

“BECOMING A TRANSLATOR”

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a main problem in the field of translation studies, namely “who are translators”? From ancient times people did translations. Students at faculty of foreign languages study the theory and practice of translation, and some graduates wish to become translators in different fields. Starting from the difficulties encountered by students during the seminars of translation, I thought it would be useful to describe briefly what means to be a translator and which the key aspects of this profession are. The way from theory to practice in any field is hard; therefore the novice translators need a helpful guide and advice about how to translate faster and more accurately. The present paper proposes to provide readers with some information that inspires guides and encourages them to become professional translators.

Key words

internal and external knowledge, text's and translator's reliability, accurate or faithful translation, professional pride.

Motto: “Translation is transmission. Translators are links in the communicative chain.

Translation is synaptic action in the global brain”.

Douglas Robinson, *Becoming a Translator* (2012)

Internal and external knowledge

Translation is different things for different groups of people. For people who are not translators, it is primarily a text; for people who are, it is primarily an activity. Or, as Anthony Pym (1993: 131, 149-50) puts it, from the perspective of “external knowledge” (the knowledge of non-translators) translation is a text; from the perspective of “internal knowledge” (translators) translation is an activity that aims at the *production* of a text.

From the translator's internal perspective, the activity is most important: the process of becoming a translator, doing research, networking, translating words, phrases and registers, editing the translation, delivering the finished text to the teacher/client.

Inside/internal perception: a translator thinks about translation from inside the process, knowing how it's done, having a real and practical sense of the problems involved, some solutions to those problems, and the limitations on those solutions (the translator is aware of the fact that no translation will ever be a perfectly reliable guide to the original).

Outside/external perception: a non-translator thinks about translation from outside the process, not knowing how it's done, but knowing that it's a well-made translation. Outside translation users would like to have a text translated reliably and rapidly.

From user's external point of view, the only possible reason for translation theory to exist is to develop normative standards for accurate and faithful translation – to make sure that translators are translating in conformity with collectively imposed standards and not, say, becoming the “traitors” they are always halfway suspected of becoming (*traduttore traditore*).

From the translator's internal point of view, however, translation theory exists largely in order to help them to solve problems that arise and to defend their solutions when criticized, and thus to grow professionally in skills, knowledge, demeanor, and credibility.

Both the source text and the target text are determined by the communicative situation in which they serve to convey a message. All texts, not just translations, are determined by the communicative situation, not abstract universal rules governing writing or speaking. It is impossible, therefore, to say that text-based “equivalence” is or should be the defining criterion of a good translation, or that a single type of equivalence is the only acceptable one for all translation. These things are determined by and in the communicative situation – by people, acting and interacting in a social context.

The translator's reception, the way he receives the text, is determined by the communicative needs of the initiator or the target-text recipient.

The translator mediates between two textual actions, the source text as an action functioning in the source culture and the target

text which the initiator wants to function in a certain way in the target culture. In the end, the initiator's requirements will determine the nature of the target text, but those requirements must be filtered through what the translator has determined as the "function-in-culture" of the source text. Ethical considerations come into play when the translator feels that there is too great a discrepancy between the two textual actions.

Since the target text will serve different cultural and social functions in the target culture from those served by the source text in the source culture, it is exceedingly rare for a translation to be "functionally equivalent" to its original. Functional *change* is the normal purpose; how will the purpose of this textual action change in the target culture?

Translation is the production of a functional target text maintaining a relationship with a given source text that is specified according to the intended or demanded function of the target text (translation purpose). Translation allows a communicative act to take place which because of existing linguistic and cultural barriers would not have been possible without it.

Reliability

Reliability is often called "equivalence" or "fidelity". It may mean that the translation follows the exact syntactic contours of the original. A text's reliability is venturing into the territory traditionally called "accuracy" or "equivalence" or "fidelity". There are many different types of textual reliability; there is no single touchstone for a reliable translation, certainly no single simple formula for abstract semantic and syntactic "equivalence" that can be applied easily in every case. All that matters to the user is that the translation be reliable, accurate, effective, and easily readable in the target language.

