

Historical European Martial Arts Coalition (HEMAC)



School voor Historische Schermkunsten
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A Primer to Translating Historical Martial Arts Treatises

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The Historical European Martial Arts Coalition (HEMAC) is a pan-European coalition of martial artists and researchers dedicated to the study of traditional European fighting arts and martial traditions. HEMAC has members throughout Europe.



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Introduction

In recent years, the number of practitioners of Historical European Martial Arts seems to have grown exponentially. Likewise, the number of tournaments and similar events has grown very swiftly. However, the number of new English translations of treatises (and the number of individual translators working on making such translations), seems to have increased only slightly - if at all.

In part, this can be explained by the higher number of readily available translations, meaning that people have less need to work on making their own translations to further their research. However, the number of treatises translated into English still only represents a fraction of the number of available sources (a number which also keeps increasing).

At the same time, we have noticed that there are HEMA practitioners who would like to begin to do some translation work. Unfortunately, a lot of these aspiring-translators do not know how to begin, or fear that they may never achieve the high standards set before them. Often, just beginning to make a translation is a very daunting thing. The following document has been prepared especially to help this group of people to begin translating treatises.

Before Starting the Translation

Before starting your translation work, there are a number of preparations you can make. First of all, you need to have a good grasp of both the language from which you are translating and the language to which you are translating. Often one language will be your mother tongue and the other language will be foreign, but sometimes a project may require the use of two foreign languages. Secondly, you need to decide what kind of translation you want to make. And of course, you must make a sensible choice of what source you want to translate.

Language

In order to be successful in your translation work, you need to have a good vocabulary, and you need to understand the grammar of the languages involved. Knowing some of the idiom will definitely also help.

Dictionaries and thesauri can help you a lot with vocabulary, but it is important to understand the range of meanings that a word in the source language may have, in order to choose the word in the

target language that best represents that meaning. Next to paper dictionaries, the internet now offers various alternatives, including Google Translate; this online service should not be dismissed summarily, as some people engaged with translation work do find that it has its uses. Some translators believe that it is helpful for individual words, though not so good for sentences; other translators use the tool to help gain a rough understanding of the gist of the sentence, and then use a more detailed dictionary to prepare the more correct translation.

Grammar is less easily helped with online tools, and so a good understanding of grammar (and syntax) is absolutely necessary to understand who is the subject and who the object, or who is doing what to whom, in any sentence. Just a pure, literal word-by-word translation will not get you the results you need, most of the time. So, if you do not have a good understanding of grammar and syntax in either the target or the source language (or both!), you should read up on it.

It is also worth noting that some languages, such as Latin and German, still use cases - where nouns, adjectives and articles have different endings depending on the role of the noun in the sentence (subject, object etc). Knowing these cases, along with a proper understanding of grammar, can be a great boon to a translator as it takes away the doubt about who does what to whom. In languages without cases, this can sometimes only be determined from syntax.

As an example, we can take a look at the following sentence in English: "*Marcus kicks Lucius.*"

In this sentence, the order of the words tells us who is the kicker, and who is the receiver of said kick. Now, let us look at the same sentence in Latin: "*Marcus Lucium calcat.*"

Latin is a very interesting language, as the order of the words is not constrained by syntax. The above three words could be ordered in essentially any way without changing the literal meaning of the sentence. It is clear from the cases of the names Marcus (nominative) and Lucius (accusative), however, who is kicking whom. As an aside, please note, however, that while this is true in principle, Latin did have a preferred structure (subject - object - verb). Variations in sentence structure could for instance be used to indicate where the emphasis is placed (on the first word in this example).

More information about cases can be found online here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical_case

Degree of Interpretation

Any translation will include a certain amount of interpretation. You will always have to choose what you believe is the best translation for any one word, group of words or whole sentence. The degree of interpretation you want to include in your translation, however, is something you have to think about.

On the one hand you can keep your translation very close to the original text, in which case your translation may at times appear a bit stilted, but the degree of interpretation is minimal, meaning a reader can feel closer to the original text. On the other hand, you can make a more readable translation, which will invariably include more of your own interpretation.

There is no correct answer here, it really depends on your preference and your target audience (experienced practitioners who have read other texts before likely prefer a more literal translation, whereas beginners or non-practitioners would probably prefer a more polished and interpretive version). What is important, however, is that you are open and honest about this, so that a reader knows what he or she will be reading.

