the focus of the course by doing something that the students had never done before. Thus, I began to incorporate subjects that did not exist in the students’ translation curriculum at the time such as dubbing and subtitling of films, corpus linguistics, web translation, legal translation, criticism and comparison of translations of French and English novels, short stories and theatre plays with their originals.

According to Newmark, “Translation criticism is an essential link between translation theory and its practice; it is also an enjoyable and instructive exercise, particularly if you are criticizing someone else’s translation or, even better, two or more translations of the same text.” (Newmark 1988, 184) Newmark then goes on to cite why translation criticism is essential: “firstly, because it painlessly improves your competence as a translator; secondly, because it expands your knowledge and understanding of your own and the foreign language, as well as perhaps the topic; thirdly because, in presenting you with options, it will help you sort out your ideas about translation.” (op.cit: 185) Therefore, an important component of the theatre translation course was comparing and contrasting French and English plays and their translations and comprised the basis for the first project in the course (see appendices for project guidelines).

Such an activity was particularly appropriate for students translating between non-mother tongues because it was non-threatening. They themselves did not have to translate (except to improve upon a phrase or word they thought needed changing) but simply compare, contrast and critique the translations according to the American Translators’ Association Error Marking Guidelines. Moreover, the students became familiar with the genre of theatre and could observe applications of theatre translation theory. Last but not least, the task was motivating and enjoyable.

While the students were doing comparative analyses of the originals and translations of French and English theatre plays, I envisioned having them put on a play that they themselves had translated thus experiencing the full realm of going from theory to application.

Since I had done my master's thesis on "Teaching English through Drama: Designing a Content-Based Course" I was familiar with all aspects of theatre production such as teaching students to analyze, write and perform plays. But teaching English through drama was very different from teaching theatre translation between two non-mother tongues. What was the best way to proceed?

### 2.4.2 Translating Plays

Firstly, it is essential that students realize that translating plays differs greatly from other types of translation because "...a theatre text exists in a dialectical relationship with the performance of that text. The two texts -written and performed- are coexistent and inseparable, and it is in this relationship that the paradox for the translator lies." (Bassnett-McGuire 1985: 87)

Secondly, the students should be given some strategies on how to translate a play. Both Bassnett and Aaltonen provide excellent guidance about translation strategies. Bassnett mentions five:

- a. Treating the theatre text as a literary work.
- b. Using the SL cultural context as a frame text.
- c. Translating 'performability.'
- d. Creating SL verse drama in alternative forms.
- e. Co-operative translation. (Bassnett-McGuire op.cit.: 90, 91)

However, Aaltonen approaches strategies from a different perspective and argues that the conditions under which the play will be performed should dictate which strategy should be used. "Thus I suggest that the translation strategies in the theatre fall into three categories: loosely targeted translation, translation for creating a new source text and translation for spatially and temporally controlled reception. (Aaltonen 2004: 5). The students in the workshop based their translations on the last strategy because they knew the exact date, time, place and audience that the plays would be performed. "The third strategy has the most precise target of the three. Texts in this category are aimed at a controllable reception on stage, in a particular location at a precisely defined point in time by a definable audience. Their reception is audio-visual, and their anticipated life usually covers one production.(Aaltonen op.cit: 6).

Finally, in reading about theatre translation it was fascinating for me to find three authors, Wellwarth, Bassnett and Hite, who touched upon acting skills for translators. In talking about qualifications of theatre translators, Wellwarth stresses the following:

While it would be unreasonable to demand that the dramatic translator be as intimately acquainted with theatrical technique as the playwright, for whom it is an absolute necessity, there is no question that some experience as an actor particularly or, failing that, a knowledge of the technique of oral communication is indispensable. (Wellwarth 1981, 141).

Bassnett on the other hand, thinks that the written text is what the translator has to focus on, rather than a gestic text or hypothetical performance. (Bassnett 1998, 102) She goes on to say that:

if we accept the idea of a gestic text that exists within a written text and needs excavating by actors, then we are faced with an absurd problem for translators...To do such a thing a translator would not only have to know both languages and theatrical systems intimately, but would also have to have experience of gestic readings and training as a performer or director in those two systems. (op.cit:92)

Contrary to Bassnett, Rick Hite advises theatrical translators to become actors and listen to their work so that they may perceive “the problems of translating from spoken text to spoken text’ and ‘become more sensitive to the vocal idiosyncrasies of both languages of their inherent rhythms, patterns and stress.” (Hite in Zatlin, 2005:2)

### 2.4.3 What Plays to Translate

The next problem I faced was to find plays that would accommodate the course’s constraints, such as number of students, time, language level and the important fact that they would be translating between two non-mother tongues. First, I had to find enough plays that would involve all twenty-one students. Second, owing to time limitations, the plays had to be short. Last, but not least, the language level of the plays should be such that it would not be too difficult because the students were “building bridges” between “language storage rooms where L1, L2 and L3 are focused.” (Kornakov 2000: 244)

While teaching at Ankara University (AU), I came across a wonderful book of ten original one-act plays to teach English through drama (Shackleton 1985). Since my AU students had performed three of the plays successfully (*The Applicant* by Harold Pinter, *The Sandbox* by Edward Albee and *Mother Figure* by Alan Ayckborn), I decided to try them out again with the workshop students and in addition to using four other plays in the volume. So all twenty-one students were accommodated in all seven plays. The total performance of all the plays was approximately one and a half hours.

