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Diego Stefanelli

Towards a typology of French-speaking translators of scientific texts (1600–1815)

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Keywords: history of science, scientific translations, translators

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Due to the significance of one of its translators (Denis Diderot), the French translation of the *Medical Dictionary* of Robert James is arguably one of the most renowned French scientific translations of the 18th century. The translators were Diderot, Marc-Antoine Eidous and François-Vincent Toussaint. None of them was, properly speaking, a scientist. The translation had to be revised by an expert of the field, the young physician Julien Busson, a *docteur-régent* of the Medical Faculty in Paris. In the *Avertissement de l'editeur* he explained that his advice was necessary because of the limited medical knowledge of the translators:

*Les Libraires qui le distribuent aujourd'hui ayant été informés du mérite de cet Ouvrage, crurent rendre un service au Public en lui en procurant une Traduction Françoise: ils chargerent de ce travail Messieurs Diderot, Eidous, & Toussaint, connus par la grande intelligence qu'ils ont de la Langue Angloise. Si cette connoissance, jointe à une littérature profonde & choisie, & à un jugement sûr, avoit suffi pour donner à cet Ouvrage le degré de perfection que l'on étoit en droit d'exiger; il est certain qu'il pouvoit passer d'entre leurs mains dans celles du Public; mais comme il étoit naturel qu'un Ouvrage de Medecine fût examiné par un Medecin, je fus chargé par les Libraires de la révision & de la correction de cette Traduction, ainsi que d'y faire les additions ou les retranchemens que je jugerois nécessaires (*JAMES / DIDEROT; EIDOUS; TOUSSAINT 1746*, Avertissement de l'Editeur* [not numbered])

[The booksellers who distribute it today, having been informed of the merit of this work, currently render a service to the public by providing a French translation: they commissioned Mr. Diderot, Eidous and Toussaint, known for

their great understanding of the English language, to undertake this work. If this knowledge, combined with a profound & selected erudition, & a sound judgment, had been sufficient to give this work the degree of perfection one was entitled to demand; it is certain that it could pass from their hands into those of the Public; but since it was natural that a work of Medicine should be examined by a Physician, I was entrusted by the Booksellers with the revision & correction of this Translation, as well as making the additions or retrenchments I deemed necessary]

This passage immediately prompts the essential question that I seek to answer in my paper: Who were the translators of scientific texts in the 17th and 18th centuries? For this period, can we adopt the category of *scientific translators* as a means of defining those translators whose *specialization* was the translation of scientific texts? Should the translation of James' medical dictionary, carried out by translators who were not experts in the field but then reviewed by a physician, be considered as an exemplary and representative case?
The objective of this study is to determine whether there was a specialization of French-speaking translators of scientific texts during the period of modern science's specialization. In fact, as we will see, the majority of them were more similar to Busson than to Eidous, Diderot and Toussaint. Not only because the majority of them had a scientific background, but also because (like Busson)[1] they did not occupy prominent positions within the scientific community.

Translators-focused approach and establishment of the translators' database

The history of scientific translations is a relatively overlooked aspect of translation history studies. Even less studied are the main actors in this field, namely the translators. This is true in both disciplines between which my contribution is intended to be placed, namely, the history of science and the history of translation.[2] On the one hand, scientific translators have been quite overlooked by translation history scholars (as, for example, in the forefather of such translator-oriented history of translation, DELISLE & WOODSWORTH 2012). On the other hand, historians of science have typically paid little attention to translators of scientific texts as a major group of actors in the scientific community. More generally, the role of translation in the history of science has still been little investigated by historians of science (with some significant exceptions such as, among others, PANTIN 2007, COOK & DUPRÉ 2012 and FRANSEN & HODSON & ENENKEL 2017).
Although some translators have been extensively studied, a comprehensive study of scientific translators remains lacking. With regard to French-speaking scientific translations in the 17th and 18th centuries, the only attempt to do so (to the best of my knowledge) can be found in the chapter on *Sciences et arts* written by Patrice Bret and Ellen Moerman in the *Histoire des traductions en langue française* (BRET & MOERMAN 2014). The authors dedicate a chapter to the scientific translators, with a particular focus on their professional status and their linguistic skills, with the goal of defining a typology of these translators. They caution, however, that we are still a considerable distance from being able to

[1] For some information about Busson see WILLIAMS 2003: 12 and SCHNEIDER 2012: 186.

[2] About the "commensurability" of the two disciplines see OLOHAN 2014.

conduct a comprehensive prosopographical study of the scientific translators for the entire period under consideration.[3]

The purpose of this study is to partially fill this research gap. Relying on the translators of the texts included in our common DFG-project, I have extrapolated a database of 267 French-speaking translators of English, German and Italian scientific texts (1600–1815).[4] Given our focus on solely book-based translations, I have excluded authors of translations that appear in the form of articles in scientific journals. This represents a significant exclusion. It is evident that numerous translators who are not included in my analysis, as they translated only for journals, deserve a significant role in the history of scientific translations.[5] In addition, there are other, more general limitations to be considered in relation to the quantitative-prosopographical approach itself. Since the 1970s,[6] historians of science have debated the usefulness and limitations of using prosopographical methods in their discipline (STURDY 1995: XII). I certainly do not intend to enter into such discussions here. One cannot but agree with what Maurice Crosland has written concerning the "dangers" of prosopography applied to the history of science (in this case, of the members of the Académie des Sciences): "There would be dangers in trying to construct a comprehensive but simplicist quantitative collective social biography or 'prosopography', which attempted to categorise members of the Academy exhaustively and mechanically" (CROSLAND 1992: 173–174).

