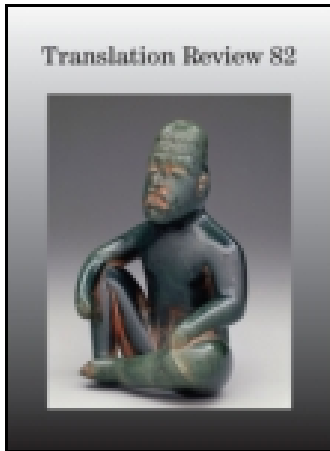


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# Teaching Students To Write In Their Own Voice: The Practice of Translation

by Janis Forman

As a novice translator and literary scholar and as an experienced instructor of expository writing, I became fascinated by the possible connections between translation and writing processes. This article first traces my process of translating a short essay by Rousseau, "La Préface de Narcisse,"<sup>1</sup> and then, with attention to the concept of voice, suggests how translation processes may apply and enrich the teaching of expository writing in our undergraduate liberal arts programs.

## Translation Processes of a Novice Translator and Literary Scholar

In his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, the German critic and literary historian August Wilhelm Schlegel urged literary scholars to develop the flexibility to transfer themselves into the peculiarities of other nations and ages, to try to *feel* these ages and nations, as it were, from their own centers. To develop this flexibility he so valued, Schlegel argued that critics must also be translators. Successful translators would be able to submerge their own voice in that of the text to be translated. As a result, their critical judgment of the text would be accompanied and tested by the empathetic understanding that emerges from the practice of translation.

I was acquainted with Schlegel's ideas when I began translating Rousseau's "Préface de Narcisse," but I had neither a map nor a set of directions for applying it to the actual practice of translation. The "Préface" is an early autobiographical essay rather than a preface to Rousseau's play, "Narcissus or the Lover of Himself." In the "Préface," Rousseau defends himself against charges of hypocrisy that readers of the First Discourse were inclined to level against him. There Rousseau argued that the arts should be banned from society because they corrupt people by arousing their passions. Meanwhile Rousseau himself wrote three operettas and seven plays between 1742 and 1752. In the "Préface," Rousseau argues that in an already corrupt society like France, the arts serve as a useful diversion, keeping people too busy to commit crimes. The considerable success of Rousseau's play "Narcissus or the Lover of Himself" probably led him to write the "Préface" in order to justify himself.

In my first attempts to translate the "Préface" I did not solidly grasp what constituted an adequate translation, although I knew it had to include a sense of Rousseau's distinctive voice as well as his argument. Through the practice of translating the "Préface," I learned that, although Schlegel does not use the word "voice," his sense of the author in the original text is precisely this. Voice, as I came to under-

stand it, is the writer's distinctive presence in his prose as readers sense the movement of the writer's mind across the page through his rhythms of syntax, diction, and thought. These characteristic rhythms of thought are both revealed by and opened up by readers in the transaction that occurs when readers follow the author, moving, for instance, between the abstract and the concrete, or extending an image, structuring an argument, or circling around a theme.

This definition emerged from thinking about my practice of translation. But my first attempts to translate Rousseau's essay did not benefit from a clear understanding of what constitutes voice. So, given neither a set of procedures nor a clear-cut goal—a sense of what the translation should be or do—I blundered into the French for a first round. The route I mapped for myself, as you will see, is characterized by its bumpiness. My "method"—if we can call it one—was to translate word for word, unwittingly adapting the pre-saussurian notion that language is a list of words and that one can simply pull the French words out one by one from the text and set them into English equivalents. The "method" focused upon what I didn't know. I stopped at every point where I was uncertain about the meaning of a word. These words, italicized in the sample section of the French, mark the places where I paused in my reading of the French:

Je suivrai pour cela, selon ma *coutume*, la méthode simple et facile qui *convient* à la vérité. J'établirai de nouveau l'état de la question, j'*exposerai* de nouveau mon sentiment, et j'attendrai que sur cet *exposé* on veuille me montrer en quoi mes actions dementent mes discours. Mes adversaires de leur côté n'auront garde de demeurer sans réponse, eux qui possèdent l'art merveilleux de disputer pour et contre sur toutes sortes de sujets. Ils commenceront, selon leur *coutume*, par établir une autre question à leur *fantaisie*; ils me la feront résoudre comme il leur conviendra: pour m'attaquer plus commodément, ils me feront raisonner, non à ma manière mais à la leur.

