

Eacersall, Douglas. "Martial Translations: HEMA and the Revival of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts." *LingAppl@ Quarterly*, Vol. 2, (2011): 3.

Martial Translations: HEMA and the Revival of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts

Douglas Eacersall (University of Southern Queensland)

By the end of the seventeenth century the gradual rise of gunpowder and the development of standing national armies with effective firearms meant that the hand-to-hand combat of the medieval and Renaissance became obsolete (Black, 1994). This lack of relevance meant that the knightly martial arts as practiced on the battlefield were no longer used and died out. Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) is a modern movement that seeks to revive these Western martial traditions.

The modern HEMA movement consists of a number of groups that seek to physically reconstruct, and pass on to others, the lost European medieval and Renaissance combat arts dating back to the 14th century. These groups can be found in North and South America, Europe, Asia, South Africa and Australasia. A very important part of the authentic reconstruction of traditional European martial systems, including wrestling, archery, fighting from horseback, dagger, sword and buckler, long sword, rapier and polearms involves the translation and interpretation of fencing manuals from the period. These manuals are largely of German, Italian, Spanish and English origin and detail European military combat, martial sports and personal self defence techniques from the 14th to the 17th century. Quite extensive transcription and translation projects have been initiated in order to translate these predominantly Middle High German and Latin texts into English. These projects have been undertaken by individuals within the HEMA movement, and involve original manuscripts, translations and interpretations being shared through word of mouth, photocopies, published works and online discussion boards. The translation and interpretation of these medieval and Renaissance texts is fundamental to the reconstruction of Western martial traditions and raises questions of translation accuracy and authenticity.

While this article will focus on the investigation of translation quality and authenticity within HEMA these questions are part of a wider research project titled *White Men Sporting Swords: Reconstructing 'Historical European Martial Arts' in Australia 1971 – 2011*. The aim of this project is to conduct an historical investigation of the HEMA movement in Australia and examine HEMA as a site for exploring the themes of heritage, physical culture, masculinity, and whiteness. This article will consider one aspect contained within the theme of heritage, which is the concept of authenticity as discussed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1993) in their work into 'invented tradition'. Pivotal to this concept are the techniques of translation and the importance of authentic translation in the reconstruction of HEMA traditions. This will be achieved by applying relevant translation theory to the translation practices in HEMA which

Eacersall, Douglas. "Martial Translations: HEMA and the Revival of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts." *LingAppl@ Quarterly*, Vol. 2, (2011): 3.

results in the following research questions:

What are the translation methods used by HEMA practitioners and how do they compare with methods described within translation theory?

According to the assessment criteria established by translation theory what is the level of quality of translations within the HEMA movement?

This is a rich area of study as the translation methods used by HEMA practitioners include highly rigorous techniques as well as complex, novel and at times less rigorous approaches to produce meaning from difficult texts. It is also a significant area of study as a contrast to the work on translation that has been positioned to discuss the translator as professional and expert (e.g. Holz-Manttari, 1986; Snell-Hornby, 1995) as this project seeks to examine the relevance of translation theory to amateur translation.

In order to answer the first research question described above it will be necessary to outline some of the methods within translation theory. Broadly these methods include the discussion of 'word-for-word' or 'sense-for-sense' translation; the concepts of equivalence and equivalence effect; functional theories; discourse and register analysis; systems theories; and philosophical theories (Munday, 2008). For this project, the 'word-for-word' or 'sense-for-sense' dichotomy, the concept of equivalence and functional theories of translation will be most relevant.

Early theories of translation focused on the equivalence of discrete units (usually individual words) in order to reproduce the source text into the target language on a word-for-word basis (Snell-Hornby, 1995). At the other extreme, translation theory has involved sense-for-sense translation where the translator has sought to achieve an equivalent sense of meaning by conveying the feeling of the source text into the target language without focusing on individual words (Snell-Hornby, 1995).

More recent approaches seek to combine each of these methods to form a more integrated process that acknowledges the complexity involved in translation.

...crucial here is the *understanding* of the text, which does not simply involve familiarity with words and structures, but presupposes the ability to penetrate the sense of the text, both as a complex multidimensional whole and at the same time in its relationship to the cultural background. (Snell-Hornby, 1995, pp. 33, 34)

What is important here is that a holistic approach is taken with consideration given to the sense as well as individual words and structures. As part of this approach Snell-Hornby also adds the concept of culture. This is an important element to

Eacersall, Douglas. "Martial Translations: HEMA and the Revival of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts." *LingAppl@ Quarterly*, Vol. 2, (2011): 3.

consider in translation especially for medieval and Renaissance texts as the separation is not just one of cultural difference but cultural difference compounded over time.

The concept of culture as a totality of knowledge, proficiency and perception is fundamental in our approach to translation. If language is an integral part of culture, the translator needs not only proficiency in two languages, he must also be at home in two cultures. (Snell-Hornby, 1995, p. 42)

The importance of culture in translation means that consideration will need to be given to the cultural meaning and significance of certain elements contained within the source text and decisions then made regarding how and if these can be conferred through the target text.

