Technology and Greek in the Translation Course

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Abstract
The Greek or Latin literature in translation course is useful yet problematic. It offers a glimpse into the subject to entice first year students and to edify non-majors. Instructors, however, are left with the task of attempting to contextualize and explain works to their Greek-less and Latin-less students without the aid of the original language to differentiate ideas. It is certainly possible to cover large concepts, such as μῆνις. If, however, the word 'anger' appears past the first line of the *Iliad*, how is a student to know if it represents μῆνις or something else which should impact their understanding the passage? Similarly, if given two different translations of the same text, how can a student judge the relative merit of those translations without knowledge of the original? In an academic environment where undergraduates are being encouraged to conduct original research earlier, educators can not simply provide translations minus understanding of the original language without robbing their students of vital information that could spur them on to further work.
This paper documents a class wherein we attempted to bridge the gap between the translations and Greek texts. Our goal was not only to introduce our students to the works and the world where they originated but to also provoke critical thought and allow our students to engage directly with the original texts. Using a series of three projects, we demonstrated to the students how they could tackle and begin to understand an unfamiliar language via tools freely available on the internet. Based on our experiences teaching this class and reactions gathered from our students, we propose a new potential model for literature in translation courses.

In 1913, Clarence Bill penned an article discussing the recent introduction of beginning Greek and Greek literature in translation classes to universities. He bemoaned that "in spite of the opposition these courses have met with in some quarters, they are evidently here to stay."[1] From the very beginning the major objection to translation courses has been that they lack the rigor of study and depth of understanding that comes from reading a work in the original Greek. The overall value of the literature in translation class is evidenced by its continued existence in course catalogs. Yet it is an inescapable truth that translations by their very nature are not the same as the original text, that

> "[the] translator, as the product of his or her own time, will add, consciously or unconsciously, elements that the original author never even conceived of, elements that may be due to linguistic constraints, given that no two languages are ever identical, or to stylistic or genre shifts, or, most likely to audience

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[1] Bill, Clarence P., "Business of a College Greek Department," 112.

expectations."[2]

As instructors in ancient literature it is our duty to assist our students in stripping away our modern attitudes as we read and to attempt to explain the text and its concepts from the standpoint of a contemporary. This is especially critical in a translation course, where the addition of extraneous elements is doubled, we must provide the extra help to those students who do not or have not had the time or opportunity to study Greek or Latin. Small concepts can be handled on a case by case basis, we need to explain *μῆνις* and *virtus* to our students or we would be doing them a disservice, but we can not spend time on every word. The particularly industrious and curious student could always seek out the information on her own, but the process of getting the original text and a dictionary then deciphering it all can be intimidating if not downright confusing. The process has grown easier with the development of tools like those found at the Perseus Digital Library (PDL)[3]; the original texts with word definitions are easily obtained and can be viewed side-by-side with translations. The availability of this sort of technology, and the desire to further refine and develop it, was the primary force in the curriculum for a course we taught in the Spring semester of 2013 at Tufts University.

The course description for CLS 31, Classics of Greece, was perhaps deceptively simple, "A study of major Greek literary works in translation. Authors include Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plato."[4] What we intended to teach did fit that description but was much more grand in scope. We wanted to take students who we assumed had little to no exposure to Ancient Greek and have them work directly with

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[2] Bassnett, "Translation, Classics and Education," 9-10.
[3] http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/
[4] Tufts, *Spring 2013 Course Offerings*, 47.

those authors in the original language. We intended to do this by first introducing the students to the Greek alphabet and then assigning them a series of three projects, wherein we would teach the students how to navigate and make use of the PDL and then later the Alpheios Project interface. Our goal was to demonstrate to the students that they could start from no knowledge of a language and, with the proper tools, be able to reach enough insight into a text to produce a critical reading of a translation of that text.

