THE GRADUATION PAPER IN TRANSLATION STUDIES: NUANCES OF CRITICAL THINKING

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Abstract

Critical thinking skills play a vital role in a knowledge society and have a direct influence on the quality of teaching and learning. We aim at highlighting the way in which the graduation paper in Translation Studies can become an excellent opportunity to encourage students to test the applicability of key concepts from this field and to tackle research systematically. Based on our experience of supervising graduation papers on translation studies-related topics, we have identified students' typical approaches and recurring difficulties. This allows us to suggest possible solutions for the problems encountered, depending on each stage of the process. Our purpose as supervisors is to endow students with the cognitive flexibility they need in order to draw up an adequate research plan, use translation assessment criteria creatively and hone their critical skills for future real-life situations.

Keywords: research, critical thinking, translation studies, systematicity

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"… the quality of everything we do is determined by the quality of our thinking."
(The Foundation for Critical Thinking)

Preliminaries

We live in the knowledge society, and the ways in which we use key concepts such as information and learning represent constant challenges. The permanent need to adapt to the changes and the increasing demands regarding the processing speed and volume, along with the analysis and structuring of data, requires enhanced analytical skills and heightened flexibility. The capacity to process, analyse and integrate new knowledge as well as to apply it with the highest degree of efficiency demands, arguably more than before, critical thinking skills or "good thinking skills […] that can help us to make reliable decisions and acquire new knowledge quickly" (Lau, 2011: 1).

On the other hand, in a digital world in which communication and exchanges of information are taking place at unprecedented speed, interculturality and, primarily, globalisation, bring to the fore the translation process and demand a greater responsibility from translators. The diversity and increased availability of search engines and CAT tools, their use and integration into the translation process (sometimes from the very beginning to the very end) also require a closer look at the quality of translated texts, hence the need to define clearer standards and methodologies regarding the translation process assessment.

In this context, supervising graduation papers on translation studies-related topics is a good opportunity for educators and trainers to make sure that students are familiar with translation assessment principles and are able to apply them to various text types. Our experience in the Department of Applied Modern Languages, Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University has taught us that this particular learning experience holds enormous resources.

The graduation paper

We see the graduation paper as an important stage in building translator competence because it establishes useful overlaps between research methodology and translation theory, practice and translation quality assessment. It also gives educators and trainers a rather accurate tool for assessing third-year undergraduates with a view to giving them customised feedback throughout the preparation period.

This type of paper - similar in nature to a research project - enables us as trainers to check and assess both the students' information mining skills and their capacity to synthesise the data gathered to produce a coherent medium-length text according to a set of standards.

Starting from the definition of research as "a systematic investigation toward increasing the sum of knowledge" (*Chambers Dictionary*, 1989), the graduation paper as a whole should reflect the way in which students can manage specialized knowledge. This involves identifying, outlining and operating with concepts from their field of study extracting pertinent information, selecting and using bibliography, identifying a research problem, drawing up a case study, applying theoretical knowledge to solve practical problems and providing relevant examples.

As for the actual writing stage, its aim is to allow the supervisor to monitor and assess the way in which students succeed in presenting the information and describing the methods they employed. Essentially, the aim of such a synthesis can vary from case to case, along a continuum between the informative pole and the creative one. The originality of the student's research should be shepherded to include, underline and manifest personal contributions. These contributions should be utilised in assessing whether the student achieved certain objectives, e.g. highlighting another perspective, offering innovative explanations, providing illustrative examples and imagining new directions of study.

Before discussing the topics and methodology of a graduation paper in Modern Applied Languages and starting from the idea that "theory and practice are as inseparable in Translation Studies as they are in all other fields of human endeavour" (Williams & Chesterman, 2014, p. 2), we think that it would be useful to mention the key curricular areas at the undergraduate level. Some of the theoretical subjects students study during a three-year specialisation in Applied Modern Languages have a direct bearing on their graduation papers.

The Graduation Paper in Modern Applied Languages

The Applied Modern Languages specialisation at our University involves an interdisciplinary path which develops along three directions:

- advanced language studies (two compulsory foreign languages, in theory, both B2 to C1);

  - They comprise theoretical and practical courses of grammar, speaking and writing techniques, lexicology, text typology, text analysis and text production, translation, cultural studies, communication techniques and mass media etc.
  - The linguistic preparation involves both contemporary language practice and specialised languages, with a focus on communication competences and techniques, translation techniques, the use of terminological databases, and familiarisation with the cultural perspectives and mentalities common to the countries in which the languages are studied.

