

When Wikipedists Meet Encyclopedists...

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IN HER introduction to the articles that originated from the 2009 MLA Presidential Forum, Catherine Porter notes the “recent emergence, in United States colleges and universities, of courses and programs in translation studies” (7). She also argues for the importance of treating “translation as complex, high-level intellectual work,” a refreshing perspective that not only affirms the relevance of foreign language proficiency in an increasingly global context but also highlights the intellectual enrichment one gains from engaging in translation work.

As an example of the ways in which translation may in fact enhance students’ linguistic and cultural proficiency while sharpening their critical sense, the attached poster (presented at the 2009 ASECS conference) sketches the participation of my undergraduate students in the Collaborative Translation of Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*.¹ I now regularly assign this translation exercise in a course I teach on the French Enlightenment. What prompted me to consider including it in this class was my desire to better integrate into my course the study of the *Encyclopédie* as a great portal to the ideas and the spirit of the Enlightenment, despite the unwieldy nature of this work that spans 17 volumes of text and 11 volumes of plates containing 72,000 articles written by more than 140 contributors. Listening to Dena Goodman’s presentation of this ongoing translation project at the 2004 ASECS meeting, I perceived an opportunity to design a course assignment that might — despite considerable challenges — yield great pedagogical benefits, not only in terms of learning about eighteenth-century France but also in my students’ thinking about information legitimacy and the classification and development of knowledge.

Describing the Assignment

This translation exercise is one of several assignments in my course and counts for 20% of the grade. We start the assignment about two weeks after the beginning of the

semester when we discuss the construction of knowledge and intellectual life in the Enlightenment. The learning goal of this assignment is both to ease students into the use of the *Encyclopédie* as a reference tool and to lead them to explore more broadly its organizational structures. Other assignments for the course are an eight-page analytical composition (20%), regular oral participation in class discussions of assigned readings (20%), an oral presentation of one of these readings (20%) and a final exam (20%).²

The translation assignment first requires students to browse the American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language (ARTFL) *Encyclopédie* and to find an entry of interest to them.³ Depending on their specialization, students might, for example, opt for an entry in art, politics, architecture, or philosophy, but the final decision as to what they will translate is made in consultation with the editors of the Collaborative Translation project. Second, when students start their translation, they are asked to take note of the field of knowledge in which the term is placed and to the specific references the entry contains. The next step in this assignment is to analyze the organization of the article, its articulation and its vocabulary. Finally, students note the passages that defy translation and reflect on the causes of this difficulty. So far, this project has resulted in the publication of my students' translations of "Aigle," "Belzeub," "Révolte," "Orion," "Restauration," "Arot & Marot," "Clocher," "Curiosité," "Pérou," "Corruption," and "Féminin," in addition to my own translation of "Traduction" in the online Collaborative Translation.

Exploring the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1777)

Overall, this project has exceeded my expectations in terms of the intense interest and exceptionally high quality work it has elicited from students. The most obvious rewards come from acquainting students with the pressures of publication and seeing them apply themselves and perform. In addition, while the practice of translation enhances linguistic proficiency, collective editing sharpens students' critical sense. More subtly, this assignment pushes students to experience cultural transfer and interactions even before they start their own translations.

Indeed, by simply browsing through the *Encyclopédie* to determine which entry they will translate, students first perceive the scope of the Encyclopédists' project. Students are reminded that the *Encyclopédie* itself started as a translation project of Chambers' *Cyclopaedia*, which had been a commercial success in England starting in the 1720's. Although students do not access this work directly (except in the parts of definitions that directly refer to passages of Chambers' work), they quickly understand that Diderot and D'Alembert greatly expanded on the original text, which comprised only two volumes. This difference leads to questions about what material was added

to or taken out of the original, and where the new words, concepts and the “renvois” came from, thus pointing toward important epistemological issues. What knowledge and philosophy of knowledge did the *Encyclopédie* seek to transfer, and what was its underlying spirit and ideology? The students find answers to these questions in the revised “Prospectus,” which includes Diderot and d’Alembert’s assessment of Chambers’ original text. After presenting the *Cyclopaedia* as a compilation of French sources, Diderot and d’Alembert are free to point out its weaknesses:

