

Putting Translation Theory Into Practice

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It may seem today that translation theory hardly needs to be discussed any more. There is a growing consensus among theorists that translation means comprehending the author's meaning and restating that meaning in another language in the way in which the author would most probably have expressed himself or herself, had he or she been a native speaker of the target language.

Practitioners too are increasingly aware of translation theory thanks to a fast-expanding literature on the subject, as well as numerous lectures, seminars, conferences, etc.

Yet there are still many translations in existence that do not bear out the theory. In certain parts of the world the overwhelming majority of translations can even be said to be outright denials of the theory, although the translator's footnotes or forewords often indicate that they have heard of it.

How is it that theory and practice are particularly far apart in translation?

One obvious reason is, of course, that translation theory is still relatively young; and, even though it has evolved from practical experience and observations, most of today's practitioners and instructors are still heavily influenced by a purely linguistic approach. They find it difficult to free themselves from its grip because, having been used to—or even trained to—translating literally, they are often no longer capable of starting again from scratch. Moreover, they may be lacking in aptitudes and skills which may seem irrelevant if one adopts a linguistic approach, but which are essential for translating.

Furthermore, theory is a matter of knowledge, while practice is a matter of know-how, and knowledge does not automatically give rise to know-how. This fact, which is often overlooked in translation, may also partly account for the mis-match between theory and practice in this field.

Although an article is certainly not the ideal way of converting theory into practice, or knowledge into know-how, I would nevertheless like to discuss at least three practical consequences that should be drawn from theoretical insights, because, in my opinion, they could be particularly valuable in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical performance.

The first lesson to be drawn from theoretical teaching concerns the translator's working routine, while the second concerns the self-evaluation procedures that must go along with each operation of the translation process. And I will end by highlighting what appears to me to be the most important, albeit very general, consequence that needs to be drawn from translation theory if it is to have a significant impact on performance.

The working routine

To make my point I have to revert briefly to the theoretical definition I gave a moment ago: translation means comprehending the author's meaning and restating that meaning in another language in the way in which the author would most probably have expressed himself or herself, had he or she been a native speaker of the target language.

If we ask what this definition implies in practical terms, the only possible answer is that it means intelligent reading followed by competent writing. Obviously, one has to have the linguistic and extra-linguistic tools to understand what one is reading and to make it understood when writing it down, but these are only prerequisites of the task at hand. As for the operations themselves, they seem, on the face of it, to be exactly the same as those commonly performed by any interested reader and skilful writer, the only difference being that, by definition, the reading and writing are done by the same person and in two different languages. But again, this qualification only means that translators must have a wider range of tools at their disposal than readers and writers taken separately. It does not alter the activities themselves.

Can we therefore say that there is nothing more in translation than that?

Basically, I think there is not much more in it, or rather, ideally, there should not be much more in it, seeing that even children who happen to have the necessary tools are capable of doing it spontaneously and efficiently. Indeed, as one of my French colleagues, Dr. M. LEDERER, rightly points out,¹ 'immigrants' children are often called upon to help their parents communicate with the local people. They do it effortlessly and they do it well.

How is it that children are capable of performing what adult translators do not seem able to cope with?

There is more than one reason for this apparent paradox.

First of all, children are generally asked to translate orally; and oral translation, while perhaps more demanding than written translation with regard to the necessary tools, is far more likely to be done in the right manner spontaneously and without any prior training. The main reason for this is that no listener, not even a very young one, is capable of remembering all the words of, let us say, three or four sentences pronounced just once at a normal rate. Therefore, by the time the child or adult interpreter is asked to say the same thing in an other language, he or she will have forgotten most of the words, remembering only what the speaker wanted to communicate. Consequently, he or she can say it again spontaneously and naturally.

Why is imperfect word memory conducive to adopting the right approach to translation? To answer the question, we must remind ourselves of the reason why translation depends on the translator's understanding of the message and cannot be done by merely converting words of one language into words of another language. As everybody knows, the reason is that languages not only differ from each other as such but also in the way they are used to express facts and concepts. Translation deals only with what results from the use of languages, i.e. speech, and not with languages as such. Since at the speech level the number of possible combinations of linguistic elements is infinite in any given language, depending on the subject matter, the context, the style, etc., there is no way of resorting to pre-set equivalents for translation purposes. Such ready-made equivalents do not exist and will never exist, if only because there is an infinite number of them. Equivalences at the speech level—oral or written—have to be tailor-made for each and every utterance. This creation of equivalences can only be achieved by first stripping the message of its original wording and then fitting it into the appropriate moulds provided by the target language.