- specialised subjects, such as economics, law, marketing, management, computer technology, European institutions and mechanisms of European integration etc.;
- compulsory internships destined to integrate and practise theoretical knowledge in real work environments, in order to acquire professional experience.

The graduation paper can be written in one of the two foreign languages studied; it also must contain a summary in the other foreign language, and a second one in Romanian. During the graduation paper defence, students must answer questions in both foreign languages and in Romanian.

The graduation paper is structured into a theoretical part and a practical part. The two can be presented either distinctively or combined, with theoretical considerations accompanied by examples. The choice depends to a large extent on the research type and topic, as well as on the selected methodology. The usual general structure (introduction, body, conclusion and, possibly, appendices) is nevertheless compulsory.

As we see, the main feature of Applied Modern Languages undergraduate curriculum is its interdisciplinarity. This is highlighted by the diversity of topics students approach for their graduation papers, but, in what follows, we focus only on translation-related topics.

Theory and practice in translation-related graduation papers

The question regarding the interaction between theory and practice has permeated the debate regarding the usefulness of teaching translation theory (Chesterman & Wagner, 2002/2010; Baer & Koby, 2003). As Fawcett *et al.* (2010, p. xi) underline, it is a question with a multifold answer, with the mention that what stands out is the mutual influence of theoretical considerations upon practical translation decisions:

> Firstly, there are the effects of theory on practice and the effects of practice on theory. Secondly, there is the opposition between theory as description, and theory as tool. And, thirdly, there are theories of translation and theories from outside translation. The first pair is in many ways the most tricky and seems to go to the heart of what it means to link theory and practice.

Needless to say, both the theoretical background and the review of the literature concerning a certain topic hold an undisputed place in the architecture of a graduation paper. In the case of translation theories, the classical dichotomy between free and literal translation, translation shifts (Catford, 1965/2000), translation procedures such as borrowing, calque, modulation and transposition (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995), or the divergent tendencies of foreignisation and domestication (Venuti, 2004) present many tools which allow us to have coherent discussions about translated texts. They are of great help for students too, even though their identification in texts is sometimes faulty, generally resulting from insufficient practice. It is in fact the classical example of theoretical knowledge confined to the perimeter of a class and/or exam, whose application to the students' research activity is not immediately obvious to them. Depending on the topic chosen (i.e. literary translation or specialised translation), functionalism and the Skopos theory (Reiss & Vermeer, 2014) hold more or less weight in the theoretical part of the graduation paper. This paper is—or should be—a moment when the journey comes full circle, and translation theories, whose main conceptual pillars have been motivated by debates around concrete texts, are put again to the test in order to check their validity.

As mentioned above, students tend to use positive or negative adjectives concerning the quality of the translation which are placed towards the extremes of the assessment scale. In general, moderate assessment opinions such as the ones used by

Chesterman and Wagner - that is, a translation is "more readable" than another (Chesterman & Wagner, 2002/2010, p. 8) or a translation represents "an acceptable version" which is "pleasant to read, easy to understand" (Chesterman & Wagner, 2002/2010, pp. 9-10) are usually overlooked.

The choice of the text type - literary versus non-literary, in a first stage - is important. In what follows, we will not go into such details, but limit ourselves to broader considerations that apply to both categories of texts.

Critical thinking

Systematic research involves a clearly formulated methodology, a series of techniques and procedures applied in a logical succession. Therefore, the graduation paper, due to its specificity, should aim at honing the student's ability "to think clearly and rationally, understanding the logical connection between ideas" (SkillsYouNeed, n.d.) in a systematic way — these attributes being, actually, the characteristics of critical thinking.

Critical thinking has been seen from different perspectives along the years: it was defined as "reasonable, reflective thinking about what to do and believe" (Ennis, 1962) and as "skilful, responsible thinking, that facilitates good judgment because it 1) relies on criteria, 2) is self-correcting and 3) is sensitive to context" (Lipman, 1988). Today, critical thinking is a key concept in many fields (and disciplines), including Translation Studies, if we consider the skills a translator must have. Developing abilities such as comprehension, creativity, self-monitoring, complex judgement and analysis faculties, and good translation assessment and translation review skills involves, largely, an active-reflexive learning style. As the common denominator of all these skills is critical thinking, the graduation paper is meant to nurture it, as this will allow them to improve both their thinking and their linguistic abilities.

More recently, while analysing the thinking skills needed in the contemporary world, Lau (2011) stresses two important features of critical thinking: 1) the interdependency of critical thinking and creativity; 2) its systematic character, which allows us to identify several subskills of the proficient critical thinker, namely the ability to:

- understand the logical connections between ideas;

- formulate ideas succinctly and precisely;
- identify, construct, and evaluate arguments;
- evaluate the pros and cons of a decision;
- evaluate the evidence for and against a hypothesis;
- detect inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning;
- analyse problems systematically;
- identify the relevance and importance of ideas;
- justify one's beliefs and values;
- reflect and evaluate one's thinking skills (Lau, 2011, p. 2).

