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Teaching Diachronic Translation at the History of English Classes

Professional training of students majoring in translation studies involves their practicing various types of translation, both in terms of modes of translation (written translation – oral interpreting; simultaneous – consecutive; computer-assisted – machine translation, etc.) and types of texts translated (literary – specialist translation). Besides mastering these mainstream types of interlingual translation, the curriculum in English philology offers future translators a unique, and so far mainly undiscovered, chance to try their hand at intralingual diachronic translation during their classes in History of the English Language. While analysing Old English and Middle English texts, translation students can get the fascinating experience of transferring these texts through time and giving them a modern shape.

Naturally, the task of translating an old English text into the present-day English means a challenging undertaking, as it requires from a student meticulous work with dictionaries, textbooks on historical grammar and encyclopaedias to cope with the language code and sociocultural specificity of the text created in a different historic epoch. Though far from easy, translating texts written in a language now dead seems to be an effective, practical, "on-the-job" way of mastering historical linguistics and making theory alive. In terms of assessment, the quality of translation produced by the students can serve for professors a reliable integrated indicator of their overall linguistic erudition and competence in the range of problems they must be able to address during their course in the History of the English Language.

In this paper we will point out some issues that must be taken into consideration while teaching students diachronic translation.

Seeing an Anglo-Saxon text for the first time, students usually find it difficult to believe that what they see is English. As Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable put it, "… a page of Old English is likely at first to present a look of greater strangeness than a page of French or Italian because of the employment of certain characters that no longer form a part of our alphabet." [1, p. 47]. Spelling, however, is the least difficulty students face. Anglo-Saxon lexicon appears to lack all those familiar Latin and French words which constitute such an essential part of the present-day English vocabulary and instead abounds in lexemes that look strange to the modern eye. Furthermore, even having found the meaning of every word in the text, students will still feel perplexed as to how to connect them in a meaningful sentence, as they confront intimidating inflections and confusing syntax.

Anglo-Saxon was a synthetic language, with the noun and adjective inflected for four cases in the singular and in the plural and the adjective having strong and weak forms. Nouns had different paradigms depending on the grammatical gender and the stem-building suffix. Verbs had strong and weak conjugation, both distinguishing two tenses (present and past), three moods (indicative, imperative and subjunctive), two numbers (singular and plural) and three persons, in addition to the existence of two infinitives and two participles. Pronouns were also inflected. Consequently, word order in Old English was freer than in the present-day English.

Old English sentences generally look less orderly than modern ones, with connections between clauses often vague and semantically syncretic. The major syntactical oddities that require students' special attention include (though are not limited to) the following:

1. correlation, a much favoured by Old English writers method of holding parts of a sentence together. Semantic relationship between correlated clauses often seems obscure because the conjunction and the adverb in most cases have the same form, e.g. *þā* can mean both 'when' and 'then'.

Þa hie ða þæt geweorc furþum ongunnen hæfdon, þærto gewicod hæfdon **þa** onget se here þæt hie ne mehton þa scipu ut brengan. 'And when they had begun the work, and encamped before it, then the army understood that they could not bring out their ships.' (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 895)

Þonne þy ylcan dæge [þe] hi hine to þæm ade beran wyllað, **þonne** todælað hi his feoh … 'On the day when they will bear him to that funeral pile, they divide his property …' (*Ohthere's and Wulfstan's Story*)

2. recapitulation and anticipation

Anglo-Saxon writers often used a device of pausing in mid-sentence and starting afresh with a pronoun or some group of words which sums up what has gone before. A simple example is found in Alfred's *Preface to the translation of the Cura Pastoralis*:

Ure ieldran, ða ðe ðas stowa ær hioldon, **hie** lufodon wisdom … 'Our ancestors who previously occupied these places, they loved wisdom …'

It looks as if Alfred, having written "Ure ieldran, ða ðe ðas stowa ær hioldon", paused to think and then went on, recapitulating what has been written previously with the pronoun *hie*.

In the line from Ælfric's *The Passion of Saint Edmund, King and Martyr* below we see how the pronoun *þæs* anticipates the following *þæt*-clause:

þæs ic gewilnige and gewysce mid mode, **þæt** ic ana ne belife æfter minum leofum þegnum ... 'That thing I desire and wish in my mind, that I should not remain alone after my beloved thanes …'

3. impersonal sentences without the formal subject obligatory in the present-day English:

… me com swiðe oft on gemynd … 'it very often comes to my mind …' (Alfred's *Preface to the translation of the Cura Pastoralis*)

4. multiple negation and the use of *ne* to make a verb negative:

He cwæð þæt nan man ne bude be norðan him. 'He said that no man lived to the north of him.' (*Ohthere's and Wulfstan's Story*)

5. possibility of the subject following the predicate not only in questions but also in statements, as in the following line from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (A.D. 893): Hæfde se cyning his fierd on tu tonumen … 'The king had his army divided in two ...'

