

Translation as Research: A Manifesto

1. **Translation should be treated as research** by academics in and beyond Modern Languages, and by those who facilitate, monitor and assess their research. In the US the MLA now advocates this view, and it matters for appointments, promotions and tenure.¹ In the UK, “research assessment” is an additional factor. In practice this is an argument about how we spend our time (and are allowed and encouraged to spend our time) as academic researchers who work in and through languages other than English and on the cultures, societies and histories associated with them.

2. In crucial respects, **this is not an argument about the meaning of the word “research”**. In the MLA guidelines on “Evaluating Translations as Scholarship” the term “research” is never used, but there can be no doubt that the fundamental intellectual and professional issues are the same in the UK and the US. Nor, in the UK, is this an argument against the current definition of research in the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is very broad.² Crucially, it is already broad enough to include translations; and people have already submitted translations successfully to the REF. But there is no doubt that some members of the profession who have worked on translations, or who might have worked on translations, have not felt confident about submitting them to the REF, not least because of pressure from those with administrative responsibility for submissions. In this way, our academic culture currently discourages the work of translation. Perceptions of translation, and of the place of translation in the REF, need to change.

3. **Translation is intellectually and culturally valuable**. In the words of the MLA guidelines, “Translation has been an indispensable component of intellectual exchange and development throughout recorded history [...] the translation of a work of literature or scholarship – indeed, of any major

cultural document – can have a significant impact on the intellectual community, while the absence of translations impedes the circulation of ideas”. The far-reaching impact of translations is one of the reasons that translation is a good use of academic time and resources.

4. Translation is an exacting practice, at once critical and creative.

Using terms offered by the REF, we may add more specifically:

4i: **Translations require and embody high levels of specialized knowledge and scholarship**, both linguistic and cultural (or do so in many cases³). In this regard translation is closely comparable to other more established forms of research, such as the production of scholarly editions. In some instances a particular scholar will be perfectly placed to translate a particular text. Moreover, the process of translation can be expected to deepen and alter the translator-scholar’s own understanding of the text, in ways that feed into teaching and further scholarship. And this process can produce a translation – also an interpretation – that is original, significant and rigorous, that contributes to the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines,⁴ and that is a significant intervention in intellectual and cultural life.

4ii. **Translation is a form of creative writing.** This view commands wide assent among creative writers and in academic circles, especially in the field of Translation Studies – itself readily embraced by the REF. Translations can be inventive, original works in their own right.

5. Translations are no harder to assess than various other forms of research, scholarship and creative work. Appointment committees, REF subpanels and so on already deal with a very wide variety of practices and “outputs”; and it is recognized that any difficulties they may pose to assessment do not constitute a good reason to inhibit the activities in question. The same unequivocal recognition needs to be extended to translation. **In academic culture (before and far beyond REF 2020) translation should be treated as a fully legitimate form of research.**

Signatories (as of 30 October 2015):

ABIL (Association of British and Irish Lusitanists)

AGS (Association for German Studies)

The Aristotelian Society

AUPHF (Association of University Professors and Heads of French)

BASEES (British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies)

BCLA (British Comparative Literature Association)

BCLT (British Centre for Literary Translation)

BPA (British Philosophical Association)

CUCD (Council for University Classics Departments)

Professor Charles Forsdick, AHRC Theme Leadership Fellow, “Translating Cultures”

IMLR (Institute of Modern Languages Research)

SFS (Society for French Studies)

SIS (Society for Italian Studies)

SMGS (Society for Modern Greek Studies)

TaPRA (Theatre & Performance Research Association)

TRS-UK (Theology and Religious Studies UK)

UCML (University Council of Modern Languages)

Notes

- 1 See MLA, “Evaluating Translations as Scholarship: Guidelines for Peer Review” (2011), available at http://www.mla.org/ec_guidelines_translation. The arguments around translation (and language-learning) evidently extend beyond the UK and the US, and beyond the traditional homelands of Modern Languages to areas including Classics, non-European languages, Theology, Philosophy, History and Comparative Literature. The field of Modern Languages is emphasized here principally because it involves a large number of academics with combined linguistic and cultural/intellectual expertise.
- 2 See REF, ‘Assessment framework and guidance on submissions’ (2011, updated 2012), <http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/assessmentframeworkandguidanceonsubmissions/GOS%20including%20addendum.pdf>, and “Panel Criteria and Working Methods” (2012), available at <http://www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/2012-01/#d.en.69569>. The REF affects quite deeply how UK academics spend their time. Its capacious conception of “research” should be understood less as the result of a settled definition of “research” than as a way of supporting the wide range of fruitful activities carried out in disciplines such as English, Drama, Dance, Art and Music, including musical composition, performance and creative writing. Among other things, this implies some recognition of the close links, in certain areas of academic activity, between research, creative practice and teaching. Treating translation as research reinforces those links in Modern Languages, where expert knowledge of foreign languages is a fundamental tool of research, as well as a central element of teaching.
- 3 “In many cases” because not all translations are equally deserving of credit as research/scholarship/creative writing. The MLA guidelines, “Evaluating Translations as Scholarship”, are helpful here. The phrase “an exacting practice, at once critical and creative” is borrowed from these guidelines.
- 4 Originality, significance and rigour are the key criteria for REF assessments of outputs. The phrase about intellectual infrastructure comes from the definition of scholarship used in the REF. Translation as an academic activity is unusual in that it frequently serves subjects, disciplines and readerships outside its academic home territory. Among other things, this means translation may serve interdisciplinarity and, as suggested above, may help create “impact”.