

THE FUNCTION OF TRANSLATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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The development of linguistic sciences and the rapid increase of practical needs have brought about a violent reaction against the so-called 'grammar-translation' method in teaching languages. The consequence was a complete discredit of translation itself as a teaching-tool: the monostructural version of the direct method totally disregards the native language, both in preparing teaching materials and in classroom practice. The most recent variation, the contrastive or bistructural method, allows for the use of translation in so far as it provides a necessary step towards obtaining the data for contrastive analysis, which in turn becomes a preliminary for grading teaching materials and making decisions concerning their preparation (cf. Krzeszowski 1970 : 83ff, Reszkiewicz 1970 : 20ff). The validity of such an approach cannot be questioned: contrastive studies involve comparison of selected sub-systems of the languages concerned, and, as comparability is proved by translatability, translation has become a recognized criterion for establishing the crucial notion of equivalence. Thus, it must be considered one of the basic devices for all those who plan language courses or write language textbooks, in the same way as it is a basic tool for those who deal with contrastive structural studies for theoretical purposes.

My chief concern here is to try to establish the function of translation in consecutive stages of the language teaching process, i.e. during the presentation, fixing and testing of the material.

As is often the case with radical changes of attitude, the tendency to reject what had been previously taken for granted seems to have been carried too far. It will be my purpose to show that translation could retain some legitimate position in modern language teaching, provided it is defined and applied strictly in accordance with the findings of linguistic science.

It seems that, at least in part, total discrimination against translation in classroom practice is due to a potential ambiguity involved in the term itself. Commonly and intuitively, it is taken to mean 'performing a written translation of a (literary) text'. It is in this sense that the 'grammar-

translation' method made use of translation; in consequence, what was wrong with this method was not that translation was made use of, but that it was used badly. In order to clarify the notion of translation, at least six basic distinctions must be made:

1. Intralingual v. interlingual translation, i.e. paraphrase against translation proper, defined as 'an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language' (Jakobson 1966 - 233). In the following discussion it is the latter that is referred to, unless indicated otherwise;

2. product v. process, i.e. translation performed by an author of a textbook or a teacher and then presented to learners in order to clarify some teaching point or to illustrate a contrast between the L_1 and L_2 realization of some linguistic phenomenon, as different from the action of translating, performed by the learners themselves;

3. partial v. total translation, i.e. translation performed at some linguistic levels only, as opposed to functional equivalence, that is a complete translation at all levels. This distinction was first introduced by J. C. Catford (1957) who has defined three types of partial translation: phonological, lexical and/or grammatical. Phonological translation involves replacing the L_1 phonology by equivalent L_2 counterparts; in teaching practice, it underlies such bits of practical advice as, eg. 'w pozycji przed (l) krótkie (i) brzmi omal identycznie jak polskie (y)' (Reszkiewicz 1962:12). lub 'połączenie (hj) można wymawiać zupełnie jak polskie (ch) w wyrazie *Chiny*' (Reszkiewicz 1962:80). This is a kind of translation that numerous teachers find very useful. An example of the other kind of partial translation (fortunately no longer encouraged) is found in Irvine's *Praktyczny podręcznik języka angielskiego z kluczem* (1929!): "I do not learn" tłumaczy się dosłownie: ja-robię-nie-uczyć-się. "Do I learn?" — robię-ja-uczyć-się? Dlatego końcówka "s" przechodzi w czasowniku "do" w formę "does", podczas gdy "learn" zostaje niezmiennione'. (Irvine 1929:31);

4. written v. oral;

5. factual v. literary, i.e. translation performed in order to convey information, against translation made in order to reproduce a work of art;

6. foreign to native language v. native to foreign language.

Even such a tentative classification makes one realize that various types of translation can be applied in various teaching situations. The choice would involve such factors as:

1. the aim of the course,

2. the level of the course,

3. characteristics of the learners: age, nationality, previous experience in language learning, the knowledge of 'grammar', etc.

