Writing a Dissertation in Translation Studies

Introduction to Translation Studies

There is an absolutely vast body of research which is carried out in the name of Translation Studies. People have been writing about translation ever since translators have been translating. Some of the earliest writings about translation are those which tell us how the earliest Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible were made, between the 3rd and the 1st centuries BC in Alexandria. And scholars have continued to write on the subject ever since then. But it was only in 1972 that the name 'Translation Studies' was coined, by an American scholar working in Europe called James S Holmes (we are not supposed to give his middle initial a full stop, apparently, because it stands for his mother's name).

James S Holmes' article was a foundational statement, mapping out a newly-emerging field. Holmes described the scope of the discipline as: 'the phenomena of translating and translation'. Note the distinction he makes between translating and translation. That distinction demonstrates that there are two basic research models you could adopt:

a. A **product-oriented** approach, looking at the translation itself, either in isolation as a piece of text in its own right, or by adopting a comparative approach, looking at the text in relation to its original, or in relation to other translated texts.

b. A **process-oriented** approach, looking at the way in which a translation is produced, how the translator works, the choices s/he makes.
1: Text Analysis and Translation

You could undertake a straight-forward analysis of a translation (TT = target text), side by side with its original text (ST = source text). You might want to use a work of fiction that has recently been translated or you might prefer to work with a non-fiction text.

The website of the European parliament is also a good source of texts in multiple languages for you to work with. http://www.europarl.europa.eu. For example, one year a student on Translation Theory and Practice worked on the 'Differences in the way that the financial crisis is portrayed in French, Italian and English' (based upon an article drawn from the European Parliament website).

Or you could examine several different translations of the same text, produced at different times, to highlight the different strategies used. You could examine the press reviews as part of your study, and if you choose a very recent translation, you may even come across events organised by the publishers in which the translator discusses their work.

2: Translation Quality Assessment

The second research area is the assessment of a translation’s quality. There are two ways of attacking this. In an environment where translators are being trained, how are the translations assessed or marked? What are the examining criteria? You could questionnaire tutors marking translations from different languages to see what criteria are used. Does it make a difference if the translation is a grammatical exercise, or if the translation is being done for a different purpose? Alternatively, you could consider looking at how quality checking is done in a big organisation like the European Commission. This organisation has an enormous through-put. The DGT (Directorate-General for Translation) handles documents being translated into and out of the 24 official languages of the EU. What are their quality procedures?
The second way of looking at the idea of translation quality is to consider its effects on the reader. This is most easily done within the publishing environment. So with a published translation, you could have a look at the way it has been received in the press, by looking at the reviews written by the critics; you could also consider publishers’ expectations of what a translation should be like.

3: Genre translation

In the area of genre translation there are endless possibilities. You could adopt a comparative approach, such as we have already discussed, examining for example several different translations of the same poem in your language pairing. Or you could look at the very distinct area of translation for the stage, perhaps taking a particular production for your starting-point. Lots of foreign plays are staged every year, often using a new translation as a script. Even if the script isn’t published, you can often find out a lot about the play from reviews and maybe even interviews with the director and translator on YouTube (I am thinking for example of the production of Moliere’s Tartuffe, translated by Roger McGough in 2008).

But genre translation does not have to mean literature. A few years ago, we had a student who worked on a project examining how the requirements of legal translation differ depending on whether one is translating for the specialist or the lay reader. She took as her starting-point the writings of a tutor she had worked with on her year abroad. You could consider how translation is used in a journalistic context (for example, the print newspaper The Guardian Weekly, combines articles from The Guardian, The Observer and The Washington Post with articles translated from Le Monde).

When you are undertaking a comparative study, have a think about what kind of stance you are going to adopt. Will it be a descriptive approach, or one that is more judgemental?

An example of the first would be Gideon Toury’s examination of the different Hebrew versions Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ (Toury 1995: 193-205). Toury was the father of what is known as Descriptive Translation Studies. He aimed to describe what is going on in the translation process, without adjudicating, and in this case showing how the translators were adjusting their text to the norms of Israeli culture.

On the other hand, Anne Cluysenaar’s Introduction to Literary Stylistics (London: Batsford, 1976) adopts is less neutral, unfavourably comparing C. Day Lewis’ translation of Les Pas to Paul Valery’s original poem. She says “its inadequacy illustrates much more than a personal failure on Day Lewis’ part: it illustrates a failure in translation theory as applied to literature” (p.41).
4: Multimedia Translation

This covers the area of dubbing, revoicing and subtitling, and offers lots of possibilities. You could choose a particular film that you have seen, and use it as the basis of a case study. It is probably a good idea to focus upon a particular feature of the film’s dialogue. For example, a student in the past has worked on the Scottish film Trainspotting, examining the translation of slang and culture-specific references, and another has looked at last year’s film *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis*, a comedy where the main character moves from the South to the North of France and is utterly foxed by the strange patois they speak there. A third student looked at the translation of three songs in the Disney film *Enchanted*.

Or instead of a specific case study, you could focus your attentions instead upon the particular policy which is applied in a country where your language is spoken. One of our students had been hired to produce a voice-over translation of a film while on her Year Abroad in Russia and was fascinated by the process: voice-over translation is provided by a single, rather monotonous voice (see for example in news reports), and is sometimes used to dub films.