The translation emerged in discrete sections, each one bounded by those words or phrases whose meaning was unclear to me in the French or difficult to translate. These discrete sections were the stopping points whenever I was off to a dictionary to look up a word, and since I am not bilingual, I was frequently stalled at these semantic roadblocks.

Focusing upon the content of Rousseau's discourse alone—especially the words whose meaning I didn't know—resulted in a reading that was insensitive to his voice:

I shall pursue my usual method—simple, easy, and just right for conveying the truth. The question once established, I will reveal my feelings, expecting my enemies to show how my actions belie my words. My enemies will hardly be able to keep quiet—they who have the “wonderful” ability to argue any issue from one side or the other. They will begin, following the rules of our rhetorical tradition, to establish another question as they see fit, making me resolve it to conform with their views, knowing that this will leave me reasoning in their manner rather than in my own.

The first draft of the translation failed at what Jacques Perret calls the translator’s golden rule: “one asks him to be an ear which speaks, a hand serving a head that is not his.”

My preparation for this translation was my misreading the French text. For instance, there is little or no sense in this early draft that the semantic, syntactic, and rhythmic weight of any word—qualities that contribute to our sense of how Rousseau “sounds” in the essay—depends upon the word’s relationship to other words in the passage. You will notice some strange things in looking at my first draft against the French. Read properly, coordinate structures should be emphasized. These are italicized below:

*Je suivrai pour cela, selon ma coutume, la méthode simple et facile qui convient à la vérité. J'établirai de nouveau l'état de la question, j'exposerai de nouveau mon sentiment, et j'attendrai que sur cet exposé on veuille me montrer en quoi mes actions démentent mes discours. Mes adversaires de leur côté n'auront garde de demeurer sans réponse, eux qui possèdent l'art merveilleux de disputer pour et contre sur toutes sortes de sujets. Ils commenceront, selon leur coutume, par établir une autre question à leur fantaisie; ils me feront résoudre comme il leur conviendra; pour m'attaquer plus commodément, ils me feront raisonner, non à ma manière mais à la leur.*

Sentences typically shaped by parallel structure and by phrases of similar length contribute to the rather staid cadence of some sections and guide the reader’s attention to individual statements as self-contained units of thought. It is as if Rousseau intends his readers to pause for thought and edification at the end of each sentence.

Rousseau’s voice is characterized by a forced symmetry. The repetition of coordinate structures dominates, such as the series of independent clauses beginning “Je suivrai,” “J’établirai,” “J’exposerai,” “j’attendrai,” “Mes adversaires,” “Ils commenceront,” “ils me la feront,” “ils me feront.” The repeated *Je plus finite verb* underlines the rhythm of Rousseau’s diction. The most concrete thing in his universe is “Je.” Everything else is abstract or general, vague and inconsequential. Redundancy in content (for instance repeated words like “coutume,” “établir,” “question,” “convenir”) also reinforce our sense that the “Je” alone is important. It is “Je” versus “adversaires,” and we, the readers, are dragged along in the wake.

Looking at sentences 2 and 4 of the first draft of the translation, we see that I imposed a series of transformations on

the French that move away from Rousseau’s voice. The use of the appositive “The question once established” is an attempt to get rid of some of the *Je plus finite verb* combinations, as are the participials in sentence 4, “making me resolve,” “knowing that this will leave.” These devices for subordinating create a quicker movement and a richer sentence pattern than is present in the constrained coordination of Rousseau’s French. In addition, since I didn’t like Rousseau’s limited vocabulary nor the abstract register of his discourse, I introduced some variety by reading into the expression “selon ma coutume” the more specific “following the rules of our rhetorical tradition.”

