

## SOLITUDE AND BREAKTHROUGHS IN TRANSLATION STUDIES RESEARCH

Soledad y avances en la investigación de traducción e interpretación

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I am writing this essay with the intention to share my research experience with novice researchers in translation studies. Specifically, I would like to take on the issues of solitude and breakthroughs. In the humanities, doing research can be a lonely process. Unlike experimental scientific research, humanities disciplines often require us to read, think, and write on our own. It is exactly the individual creative or reflective experience and the researcher's receptivity and sensitivity that contribute to the uniqueness of humanistic literature. I started feeling this sense of academic loneliness in my doctoral study in England. Although there was a research group in my department, each of us in that group, coming from different countries, did very specialized research. We could give each other support, but we were very much on our own in dealing with occasional depression when none of our peers quite knew what we were working on.

As a research student, I saw fellow students dropping out or being terminated for lack of progress. Some of the reasons for these incomplete

candidacies were loneliness, lack of stamina, and loss of direction in study. Another more common and fundamental cause, however, is the issue of communication with supervisors. Doctoral supervisors are often busy people, having been assigned more research students than they could comfortably manage. It would be wise not to rely too much on your supervisor. He or she may be your only supervisor, but you are just one of many research students of your supervisor. Some students blame their supervisors for their lack of progress. The vicious cycle is: the less work you do, the less often you meet your supervisor. The longer the lapse between meetings, the more you miss out on obtaining their feedback on the direction of your work. This leads to a spiraling effect of strained relations with your supervisor, typical of an incomplete research candidacy. Learn instead to solve your problems independently and bring forth solutions to share with him or her. Stretch your own capabilities by reading, thinking, consulting, searching, and writing in order to present yourself positively as an earnest worker. Supervisors tend to spend more time helping enthusiastic and proactive students who demonstrate a will to excel. What kept me going was an interest in the subject area and the satisfaction of completing short-term goals, goals I set for myself weekly. This positive mindset and working momentum eventually sustained me in getting the doctorate. However, getting the degree hardly guarantees a secure professorial job at a university or a smooth career journey. It is, in most cases, at best a rather modest beginning giving you the minimum requirement to apply for university teaching and research positions. There are many more setbacks and struggles in the academic pathway ahead.

While doctoral candidates are usually protected and pampered, full-fledged researchers often face more merciless criticism in conferences. For international conferences in particular, you may be surprised to witness or face various styles and strengths of comments coming from academics of other cultures and practices. Yes, you are alone out there on the presentation floor, having to handle a grilling that may be unreasonable or unkind. The audience may not agree with the criticisms of your research and presentation. Yet, you feel like the whole world at that moment is ganging up on you. Moments like these try your pride and dignity, as well as your emotional maturity.

I think the best tactic to deal with such difficult times is to keep smiling while taking notes of the comments and questions. It is only natural, however, for your adrenaline to shoot up to such a level that you can hardly tune anything in. Nevertheless, you should thank the respondent for the comments, before

addressing the concerns. Depending on time limitations and your level of composure, you can choose to respond to some rather than all questions or remarks. If you do not have answers for certain questions, say you need some time to ruminate further and welcome more exchanges during the coffee break. The last thing you want to do is to engage in a confrontation. Whatever the agenda of the stern questioning is, keep an open mind and be receptive to chances for further improvement.

On the subject of harsh feedback, I recall an instructive incident I experienced almost a decade ago. It was in hindsight a turning-point in my research career, which gave me a better appreciation of the niche of focused research. At that time, I wrote a paper on translation and historiography, and naively felt good about it. I submitted it to a prestigious journal for consideration. It was quickly rejected three months later with a rather negative and long referee report. Understandably, I was depressed over this rejection for two weeks, after which I reread the detailed report more objectively and openly. I should not have been so harsh on myself. After all, this was my first attempt with this journal, known to have a high rejection rate. Anyway, I decided to swallow this disgrace and learn from the comments, however critical they sounded. I highlighted key points in the report and put down some notes, as if I was analyzing a research article. My article was not entirely worthless, but its structure, presentation, and style required a major make-over. I also understand that these stylistic defects could not be fixed right away. The difficulty is, English is not my native language. Besides, writing for academic publishing requires more than simply presenting something grammatical. It takes a lot more to enhance its zest and appeal to an academic audience.