We agree that the plan and the design of his dictionary are excellent, and if its execution were brought to a certain degree of perfection, it alone would contribute more to the progress of true science than half of the known books. But despite all the obligations we owe to that author and the considerable utility we have derived from his work, we could not avoid observing that much remained to be added to it. Is it truly possible to imagine that everything relating to the sciences and the arts can be included in two folio volumes? The nomenclature of such an extensive material alone would fill up one of them if it were complete. Imagine, therefore, how many articles must have been omitted or truncated in this work. (110)

The editors then lamented that Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* left “a prodigious number of things to be desired in the sciences; in the liberal arts, we found a [single] word where [whole] pages were necessary; and everything was lacking on the subject of the mechanical arts” (110). Egregiously, Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* perpetuated book knowledge and failed to recognize the work of artisans, thus creating a significant break in the chain of knowledge. The text of the “Prospectus” thus helps students recognize that the genealogy of knowledge, as presented in the *Encyclopédie*, is consciously constructed. The inclusion of the manual and technical arts is a central piece of this new representation of human genius.

The next step of this assignment — once it has been determined which entries will be translated — helps students to further their analysis of the particular system of knowledge developed and promoted by the Encyclopedists. The ARTFL version of the work allows students to follow the “renvois” (cross-references) and to enter into the logic of the work. Jumping from one term to another, the reader perceives the connections Encyclopedists intended to establish between terms and fields of knowledge, thus weaving a web of definitions and constructing a new type of knowledge. With this experience, the students quickly see that, as the “Discours Préliminaire” specifies, the “renvois” “help to show links between subject matters” (my translation) and not “the link of a subject matter with the whole,” as was the goal in Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* (Groult 182). In this way, they become active collaborators in the generation of the tree of knowledge.

As the translation process itself begins, the article “Traduction” provides a particularly useful preliminary reading. The grammarian Beauzee’s entry on

“Translation” prepares students for the tension they will find in their own work between the original and the target language, between their desire to remain close to the French text and the need to write idiomatically. Then, as the class critiques each draft translation, the exercise shifts toward a close reading of the individual articles. This phase of the project makes students attend to vocabulary, verb tenses, connectors, and metaphors, all elements underlying the articulation and nuances of the entries. For instance, students in charge of translating the entry “CORRUPTION” observe that its first definition is placed in the field of Philosophie, but that D’Alembert defines it as (in the translation of my students Laura Otte and Tim Charpie),

the state by which one thing ceases to be what it once was. One can say that wood is *corrupted* when it is no longer in existence; and that instead of wood, we find fire. Similarly, an egg is *corrupted* when it ceases to be an egg and we find a chicken in its place for *corruption* is not taken here in the usual sense. Hence the philosophical axiom, that the corruption of one thing is the creation of another.

Corruption, therefore, differs from generation, as opposites differ from each another:

It differs from alteration, like a larger from a lesser, or like the whole from its part. A thing is said to be *altered* when it is not so changed that one could not recognize it, and that it still retains its former name, but after the corruption, neither one nor the other still exists. See ALTERATION.

Students note that all references are concrete: wood, fire, eggs, and chickens belong to everyday life, and the explanation of the transformation implied by corruption is of a mechanical order. In addition, this first definition of “corruption” is understood in a positive sense, as it signifies evolution, rather than decay or disintegration. Finally, all elements used to provide the basic definition of this term are ones that our senses (sight, smell and hearing) can perceive, an approach promoted by the first part of the “Discours préliminaire.”

Comparing Encyclopedic Definitional Modes

Wikipedia, in both English and French, is the reference work our students most commonly consult, and, though sometimes unreliable, it can offer a useful means of entering into the workings of particular definitional modes. A comparison of a modern Wikipedia article with one from the *Encyclopédie* conveniently highlights the editorial choices made by contributors to both works. For instance,