Besides being painful and tedious, my stop-and-start method flew in the face of my goals. It became clear to me that the method had to fail if the translator’s task, when working with a text of some literary merit, is to immerse herself in the writer’s voice and then to create an English version of this often elusive quality—voice—that makes the text something more than information. The stop-and-start method might be appropriate for translating technical information where working with what advocates of machine translation call “routine for processing syntax and meaning” is all that is necessary to do an adequate translation of technical information. The test of adequacy for such a translation is whether or not the reader can perform the operation or understand the function: Can you cut the vegetables using the cuisinart following directions written in French? following directions written in English? That’s all that counts. But I was treating Rousseau’s French like a bunch of words that could be transported intact from a bag labelled French one labelled English. The word-by-word method, it seems, was a way that the translator “goes for content” and dismisses the language of the original as mere surface that one passes through and ignores on the way to what matters—the argument (or content).

Most striking and curious to me was the failure of the translation on other grounds. Upon reading the draft I found that it sounded too familiar to me. That is, it was as though Rousseau’s argument was filtered through my own characteristic voice. I had a bad case of the “egotistical sublime” and this distortion was more Rousseauistic than I intended; it was not my purpose to model myself after Rousseau in his inability to present others in voices other than his own. Because I could compare the draft to the French, the discrepancy between the languages allowed me to see the drift of my translation from the original and revealed certain patterns that characterize my voice—the overuse of participials, the use of concrete nouns and verbs, a high degree of subordination, a sentence unit that, rather than being self-contained, pushes the reader on to the sentence that follows. Moreover, I was better able to characterize my writer’s voice by comparing the draft of the translation to the original French than I might have been able to “read for voice” in essays that I had written; the rhythms of diction, sound, syntax, and thought of the original kept causing me to pause and observe my patterns in the translation—patterns that run counter to Rousseau’s.

Becoming aware of the gap between Rousseau’s voice and my own forced me to see the limitations of my first system of translating and to revise the English to conform to my

sense of what the French was doing.

In backtracking to the French for another try, my first step, since I had already looked up words I didn't know, was to read the original to get a feel for how Rousseau made his presence felt through the movement of his thought and language. This was accompanied by historical work—going to history not to read beyond the words of the text but to read them. For instance, looking into Rousseau's relationship to a tradition of rhetoric. In the "Préface" Rousseau posits the structure of logical argument (he says that he will provide evidence to back his views about the place of art in a corrupt society), but the appeal to logic is a kind of flimsy scaffolding. The substance of his argument is Rousseau's version of an ethical and pathetic appeal. That is, he tries to convince us of his worthiness and of his opponent's malevolence through the earnestness of his tone. One reason that we doubt and distrust him is that the rhythm of abstract and concrete we expect in a rational argument is absent. Rousseau sustains his discourse with abstractions and generalizations. In the sample passage, Rousseau's generalizations set up the expectation in the reader that he will bring in concrete evidence to support his claims, but he does not follow through with the details that his generalizations seem to promise.

In reading the French for voice, I let myself be absorbed by the sounds and movement of Rousseau's prose, letting the rhythm of his diction, syntax, and argument play in my head until it became my voice. I still committed nothing to paper. I just listened. Then, in trying to imagine how Rousseau would sound in English, I brought back the rhythms of repetition, the coordinating structures, especially the *Je plus finite verb*. Sentence 2 then becomes "Once again, I shall establish the nature of the question, once again reveal my true sentiment, and I shall expect my adversaries to seize on this revelation to try to show how my actions belie my words."