Why are these two features so relevant for the graduation paper? On the one hand, students are very creative: given a particular topic, they are likely to find innovative ways of tackling it. There can be, of course, occasional exaggerations of an overenthusiastic mind, and not all approaches are justifiable in the academic context. These, however, can be toned down by self-reflection, monitoring of inconsistencies and criteria-based comparisons with other perspectives on similar topics. In other words, creativity and critical thinking intertwine constantly in students' work.

On the other hand, thorough research and a rigorous organisation of ideas provide a solid starting point. The students' ability to find an adequate wording for a hypothesis helps them focus on the selection of pertinent examples. Sifting through ideas and providing valid arguments for a certain opinion and refuting the unreliable are also valuable exercises.

Additionally, one of the most useful principles for the graduation paper in general—and for the field of translation, in particular—is that of constructive criticism. Students who analyse the translated version of their favourite book after enjoying it in the original might be very biased and give vent to emotions. For example, if proper names are translated into the target language because the translator deemed them as representative for the character's traits, the instinctive value judgment applied by students to the translation is that it sounds "awkward" because they are familiar with the source text sonority. At other times, they resort to categorical arguments, such as "this translation is great; the other one is awful". Much too often the negative label is attached because of certain omissions in the translated version which students see as

unacceptable, with the implacable attitude of the novice who has never translated large volumes of text. It is on such occasions that the ability to analyse problems in context and to evaluate the pros and cons of the translator's decisions plays an essential role.

The model proposed by Davies & Barnett (2015, p. 8) further refines the relationship between critical thinking and creativity. According to it, critical thinking involves both an individual and a sociocultural dimension and can be approached along different axes:

> Critical thinking in higher education has, we contend at least six distinct, yet integrated and permeable, dimensions: (1) core skills in critical argumentation (reasoning and inference making), (2) critical judgments, (3) critical-thinking dispositions and attitudes, (4) critical being and critical actions, (5) societal and ideology critique, and (6) critical creativity or critical openness. Each of these, we believe, has a particular place in an overarching model of critical thinking.

While thinking in general is a cognitive ability that does not necessarily depend on education, being linked rather to one's *learning style*, *availability* and *motivation*, critical thinking, on the other hand, is closely linked to education—to an even larger extent to higher education. Developing skills such as analysing and interpreting data, assessment, explaining and supporting ideas with arguments, applying ideas or theories are indeed among the basic objectives in translator training. It is our duty as trainers to help students eventually apply this largely theoretical model in their professional life. For this, one may use various exercises which demand students' active participation: looking for several translation solutions; explaining their translation choices or preferences; supporting their points of view using relevant arguments; assessing their peers' work and giving feedback. Thus, the trainer's role is no longer to provide ready-to-use methods and solutions, but rather to create problems, to interrogate and to stimulate interaction. As Baer & Koby (2003, p. 8) put it,

> We may hope to better prepare students for the workplace by offering them appropriate tools, but if our teaching methodology is of the traditional kind […] we may fail to produce translators who are capable of the flexibility, teamwork, and problem-solving that are essential for success in the contemporary language industry, not to mention the creativity and independent thinking that have always been the hallmark of the finest translators.

Experience-based comments and suggestions

Based on a decade-long experience of supervising graduation papers on translation studies-related topics, we have been able to identify several patterns in the way students approach this task and, as a direct consequence, to come up with a series of solutions that have proved to make students' work more efficient and constructive. Inevitably, the trainers' mission is easier.

Planning the research

One of the most important stages in the preparation of the graduation paper is *planning*, for this is what allows obtaining relevant information from relevant sources. Thus, in the second undergraduate year, our students attend mandatory courses in *Information and Documentation Methodology* and *Academic Writing*. These courses are meant to familiarise them with searching, selecting and processing relevant information on a given subject. In other words, students are encouraged quite early to think of a topic for their graduation paper and even test whether their idea is likely to yield results. Our analysis of students' information and documentation practices indicates that they usually encounter a series of problems related to information gathering and selection.