6. a wide functional range of some high-frequency connectors often resulting in ambiguity of the semantic relationship between sentences or parts of a sentence.

Old English *þa*, for instance, often presents translation problems as it may function as an adverb of time 'then', an adverb of space 'there', an adverbial connector expressing transition, a discourse marker 'what is more', or as a simple subordinating conjunction indicating a temporal relation 'when' [2, p. 64]. The

conjunction *swa* could introduce subordinate clauses of comparison, time, place, cause, result, condition and concession [3, p. 940].

þæt in Old English texts can introduce object clauses, clauses of purpose, time, result, manner, kind, degree, cause and reason [3, p. 1032-1033]:

Þa forleton hie hie, eodon ofer land **þæt** hie gedydon æt Cwatbrycge be Sæfern … 'Whereupon they left them, and went over land, till / so that they came to Quatbridge by Severn …' (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 895)

Working with samples of Anglo-Saxon poetry, translation students have a unique chance to get acquainted with a very special form of literary discourse representing centuries of Old Germanic written tradition. The major challenges presented by Old English poetry to a present-day reader include, above all, even more, compared to prose, sophisticated syntax explained by the poet's obligation to meet the demands of metre and alliteration and high frequency of specific poetic words not found in prose. The most frequent of them are the words denoting 'man', 'warrior': *beorn, guma, hæleð, rinc, secg*. Other frequent occurrences are *wicg* 'horse', *heoru, mece* 'sword', *naca* 'ship', *sefa, ferhð, hyge* 'heart', *gar* 'spear', *wine* 'friend', *guð, hild, beado* 'battle', *seld, sele* 'hall'. In some cases it is the specific meaning which is poetic: thus *lind* and *helm* are in general use in the senses 'lime tree' and 'helmet' but limited to poetry in the senses 'shield' and 'protector' [4, p. 498].

Anglo-Saxon poetic vocabulary is rich in compound nominations, among them, figurative epithets also known as "kennings", such as *beadu-leoma* 'battle-light', a term for a sword, *feorh-hus* 'life-house' for the body, *hran-rad* 'whale-road' or *swan-rad* 'swan-road' for the sea, *heofon-candel* 'heavenly candle' for the sun, etc.

Students' attention should also be drawn to the fact that Anglo-Saxon poetry was rather formulaic – the linguistic units from which Old English poets built their poems are frequently neither single words nor sentences, but set phrases which fill a metrical half-line and are used repeatedly to express the same idea. The verse composition employing formulae provided ready-made moulds for familiar concepts, and there is evidence that they were often associated in poets' minds with traditional ways of handling common scenes and events. [4, p. 502].

When, after struggling with Old English texts, students get down to Chaucer, morphology and syntax do not look scary anymore and much more words can be recognized without the assistance of a dictionary. However, it is Chaucer's vocabulary that conceals most traps for a modern translator.

Some words in Chaucer's texts will still be incomprehensible for the modern reader because they have left the English vocabulary completely or are lingering on "at the exit", being limited functionally. Other words will be familiar but nevertheless misunderstood because the common meanings associated with them in the present-day English will not seem to relate to the context. Some words will look weird, funny or out-of-place because Chaucer uses them differently from modern usage [5, p. 1464].

A number of words common in the 14th century have fallen into disuse over time and have to be replaced with their modern equivalents. Such was the fate, for instance, of *eek* 'also', *foreward* 'an agreement', *hethenesse* 'heathen lands', *reyse(n)* 'to go on a military expedition; to travel', *wight* 'a living creature', *gypon* 'a tunic', *bismotered* 'bespattered as with mud or dirt', *delyvere* 'active, nimble, agile, quick in

action', *chyvachie* 'cavalry expedition', *nyghtertale* 'night-time' – these are only several words that students will come across reading the first pages of the General Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

In contrast to words that are no longer used in English, words that look familiar to the modern reader are more problematic, as in Chaucer's work they may not mean what they commonly mean today. Here the translator deals with the cases of semantic development, when the semantic structure of a word has undergone transformation over the centuries. Actually, instead of trusting the familiar form, the translator has to look into the meanings the word had in Chaucer's time and correlate them with the context. Below are some examples of "misleading" words that have to be replaced for the present-day reader.

