TRANSLATING: THE CONSTRUCTIVE WAY

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Why are so many people dissatisfied with translations? Why are so many translators frustrated by their work?

For two essential reasons:

• Most translators are not really aware of what they are doing (and for whom);

• Most translators are not allowed to develop the self-confidence necessary to do their work well.

In many cases neither side - translators or users - is willing to accept, leave alone understand, that translation processes are very complex from a psycholinguistic and a sociolinguistic point of view. And rarely is it recognised by either side that a good translation is the result of a co-operative effort and a constructive attitude.

Laypersons and, alas, many translators have been deceived by illusions of symmetry which superficially seem to define the relatedness of source and target texts. Quite often metaphors like that of the navigator who successfully negotiates the narrow and dangerous straits which separates the shores of two cultures and languages are used (quite recently (1993) so in the Festschrift für Katharina Reiß, entitled TRADUCERE NAVEM).

In order to translate constructively we need to look not at the horizontal connection which seems to relate source to target texts, but rather at the vertical construction which is necessary to erect a solid foundation on which this horizontal transfer of words, thoughts and

cultural scenes becomes possible. When we look at translation, from the constructive point of view, we are not so much interested in the asphalt surface of the bridge which allows vehicles to transport goods from A to B but rather in the constructive elements of the bridge, its foundations, pillars and pylons which support the horizontal connecting road.

It takes an expert, however, to construct such a complicated supporting structure - an expert, who knows about the properties of the material he works with. Translators are rarely seen as experts of this kind by their clients and other users of translations. Often the only expertise that the public appreciates is that of knowing a foreign language well. Accordingly, the status of a translator is often linked to the language he works with: if it is Vietnamese or Swahili, people are impressed, if it is English, at least in Germany, many clients and users think that with a little time and practice they could do a translator's job themselves.

Market place

If we extend the bridge-building metaphor a little further we can compare a translator's services to those of an architect or engineer who will, of course, first consult his client in order to find out what kind of bridge for what kind of purpose he has in mind. And in order to offer his services at a competitive price he will also inform himself about the market situation in his field of expertise.

In Germany, the market for translations has become fairly complex and has many aspects. There is, however, a strong tendency to assess translators' services with a fixed stare at one's purse. Many large firms who had established pools for translation services as part of their administrative back-up services now tend to cut down on personnel in these translation departments because they are considered to be uneconomical. Management increasingly believes that you get

translations much cheaper if you hand them over to an agency rather than spend a lot of money to employ your own translators.

Accordingly, the number of translation agencies in Germany has grown considerably over the last years. Many of these agencies are not particularly interested in the formal qualifications of the translators who work for them. At least they are normally not prepared to pay higher fees for a translation by a graduate who holds a translator's diploma from one of Germany's universities.

For financial reasons, again, some corporations consider it more economical to help their engineers, technicians and computer experts to improve their (foreign) language skills (and thus make them skilled translators - see above p. 2).

Multinational corporations and institutions (particularly within the framework of the European Community) who have to deal with a considerable amount of translations are also quite eager to make use of the tools available in the field of 'computer-assisted translation' and/ or machine translation.

All of these trends can be seen within the framework of increased cost-consciousness. The aim is to cut costs and not to improve the quality of the product. Indeed, the question of quality assessment and assurance is rarely part of the discussions which take place before translation departments are dismantled, engineers are asked to become translators or translation tools are employed. If there is no qualified translator who possesses enough expert knowledge in the field of translation processes, who would be able to assess the merits and pitfalls of alternative solutions and systems?

There is, however, one trend which is more in favour of qualified translators and may provide more work for them in the future: new laws concerning the quality of the documentation which normally comes with purchased products are far more demanding as far as the clarity and coherence of these texts are concerned. 'Technical writing' has therefore become an integral part of translator training at many German university institutions, allowing qualified translators to branch out into

the fields of documentation and (mother tongue) text production (cf. Göpferich 1995).

Thus, the market for translation services has become quite complex over the last years. Although the demand for translations is growing, this does not mean that it is easy for qualified translators to market their skills for a fair price. It is not enough for them to just claim that they are better because they have done a four-year university course nor can they patiently sit back and wait until clients discover their superior skills. If they want to demonstrate that they are the experts, they must offer more than competitors who rely solely on their knowledge of a certain foreign language, i.e. they have to demonstrate translatory competence.

An essential part of translatory competence is procedural knowledge, i.e. knowing what goes on in one's brain while one is translating (and also what goes on between clients/users and translators when translation services are sought, defined and rendered). One would assume, therefore, that a translator's most valuable ally is an expert in translatology who can explain in a detailed way and in scientific language what constitutes translatory competence.