A text that meets those demands will be called a "good" or "successful" translation. Reliably translated texts cover a wide range from the lightly edited to the substantially rewritten, with the "accurate" or "faithful" translation somewhere in the middle; there is no room in the world of professional translation for the theoretical stance that only straight sense-for-sense translation is translation. It's a mistaken belief to consider "fidelity", an exact one-to-one correspondence between original and translation, the only goal of

translation. In all translation there is present the element of creative interpretation.

From the translator's internal point of view "creative interpretation" means that all text-processing involves some degree of interpretation and thus some degree of creativity.

The translator's reliability

But the text is not the only important element of reliability for the user; the translator too must be reliable. The best synonym for the translator's reliability would not be "accuracy" or "correctness" but "professionalism": the reliable translator in every way comports himself or herself like a professional. A sensitive translator will recognize when a given task requires something besides straight "accuracy" – various forms of adaptation, various kinds of imaginative re-creation – and, if the client has not made these instructions explicit, will confirm this hunch before beginning work. Accuracy is essential to a good translation, but it cannot guarantee that a text will be effective. But most important of all, the translator should be sure that rewriting will not take the meaning too far away from the original – as in the game of "Chinese whispers."

Aspects of translator reliability

Reliability with regard to the text

1. Attention to detail

The translator is meticulous in his/her attention to the contextual and collocational nuances of each word and phrase s/he uses.

2. Sensitivity to the user's needs

The translator listens closely to the user's special instructions regarding the type of translation desired, understands them and strives to carry them out exactly and flexibly.

3. Research

The translator does careful research, in reference books, internet databases and other web-based research, and through phone calls and email inquiries

4. Checking

The translator checks her/his work closely, and if there is any doubt has a translation checked by an expert before delivery

to the teacher/client.

Reliability with regard to the client

5. *Versatility*

The translator is versatile enough to translate texts outside her area of specialization, out of languages s/he doesn't feel entirely competent in, in manners s/he has never tried.

6. *Promises*

The translator knows her/his own abilities and schedule and working habits well enough to make realistic promises to clients or agencies regarding delivery dates and times, and then keeps those promises; or, if pressing circumstances make it impossible to meet a deadline, calls the client or agency and renegotiates the time frame or arranges for someone else to finish the job.

7. *Friendliness*

The translator is friendly in person, is pleasant to speak with, has a sense of humor, offers helpful advice.

8. *Confidentiality*

The translator will not disclose confidential matters learnt through the process of translation, or negotiation to third parties.

Reliability with regard to technology

9. *Hardware and software*

The translator owns a late-model computer, a recent version of Microsoft Word, an Internet connection, an e-mail address, and a scanner, and either owns and uses regularly, or is prepared to purchase and learn how to use, translation-memory software specified by the client.

Who are translators?

Translators and interpreters are voracious readers, people who are typically in the middle of four books at once, in several languages, fiction and nonfiction, technical and humanistic subjects, anything and everything.

They are hungry for real-world experience as well, through travel, living abroad for some period of time, learning foreign languages and cultures, and above all paying attention to how people

use language all around them: friends, colleagues, the kids' teachers, clerks, doctors, from this or that region or social class, and so on.

Translation is often called a profession of second choice: many translators were first professionals in other fields, and only turned to translation when they lost or quit their jobs or moved to a country where they were unable to practice them. There are non-translators (diplomats, language teachers, world travelers) who share many of the characteristics of a translator. The primary characteristics of a good translator are similar to the expectations translation users have for the ideal translation: a good translator is reliable and fast. For the translator, reliability is important mainly as a source of professional pride, which also includes elements that are of little significance to translation users. It is extremely important that the translator enjoy the work. Let's consider these two internal requirements in order: professional pride and enjoyment.