The French borrowing *defend* in Chaucer's time had the meaning 'to ward off, prevent, prohibit', now obsolete [6, p. 251]. *Drede* in Chaucer's text can sometimes mean 'doubt' [7, p. 1241], *lusty* had the meaning 'joyful, pleasing' [6, p. 541[. *Harlot* changed its meaning from the 13th-century 'vagabond, rascal, low fellow' to 'itinerant jester; male servant; fellow' in Chaucer's time. The meaning 'prostitute' was first registered in the 15th century [6, p. 428]. In *The Reeve's Tale* the miller uses this word addressing a young man: "Ye, false harlot," quod the millere ... (line 4268). The French borrowing *corage* in the 13th century had the meaning 'heart as the seat of feeling, spirit, nature'. In the 14th century its semantic structure began to change to include the meanings 'intention, purpose' and 'bravery, valour' [6, p. 221]. The original meaning being obsolete now, this noun also requires substitution in the modern translation:

So priketh hem nature in hir corages ... 'so nature pricks them in their hearts' (*General Prologue*, line 11)

Proper names designating intertextual links require special attention on the part of the translator. Thus, to adequately comprehend and translate the line below the students should be familiar with the corresponding fragment from the Gospel of John:

... Jhesus, God and man, Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan ... (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, lines 15-16).

Translation of Chaucer's toponyms will in many cases call for the assistance of reference resources. For example, translating the line "In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay" from the *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, it is relevant to understand that Tabard refers to an inn and Southwerk in Chaucer's time was a town across the Thames from London. It was from that place that the main characters set off on their pilgrimage.

Some geographical names used by Chaucer were part of the medieval reader's general knowledge but have fallen into disuse or changed over time, so they have to be brought up to date or explained in modern translation. For example, translating the following sentence which describes the Knight's military experience, students will have to find out that the first two geographical places today are located in Turkey and have new names and *the Grete See* today is called Mediterranean:

At **Lyeys** was he and at **Satalye**, Whan they were wonne, and in the **Grete See** At many a noble armee hadde he be. (*General Prologue*, lines 58-60).

The vibrant picture of medieval reality created by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* may considerably lose its actuality and colours without the translator's conscientious effort to grasp its historic and sociocultural context. Dealing with

objects and concepts of the 14th century, it is often not enough simply to rewrite their old names in a modern spelling – it is essential to understand their place and function in their historic setting and to find adequate means of rendering them to the modern reader. Let us look at some examples.

The correct understanding of the following line from *The Miller's Tale* which describes the beauty of the carpenter's wife depends on the translator's knowledge of the fact that the Tower of London in Chaucer's time housed a mint:

Ful brighter was the shynyng of hir hewe Than in the Tour the noble yforged newe. (lines 3255-3256)

Describing Absolon's shoes in the same tale, Chaucer makes a very casual reference to St. Paul's Cathedral, which is likely to look vague to the modern reader, unused to fashion patterns based on architectural masterpieces, so it is up to the translator to explicate the author's reference:

With Poules wyndow corven on his shoos (line 3318) 'His shoes were carved in such a way that they resembled a window in St. Paul's Cathedral.'

Without a translator's aid the exclamation "A wilde fyr upon thair bodyes falle!" from *The Reeve's Tale* (line 4172) will be most probably misunderstood by a modern reader who does not know that *a wilde fyr* refers to an inflammatory disease affecting the skin [8, p.125].

Every morning the town-dwellers in Chaucer's England were woken up by the *belle of laudes,* the first of the day-hours of the church, and in the evening they went to bed at *corfew-tyme.* Both "lauds" and "curfew" have survived, though the functional load these words had in Chaucer's world has considerably changed by the 21st century. "Lauds" is in modern English functionally limited to ecclesiastical contexts [9, p. 847]. "Curfew" was 'a regulation in force in medieval Europe by which at a fixed hour in the evening, indicated by the ringing of a bell, fires were to be covered over or extinguished; also the hour of evening when this signal was given' [10, p. 1263]. In the present-day English this meaning is historical and requires certain background knowledge on the part of the reader:

And thus lith Alison and Nicholas, In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas, Til that the belle of *laudes* gan to rynge… (*The Miller's Tale*, lines 3653-3655)

The dede sleep … Fil on this carpenter right, as I gesse, Aboute *corfew-tyme* … (*The Miller's Tale*, lines 3643-3645)

Summing up, we can conclude that practicing translation of Old English and Middle English texts into the present-day English at History of English classes gives students of translation a rare chance to get to grips with diachronic translation and while doing it to use their theoretical knowledge of historical linguistics, to make friends with etymological dictionaries, to learn from a wide range of reference sources, to feel the continuity of the language they study and, most exciting, to get in touch with people's life in the ages long gone. At the same time, the methods and techniques of teaching diachronic translation still remain the property of individual specialists in the field and are awaiting proper investigation, development and popularization.

Literature

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