As will be shown, one of the principal issues is the categorization (social and professional) that is employed. Such categorization frequently gives rise to generalizations, simplifications, or anachronisms. Another issue is the underrepresentation of specific groups of translators, such as female translators of scientific texts. The quantitative approach is inadequate for accounting for these translators. Not only are they a quantitatively small minority,[7] but it is often challenging to quantify their translations, as they were frequently either anonymous or appeared under their husband's name.[8] The quantitative approach inevitably leads to overlook these significant actors of the scientific community of the time, since they are not, in purely quantitative terms, a representative type of scientific translator. Despite its limitations, the quantitative approach is

[3] "Nous sommes loin encore d'être en état de faire une étude prosopographique complète du monde des traducteurs scientifiques pour l'ensemble de la période, mais il est possible d'en ébaucher quelques caractères au siècle des Lumières" (BRET & MOERMAN 2014: 655).

[4] The vast majority of translators (72%) were born in the 18th century. Consequently, my quantitative analysis will inevitably focus more on that century.

[5] See GIPPER 2022.

[6] See, among others, SHAPIN & THACKRAY (1974), PYENSON (1977).

[7] The corpus reveals a dearth of female translators: Gabrielle Brisson (wife of Biot), Marie-Anne Pierette Paulze Lavoisier, Claudine Picardet (Mme Morveau) and Marie-Geneviève-Charlotte Thiroux d'Arconville. One should also mention Gabrielle-Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil (Mme Du Châtelet), who translated from Latin the *Principia* of Newton (1759).

[8] A particularly noteworthy example is Claudine Picardet, who not only translated books but also a considerable number of papers published in scientific journals. For an overview of female translators of scientific texts in this period see BRET & MOERMAN 2014: 660–665. About Thiroux d'Arconville and Claudine Picardet see, among others, BRET & VAN TIGGELEN 2011, BERNIER & GIROU-SWIDERSKI 2016 and BRET 2014, respectively. About Madame Lavoisier's translation of Richard Kirwan's Essays see BRET & KAWASHIMA 2019.

undoubtedly useful. In particular for the under-researched group of scientific text translators, a quantitative survey that is mindful of its limitations can yield interesting data. First and foremost, it can serve to make *visible* these overlooked actors of modern science.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, I have conducted a comprehensive examination of an extensive database of translators, addressing a number of research questions that I believe are of significant relevance to my subject. I have concentrated on the one hand on the professional field in which the translators were active (a criterion which, as we shall see, presents certain difficulties), and on the other hand on the characteristics of their production as translators, that is the typology of their translations (have they translated only scientific texts or also other texts?) as well as their quantitative aspects (how many scientific translations have they produced?). By integrating these two sets of data, I then endeavor to outline some typologies of these translators.

Professional domains of translators

As Fritz Nies and Yen-Maï Tran-Gervat have pointed out in the chapter dedicated to the *Traducteurs* in the already mentioned *Histoire des traductions en langue française*, "l'histoire sociale des traducteurs est un immense champ, encore peu exploré par les historiens" (NIES & TRAN-GERVAT 2014: 103). In addition, the authors demonstrate the intricacy of a similar task. Primarily, there is a practical challenge, as it is often challenging to ascertain the biographical details of many translators. Sometimes, despite extensive research, they either remain anonymous or are nothing more than a name on a title page or mentioned in a biographical dictionary (NIES & TRAN-GERVAT 2014: 103). There is then a difficulty related to the historical context, namely the fact that the professions of Ancien Régime were characterized by "fluctuations" (NIES & TRAN-GERVAT 2014: 113) that renders it particularly difficult to delineate professional categories with distinct boundaries.

Restricting the perspective to that of translators of scientific texts does not diminish the inherent complexity of the task. On the contrary, the fact that modern science was defined as a specialized (and institutionalized) field of human knowledge during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries makes it particularly challenging to identify the characteristics of such a large number of scientific translators. This concerns not only the basic biographical data (date and place of birth/death, geographical area of activity), which for numerous translators would require a considerable amount of additional research, but above all the question that I find most intriguing (at least to my point of view), which is whether these translators possess any scientific backgrounds and their standing within the scientific community.

In fact, there are some preliminary issues to address. In what ways can the term *scientific background* be employed in this period? In comparison to the well-established didactic-academic tradition of medicine, which can be traced back centuries, the institutionalization of other scientific disciplines at the time was more complex. And more generally: what does it mean, from a professional standpoint, to be a *scientist* in this historical period? Alongside professional figures such as physicians, surgeons, university professors, and employees of scientific institutions (like the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris), there were scientists who supported themselves in other ways. A typical example is Jean Senebier, who

was a Genevan Calvinist pastor as well as the librarian of the Genevan library. He translated numerous works of the Italian scientist Lazzaro Spallanzani and published a substantial body of botanical research, despite not being a professional scientist. Nevertheless, he enjoyed a certain prestige within the scientific community (not least because of his translations).[9]

Furthermore, there are opposite cases, namely translators who had received scientific training but subsequently pursued careers in fields that were distinct from the original field of specialization. For example, the case of Jean Baptiste Lefebvre de Villebrune can be cited. As noted in the *Nouvelle biographie générale* (HOEFER 1859: 314), he was a physician and had some knowledge of natural history, but he had ceased medical practice to pursue the study of languages, becoming a professor of Hebrew and Syrian at the Collège de France (1792). The same can be said for Augustin-François Jault, who translated among others Samuel Sharp's *Treatise on the operations of surgery* (SHARP / JAULT 1741). As we read in the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Medicales*, after 12 years among the Jesuits, he studied medicine and became a medical doctor at the Faculty of Besançon, but he never engaged in the practice of medicine. Instead, he became "interprète pour les langues orientales" of the duc d'Orléans and in 1746 he assumed the chair of Syrian at the Collège de France (JOURDAN 1832: 348). Should we include Lefebvre de Villebrune and Jault among the scientists? While it may be appropriate from a strictly biographical perspective, it would be less so when viewed from the broader perspective of professional spheres.

