

Interview

An interview with Professor James Dickins on the teaching of translation

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James Dickins is Professor of Arabic at the University of Leeds, UK. He has a BA in Arabic and Turkish from the University of Cambridge (1980) and a PhD in Arabic Linguistics from Heriot-Watt University (1990). He taught English at Gezira Aba Higher Secondary School for Boys in Sudan from 1980-1982, and has taught Arabic and Arabic>English translation at the University of Cambridge, Heriot Watt University, and the universities of St. Andrews, Durham, Salford and Leeds. He is currently Professor of Arabic at Leeds. His publications include *Standard Arabic: an advanced course* (1998, with Janet Watson), *Extended axiomatic linguistics* (1999), *Thinking Arabic translation* (2002; 2nd edition 2016, with Sandor Hervey and Ian Higgins), and *Sudanese Arabic: phonematics and syllable structure* (2007).

Interview

Interviewer: You have taught Arabic-English translation since 1986, that is an impressive 31 years. Throughout these years, did your teaching techniques and approaches change? If yes, how and why?

James Dickins: I think my teaching techniques have changed. I hope that I now allow students to talk more, and constrain myself to talk less. I remember many years ago being told by a student who had been a teacher themselves that I had too much ‘TTT’ (teacher talking time). Ever since then, I have tried to make sure that I allow the students to talk more. I probably also now use more group work than I did when I first began teaching Arabic-English translation. Teaching in some ways becomes easier over the years, both because the teacher has experience of almost any situation which can turn up in the class, and because teachers acquire an ever larger stock of teaching materials which they can draw on. Technology has also made teaching easier. When I first taught Arabic-English translation, it

was necessary to copy any material which needed to be shown to the class onto an acetate. Now, translations can be projected directly onto a board from a computer document, whether this is a Word document a PowerPoint presentation slide or something else. It is also much easier to do handouts now than when I first began teaching. Not only are photocopiers connected to computers, but they are able to staple as well as copy very quickly and reliably; when I first began teaching, photocopiers were very unreliable – and jammed and broke down with great regularity! Computers also make it possible to communicate with students outside class and at a distance, so that aspects of teaching can be done at any time, not just during class hours.

One potentially negative aspect of having taught for so long is that a teacher can become stuck in their ways, and unwilling to develop new teaching techniques. Bad habits, as well as good ones, can be made permanent. I hope this hasn't happened in my case!

Interviewer: Would you say teaching translation is the same regardless of the pair(s) of languages students work with? Or is it tailored to each language pair to consider the cultural and linguistic variations of that specific case?

James Dickins: I think that teaching translation must to some extent be tailored to the language pair with which one is dealing – though there are, of course, general principles which apply both to teaching generally and teaching translation in particular. One of the interesting points about the Thinking Translation series is that the same general translation principles have proved to be usable with many language pairs, involving both European languages (French, German, Spanish and Italian), and Arabic. Since I first began teaching translation a great deal more research has been done on translation pedagogy as a set of skills in its own right. Previously, translation teachers had to rely on insights from language teaching pedagogy (some of which were not really appropriate to translation teaching), plus techniques which they themselves had developed for teaching translation.

With regard to teaching Arabic-English translation there are certainly specific issues which are not found in dealing with some other language pairs. The same will be true, of course, for all language pairs, even if the two languages in question are linguistically and culturally close to one another.

Interviewer: What is specific to teaching translation with Arabic-English language pair?

James Dickins: Specific issues can be linguistic (in the narrow sense), discursal or more general. One example of a linguistic issue is the different uses of coordination in Arabic and English, and the implications these have to teaching Arabic-English translation. Another example of a specific issue is the translation of tenses between Arabic and English. Arabic makes principle use of two basic tenses, the past and the imperfect – the latter being extensively employed even where referring to past time. English has a much more complex tense system, involving not only multiple tenses (present, present perfect, simple past, past-perfect, etc.), but also a distinction between punctual and continuous tenses. Unlike Arabic, English also has very rigid rules of the use of tenses. The complexity of the English tense system often presents a challenge when translating from Arabic to English.

Discoursally, Arabic differs from English in many ways. In the pre-modern period, the genres of Arabic were quite different from those of English, making it difficult even to find an appropriate target genre for some Arabic texts. A good example is the translation of a traditional Arabic *maqama* into English. In the modern period, of course, genres have moved more close together, as Arabic has adopted from Western cultures genres such as the novel, the short story, or popular science. Even in relation to modern texts, however, differences in typical writing style between the two languages within a particular genre can cause significant translation problems. In many genres, Arabic, for example, continues to make (as it did in the pre-modern period) extensive use of forms of parallelism, which are not nearly so common or complex in English. Producing adequate English translations of these which do not entirely lose the semantic content or the rhetorical effect of these is a significant challenge.

A more general issue is that of cultural differences between English-speaking cultures and Arabic-speaking ones (which are obviously much larger than the differences between those of different European cultures), and the implications which these have for teaching Arabic-English translation. A good example is what people say when they meet a friend who has had their hair cut. In Arabic, it is standard to say *نعيمًا na'imān*, the reply to which is *انعم الله عليك an'am allahu 'alaik*. This is difficult to translate idiomatically into English, not only because English does not have a standard formula (still less a standard reply) which someone says to another person who has had their hair cut, but also because other usages, which one might think of such as 'congratulations' are likely to sound unnatural in the context.