In translating by the stop-and-start method of my first approach, I resisted listening for Rousseau's voice; I just "went for content," since deciphering all the words I did not know had been hard enough. I was also offended by what I sensed as the temperament of the man in the essay: he was humorless, inflexible, capable of duplicity, and incapable of self-irony. His monolithic sentences presenting fully formed apparent truths seemed to prevent questions or responses from the reader. I was also so bored by Rousseau's reliance upon abstraction and parallel structures as to subvert these by turning them into concrete English expressions and participial phrases, which are pleasing to me and are qualities that I work for in my own writing.

The revised translation grew out of my decision to read the whole essay first; to allow Rousseau's voice to work in my brain before touching pen to paper; to watch whether I was resisting this and to think about why; to imagine what an English version of the "Préface" ought to sound like; and to achieve this by working microscopically and telescopically, that is, by translating each sentence with a sense of the essay's overall focus.

If the practice of translation, then, is a process by which the translator renders her sense of the author's characteristic voice in English, here are some questions that the trans-

lator can consider.

- In doing a translation, what are my options and what are the effects of choosing one word or pattern rather than another?

- Why do I choose what I choose? For example, do my choices have to do with linguistic constraints or stylistic choices?

- How does the translator's characteristic voice impede her from approximating the author's voice in English?

When translation is also regarded as a process by which the translator can develop her own voice as a writer, additional questions apply.

- What do my choices indicate about my characteristic voice?

- How does my voice change in other writings as a result of my work in translation? How, for instance, does the practice of translation expand the translator's ability as a writer by encouraging her to try new rhythms of diction and syntax and new ways of organizing thoughts as she attempts to approximate the original?

Paradoxically, a good translator makes her presence felt by her absence from the translation. If her voice is intrusive, she has spoiled the effort. The translator, when worthy of attention, is to be praised for having no distinctive voice of her own, for being anonymous. The author's voice must shine through the translation, which builds itself into our confidence, establishes itself in our minds as the way in which certain thoughts and feelings must be patterned—inevitably—by the author, not the translator.

## Translation Processes and the Teaching of Expository Writing

The practice of translation made me aware of my characteristic voice in English and its limitations—at worst I was locked into certain syntactic habits, habits of diction, ways of connecting thoughts. The need to bring Rousseau's voice into English forced me to submerge my own and in the end helped me to recognize my voice, learn its limitations, and expand it.

What, then, can be drawn from the practice of translation for teaching students to write in their own voice, or better, to discover voices, creating them as the "writing situation" changes? Here are a few connections.

1. To revise my method of translation I needed to revise the way I read: the preparation for translating from the source language is reading the original for voice. The translator, then, is a special reader: one who is reading in order to write, *one who is reading for language as well as for content*. And we have her translations as evidence of how she reads. Students in expository writing classes can also become special readers, readers who are about to write a response to a reading. Evidence of how they read is lodged in the way they write about their subjects.

But most of our students read for content alone. Language is for most of them a transparent surface that vanishes as they read, yielding information. As I observed in working with students in a combined history and writing course for sophomores, the way students talk about and write about a history book make it seem to be authorless. The book

seems to contain “the facts of history as they were and are” rather than a mind working with facts to create a coherent narrative. None of the students recognized that a “story” is written by a person who has a voice of her own for shaping an argument, for making choices about the way she presents and orders details, and for quoting sources (thus allowing a voice other than her own to carry her argument). The students assumed that language simply transmits information; they did not seem to know that language—their own writing as well as the books they read—shapes information and expresses the writer’s distinctive voice.

This kind of class is sometimes the fault of the instructor. Too often courses that should have a strong writing component, like that history course, focus upon content alone. Even a course on the study of translation gets bogged down in discussions about translation within a framework of the history of ideas and literary history. There is certainly a need for and interest in discussing why we choose to translate certain works and not others, how we re-shape literary history by our choices, leaving some texts in obscurity and retrieving others for study. But there is a problem when there is more talk about translation as a theme than there is talk about its practice, and actual in-class practice, and close readings of individual texts. Similarly, in freshman and advanced writing courses we must be careful that students’ writings rather than an anthology of readings is the center of the class. Frequently, rather than working closely with language by reading and writing every day, students spend their time discussing short stories and essays.