I have therefore identified a few broad areas, that, despite being probably too general, may offer some interesting trends. Consequently, I have prioritized the general area of activity over professions or backgrounds:

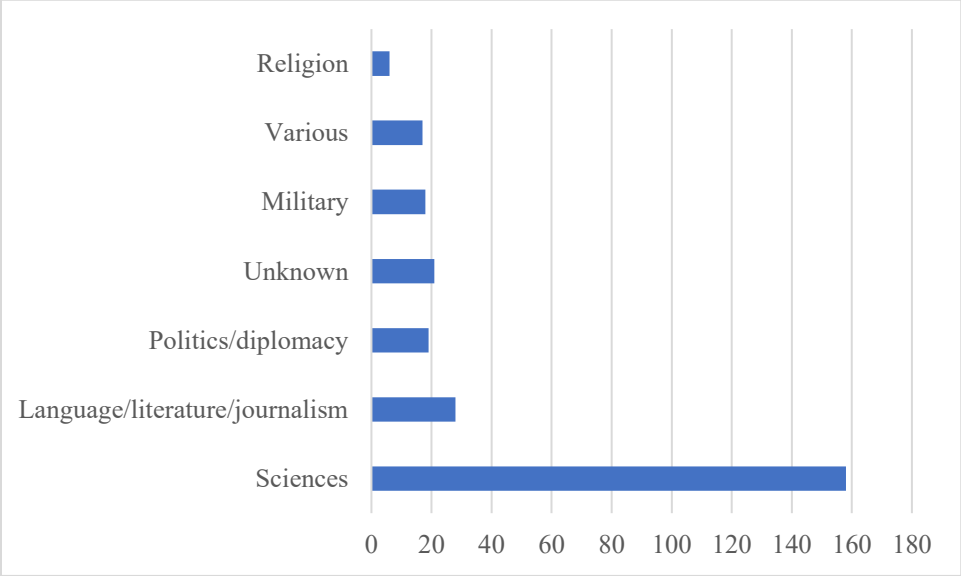

Figure 1: Number of translators and professional spheres

To return to the two examples above, I have included Senebier in the scientific sphere, excluding Lefebvre de Villebrune and Jault instead. Certainly, there are cases in which the delineation of the translators' principal field of activity can be particularly challenging. One can only confirm, once again, the difficulties highlighted by Crosland: "There are many cases where categorization would be

[9] On Senebier's translations see RATCLIFF 2010; GIPPER & STEFANELLI 2021.

arbitrary and quantification would be misleading" (CROSLAND 1992: 176). Consider for example Jean-Baptiste-Louis-Théodore de Tschoudi, a military with a strong interest in both the literary and botanic fields, as well as a cofounder of the Académie de Metz. He translated some parts of the *Gardeners Dictionary* by Philip Miller (MILLER / TSCHUDI 1768). In the frontispiece, the translator's name is mentioned in conjunction with a heterogeneous list of titles: "Citoyen de Glaris, Bailli de Metz, Capitaine au Régiment Suisse de Jenner, de l'Académie royale des Sciences & des Arts de Metz, de la Société de Physique de Zurich, & des Sociétés économiques de Berne & de Soleure". In what field should we situate such a personality: military, literary or scientific? Complex cases such as this one, along with quantitatively isolated cases, have been included in the category "various". It is also important to note that there are still translators whose professional (and often biographical) details remain "unknown".

Some translators come from non-scientific fields, such as "politics/diplomacy", "military world", "journalism/literature/language". Nevertheless, more than half of the translators (59%) were active in the scientific world and belonged in various ways to the scientific community. Indeed, the majority of translators who work primarily in the field of science, despite the limitations of this classification, appear to be clear. Interesting data emerge from a closer examination of the "Sciences" category. It should first be acknowledged that the disciplinary subdivisions utilized here may appear somewhat anachronistic when considered within the context of the period in question. It should be remembered that, at that time the main distinction was between the "sciences mathématiques" (in which mathematics, geometry, applied mechanics, astronomy, etc. should be included) and "sciences physiques" (to which belonged medicine, surgery, zoology, pharmacy, mineralogy) (BRET & MOERMANN 2014: 666):

