



An Interview with Jean Boase-Beier

1. How did you get into translation?

I first started to become interested in translation at school. I was in the 4th form (so about 14) and we had to translate from French, and one day I suddenly realized that it wasn't just a matter of getting it right. You could translate in different ways, and you could have fun thinking of all the ways you could say what the original text said. With a flash it shifted, in my head, from mechanical to creative. I can still see myself in that French classroom. After that I looked out for things to translate. When I went to live in Germany 5 years later I translated everything I could see. The best part of my job as a student *Hilfskraft* (roughly translated: dogsbody) was to translate folk songs from German into English so they could be sung. At that point I started to get interested in the theory of translation, as well.

2. What is it about translation that interests you the most?

I am fascinated by what happens when stylistic features of a text – those things that you have most choice about - cross a language-boundary.

3. Where do you see Translation Studies heading in the future?

I am sure there will always be a great deal of interest in the questions that preoccupy us now, such as the ethics of translation, the different methods of translating, and the different ways of reading translated texts. I think in the future there will be more interdisciplinary influences on Translation Studies, so that Corpus Studies, or Computer-Assisted Literary Analysis, for example, will be investigated more by Translation Studies scholars. But also I think that the role of translation in other areas – in the movement of peoples or the development of medicine or the writing of history – will be better acknowledged. Some of my fellow Translation Studies scholars don't find the stuff to do with IT all that interesting, but I disagree. Everything in the world is interesting. (With the possible exception of football.)

What role do you think technology plays in Translation Studies?

Technology has a potentially far greater role in Translation Studies than in the practice of translation. Where it affects the practice of translation, it's often in areas such as use of online dictionaries or research resources and so on, which can be very useful but don't radically change the way we translate. With Translation Studies it's different, because technology allows us to do things we can't do without it. Corpora and their analysis are a case in point. We can observe and analyse trends and styles in a way we simply can't do without the technology of corpus analysis.

That tends to be my view but I think it's possibly a rather limited view. I want to look into Corpus Studies more now for a revised edition of one of my books, and because I don't like to be ill-informed. Maybe I'll find that this additional knowledge – like any knowledge of anything at all, potentially – can change how people translate in ways I hadn't realized. Maybe it will change the way I myself translate.

4. How important do you think it is for a scholar to be a practitioner and vice versa?

It's not crucial for a scholar to be a practitioner, because you can always be interested in something and find out about it and become an expert, without actually doing it, or without being able to do it well enough to be a practitioner. If this were not the case anyone writing a history of surgery would have to perform operations. And imagine if an art historian had to be an artist or a literary critic had to be a novelist. If a scholar had to be a practitioner, there would be far fewer experts or, for that matter, teachers. Of course, if a scholar *is* also a practitioner, it adds a further dimension to scholarly analysis. But there can also be disadvantages. I am a poetry translator and I research and write about poetry translation. The danger of that is that I can feel I know what I am talking about better than someone who doesn't actually do it. But that just isn't true. It's just arrogance and one should stamp it down in oneself.

But it *is* crucial, on the other hand, for a practitioner to be a scholar. Being a scholar of translation is not about knowing everything that has been written in Translation Studies, or even most of it. It is certainly not about agreeing with it. Being a scholar is a mindset – it's about curiosity and the desire and readiness to learn. If you don't want to read what others have written, if you don't want to understand what they have thought, if you don't care to know why people explain

things the way they do, if you don't want to engage with new views and at least examine them, even if you end up disagreeing profoundly, if you just don't want to know – well, then you are unlikely to make a good translator. Being a scholar is about having a creative and alert mindset, and you need to have both these things to be a translator. Translators are curious about what is not immediately obvious, about what is foreign and strange and not everyday. I would say that is the definition of a scholar. So we might be tempted to say that a translator is by definition a scholar. But is this true? Some translators – though I am sure they are in the minority – can have a sort of rather studied dislike of anything that seems to be theoretical or scholarly. But why bother to cultivate such an attitude? Why not just be interested in everything, especially when it has to do with what you practise? I would say that translators who take this attitude are probably still scholars – they just pretend not to be.

5+1. What are you currently working on in terms of research or translation project?

I'm working on three different types of project. First of all, there is the editing I do for Arc Publications. I edit 4 series of translated poetry books for them. At the moment I have just been working with a translator from Norwegian. It is fascinating to work with a language you don't really know. You can ask naïve questions about what the text really says or what a word might suggest, and sometimes, from the perspective of imperfect knowledge, you can get to very helpful insights about what a poem is doing, and about alternative ways of translating it. Part of what I do as editor is also to think, together with the translator, about how the poetry reads in English. I am convinced that, if you translate with a full awareness of how the original poem works poetically and stylistically (which the translator can do much better than me – I can only make suggestions and act as a trigger to think about things differently), the translated poems will also be susceptible to stylistic analysis.

The second project is the academic one: the new edition of a book I mentioned earlier. In a sense, it irritates me as it takes time away from translating and editing. But in another sense I enjoy it and find it extremely useful, because it makes me keep up with what fellow translation scholars are saying.

Then, thirdly, I am working, together with a co-editor, on an anthology of Holocaust poetry, some of which we are translating ourselves, some of which others are translating and we are merely collecting, and in other cases we are discussing other people's translations with them as they appear. This project, that arises from a research project I had a few years back, is very important to me: I and my co-editor, Marian de Vooght – who was my Research Associate and is

also a poetry translator - want to collect poetry that is less well-known, maybe from countries and languages and situations that we don't so readily associate with the Holocaust, so that we can see how many different people were affected, and think about why they wrote poetry and what it means to translate it. There is a danger that the same poetry is translated over and over again, that there are a few famous Holocaust poets, and that therefore all those voices of other people – the disabled Polish resistance fighter who managed to smuggle her poems out of prison before the Nazis executed her, the young Czernowitz poet who was deported before she had time to develop her poetry, the French poet writing, against all the odds, in the Buchenwald concentration camp – will not be heard. In many ways it's an ideal translation project because it combines research and translation. And yet: would it not have been better if this poetry had never had to be written? It would, of course.

.....

Dr Jean Boase-Beier is an Emeritus Professor at the University of East Anglia. She studied English and Linguistics at the University of Regensburg, Germany, where she also lectured in Linguistics and German and led a research project funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Council) on Word Formation. She has taught Literary Translation, Linguistics, German and Stylistics at UEA since 1991 and set up UEA's MA in Literary Translation in 1993. An Executive Committee member of the British Comparative Literature Association, member of the Advisory Panel of the British Centre for Literary Translation, and former Executive Committee member of the Translators Association, she is also a translator between German and English and the editor of the Visible Poets series of bilingual poetry books (Arc Publications). Jean Boase-Beier was promoted to Professor in 2008. She has recently held an Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellowship on *Translating the Poetry of the Holocaust*. She retired from UEA in January 2015 but continues to supervise PhD students and to hold workshops.



<https://www.uea.ac.uk/literature/people/profile/j-boase-beier>