

**Johnson, Penélope (2024). *Writing a translation commentary*. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 244, £35.99. ISBN 9781032227030**

Penelope Johnson's new book aims to offer guidance to students and professional translators and interpreters on how to write "balanced, articulate and convincing" translation commentaries or reflective reports (p. 1). Designed for self-study as well as for use on undergraduate and postgraduate translation courses, this textbook forms part of the Routledge *Introductions to Translation and Interpreting* series, which provides materials for translator education.

Johnson begins with a short introduction in which she defines a translation commentary as a "coherent piece of academic writing, underpinned by theoretical concepts and illustrative examples, where students can present their rationale and justification for the translation decisions taken" (p. 1). In doing so, she establishes the book's focus on the sorts of commentaries involved in formative and summative assessment in translator training rather than the type of critically reflective commentaries integral to translation practice research (see Williams and Chesterman, 2002; Grass, 2023; in relation to the latter type of commentary). That said, although the book does discuss, in Chapters Four and Five, longer 'themed' or 'supervised' commentaries, such as masters' dissertations, some clarification of the difference between the two types of commentary would have been helpful at the outset to avoid any potential confusion. Johnson does make it clear later, however, that supervised commentaries "may also be much longer than 5000 words, like in the case of PhDs that are comprised of a translation and a commentary" (p. 115), and, in relation to writing reflective reports for interpreting practice, that certain types of reports could "turn into an action research paper" (p. 159).

The introduction then serves to outline the book's main argument that writing such a commentary is the best way to learn the skills necessary to become a competent translator (p. 2), and here Johnson positions her discussion within a framework of various cognitive theories: Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of higher and lower order thinking skills (p.1); the construction of knowledge through social interaction (Kiraly, 2000) (p. 1); educational theory on academic writing (Bacha 2002; Cottrell, 2019; Zamel, 1987) (p. 1) and Kolb's (2014) experiential cycle of "experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting" (p.1). She also aligns the book with recent translator education scholarship in relation to the use of self-reflection when writing commentaries (Washbourne, 2022) (p. 3) and using 'translation journals' as a means of developing the metacognitive skills of reflection and decision-making (Mazzei & Aibo, 2022) (p. 2). Johnson then explains that Chapters One to Five draw heavily on approaches to translator training found in Routledge's *Thinking Translation* series (p. 3), which is surprising given the book's emphasis on experiential learning, as some of the training methods proposed in this series might be considered, by comparison, relatively old fashioned in this regard. Further elaboration of the scholarship advocating the development of students' self-reflective behaviours would have been useful to supplement this.

Part I of the book, "Before translating", comprises the first two chapters. The first is devoted to analysing the source text and provides a straightforward and thorough guide to doing just that, focusing on three elements: contextual information, macro and micro level issues. The information in this chapter is clear and well-presented and

there is good coverage of translation theory relating to aspects such as function and purpose of the text, genre and text type, intended audience, medium of publication, paratextual devices, tone, style and specific characteristics such as terminology. Johnson helpfully points out that the order of the analysis, as presented in the chapter, is “not intended to be linear or chronological” (p. 10) and that students should approach it in whichever order is most suitable for their own individual purposes.

Chapter Two offers guidance on writing a translation strategy by picking up on each point raised in the previous chapter and explaining how to formulate a strategy from issues identified in a source text analysis. It could be argued that a full chapter devoted to developing a translation strategy *before* translating might inhibit some students – particularly those new to translation – from following their intuitive decision-making, at least in the initial drafting of the target text. Indeed, Johnson points out that Haywood et al. (2009) suggest that “translators often come to a better understanding of the source text once they start translating” (p. 36), and, in this sense, the strategies presented here might be more usefully applied once the translator has made a first draft. Viewed in this way, the chapter serves as a useful tool for helping students reflect on their choices, consult theory and make any revisions they deem necessary. The reader is signposted to plenty of translation studies scholarship on a variety of topics, including specific fields, such as translating children’s literature (p. 54) and the translation of multilingual texts (p.55).

The first chapter in part II of the book, “While translating”, focuses on how to select examples to illustrate and justify translation decisions at textual level. Here the author suggests that the best way to do this is during translation, by marking challenging sections of translation or noting where various alternatives are being considered, with these marked sections thus illuminating useful examples for discussion in the commentary. It would have been useful here, I felt, to bring in the idea of using a ‘translation journal’ or ‘diary’ as a method of reflecting on these issues. Johnson then proposes applying the matrices presented in the *Thinking Translation* series – cultural, formal, semantic and varietal – as a framework for categorising illustrative examples (p. 64), and highlights translation theory relating to challenges linked to each of the four categories, for example, culture specific items (Franco Aixelá, 1996) and proper nouns (Craigie & Pattison, 2018) in the cultural matrix (p.66), and grammatical issues (Rogers et al., 2020) in the formal matrix (p. 70). The following chapter then turns more specifically to actually writing the commentary.