I know you might be saying: how about hiring professional English editors to do the job, quick and easy? Not that I am too stingy to pay for editing services, but I do feel that learning to write and rewrite well is best achieved through hands-on experience. It is only through doing it the hard way yourself that you can most fruitfully acquire the secrets of good writing and nurture your own writing style. That summer was solely devoted to improving my writing. This was done by an analytic reading of published books and articles of established authors in Sinology, History, and Translation Studies. I consciously studied the structure of their writing and their flow, transition, and coherence strategies. Since my research focus is on the historical study of interpreting and interpreters in ancient China, the writing style in History and Sinology would indeed better serve my purpose. It was only after that summer's rigorous stylistic

learning that I was once again confident to face and enthusiastically rework the rejected piece.

With a hopeful and positive mindset, I assiduously revised the article, applying the structural and stylistic devices I learned from superior scholars. The revision itself took about two months of daily writing, before my resubmission. For better or worse, I had no idea that the same unsympathetic referee would be reading my revised piece. This time around, though, the referee was not unsympathetic. To my delight, it was accepted. It was an emotional moment, knowing that my hard work eventually changed the decision of the same referee. The referee was most emphatic in pointing out that I took his or her initial critique seriously and addressed my problems in writing. The reviewer was pleased with the revised manuscript and had no hesitance in recommending it to be published. I have always wanted to know who this referee is; I want to sincerely thank this scholar for giving the most honest and useful report to begin with, alerting me, although not instantaneously, to my stylistic and writing weaknesses. That negative report, with every good intention, motivated me to enhance my writing, starting from scratch by reading Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*,<sup>1</sup> followed by several other books on technical writing.

As I said, that summer was a turning point in my academic career. The seemingly elementary and regressive step I took to attend to my writing inadequacies in fact brought about encouraging consequences. It sounds strange, but greater awareness given to the structure and style of writing in turn makes the writing exercise itself more interesting and appealing. I started to find writing enticing and to enjoy the revision process. After the acceptance that summer, I embraced a new vision and had greater confidence in academic writing, and the quality of my subsequent articles seemed to have taken a leap. There is a major difference if you pay attention to engineering the structure and coherence of your writing. At least, I now have a good idea what quality research writing is like. This renewed understanding likewise elevated my own expectations of my writing, thanks to the referee's initial rejection. My experience suggests that this sort of breakthrough in writing is not impossible, even for non-native speakers of English, if you set your mind on taking the challenge and act on it. The effort and time spent on it definitely pay off in the long run.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Strunk and E.B. White. *Elements of Style*. New York: Harcourt, 2000.

Being a non-native speaker of English seems to have only a downside in a world of international academic publishing, in which English is the *lingua franca*. No doubt writing in your second or third language, particularly for academic publication, is an uphill battle. Yet being a bilingual in fact gives us an additional way to disseminate our research. This linguistic edge empowers you to publish in your native language in your country or countries in which your mother tongue is widely used. What comes with this (near) bilingual niche for us, however, is the question: should I write and publish using, apart from English, my native language? It is of course a matter of personal choice. Speaking for myself, though, I recall that when I first taught translation, my mentors warmly advised me to actively publish in English, not Chinese. The idea was to attend to the expectation in Hong Kong's higher education of international research and publications. Considering the hegemony of English in international academia, English publications from Western publishers still carry greater weight than Chinese publications, as far as Hong Kong is concerned. I followed my mentors' advice and write almost entirely in English. Other mentors, however, held other opinions, saying that if I were to write and publish in Chinese, I could reach a lot more potential readers from mainland China. In fact, both views bear some truth. Yet some others proposed the option of me translating my published articles into Chinese. Nonetheless, I have been sticking to publishing only in English. My rationale is rather conservative: life is short, and I would like to use my time to work on original research and reach international readers. In order to do that, I choose not to invest my time in translating my output into Chinese. I expect all my publications to be unique and original. There is no right or wrong in this sort of decision. It is a matter of which option would better serve your ultimate cause.