What can really help you here are translations of the same (or similar) texts by other people. Seeing how they translated tricky words or sections can help you form your own ideas about how to express them. This will especially be true when the concept described is quite simple, but where the wording is complex. You need to have an idea of what a treatise is trying to say to make your own translation understandable. It is important, however, that you do let the text you are translating have the final say in the translation, not your preset ideas or interpretations from other texts. You must keep an open mind!

Choosing an Appropriate Text

While it might be tempting to dive in and tackle a text that no one else has translated before, that might not always be the best way to begin. It would certainly be a great step forward for the community if someone could translate the entirety of Paulus Mair's *Opus Amplissimum de Arte Athletica* into a modern language... But can you really guarantee that you will manage to finish a ~1200 page translation? It might be better to choose a ~50 page treatise and work on that, so that you have a reasonable chance to succeed and finish your first project.

There is a distinct advantage in choosing a text that has already been translated once or twice before: you will have other translations to which to refer during your work. If you reach a passage where you cannot understand what the author meant, or where it could be translated in two or three different but equally valid ways, it can help tremendously to be able to look at someone else's translation to see how they dealt with the passage. On the other hand, you do have to take care not to make the same mistakes they made. If a passage is difficult for you, it might also have been difficult for the previous translator.

This is a very good "safety net" as you begin your first one or two translations, and it can help you to become familiar with the source language in a more comfortable fashion. Then, once you have translated a couple of "easy" texts (short texts, with previous translations to help the process), you might feel much more comfortable and able to tackle one of the bigger and slightly more difficult texts.

An excellent short text to begin with for translating from 15th century German is the sword and buckler treatise of Andre Lignitzer. There are only six paragraphs, the treatise is full of helpful keywords, and there are few tricky sections. This could be translated in just a few hours and there are other existing translations with which you can compare during or after the process. Taking this treatise as your first piece for translation will help to build your confidence and your knowledge of relevant keywords if you plan to tackle other 15th or 16th century German texts.

If you wish to work with sources from different time periods or in a different language, then the advice still holds. Obviously this treatise by Lignitzer would not be the best starting point, but there will be other short texts (or even shorter chapters of a longer text) that will let you gain some familiarity with the process and some confidence in your own ability.

The most important thing is not to dive in too deep at the beginning. If you take on too big a task, or too difficult a task, then you will be much less likely to complete it or make a good job of it. Sure, have Mair's ~1200 page *Opus Amplissimum* (or a similar great endeavour) as your long term goal, but begin your development as a translator with something manageable and gradually work up.

During the Translation Process

Once you have started making a translation, finishing it means that you just have to keep going!

Try to have regular times to work on your translation and do your very best keep to those times at the very least. Any additional time spent working on the translation is a bonus - but you do need to stick to your schedule to be able to progress at a decent pace. Working on it daily is a great target to strive for and ensures that you will keep going and will get your work finished within a reasonable time. If this is not possible, then setting a particular time on one particular day of the week can work in a similar fashion.

When translating, set yourself achievable goals and breakpoints so that you can notice your progress and see your target (finalising your translation) approach. What you do with those small completed sections is up to you. Some people prefer to share this work, as Francesco Lanza does with his translation work on Marcelli's 1686 treatise (found online at <http://marcelli-translated.wikispaces.com/>), whereas other people want to finalise the full translation first. This also depends on what you want to do with your translation once it is finished.

Sharing the translation in public, piece by piece, helps give you a feeling of accountability and responsibility, to ensure that you do put in the necessary effort to finish the daily or weekly piece and put it onto the public medium (blog, forum, Facebook, whatever) at the correct time without missing lots of deadlines. Working without sharing in this fashion requires a lot of self-discipline to keep going, and a lot of people who choose not to share their translation like this find problems with motivating themselves to finish the project. Whatever your method, you must find some kind of process whereby you do complete sections, so that you do finish the translation.

Often your translation will be better if you go through it at least twice. The first time your translation will be relatively rough, and you can underline some parts that you found hard to understand or translate so that you know you will have to think more about these sections. The second time, you can control and smoothen your initial work, and put more thought into the difficult areas. There is a high chance that they will not be quite as difficult as you thought initially.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, translation is not a one-to-one relationship for replacing words in different languages. Even if you want to make a translation that is quite close to the original, some interpretation must be involved, which means you have to understand what is presented in the original language. This may also mean that sometimes you have to take your translation to a training practice, and see if what you have translated can actually work.