Thus, when planning a course aimed at teaching spoken English in everyday situations, any written translation will be excluded, while a course

aimed at training a group of translators for industry will make excessive use of factual written translation. Similarly, training professionals to perform simultaneous interpretation will require a great amount of practice devoted to teaching factual oral translation. In both cases, factual translation, written in the first case and oral in the second, can also be appropriately used as an aptitude test, checking the candidates' ability to make good progress during the course and to follow the career for which they are being trained. On the other hand, in such cases translation is seen as an end in itself and not as the means towards an end. The skill of translating is different from, and more difficult than, any of the basic linguistic skills; in fact it is a bilingual skill, and as such it requires special training. Thus teaching translation is a process entirely different from teaching language, and specialized courses, like those for professional translators and interpreters, must employ methods different from those adopted for regular language courses.

It is those regular courses, however, that will be considered here in relation to the possible application of various types of translation.

Common assumptions concerning elementary language courses are that the teaching material should cover, by and large, the whole of the phonological system, a great part of the morphological system, a relatively large vocabulary and a broad choice of syntactic constructions, especially those characteristic of the spoken language. On the advanced level, the material will cover the whole of the morphological system, a wide range of structures characteristic of both spoken and written language, an enlarged vocabulary and some ability to differentiate between styles, dialects and registers in all codes (i.e. oral and written, analytic and synthetic, cf. Reszkiewicz 1970). The scope specified in such general terms is, of necessity, both tentative and arbitrary, just as — contrary to the discussion devoted to teaching beginners — the literature on the subject is scanty and highly incomplete.

It is also assumed that the learners are adults or children over 14 (as teaching languages to young children requires different assumptions and specific techniques), with an average knowledge of the 'grammar' — in the popular sense of the word — of their native language. Other factors, eg. size of groups or kind of textbooks and aids available, will not be considered, as irrelevant to the question under discussion. It is the factor of level that seems decisive, as the function of translation in a language course depends almost entirely on how advanced the learners are.

The principle of general rejection of translation is best justified in teaching beginners. On the elementary level, apart from phonology, three constituents of L_2 are taught: lexis, syntax and idiom. The last, especially

the relative idioms, i.e. semantic combinations of words other than those expected by the learner which are conveniently called 'conventional syntagms', occur more frequently in everyday spoken language than in written registers and as such, they will appear in the very first portions of the teaching material. Therefore, they deserve appropriate attention — something that the old, word orientated methods failed to recognize. It is just those conventional syntagms that make translation an inappropriate teaching-tool; partial foreign to native language translation (i.e. lexical or grammatical) will render ungrammatical, or at least unacceptable, sentences. (Eg. *Jak długo pan weźmie naprawić moje buciki?*, Irvine 1929 : 77) Total translation, if functionally equivalent, will most frequently lack formal equivalence (or congruence) for which all beginners automatically look. To cite a very trivial example, I actually heard *How are you having yourself?* used as a greeting, cf. *How do you do?* Such word-for-word, or lexical, translation seems both a natural tendency and the chief source of errors caused by negative transfer. (Cf. Halliday, McIntosh, Strevens, 1965 : 266) The literature on the subject provides numerous examples (cf., eg. Krzeszowski 1970 : 74ff); from my own teaching practice come *Jak się pani ma, pani Brown?*, unacceptable in Polish, except for very special registers; or * *She washed her head*, unacceptable in English. The same holds true in relation to syntax — in languages as distinct as English and Polish, equivalence is by no means always accompanied by congruence, and the habit of translating can result in deep-rooted mistakes of the type * *There is a book* (instead of the correct *There is a book there*, cf. Polish *Tam jest książka*) or * *Father Robert's* (instead of *Robert's father*, cf. Polish *Ojciec Roberta*).

Using translation seems more appropriate when teaching lexis: in general, inside elementary vocabulary, extensions of meanings of words translated are not drastically different. But even here some meanings will be best taught in the total context of L_2 (eg. the denotation of the word *lunch* or connotation of the word *bloody*), and lexical translation should be employed only if other methods fail or prove less economical. Eg., with a very limited vocabulary and range of syntactic structures, it might prove difficult to provide a context in which the meaning of a given lexical item could be readily understood. Even then, however, learners should not be made to perform the translation themselves; it should be offered by the textbook or the teacher in the form of functional equivalent, that is as the total, and never purely lexical or grammatical, translation (a good example of this principle is found in Smólska, Rusiecki, Krasnodebska 1971). It does not seem advisable, however, to use such ready translation equivalents to illustrate linguistic differences

between chosen elements of L_1 and L_2 systems: the lack of congruence will in any case naturally become one of the learners' first observations, and, on the other hand, it may prove too early for significant generalizations.

