The Digital Translation Classroom: Another Day at the Computer for the Burgeoning Translator

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ABSTRACT

This contribution analyzes the unequal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on university teaching and learning environments, drawing on the author's direct experience of teaching translation in the USA and in Germany. The research letter adopts a broad perspective considering social and personal aspects such as the economic impacts of the crisis on university budgets resulting from reduced enrolments in university courses and the potential benefits of reduced class sizes alongside the accelerated arrival of the digital humanities as a prerequisite for the long-term survival of translation departments. The central section, entitled 'Scientific Translation with Corona as Reference Point' focuses on a recently taught translation course in which the author allowed a space of reflection on the pandemic both to help us cope with the threats and opportunities it might offer. The international stakes of the pandemic gave us an opportunity to reflect on the cultural and linguistic situatedness of scientific translation.

KEYWORDS: translation and homeworking; online translation courses; reduced enrolment in translation courses; pandemic teaching environments; scientific translation; contemporary reception of *Dissoi Logoi*

Pandemics, Inequality, and the University Campus

The pandemic has wrought redistributions of time, wealth, and well-being, which call to mind a great anonymous essay of the Sophistic Enlightenment. The tendency towards unequal effects within moments of upheaval was described around 400 BCE in the *Dissoi Logoi*, whose title literally means "Dissenting Words," or, more idiomatically, "Dispute," "Debate." Its most intriguing section, "On What is Good and What is Bad," argues the proverbial point that goodness is always a matter of perspective: "for some people [any given object or event] is good, for others [the very same thing is] bad." The section's opening point is that the good things in life (food, drink, and sex) are only "good" if you are healthy enough to enjoy them—a bitter reminder to the

undermining effects of a public health crisis on fundamental assumptions about the quality of life. It is worth quoting some examples to convey the great Sophist's inductive argument:

> Illness, further, is bad for patients, but good for physicians. Death is something bad for those dying, but good for undertakers and grave diggers. […] And the fact that the trading vessels shatter and smash is bad for the ship-owners, but good for the ship-builders.
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> Furthermore, the fact that iron corrodes, loses edge, and wears out is a bad thing for the others, but good for the blacksmith. And that pottery gets broken is a bad thing for others, good for the potters. And the fact that footwear gets worn out and broken through is a bad thing for others, good for the cobbler.[1]

All of these cases involve economic forms of "good"—the kind given and taken the most recklessly by a pandemic that is thrusting many of us deeper into a digital economy which is more familiar to some than to others. Mid-2020, when global education was going fully digital, and every major institution had to subscribe quickly to stable conference software, many of my academic peers started reposting a meme which laughs at the paranoid thought that the economic beneficiaries of digitalized classrooms could have authored the whole pandemic:

(*Let's See Who's Really Behind Covid 19 Meme*, no date)

A conspiracy is not even necessary for Zoom stock to have appreciated by billions of dollars at the peak of the pandemic (an excessive effect which has since self-corrected by several billions). As the *Dissoi Logoi* display with other life-and-death examples, it is not just that some parties benefit

[1] (Molinelli, 2018:51) (Translation modified.)

by inflicting pain on others, as in war, but that when grief and suffering occur on a large enough scale, some parties will *find a way* to benefit economically.

We could extend the list with a number of examples affecting a person's capacity to succeed in competitive work environments. Let us just consider the enforcement of home office work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being allowed to stay home and work is good for professionals without children who cannot go to daycare, but bad for those with children at home. The same can be said for people who formerly had long commutes: home office is good for them, but bad for those who live near their offices but cannot get inside to utilize their office amenities. Home office is good for those who are relatively domestic and self-sufficient, but bad for those whose work was highly collaborative or whose social life was structured by routines requiring mobility. Of course, one and the same person might have the downsides of being a parent whose social life was with scattered acquaintances, but the upsides of having had a long commute and solitary work that can be done at home, so that that person's net cost or benefit could be difficult to measure. In practice, however, the burden of continuing one's career without being able to count on childcare services seems to be the factor creating the most intense stress, especially for women, as men reclaim old-fashioned claims to privilege as a way out of the strain.[2] One thing is for sure: COVID is creating new challenges for people in competitive fields like translation and university work. And challenges for some mean opportunities for others: usually along the lines of the rich getting richer since stress falls harder on those with fewer resources.[3]