We are not the first to attempt this reintroduction of Greek to the translation course. David Porter wrote in the 70's of teaching his translation students a "modicum of Greek" via a "mini-course in the Greek language."[5] More recently, Anne Mahoney wrote of using the PDL in her classes to illustrate the use of formulaic language as a Homeric convention and its relation to oral composition.[6] Our class lies somewhere in the middle of these two approaches. Porter provided grammar instruction to his students in a more traditional manner, using a weekly discussion group to cover second declension nouns, basic verb forms, etc.,[7] something which we did not attempt. Mahoney limited the scope of her students' projects to Homeric epithets, while we encompassed a broader field of subjects and authors.

Our utilization of technological resources was central to the success of the class. The PDL is more than just a corpus of digitized Greek and Latin texts, it provides many services for textual research and analysis. Our students spent most of their time on the PDL reading in the text viewer, wherein it is possible to see the original Greek and an English translation

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[5] Porter, "A Modicum of Greek," 97.
[6] Mahoney, "Exploring Homeric Language," 71.
[7] Porter, "A Modicum of Greek," 98-99.

side-by-side[8], and utilizing the Greek Word Study Tool, which provides not only vocabulary

definitions but syntactic forms and frequency statistics[9]. The accessibility of the texts coupled

with their digital structure which links every word to the Word Study Tool made quite tractable the

difficult task of having non-Greek students understand a Greek sentence. The other tools we

introduced our students to were developed by the Alpheios Project.[10] The Alpheios Greek and

Latin tools provide easy access to vocabulary and grammatical information much like Perseus;

they also provide the ability to track a user's learning, to view and create translation alignments,

and to view and edit treebanks "large collections of Classical texts in which the syntactic,

morphological and lexical information for each word is made explicit."[11] For our final assignment

we had our students use the Alpheios Alignment Editor[12] and the stored treebanks.

Project 1

Setup and purpose

In the first project we directed the students to take a passage of three to ten lines from

the *Iliad* and make a comparison of two translations of that passage as informed by the Greek

text found in the PDL. Before giving the assignment we covered the Greek alphabet and

provided an exercise of transliterating and guessing the meaning of Greek words with English

derivatives. When we introduced the project in class we gave a tutorial of how to navigate the

PDL and showed the students the features they would be using most. In the text of the

assignment we suggested they first compare their English translations and then use those

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[8] For an example of the interface, see
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0012.tlg001.perseus-grc1.
[9] The Word Study Tool entry for μῆνιν
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=mh%3Dnin&la=greek&can=mh%3Dnin0&d=Perseus:text:1999.01.0133:book=1&i=1#lexicon.
[10] http://alpheios.net/
[11] Bamman, "*Dependency Treebanks,*" 79.
[12] http://repos1.alpheios.net/exist/rest/db/app/align-entersentence.xhtml

similarities and differences to guide their focus on the Greek.

<u>Students' papers</u>

We had three basic types of papers from our students. There were the few who used no Greek at all and only turned in a comparison of the translations. On the opposite end of the spectrum were the students who made good use of the Perseus Word Study Tool, looking into the lexica and using the word frequencies to further understand a word and the contexts in which it was used. Many of these students had some experience with classical languages or other inflected languages, as we discerned from the papers or found out in the course of the class. Then in the middle were those students who seemed to have difficulties with the Greek. Some issues appeared to stem from the Word Study Tool itself, the automatically generated base definitions sometimes are incorrect and these nonsense "definitions" caused confusion. Students seemed not to use the lexica in these instances, we can not know why without polling the students, but it is probable that the reason was the dense and intimidating form of the lexica entries. It takes time and training to read Liddel, Scott, and Jones. The other primary issue stemmed from students not being able to properly align the Greek words to the English, even with the help of the dictionary. Some of the problems may have been that words appeared in a different order or the presence of enjambment created a mismatch in the lines. It is also likely the sheer number of Greek words and English definitions and the action of clicking back and forth between them was confusing.

The intent of the assignment was not lost on the students who worked with the Greek, even those who experienced difficulties. They all drew comparisons between the translations and the original text. All encountered the texts not lining up in an exact manner. The analysis of the translations did not go as deep as we might have liked in many cases, but overall the papers were done well.

