The Pragmatics of Translator Training in the 21ˢᵗ Century

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ABSTRACT

Translation Studies and the teaching of translation have been well established for a long time. Recently, however, university departments training future translators have become aware of the fact that academia, and what almost obsessively has been referred to as 'the real world', need to be brought together far more closely than has been the case until a recent past. This has entailed the development of new and more flexible syllabuses. For example, establishing close links with professional translators. Also employing new teaching techniques that may clarify the cognitive processes that take place while a source text is converted into a target one. A concomitant result of the desire to create fully qualified translators has also been a greater awareness that employability is the ultimate aim of the training that takes place in the classroom.

1. Introduction

One still remembers, with a certain amount of nostalgia, the days when learning a foreign language had, as a main component, what in Spain was known as *traducción directa* and *traducción inversa* and in France *version* and *thème*. Translation from and into the foreign language was one of the two components of what has come to be known, rather derisively, as the grammar-translation method of learning languages. But, while it was not surprising that translation practice should have been given such an important role, since it formed part of an honourable tradition that went back to classical antiquity, things soon started to change. At first, it was translation into the foreign language that became discredited as being artificial, if not impossible, in a way that translating into the mother tongue was not. At the same time, the 'model' translation that students were usually given after having had their attempt corrected and criticized was also attacked as unrealistic because it created the misleading impression that it was the only possible translation instead of obviously just one possible version.

In any case, by this time the whole attitude to translation had started to change. The debate started in respect of whether translation was an art or a science, whether there was such a thing as a science of translation, how possible translation was, was it just a branch of linguistics, until most translation specialists seemed to accept that translation was an interdisciplinary undertaking, with 'Translation Studies' as the most appropriate name. Those were the days when names that have become familiar to everybody interested in translation can be said to have started the flood of books and articles that have resulted in the present formidable bibliography of Translation Studies. This is not the place to supply a full list of translation scholars, but names such as Catford (1965), Nida (1969) or, a little later, Venuti (1995), are among the best known – and, it has to be added, among the most readable – of translation specialists. From our perspective, they are of historical interest: Catford because of his strictly linguistic approach; Nida because of his translating principle of 'dynamic equivalence'; and Venuti because of his distinction between 'domestication' or 'foreignization' as translation techniques.

The transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century has brought a number of new approaches to the whole field of translation. If the precise – should one say 'the scientific'? – meaning of 'translation' still proves elusive, it is clear that academics involved in the practical teaching of postgraduate courses in

translation have become more aware both of the actual teaching requirements and – because of them – of the need to eliminate any barriers between the training given to students while they follow their master's course and what has come to be almost obsessively described as 'the real world', meaning by that the requirements of a professional translator. This awareness has resulted in broader syllabuses which cover not only the traditional topics taught in this type of training (legal, economic, medical) but incorporate a more general type of background studies. Susan Bassnett (2007) has commented on the disappearance of the split between linguistic aspects and literary ones, plus the fact that this 'cultural turn' in Translation Studies goes hand in hand with a cultural turn in a much broader context:

> The cultural turn in translation studies reflects the cultural turn in other disciplines, which is an inevitable result of the need for greater intercultural awareness in the world today. It is greatly to be welcomed, for it offers the best chance we have to understand more about the complexities of textual transfer, about what happens to texts as they move into new contexts and the rapidly changing patterns of cultural interaction in the world we inhabit. p. 23)

At the same time, the gap between the linguistic knowledge students acquire at university and the requirements of the 'real world' has resulted in the realization that there is an urgent need for professional translators to become involved in the training of future practitioners, so that *academic* translation really becomes *professional* translation (Smith, 2007). In the lines that follow, I shall try to summarize the changes taking place in translation training programmes and the ultimate aim of these changes.

2. Some Translation Prerequisites

It is obvious that the first prerequisite for embarking on a translator-training course is a profound knowledge of both the language and the culture of the language(s) involved – and that means the foreign language(s) *and* the mother tongue. (In this respect, it is appropriate to remember the well-known fact that a high number of native British graduates who apply for a translating job in one of the translating or interpreting sections of the EU fail in their application, not because their knowledge of the foreign language(s) is deficient, but because their English is not good enough.) However, it is interesting to note that the present interest in adapting syllabuses to the real needs of the

professional world has resulted in the fact that few writers specifically mention this prerequisite, in a noticeable contrast to the insistence found in previous translation specialists. Henri Van Hoof, for example, back in 1962, writing in the context of interpreting, stated that before starting his/her practical training, the student 'doit avoir acquis une maitrise parfaite, un contrôle presque inconscient des langues dans lesquelles il désire travailler'('must have acquired a perfect command, and almost unconscious control of the languages in which he/she wishes to work', p. 57). In its fundamentals, this is clearly applicable not only to trainee interpreters, but also to trainee translators. On the cultural side, Edmond Cary (1986) insisted that the linguistic context was simply the 'raw material' of a text: 'c'est le context, bien plus complexe, des rapports entre deux cultures, deux mondes de pensée et de sensibilité qui caractérise vraiment la traduction' ('it is the context, rather more complex, of the relationship between two cultures, two worlds of thought and sensibility that truly characterize translation', p. 35). In this respect, it is also significant that in many universities translation is still taught basically 'as a way of improving students' linguistic proficiency', as shown by the answers of 19 (out of 21) institutions who took part in a survey questionnaire (see Penelope Sewell, in Penelope Sewell and Ian Higgins, 1996, p. 135-59).