5: Translation and Technology

This is probably rather a specialised area for someone new to Translation Studies. It covers the use of Computer-Aided Translation tools (CAT tools), Translation Memories that translators use to speed up the translation process, and so on.

But this website describes quite a straightforward project to evaluate how machine translation tools such as Google translate deal with particular kinds of texts, using pairs of sentences, written in British English and internationalised English, which some of you may find interesting and adaptable: [http://www.techscribe.co.uk/techw/student-project-machine-translation.htm](http://www.techscribe.co.uk/techw/student-project-machine-translation.htm)

Dorothy Kenny, a researcher in Translation Studies at Dublin City University and currently our external examiners on the Master’s, has worked on a real-life project to improve the way that machine translation copes with translations of weather reports from English to Irish: showing how standardizing the language of the input improved the quality of the output.

6: Translation History

When considering the history of translation in a particular culture, or area, the focus can be diachronic (seeing how the practice has developed over time) or synchronic (where the study is more focussed upon a particular time period).
This article would be an example of the latter: José Lambert, Lieven D’Hulst, Katrin Van Bragt (1985), « Translated Literature in France 1800-1850 », in The Manipulation of Literature, Theo Hermans (éd.), London and Sydney : Croom Helm. You would consider who was translating, what they were translating, on whose behalf and why (ie who was paying them to do it and what was their purpose in commissioning the translations), as well as of course how they were translating. Was there, for example, a dominant methodology?

Another possibility is that you focus upon a particular translator, examining the different translations that they have done, looking at their motivations, their choices of text, their strategies, perhaps their training, their biographies. See for example, Hilary Brown (2012), Luise Gottsched the Translator (Rochester, NY: Camden House)

And don't be misled by the term 'history'. This could be a very up-to-date project. We are so often told that the market for translated literature is weak in the United Kingdom, that customers would rather choose home-grown over translated literature. However, this might be in the process of changing, following the runaway success of the Swedish writer Sven Larsson's Millennium Trilogy and the new authors such as Norwegian Jo Nesbo following in his wake.

7: Translation Ethics

The area of translation ethics is quite wide-ranging. It covers everything from the translator’s rights to the copyright of their translation (often these belong to the publisher), to issues revolving around the way that a political power can wield power through translation in the colonies.

For example, a past student project looked at Haiti. This was the earliest French colony to gain its independence in 1804, but French continued to be the language used in political circles for decades afterwards, and an official Haitian Creole dictionary has only recently been produced.

A possible project could be an examination of the codes of practice that are in place to guide or govern the work of translators in a particular country or context.

Some of you are European Studies students. You have been studying work in translation throughout your University careers. You might want to explore the topic of reading in translation, of teaching/ learning literature in translation: what are the implications, what's the policy? You could examine the set texts on a European Studies course (for example the Landmarks in Literature course for first years). Particular editions are recommended. Why have they been chosen and by whom? Is it possible for the students to find out about the translators? What sort of information is included about the translator or indeed the translation process in the texts themselves?
8: Terminology and Glossaries

This is another rather specialist area, but it might still be possible to find some material for research. Terminology management is crucial to the success of a translator that works in a specialist field. A possible project could look at the new generation of cloud-based applications that translators can use to manage their terminology databases.

POSSIBLE PROJECT: a study on the impact of recent cloud-based applications on the translation industry, for example the new online terminology management portal www.Termwiki.com.

9: The Translation Process

This again is a more specialised area which looks not at the product (the translation itself) but at the process - the way that translators work:

- How translators distribute their time
- How they use reference material
- How they revise (and when)
- How they keep up-to-date
- How they use technology, translation memory, etc

There are many different methods that can be used to study the working methods of translators, from the straightforward (questionnaires, observations) to more technical strategies, such as key-stroke logging or eye-tracking (key-stroke logging using software to record the words that a translator types, used to monitor for example how a translator edits or revises their work; eye-tracking uses camera technology to record where a translator looks, what they look at, in what order they process tasks).

POSSIBLE PROJECT: how professional translators make use of an online forum such as www.proz.com to keep up-to-date, to share terminology, to network

POSSIBLE PROJECT: examine the use of a particular new technology (for example eye-tracking) in TS research

10: Translator training

This covers the areas of curriculum design, teaching, delivery: who decides what to teach on a translation course and why, and what does the research say about it.

This area also bleeds into the domain of pedagogical research. You could look at how the act of translation can be used to improve a student’s language skills. You find examples of this type in journals devoted to

POSSIBLE PROJECT: a study of the Optimale (Optimising professional translator training in a multilingual Europe) project (http://www.translator-training.eu/)

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language teaching, such as this one which looks at whether or not using translation as a teaching tool helps students to retain the vocabulary that they are being introduced to: Kirsten M. Hummel (2010), 'Translation and Short-Term L2 Vocabulary Retention: Help or Hindrance?' Language Teaching Research vol 14 (1), pp.61-74. Available online.

11: The Translation Profession

The final area considers the status of the translator. Wendy Leech's MSc thesis at Imperial College, The Translator’s Visibility: An Investigation into public perceptions of the translator and how to raise the translator’s status in society (available online here), examines public perceptions of the translator in Britain. She questionnaired members of the public, professional translators and language students for her research.

For your project in this area, you could consider how a professional association has developed in a country where the language you study is spoken, for example.

Bibliography