Project 2

<u>Setup and purpose</u>

The second project was meant to be an intensive word study. We provided two options, to either take an English word and find its Greek equivalents or to take a Greek word and find its English equivalents. In both instances we asked them to look at several appearances of their word of choice. The students were to take note of the dictionary meanings of the Greek words and see which English words to which they mapped and also to note the context. The purpose was to demonstrate that many Greek words do not have direct English translations and are frequently context specific in their meanings and subtext. Students were to present these "shades of meaning" backed up with textual examples and attempt to draw conclusions about the larger concepts being used.

<u>Students' papers</u>

On the whole students performed better on the second assignment than on the first. It is likely because they did not have the added complication of learning to use the Perseus tools. There was still, however, evidence of common difficulties in the papers. Many papers seemed to suggest the students had not looked at the full lexica entries provided by the Word Search Tool. In one respect this was a good thing since it allowed the students a chance to figure out the various meanings of a word on their own, but it did lead to a few instances of the students making incorrect conclusions. Some students also appeared to have issues with the English translations. The primary source of the translations they used was the PDL. Since the PDL can only host materials that are in the public domain, frequently the texts are 19th and early 20th century in origin and the language is archaic in comparison to the modern idiom. Due to this there were instances where students expressed confusion at the translator's word choice and

how it related to the definition of their Greek word.

By far the papers which exhibited the greatest understanding of the Greek words were those that began with an English word and then attempted to find equivalent Greek. These papers provided the best analysis of larger concepts and better demonstrated how Greek words frequently do not have close English counterparts. They also avoided a mistake that several of the other students made. The students starting with a Greek word and then trying to find the different ways in which it was translated tended to take the translator's choices as the meanings, rather than attempting to dig further into the context surrounding the word.

Project 3

<u>Setup and purpose</u>

The third project introduced the concept of sentence alignment and attempted to lead the students into some grammatical understanding of the Greek. Due to the nature of the assignments and the lack of instruction in grammar, the true goal was not to obtain correct answers but to get reactions to the assignment and attempt to understand how the students were approaching the tasks. There were three sections of increasing difficulty with accompanying questions for each as well as some questions about the assignment overall. Students had a choice whether to complete the second or the third section, the third being more challenging. The first was to get the students familiar with the Alpheios interface and sentence alignments. We asked the students to write out an aligned sentence of the *Odyssey*, correlating the English and Greek words and then to draw a Reed-Kellogg sentence diagram. The second section tasked students with finding a sentence in a non-aligned Alpheios text, finding a translation of that sentence in Perseus, and then producing an alignment of the two. Section three was like section two, but asked the students to take both their original text and its

translation from Perseus. Working with the Alpheios text for the second question provided the students with vocabulary from the Alpheios Tools and treebank diagrams, making the process easier than the third option.

<u>Students' papers</u>

The third assignment was perhaps the most interesting from our standpoint. We emphasized to the students that we were not grading on correctness but on the completeness of their answers to the survey questions we asked. The reactions to the assignment were largely positive, several students likened the process of sentence alignment to a puzzle and found it engaging. Of the 18 papers reviewed, 13 students clearly demonstrated that they had experience with grammatical concepts from other languages. There were a few common threads that ran throughout a majority of the responses. Almost all of the students expressed a desire to have received instruction in Greek grammar during class. The most common grammar related issues reported were students being confused by Greek word order, not knowing how to resolve multiple English words that map to one Greek word, and how to handle Greek particles. The sentence diagramming exercise posed problems since several students had never encountered Reed-Kellogg diagrams in previous English classes. Many felt that having to learn this skill on top of the rest of the assignment was a negative. The treebank diagrams found in Alpheios presented similar challenges. We did not spend formal class time explaining the treebanks and their specific vocabulary and structures and many students said that they wished we had. The current treebanking documentation is geared toward advanced users and is certainly confusing for students with no Greek background. While some of the labels on the treebank diagrams are intuitive if one has a basic level of grammar knowledge, many simply are not and it is little wonder that several students expressed having difficulties understanding them. The last major issue that students reported was purely technological. A

few students had trouble working with the Alpheios site, either because the Alpheios tools require the Firefox browser or there were odd operating system interactions. The general sentiment was that students wished that we had introduced Alpheios earlier so that these problems could have been worked out before the actual assignment.