In terms of the HEMA movement and the theoretical considerations of translation studies there are practitioners who begin translation with no knowledge of the source language. This means that translation must proceed, at least initially, as a decoding and encoding exercise using predominately a word-for-word approach. This approach can result in target texts that contain some ambiguity of meaning and so the target text produced may then be read and revised a number of times to reflect a better sense of meaning. This sense of meaning is achieved through a number of methods, including returning to the source text for further decoding, and using additional contextual clues, such as other sources which discuss similar techniques and making reference to pictures of the martial skills described in the text. The individual may also compare the translation to reconstructions of the text undertaken previously by others and posted on the internet. Some of these translations have been undertaken by more experienced translators and offer the amateur, clues and direction in their own translations.

Another difference between HEMA amateur translation and the translation in translation theory is that translation theory assumes a linear process, whereby a client requests a translation of a specific text to be delivered by the professional translator within a set time frame. In contrast to this HEMA translation is more circular rather than linear. Within HEMA, as an individual's linguistic and translation skills improve it is usual for a practitioner to return to the same text and improve upon previous translations. This method is similar to the looping model, although over longer time frames, outlined by Nord (2005) where "translation is... a circular, basically recursive process comprising an indefinite number of feedback loops, in which it is possible and even advisable to return to earlier stages of the analysis" (p.34). Over time this circular process allows the practitioner to develop linguistic skills and hone the sense-for-sense techniques discussed above. Many of the practitioners of HEMA are also actively involved in the study of medieval life and so have an ever increasing sense of the cultural considerations when attempting translation of medieval texts. What this means is that amateur translation within HEMA is moving over time, within

Eacersall, Douglas. "Martial Translations: HEMA and the Revival of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts." *LingAppl@ Quarterly*, Vol. 2, (2011): 3.

individuals and collectively, away from word-for-word decoding and encoding towards a more professional and integrated approach that includes sense-for-sense and cultural considerations. How extensive this shift is over time will be part of the ongoing investigations into translation and authenticity within the HEMA movement. In order to investigate this development in proficiency it will be necessary to address the second research question stated above, namely,

According to the assessment criteria established by translation theory what is the level of quality of translations within the HEMA movement?

Here, some of the relevant assessment criteria will be outlined but actual analysis of the texts will occur at a later date. There are many methods for assessing the quality of a translation. These methods include mentalist approaches, response-based approaches (e.g. behavioural, structural and functional), and text and discourse based approaches (e.g. descriptive translation studies, post-modernist thinking and linguistically-orientated approaches) (House, 2001). Each of these approaches derives from a particular theory of translation and depends upon the theoretical assumptions made in regard to "...the nature of the relationship between a source text and its translation text" (House, 2001). There are varying degrees of positives and negatives with each of these approaches. In this particular case the plan is to use linguistic approaches as they take into consideration the source text as well as the target text and avoid some of the more ambiguous aspects of the other methods. As mentioned previously, actual assessments using these linguistic approaches will be carried out as this research project progresses.

In conclusion, HEMA represents an interesting case study to investigate the areas of theory and quality in translation studies. This article discussed how HEMA does not initially appear to follow the professional methods of translation theory as established by translation scholars such as Snell-Hornby (1995) and Holz-Manttari (1986). This is because the majority of HEMA translations begin as word-for-word translations conducted by amateurs. This article discussed though how these first attempts are then developed further through more complex processes that include sense-for-sense translation and approaches that seek to integrate a number of strategies, including cultural considerations. This process can occur over extended periods where the translator may return again and again to a translation making adjustments as knowledge of the source language and translation increases. This suggests that translation can be a process that enables translators working at an amateur level to progressively gain the necessary linguistic and translation proficiency that results in the development of more professional and authentic translations. As this research project progresses examples of HEMA translations will be analysed utilizing some of the assessment methods from translation theory. This will give an indication of the quality of the translation of medieval and Renaissance texts and provide a starting point for an investigation into the authenticity of the modern interpretation and reconstruction of historical European medieval and Renaissance martial arts.

Eacersall, Douglas. "Martial Translations: HEMA and the Revival of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts." *LingAppl@ Quarterly*, Vol. 2, (2011): 3.

References

- Black, J. (1994). *European warfare 1660-1815*. London: UCL.
- Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (Eds.). (1993). *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holz-Manttari, J. (1986). Translatorisches handeln - theoretisch fundierte berufsprofile. In M. Snell-Hornby (Ed.), *Übersetzungswissenschaft - eine neuorientierung* (pp. 348-374). Tübingen: UTB.
- House, J. (2001). Translation quality assessment: Linguistic description versus social evaluation. *Meta: Translators' Journal*, 46(2), 243-257.
- Munday, J. (2008). *Introducing translation studies: Theories and applications* (2 ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Nord, C. (2005). *Text Analysis in translation: Theory, methodology, and didactic application of a model for translation-orientated text analysis* (2 ed.). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Snell-Hornby, M. (1995). *Translation studies: An integrated approach*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.