Here are a few more tips and tricks to help you out with more practical issues:

- If you have a transcription of the source you are translating, preferably in a format you can edit and work in, this can greatly help. In translating, you can then delete parts of sentences as you translate them, ensuring that you do not forget anything. Alternatively, you can use a printed version of your source and cross through all you have translated.

- Certain sections are a lot more tricky to translate than other parts. If you recognise such sections (for instance the dedication in many 16th and 17th century sources, in which overly complex language is often used), and struggle with them, it might be smarter to skip them and come back to these parts later, when you have more experience with this source, and feel more motivated when you are almost finished.

- As well as using dictionaries and word lists compiled by other people, build your own dictionary of useful keywords and phrases. It will help you to learn and remember the words and phrases better than if you have to consult another dictionary each time you see them, and it will slowly grow into a context-specific document that will be exceptionally useful for you and for any other translator with whom you decide to share your work.

- Identify one or two other translators, and ask questions if you are stuck. It is not a sign of weakness to ask questions. It might be worth joining one or two of the forums to find and talk to other translators: the Schola Gladiatoria and the HEMA Alliance forums are both good options, and most HEMAC members would be willing to share their knowledge:

<http://www.fioredeiliberi.org/phpBB3/index.php>

<http://hemaalliance.com/discussion/>

<http://www.hemac.org/>

After the Translation is Complete

Once the translation is complete, there are a few final choices to be made. These will govern how accessible the translation will be, and may impact on opportunities for formal publication at a later date.

Once you create a translation, you will have copyright over it. This exists automatically, you need not do anything to register it. It is worth writing a statement such as "Copyright © [your name], [year]" to make your ownership of the document explicit, although you do not need to do so. If you want to license usage of the document under a particular kind of license (such as one of the Creative Commons licenses) then you should state this as well.

Different licenses will allow people to use your translation in different ways and for different purposes. The more strict a license you choose, the less able people will be to use your translation for their own work; the more free the license, the more options other people will have to use your work to further their own.

Every country has different copyright laws, so the subject is a quagmire, and a discussion on the subject is far beyond the scope of this article. Please see the following link for further information about the various different Creative Commons licenses:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

In terms of how to distribute the translation once it is complete, there are two main distribution channels: online and offline. In general, online distribution will have a much greater reach, but offline publication may carry more academic weight and "real world" recognition. Both channels have different advantages and disadvantages, which will be summarised below.

Online - ebook / pdf document

If you plan to make a document available, then you need to decide on the format. Choosing to use a .doc (Word), .odt (Open Office) or .rtf (rich text) document is probably a bad idea, since these formats have a habit of displaying differently on different computers, and are easily editable by the people who are downloading your document. If you let someone edit the document and insert their own words or punctuation into the document, then the issue of copyright becomes significantly more difficult. Alternatively, in such an editable format, the reader may delete part of the document by mistake, without noticing, and then will be working with an incomplete translation.

A much better option is to use a .pdf document, since this can be created very easily from your .doc work-in-progress file (or whatever type of file you use to work on your translation), and is fixed thereafter. It will always display in the same fashion on every computer and browser, and people cannot edit it to change what you have written. The .pdf format has the advantage that it is universally supported and everyone will be able to view it. If you choose to use .doc or .odt or another proprietary format, then only people with the correct application will be able to view the document.

One of the facts of life is that if you put a document out into the Internet, it will inevitably find its way onto one (or more) of the many file sharing sites. Your website will not be the sole location of the document for very long. That being said, if you are providing the translation free of charge, then this is not necessarily a bad thing. The more people who have access to your translation, the more people will read it, and so if another website spreads the document on your behalf then so much the better!

If you choose to make the translation into an ebook, then you will need to know how to construct an ebook properly. You will also have to choose your target audience: are you looking to make it available for people with Kindles, or any other readers? While ebooks are quite popular, your best option is probably just a simple .pdf file that will be accepted universally.

Online - personal website / blog

If you make the translation available online through your own website or blog, then the translation will draw people to your site. This will have benefits for your website's ranking and statistics; however, if your website is small and difficult to find (or not very well constructed), then people may find it more difficult or off-putting to come to your site to read the translation.