We can make even more specific observations that apply to university work, to the translation industry, and thus of course to translator and interpreter training. As *Chronotopos: A Journal of*

[2] Myriad articles are sounding the alarm on this point: (Hank and Steinbach 2020; Savage 2020; Taub 2020; Wenham, Smith and Morgan 2020)

[3] Even the Scottish economic theorist Adam Smith, often cited as the first great apologist for capitalism, wrote at length on the tendency of every change in work relations to benefit employers and to hurt employees, and on the difficulty of finding a legal remedy for it: "The workmen desire to give as much, the masters to give as little, as possible. […] It is not, however, difficult to foresee which of the two parties must, upon all ordinary occasions, have the advantage in the dispute, and force the other into compliance with their terms. […] In all such disputes, the masters can hold out much longer. A landlord, a farmer, a master manufacturer, or merchant, though they did not employ a single workman, could generally live a year or two upon the stocks, which they have already acquired. Many workmen could not subsist a week, few could subsist a month, and scarcely any a year, without employment. In the long run, the worker may be as necessary to the master as the master is to him; but the necessity is not so immediate." (Smith 1852:27–28) Notably, the fourteen-century Black Plague was a great exception to those "ordinary occasions

Translation History puts it in their front matter of their recently released issue on "Translation and WWII:" "Research on the history of translation can make its contribution by asking about the role of translation in historical situations of crisis" (Schippel *et al.* 2020:19). Their argument is that confinement to home office is also an opportunity to open our minds and reflect on the past.

Research goes on, but university budgeting has entered a new phase of crisis because many students would rather not enroll at all if they would have to forgo the usual benefits of campus life: participating in social and cultural events with other students, conversing spontaneously with instructors, and enjoying the on-site resources of the university, like libraries and sports facilities. In the United States, a staggering 21.7% fewer students enrolled in postsecondary schools in 2020 compared to 2019. An internal report published on October 28, 2020 at my university, the Johannes-Gutenberg-University of Mainz, expressed the various difficulties (and successes) with digital semester. Of course, the majority of students (64.1%) miss the "campus life" (*Campus-Leben*, in German).

Class size has never mattered more. Small translation workshop-style classes seem to work even better than before, but slightly larger reading-based seminars seem doomed since it's hard to build a sense of solidarity in the classroom. It seems that the digital classroom magnifies the effect of classroom size: a small classroom feels even more intimate since every student is equally close to the camera. A large classroom feels immeasurably large when there is no way to gain an overview of the whole.

There may be a content-related factor at play. Maybe there's something in the nature of translation work that requires a kind of loose focus, not unlike the kind of multitasking that tempts one back to the temptation of higher dopamine rewards for scrolling through social media or news feeds than for writing, studying, and paying attention during classes conducted in front of the screen. That might explain why translation students can succeed even in the widely maligned digital teaching environment.

Scientific Translation with Corona as Reference Point

Teaching translation digitally for the past two semesters when the university has been on lockdown allows for a few observations. In a highly international department like ours, differences in linguistic competence can often be a factor in student success outcomes. Now bandwidth issues have added a mechanical dimension to the problem of who can express their ideas most effectively—whether in a translation assignment or in a seminar discussion. These factors may even have a minor correlation if only because local students have a kind of home-field advantage: they have more options for home office in the place where they grew up and where their parents and long-term friends live. And Germans generally arrive with stronger German and English than most of our non-German students.

