Restoring the Drum Museum, Beijing, 2006

This article was published in *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 12.3-10 (2004). Most points are still valid. And updated version is given as a lecture (see 'Lectures')

JOURNALS AND QUALITY IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

Cay Dollerup, Copenhagen, Denmark

www.cay-dollerup.dk

In this article I shall address research expertise and quality in Translation Studies as an editor of a scholarly journal in the field, namely 'Perspectives: Studies in Transla-

tology'.[1] 'Perspectives' mostly seems to attract contributors with novel ideas in the area which I term 'cultural translation'. However, the journal is not exclusive and has also published theoretical as well as empirical studies.

No two journals are alike. Nevertheless, I hope to make some general points about the role of journals in research expertise guidance and their potential as powerful learning tools for authors whose contributions are published.

Journal publications represent the cutting edge of research, the general advances in a discipline, and they combine research with quality. In the editorial process, they are combined with selection and constructive criticism. I shall discuss journals as (a) an editor, (b) as a potential contributor to any journal, (c) as a user of journal articles, and (d) as a reader of reviews. But let me also hasten to add that whatever is presented here is more of an ideal than reality.

Journals and scholarship

Many features are easier to understand when journals are placed in the major fabric of scholarship.

According to an old UNESCO study, knowledge in the world is doubling every seventh year. No matter whether this is the right figure, there is no reason to question the overall assessment that human knowledge is expanding. The type of knowledge we are concerned with in scholarship is founded on systematic and stringent research (as defined within the given discipline). Scholarship is published in the form of brief messages, information, lectures, papers, in small informal fora, at conferences, in journals and in books. In this way, it becomes part of the shared and public pool of human knowledge. A rule of thumb says that there is a journal for every eighty scholars in a field. These journals have widely different audiences and circulations. Some may be confined to one university, others to one nation, and others again may be international.

To many scholars, journals are a first step in publication and to others the first stage of publishing what they hope will eventually become a book. One achieves recognition in the scholarly community by publishing, but it requires an effort and the higher the ambition and the more prestigious the journal, the harder the work. Several years ago, the

Modern Language Association of America published a study showing that it is actually more difficult to have an article than a book accepted for publication, although most people tend to consider books more prestigious.

It has also been claimed – in the old UNESCO study - that only two per cent of all research is of enduring value. The concept of 'enduring value' varies from field to field. How long is an article referred to? My feeling is that, in the humanities, it takes most articles twenty years to make the grade, but also that this span may have been reduced considerably in recent years. A study in the field of botany has shown that the time between the publication of an article and its absorption in the scholarly community would vary, from subdiscipline to subdiscipline, from 1.5 to 17 years – defined by means of 50% of the references made to it.[2]

Commitments to publisher and readers

A journal and its editors have obligations. (a) to maintain a high standard, and (b) to ensure an influx of good contributions. The survival of a journal depends on whether these obligations are met or not.

In the long run, survival in the journal world depends on quality because this ensures a sufficient number of stable subscribers, including libraries. This, in turn, presupposes that there is a steady demand for past, present and future contributions. This enviable state can only be achieved by maintaining quality and providing a valuable source of information and inspiration for new research. Good articles attract more good articles and are thus also a fine means of attracting new contributors.

Types of scholarly publications

A bit crudely, scholarly journals and collective works could be classified as follows:

1. Uncritical collections. They are exemplified by conference proceedings which do not separate the wheat from the chaff. They demonstrate to the powers that be that the contributors publish.

2. Those that count on the safe bets and publish contributions from established scholars. And
3. Those that invite contributions from everybody.

No journal relies exclusively on one of these policies, but the trend is there. 'Perspectives' belongs to the third category. Since our main area is 'cultural translation', research expertise is harder to define than in, say, corpus-based or psychology-oriented empirical Translation Studies.

Contributions

About 25% of our contributions are submitted because members of the editorial board have heard or read them and encouraged the authors to publish.

The decisive criteria in terms of quality and research are:

Whether the central ideas or approaches

- (a) are novel and original. Ideally there should be one original idea per three pages,
- (b) are well presented, and
- (c) do stand up to close scrutiny.

These factors are also crucial to research expertise in other contexts. Articles which do not meet these criteria have little chance of acceptance.

