How to write a commentary

The commentary exercise
For some of the assessments you are doing, you might be required to produce a commentary to accompany the translation you have produced. On the MA Specialised Translation module, the commentary will be used to compare and contrast the translation approaches taken to texts from two different domains. Different word limits will apply for different modules, so please check your module handbook for details.

Why is it important?
Penelope Sewell argues that "Commentary-writing provides a different kind of outlet, a place where theoretical knowledge really comes into its own because it is being applied to a practical situation" (2002: p.22).

For Sewell, writing commentaries contributes to the mastery of the art of translation by raising the student’s awareness of the factors which affect translation. In addition, it hones the ability to articulate choices, a skill which is highly valued by the professional translators she canvassed, who are often called upon to defend their choices to clients.

Getting ready to write a commentary
If you lay the groundwork carefully, the commentary will start to write itself. Begin by choosing your text or texts, designing your brief and carrying out your source text analysis. There are handouts to help with all of these in the How to Translate section of these webpages.

For your commentary, you will need to incorporate plenty of background reading (please visit the Building Bibliographies page for advice on building a list of references). It is crucial that you hold off on completing your draft translation until you have a clear idea of what research is needed to underpin your commentary. The purpose of the commentary, and the attendant background reading, is to develop your translation skills, render your translation choices more sophisticated, and push the boundaries of your thinking. It is a serious academic endeavour and we are looking for serious input. If you complete the translation first, and then play a game of panic-catch-up on the commentary, it comes off badly and inevitably attracts a poorer mark. More importantly, you haven't learnt anything, since you have translated in exactly the same way you would have done before.
Therefore, **do your background reading up front**, as you encounter decisions that need to be made, and use it to inform the translation process.

This means researching your chosen genre and text-type(s) **when** you are situating your source, rather than **retrospectively**. Similarly, it means exploring your text-specific challenges (proper nouns, humour, culture-bound terms, etc.) **before** you begin translating.

### Writing your commentary

There is not necessarily a ‘right way’ to structure and organise your commentary. We are looking for a plausible and well justified project, which is logically organised and well expressed. It should engage with a good range of academic literature.

Your commentary should aim to cover the following areas:

1. **A justification of your project.**
   Why did you choose this ST, and what is the purpose of your TT? Use this section to situate your ST (using Nord’s T.O.S.T.A method) and to discuss the parameters of your brief. It is advisable to focus upon points of difference, or interesting challenges raised, rather than trying to cover everything. See the handout **Source Text Analysis**.

2. **Your global translation strategy**
   What overall strategy have you adopted, in order to achieve the effect you are aiming for? See the handout on 'Determining your Overall Strategy' in the **How to Translate** section of this website. I have two pieces of advice to give here. Firstly, it is advisable to decide on your global strategy **before** you start to translate, rather than trying to apply a theory retrospectively. Secondly, in order to produce a successful commentary, you will need to explore your macrostrategy thoroughly. If for example, you decide to adopt Nida’s approach, we will expect you to demonstrate that you are conversant with his writings beyond a superficial application of the terms 'dynamic' and 'formal' equivalence. Equally, if you select a strategy based upon Venutian concepts, we will expect a thorough understanding of the notions of foreignising and domesticating.

3. **Specific problems encountered during translation**
   The purpose of the commentary is to allow you to reflect in a critical way on the translation decisions you have made. To do so, you need to make precise reference to specific examples from your translation. Do not present these as a list: a good analysis will group and organise the examples into a coherent narrative. The way in which you do this will depend entirely on the nature of your project. You should make reference to
relevant translation theories in the course of your discussion. You may wish to describe a range of potential solutions to a given translation problem, before explaining why you opted for your final choice. You may also wish to make reference to appropriate parallel texts in the target language which have informed your choices. You need to show how your translation decisions relate to the global translation strategies you have already outlined.

**Bibliography**