There is, indeed, no lack of publications in this field, and the volume of scholarly research has been growing steadily over the last years. This accumulated knowledge, however, is hardly ever tapped by practising translators - it circulates within the realm of academic institutions where it may or may be not applied to teaching translation courses. Very rarely, however, does it happen that clients and users of translations inform themselves about what they can reasonably expect from a translation and a translator.

This may be fair enough, because clients and users are laypersons in the field of translation, so why should they probe into the depths of research? Surely, they can leave that to the practitioner, the translator? After all, if you commission a bridge you do not feel obliged to study bridge-building first. You do assume, however, that your architect has done so.

Obviously, in the field of translation things are viewed differently - from either side. On the one hand, many users/clients are very reluctant to see themselves as laypersons in the field of translation. They feel that knowing a foreign language fairly well - as many of them do - qualifies them to not only have a say in matters of translating, but also to evaluate and criticise them.

Practising translators, on the other hand, are often very reluctant to learn more about their profession. Most of them only want to acquire skills which can be turned to immediate use. Some of them ridicule scholarly research as an academic exercise which, at its best, describes trivialities in the lofty language of linguistic jargon.

In view of the complex market situation, as described above, it seems grotesque that so many translators scorn the helping hand offered to them by translatologists. A raised awareness of what translators really are doing would put them in a position:

• to adapt to different conditions in various segments of the market;

• to explain to their clients and/or users what they can reasonably expect from a quality translation;

• to understand the illusions laypersons necessarily have with regard to translations;

• to evaluate fairly the quality of translations on the basis of valid criteria;

• to assess the quality of translation tools;

• to cooperate with machine-translation systems and to adapt them for specific purposes;

• to train, motivate and cooperate with colleagues.

Illusions of simplicity

Translating seems to be a fairly simple activity. Yet this is an illusion. We could compare it to the illusion we all experience when we see the sun 'rise' and 'set'. Although for many generations mankind

has been convinced that, quite obviously, the sun must be moving around the earth, we now know better.

It also seems to be obvious that source and target texts are held together by a relation of symmetry - one being a replica of the other in another language. But we know better, or at least translatologists do. Ever since Hans J. Vermeer published his "skopos-theory" of functional translation (Reiß-Vermeer 1984), it has become widely accepted that translated target texts are just as much tied to their users' expectations and anticipations as to the 'original' source text. In other words: they are texts in their own right and whether they serve their users' legitimate and defined needs is the most important criterion when assessing their quality.

To entertain illusions of simplicity and symmetry has disastrous consequences. They are the basis of many popular and erroneous assumptions which become obstacles for all those practitioners who would like to translate the constructive way, e.g.:

- Translators objectively de- and encode information;
- translating is the application of linguistic skills;
- translation quality can be assessed by anyone who 'knows the language'.

A further consequence of such illusions are rules and principles for translators of this kind:

- One should translate as closely to the original as possible;
- one should translate the exact meaning of each word;
- one should guarantee the correctness of one's translation by looking words up in the dictionary;
- it is inevitable for translations to be inferior to originals;
- it is normal for a translation to sometimes sound a bit awkward;
- translators should be careful not to distort their comprehension of the source text by bringing in personal ideas and subjective views.

Trust and responsibility

The main obstacle to constructive translation is that comprehension processes are necessarily subjective. The fact that this is so has been accepted in the relevant literature for some fifteen years (cf. Hönig/ Kußmaul 1982) and has been confirmed over and over again by psycholinguistic research and empirical investigations (cf. Kiraly 1995).

Yet neither clients/users nor translators themselves are usually prepared to act accordingly. This becomes apparent when translations are evaluated and proof of their „correctness" is demanded. There is no way any part of a translation can be proved to be „correct" in the sense that it is a faithful replica of the original. All a translation can achieve - and a translator should aim for - is to satisfy the (defined) needs of clients and/or users.

In many cases, however, clients exercise considerable pressure on translators to provide quasi-scientific proof that their translation is correct. The result is very often a translated text which is produced "defensively", the translator's strategy being: "I know this does not sound particularly good but I challenge you to prove that it is not correct".

Again, we are coming back to the central issues of self-awareness and self-confidence. Clearly, clients who put translators under this kind of pressure stifle their self-confidence. How can any translator trust his associations and linguistic reflexes if he knows that his client does not trust him? He/she will therefore translate 'defensively', producing a text which neither reads nor sounds like an original text. Paradoxically, this is what some clients want (but not the eventual users!), because they deeply distrust any translation which, in their eyes and ears, sounds too good to be 'only' a translation.