Professional pride

From the user's point of view, it is essential to be able to rely on translation and on the translator as well. For the translator or interpreter the highest consideration is professional pride, professional integrity, and professional self-esteem. Translators want to feel that their job is important, that they do it well, and the users appreciate their work. Most people would take professional pride in a job that pays less than get rich doing things they don't believe in.

The areas in and through which translators typically take professional pride are reliability, involvement in the profession, and ethics.

Professional pride in reliability is the main reason translators will spend hours hunting down a single term. It feels enormously important to get it right: to find exactly the right term, the right spelling, the right phrasing, the right register. Not just because the client expects it; also because if the translator didn't do it right, his/her professional pride and job satisfaction would be diminished.

Involvement in the profession is of great importance to translators. Taking classes on translation, attending translator conferences, reading about translation, discussing problems and solutions related to linguistic transfer, keeping up with technological developments in the field - all this gives translators the strong sense that they are not isolated persons but professionals surrounded by

other professionals who share their concerns.

The professional ethics of translation have traditionally been defined very narrowly: it is unethical for the translator to distort the meaning of the source text. This conception of translator ethics is far too narrow even from the user's point of view: there are many cases when the translator is asked to "distort" the meaning of the source text in specific ways, as when adapting a text for television, a children's book, or an advertising campaign. From the translator's internal point of view, the ethics of translation are more complicated. Translators are human beings, with opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Translators, like all professionals, want to take pride in what they do; if serious clash between their personal ethics and an externally defined professional ethics makes it difficult to feel that pride, they will make strict decisions about where and under what conditions they want to work.

Enjoyment

No matter how one diversifies one's professional life, translating, like most jobs, involves a good deal of repetitive drudgery that will simply never go away. And the bottom line to that is: if you can't learn to enjoy even the drudgery, you won't last long in the profession. There is both drudgery and pleasure to be found in reliability, in painstaking research into the right word, in brain-wracking attempts to recall a word that you know you've heard, in working on a translation until it feels just right. There is both drudgery and pleasure to be found in speed, in translating as fast as you can go. There is both drudgery and pleasure to be found in taking it slowly, letting your mind roam, rolling target-language words and phrases around on your tongue. In fact in some sense it is not too much to say that the translator's most important skill is the ability to learn to enjoy everything about the job. The most important skill for the translators themselves is the ability to produce reliable texts. But a fast and reliable translator who hates the work, or who is bored with it, feels it is a waste of time, will not last long in the profession.

Translation for the professional translator is a constant learning cycle that moves through the stages of instinct, experience and habit.

Experience, especially fresh experience, is in most ways the opposite of habit. It startles the translator out of his/her habitual

routines, makes him/her feel alive, so that s/he really feels things. There is pleasure, above all, in variety, in a shuttling back and forth between the new and the old, the familiar and the strange, the conscious and the unconscious, the intuitive and the analytical, the subliminal and the startling. This back-and-forth movement between habit and fresh experience is one of the most important keys to successful, effective, and enjoyable translation, requiring both calm expertise and the ability to grow and learn and deal with unforeseen events. Life is boring without fresh experience, because experience brings novelty and forces us to learn.

The process of translation

In the process of translation a novice translator begins by approaching a text with an instinctive sense that s/he knows how to do this, that s/he will be good at it, that it might be fun. Then s/he realizes that s/he doesn't know how to proceed, but takes a guess anyway; and soon is translating away, learning inductively as s/he goes, by trial and error, making mistakes and learning from those mistakes; s/he gradually deduce patterns and regularities that help her/him to translate faster and more effectively; and eventually these patterns and regularities become habit or second nature, are incorporated into a subliminal activity of which s/he is only occasionally aware; s/he is constantly forced to revise what she/he has learnt through contact with new texts. The translation cycle is as follows:

1. Translate: act, translate intuitively.
2. Edit: think about you've done; test your intuitive responses against everything you know; but edit intuitively too, allowing an intuitive first translation to challenge a well-reasoned principle that you believe in deeply; let yourself feel the tension between intuitive certainty and cognitive doubt, and don't automatically choose one over the other.
3. Sublimate: internalize what you've learnt through this give-and-take process for later use; make it second nature; make it part of your intuitive repertoire; but sublimate it flexibly; always be ready to doubt, argue, contradict, disbelieve, challenge, question, and even be willing to break your own rules.

