

VY Mudimbe: A Reader

Translation Seminars 12-13 May 2011

Report for IATL

This statement reports on the Mudimbe translation seminars funded by IATL, Warwick. As the application set out, the seminars responded to several of the Institute's objectives: it offered training to undergraduates in professional academic translation skills (thereby providing academic literacy); it spoke to a global culture in its examination of Mudimbe's intellectual oeuvre; its interdisciplinary nature was reflected in the participation of members from the French and Classics Departments; and it represented an excellent example of research-led teaching – the students contributed to a forthcoming publication: *VY Mudimbe: A Reader*.

The four seminars, or workshops, engaged with three texts that had never been translated into English. In the first session, we introduced and contextualised the work of Mudimbe for the students. Students were also given the opportunity to discuss at length their own knowledge about postcolonial studies (the arena in which much of the work of Mudimbe is situated). We then moved on to begin translating key paragraphs from our first text: 'Héritage occidental et Conscience nègre'. Indeed much of the debate hinged on the crucial question of how to translate the nouns in the title: what is "heritage" and "consciousness"? What do we mean by a "legacy"? What are the meanings of the Sartrean term "consciousness" in a postcolonial African context? In this first session we translated the first fifth of Mudimbe's essay.

In the second workshop, we turned to the end of the essay, which contains a particularly important paragraph summing up Mudimbe's point about the curse and gift of western knowledge for postcolonial African thinkers. This is a crucial section to get right, and so we encouraged the students' input at this juncture of the essay.

In this second session, we also moved on to consider the next essay for translation: 'Hérodote, le menteur'. This was quite a challenging work for our students, as reading it required a background in classical Greek historiography. This was provided by us as the seminar leaders. We asked the students to translate a key paragraph near the end of the essay, an essay that examines how patriotism has been at the heart of history-writing since those writing historical narratives in ancient Greece. The relationship between the nation-state and the production of History was a theme that the students relished discussing.

The difficulty of Mudimbe's prose ensured that we continued with this essay into the third seminar. When we were all happy with our translation, we moved onto the final piece, an excerpt from *Carnets d'Amérique*, a travelogue of Mudimbe's 1974 visit to the United States. We asked the students to translate some sections from an interview Mudimbe conducted with the famous poet and politician Léon-Gontran Damas. The interview looked at the relationship between 1970s Black Nationalism

movements in the US and earlier *Négritude* aesthetics and politics of the previous generation. This excerpt was full of poetic description of the encounter between the young Mudimbe and senior Damas, and the students greatly enjoyed translating them.

The first workshop revealed one pedagogic concern: one student dominated the discussions which prevents others from participating. Having received initial feedback straight after this first session, we were able to address this concern. We made sure that all students had the chance to translate and discuss and meditate upon their translations with others in the following sessions. Apart from this minor issue, the seminars proceeded with great success. Our professional translator benefited greatly from the students' efforts, and they have helped him improve and nuance the first draft of his work.

We are extremely pleased to report, then, that this project has been a huge success. The feedback forms express the students' enjoyment of the process, and their empowerment from being part of an academic publication. They felt that it gave them an interesting view into the professional world of translation; it has helped them revise for forthcoming finals exams; and it has encouraged some to consider further research.

On this platform, we are now able to make a proposal to a publisher for *VY Mudimbe: A Reader*. The IATL funding will have directly impacted and contributed to the publication of academic research which profited from the work done by undergraduate and postgraduate students at Warwick. We look forward to acknowledging the work of these students and IATL's generosity in our publication.

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