## 3 The Students

Near the end of the first semester of the workshop, the students answered a bio-data questionnaire, which gives a picture of their language skills, travel, educational background and goals for the future. The results are listed below:

1. 18 Females 3 Males
2. 2 (26 years old) 17 (25 years old) 2 (24 years)
3. All studied English in high school, 3 (French, German) 1 (French), 11 (German)  
(One student is bilingual in English and Turkish, and another is an Erasmus student from France, but is studying international relations, not translation)
4. All were exempt from the English Preparatory exam (except the Erasmus student)
5. All attended French Preparatory classes: 19 for 1 year and 1 attended for 2 years.
6. Travel outside of Turkey: 18 have traveled outside of Turkey and 1 has never traveled abroad. France was the most visited country, followed by England, Italy and Spain
7. Internships abroad: Only two people had done internships abroad in France and Canada. The rest had done internships in Turkey at Club Med, TV stations, government offices, translation bureaus and other such organizations.
8. Years of Studying English: from 21 to 11 years
9. Years of Studying French: 5 (except the Erasmus student)
10. Future goals: 12 want to work in the translation field, 9 want to work in other areas such as starting private business, working with their father, being an academician, studying abroad, working in an international organization.
11. Other languages studied after high school. 8 studied German, 8 studied Italian and 6 studied Spanish, 1 knew Portuguese because of being an exchange student in Brazil.

## 4 The Course Syllabus

All instructors at Bilkent University are required to put the syllabus for their courses online. Below is an example of the syllabus for the 15-week workshop:

### Weekly Topics:

- Week 1:** Negotiation of syllabus, pre-course assessment: Two essays in French and English, two translations: French-English, English-French with a 200-word process commentary on each from Hardin (1990).
- Week 2:** Features of translating from L1-L2 and vice versa, L2-L3 translation, “building bridges”, text analysis, editing translations by Larson.
- Week 3:** Mother tongue translation: Ottoman Turkish to Modern Turkish, 200 word process commentary, Interlingual translation, text analysis by Newmark, 200 word process commentary, discussion of process-oriented translation.
- Week 4:** Translation criticism, comparative stylistics of French and English using multiple translations of the same text, evaluation using ATA (American Translator’s Association Error Marking Guidelines).
- Week 6:** Introduction to theatre translation, project I guidelines, readings and discussions on theatre translation. Choice of plays on reserve in the library.
- Week 7:** Class project work.
- Week 8:** Presentations of project I: Comparison of an original play in French or English with its translation.
- Week 9:** Presentations of project I. Introduction Team translation project II to be done according to Larson’s guidelines for translation projects.
- Week 10:** Background on the plays to be translated. Viewing of videos of three absurd plays.
- Week 11:** Discussion of videotapes and analysis of the performance, acting, set, props, and direction. What is involved in a play performance? How did you feel as the audience?
- Week 12:** Theatre translation readings and translation strategies. Selection of plays and casts.
- Week 13:** Project II work: Working on the first individual rough drafts of scripts.
- Week 14:** Project II work: Group translation, transfer process, checking the translation, back translation.
- Week 15:** Project II work: Polishing the finished product through the use of consultants, experts, and native speakers. Preparation of final text and performance.

### Assessment:

In-class attendance	05
Homework	10
Project I	25
Project II	25
In-class participation	10
Quiz	25

## 5 Conclusion

The best way to determine if an experiment is successful is to look at the results. When viewing the video tapes of the student performances, one can see that the students were highly motivated by the activity and that they did well in spite of many constraints, the first of which is the uneven level of their French compared to their English background. With only five years of French studies, compared to twice or three times as much English studies, the

students have been reluctant to speak French in class. However, after the translation activity, they could not stop speaking French. So one result could be that this activity enhanced their language skills.

Another important result is that before this class, no student had ever done theatre translation before. To evaluate the quality of the translations, I asked audience members to vote on the best plays according to comprehensibility, accuracy, naturalness and clarity and four plays were considered successful. One was deemed to be mediocre and two were judged to be poor. However, such results might not only be attributed to the translations but also to the plays themselves. Some plays, especially the ones by Alan Ayckbourn, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee, seemed to be better written than others.