To start with, after selecting a broad topic, most students have a hard time *defining the theoretical or practical framework*. As a consequence, the theoretical resources they find are not always the most relevant and, more importantly, cannot be easily organised conceptually, thematically or chronologically because they tend to be quite eclectic. As they lack rigorous resource selection criteria, students find it difficult to stop searching and end up spending too much time with this preliminary stage[1]. This is why it is important for the supervisor to discuss individually with each student and guide them in choosing the right keywords and, implicitly, in finding a fertile and solid research path. In a nutshell, the teacher's role at this stage is to help students understand the topic they are researching and to make sure they do not move on before having a clear direction in mind. A method that has proved efficient in our case consists

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[1]Most students only use the Google search engine and keyword search (more often than not, only one keyword). Few of them use advanced methods involving logical operators and combinations of keywords or syntagms. Moreover, the actual identification of the relevant keywords poses problems, and that entails the danger of deviating from the main topic and of selecting non-relevant sources.

of asking students to formulate a starting question they want to answer in the paper or a hypothesis they want to test. Very often, the simple fact that a question requires a yes or no answer is an indication that the student has not yet found a good starting point.

Moving to the next stage without a solid topic leads to difficulties in *integrating the theoretical part into the applicative one / linking theory to practice*, because the selected resources are not relevant and do not support the case study. More precisely, students do not know how to organise material so as to turn it into the backbone of their own original research, thus *highlighting the objectives of their case study*. Most often, they simply make a list of summarised ideas, quotations, and paraphrases: a "passive" display with no indication of the paper's aim.

In order to get over these obstacles, students can be advised to use reading sheets. How they make them is of utmost importance. These notes can simply consist of lists of quotations, classifications and ideas, or they can be designed as *part of the student's research process* on the selected topic (what has been said about it, who are the most relevant authors, how the topic has been tackled so far, what aspects have been dealt with, whether various problems have been solved or not, etc.). We can thus infer that critical thinking means here a permanent and careful monitoring of one's own thinking and cognitive processes during the information and documentation stage: "What do I understand from what I have read?", "In what way can this be useful for my research?" This active reading and documentation approach has two advantages. The first one is that students are constantly aware of the main objective of the research, as the latter is structured into three basic questions: "What do I want to do?", "Why do I want to do it?" and "How do I want to do it?" The second advantage is that students are thus forced in a way to elaborate a strategy for pursuing the objective they set.

The way students tackle the selected material, the way they organise information and try to identify or formulate approaches actually reflects the extent of their ability to think critically, an essential ability at this stage of the research process.

Patterns in students' approach to the graduation paper

In our view, there are three constants in the way students envisage their work before being guided by the supervisor and, often, throughout the preparation of the paper to varied extents, in terms of their overall attitude and approach to methodology.

Firstly, whenever translation analysis is involved, we can see an all-too-natural tendency to hunt for mistakes. A natural tendency, if we consider that the education system – in our country, at least –often tends to view errors as something to spot and correct as quickly as possible, sometimes without any reflection as to the reasons which led to it, to the context that might justify the translator's "faulty" approach. Moreover, throughout years of education, assessment is done according to grids which sanction mistakes, i.e. deviations from a certain norm. In other words, once in the position to "judge", students consider that this automatically involves criticising. Reiss (2014, p. 3) finds a plausible explanation to this approach:

> The students' practical translation exercises and their examinations, whether on the elementary or more advanced levels, are "corrected" and graded, i.e., criticised and evaluated. Here again we may ask whether the correctors give sufficient attention to the range of possibilities offered, expected, or even desired. What criteria are employed beyond the obvious ones of vocabulary blunders and misunderstood grammatical constructions? To what extent does the corrector simply rely on his own feelings?

Secondly, we noticed that there is a *short range of topics* that spark every generation's enthusiasm without the students being capable of finding arguments in favour of their potential choice. In our opinion, these topics are actually the most visible translation difficulties: cultural references, proper names, proverbs and idioms. They can indeed make excellent research subjects, but a student's justification is usually limited to statements like, "I was totally surprised by how *quidditch* was translated into Romanian", "I realised there's no way to render that Romanian proverb in other languages" or "I'm sure this cannot possibly be translated into any other language".

Thus, it is not surprising that, in the third place, it is a certain degree of *disarray* that characterises the first steps of students into graduation paper preparation. Briefly, they have an idea about the fascinating thing they would like to talk about, but no clues as to the how to tackle this first real research task in their lives. Also, in the initial stages of the work on the case study, their evaluation may be an illustration of the inability to see the forest from the trees. Too busy to identify the minutiae of the transfer from ST to TT, students draw lists of problems, followed by a sort of "categorising block": assigning category names to sets of problems seems a daunting task.

Responding appropriately to these intuitive student behaviours requires teachers to answer essential questions about the role of the entire process:

- What do we assess in a graduation paper: the relevance and depth of the analysis, the original approach or simply the compliance with the existing norms/the adequate usage of existing theoretical instruments and models?
- How do we assess a graduation paper?

