

TRANSLATION TEACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

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According to Louis Kelly (1971), all our civilization comes to us through translation, from the sacred scriptures to the documents of the European Communities. But who were these translators throughout history and how had they learned their languages? Some of them had lived in border areas, travelled, or had mixed parents, others must, somehow, have had to study a foreign language.

Translation, according to Hartmann and Stork (1972:242), is "the process or result of converting information from one language or language variety into another". Translation is a process which is completed when the translator feels s/he has accounted for the lexical, idiomatic and syntactical differences between the source-language text and the lexical, idiomatic, and syntactical means of expression in the target (receptor) language and produced a qualitatively satisfactory translation result. In translation processes certain rather specific objective concepts, based on the translator's individual character and her/his background, experience, and creativity, are integrated into her/his work. In other words, translation processes are anthropologically based (Wills 1989). The anthropological basis of translation processes includes cognitive, interpretative, associative, and habitual procedural modes. Nevertheless, the nature of translation requires a systematic separation between planning and execution. Translation processes require the ability to set standards and make judgements, but they also require a large measure of initiative, intuition, and willingness to take risks.

While translation, as distinct from interpretation, concerns itself only with written texts and not with oral productions, it does deal with language in use (*parole* in the Saussurean sense), as does pragmatics. Syntax and semantics are concerned with language as a system. Reflections on the theory and pedagogy of translation extend far beyond the concerns of the linguist, which for the most part are centered on syntax (the set of rules governing the combinations of symbols) and semantics (the confrontation of those symbols with reality or with the symbols of another language). The translator (student-translator) must take into account the origin

of the text to be re-expressed, its nature, and the audience for whom it was intended (its future readers).

Translation as a method for language teaching and testing is not unknown to scholars and actually has prevailed for many centuries. At different periods it has been either an accepted or a controversial component, depending on prevailing objectives and teaching preferences. However, ever since language learning was recognized as a conscious and intellectual process within the cognitive code-learning theory, translation has become a learning/teaching device frequently incorporated into the curriculum. The central practical issue has been the use of translation as both a *means* and an *end* of foreign language instruction. It has been claimed that when translation is used as a *means* it stimulates negative transfer. The counterclaim is that translation helps to overcome and neutralize it. It has been argued that translation of the native language into the target language induces learners to make errors and thus amounts to setting traps. As Widdowson has pointed out (1975:91) "The basic objection to the use of translation in foreign language teaching is that it encourages the learner to think that structurally and lexically similar sentences in two languages mean the same and that it therefore discourages the learner from looking for meanings in the relationship between the sentences and the situations in which they are presented", and, elsewhere, "The objections to the use of translation seem to (...) involve establishing structural equivalence. It is said, for example, that translation leads the learner to suppose that there is a direct one-to-one correspondence of meaning between the sentences in the target language and those in the source language. Another and related objection is that it draws the attention of the learner to the formal properties of the target language sentences and distracts him from the search for contextual meaning – that is to say meaning which is a function of the relationship between sentences and appropriate situations" (Widdowson 1979:67). Empirical observation, however, has shown that the same kinds of errors attributed to translation also occur when learners produce target language utterances without setting out from a native language (such as free composition). By applying translation consciously and systematically, learners can be conditioned to monitor their own code switching. Danchev (1983:40) claims that translation is like medicine in that if you get the right dose properly administered it will have a curative effect; to the contrary, when used injudiciously it can prove harmful. In Danchev's (1983:35-56) opinion, translation allows for:

1. Natural and easy comparison between the target and native languages of learners, thus facilitating faster decoding of difficult target language structures and elements.
2. Quick and effective comprehension control.
3. Overcoming and neutralization of native language transfer.

Genuine translation involves the students in serious considerations of the expressive possibilities of the new language, but also expands their appreciation of the semantic extensions and limitations of their first language and the implications

for meaning of its syntactic options. It is, then, an appropriate undertaking in an advanced course, or even at the intermediate level when particular students are especially interested in attaining competence in it.

Translation involves careful analysis of the meaning of the source text. Various aspects of the meaning are considered and they are re-thought in terms of the target language. Students learn a great deal as they discover that it is not always possible to attain exact equivalence and as they evaluate possible versions to see which most fully captures all the implications of the original. They will find that they need to look beyond single words, chunks of sentences, or even complete sentences to whole stretches of discourse as they make their decisions.

The production of an acceptable translation into the target language is for most students a *means*, not an end – a means for developing sensitivity to the meanings expressed in a stretch of discourse in their own language and to the different linguistic mechanisms used by the two languages to convey these meanings. Students learn to translate ideas, not words. Through a comparative examination of the syntactic and semantic systems of the target and native languages and the cultural contexts in which they operate, students attempt to expand their own potential for expression in the target language.

As an *end*, and in spite of the growing need for translators, the argument has been advanced that translation should only be taught to whoever is expected to become a professional translator and that the ordinary language learner, therefore, need not study translation as an end in itself, even though he may be using it as a means of foreign language study and acquisition. However, if the general public's awareness of the importance of correct translating is to be enhanced, this can hardly be achieved only by organizing more courses for professional translators. Since the number of language learners far exceeds the number of students in special translation courses, inclusion of translation in a regular curriculum provides an excellent opportunity to make language learners more aware of the skills required to be a good translator.