Talking to some clients one gets the impression that they find it easier to accept a bad translation than a self-confident translator. This kind of destructive attitude, based on distrust, relegates translators to the status of a walking dictionary without any true translatory competence. Constructive translation is only possible if clients implicitly

trust translators and if translators feel responsible for the way their texts are used.

But translators can demand this kind of trust only if they themselves act responsibly. Clients will only accept that the comprehension of a text is necessarily subjective if they are convinced that translators act in their - and the users' - defined interests. Clients must feel that by trusting translators they do not become the victims of their whims and fancies.

In other words: if translators are not subjected to the impossible task of proving the 'correctness' of their work, they consequently have to accept that they are held responsible for the effect their translations have. It is therefore their duty to find out what the possible and actual uses of their translations are and to construct them accordingly.
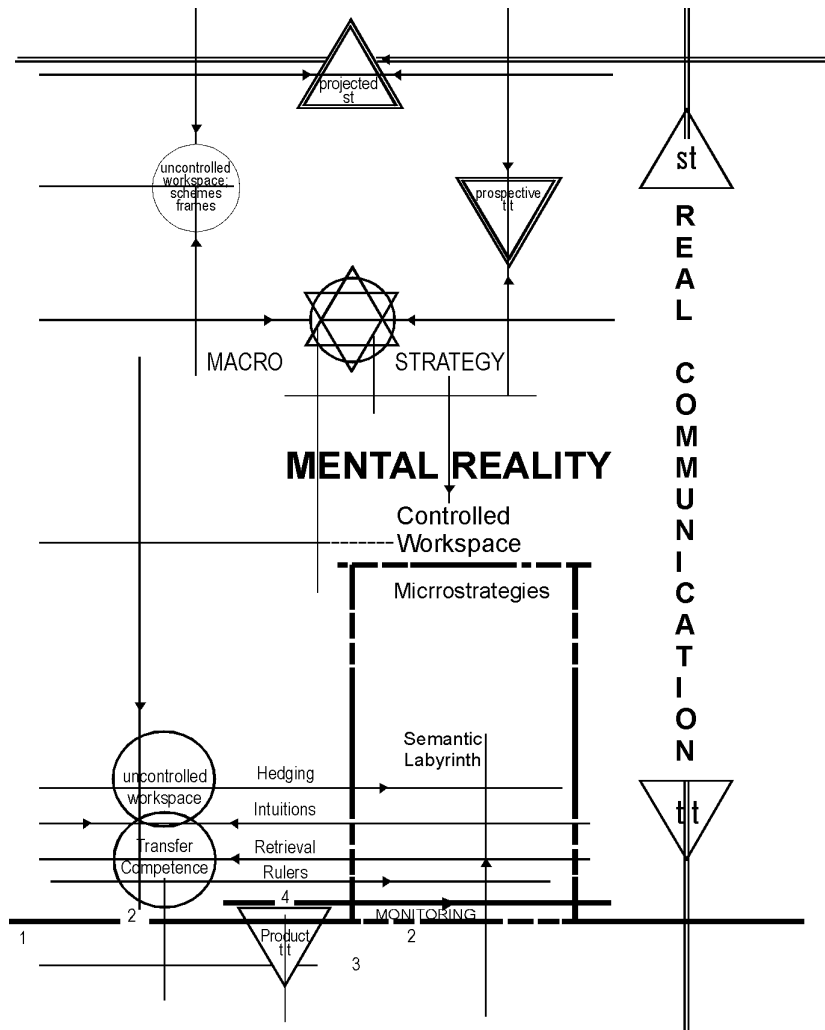
In constructive translation, dictionaries will be neither used as a sword to attack the translator with, nor as a shield, behind which translators take refuge.

A way out of the labyrinth

A typical mental experience of translators is that of being lost in a labyrinth of conscious analysis and fleeting associations, not knowing where to turn and losing precious time in the process.

The only chance not to lose your way in the semantic labyrinth is to have a bird's-eye view of its layout before you enter it. In other words: translators must have an idea of what goes on in their minds when they are translating. FIG.1. sketches an idealised model of translation processes.

projected
st

uncontrolled
workspace:
schemes
frames

prospective
t/t

st

MACRO   STRATEGY

R
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C
A
T
I
O
N

MENTAL REALITY

Controlled
Workspace

Micrrostrategies

Semantic
Labyrinth

uncontrolled
workspace   Hedging

Intuitions

Transfer   Retrieval
Competence   Rulers

t/t

4

2   MONITORING   2

1   Product   3
               t/t

There is not enough scope within the framework of a short contribution to explain every detail of FIG.1., I shall concentrate on its main aspects (more details are provided in Hönig 1995 and 1996).