While students' proficiency in their foreign language(s) seems to be taken for granted when discussing present and future trends, the eternal query 'what is involved in translation?', and the relationship between theory and practice are still debatable topics not easily brought to any satisfactory conclusion (Boase-Beier, 2011, p. 159-63). Also, on a more traditional side, the translator is still seen as a creator, an author, although with less rights and possibly more problems than the original writer (Bravo Utrera, 2004, p. 27).

The present interest in Translation Studies in the description of translation reality, in what professional translators really do – probably helped by the new 'minority languages' in the EU – has helped to bring up again the question of whether one should translate out of one's mother tongue (L1). Initially, the consensus has always been that a professional translator may well translate from a number of foreign languages (each of them, L2), but always into his/her L1; otherwise, sooner or later

the translator will end up writing something in the target text that, for whatever reason, is not acceptable to native speakers of the source language. Professional linguists have always been perfectly clear about this, and the great Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, back in 1904, had already warned of the dangers of using a language other than one's own: 'Sentences constructed by non-natives are apt to be of the kind that would never occur to a native, even if it may be difficult enough to find positive "mistakes" in them' (1904, p.18).

On the other hand, it is clear that professional translators do sometimes translate from L1 to L2; in some cases, it is even expected of them, as happens in West Germany, where the translation market expects translators to translate both ways (Kiraly, 1995, p. 17-18). In respect of translator training, this begs a number of questions because, as Kiraly himself puts it:

It is of vital importance to the field of translator training to ask whether professional translators can realistically be expected to translate adequately into a foreign language; whether the skills involved in both directions are the same; and whether the skills involved in this type of translation activity can be trained in the same way as skills involving translation into one's mother tongue. (*ibid.*).

To this could be added that the basic skill will be the same in both directions, but that the prerequisite of having a profound knowledge of L2 will inevitably become a more delicate issue if it comes to having to write in it. Jespersen's words just quoted come to mind.

3. The Update of Teaching Syllabuses

The search for new syllabuses and new teaching methods that really prepare students for the 'real world' of professional translation has led to a number of initiatives which include the participation of professional translators in the teaching process and the development of assessment techniques which provide a satisfactory evaluation of translated texts. Both aspects have been taken into consideration at the University of Lille 3 by means of the creation of a rating scale to evaluate translation while seeking 'to bring together criteria traditionally applied in the context of university translation courses and those criteria widely considered pertinent by translation professionals when they seek to recruit reliable, high-performance translators' (Delizée, 2011, in Ilse Depraetere (ed.), p. 20).

A similar, perhaps more ambitious, approach to updating present syllabuses is mentioned by Mary Snell-Hornby in her description of the translating course at the Institute of Translation and Interpreting in Vienna and the planning for a future curriculum. The key in future programmes is flexibility, which basically means a modular approach. The hope is to create a translator of the future who will be a 'multicultural expert' (Snell-Hornby, 1992, in Cay Dollerup and Anne Loddegaard, p. 22).

A key concept in Higher Education which must not be forgotten is now employability, which 'aims at giving people access to the skills they need to gain and retain a fulfilling job or transfer to a new, better, job' (see Chouc and Calvo, 2010). In their paper, the authors describe how employability can be embedded in the translation and interpreting syllabuses of a British and a Spanish university: Heriot-Watt University, in Edinburgh, and Universidad Pablo de Olavide, in Seville, and how it can be helped by means of career fairs, websites and links with professionals – meaning bringing professional translators to the university. Ultimately, the aim is to build 'bridges between academia and the work-place'.

Among the enthusiasm for new syllabuses and techniques, a study that somehow puts a damper on the new techniques has been carried out by Stuart Campbell and Sandra Hale, in which they describe the assessment system in a number of institutions across the world and criticize the lack of uniformity in respect of length of texts translated, time allowed or even assessment scales (Campbell and Hale, 2003, in Gunilla Anderman and Margaret Rodgers (eds.), p. 208-11).

One final aspect that must be mentioned in respect of bringing professional translators into contact with translation trainees is the use of the so-called 'think-aloud protocols', a technique brought into the field of translation from psychology and the social sciences. Because of its importance in the cognitive process, I shall discuss it in the final section of this article.

