

CHAPTER 4

How to enhance your writing skills

In Chapters 2 and 3, we introduced you to analytical (or “deconstructive”) methods of preparing a text for translation and to criteria for evaluating existing translations. Chapter 3 presented worked examples that analysed four English texts; annotated translations of four texts translated from English into French, German, Italian and Spanish; annotated translations of four texts translated from French, German, Italian and Spanish into English; translation comparisons; and hints on editing translations.

In the present chapter, however, we will turn our attention to preparing *you*, a translator and “writer by proxy,” to tackle literary-type texts and initiating you into creative and constructive methods of improving the quality of your translations. We have also included some “workouts with words” to help you extend your active vocabulary, either in English or in your own target language.

One key facility that translators and writers have in common is the ability to work wonders with words. This was more widely acknowledged in the second half of the twentieth century, which saw publishers giving more credit to translators and the emergence of the translator/writer and translator/poet. Well-known figures in this category include the playwright and novelist Michael Frayn, the Mexican Nobel Prize-winner Octavio Paz, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney and the British poet and critic Michael Hamburger. Michael Frayn translated Anton Chekhov’s plays from the Russian; Octavio Paz, who had lived in a few countries during his career as a Mexican diplomat, translated from several languages, including Chinese, English, French, Japanese, Portuguese, Sanskrit and Swedish. Seamus Heaney’s remaking of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 2000, and he received considerable posthumous acclaim when his complete translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* Book VI was published in 2016. Michael Hamburger, for his part, made a plethora of German poets accessible to English readers through his translations of Benn, Celan, Enzensberger, Hölderlin, Sebald and others.

For translation students and for translators who do not usually work with literary-type material, creative writing is an effective and enjoyable way to add new tools to your toolbox and become even better at crafting a text. In this section, we

will introduce you to some of the stylistic and linguistic “tricks” that writers use to hook their readers, demonstrating how a piece of writing is generated and encouraging you to get under the writer’s skin and even to think like a writer rather than as a translator.

Because we believe that this book and this chapter in particular could be useful to students of world literature and of English language or creative writing, this chapter has a wider focus. It includes various writing tasks, many of which were devised for use in multilingual *Painting with Words* workshops for translators and in more general writers’ workshops. It is up to you, the reader, to decide which tasks you wish to tackle in order to enhance your writing skills.

FINDING YOUR VOICE AND CAPTURING OTHER VOICES

Professional singers may often have a wide repertoire spanning several musical genres, yet those who become household names, like Edith Piaf, tend to have a very distinctive voice. The same applies to many successful writers – their voice is original enough to have attracted a publisher’s interest. One secret of successful translation is the knack of capturing an author’s voice. Before you can do this to the best of your ability, you need to find your own writer’s voice.

The following writing exercises should stimulate your creativity and help you to explore your own voice. Once you have found it, you will be better able to appreciate those features of another writer’s voice that make it special and different from everyone else’s, which is particularly important when translating literary-type texts. It is possible to appreciate an author’s voice *intellectually* by analysing and “deconstructing” his or her work, but it is only when you can understand it at an *emotional* level that you will be able to do full justice to an author whose work you are translating, without of course allowing your own voice to intrude on the author’s. If we take an example from a different area of creative endeavour, art students often visit art galleries during their studies. With the help of their tutor, they can gain an academic insight into the techniques and strategies the artist used, but as they become more advanced practitioners of their craft, they are encouraged to try to copy or “transcribe” one of the great masters. This hands-on and more emotional experience of the act of creation, even if it is by proxy, helps them to determine which, if any, of the artist’s strategies will work for them as they start to develop their own style and produce original work.

The aim of our writing tasks is to give you the chance to create your own source texts and, in the case of bilingual or multilingual groups of students, to allow you the opportunity to be translated. This is the chance for you to defy the fictitious mathematician created by the early eighteenth-century writer Baron Charles de Montesquieu, who was somewhat disparaging about translation. His mathematician told another character, a translator, that if he carried on translating

forever, nobody would ever translate him! (*Lettres persanes* [*Persian Letters*], 1721: letter 128). You and your colleagues or classmates can prove him wrong if you each produce an original piece of writing and ask a translator working in the opposite direction of the same language pair to translate it for you.

The greater facility with language that you will acquire by experiencing the thrills of painting pictures with words will not only give you a glimpse into the secrets of the craft, it will also help you to become a more instinctive translator, more aware of the choices an author must make and more able to account for them in your target texts.

In these tasks, you will probably find it easier to write in your first language or in the one you dream in most. In a foreign language class or workshop, however, the exercise can be carried out in the language the students are studying.

Try to be spontaneous, drawing on a more primal level of consciousness, and if possible, carry on writing until you have put all your ideas down. You can check the spelling and grammar later.

WHERE DO YOU START AND HOW CAN YOU FIND INSPIRATION?

Writers draw their ideas from memories, both their own and other people's, from paintings and photographs, from conversations they have overheard, from historical documents or simply from daydreams. When you are daydreaming, you may find yourself wondering, "What would happen if . . .?" This question can lead to the creation of an entire world.

To get you started, we have devised an exercise that links up with our key themes of time, context and culture and will also give you an insight into their role in weaving the fabric of a fictitious world. This exercise has been used in creative writing seminars for translators and works well in foreign language classes too as a language enhancement exercise. Because most modern fiction tends to be character-driven, the task involves creating a character. You will also need to select a setting in a specific time and culture.

When you tackle the task, you will probably need to answer some of the five questions that journalists refer to as the five Ws (Who? What? Why? Where? When?). Traditionally, before the days of desktop publishing, these questions had to be answered in the report's first paragraph or so because newspaper articles had to be cut from the bottom up if the production editor ran out of space to fit in the whole text.

Such an assignment fits well into a classroom context because people can bounce ideas off each other, stimulating a kind of collective creativity. It also works for individual private study but is more fun if you can ask a friend or family member to help you.

Task 1: Creating a character and a setting (an individual or group exercise)

Draw the rough outline of a person in felt-tip pen on a large sheet of paper (A3 or bigger if possible – last year’s calendar is fine for this task).

- a) To begin with, focus on the *who* and the *what*. Fill in the outline you have drawn with details of the following: their birthday, age, birth-sign, what they usually had for breakfast, what language they spoke, whom or what they loved/hated, their greatest fear, what newspaper they read, their aim in life and what made them special.
- b) Try to decide *where* and *when* they live/lived. Once you have done this, give them a name. The name needs to match the time and the culture and the character’s social position.

If there are children in your extended family, you can use your character as the basis of a story written especially for them. To flesh out fictional characters, a writer needs to explore why people act in a particular way. The *time* in which you set the action may have created an obstacle to overcome. Someone living one hundred years ago or in a different culture is likely to have encountered or to encounter context-driven problems that differ from those we are familiar with nowadays or in the West. They might have struggled to get a job so that they could afford to get married (a problem that still prevails in present-day India, for example) or could have found it hard to break through the barriers of class, gender or circumstances of birth (such as the stigma of illegitimacy).

When deciding on the *context* and a *cultural setting* for your story, you will find it helps if you tap into your own memories of staying with grandparents and elderly relatives when you were small. What did their house smell of? What sounds did you hear? What shadows were cast on the wall as you tried to drop off to sleep?

EXPLORING A THEME

The next question you need to consider still addresses the issue of *what*, but it focuses on the whole picture, rather than on details, so that it can become clear in your own mind what the main theme of your writing is. Defining your theme will help to improve your thinking skills and develop your understanding of the power of words. An effective way to do this is to imagine that a friend asks you, “What is your story about?” Try to tell him or her in thirty words or less. If you can do that, you