¹ *Transcoder ou Réexprimer?* in: *Interpréter pour Traduire*, Didier Erudition, Paris, 1984.

Consequently, the original wording is nothing but a wrapping which the translator has to discard as soon as he or she has grasped the contents, which are then rewrapped as appropriate in the target language. Anything that helps translators to focus their attention on the contents, instead of clinging to the wrapping, will therefore also help them to grasp and repackage the contents. Thus forgetfulness of words in oral translation, far from being a problem, is actually a blessing for interpreters, as it facilitates the crucial operation of the translation process, i.e. deverbalization.

Translators are less fortunate in this respect—or are they? Do they not also have the possibility of taking their minds off the words by making the best possible use of their natural tendency to forget them? Are they obliged to keep their eyes riveted on the text in front of them simply because they have the opportunity to do so? Is it not illogical to try to deverbalize while causing the very words one would like to forget to invade one's consciousness? Seeing that acute awareness of the original wording, sustained by a continual perception of this wording, is by no means conducive but highly detrimental to their efforts, would translators not be well advised to handle their text like an only-once-heard speech?

Of course they would. Experience shows that when forced to translate paragraph by paragraph without having the text in front of them in the rewording stage, even translators who for years have been addicted to word-by-word translation are suddenly capable of writing readable prose.

Yet, while they acknowledge the difference it makes to the quality of their own writing, they literally have to be forced into it. It is not, of course, because they fear the method might not be safe enough, since, obviously, once the translation has been written down, they are free to check it, even several times, against the text and make good any omissions or inaccuracies.

Their reluctance is not due, either, to any misgivings they might have about the proper reproduction of the original style, since they quickly realise that style is not simply a matter of form—i.e. part of the wrapping they are told to discard—but is part of the contents. Indeed, style is essentially a clue to the viewpoint from which the writer presents his or her ideas, which obviously affects the ideas themselves. Just consider what the ironical style, for instance, does to the contents. If it were not recognized by readers as a hint to the perspective chosen by the writer, they would get a message that would be the opposite of the intended one.

The reason given by translators for their reluctance to put the text aside is always the same: they find it more difficult to translate without having it in front of them, in spite of the fact that—all other things being equal—the result achieved shows that, on the contrary, it makes things easier for them.

To understand what appears to be yet another paradox, let us revert to our young 'interpreters'. The second reason why these children perform so well is that they are asked to translate only matters which they are perfectly knowledgeable about and which are presented in a manner that matches their presumed capabilities of understanding. Similarly, when re-expressing the message, they talk about matters they are familiar with and in terms they are accustomed to using in their daily lives.

These conditions are rarely met in translation. Since, unfortunately, this activity is still widely regarded as a mere by-product of language learning, translators often lack the necessary extra-linguistic knowledge to grasp the message and restate it in proper terms. As long as they have the text in front of them, they nevertheless think they can translate it

as, wittingly or unwittingly, they slide into the word replacement technique. When the text is taken away from them and they are asked to rewrite what they have understood, obviously they can no longer fall back on this technique. That is why they find it more difficult to write their translation down without constantly referring back to the text. Instead of limiting themselves to exchanging words for words, they find themselves compelled to ponder on what the author actually wanted to say and to re-express it in their own words.

Yet, however painful it may be to work one's mind into reasoning along with the author and expressing his or her thoughts in the same spirit as he or she had done in the source language, it is the only possible approach to translation. It is the normal pain of childbirth. Pushing the text aside does not exacerbate it, but actually alleviates it, while helping at the same time to ensure that all the stages of the correct process have been gone through.