Last term I taught a class on "popular science in translation." The university had gone on lockdown at the end of the previous term, so the corona measures felt new and exotic, and they were being heavily debated in the public discourse. My turn to a topic that was on everyone's mind as the content for a language-based course resembled what Scott Thornbury has dubbed "Dogme ELT," a pedagogical application of the Danish film-making principle Dogme 95: "The emphasis on the here-and-now requires the teachers to focus on the actual learners and the content that is relevant to them" (Meddings and Thornbury 2009:6). By making the pandemic into a course topic, I sought to deepen students' appreciation for the relevance of the course topic while also letting us engage in cathartic discussion about the problem that was disrupting so many plans and routines.

Because it was a translation course, I wanted to begin by ascertaining whether any differences in text type existed between German and English-language media coverage of the pandemic. The media itself was also engaging in regional comparisons. Differences in infection rates between countries often set the tone for those comparisons. On May 19, 2020 the German Ministry of Health posted an animation on Facebook showing that their infection rates were lower than their neighbors'—as if reporting the outcome of an international sporting event, where the successes of Germanic mask-wearing discipline symbolized the home team's good athletic training.

Relevant to our course topic, the perception was palpable that skepticism and support for corona measures had to do with a person's readiness to accept the validity of scientific research in general.

In one of our first readings, we read that the British "Royal Society" had made it their business not only to convey scientific results to the public, but to teach the very idea of skepticism through the manner in which these ideas were imparted (Olohan 2015:173–5). In a time when the notion of "skepticism" stood above all for resistance to the consensus that measures like wearing masks and social distancing were necessary, it was interesting to consider what kind of language and rhetoric distinguished scientific skepticism from the kind of contrarianism that gains traction when popular demagogues stoke the flames of doubt in scientific expertise. The notion that scientific expertise is hard won through a repeated confrontation with doubt in the results of scientific study is something that a public will only believe if they have deeply engaged with science over a long span of time.

The course was a translation workshop, which means that the emphasis was on improving students' ability to create good translations. Creating good translations, however, requires a thorough understanding of the source and target contexts, and to achieve this end, reading widely is necessary. We thus discussed works like Olohan's as well as research on the history of science (Schäfer, Kristiansen, and Bonfadelli 2015). For every reading, a reading question was assigned, and the first reading was not assigned at all, but required the students to find English-language and German-language coverage of pandemic news. They prepared to discuss what this coverage might indicate about the respective nations' cultural differences in terms of public trust in scientific research and of individual responsibility in a public health crisis.

This assignment was not resistant to confirmation bias, and to some extent we saw the cultural stereotypes we were trained to see: Germans behave in a cooperative and orderly manner, especially in a crisis, whereas Americans create chaos by insisting on their individual rights. Perhaps even more disappointing than the confirmation of stereotypes was the smallness of the differences in the media coverage. Both discourses struck an extremely worried tone, but on the whole German-language media showed more concern about effects of the pandemic itself, whereas English-language media also worried about whether the population would take it seriously enough. A contrarian blog post on *Psychology Today*, in English, at the beginning of 2020, argued that the coronavirus panic was nothing but a "pandemic of anxiety," and that fear of the virus would

overtake the virus itself in its negative consequences.[4] This kind of skepticism was more widespread among the scientifically minded in Anglophone countries before the Spring of 2020, but we watched as skepticism maintained its foothold among swaths of the Anglo-American population.[5] It was only in the Summer of 2020 that the German *Querdenker*, or "free thinkers," began making their defiance of the rules known loudly at public protests in Berlin and elsewhere. Translation occurred, for better or worse, and now both societies have a more heterogeneous mixture of trust and distrust towards expertise.

The course reminded us of the various phenomenological factors that make translation necessary. We had the sense that not only language and culture, but geography affects our perception as we are differentially endangered by the pandemic. One of my students was living in a high-rise apartment in Mumbai, India. She spoke about the difficulties of gathering with her family despite their proximity, while another student, originally from Canada, was living in the small town of Germersheim, where our institute was located. She could move more freely but had no place to go although Germany had low enough infection rates at the time that leisure travel to neighboring cities was allowed when my family in California was being advised to wear masks even outside. Making sense of the pandemic together was one small way that we could make the world feel less small.