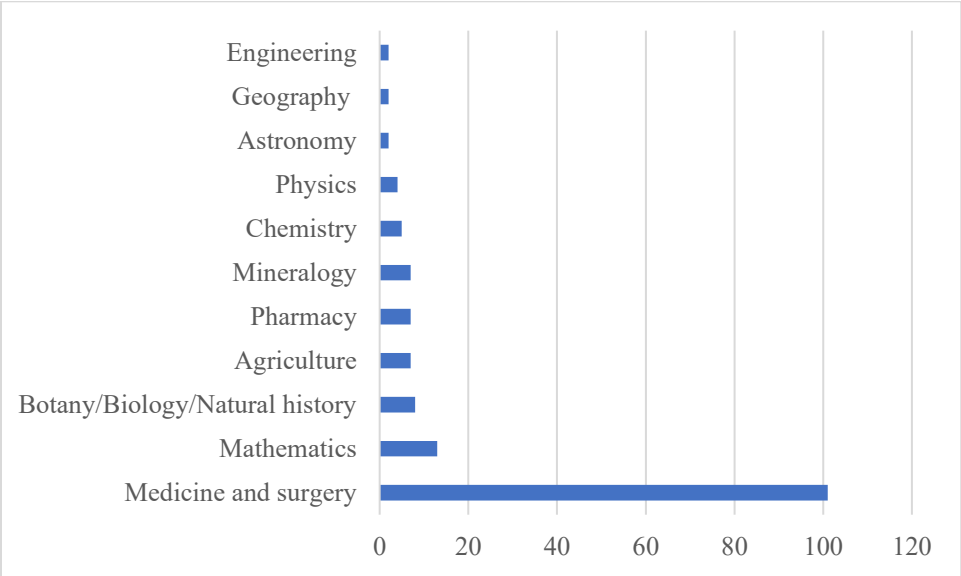

Figure 2: Number of translators and scientific disciplines

It should be noted that I have included both medicine and surgery in the same category. However, there had been considerable debate among medical professionals regarding the nature of the relationship between these two

disciplines.[10] Furthermore, I have considered pharmacy as a distinct category, although it should be remembered that the *apothiquaires* did, in fact, belong to the world of medicine. In general, it should be kept in mind that the medical field at the time was multifaceted and complex to define, encompassing a diverse array of professions and actors. Once more, the categories selected are bound to entail a certain degree of simplification. However, this is an acceptable consequence of the practical utility of such classifications. In any case, the prevailing pattern seems clear: the vast majority of translators came from the medical world.

Quantitative aspects of translators' production

Although it provides interesting data, the definition of spheres of activity remains very problematic. The fact that the scientific profession is evolving in complex ways over this period makes it difficult to draw up a general profile for all translators of scientific texts. Some apparently less refined criteria seem to be more fruitful. They concern the products of the translation activity of our translators. A preliminary distinction can be made between those who have translated only scientific texts and those who have translated scientific texts in addition to other kinds of texts (for example, literature or travel accounts). Thus far, 53 translators (20%) have been identified as having translated also other types of text. It is noteworthy that, despite this relatively small number, we find in this group some of the most prolific translators of the database, such as Lefebvre de Villebrune and Eidous.

Nevertheless, the majority of our translators translated only scientific texts. At least from a purely quantitative perspective, it is possible to hypothesize a kind of *specialization* of these translators. If we then look at another criterion, namely the number of scientific translations each translator has completed, we find some interesting trends. The vast majority of translators have only translated one or two texts:

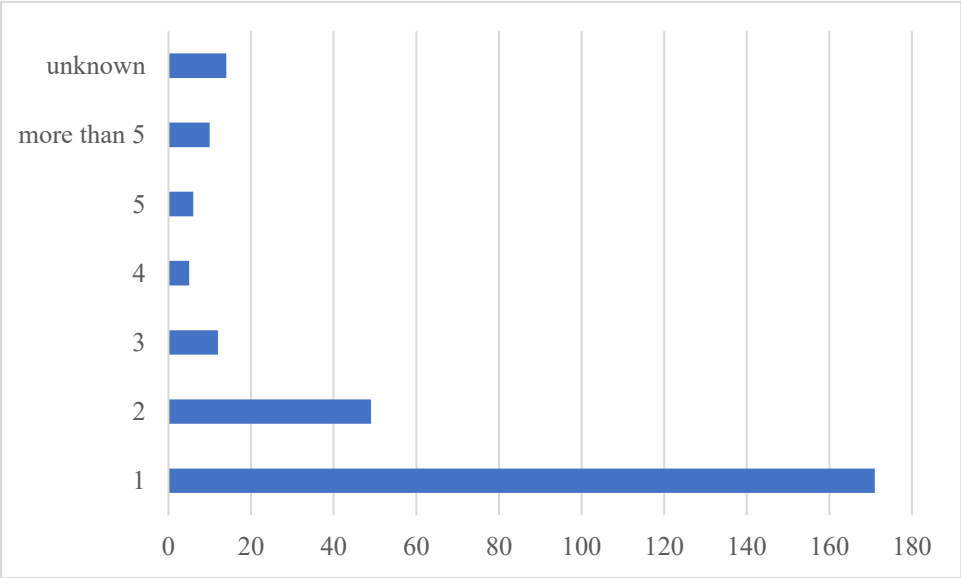

Figure 3: Number of translations per translator

[10] One of the most significant milestones in the recognition of surgery as a distinct scientific discipline was the establishment of Académie royale de chirurgie in 1731 by Georges Mareschal.

It must be admitted, however, that for some translators, some translations may have been overlooked (either because their authors remained anonymous or because it has been difficult to find additional information). Nevertheless, the overall trend remains clear. This seems to indicate that there is a lack of *professionalization* among translators who specialize in scientific translations. Those who produce a large amount of scientific translations seem to be an exception. The data appears to exhibit a quite clear pattern. The majority of translators specialise exclusively in scientific texts, yet they translate a relatively small number of texts. The tendency towards specialization among translators of scientific texts is accompanied by a parallel trend towards a limited number of translations per translator. Indeed, it is unlikely that the majority of these translators would have considered translating scientific texts as their primary occupation.

Towards a typology of scientific translators

The data collected thus far, despite the aforementioned limitations, provides an overall picture of all the translators considered. As shown by Nies and Tran-Gervat (2014), however, it is particularly fruitful to outline some *types* of translators. To do this, I will try to identify certain groups of translators who share common characteristics. In order to achieve this, it is useful to combine the two types of data that have been collected so far, the professional status of the translators and the characteristics of their translation activity. In order to provide a more concrete illustration, a few examples of translators will be provided for each category.