This model assumes that the translator is at once:

- (a) a professional, for whom techniques have become second nature, occurring rapidly enough to enhance his income; and

- (b) a learner, who must solve new problems, and thrives on such problems, since novelties ensure variety, interest and enjoyment.

The translator should be a lifelong learner, always eager to push into new territories, and at least occasionally, willing to let other people chart the way into those territories. No one can experience more than a few dozen things even through books and courses and other first-hand descriptions. We have to rely on other people's experiences in order to continue broadening our world – even if, once we have heard those other experiences, we want to go out and have our own, to test their descriptions in practice.

Intuition, pattern-building, and rules and theories are all important channels of experience and learning. Each has its special and invaluable contribution to make to the learning process. Intuitive guesswork without the ongoing practical trial-and-error of pattern-building or the rules, laws, and theories introduced by teachers would leave the translator a novice: pattern-building and rules and theories are essential to professional competence. But pattern-building without fresh perspectives and creative intuition would become a mechanical activity. Rules and theories too should have an expansive effect on the learner, opening up wider horizons of translation. Rules and theories without surprises from the world of intuitive guess, or a solid grounding in professional practice, would be sterile and empty.

The meaning of the word is its use in the language

Translation is primarily about words and their meanings: what the words in the source text mean, and what words in the target language will best capture or convey that meaning. Words and meanings are important for the translator in the context of someone actually using them, speaking or writing them to someone else. People using language always take precedence over meanings in the dictionary, semantic fields in the abstract. In ordinary day-to-day life words and meanings take on their importance in connection with people. They take on meaning through people; they tell us more about the people around us than we knew before, help us to understand them better. A dictionary could represent the two different meanings of the word “silly” by identifying two separate semantic fields: (1)stupid, foolish, ridiculous; (2) funny, humorous, playful. But this would only be a pale imitation of the living complexity of Jim's and Maria's

shifting sense of the word in their relationship, as in the following example:

“Jim and Maria live together. Jim is a native speaker of North American English., Maria a native speaker of Argentinean Spanish. Maria’s English is better than Jim’s Spanish, so they mostly speak English together. Maria gets offended when Jim calls her <silly>. He says he means the word affectionately: in his family everyone used <silly> as a term of endearment. It was a good thing for someone to be silly; it meant funny, humorous, genial, pleasantly childlike, a good person. Maria explains that she learnt the word in school, where she was taught that it means <stupid, foolish, ridiculous.> As a result of this conversation, Jim is careful to use the word <silly> in contexts where he hopes his light, playful mood and affectionate tone will make it clear to Maria that he doesn’t mean to hurt her feelings with it; Maria begins to notice that the word as Jim uses it means something different from what she learnt in school. But occasionally she hears him using it in a less loving way, as when they are having an argument and he shakes his head in disgust and snorts, in response to something she has just said, <Don’t be silly!> She guesses, rightly, that for him in that particular context <silly> does mean more or less what she was taught:<stupid, foolish, ridiculous.> But she also accepts his insistence that for him it mostly means <funny, humorous, playful.>”

We almost always learn words and their meanings from people. The only really reliable way to learn a new word is in context, as used by someone else in a real situation, whether spoken or written. Only then does the new word carry with it some of the human emotional charge given it by the person who used it; only then does it feel alive, real, fully human. A word learnt in a dictionary will most often feel stiff, awkward, even if its dictionary “meaning” is “correct”; other people who know the word will feel somewhat uncomfortable with its user. A prime example of this is the student paper studded with words taken straight out of a dictionary, words that the student has never seen or heard used in a real conversation or written sentence. For the teacher who knows the words thus used, the whole paper comes to seem like gibberish, because the words are used mechanically and without attention to the nuances of actual human speech or writing.