The next question also has a bearing on research expertise, namely: are the central points conveyed comprehensibly? Submissions must be structured in such a way that connections are logical and consistent and the central ideas stand out clearly. The style must be reasonably good. These features are extremely relevant and cannot be emphasised too often.[3] It is a minus, not to say impolite, to submit articles which do not bear witness to a minimum of willingness to follow our style sheet which is printed in most issues of the journal and also posted on the Internet.

Upon receipt of a submission, I browse through it to check whether it seems to be worth the subsequent efforts. If it is unsuitable for 'Perspectives', for instance, by lying outside the field of Translation Studies, it is returned to the author with this information. Rehashed articles are also stopped at this stage. Conversely, it does not matter at all

whether the other editors and I agree with the author or not. This preliminary examination weeds out about half the material submitted.

Depending on the content of an article, it will then be circulated or sent to outside referees if there is no appropriate expertise on the board: referees are asked only to assess (a) whether the article is publishable in general, and (2) specifically in 'Perspectives', (3) is original given the author's placement in geography, and a few other things Referees tend to be busy, so refereeing should be kept to a minimum, especially since anonymous refereeing is well-nigh impossible in Translation Studies. Refereeing is also used with caution: the American refereeing comments I have met with have not been masterpieces of guidance. So referees are employed to guide the editors - not the authors. Comments, if any, are taken into account.

The article is then gone over again and either accepted or accepted provisionally, depending on the nature of the emendations required.

The author is informed accordingly.

Leaving aside the stylistic revision that is undertaken by a native English speaker and an editor, we now concentrate on editorial work, the overriding principle of which is to bring the good and novel points into focus. Queries, emendations, omissions and additions suggested are all done by hand or on a separate sheet. These are precise, since, as an author of articles and books, I always find vague instructions such as "we would like you to expand on the point about ..." more confusing than informative: I am given no direction about what type of expansion I am expected to provide. So our comments are precise. What do these comments address?[3] First and foremost they concern (1) the structure of the presentation. Frequently contributors (2) leave out crucial transitions. There is often (3) a failure to perspectivise findings. Other weaknesses are (4) irrelevant discussion, (5) too much exemplification, (6) repetition, and (7) inclusion of local or national material – at least in the context of publication in an international journal. The contribution must be interesting and lucid to readers who are interested in Translation Studies worldwide, not only at one single university.

In a few cases, authors have not referred to publications which they ought to know. In cases where these clearly are not available to the author, we send them along or request a specific phrasing which solves the problem.

The above illustrates that the interplay between contributor and editor constitutes intensive and specific research guidance. It is a pity that it cannot be undertaken face to face but has to be sent by mail to the author with a request to revise the article, taking the comments into account. A letter may – in excerpts – run as follows:

> We have now checked your article and prepared it for publication. Please take note that the criticism is given in order to make your contribution read better ... We now go over the article, page by page.
> P. 2. Please use minuscules, possibly bold letters instead of capitals.
> P. 3. No numbers in subheadings (Style sheet).
> P. 4. You must be specific about the objectives of the study. Burying them the way you do here is to do readers a disservice. ...

There is nothing sensational about such suggestions – I also get them when I contribute to well-known journals. All respectable journals suggest constructive emendations. However, even though authors are made aware that the criticism is constructive, c. thirty to fifty per cent of the contributors fail to send in a revised article. These are losses to 'Perspectives' – not necessarily to Translation Studies. Quite a few of these contributions later appear in other journals with substantial changes. In my experience, acceptance of criticism is related to (1) the rhetorical norms of the contributor's culture and (b) the contributor's experience, meaning that seasoned researchers are more appreciative of constructive comments whereas junior scholars take them too seriously, and senior scholars who have not had their material checked previously consider any comment offensive.

More than half of the authors return revised manuscripts - sometimes with a note of thanks which is gratifying, although it is an editor's duty to raise the level of presentation and the communication of research. The revised manuscript is read to make sure it

can stand on its own. It is never checked against the emendations suggested since the author has considered the objections and emendations and often come up with better solutions than the ones forwarded. So, apart from the instructional effect, there is often better thinking, increased expertise if you will.