Needless to say, at early stages of teaching, translation should never be used as a testing technique. If applied at all, it could only serve to check achievement as far as the analytical codes are concerned, by administering translation of a written text from L_2 into L_2 . Native to foreign language translation, as well as oral interpretation, will be indubitably considered well beyond the level of teaching even by advocates of the translation method. Yet, rather than the actual command of L_2 , a translation test will check the special bilingual skill of 'deciphering' the text. Moreover, using translation tests at early stages would lead to 'a concentration on formal equivalence at the expense of contextual equivalence' (Halliday, McIntosh, Strevens, 1965 : 266). All such disadvantages are involved in purely factual translation; introducing translation tests performed on texts which display literary features (as was common practice some 30 years ago) would be pointless: the range of possible renderings would make it utterly impossible for the teacher to score what the learners might produce, even though they were entirely unaware of the significant choice they had been offered. To sum up, translation tests should be discouraged 'when other means exist to test language without translation' (Lado 1961 : 261), and such means do exist, as modern teaching practice and theory have shown (cf., eg. Harris 1969).

To make the picture complete, it might be added that one type of partial translation, i.e. the phonological, has been encouraged and actually found useful by some teachers working with beginners. Pairs of words belonging to L_1 and L_2 respectively and built of foreign sounds and their closest counterparts in the pupils' native system (eg. Polish *tu* v. English *too* or Polish *insekt* v. English *insect*, Reszkiewicz 1970 : 32) make the learners recognize significant differences between contrasting sounds and can prove helpful as a step towards teaching correct pronunciation (cf. also such textbooks as Bałutowa 1965 or Jassem 1965).

Although it might seem somewhat paradoxical, more room for translation can be found in the process of language learning at advanced levels, its possible application in classroom practice growing in proportion to the learners' knowledge of the language taught. Translation will now be disregarded in teaching those parts of the L_2 system in which it might have been previously employed and, conversely, included in teaching those aspects of language for which there could have been no room at early or intermediate stages.

Thus partial phonological translation, successfully used in courses for beginners, will not find any application in advanced teaching. The foreign phonemic system having been learned, instruction aims at teaching recognition and production of sounds at the allophonic level, i.e. concerned with complementary distribution and free variation. Hence, sound contrasts will occur inside one system only, with total disregard of the phonology of the learners' native language.

A similar situation occurs in teaching lexis. On the one hand, the range of vocabulary at the learners' disposal is adequate to convey the meaning of any new lexical item, either through providing an appropriate context or an operational definition. On the other hand, the one-to-one correspondence, established for L_2 lexical items and their L_1 counterparts and valid for elements of a basic vocabulary is disturbed as soon as the learners discover that, with more complex words or more subtle usages, various contexts call for various renderings of a given item (cf. Halliday, McIntosh, Strevens, 1965 : 125). The same holds true for numerous grammatical patterns — the exact match is upset when the students realize that eg. English Present Perfect can be rendered by Polish Past, Present or Future (cf. *He has done the work* — *Wykonał pracę* v. *They have been waiting for an hour* — *Czekają od godziny* v. *Come after you have finished the work* — *Przyjdź, jak skończysz pracę*). Introducing such contrasts through translation equivalents can both increase the danger of negative transfer and cause serious methodological difficulties in establishing complete lists of possible correspondences, as these are to a great extent dependent on particular contexts.

Translation equivalents used to illustrate contrasting elements of syntactic structure of the two languages concerned will prove necessary in order to explain systematic differences in derivation, such as absence v. presence of a given rule, differences in 'depth' of languages, obligation v. option in rule application, difference of productivity of a given rule in two languages, etc. Such problems, however, are the domain of contrastive grammar and go beyond 'language' as the term is commonly conceived of when one talks about 'teaching language'. Consequently, they will become a crucial part of a teacher-training course or a specialized course for linguists. They must also be included in the programme of any course aimed at producing professional translators. The function of translation in such specialized teaching is in itself an important and complicated subject for research — for obvious reasons, it goes well beyond the scope of the present discussion.