Military personnel

The presence of military personalities in our list is a noteworthy phenomenon. However, it reflects the general importance of military careers among the French translators in the 17th and 18th centuries as Nies (2017) has pointed out. First and foremost, they translated texts related to their discipline. In this period, technical texts about military science circulated in whole Europe through numerous translations (as shown by CUCCOLI 2018). A good example of this is the wide reception of the military writings of Alessandro Vittorio Papacino d'Antoni, director (from 1765) of the *Reali Scuole teoriche e pratiche d'artiglieria e fortificazioni*, instituted by Carlo Emanuele III in Turin (1739). His French translators were all military themselves: Gratien-Jean-Baptiste-Louis de Flavigny, who translated in 1773 his *Esame della polvere* (PAPACINO D'ANTONI / FLAVIGNY 1773a),[11] Antoine Baratier Saint-Auban, who translated his *Dell'uso delle armi da fuoco* (PAPACINO D'ANTONI / SAINT-AUBAN 1785) and Jean-Baptiste-Gaspard Cusset, seigneur de Montrozard, translator of his *Istituzioni fisico-meccaniche* as well as of the second volume of the treaty *Dell'artiglieria pratica* (PAPACINO D'ANTONI / MONTROZARD 1777 and 1780, respectively).

[11] He is also credited with the translation *Principes fondamentaux de la construction des places* (PAPACINO D'ANTONI / FLAVIGNY 1773b). As Prospero Balbo (BALBO 1805:75) noted with spite in his *Vita di Alessandro Vittorio Papacino d'Antoni*, the text was not presented as a translation, but was in fact derived from the third book of Papacino d'Antoni's *Dell'Architettura militare*.

Although one can speak of a tendency for these translators to specialize within their discipline, translators with military backgrounds who are also interested in other sciences should not be forgotten. An example is Théodose Le Barbier de Tinan, who was a military administrator (commissaire de guerre) in Strasbourg. He had many scientific interests and translated the Italian scientists Alessandro Volta and Giuseppe Toaldo.[12] Another interesting case is the baron Jacques-Joseph Roque. A member of the chevau-légers of the garde du roi (since 1773) he emigrated to England after the Revolution. There, he developed an interest in the pioneering works of the English physician Edward Jenner regarding vaccination, and became his French translator (Jenner / La Roque 1800).[13] François-René-Jean de Pommereuil, a *general de division* who made a successful career during the Napoleonic years, translated the writings of the Italian mineralogist Scipione Breislak from their Italian manuscripts, with the addition of some notes (BREISLAK / POMMEREUIL 1792 and 1801).

Then there are cases where the categories of military personnel and scientists overlap to the point of blurring, namely the cases of military physicians. This occurred especially during the Napoleonic wars. Some physicians who were employed in the Napoleonic army translated some scientific works during those very years. Just a few examples will suffice. Étienne-Benoit Révolat became physician in 1792 and served in the Napoleonic wars as *chirurgien-major* and *médecin principal* (DECHAMBRE 1876: 315). During these years he translated Thomas Denman's *Essay on the Puerperal Fever* and Gaetano Polloni's *Osservazioni mediche sulla malattia febrile dominante in Livorno* (DENMAN / Révolat 1797 and PALLONI / RÉVOLAT 1805). Another example (among many others) is Nicolas Heurteloup, first surgeon of the French army in 1800, who translated in these years Giuseppe Giannini's treaty *Della natura delle febbri* (GIANNINI / HEURTELOUP 1808).

Language, literature, journalism

A very heterogenous category is that of translators belonging to the domain "language/literature/journalism". They were journalists, lexicographers, literary critics, professors of literature, philosophers[14] who *occasionally* translated scientific texts. As to the number of scientific translations per translator, there is no significant divergence from the general trend, the majority of them (61%) having translated only one scientific work. However, two remarkable exceptions must be mentioned. In fact, two of the most prolific French translators of the 18th century, Jean Baptiste Lefebvre de Villebrune and the already mentioned Eidous translated also scientific texts. In this domain, too, they were particularly prolific, with each having translated more than six scientific texts. Both translators were in fact little esteemed by their contemporaries precisely because of this abundance of translations, which, according to many, implied little attention to the quality of their translations. The scientific translations of Eidous would deserve a separate

[12] VOLTA / LE BARBIER DE TINAN 1778 and TOALDO / LE BARBIER DE TINAN 1779.

[13] See MICHAUD 1846: 407.

[14] For example, one can cite the numerous mineralogical translations made by the *philosophe* Paul Heinrich Dieterich, baron d'Holbach (see BRET & MOERMAN 2014: 655–657).

study, which I do not intend to do here.[15] It should be mentioned, however, that he was the author of more than forty translations. At least 11 of them concerned scientific texts.[16] Such numbers were quite exceptional not only for the translators of scientific texts, but more generally.