Students' written evaluations about their projects were also enthusiastic and positive. They enjoyed learning something for the first time. Moreover, they wanted to have copies of the tapes of their performances and felt proud of their accomplishments.

A negative aspect of such a course is that it may be considered as too "laborious" for teachers, and students to undertake. McAlester discusses this as a drawback for a detailed procedure implemented by a colleague regarding evaluation: "While this may be an excellent exercise for a seminar, it is hardly practicable for the teacher of translation who has a bundle of exams to mark for next week." (McAlester 2000:135). In spite of the above statement, however, another aim of the translation workshop was to have the students "build bridges" between two non-mother tongues so that they could translate between them with more ease. This appears to have been accomplished. The implications of this study for researchers in teaching translation between or into non-mother tongues could be that perhaps translating and performing carefully selected theatre plays, with their high motivational factor, could be considered as an alternative to the recommended class materials such as tourist brochures.

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## Appendix 1

Bilkent University  
School of Applied Languages Fall Semester 2006  
Trin 461 English-French-English Translation Workshop  
Translation Project I Guidelines: Translation Criticism  
Barbara Blackwell Gülen, Instructor  
Tuesday, November 28, 2006

**Objective:** To compare a minimum of three (3) pages-a minimum of 9 in total- from the beginning, middle and end of a theatre play translated from French to English or English to French according to (but not confined to) the requirements below:

**I.** Cover page with title, author of original work, student name, section and date.

**II.** General Format (See reserved material in the Bilkent University Library)

Table of Contents with page numbers

**1.** Introduction

1.1 Statement of Purpose

1.2 Background information about author, translator

1.2.1 Analysis of the plot, episodes, scenes, acts, characters of the play.

1.2.2 Summary of critiques written about the play.

1.3 Method of comparative analysis

1.4 Review of Literature on theatre translation (See bibliography and handouts in library reserve).

**2.** Comparison of translation and the original text.

This can be classified in many ways: according to ATA Guidelines, types of differences or contrasts or by book sections including the sentences in which the contrasts appeared with the page numbers and lines in parentheses; comments on the translations; examples of how the translation could be improved or changed.

2.0

2.1

2.2

**3.** Conclusion

**4.** Bibliography. According to the American Psychology Association guidelines on the Internet. See copy of my example on online reserve.

**5.** Appendices. This section should include:

**a.** Both source language and target language texts that have been compared including color-coded (a different color for each type of contrast, omission, additions, etc.) underlined passages of the results found.

**b.** An explanation of how the texts are arranged so that the grader can find the passages easily.

**c.** Anything else that is referred to but not included in the body of the paper.

**6.** Footnotes of references either listed in the back or at the bottom of each page.

**7.** A short oral presentation of the comparative study.

**III.** Grading will include: ability to following the above instructions, effort, appearance, presentation, number of examples and pages done and referencing, among other factors. (20% of course grade)

**IV.** DUE DATE: Tuesday, December 12,2006

## Appendix 2

Bilkent University Trin 461 English-French-English Translation Workshop  
Final Project Guidelines: Process Approach to Theatre Translation  
Barbara Blackwell Gülen, Instructor  
December 8, 2006

**Due Date:** Friday, December 28, 2006 at 15:00 (one copy on diskette and one hard copy per person)

**Objectives:** To translate an English sketch into French according to the principles of current literature on theatre translation and to record the process; to perform the translated version.

**Behavioral objectives:** By the end of this project students will have:

- gained an understanding of the process of theatre translation
- applied the most important concepts of theatre translation principles such as targeting the text, adaptation, recreation, addition, omission, etc.
- experienced all phases of theatre performance including reading the script, choosing the actors, memorizing lines, directing, acting and teamwork

**I.** Cover page with title, author of original work, student name, and section date.

### II. General Format

Table of Contents with page numbers

#### 1. Introduction

1.2 Statement of Purpose

1.2 Information about the play (episodes, characters, props,

1.3 Information about the playwright,

1.4

#### 2. *Daily record of the process* of translation, preparation and performance.

2.0

2.1

2.2

#### 3. *Conclusion*

4. *Bibliography* of all sources consulted-written according to the American Psychology Association guidelines on the Internet.

5. *Appendices*. This section should include:

a. The individually translated first draft translation of the sketch.

b. The final group script to be performed. Any other information mentioned in the text (like group meeting schedules and times, distribution of roles, director's notes)

6. *Citations* listed in the text (last name, date of publication, page number) or footnotes of references either listed in the back before the bibliography or at the bottom of each page.

7. *Performance of the sketch*

**III.** Grading will include: ability to following the above instructions, effort, appearance, performance, record of process followed, etc.

Point distribution:

1.	First draft individual translation:	5
2.	Process:	5
3.	Final collaborative translation and other factors:	20
4.	Performance:	10