“Corruption” appears in the English Wikipedia first as a political term. Then follow corporate corruption and corruption as a philosophical concept that “refers to spiritual or moral impurity, or deviation from an ideal,” putrefaction, data corruption, and bribery. Each type of corruption is configured as a hyperlink that takes the reader to a fuller explanation. In the French Wikipedia, by contrast, corruption is highlighted first as a very general term, focused primarily on the misappropriation of means to get an advantage. This entry further lists domains of corruption that overlap with its English counterpart, although the former is more focused than the latter on the moral wrong caused by corruption. Thus, this popular information source provides students with a basis for comparison in a culture closer to them. It sheds light on the particular focus, references, and links that the original *Encyclopédistes* established and leads students to reflect on the specificity of their own cultural frame of reference. Although Wikipedia includes in its definition the material aspect of “corruption,” its dominant angle clearly reflects the current culture of transparency promoted by corporations and governments in diverse parts of the world. This diachronic and bilingual back and forth not only enhances students learning about the Enlightenment and about the language that represents it but also about the encyclopedic definitional mode.

Improving French Language Proficiency

For the most advanced students, this translation exercise makes them work on the various values of the past tenses, as for instance in the entry “Restoration.” Here students note that the present tense is used to describe the part of the concept that derives from the architectural field, as in construction. When referring to the period of the Restoration, on the other hand, the author switches to *passé-simple*, a tense we teach to advanced students as being the equivalent of the *passé-composé*. However, in entries such as “Arot and Marot” or “Belzebub,” students note that the *passé-simple* seems to have a different value than in the definition of the historical period of the Restoration. And in fact, in this particular context, the *passé-simple* is not used to indicate a completed action in the past but to make a passage more poetic and to emphasize its mythological aspect. In addition to such demonstrations of fine grammatical nuance, the review of more basic structures and the meaning they carry may be an even more valuable component of this translation exercise. The passive voice, reflexive verbs and the omnipresent impersonal “on” are all excellent grammatical points from which to discuss partial and impartial perspectives as well as authorial and editorial strategies.

The challenges students encounter in this project can, in some sense, be said to enhance all of the pedagogical benefits I have mentioned. There is, of course, the untranslatable, the specialized, and the obscure that resist the transfer of ideas and concepts from eighteenth-century French to twenty-first-century English. And there

is often very precise, rare vocabulary for which not even a specialized dictionary seems to offer an equivalent. We have resolved such problems either by talking to specialists on our campus — my students went to interview historians and art historians, for instance, to understand the nuances of their entries — and in some cases we have sent inquiries to the translation collective project mail list, which is a wonderful way of making students feel they are part of the conversation within a broader scholarly community.

In conclusion, using translation as a means of apprehending the *Encyclopédie* brings this huge masterwork to life and shows that it is, as Peter France has argued, an “organism” rather than an “inert database” (73). The cultural transfer and interactions present in the practice of translation magnify the choice of metaphors, cultural references, value judgments, authors’ motives, biases, expertise and sources. In other words, it is a technique that can be used to train students to acquire the information literacy skills that help them discover new information by navigating a complex and foreign system of knowledge. Not simply an extraordinary way for students to explore the French Enlightenment, active engagement with translation of the *Encyclopédie* enhances their understanding of knowledge formation, which is perhaps the most valuable of all lessons in the information age.

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NOTES

- ¹ See <http://english.illinoisstate.edu/digitaldefoe/teaching/pierettiposter.png>. The Collaborative Translation of Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* can be viewed at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/intro.html>.
- ² Primary reading assignments for this class are: Graffigny, *Lettres d’une Péruvienne*; Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*; Diderot, *La Religieuse*; Voltaire, *Traité sur la tolérance*; Beaumarchais, *Le Mariage de Figaro*; Laclos, *Les liaisons dangereuses*. Secondary sources to introduce the *Encyclopédie* and support our analysis of its organization include Daniel Brewer’s article “Ordering Knowledge” and parts of Martine Groult’s extensive work on the *Encyclopédie*, in particular her article “L’encyclopédisme dans les mots et les choses: différence entre la *Cyclopaedia* et l’*Encyclopédie*,” which draws attention to the importance of distinguishing between the ways in which an encyclopedia may promote knowledge.
- ³ The ARTFL Project made its electronic version publically available online in 2008. The numerous research and archival materials and documents along with the new ARTFL-FRANTEXT research tool have immensely enriched this project over the years. See <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/databases/TLF/>.

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