For the majority of these translators, scientific translation was a sporadic activity. Among them we find, for example, Pierre-François Guyot Desfontaines, mostly known for his polemics against Voltaire and his French translation of *Gulliver's Travels*, but author also of an interesting translation of Francis Clifford's *State of Physick, Ancient and Modern* (CLIFFORD / DESFONTAINES 1742).[17] For the classical scholar Pierre Henri Larcher, mostly known for his translation of Herodotus, his only scientific translation, that of Pringle's *Observations on the Diseases of the Army* (PRINGLE / LARCHER 1771) was part of a series of translations of English literary and historical works, that he would later regret as a distraction from his studies in classical philology (as we read in DACIER 1821: 247). François Artaud-Soulange, who migrated to Göttingen after the French Revolution, became professor of French literature at the University of Göttingen, as well as correspondent of the local *Akademie der Wissenschaften* (from 1823). He was the author of only one scientific translation, which, however, was of considerable importance, that of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte* (BLUMENBACH / ARTAUD-SOULANGE 1803). Another interesting case is *baron* Pierre de La Montagne, a correspondent of the Museum of Bordeaux and, after the Revolution, a member of the local *Académie des sciences et belles-lettres* (QUÉRARD 1830: 503). He translated many literary works and travel accounts. His translations include also a scientific translation, that of William Falconer's *Dissertation on the Influence of the Passions upon Disorders of the Body* (FALCONER / DE LA MONTAGNE 1788). Interestingly, he added many notes to Falconer's text and he presented himself, in the frontispiece, as *docteur en médecine*. Indeed, he should be regarded as another case of a medical man who dedicated himself entirely to literature (and literary translations).

Bret & Moerman (2014: 655–657) have already drawn attention to this category of translators who belonged to the vast world of what is today referred to as the "humanities" and who also engaged in the translation of scientific texts. Their contribution to scientific translations was undoubtedly important. From a quantitative point of view, however, they were essentially a minority. More significant seems to be the other type of translators mentioned by Bret & Moerman 2014 (660), namely those who were members of the scientific community, though not necessarily occupying high-level positions within it.

Sciences: a focus on physicians and surgeons

Indeed, the analysis has revealed that the majority of translators were primarily engaged in the scientific domain. Rather than addressing each scientific discipline, I will focus on the most numerically significant group of translators, namely physicians and surgeons. In doing so, I exclude other translators coming

[15] Eidous' translations of travel literature have been already studied by DONATO 2012 and ECHE 2015.

[16] The number is based on the translations generally attributed to Eidous. Since some attributions should however be revised, the number must therefore be considered with some margin of uncertainty.

[17] About the translation see LÉGER 2004.

from other disciplines, who are likely deserving of more careful study (just think on mineralogy and the increasing number of French translations of German texts in the second part of the 18th century).[18] Nevertheless, focusing solely on this category of scientific translators allows for a more nuanced examination of a relatively smaller number of translators whose professional identity was, in the majority of cases, more clearly defined than for other scientific areas.
With regard to the number of translations per translator, the majority of translators tend to translate only one text:

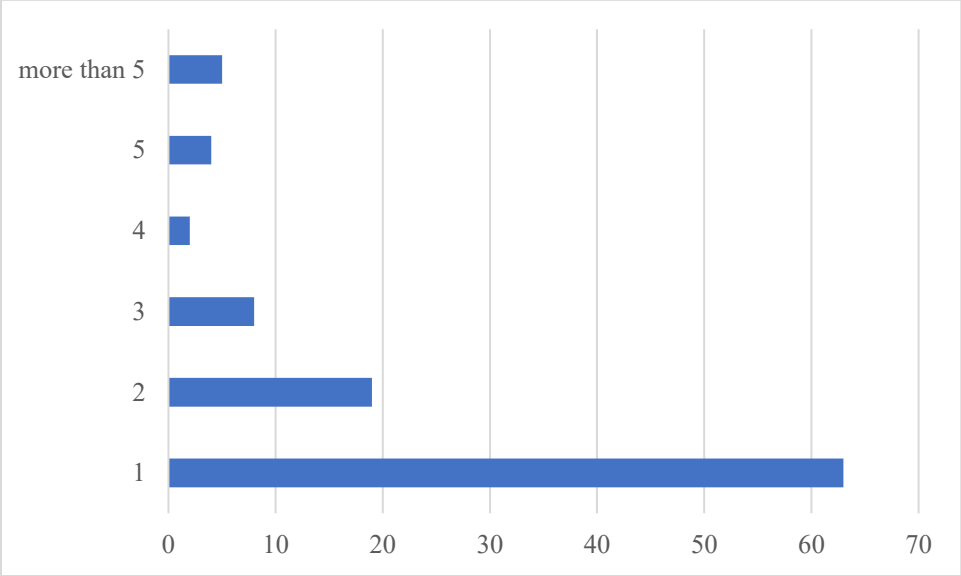

Figure 4: Number of translations per translator (physicians/surgeons)

Among the minority of translators who have produced numerous translations, there is one rather exceptional case, Antoine Jacques Louis Jourdan, the editor, among others, of the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (1825). He translated at least 20 medical works, from many source languages (German, Italian, Latin, English), most of which, however, are not part of the corpus under consideration here (having appeared after 1815).
It is therefore of greater interest to consider not the quantity of translations, but rather the timing of these translations in the translators' scientific careers. It is not uncommon for many of them to make their scientific debut with translations, as Georges Cuvier observed in the case of Pierre Lassus.[19] In fact, Lassus (born 1741), whose successful career as surgeon started in the 1790s, translated Pott when he was at the beginning of his thirties (POTT / LASSUS 1771). A similar case was Jean-Bruno Cayol, who published, at the age of 25, his only translation, that of Antonio Scarpa's treatise on hernias (SCARPA / CAYOL 1812). Léopold-Joseph Renauldin, too, who in the 1830s was a well-known and respected physician, had begun his career translating (at the age of 29) the *Handbuch der medicinischen Diagnostik* of Wilhelm Friedrich Dreyssig (DREYSSIG / RENAULDIN 1804).[20] As we read in the *Biographie médicale*, Charles-Augustin Vandermonde began his

[18] See MANNWEILER 2024.