Moreover, translators who abstain from referring back to the text while rewriting the author's meaning in the target language are sure to avoid another trap for the unwary, *i.e.* discontinuity of the translation process. Indeed, translators are often seen to take great pains to extract the meaning of a text, but apparently forget all about it as soon as they start writing out their translation. Instead of re-expressing this meaning naturally and spontaneously, they seem to lose hold of it while reverting to the original wording and letting themselves get caught in its toils. Thus, their deverbalization efforts do not link up with the next stage of the process. They leave nothing but loose ends. This pitfall need not be dreaded if, once the author's meaning is understood and the style in which it is put imbibed, it is reworded in its entirety without any further reference to the text except for the final checks. Ironically, the best way to make sure that the reading and writing operations are safely linked is to prevent them from mixing.

Thus, adopting a working routine that bears out the correct methodological approach improves the translator's performance, not only by facilitating deverbalization, but also by channelling the entire translation process in the right direction and ensuring its continuity.

Furthermore, it enables translators to find out fairly quickly by themselves whether they are qualified to translate a given text or not. If they feel completely lost without the text, it shows that they do not have the necessary extra-linguistic knowledge to translate it. They should rather abstain and go for another text whose referent might be more in tune with their own background.

Self-evaluation procedures

Yet, whatever the advantages of this working method, it is no protection against misinterpretations. It is no safeguard either against occasional relapses into word-by-word translation, for instance when a concept or an allusion is not clearly understood.

The temptation to gloss over such difficulties is all the greater for translators as it is precisely the words that we are unable to process properly, for want of adequate linguistic or extra-linguistic knowledge, that our memory tends to register. Instead of tackling the root of the problem, *i.e.* lack of comprehension, translators are often prompted to simply replace the words by any terms in the target language that they consider equivalent on the language level. In doing so, they fail to realize that they are not solving the problem but only passing it on to the user of the translation, who is left to do the guesswork.

Another reason why translators are prone to skip over problems instead of solving them is that this is what we, as readers, often do whenever we are not interested or motivated enough to come to grips with what is eluding our understanding. We may not even always be aware that we have not fully understood the author's meaning. Translators, however, cannot be satisfied with hazy ideas of the possible meaning of this or that part of the text, since hazy ideas cannot be put into clear words. They cannot afford, either, not to be aware that they have missed something the author implied, as it will most probably affect the way the message has to be reworded.

That is why I said at the beginning that, ideally, translation should be nothing more than an act of reading followed by an act of writing. But this ideal situation does not always exist.

Comprehension problems are, moreover, easily misinterpreted by the translator, who tends to diagnose them as rewording difficulties, or even inadequacies of the target languages: "*I cannot find the right words for it or there are no words in my language to express this thought.*" These are the most common responses I got from participants in translation workshops whenever they got stuck. However, each time the real culprit turned out to be not the target language or lack of mastery of that language, but lack of understanding of the author's meaning. Once this meaning had been made clear, everybody was able to reformulate it.

The fallacy here is due to the fact that deverbalization is often finalized only in the rewriting stage, just as any writer's thoughts acquire final contours and structures while he or she is putting them down in writing. If the translator does not succeed in freeing the cognitive contents from its last bit of wrapping in the final stage of the process, he or she will sense that there is a problem. And since awareness of the problem coincides with the rewording operation, the problem itself is wrongly diagnosed as one of reformulation. Yet it would be erroneous to believe that any difficulty encountered at the time of writing is a writing problem. On the contrary, more often than not, translators will realize on reflection that they are at a loss for words because they are not quite sure about what they are trying to express. Obviously, a difficulty can be overcome only if it has been properly identified in the first place.

It may, of course, happen—and it does so quite often—that we have understood the author's meaning but do not know how to re-express that meaning in the target language. Although almost all real rewording problems in one's mother tongue are nothing but symptoms of inadequate knowledge of the referent of the text, and therefore call for more reading or inquiring on the subject matter, we tend to dispose of such problems by using the short-cut provided by a bilingual dictionary. In doing so, we forget that bilingual dictionaries only offer answer on the language level and not on the speech level, and, since the translator is dealing with a text, i.e. speech, and not with a pair of languages, the words suggested by the dictionary will most probably not be the right ones.