I did not think about my ultimate cause until much later. During the first seven years of my career, I wandered across various topics in translation studies, writing on subjects from subtitle translation to note-taking skills for interpreters. I was trying out different subject matters, rather aimlessly stretching my imagination and energy. My earlier publications are diverse and isolated attempts, with little scope for further expansion. Or should I say that I did not quite grapple with the way to expand a topic? My mind was not modeled or trained to think about multiple perspectives at the time. Yet the rumination on different possible twists of perspectives, arguments, and alternatives, is a necessary cognitive process in quality research. Recognizing this crucial feature of good research articles, I was motivated to think more critically in the

construction of arguments. Thinking thoroughly does make a difference in the sense that you want to cover all fronts and critique your own writing as a potential reader does. This awareness coincided with an intention to narrow down my research on the historical study of interpreting in ancient China. But realistically, it is the accumulated effect of the above efforts that ultimately enhanced my research and writing. Now I would think more thoroughly about the subject of research and conduct a broader literature search. With this scale of energy and effort directed to one research topic, it would be difficult to digress or span out too much on what you could practically research on.

The problem with working on the history of interpreting is that the subject itself crisscrosses two disciplines. The legitimate question to ask is: are you studying interpreting or history? The two disciplines rely on different methodologies and ask distinct questions. It is easy to be confused if one is not clear about his or her ultimate subject discipline. I was fortunate, at the beginning of doing historical studies of translation, to have learned mentors reminding me of the importance of thinking as a translation studies researcher. In this connection, it is not the immense documentation and endless digging of historical evidence that count. It is the selective use of archival evidence to reflect on what is relevant and pertinent to the study of interpreting or translation that would really advance translation studies. While immersing myself in the sea of historical materials, I alert myself to the kinds of pertinent questions asked in translation studies, such as the agents of the translation, aims of the translation or the agenda of the interpreting events, the translation product or interpreting process, manipulation and ideology and so on. In this line of thought, history is means and translation studies research is the end.

One of the appeals of the historical approach to interpreting studies is that instead of me imposing my views and opinions about cross-linguistic or cross-cultural matters, we have the archival evidence itself ‘speaking’, thus gaining in objectivity and authenticity. Besides, with evidence such as standard historical texts, private archival collections, memoirs, letters, paintings, and travelogues as the basis of analyses and observations, the research writing becomes far more concrete and substantial. With this wealth of archival sources, different dialogues could be conducted between the researchers and the evidence. It is the constant questioning, conjecturing, validating, and further inquiry that sustain the historical approach to interpreting studies. There may be peers saying that it is a regressive way of approaching interpreting studies, since it looks back at what happened in the past, rather than advancing the discipline

on the technique and efficacy of interpreting. Others would say: why not let historians do it? But then historians would mostly not do it; they have more pressing topics to work on, which certainly will not be the marginal disciplines of interpreting and interpreters in histories. Contrary to the skeptical view, studying the history of interpreting is in fact one way of advancing interpreting studies. It is only through the original cases of interpreting across different language cultures, millennia ago, that we are able to identify what interpreting and interpreters were like. Who were those interpreting in the diplomatic or civilian settings? What were their constraints? How were they identified or recruited? What was their background of bilingual competence? Could the interpreting title be inherited? How was this privilege protected? The development of interpreting studies without attending to the historical side of the craft and profession would therefore be a major oversight.

The last point I want to make parallels the final stage of a research project: presenting your research in conferences. Instead of reiterating the dos and don'ts for conference presentation, which you could probably learn from other arenas, I want to highlight a more personal aspect of it. The greatest appeal of international conferences to me is the chance to meet up with good friends, foreign friends whom you came to know from earlier meetings overseas. These like-minded academics with whom you developed personal bonding make the long-distance traveling worth it. The moral support and rapport they offer me in each reunion and subsequently via email exchanges are bonuses in my career. This kind of professional friendship entices me to keep going to certain conferences.

This short essay captures some of my important changes over the last two decades. I believe most students or researchers in translation studies must have shared similar experiences, although you may choose to deal with the situations differently. Anyway, I hope that this essay may somehow serve to inspire you in the trajectory of your research.