Interviewer: You have co-authored the book *Thinking Arabic Translation: A Course in Translation Method: Arabic to English* with Sándor Hervey and Ian Higgins that has been published in 2002 and 2016. What is the aim behind the collaboration of this book?

James Dickins: To paraphrase what we say in the Introduction to *Thinking Arabic Translation*, the aim of the book is to provide structured course will help most students to become significantly better at translation – sometimes good enough to earn their living at it. The book’s progressive exposition of different sorts of translation problem is accompanied with plenty of practice in developing a rationale for solving them. The book is a course not in translation theory, but in translation method, encouraging thoughtful consideration of possible solutions to practical problems. Theoretical issues do inevitably arise, but the aim of the course is to develop proficiency in the method, not to investigate its theoretical implications. The theoretical notions that are applied in the book are borrowed eclectically from translation theory and linguistics, solely with this practical aim in mind. In order to achieve its goals, *Thinking Arabic Translation* adopts a progressive structure, with an overall movement from general genre-independent issues to specific genre-dependent ones.

Interviewer: Are there any changes to the 2nd edition? And why?

James Dickins: Yes, there are a number of changes to the 2nd edition, including some new chapters. At the most basic level, I have corrected a number of mistakes of spelling, etc. (errata) which were found in the first edition. I have also added additional sections to existing chapters; in Chapter 1, for example, I have added information on the use of electronic (computational) translation tools. Although some of these were available at the time of the 1st edition in 2002, they were very much less used than they are in contemporary professional translation, where they have become part of the essential tools of the trade. I also re-ordered some of the chapters, for instance moving the chapter on Revising and Editing TTs to Chapter 3, rather than Chapter 20 (at the end of the book) where it was placed in the 1st edition. This was because revising and editing are so basic to the overall translation process that it seemed anomalous not to talk about them until the very end of the course.

The 2nd edition of *Thinking Arabic Translation* also contains a number of new chapters; one on parallelism (Chapter 11) and two on different types of technical translation: the translation of botanical texts (Chapter 17) and Islamic finance texts (Chapter 19). I

included the chapter on parallelism because this has been and remains a very important feature of Arabic style, and one which yields very serious challenges for translation into idiomatic English. I included the two new chapters on technical translation, because it seemed important to give students focused practice in the translation of technical material. I chose botanical texts, because these are one of relatively few areas in which original scientific research is produced in Arabic. This means that Arabic-English translation in this area is not an artificial exercise, as it would be, for example, if students were asked to translate a text dealing with some aspect of physics from Arabic to English (English being now the almost universal language for the writing of physics research).

I chose Islamic finance texts, because Islamic finance is now a huge area economically - it has been estimated that the Islamic finance industry was worth \$2 trillion globally at the end of 2014, and that it will be worth \$4 trillion by 2020. Given that the basic Islamic finance texts are in Arabic, this also generates a large amount of professional translation from Arabic to English; students who do a Masters degree in Arabic-English translation may well go on to become professional translators in the area of Islamic finance.

The overall structure of the second edition of *Thinking Arabic Translation* is as follows. Chapters 1–5 deal with the fundamental issues, options and alternatives of which a translator must be aware: translation as process, translation as product, cultural issues in translation, and the nature and crucial importance of compensation in translation, as well as techniques of revising and editing which are an integral part of any polished translation. Chapter 6 provides an introduction to genre. Chapters 7–13 deal with translation issues relating to key linguistic notions: semantics (denotative and connotative meaning), and the formal properties of text (considered on six levels of textual variables from the phonic/graphic to the intertextual), as well as a consideration of parallelism (Chapter 11), which involves both grammatical and semantic, and sometimes also phonic, considerations. Chapter 14 deals with metaphor. Chapter 15 deals with stylistic issues (register, sociolect, dialect). Chapters 16-19 focus on specific technical areas in which Arabic>English translators might do professional work: medicine, botany, constitutions and Islamic finance. Chapter 20 looks at consumer-oriented translation, with a focus on tourist brochures. Finally, Chapter 21 provides a summary and conclusion, together with information about pursuing a career as a professional translator.

Interviewer: What are you currently working on?

James Dickins: In translation studies, I am working on three articles: *Tropes and Translation*, which is to appear in the *Routledge Handbook of Translation and Linguistics* (Adelina Hild and Kirsten Malmkjaer, eds.), *Translating tropes between Arabic and English*, which is to appear in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Arabic-English Translation* (Sameh Hanna and Hanem El-Farahaty, eds.), and *Types of connotative meaning, and their significance for translation*, which is to appear in a Festschrift. I also have a longer-term project to write a book entitled *Thinking translation methodology*.

Outside translation studies, I am working on an article entitled *Para-syntax and thematic structure in Arabic*, and on a book entitled *Sudanese Arabic: syntax*.

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

Author's information

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