Even thorough knowledge of the referent of the text does not guarantee that the translator will not have a few problems of understanding or reformulating. In our modern world, specialists can no longer cope with all there is to know in their own fields. Furthermore, even highly specialized texts frequently contain comparisons with or allusions to similar problems or situations in a completely different field with which the translator may not be familiar. Universal knowledge is no longer within anybody's reach. Moreover, the original wording may not always be crystal clear. Therefore, translators are bound to encounter difficulties. It is not, however, the existence, nor even the number

of these difficulties that will affect the quality of translations. The quality will depend solely on whether the translators themselves are aware of them and on how they handle them. If they realize that there is a problem, if they diagnose the problem correctly (comprehension/expression) and, instead of passing it over, solve it by reasoning or searching for the background information they need for proper understanding or rewording, they will stay on the safe side and most probably produce a useful translation. Thus, in the final analysis, the reliability of any translation is primarily a matter of the translator's sensitivity to, and accurate identification of, any shortcomings in his or her own understanding and means of expression.

What instruments do translators have at their disposal to sharpen their awareness of any insufficiency in understanding and any defects in their formulation of a given message?

According to my experience there are two tests that one's own comprehension has to pass before it can be declared reasonably safe. The first question the translator should ask himself is: *How does what I understand relate to what I have understood so far and to what I gathered from the rest of the text when I read it through before starting to translate it, as well as to what I know of the subject matter myself?* If everything fits into a logical, coherent whole, the first test can be considered to have been passed successfully. If there is a discrepancy, the translator must find its cause.

The second question no longer concerns *what* the author actually wrote down, but *why* he wrote it. *What prompted the author to say this? Why did he or she think it mattered and what was he or she trying to get at?*

If we do not manage to come up with a plausible answer to this second question, our understanding of the author's meaning is very likely to be incomplete. We may have gathered what was explicit, but probably not what was implied. More thinking will have to be done. More background information will have to be obtained.

Since these two questions concern the translator's understanding, they must be constantly kept in mind during the reading periods. They should, however, also be asked at the rewriting stage, because, as we have seen, part of the ultimate deverbilization may occur only in this second stage.

As to the writing itself, there are also two questions translators must put to themselves. Firstly: *Is what I wrote exactly what I understood and intended to write, or does it convey a meaning that I did not want to express?* Scrutiny of one's own writing under this heading should never be neglected, since otherwise, although the message may have been understood, the way it is put may give rise to misunderstandings.

Finally, translators should ask: *Will my rewording of the message produce the same effect on my readers as the original version did on its readers? Is there conformity in terms of style, specificity of language as well as clarity and intelligibility of expressions, especially as my readers do not share the same background as those of the original author?* A critical assessment of the translation from this viewpoint can make a considerable difference, seeing that one of the most glaring defects of many translations is that they seem to have been written without any thought for their readers' requirements and expectations. Yet translators must not only be fully aware of whom they are communicating with, just like any writer, but also of any possible differences between the author's readership and their own. Only then will they be in a position to do what is also part of their role, i.e. decide, in the light of their own bicultural experience, whether adaptations are necessary or not.

The prerequisites

Needless to say, such self-evaluation alone requires a good deal of knowledge, strong reasoning powers and a self-critical mind. But that is the price of translation. It is indeed in the very nature of this activity to make high demands not only on linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge, as well as on the writing skills of those who exercise it, but also on their reasoning powers and, last but not least, on their intellectual honesty. Those who fulfil these basic requirements will have no difficulty in acquiring the theoretical knowledge and practical know-how specific to translation.

This specific knowledge and know-how, however, while essential, cannot replace any of the basic capabilities, but only direct and coordinate them for translation purposes, just as in a theatre a director's knowledge and skills are no substitute for the cast, but allow interaction between the individual capabilities represented on the stage to become a play. Without coordination there would be just interaction, the result of which would be left to chance. Without capabilities whose interaction can be channelled to serve a specific goal, the director's knowledge and skills would be as ineffective as a free-spinning wheel. The fact that he not only knows the principles of directing but has also learned to convert them into directing skills does not make him more effective if there is no cast to direct or if the cast is incomplete. Is it not even inconceivable to try to apply directing principles without bothering about whom to apply them to?

Thus, putting theory into practice means not only converting knowledge into know-how, but also making the necessary roll-call before any performance. Above all, it implies refusal to raise the curtain if someone is missing at the call. The audience cannot be deceived. Trying to fool them only amounts to fooling oneself and making a fool of the playwright.

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