In our opinion, we must be realistic regarding the degree/type of originality we ask for at this level. The personal contributions can be achieved "by providing new data, by suggesting an answer to a specific question, by testing or refining an existing hypothesis, theory or methodology, by proposing a new idea, hypothesis, theory or methodology" (Williams & Chesterman, 2014, p. 2).

As to the second question, the official grading grid proposed by our department seems to give at least a partial answer, or at least a basis for discussion: relevance of the topic for the field of study)[2], depth of analysis, coherence in the use of concepts, quality of the working hypothesis and validity of conclusions, methodology, style, length, references and citations, grammar and formatting.

Supervisors' instruments

Ideally, the supervisor should be able to maintain students' enthusiasm, curiosity and critical tendency while at the same time channelling them towards an objective and structured paper. In order to achieve that, the following steps are of the essence at the very beginning of the work.

One should start by choosing the appropriate type of text for the subject the student wants to study. From experience, we know that the teacher's experience is likely to be a better indicator as to the potential of a text or corpus than the student's excitement, but this rule does not always apply. There are students with a highly analytical mind whose approaches can be very detailed and well-argued. A good supervisor should consider analysing suggestions before giving a verdict.

In close relation to the previous "step", there is the choice of the right approach. First, it should be decided whether the student will analyse existing translations (if so,

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[2] In principle, it goes without saying that a paper accepted for defense has to have a relevant topic, but there may be a good reason for mentioning it in the grid: students will better understand the teacher's requirements when the topic is selected.

whether he/she will look at one in particular or rather have a comparative view), will propose a translation of his/her own and explain his/her solutions or will both analyse existing versions and suggest personal solutions whenever appropriate.

Then comes the stage during which the two need to choose the elements to analyse/translate, with two main options available: one type of translation problem throughout a long text (e.g. translating colloquial language in a novel) or a thorough examination of all the difficulties in a short fragment.

The supervisor also must provide a list of model translation analyses both before[3] and after[4] the approach and the type of analysis have been decided upon. A lot of time is gained in this way, as students easily get an idea of what is expected of them, understand the need of precise terminology and are less likely to indulge in non-constructive subjective considerations. In this respect, we agree with Reiss (2014, p. 17): "In this kind of normal situation it is the type of text which decides the approach for the translator; the type of text is the primary factor influencing the translator's choice of a proper translation method".

Last but not least, the supervisor should provide a work calendar at the beginning of the academic year and insist on sticking to it. Otherwise, there is a double risk: students might start – due to their enthusiasm for the topic – by working on their case study before mastering the theoretical tools, and they might underestimate the time needed for actual writing. The calendar we have tested for a working interval of eight months is the following:

1) first three months: final choice of topic, provisional overview of the paper confirmed by the supervisor, indicative bibliography (with at least some of the titles already read), case study – discussed and agreed upon with the supervisor;

2) fourth month: draft of one theoretical chapter and detailed plan of the case study, detailed feedback from the supervisor;

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[3]A possible indicative list could be: Baker, Malmkjaer, 2001; Lungu Badea, 2005; Risterucci-Roudnicky, 2008; Venuti, 2004; Vinay, Darbelnet, 1995.

[4]Encyclopedias of translation, scientific papers on the same or on a related topic, PhD theses, graduation papers, master's theses.

3*) fifth and sixth month*: draft of the other theoretical chapters and work on the case study in the background, detailed feedback from the supervisor;

4) *seventh month*: submission of the case study and detailed feedback from the supervisor;

5) *eighth month*: submission of the entire paper for final feedback.

Conclusion

Our experience indicates that supervisors can build efficient methods of nurturing critical thinking based on the most common student behaviour patterns they notice. The guiding principle is that students should be given enough advice as to avoid wasting precious time (for example, using wrong documentation methods or making their own general planning of activities), but not be spared the essential steps of the process, even if they involve trial-and-error: selecting a valid topic, formulating the relevant starting questions, designing a research plan, etc. Moreover, while the theoretical part of the graduation paper needs a careful assessment of the potentially useful concepts, the case study puts the students' creativity to test. The students' arguments in favour of the applicability of certain concepts to the analysis of the original and translated versions of a text are often pleasant surprises. Binary oppositions such as foreignisation and domestication, addition and omission, are often not enough as umbrella-terms which account for the translation choices. A whole network of translation methods and procedures is therefore needed in order to identify the reasons behind certain target text options. This process provides students with a precious tool to use in their future professional life: the skill to think critically.

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