

TRANSLATION PROBLEMS AND TRANSLATION DIFFICULTIES: TOOLS FOR TEACHING SPECIALIZED TRANSLATION

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1. Introduction

When training translators, our exercises concentrate on teaching students how to comprehend source texts and how to produce target texts, because, in a broad sense, translation involves two phases: comprehension of a source text and production of a target text. Most of our exercises concentrate on recognizing the semantic weight of the source-language text and enacting procedures for producing an equivalent target-language text (for general coursebooks, see Baker 1992 and Newmark 1988; for Spanish-English coursebooks see Beeby Lonsdale 1996; Hervey 1995; and López Guix 1997; and for translator trainer texts, see Gile 1995; Kussmaul 1995; Wilss 1996). We concentrate on the texts and the languages, but very seldom on the people who translate, namely the trainee translators, our students. A notable exception to this trend is Douglas Robinson's *Becoming a Translator* (1997) which concentrates on the personal growth of the translator and the translator's knowledge. However, although Robinson's excellent book does put forward many practical exercises designed to link theory to practice, the body of translator training literature thus far has neglected to propose any that clarify the distinction between translation problem and translation difficulty. I feel that such a distinction is key to training all translators in sharp and practical self-awareness. Translation problems are those points which prove a challenge for all translators in a particular language combination, while translation difficulties are rooted in the individual translator as a product of his or her educational or cultural background and experience. In this article, I would like to propose two awareness-raising exercises which bring this distinction home. While I propose these activities within the context of Spanish-English specialized technical translation, I feel that these activities could be used in all

language combinations and for all text types, since translation problems and translation difficulties are not restricted to language combination or text type.

2. Translation problems and translation difficulties

This article and the exercises proposed below make use of the distinction between translation problems and translation difficulties. Many authors seem to equate these terms in their writings, but several authors have used the distinction in very helpful ways. Peter Newmark has used the term "translation problem" more or less as a unit of translation. Newmark defines translation problem as an instance when literal translation becomes inadequate (1988: 30-31). When this happens, the translator must make a concerted effort to enact all of his or her skills in order to render the source-language sentence into an adequate target-language sentence. However, he uses "problem" and "difficulty" almost in the same breath. Christiane Nord makes a more practical, pedagogical distinction between the two, first in a short article (1987), and then in her *Text Analysis in Translation* (1991). She defines "translation problems" as those points which prove a challenge for all translators in a particular language combination, while she regards "translation difficulties" as rooted in the individual translator as they may arise from his or her educational or cultural background and experience (1991:150-160).

These concepts are useful when teaching specialized or technical translation, because they allow trainers and students to separate and discuss what is a challenge for all translators from what may or may not be a challenge for individual translators. For example, translating *informática* from Spanish into English constitutes a problem, because English offers several possible renderings depending on the context, *computer science*, *computing*, *computers*, *computer skills*, and so forth. I do not believe, however, that it would constitute a translation difficulty for anyone for educational or cultural reasons. However, translating *dirección* may constitute a difficulty for those translators who have training and a background in the humanities, if they cannot distinguish whether to translate this term as *address*, *steering*, *heading* or *location* depending on the specialized field in which it is used.

3. Translation problems: An exercise in annotation

Most translation trainers incorporate exercises that involve annotated translations into their teaching. These exercises consist of first having students translate a text and then having them annotate several problematic points. But these exercises tend to be limited pedagogically for a variety of reasons. Many teachers use annotated translations as a way of having the students exteriorize their thought protocols with the intention of either formatively assessing the education process or summatively assessing students' performance. Annotation exercises used in this way serve the teacher, but not the students. Also, by producing the translation of the same passage that they are to annotate, the task of translation and the task of annotation become intermingled; students think about the annotations when translating and think about the translation when annotating. This does not help students to reflect on their translation activity objectively and intellectually from both a linguistic perspective and a personal perspective.

The following exercise is an annotated translation with a twist. I feel that most translators have a good grasp of the problems which any particular translation involves, but they tend to deal with them instinctively. The act of translation and the act of annotation make them blur the line between comprehending the source text and producing the target text. The best way to concentrate on translation problems is to separate the act of translation from the act of annotation. The following exercise, therefore, involves annotating texts translated by others.

STEP 1: Choose an appropriate specialized text from a publication in both the source language and the target language, or, alternatively, produce a target version yourself.

Abstracts in English are often published side by side with their source texts in specialized journals; these are often the right length, and do not contain too many details for the purposes of this exercise. Below is an extract from an article on the IPv6, the new addressing protocol for the next generation of Internet growth, and a version translated by me for the purposes of this exercise:

Que aporta IPv6?

Direcciones de 128 bits. IPv6 puede direccionar 2^{128} interfaces o conjuntos de interfaces. En la práctica ese número será bastante menor, por las mismas razones que en las clases de direcciones de la IP actual. Aunque el direccionamiento final no está definido aún, se estima que puede ser algo parecido a [proveedor. organización. red. interfaz], que en cualquier caso dará direcciones suficientes para que cada individuo pueda disponer de miles de conexiones a nivel de interfaz. (Consuegra 1998: 31)

What does IPv6 have to offer?

128-bit addresses. IPv6 can address 2^{128} interfaces or groups of interfaces. But the number will actually be much smaller for the same reasons as for the current IP. Although the final addressing format remains to be defined, it will more than likely be something like [provider.organization.network.interface]. This, in any case, will provide enough addresses so that each user can access thousands of connections at the interface level. (Author's translation)

STEP 2: Have students annotate the texts and concentrate on translation problems. Reiterate to them that they should concentrate on making annotations of instances that will be problematic to all translators in this language combination. The notes should discuss what the problem is, what the available choices are, and why the translator made the choice used in the target version. Limit the number of annotations they are to produce or allow them freedom to choose as many as they see fit.