In this place, it can only be said tentatively that translation equivalents, used at advanced levels of language teaching as an ad hoc device,

can prove helpful in systematizing some working contrastive rules at which the learners themselves arrive by automatic induction.

Conventional syntagms, an important constituent of the teaching material in elementary courses, can hardly be listed as a teaching problem at advanced levels. On the one hand, the basic everyday-use repertory should have been already mastered. On the other hand, the novel instances of the so-called 'usage' which the advanced students encounter either in spoken language or in written registers which now provide a larger proportion of teaching materials, are both easier to understand and more readily accepted, as the intuitive tendency towards seeking congruence operates much less strongly than at early stages. It is at this level, however, that language varieties first appear, presenting a wide range of methodological problems. Commonly referred to as 'differences of style', they cover what has been distinguished under such headings as idiolects, dialects (geographical, social and temporal), registers, styles and modes (cf. Catford, 1957 : 83 ff). Apart from some random considerations which come as a result of teaching practice rather than of linguistic theory, so far no full investigation has been carried out on the teaching of language varieties to advanced students. Authors of textbooks seem to agree, however, that it is with this goal in view that intralingual translation, or paraphrase, should be introduced. Thus semantically related sentences are shown to differ in their surface structures, and semantic equivalents are proved to vary in respect of their stylistic value. Introducing interlingual translation of particular variants — both as a ready product and as translation process carried out by the learners themselves — can help learners to realize the relevant differentiations, if only by making them note the corresponding variations which are found in their native language but are seldom consciously perceived. Cases of various kinds of untranslatability, semantic, syntactic or purely pragmatic, often prove equally instructive. Semantic equivalents do not always fulfil the requirements of functional equivalence in particular contexts. In other words, total interlingual translation often implies choice between possible semantic equivalents, which is the crucial problem of rhetoric and a necessary preliminary for appreciating the manifold possibilities of using language as a medium of art. It would require vast research to arrive at any methodological implications concerning this problem; in this place, only its existence can be briefly signalled.

Relatively more investigation seems to have been carried out concerning the function of translation in testing. The place of translation tests in advanced teaching is recognized by numerous authors (cf. Valette 1967, Bennett 1968). While there exist better techniques to check reading

knowledge, translation can be used to test vocabulary and especially words in context, i.e. conventional usage. When they involve no vocabulary problems, translation tests can also serve to test grammatical structures. It must be remembered, however, that it is chiefly the ability to translate that is tested, and not any of the basic linguistic skills. Moreover, advanced translation tests are extremely difficult both to set and perform. On the one hand, the number of possible translation equivalents grows with the degree of sophistication, due both to ambiguity of various types and to the language varieties involved. On the other hand, inadequate knowledge on the part of the learners leads to relative untranslatability caused by various factors of the context. Such — and similar — problems occur in factual translation. Literary translation, the subject of study of a separate discipline, presents such a vast range of problems that it does not seem possible even to try to list them here. In a regular, non-specialized language course there seems to be no place for it at all, except as an occasional refined exercise in style at very advanced stages, i.e. at a nearly bilingual level of proficiency. Therefore, when using translation as a proficiency or achievement test, it must be carefully observed that the text chosen

1. requires factual and not literary rendering, i.e. all semantic equivalents are functional equivalents,

2. avoids all types of ambiguity and untranslatability.

These requirements fulfilled, translation into L_2 , i.e. contrary to translation for instruction, proves more informative, because the element of guessing is eliminated and the synthetic code, more difficult to achieve, tested.

The complexity of the problem, inadequacy of theoretical research and lack of adequate evidence, as well as practical considerations, make it impossible to offer in this place anything more than a very tentative and very random review of the questions and insights which emerge when any attempt is made to define the function of translation in modern foreign language teaching. Any conclusions following from this discussion must also be, of necessity, highly tentative. It seems, however, that total rejection of translation as a teaching-tool or testing technique would deprive the teacher of a device which, when used appropriately and in accordance with the principles and requirements of modern methodology, can prove very useful. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the function of translation as a teaching-tool greatly depends on the proficiency of the learners and that these two variables — the amount of translation used in classroom practice and the level of learners — are directly and not inversely proportional.

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