

A Methodology for Historical Translation Criticism

What follows is a suggested procedure for rhetorical criticism applied to History of Translation, for use by university students and teachers, or translation researchers working with historical texts. The scope of the chosen topic will obviously depend upon the size of the assignment: a 2000-word essay undertaken as part of a university curricular unit would obviously require a much narrower scope than a PhD dissertation or multi-centre research project.

1. Choose your text(s):

Your choice of text(s) will depend upon your prior knowledge (linguistic, historical, generic etc) and personal interests. Naturally the analysis will be facilitated if you choose to work with an author, genre, culture or period that you already know something about or are interested in. You will need to have very good reading skills in the target language(s), and ideally in the source language too (though this may not always be possible in historical contexts).

Texts chosen for analysis may be *literary* (canonical or non-canonical), *sacred* (e.g. vernacular versions of the scriptures), *pragmatic* (legal documents, historical chronicles, private correspondence, reports etc), *scientific* or *philosophical* (treatises, philosophical essays), *propaganda* (political pamphlets, publicity, etc) or other genre. If possible it is a good idea to select something that motivates you personally for some reason, as this will generate an emotional investment that will animate your analysis.

2. Choose your approach:

You may choose to focus on:

- the text (*rhetorical artefact*): this might involve a comparison of source text and translation, or of different translations of the same text, etc
- the translator (*rhetor*): this is particularly appropriate if the translator is a figure of some historical significance or inherent interest (e.g. Chaucer, Hölderlin, Sir Richard Burton), though the category could also include the study of translations produced under the auspices of a particular school, society or publishing house (e.g. School of Toledo, Royal Society, Penguin Classics). Typically this would involve looking at different translations produced by the same rhetor.
- the context (*situation*): this might involve a study of translation(s) produced under a particular regime (e.g. Court of Louis XIV, Portuguese *Estado Novo*) or in particular historical or cultural circumstances (German Romanticism; post-War Britain).
- the subject (*message*): this would involve examining translations produced in the same or different languages in order to understand how a particular subject was being treated in a particular historical context (e.g. the astrolabe in early modern scientific translations;

representations of the East in Victorian Orientalist translations;
representations of Jesus in non-conformist religious literature)

3. Formulate a research question: this may emerge naturally from your reading of the text and background material. You should seek to focus upon some aspect that is problematic or requires clarification (because it has not been investigated before or is inherently complex), or which attracts you because it deals with a question that concerns you in some way. Example research questions include:

- Text-oriented: How have particular features of a text been translated in different versions (e.g. impersonal structures in a scientific text; markers of register in a propaganda texts; metre or metaphor in poetry, etc)?
- Reader-oriented: How does a particular translation construct its reader (compared to the source text or to other translations of the same text)? How was the translation received in the target culture?
- Translator-oriented: What does the translation reveal about the worldview or motivations of the translator/school/publishing house responsible for it? How does a particular author's translational output compare to their 'original' writings?
- Context-oriented: What function is a particular translation serving in a particular historical or cultural context?
- Message-oriented: What message is being transmitted about a particular subject by a group of translations from the same or different periods and contexts? How is a message altered in the process of translation?

4. Analyse your data:

Once you have established your research question, you will need to process the translations in the light of it. This will involve noting down all examples of the feature you are studying or things related to it, and then categorizing or grouping them in some logical way. You may have to undertake further background study into aspects that emerge from this process (historical, political, cultural, linguistic, biographical, etc). Generally speaking, it is a good idea to allow the questions to guide the research rather than the other way around, though of course you may have to be prepared to be flexible if your initial orientation draws a blank or if you discover that the question you are researching has already been covered by others or is too vast to be done in the time available.

5. Writing your text:

Plan your text before you write it. This will involve selecting and ordering the material and then framing it with an Introduction (in which you specify what you are trying to do) and a Conclusion (in which you discuss the extent to which you succeeded in doing that). The style and formatting conventions will be determined by the publication or institution overseeing the research.