If student writing is the center of class activity, how then do we teach them, the history students as well as other students of composition, to “read for voice” and to write with a sense of voice? We can have these history students respond in writing to two or three versions of ostensibly the “same story,” for instance, a student’s description of her Saturday night date in a letter intended for her parents, then one on the same theme for her younger brother, and a third for her best friend. After discussing the distinctions among the stories, students may write three versions of the story, each one employing a different voice.

One difficulty in teaching voice is getting students to hear it. Imitation is a useful technique here. Just as the translator must “role-play” Rousseau in order to put together a credible version of his essay, students may role-play other writers to develop a sense of voice. Mimicking a voice other than one’s own was essential to shaping a translation with voice; similarly, students may imitate writers who have distinctive voices in order to write with a sense of voice. The instructor may first point out the obvious features of Rousseau’s or Emerson’s or Didion’s voice in a given piece of prose, and then the student may be asked to write about, for instance, a rock concert or a visit to a park as Rousseau or Emerson or Didion would have written about it.

2. Reading for voice was essential to my revised translation of Rousseau’s “Préface.” The stop-and-start method used in the first draft prevented me from being absorbed in Rousseau’s voice and from taking hold of it to create an

English approximation. If instructors of expository writing confine their comments on student papers to remarks about single words and errors in punctuation, they will be teaching their students by these comments to see writing as the word-by-word process of my first translation. Moreover, as is clear from my first and final drafts of Rousseau’s “Préface,” any attempt to correct or modify students’ style is an act of translation. Since acts of translation modify or destroy voice, writing instructors need to be careful not to stick to the word or sentence level when asking students to revise their essays.

Generally college students assume that revision is a cosmetic trick (if they consider it at all). To most of them, revision is a matter of finding a more suitable word, so they hunt for synonyms. By instructors’ responding to a sense of voice in student writing (or to the possibility for voice in it), they will help students write with a sense of voice. So will encouraging students to view first drafts as first efforts rather than as final drafts. Schlegel’s argument, then, that critics must be translators applies to students and teachers as well whenever they act as special readers and writers—the ones who read and write with a sense of voice.

3. Because freshman and sophomore introductory courses in the major disciplines often focus on acquisition of the discipline’s vocabulary, students seem to equate successful writing in the academic disciplines with using the jargon. Using the new nouns and verbs they have learned is for many of them the hallmark of the economist or the biologist or the historian. Students’ exclusive focus on learning new words and concepts to which these words are tied is very much like my first attempts to translate when I was so compelled by a need to know the content that I forgot the larger picture. Writing instructors can have their students put jargon in its proper place by asking them to minimize the jargon in translating ideas they may have just learned in the introductory courses for an educated but nonspecialist reader.

One side benefit of translating from the disciplines is that students become better readers of these disciplines. It is not unusual for students to use the jargon belonging to the discipline, but, upon performing the reflexive act of rereading and interpreting the language of the discipline, they see that the meaning of special terms is unclear. Translation, then, operates as a heuristic, helping students to pinpoint gaps in their understanding of concepts in the discipline.

Despite the belief of ancient rhetoricians that the practice of translation helped young rhetoricians develop both ideas (*invention*) and facility with language (*style*), translation has been virtually ignored in today’s expository writing classes.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because those who instruct expository writing have little or no training in foreign languages and translation, the links between translation and expository remain obscure. As this exploration of my own translation process and its application to writing instruction suggests, it is, then, for professional translators and for students and instructors of translation and foreign languages to bridge the gap.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>The translation appears as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Preface to *Narcisse*," translated, edited, and with an introduction by Benjamin R. Barber and Janis Forman, in *Political Theory*, Volume 6, Number 4, November 1978, pp. 537-554.

<sup>2</sup>In Book 10 of *The Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian discusses the benefits of translation. Closely related topics, pastiche and paraphrase, are also considered in this book.

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