



Translation Talk

Interviews conducted by students in the M.A.
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Susanne Goga-Klinkenberg is a prolific literary translator working primarily from English to German. Born in Germany in 1967, she studied Literary Translation at Dusseldorf University from 1988 to 1993 and has translated more than 100 books from English and French. Since 2005, she is also a novelist, publishing under the name Susanne Goga. She is currently working on her 15th novel. Photograph by Detlef Ilgner.



How do you avoid burnout as a translator? Do you think it's possible to do the job if you don't feel passionate about it?

Fortunately, I never had a tendency for burnout but of course, there have been times that were more stressful than others. Apart from the usual advice about regular sleep, healthy food and exercise plus whatever else may be of help (e.g. meditation) there is one thing I always felt is important: to translate what you like.

Of course, you cannot always work on texts you love but continually doing something you do not like may be detrimental to your wellbeing. For example, I translated non-literary texts on the side for years and while the income was nice, it never was what I really wanted to do. So I gave it up and felt much better doing only what I really like.

But, of course, this is a thing that may develop over your career. At the beginning I took practically every job I could get which is quite usual.

What part of your past translation work do you look back on most fondly?

At a very early point in my career I translated nine songs by Kurt Weill from English. They were to be performed by a singer so this was a real challenge, creating German texts that went with the music.

Apart from that there are some books I translated that are quite close to my heart, one of them being Chris Cleave's novel *Everyone Brave Is Forgiven* which is an exquisite read and was quite tricky to translate.



I also love translating short biographies of classical artists, something I have been doing since 2005. I have learned a lot about classical music from this.

How much does your workflow rely on technology? Do you use a lot of translation software, or is it mainly things like word processing and collaboration tools?

I do not use any translation software because I have found that it does not really help me in doing literary translation. Of course, I constantly rely on the Internet for research and exchange with colleagues. However, what has been most useful over the years is speech recognition software, i.e. I usually dictate my translations. There are several advantages to this:

- It reduces the strain on shoulders, arms and hands because I do not have to type large amounts of text.

- I can hear what I am translating and spot at once if a sentence or phrase does not flow or sound right.


The problem is that the best software out there does not support Mac anymore – so I have to improvise since I have been working with Mac exclusively since 2009.

How has the field of literary translation changed over the course of your career?

Well, I think the most important factor since I started doing this in 1993 is the development of the Internet. When I started, research often was difficult and time-consuming. You did not have all the dictionaries at your service, had to order books from far-away libraries, etc. I remember translating the first chapter of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* for a workshop and being close to despair because it was almost impossible to resolve some questions. Today I would look them up on the Internet and find the answers quickly.

As for the situation in Germany, I think the fact that most of the literature we read has been translated from other languages has become more of an issue. There is still much to do with regard to appropriate recognition (and payment) of translators but some things are slowly changing for the better. On the other hand, the economic pressure on publishers is sometimes passed on to the translators, i.e., they are offered smaller fees for doing the same work because they somehow have to fit into the publisher's calculation although their contribution cannot be compared to the paper supplier's or the printer's.

All in all, however, I think that translators have become more visible over the years which is a good thing. We are the German voices of authors from all over the world.



What issues do you expect to become most important in your field going forward? Either in your language pair or just generally for the field.

I think this depends on how book trade will change as a whole. Every change with regard to e.g., digitalization will somehow affect translators as well in some way or other. Maybe there will be new technologies as well but this is not really my field of expertise.

For my language pair I have not seen any essential changes since English/German is and will probably remain the most popular and wide-spread pair. About 70% of all book translations (fiction and non-fiction) published in Germany are from English, followed by French (10%), Japanese and Dutch. While English had the same importance when I started my career, Japanese has become a surprise runner-up in recent years, caused by the growing number of Manga translations.

Is there any piece of advice you would like to pass on to translation students, in universities or elsewhere?