Translation activities can be divided into two main categories: communicative and semantic (Newmark 1982:38f.). In the first category the text attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to the effect obtained on the readers of the original. It addresses itself only to the second reader who does not necessarily anticipate certain difficulties or obscurities and, therefore, is expecting a generous transfer of foreign elements into her/his own culture and language. This method emphasizes the "force" rather than the content of the message and is likely to be smoother, simpler, clearer, more direct, conforming to a particular register of language and often tending to undertranslate, using more generic catch-all terms in difficult passages.

On the contrary, a semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. This type of translation remains within the original culture and assists the reader only in its connotations if they constitute the essential human (non-ethnic) message of the text. A semantic translation tends to be more complex, more awkward, more detailed, and more concentrated, and it pursues the thought

process rather than the intention of the transmitter. It tends to overtranslate, to be more specific than the original, and to include more meanings than does the communicative type.

As an exercise, translation involves comprehension and expression. Comprehension requires a profound knowledge of the source language in order to perceive the meaning at several different levels and also familiarity with the content area of the text. Expression necessitates the ability to recreate in the target language what has been understood in the source language as accurately and faithfully as possible and at the same time in a style which reflects that of the source language.

Comprehension can be classified into four levels of meaning (Marsh 1987:23):

- a) linguistic which includes lexico-morphological, syntactic, stylistic and contextual meaning;
- b) conceptual, i.e. the extra-linguistic meaning, knowledge of the discipline or topic in the real world;
- c) pragmatic and rhetorical – such as what communicative or illocutionary act does the writer wish to convey and what perlocutionary force; and
- d) socio-cultural – elements within the text related specifically to the ethnography of the speech community.

Theoretically, student-translators should have few problems with comprehension (especially when working from their mother tongue), but, in practice, conceptual meaning, especially in technical translation, is frequently a major source of difficulty. The second element, expression, is the one which causes most problems. Students become so absorbed with the formal properties that they lose sight of the conceptual and communicative meaning. As they are indulging in a derivative form of writing, the natural desire to be accurate tends to dominate the process as the students fear they might go too much away from the original.

Teaching someone how to translate means teaching the intellectual process by which a message is transposed into another language; that is, placing the student in the centre of the translating operation so that he can understand its dynamics. It is the *meaning* of a message that is transferred from one language to another, and the transfer is accomplished by analyzing and then reconstructing semantic relationships. This interpretation of a text – discourse analysis – is an art of intelligence much more demanding than the simple comparison of two linguistic systems. It requires a highly developed capacity to understand, in combination with an ability to manipulate language. Thus, the teaching of translation should be based on the manipulation of language.

An introductory translation course should deal with pragmatic texts, that is, texts whose fundamental purpose is to convey information and in which aesthetics is of secondary importance. Pragmatic texts generally have a practical and immediate application. As instruments of communication, they are more or less ephemeral, at least as far as the useful life-span of their content is concerned.

The term 'pragmatic texts' covers, among other things, newspaper articles, general correspondence, non-technical brochures, tourist information, and official

reports and documents – in short, general texts dealing with topics like pollution, fitness, consumer affairs, drugs, leisure, economics, or sports.

Several characteristics distinguish pragmatic texts from other types of texts. One is anonymity. In a pragmatic text, the focus is not on the author's impressions, as it is in a literary text, but on relatively objective facts. The pragmatic text is more denotative than connotative, it is concerned with a more or less objective reality, its primary goal is to communicate information, it generally admits of only one interpretation, it is sometimes written in a codified language, it has an immediate and short-lived use, and it tends to be didactic.

There are pedagogical reasons for not using works of literature in an introductory translation course. First, literary translation is an idiosyncratic genre. Literary works have aesthetic qualities beyond their purely referential content. Literary language is probably the most refined and most difficult to translate. Because of its individualistic diction and style, it has little in common with ordinary language and writing.

Second, it must be recognized that literary translation demands literary ability. It requires a sensitivity to art, born of an interest in and exposure to works of literature, which enables one to appreciate fully the feelings expressed in a work, its verbal resonance, and the symbolic import of its images. The translator must feel an affinity with the writer.

Third, it would be contrary to the principles of good teaching to base an introductory method on texts whose style is the furthest removed from that of pragmatic texts, especially when pragmatic texts constitute the overwhelming majority of a translator's work.

Finally, by excluding literary texts, I define the practical translation course as training in "functional" communication and the translator as a writer who, though s/he does not herself/himself put together the ideas that make up a text, is entrusted with the task of expressing them in another language.

Articles from newspapers, magazines and journals (preferably supplied in full although not necessarily to be translated in full) provide the most sensible texts for several reasons: they are usually based on topical issues which the student is likely to have knowledge of and interest in, therefore increasing motivation, and reducing possible cultural lacunae; the language is modern; within journalese, style varies considerably depending on which section of a newspaper, magazine or journal the piece is chosen from; information load is usually high, calling for extremely compact syntactic structures and a high proportion of 'content' lexical items, which proves challenging without being impossible; and, finally, topic range is wide (cf. Marsh 1987:28).

The actual techniques should not be aimed at making translation, a means, the end of the language teaching process. We should be looking at the whole of our language teaching and attempting to co-ordinate and unify it rather than having this completely artificial binary division between oral and written work. Translation into the foreign language should be a weapon in our language teaching techniques arsenal together with translation into the mother tongue and a wide range of other exercises. To use another analogy, translation should be on the menu but definitely

not the only fare. After all translation is an art, not a science. Guidance can be given and general principles can be taught but after that it (i.e. translation) must be left to the individual's own feeling for the two languages concerned.

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