Extra Credit

After collecting the third assignment we gave the students an opportunity for extra credit by answering some additional questions. We wished to gain some more information on the students' backgrounds and some more reactions to the overall process. The three main questions were:

> 1) How much do you feel the previous projects helped you tackle this last one?
> 2) Have you studied any languages other than your first language?
> 3) If you have studied another language, do you think that your skills in that language helped you with this project?

If we had any specific questions about a student's response to a section of the third assignment, we asked it in addition to the basic three. Nine students participated in this optional assignment. Answers about the usefulness of the previous assignments varied, most found the exposure to the technology the helpful element, others cited familiarity with the Greek and the concepts that went into deciphering it. All nine students had studied at least one language other than English, Spanish being the most frequent with seven students at varying levels of proficiency. The overall consensus was that the other language or languages helped students reconcile the differences in word order and the lack of exact word for word translations. Three of the nine students had taken Latin previously and all used their knowledge to infer Greek grammar properties, such as case endings. Students with other language backgrounds did not have the same insights into the structure of Greek.

Future changes

Overall the reactions to the class and the projects were positive. The concept of the

course worked well enough that we held another iteration of the course this semester Spring of

2014. Reflection on the students' papers and reactions have highlighted some changes, which

we plan to implement. The students most frequently expressed a desire to have had a better

grasp on the Greek grammar. To help with this we gave some extremely basic grammar

instruction during class, primarily highlighting the inflected nature of Greek and the different word

order. We had wanted to approach this from a non-traditional angle and teach the treebanks

from the beginning. Treebanks are typically reserved for advanced language students to build,

but there is a clear utility in their structure for beginning learners. If a student is able to construct

a treebank of a Greek sentence, translation is a trivial next step. However, we were unable to

rework the current tags in use and documentation, which are geared more towards linguists, not

beginning students.[13]   We will be collaborating with colleagues at the University of Leipzig to

develop the early stages of a treebank based curriculum, a concept around which they are

developing a full course.[14]   Ideally, the next iteration of the course will introduce the treebanks

from the beginning.

Another major change involved some modifications to the projects. The first project

incorporates sentence alignment from the start in an attempt to make more concrete the

comparison of the translations and the original Greek. The second project now has only one

option primarily due to the great difference in quality of analysis for those students who started

with an English concept and then delved into the Greek equivalents. Project three has been

reworked entirely, since sentence alignment is now in the first project; the students are to tackle

a longer passage with the help of treebanks on Alpheios or create a translation of the English into

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[13] For documentation see: Bamman, "Guidelines for Greek Dependency Treebank."
[14] See: http://www.dh.uni-leipzig.de/wo/projects/historical-languages-elearning-project/

another language and align that to the Greek.

Lastly, we have found a way to conduct anonymized surveys, which we hope will reduce any social desirability bias that could have impacted the last class' answers to any questions we posed. We intend to analyze and write up the results of the Spring 2014 class.

Conclusion

We recognize that we did not teach our students Greek with our approach nor will they be able to go and truly read Greek literature. Students must still put in the hard work to master a language in order to not be tied to dictionaries and grammars, be they physical or digital, that impede the enjoyment of reading. We do believe, however, that we offered our students considerably more than the traditional translation course. Many students in their reactions to the third project expressed confidence in their ability to gain some meaning from the original texts and further insight into Greek culture for all their troubles. In a world where access to other languages has exploded with the proliferation of the internet and the technologies surrounding it, students ought to know that the tools exist to take on new languages. They also ought to know basic critical thinking concepts that will help them use those tools effectively. These skills can only help them in their further pursuits, especially if they continue down an academic path. Traditional academia and modes of research are quickly being eclipsed by new models driven by 'big data' and statistical analysis. If we wish to encourage our students to conduct novel and significant research, they must know that they do not need to be held back by an imperfect mastery of a language.

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