The more situational and personal associations translators have with a word or a phrase, the more complexly and flexibly they

will be able to use it themselves. This complexity and flexibility of use is a goal to strive for. The more complexly and flexibly a translator uses language, the better a translator s/he will be. The goal is to store as many vivid memories of people saying and writing things as s/he can, but to store them in linguistic habits where s/he doesn't need to be conscious of every memory but beneath her/his conscious awareness.

Cultural knowledge

Cultures, and the intercultural competence and awareness that arise out of experience of cultures, are far more complex phenomena than it may seem to the translator who needs to know how to say "mi-e dor" in English, German and so on, and the more aware the translator can become of these complexities, including power differentials between cultures and genders, the better a translator s/he will be.

Translation theorists have been cognizant of the problems attendant upon cultural knowledge and cultural difference at least since ancient Rome, and translators almost certainly knew all about those problems long before theorists articulated them.

Some Renaissance proponents of sense-for-sense translation were inclined to accuse medieval literal translators of being ignorant of cultural differences; but an impressive body of historical research on medieval translation (see Roger Ellis³³, 1996) is beginning to show conclusively that such was not the case. Medieval literalists were not ignorant of cultural or linguistic difference. Cultural knowledge and cultural difference have been a major focus of translator training and translation theory for as long as either has been in existence. The main concern has traditionally been with so-called "realia", words and phrases that are so heavily and exclusively grounded in one culture that they are almost impossible to translate into the terms – verbal or otherwise- of another. Long debates have been held over when to paraphrase, when to coin a new word by translating literally, and when to transcribe. And these "untranslatable" culture-bound words and phrases continue to fascinate translators and translation theorists. How can be defined the points where one culture stops and another

³³ Ellis, R., (1996) *The Medieval Translator*, Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols.

begins? The borders are no easier to draw than those between languages or communities.

Immersion in cultures

The professional translators continue to immerse themselves in cultures: local cultures, regional cultures, national cultures, and international cultures. They read voraciously. They learn new foreign languages and sometimes, they spend weeks, months or years in the countries where those languages are natively spoken. They nose out differences: wherever things are done a little differently, a word or phrase is pronounced differently or given a slightly unexpected twist, people walk differently, dress differently, gesture differently, the translators pay attention. Perhaps here is a cultural boundary that needs to be crossed. Why do translators want to cross it? Because it's there. Because that is what translators do, they cross boundaries.

The importance of analysis

The ability to analyze a source text linguistically, culturally, even philosophically or politically is of paramount importance to the translator. The importance of analysis goes most without saying. Wherever translation is taught, the importance of analysis is taught:

- Never assume you understand the source text perfectly.
- Never assume your understanding of the source text is detailed enough to enable you to translate it adequately.
- Always analyze for text type, genre, register, rhetorical function, etc.
- Always analyze the source text's syntax and semantics, making sure you know in detail what it is saying, what it is not saying, and what it is implying.
- Always analyze the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic relationship between the source language and the target language, so that you know what each language is capable and incapable of doing and saying, and can make all necessary adjustments.
- Always pay close attention to the translation commission (what you are asked to do, by whom, for whom, and why), and consider the special nature and needs of your target audience; if you aren't given enough information about that audience, ask; if the commissioner doesn't know, use your professional judgment to

project an audience.

These analytical principles are taught because they do not come naturally; they must be taught by experience, or by a translation teacher.

The experienced professional translators will gradually move “beyond” analysis in much of their work, precisely by internalizing or sublimating it. It will seem to professional translators as if they rarely analyze a text or cultural assumptions, because they do it so unconsciously and thus so rapidly. The analytical procedures taught in most translator training programs are not consciously used by professional translators in most of their work, because they have become second nature. And this is the desideratum of professional training: to help students first to learn the analytical procedures, then to sublimate them, make them so unconscious, so automatic, and so fast, that translation at professional speeds becomes possible.

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