[19] "Il possédait […] plusieurs langues, et il avait débuté dans la carrière littéraire par des traductions d'ouvrages chirurgicaux anglais" (CUVIER 1819: 354).

[20] QUÉRARD 1859: 117.

career, once he had completed his medical studies, precisely with a translation, that of a dissertation of Carlo Curzio on a skin disease (CURZIO / VANDERMONDE 1755). He was 28 years old at the time and that was his first publication. One year later he released his first original work, his *Essai sur la manière de perfectionner l'espèce humaine* (1756). Interestingly, the *Biographie médicale* adds that young Vandermonde's annotations to his translation of Curzio had already demonstrated that he "était capable de donner quelque chose de mieux que ces traductions" (BAYLE 1841: 523).

Indeed, for many physicians, translating the works of prominent physicians represented a means of establishing their reputations and making a name for themselves. In this case, translation served as a significant stepping stone that could potentially enable a young scientist to attain some degree of prestige (or, at the very least, visibility) within the scientific community. This, in turn, could pave the way for them to gain employment within the scientific institutions of the time (BRET & MOERMAN 2014: 649). This trend is corroborated by an analysis of the age of translators at the time of their first translation. Over half of them (52%) first began translating when they were in their twenties and thirties.[21] This finding appears to corroborate the strategic role of translations in the career progression of the majority of these physicians. They were completed at the outset of their careers, and primarily served to establish reputations.[22] Nevertheless, for a significant number of these translators, the practice of translating was primarily a provisional undertaking that would ultimately be abandoned.

However, not all translators were able to make a career out of translation. In fact, there are translators who were only known for one or two translations, and who occupied secondary positions within the scientific community of their time. Further archival research could certainly provide more in-depth information for each of them. For the moment, it is sufficient to look in some nineteenth-century dictionaries. For many of these translators, the only works that were cited were their translations. See for example how the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* presented the physician Jean-Denis Duplanil:

Duplanil (Jean-Denis). Ce médecin, natif de Paris, appartenait à la Faculté de médecine de cette ville, où nous le voyons prendre la première inscription, le 26 octobre 1765. Il est mort à Argenteuil, près de Paris, le 7 août 1702 [sic], après avoir été médecin honoraire du comte d'Artois (Charles X). Fort laborieux, ami des sciences, possesseur d'une riche bibliothèque, Duplanil à laisse les ouvrages suivants:
1. Médecine du voyageur […], Paris, an IX (1801), 3 vol. in-8º – II. Médecine domestique de Buchan; trad. en franç. 1775, 5 vol. in-8º – *III. Méthode nouvelle et facile de guérir la malad. vénérienne, par Clarc.* Trad. en franç. Paris, 1785, in-8º (DECHAMBRE 1884: 668).

[Duplanil (Jean-Denis). This physician, born in Paris, belonged to the Faculty of Medicine of that city, where we see him taking his first registration on October

[21] Such data should be treated with some caution, as the age of a considerable number of translators (33%) could not (yet) be determined. Consequently, it is possible that the image may undergo some alterations, although it is unlikely that these will be significant.

[22] This is, it should be repeated, a general trend. Of course, there are individual cases where translations are placed at other points in the career.

26, 1765. He died in Argenteuil, near Paris, on August 7, 1702 [sic], after serving as honorary physician to the Count of Artois (Charles X). A hard worker, friend of the sciences and possessor of a rich library, Duplanil left the following works (…)]

The only works for which he was remembered were, next to his *Médecin du voyageur*, his two translations. For many translators the same applies. Even less had written the surgeon Vincent Abbadie. Born in Pujo (Bigorre) in 1737, he attended hospitals in Bayonne to become a surgeon and he then went to Paris to continue his studies. The *Biographie médicale* (Bayle 1841: 626) informs about his career: he worked at the Hôpital de Bicêtre and then he became surgeon of Louis-Jean-Marie de Bourbon, duc de Penthièvre. Thanks to this one, he received a "brevet de chirurgien-général de la marine". He authored only one work, a translation of some essays of David MacBride (that he dedicated to his protector) (MACBRIDE / ABBADIE 1766).
For other translators, the translations served their purpose better. A translation dedicated to an eminent scientist could be an effective means for a young physician to gain recognition and establish valuable connections within the scientific community. In the *Éloge de M. La Virotte* appeared in the *Journal des sçavans* (July 1759), one finds an interesting image of a young physician striving to establish a reputation among his colleagues in Paris. The dedication of La Virotte's translation to Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan, a well-established member of the Académie des Sciences, proved particularly helpful in this regard:

Il prit le Bonnet à Montpellier, & il vint ensuite à Paris; mais il ne pensa d'abord qu'à perfectionner ses connoissances dans la Capitale […]. M. la Virotte, jeune, jaloux de s'instruire, chercha alors, & a toujours cherché depuis les hommes célébres dans tous les genres […] Il publia quelques ouvrages, traduits de l'Anglois: Observations Nouvelles sur les crises. Dissertation sur la transpiration. Nouvelle Méthode pour pomper le mauvais air. Nouvelles Observations Microscopiques. Dissertation sur la chaleur. Exposition des découvertes de Newton, par Maclaurin.[23] *Il dédia ce dernier ouvrage à M. de Mairan, à ce Philosophe si célébre par ses découvertes […]. Il accueillit le jeune Traducteur, il le connut, il estima ses talens, il le présenta à M. le Chancelier Daguessau, qui, rassuré sur la jeunesse de M. la Virotte, par les suffrage de M. de Mairan, l'admit à nos Assemblées.* (ANONYMOUS 1759: 452)