Do what you like. Do not be afraid of challenges but listen to your gut instinct if something does not feel right.

Here is a little story: At the beginning of my career I was offered to translate a book from French although this was my second foreign language and I was less experienced than in English. So I skimmed the book and said yes. But as soon as I started the translation, I realized that the text was far beyond my skills. I soldiered through but in the end felt that it was a failure. Plot twist: After completing the translation, I learned that there was a colleague who had translated the author's previous books. She was an expert in the field of Caribbean-French authors but the publisher did not want to pay her much higher fees. In the end she edited my translation and they had to pay us both.

In short: It is important to distinguish between a true challenge where you can extend your limits and learn something new and a job for which you are simply not qualified. And of course, you should read a lot in both your source and target languages, thereby extending your language skills and cultural knowledge as well as honing your style and sense of your first language.

Would you say that you adhere to any particular theory of translation in your work? Do you use a mix of approaches for each project or stick mainly to one?

To be honest, I am not much of a theorist. I did the classic theories in my studies but never felt that they did really help in day-to-day work. But there is one exception:



Judith Macheiner's *Übersetzen. Ein Vademecum*. I am not sure if it has ever been translated into English. In this book she discusses the concept of "Wirkungsäquivalenz" or equivalence of effect, meaning that the overall aim in translation should be to create the same effects that the readers of the original text experience. The best example may be humor: if a certain pun does not work, try to find one that does, here or close to the place of the original pun in order to preserve the intended effect on readers. It may seem obvious but for me this has always been helpful. And it does not just apply to humorous passages but to every other effect created by the original text.

In literature, the subtext is often just as important as what's on the page, if not more important. Do you ever find it impossible to translate subtext without adding more explanation? How do you reconcile this?

Yes, I do. Sadly, I do not have a good example from my own work at hand but this happens, for example in cases of cultural differences between countries. Let's say you have subtext concerning Thanksgiving in an American novel which is a very important holiday in the US but something we do not celebrate in Germany. Sure, there are church services dedicated to giving thanks for the year's harvest but there are no festive dinners, family reunions, etc. as there are in your country. And there are readers in Germany who do not know about the importance of Thanksgiving either. So I have to decide if I just hope that readers will understand the subtextual hints or add a short explanation.

This may also apply to people, places, quotes or events which mean something to an American reader and evoke certain reactions but will probably not to a German reader. There is no sure formula for solving such issues, you will have to look at each problem and decide how to proceed. Sometimes you can rely on German readers understanding the subtext, in other cases you will have to add a short explanation or find an equivalent from your own cultural context that works.

Have you run into situations where the text was purposefully ambiguous? How do you think translators should handle those situations?

Yes, I have. In such a case there are basically two possibilities: either the text is meant to be ambiguous or it just seems ambiguous and can be explained in an unequivocal way. In an ideal world you can ask the author what they mean which I have done in some cases. Some are very helpful and try to explain what they meant or how they left the text deliberately ambiguous. Others do not wish to discuss their texts which I have to accept as well. In this case, I can only try to keep my German version ambiguous as well. If this does not work, I will have to choose an interpretation and stick with it. Here is an example of a helpful exchange with an author. I will keep this anonymous but hope it illustrates how this can work if the author is accessible:



My question:

p. 234: "We needn't put this city back the way we found it, you know."

Is there a sexual connotation or allusion in this (because Mary obviously pretends to be available to Cooper)? Does "put back" mean something like a) restore or rather b) give back? And what does "the way we found it" mean? The way it was before the war or the way it has become after the bombings?

Author's answer:

There is indeed an element of suggestiveness to this. On one level Mary is saying that the strict protocols which applied before the war need not apply to Cooper's administrative decisions during or after it. At the same time she is suggesting that interpersonal morals are now subject to the same relaxation. "Put back" means more "restore" than "give back". And "the way we found it" means before the war.

Interview conducted by Katherine Ziegler.