Translators must adopt a macrostrategic approach. A macrostrategy is made up of three components: The projected source text (st), the prospective target text (tt) and the uncontrolled work space. By adopting a macrostrategic approach, translators define the framework within which they are going to work. Psychologically, its main purpose is to reflect one's translatory tasks before giving reign to all the linguistic reflexes and world-knowledge associations which are necessary in order to comprehend and translate a text within a feasible time-span. The problem with associations and reflexes is not that they are absolutely necessary for translatory tasks, but that they are, by their very nature, uncoordinated, open-ended and subjective. They tend to lure translators into the labyrinth.

To formulate a macrostrategy, it is useful to find the answers to the following questions:

• Who is going to use my translation and for what purpose? Some of the data can be elicited from the medium of publication and from the text type, but in some cases it will be necessary to get in touch with one's client in order to get a clearer view of the prospective tt.

• What are the themes of the source text? What do I know about them and where from? What research do I have to do in order to compensate for my knowledge deficits and to understand the text more 'objectively'?

In many cases the answers to these questions will convince the translator that—given his/her knowledge deficits—it would not be very economical to fill such vast voids. Cost-benefit analyses of this kind may well result in a decision not to take on the task—a sign of translatory competence—whereas to take on any task as long as one 'knows the language' is surely a sign of not being unaware of one's uncontrolled workspace and therefore of translatory incompetence. On the basis of the answers to the previous questions - how is the source

text structured? What are the relations between its author, its themes and the medium of publication (cf. Hönig 1987 on translation-relevant textual analysis)? Such an approach will afford the translator the distance necessary to view the projected st more clearly and with professional detachment.

A macrostrategic approach is the basis for constructive translating. It provides the plan for professional construction-work. It also enables translators to assess whether their linguistic and knowledge bases have to be widened for this particular task, what tools and research methods they can use and whether, on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis, such efforts are worth their while (and their clients' money).

A macrostrategic approach also creates a framework for objective quality assessment. Evaluation (as pointed out above, p. 3) is not only necessary in order to assess the quality of work of other translators, but also when translators use machine translation systems. A professional translator should not only be able to cooperate with such systems and do the mandatory post- (and/or pre-) editing tasks, but he/she must also be able to do feasibility studies on the basis of which clients and users get a clear idea of how the use of such systems relates to the quality of the work produced.

Teaching translation constructively

The most pragmatic argument in favour of a university diploma course for professional translators is that the status of a university graduate is essential for translators to be accepted as competent partners in a constructive dialogue between them and their clients.

This does not mean, however, that any university course will do. Academic institutions training translators have to provide evidence that the aim of their courses is not just (foreign) language acquisition, but to teach genuine translatory competence. This means that courses must be firmly based - as, indeed, all university courses should be - on

the considerable procedural and methodological knowledge which has been accumulated over the last years in translatological literature.

This does not mean, of course, that language acquisition courses should be banned altogether. They are useful as long as there is a definite demarcation line between courses teaching language skills and those imparting translatory competence. Text production (see above, p. 3) in one's mother tongue, however, should be an essential part of practical language work. How can we expect anybody to produce a certain type of text on the basis of a source text if he/she has never been able to produce that text type in their mother tongue?

It is sometimes claimed by practising amateur translators and laypersons commissioning and/or using translations that courses in translatology lead straight into the ivory tower and are of no practical use. The opposite is true: translating has always been - and is increasingly - a very complex, if not complicated, task and only those professionals who inherently understand this complexity will be able to handle it.

In response to that facile argument it must also be mentioned that good translators are the worst enemies of mediocre and bad ones. As it is in the interest of the latter group to enhance the layperson's prejudice against proper and research-based teaching of translation courses, it must be accepted by qualified, professional translators (and students wishing to become one) - that nobody is a born translator and experts - as in any other field - have to acquire their competence and skills.

And there is yet another dimension to the central issue of self-confidence. Over the last twenty years translatology has established itself as an academic discipline in its own right. Having gained their independence from theoretical and applied linguistics and from philology, translation scholars can afford to return to practical translation work. Indeed, they should, because scholarly investigations have so far had very little impact on the work of translators as it is practised every day. Nor has it been able to change much in the way translations and translators' work is being perceived by the public at large.

Constructive translating will only be possible, however, if both sides are aware of the parts they have to play. Academic institutions training professional translators must not shrink from their responsibility to also educate users of translations - even if this does mean leaving the ivory tower.

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