4. Think –Aloud Protocols as a Teaching Tool

Specialists in Translation Studies have always tried to establish very clearly the difference between translation as *product* and translation as *process*. The real difficulty lies in the fact that translation as product, i.e. the translated or finished target
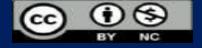
text, is there for us, in black and white, ready to be compared with the source text so that we can decide how good or how bad the translator has been, while the really interesting aspect would be to know why and how the translator has reached his/her final decision. We all know that decision-making is an intrinsic part of translation, but why has a translator taken a specific decision in a specific case? Has it been an easy decision, perhaps just an automatic one, or has it been a difficult, even an agonizing decision?

To try and discover what goes through a translator's mind in the process of turning an ST into a TT, and to make use of it as a practical help in the training of future translators, tutors in academic circles have relatively recently resorted to establishing sessions of 'think-aloud protocols' (TAP) in which a professional translator is asked to translate a text, saying aloud, as he/she goes on, everything that crosses his/her mind in the process of reaching a final decision in respect of the translation of a word, phrase or full sentence. The listeners may be allowed to ask questions, although usually the translator is left in peace, his/her performance being recorded so that there can be discussion of specific points at the end of the session. Full details of the translations provided by the eighteen subjects who participated in a TAP experiment are given in Kiraly (*op. cit.*, chapters 5 & 6 and a long Appendix, pp. 116-63, with individual performances and evaluation).

Although TAP sessions tend to be considered useful, at least in a practical context, not everybody thinks that they are the real answer to the question of translation as a process. For one thing, it is not exactly the same to think aloud in public and to do it in one's privacy – assuming that the translator who has been used as a guinea-pig does think aloud when working alone. Also, whether in public or in private, a TAP, according to some scholars, does not necessarily express everything that goes on in the interpreter's mind. It is well known that thought is much quicker than speech; because of this, it may well be that thoughts have gone through the interpreter's subconscious that do not come out in an express way.

There are also the practicalities of making sure that the data collected by means of TAPs have been obtained under very rigorous experimental conditions, and that there exists real standardization in the assessment of the results. In a comprehensive article, Silvia Bernardini (2001) has discussed the problems of the 'somewhat rudimentary stages' in which TAP analysis still finds itself:

> TAP studies are very labour-intensive, requiring experimenters, once they have designed the experiment and carried it out, to transcribe and code the transcripts appropriately before they can proceed with the analysis.

> This intermediate phase is time-consuming and does not appear at first to be particularly rewarding. For this reason, there seems to be a tendency for researchers to transcribe quickly, and then proceed swiftly to a coding of the most obvious features relevant to their hypotheses. This is an understandable but unfortunate practice. (p. 256)

Whatever ones' view in respect of the reliability of TAPs, there is no doubt that they are a useful contribution to students' awareness of what is implied in the act of translation. I myself have often used it in class – calling it 'slow-motion translation' – and the results have always been positive. Elsewhere I have given a full example of 'Translation as Process and Translation as Decision-making', where I tried to deal exhaustively with each possible rendering, only to conclude that, even if I put aside the finished product for a couple of days and then found that I could not improve it in any way, it would only be 'one' possible version (Sánchez, 2009, p. 233-44). And, incidentally, this is also a good reminder that the finished text will ultimately be judged applying aesthetic, not scientific standards.

5. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the present century the search for new syllabuses and a new teaching methodology has been a marked characteristic of university departments teaching masters degrees in translation. What one might almost call enthusiasm for ensuring that what takes place in the classroom is a proper reflection of the 'real world' has resulted in the development of things such as wider modular curricula, bringing professional translators to the university, and attempting to have an accurate understanding of translation as process by means of adopting techniques such as the so-called 'think-aloud protocols'. This is not surprising, considering that the desire to create properly qualified professionals has gone hand in hand with the attempt to ensure employability for those who successfully finish their training. Employability is indeed a key word because, as Chouc and

Calvo have put it, '[t]he concept shapes the social role and position of universities in a globalised, frantic word' (*op. cit.*, p.71).

At European level, the training of future graduates was extensively treated in a series of recommendations for universities found in a study published by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission in 2005. The recommendations were the obvious ones, and can be summarized into two aspects: improvement of syllabuses and ensuring a period of work experience away from the university.

The immediate future, then, seems exciting when we consider what has become a new outlook for the translating profession. Will the professional translator of tomorrow, as we have seen it mentioned by Mary Snell-Hornby, be just a language specialist or a 'multicultural expert'? Will the technological and scientific resources at present available develop more sophisticated tools to analyse, for example, the cognitive processes that we now try to discover by means of TAP experiments? The branch of Applied Translation Studies that incorporates the teaching and learning taking place in university departments that train future translators has a brilliant future if 'employability' really means that there has been full integration of classroom activity with the 'real world' by the time students leave university and join a world already familiar to them.

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