Digital Teaching and the Future of Translation Studies

Certain degrees are very rarely offered online, like the humanities degrees. Highly computer-oriented degrees, like data science, are often offered online. Where does translation fit in? Fully online translation degrees exist. The University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee has offered one long before COVID with specializations in French, German, Russian or Spanish to English, with foci on translation and interpreting. Of course, the success of most professional training programs center on the internships they can provide, and University of Wisconsin has many local business contacts for on-site students. Even the computer-based, peer-learning programming course, called

[4] (*The Coronavirus Is Much Worse Than You Think*, 2020) A long disclaimer has since been appended to the front of the blog post specifying that it was written in February 2020 and is not a substitute for medical advice.
[5] Considering that the pandemic already began to amplify income inequality in the spring of 2020, joblessness is a bigger threat than infection for anyone living in poverty. (Fisher and Bubola, 2020)

"42" (in reference to the cryptically numerical answer to the meaning of the universe given in *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*), requires students to be on-site, and the proximity to internships is likely the guiding motivation.

How good is the online curriculum itself? Of course, we cannot judge that prematurely. Students at the University of Mainz responded to our surveys fairly critically. The above cited report contained several survey questions related to student experience with online teaching. Just under half of the instructors (48,8 %) and just over half of the students (55,5 %) had no previous experience with online teaching.[6] The majority were satisfied overall with the experience, but both groups indicated that digital interaction also meant *less* total interaction. It required more self-disciplined and self-directed work from the students.

Furthermore, experts in digital teaching and learning say that you cannot judge the results from one or two semesters of forced experimentation during the pandemic. Besides the resentment factor clouding people's feelings about online teaching (one more restriction in their lives), it simply takes more than one semester for learning to sink in. Satisfaction with courses, while desirable in itself and for student retention and recruitment, is not the only measure of student success.

On May 27, 2020, as the infection rates from the corona virus pandemic were surging in the United States, James Lang published an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* called "On Not Drawing Conclusions About Online Teaching Now — or Next Fall," which argued for patient evaluation of the success of our digital-era online teaching not only because there is a learning curve to digital teaching, but mainly because the feedback on how well it is actually working is not immediate. Students are disgruntled that they are missing out on university life, but that may not be indicative of the effectiveness of digital teaching. In preparing translators for work in an increasingly digitized world, digital teaching may be more and more common. On the other hand, curricula will also have to adjust to acknowledge the juggernaut of machine learning—a growing

[6] Ergebnisse der Befragung Lehren und Lernen im „digitalen" Sommersemester 2020. https://www.zq.uni-mainz.de/files/2020/10/JGU_Digitales-Sommersemester-2020_Befragunsergebnisse-Kurzfassung.pdf

field within the programming world in contrast to the profession of human translation, whose future prospects depend on how we position our skills in the face of machine translation.

Among other effects, the pandemic is accelerating the (hitherto slow) arrival of digital humanities to Translation Studies. New work in the field applies historical methods (which the field has been adopting as its core methodology at least since Gideon Toury's work in the 1980s and 1990s) with developments in machine translation, which is becoming increasingly indispensable to translation practice (leaving many professional translators with nothing but post-editing work). The wish to forestall the automation of translation has been an engine to developments in the discipline, such as Hans Vermeer's *skopos* theory, which was a conscious rejection of "transcoding"—i.e., of machine-replicable translations that show no sensitivity to the target culture that will make use of a text (Rozmyslowicz, 2019:25). Research on the human-machine interface will become increasingly visible in the field of Translation Studies, as we translator-trainers learn to train students for a highly geographically dispersed, digitized labor market. Since translation work has long been a kind of computer work, a more digital approach to teaching will inevitably accompany these developments even after the pandemic. The costs of the pandemic thus may prove not to be a matter of perspective—benefiting digital natives and hurting those who offer the human touch—but rather a matter of adaptation to work worlds that are ever more digitally automated: the pandemic is bad for translation departments' current teaching models, but coping with the pandemic is offering good practice for the kind of work that will increase translation departments' survival in the future—whether it is a future full of more plagues or just one full of more artificial intelligence.

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