[He took the *bonnet* in Montpellier, and then came to Paris; but at first he thought only of perfecting his knowledge in the capital [...]. M. la Virotte, a young man jealous of learning, then sought out, and has since sought out, famous men in all fields [...] He published several works, translated from English: *Observations Nouvelles sur les crises. Dissertation on perspiration. Nouvelle Méthode pour pomper le mauvais air. New Microscopic Observations. Dissertation on Heat. Exposition des découvertes de Newton, by Maclaurin*. He dedicated this last work to M. de Mairan, to this *philosophe* so famous for his discoveries [...]. He welcomed the young translator, got to know him, esteemed his talents, and introduced him

[23] See NIHELL / LAVIROTTE 1748, SUTTON / LAVIROTTE 1749, NEEDHAM / LAVIROTTE 1750, MACLAURIN / LAVIROTTE 1749. As to the *Dissertation sur la transpiration*, it is the translation of a writing of Bryan Robinson and it was included at the end of a collective volume containing Eidous' translation of the New Dispensatory by William Lewis (LEWIS / EIDOUS 1749–1750).

to Chancellor Daguessau, who, reassured of M. la Virotte's youth by M. de Mairan's approval, admitted him to our reunions].

Louis-Anne La Virotte is among the few translators who have authored more than 4 translations. What is important here, however, is the potential influence of translations on the trajectory of a young physician's career. It is not uncommon for scientific translations to confer a certain degree of prestige (or at least of "crédit symbolique", BRET & MOERMAN 2014: 649) upon a young physician. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the field of medicine, but is also observed in other scientific disciplines. Just think to the relatively well-known case of François de Brémond.[24] In 1736, when he was 25 years old, he began working on an ambitious translation project, concerning the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, of which he translated the years between 1731 and 1736 (PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSACTIONS / BRÉMOND 1738–1741).[25] This translation, along with others,[26] was able to secure Brémond (who, it must be said, came from a well-connected family)[27] a place as *adjoint botaniste* in the prestigious academy.[28]
It is also worth noting another prolific translator from the medical field who gained considerable prestige through his translations, Édouard-François-Marie Bosquillon. He became docteur-régent when he was 26 years old. At the same time, his considerable knowledge of ancient Greek enabled him to become, when he was 30 years old, professor of ancient Greek at the Collège. He was able to combine the two fields, devoting himself to translations of both early and modern medical writings. Alongside Hippocrates, he translated many works of William Cullen and Benjamin Bell. These translations were highly appreciated, particularly because of the translator's notes, as we read in the *Magasin encyclopédique*:

Sa traduction des Elémens de Médecine de Cullen, avec les notes savantes dont il les a enrichis, est depuis plus de trente ans un livre classique, et un de ceux que les médecins consultent avec le plus de fruit, pour se diriger dans les cas difficiles. Nous lui devons encore une traduction française de la Chirurgie de Bell, auteur anglois. Les travaux que M. Bosquillon a faits sur le texte, et qu'il y a ajoutés, sont si étendus et d'un si grand intérêt, qu'il réunit dans cet ouvrage le titre d'auteur à celui de traducteur. (ANONYMOUS 1815: 182)

[His translation of Cullen's *Elémens de Médecine*, with the learned notes with which he enriched them, has been a classic book for over thirty years, and one of the most fruitfully consulted by doctors for guidance in difficult cases. We also owe him a French translation of Bell's Surgery. The work that Mr. Bosquillon has

[24] See BRET & MOERMAN 2014: 623–627.

[25] Brémond died in 1742. After his death, the physician Pierre Demours continued the translation project, publishing in 1759 the translation of the years 1737–1738 of the Philosophical Transactions (BRET & MOERMAN 2014: 625).

[26] He translated works of David Hartley, Stephen Hales, Patrick Murdoch and Francis Hauksbee (BRET & MOERMAN 2014: 624).

[27] See STURDY 1995: 400.

[28] Bycroft (2017) has studied another intriguing case concerning the role played by Charles Dufay's translation of Filippo Buonanni's *Traité des vernis* (1723) in the translator's access to the Académie des sciences.

done on the text, and which he has added to it, is so extensive and of such great interest, that in this work he combines the title of author with that of translator.]

Indeed, while a scientific translation could potentially launch a scientific career, not all translations (and translators) were the same. A translator also had to demonstrate scientific expertise. However, this is another issue (how was a *good* scientific translation expected to look at the time?), which will only be mentioned here in conclusion.

First conclusions

The quantitative-prosopographical perspective adopted here (whose limitations as much as its potential have been repeatedly emphasized) has made it possible to offer a multifaceted picture of the French-speaking translators of scientific texts between 1600 and 1815. On the one hand, the 267 translators here considered cannot be reduced to one single category. Among them one finds scientists, military personnel, journalists, language and literary professors, philosophers, polygraphs, diplomats, and others. At the same time, however, this study has shown that most of them were active members of the scientific community of their time and in various ways belonged to the world of science.
Moreover, an analysis of the products of their translation activity has demonstrated that the translation activity of the majority of them was not particularly prolific. Particularly the focus on the quantitatively most relevant group (the physicians and surgeons) has yielded interesting data. Translation was an important way for numerous physicians to establish (or at least to attempt to establish) their reputation within the scientific community. It was undoubtedly an important activity, but of limited duration. In fact, prolific translators of scientific works were the exception rather than the norm. This does not, however, imply a diminution in their historical relevance. Indeed, some translators become even more interesting precisely *because* they are exceptions.

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