If you are using your own website or blog then you have the option of copying and pasting the translated text into a webpage or blog article. If the original document is not available for download, and merely the text is available, then you will have much more control over the dissemination of the text. Furthermore, it means that you will find it much easier to make edits as required, without having to go to the hassle of uploading a new document and then letting people know that they need to download the newer version.

Online - Wiktenauer

If you are not planning to charge a fee for your translation, then you should consider donating your translation to the Wiktenauer: <http://wiktenauer.com/>

The Wiktenauer is a wonderful online resource that makes lots of transcriptions, translations and research material available to the community at large. It is always in need of more contributors to help expand what it offers. It is perfectly reasonable to host the translation on your own website or blog, and to put the translation onto the Wiktenauer as well, so that a greater number of people can benefit from your work.

The Wiktenauer team take copyright and intellectual property seriously, so you should not worry about your work being “stolen” or otherwise abused. You can find out more about their policies here: http://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Wiktenauer:Copyright_Policy

Offline - book (with an established publisher)

If you plan to publish your translation through a reputable publisher then the likelihood is that your translation will become an important part of the literature available about your subject. Furthermore, publishing through a reputable publisher will give your work a permanence and value that is very difficult to achieve with an online distribution or .pdf document. A book can be cited and carries value in an academic sense, whereas an online translation does not always carry the same worth.

Publishing your translation in a book like this also gives you the opportunity to earn some royalties for your work - always a tempting option! However, the more expensive the translation, the fewer people will buy it, and so your work will not receive the same level of exposure as it would if it was made available free of charge online.

It is worth noting that while publishing through a reputable publisher like this will bring a lot of advantages, it may take a very long time before your book becomes available in print. There will also be a host of legalities that will need to be ironed out and a legal contract that will need to be signed. This is not an easy process, and may not be the best option for someone who is just starting out with translating treatises.

Offline - book (self published)

If you want to see your translation in print in a book, but you do not want to go through the process of working with an existing publishing company (or have been rejected by a publisher), then there is the option of self publishing through services such as Lulu or CreateSpace. If you know what you are doing, and if you can edit your own work thoroughly and honestly, then this is a good option. However, if your editing skills are not up to scratch, or if it is mainly a vanity issue, then this might not be the best option. It is considerably better to make a translation available free of charge online, where people will be grateful for it, than to make a bad job of a book that people will criticise and review negatively. Creating poor quality self published books does little to advance the literature for our community and instead harms the publishers and authors who are indeed developing good quality books on the subject.

Another option self-publication to go to a printing shop directly, and have a number of books printed that you then sell. With modern printing on demand services (PoD), a small number of books can be printed with very high quality. However, for this option, you will need even stronger editing skills. Furthermore, as opposed to publishing through a service like Lulu, you will need to set up distribution by yourself.

You may make more money for yourself if you self publish rather than go through a traditional publisher, but it cannot be stressed enough that the editing job must be good, thorough, and honest. You will also need to do all of the marketing and advertising yourself, and in the end, it just might not be worth the effort.

Offline - journal article

If you submit your translation to an academic journal and have it included in such a volume, then the translation will gain a lot of academic value and recognition, and may add to your own academic credentials. It will also help to further the development of this field of study as an academic discipline worthy of study. However, the process is slow, and journals rarely reach as many people as an online translation made available free of charge. This is a good option for established translators, but is perhaps not the best choice for someone beginning to translate the treatises.

Conclusions

Translating historical treatises is a great way to study their content and to improve your own knowledge and skills. Furthermore, making such translations available will greatly enhance the accessibility of such texts, allowing people around the world to work with them. Each new translation adds wealth to our community and aids our attempts to reconstruct the martial arts from Europe's history.

However, once a translation is available, there is a good chance that that it may become the main translation of the text that will be used worldwide, so it is important as a translator to show integrity in your work and to translate as neutrally as possible - or at the very least to show where you have inserted your own ideas or interpretations! Presenting a solid translation of a treatise can be a very satisfying experience, especially if people begin to use your translation for their own studies and thank you for your efforts.

If you would like to take your first steps with translating treatises then you should speak to your club instructor or a knowledgeable individual within your club for advice, or go to one of the forums mentioned above. People will often be happy to give advice or suggestions, or to point you in the direction of a treatise that has yet to be translated.

Finally, if this article has been helpful for you, then we ask that you share it with your friends and club mates, and we encourage you to begin your first translation!