As regards the text above, for example, annotations are in order for mostly non-technical points, such as *en la práctica*, *algo parecido a*, *disponer de*. The different register, i.e. more informal, in the target version should also be noted and discussed. The only technical annotation likely would be the address in brackets. The format of an IP address requires that both the source text and the target text use one word only between the dots, in such a way that [access provider ...] would be an unacceptable translation of *proveedor* for technical reasons.

STEP 3: Discuss with the students what annotations they have made and why they considered the items they annotated to be translation problems in this language combination and for this text type.

4. Translation difficulties: An exercise in decision

The next exercise is based on a real professional situation which occurs frequently in freelance translation. Often, when a client or translation agency requires a text to be translated, they want to check first with the translator to see whether the text falls within his or her expertise. The translator will be given a sample of the text on which to base his or her decision to accept the job; this is often done over the telephone but also by fax, and increasingly it is done through e-mail. The exercise below is based on this first contact with a text to be translated, and these three delivery methods may be used in this exercise to make it either an oral or a written exercise.

STEP 1: Choose specialized texts of about 75 words in length in a variety of different technical fields in the source language only. For large groups, choose about ten, photocopy them for the whole group and choose individual students to read them out to other classmates. For small groups give each student one text and have them work in groups of three or four reading to each other. The following are two appropriate sample texts:

- a. Extract from a semi-specialized book on communications satellites:

Durante el lanzamiento se realiza el seguimiento del lanzador por teledetección y utilizando distintas estaciones terrenas que pudieran no ser suficientes para un enlace continuo, pero sí han de serlo para mantener el contacto durante los momentos importantes del vuelo. A veces se necesita utilizar telecontrol para ciertas correcciones, a pesar de que el equipo del lanzador incorpora complicados sistemas automáticos de control de la trayectoria, dirigidos por los programas de vuelo preestablecidos e incorporados a sus computadores. (García Ruiz de Angulo 1989: 20)

- b. Extract from an installation estimate for a structured cabling system:

2. PRESUPUESTO

CONCEPTO	IMPORTE
Suministro e instalación de 24 puestos de datos para ABC (Coslada)	
Opción 1 CABLE ONCE	475.030.-
Opción 2 1061 CAT & T	585.643.-

3. CONDICIONES GENERALES

GARANTIA:

Los materiales ofertados están garantizados durante un año, a partir de la fecha de conexión del sistema.

I.V.A.:

El presupuesto no incluye I. V.A,

VALIDEZ DE LA OFERTA: Hasta el 2 de Marzo de 199-

FORMA DE PAGO: Pagaré 30 días

NOTA:

No están incluidos los trabajos de albañilería y obra que fueran necesarios. (unpublished text 1993)

STEP 2: Have the students read the texts aloud to each other. This often turns into a fun exercise, because they struggle to convey the non-linguistic items present in the texts, such as the chart in the second text above. This is exactly what happens in a real world situation of this kind. In addition, this exercise helps text retention, which will hone interpreting skills, particularly those needed for successful consecutive interpreting.

STEP 3: Have them decide whether or not to accept the translation, and explain why (or why not) by discussing the translation difficulties involved. Remind them that they should be discussing these difficulties from their individual perspectives based on their cultural and educational background and experience. They should be saying things like, "I would never do this translation, because, even though I know it is about launching communication satellites, I have no idea what the text is really about. I know some things about astronomy, but this deals more with the physics and mechanical side of space flight". Or, "I think I would say yes to this translation, because, even though I would have to do some research on computer networks, it is basically a business proposal. Imagine that instead of a structured cabling system, it was an estimate for some office

furniture". The refreshing exchanges that are bound to ensue make this exercise a very good ice-breaker at the beginning of a course.

5. Conclusions

The principal pedagogical value of the above exercises lies in their consciousness-raising. Trainee translators should be helped to strengthen their source text analysis skills and their translation procedures, but they should also be taught how to objectively discuss the problems involved in the translation process as well as the difficulties each translation might involve, from a strictly personal perspective. These exercises offer opportunities for trainee translators to add self-knowledge to their knowledge of languages and translation skills, which, in future translation practice will help them guide their careers successfully. It is my opinion that ample self-knowledge is just as much of a marketable skill as linguistic knowledge.

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Abstract

Translator trainers concentrate on teaching students how to comprehend source texts and how to produce target texts, and so they concentrate on the texts and the languages rather than on the individual.

However, exercises in training translator self-awareness should also be incorporated into translator training programs. The following exercises offer opportunities for trainee translators to broaden their self-knowledge and add it to their knowledge of languages and translation skills.

The first exercise involves annotating the translation problems in texts translated by others, and the second involves deciding whether or not to accept a particular translation based on the translation difficulties a particular text presents.

Résumé

Les professeurs de traduction se soucient d'enseigner à leurs élèves la manière

dont il faut saisir les textes sources et produire des textes cibles; c'est pourquoi ils se concentrent sur les textes et les langues plutôt que sur l'individu.

Cependant, des exercices permettant au traducteur de prendre conscience de soi doivent aussi être intégrés aux programmes d'études. Les exercices suivants offrent aux futurs traducteurs l'occasion d'élargir leur connaissance de soi et d'ajouter à cette dernière celle des langues et des compétences de traduction.

Le premier exercice consiste en un relevé des problèmes de traduction dans les textes traduits par des tiers. Le second exercice porte sur le choix de savoir s'il est opportun ou non d'accepter une traduction spécifique basée sur des difficultés traductionnelles que présente un texte particulier.

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