

Sewell, Penelope M. (2002). *Translation Commentary: the Art Revisited. A Study of French Texts*. Dublin: Philomel, pp. 299, £ 12.99.

Although the book is more or less totally derived from the author's course (unit or module) on the theory and practice of translation which is part of the MA programme in French Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, readers, be they teachers, students or indeed practising translators, should not approach it expecting to find an 'off-the-peg' course in French-English translation commentary.

A brief overview of the raw material (and much of it is largely unprocessed) that make-up the volume is unusually informative. The book is divided into six sections, of which one (Section V) occupies around 70 to 75% of the pages. The opening four sections begin with an *apologia* for the translation commentary exercise followed by brief introductions to the aims, format and theoretical foundations of the art. The bulk of the text consists of six worked examples, i.e. in the first five instances a published and a Birkbeck 'in-house' version, which are then compared by a 'guinea-pig' group of six students. The sixth and final worked example is alone not the subject of several commentaries but a single one which is the work of the author comparing two in-house translations of an editorial from *Le Chasseur français* published in 1996.

In Section I the author sets out as her target readership. Firstly, they are not specialists in translation theory, save perhaps when, as is no doubt often the case, they wear alternative hats as translation teachers; secondly, students of (applied) translation studies and thirdly, professional translators and lastly, and perhaps more problematically, a wider more general readership, 'the many who have practised translating from French into English at some point in [their lives]'. Section II deals with the major aims of the work: 1) to raise awareness of translation policy; 2) to promote ability to reflect upon procedures which are often taken for granted; 3) to draw attention to the relationship between surface words and the underlying meaning; 4) to raise the profile of cultural knowledge required by translators; 5) to focus attention on patterns of differences between French and English using the techniques of comparative stylistics; 6) to promote awareness of notions of textuality, such as cohesion and coherence; 7) intertextuality, i.e. to begin to do justice to a 'gigantic network of cross-references, echoes and illusions; finally, to encourage reading of a theoretical nature to underpin the commentaries. Section III discusses different types of translation commentary based on the author's experience on BA and MA courses. All, except the last of the worked examples, are the work of students on a taught postgraduate programme comparing two

alternative renderings of literary and journalistic texts using an essay-type format.

Section IV gives a brief overview of 13 theoretical approaches of which students are made aware and which can thus inform their commentaries. The themes are as follows: 1) gain and loss; 2) Jakobson's theory of communication and the functions of language; 3) metaphor; 4) textual filters (based on Hervey and Higgins (1992)); 5) models of translation; 6) frames (e.g. Fillmore (1976) and Norbert and Shrieve (1992)); 7) *skopos*; 8) the importance of conventional collocations; 9) text typology and text linguistics; 10) relevance theory; 11) Grice's maxims for conversational exchange; 12) the culture of the source text; 13) contrastive stylistics.

As already mentioned, Section V contains six worked examples. There are two literary examples taken from the opening passages of short stories: firstly, Raymond Queneau's *Le Cheval Troyen* (1976) and Annie Saumont's *Sunday* (1998). Apart from the editorial of *Le Chasseur français* already referred to, the two other examples of journalism are both taken from the same issue of the Eurostar magazine published in 2000. Finally, there is an extract from Michel Tournier's *Le Vent Paraclet* (1977) entitled *Le difficile exercice de la traduction* reproduced in publicity material for a talk given by this writer at the French Institute in 1996.

Given the target readerships, objectives and theoretical background mentioned one may, perhaps more than in most cases, ask how presenting the work of student commentators at different stages in their development (the Queneau text was set at a relatively early stage when students were aware of very few theoretical approaches and the first Eurostar magazine text commentary was presented with a much more detailed brief) and sometimes produced in examination conditions with relatively few comments from the assessors might be of interest. For professional translators, the author claims to have received markedly positive feedback for an exercise that is not directly productive for the practising professional, since most of those consulted deemed it useful to reflect on how they approached their task. Students of translation studies will not find model answers, since no attempt is made to conceal the limitations, imperfections and in a number of cases incompleteness of the work presented. Not that the commentaries viewed as sets of scripts for instance for monitoring purposes lack merit, for there is indisputably some excellent work, but I do confess to some misgivings about the formal publication of work of varying quality as opposed to the informal sharing of good practice, say with a subsequent cohort of students. Moreover, as Section IV only describes the theories mentioned in brief outline, the book does not provide an overview of sufficient depth on

any aspect to avoid first-hand reading of the major theoretical works if any of the approaches is to be sensibly applied. For students on shorter semester-based modules, it may prove frustrating to hear of theories which there is no time to explain or apply, although some teachers (and students) may find this wide-ranging *tour d'horizon* a helpful introduction before they focus on a selected sub-set of approaches as the basis of practical application. As far as the most advanced courses are concerned, the author is honest enough to acknowledge the publication of work after the formulation of her first draft, that is perhaps not fully integrated into an already well packed teaching programme. At times, one is left to wonder whether the teaching material is sufficiently adapted to the book format, e.g. the digressions on pp. 106-7, which no doubt students find fascinating when presented in class but come over as of doubtful relevance in a published text.

The book indisputably raises awareness of most of the issues raised in Section III and the majority of the theoretical approaches in Section IV, but given the nature of the corpus of commentaries presented, there can be no question of systematic presentation. Indeed the *Chasseur français* example appears to have been included to plug what might be considered an 'accidental gap'. It is perhaps regrettable that the range of texts is not greater, particularly the use of two texts from the Eurostar magazine. To be fair, both articles are readily exploitable for sparking discussions on the culture of the source text, making possible analyses of cultural multi-layering without the need for significant amounts of input. The Annie Saumont text, which is set in USA, also raises issues of cultural complexity such as the use of a British English narrative voice with American English direct speech may have been selected for similar reasons.

In conclusion, this is definitely a volume that I am now pleased to have to hand. The examples presented are clearly useful as inspiration for producing other exercises of a similar nature (and, if desired, with other subject matter) and the methodology used provides a framework for the increasing number of courses in translation studies that can be adapted according to the time available and the level and interests of the students. The publishers Philomel deserve a word of congratulation for the quality of presentation in paperback format at a price affordable for students. There, however, is the rub. Caution is recommended in view of the danger that students pressed for time on semester-length modules/units may misapprehend the worked examples which, although presented with due words of warning, may nonetheless be misused.

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