Chapter Four begins by looking at how to structure a translation commentary, proposing two ways of doing this depending on the length of the piece. The first, for shorter commentaries of less than 5000 words, is based on the *Thinking Translation* series and the categories outlined in the previous chapter, and Johnson suggests the structure of the commentary should follow a similar pattern, albeit emphasising some aspects more than others depending on how decisions are justified and the purpose of the translation. Here she adds that, as well as being an academic assignment, a commentary can also serve as a report for a publisher or client and for justifying translation decisions to a project manager. She then turns her attention to the second type of structure, a “themed structure” (p. 93), which, as she explains, is often used for commentaries over 5000 words to provide a longer discussion on specific topics, for example, translating humour (p. 94), cultural references (p. 95), sensitive texts (p.



98) or taboo words (p. 99). In this chapter the author does introduce the use of a 'translation journal' for writing about alternative choices (p. 91), but the reference is brief and the idea might have been developed further in relation to the scholarship on the use of such journals (Mazzei & Aibo, 2022) cited in the introduction (p. 2). The second part of the chapter then goes on to look at how to integrate theory with individual examples in the narrative of the commentary and adopts a less prescriptive tone than earlier chapters, emphasising the importance of finding theory to back up decisions rather than using theory to drive the decisions in the first place.

Moving on from structure, Chapter Five focuses on types of commentary assignments, expanding on what have been referred to in previous chapters as 'shorter' and 'longer' commentaries. Johnson distinguishes various types of short commentary assignments and differentiates them from longer dissertations, explaining that the latter, referred to as "supervised commentaries" (p. 116), often take the form of a final assignment in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (p. 116). The research component of supervised commentaries is not the focus here, rather the importance of time management and how to prepare for successful supervision. The chapter then moves on to assessment criteria in relation to aspects such as structure, style and selecting illustrative examples.

Part III of the book, "Beyond the written word", looks at writing reflective reports in the fields of interpreting, audiovisual translation, localisation and transcreation. Chapter Six focuses on interpreting and offers a detailed overview of the differences between translation and interpreting, various types of interpreting and the specific skills required for this task before moving on to writing reflective reports. Here Johnson notes that the key difference between translation commentaries and reflective reports, given the immediacy of the translation act, is that the latter are principally used as a tool to retrospectively analyse performance. Here she proposes Arumí Ribas' framework of "interpreting errors" (2010) for reflecting on five categories of errors (p. 160), suggesting that this could form the basis of an error-focused report (p. 160). Despite this difference, Johnson states that many of the aspects covered in the previous chapters are, to some extent, common to both translation commentaries and reflective reports for interpreting (p. 145), and this is reiterated in the final chapter.

The final chapter begins with a brief overview of the various types of audiovisual translation, such as subtitling (p. 177), dubbing (p. 178) and audio description (p. 179), followed by types of localisation (p. 181) and then transcreation (p. 184), which is complemented with information on training, assessment and accreditation for each area. It then goes through similar elements to those covered in Chapters One to Five for each of the three translational activities, namely source text analysis, formulation of a translation strategy, structure (including thematically structured reports), style, presentation, terminology, selecting examples and integrating theory. Relevant key references in audiovisual translation, localisation and transcreation scholarship are offered and Johnson states that a subject specific volume focusing on writing reflective reports in these areas would provide the space to ensure much greater depth (p. 202) than is available in this book.

Overall, *Writing a Translation Commentary* is a useful textbook for helping both undergraduate and postgraduate students to write organised, well-structured and well



supported translation commentary assignments and reflective reports, and as such the author's aims are achieved. However, while these sorts of commentaries are the main focus of the book, further clarification of the epistemological differences between these commentaries and the critically reflective commentaries undertaken as translation practice research would have been useful. A more ambitious analysis of critical reflection and reflexivity, key elements outlined in the theoretical framework in the introduction, might also have allowed for a discussion of the methodological application of such elements in practice research, and, as such, enabled the inclusion of translation commentaries integral to practice-led PhDs and other practice-based translation and interpreting research.

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