Reviews: the last filter

In my view, the most important feature for the promotion of Translation Studies is that books are reviewed in journals. Used by librarians, scholars and graduates for guiding book purchases, reviews constitute a last filter. Given the present flood of publications in Translation Studies, reviews become increasingly important. We try to reflect this in 'Perspectives'. A review should describe a book and then assess its place and relevance to Translation Studies – this, at least, is our aim. The review should be fair, but, if the overall assessment is that a book is poor and the reviewer has no personal axe to grind, it is my firm conviction that a journal is obliged to publish the review. This should be done (1) to enhance the journal's credibility, (2) to show that there is no favouritism, and (3) because the reviewer has spent time on the review. Especially with a damning review, reviewers must, of course, be careful. And, if one has been so, it is frustrating to have editors tell one that a book as poor as that should not be reviewed at all. This has happened to me – and I see the editors' point, but, on the other hand, that kind of policy does nothing to improve research expertise.

Journals and the Internet

I do not believe that Internet journals will replace paper journals in the cultural area of Translation Studies in the near future.

The Internet may be fine for rapid exchanges, for posting contributions in a preliminary form and for breakthroughs that are to be communicated quickly. However, the Internet fails to provide the tangibility and durability which is essential to ideas that require contemplation, cogitation and rumination. I referred to the citation time in the field of botany and to my feeling that the citation span is also being reduced in the humanities. Even so, it is thought-provoking that, even in botany, 90% of all citations of many works

dated from the last 100 years. Good publications still had 10% of their use for reference potential left a century after they first appeared. If this goes for botany, why should it not also apply to Translation Studies?

Furthermore: the paper journal has more prestige. I doubt that we are going to see many references to the same Internet publication. Finally, in this context, I wish to stress that the Internet does not offer the same intense and constructive feedback that one can get from conscientious journal editors.

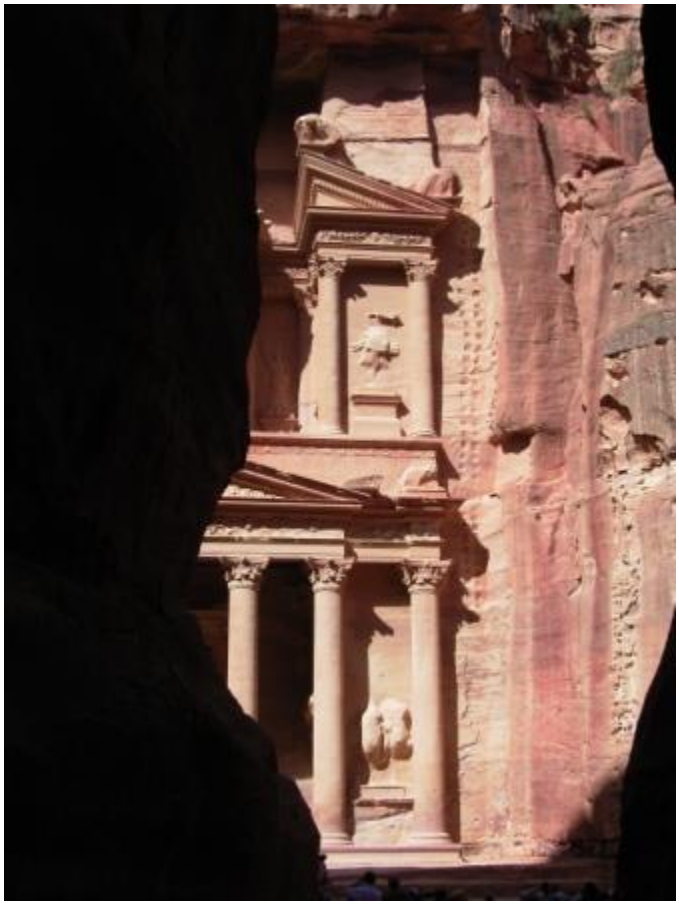
Notes

The article is based on a presentation in the panel on research expertise at the EST congress. The other participants were Heidrun Gerzymisch-Arbogast, Andrew Chesterman and Daniel Gile (chair and organiser).

1. Information about 'Perspectives' is available at http://www.engelsk.ku.dk/translation-studies/index.html

2. For this information, I am indebted to Gert Steen Mogensen, editor of an international journal in botany, who had been on a committee investigating the question.

3. Many of these points were also taken up by Heidrun Gerzymisch-Arbogast, Andrew Chesterman and Daniel Gile (from other angles). When I began my scholarly career, I would sometimes meet with editors' forewords concerned with lists of frequent weaknesses and advice about how to avoid them. I have not seen any for quite some years.



The visitor's first view of Petra, Jordan