Reading Latin/Greek in Civilization Courses

This paper presents a method for giving students who have no background in Latin or Greek the experience of reading a certain amount in the original. At its core, this is an assignment developed and refined over twenty years of teaching, originally based on a modern language technique. This assignment gives students a concrete appreciation of the decisions made by translators and exposes them to disciplinary methodologies, such as philology, historicist criticism and translation studies, which can serve as scaffolding for subsequent assignments such as commentaries, research papers and even creative writing based on classical models.

This project grew out of a desire to strengthen the connection between original language based research and typical undergraduate teaching, where the majority of instructional units are in civilization classes, where primary texts are read in translation. In many programs these classes are growing much faster than Latin/Greek enrollments and the majority of majors are in a non-language track. There is, accordingly, a large pool of students who are not exposed to the work classical philologists do and who have an imperfect understanding of the process of translation. Such students may be hard pressed to explain why a work with an existing translation would ever need to be retranslated; they are puzzled when we explain that the *traduttore* is in some sense a *traditore*, or, in more practical terms, why they should purchase a designated translation of the *Iliad* when Alexander Pope's is available for free though Project Gutenberg. Many students – and not simply those disenchanted with Pope – avoid poetic translations as too "difficult" to read, and never fully understand what a prose translation does not convey, or even the difference between a translation and an adaptation. Most of us have seen students baffled by

cultural and historical references whether updated (‘body bags’ for ‘urns’) or left alone (like the names of *komoidoumenoi* in Aristophanes). And many students have a genuine curiosity about the complex, difficult, shocking, eccentric, or merely scatological. “Is that *really* in the Greek?”

Greek and Latin take some effort to acquire, certainly, but students with limited knowledge of the languages, cultures, and writing system (as, e.g., in Japanese, the original source of this activity) can read enough Greek or Latin to be confronted with issues of comprehension, interpretation and translation, and to formulate their own answers to the “questions” in the preceding paragraph. The project described here requires the instructor to develop a short, researched English-language commentary on a chosen excerpt (examples from drama are discussed). The commentary should include information from the full range of sources, including modern language scholarship (translated) that would form the basis of any other research project. It can include nearly anything – from conceptual terms with no English language parallel to the meaning(s) of a *hapax legomenon* –that would concern an expert reader. For Greek, a transliteration needs to accompany the commentary, along with three or four translations, and instructions: typically four to six pages’ worth of text, as per the samples shown. Because most students have done nothing like this, it is important for the instructor to model ‘reading’ a text this way, explaining how to interpret it at the level of the word and phrase and the kinds of choices translators make, including questions of register, form (meter? prose? rhyme?), topical references, contested passages and (for drama), topics like stage directions and implicit meaning or pragmatics. Students need to be taught how a translator works but they do not need years of exposure to the language. Their translation will also be accompanied by an explanation of the choices they made and a rationale.

Drawing on examples of student work (from a pool of 300-400 examples), the presenter will show what students typically learn. Most gain an excellent understanding of things like word order, sound effects, register, tone, speaker differentiation, lexemes without direct English equivalents, connotation/nuance, metaphors, topical allusions, (some) syntax and how ‘close’ a translation is to the original. Individual examples rise to the level of publishable work. This can be a richly rewarding activity for everyone. It is potentially highly creative (and as such, motivating) but flexible enough to accommodate a more analytic approach. The results are fun to read and respond to, and students can even be encouraged to try out other languages than English in their translations. It is no longer radical for poets and scholar to produce translations of classical texts derived primarily from other translations (Seamus Heaney, Stephen Mitchell). Our classical civilization students can do this as well and gain a much fuller understanding of the texts they are reading.