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Importance of Linguistics in the Development of Translation Competence

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Abstract

The current debate in translation pedagogy seems to relegate the importance of linguistics to a secondary position. The objective of this article is to argue that descriptive and contrastive linguistics should constitute a core component in translator-training programs. For one thing, translators are language professionals and should be equipped with the required tools as well as metalanguage (language used to make statements about language) to analyze, understand and evaluate source and target texts in the translation process. The development of cultural, technical and professional dimensions of translation competence, which constitute the focus of translation research in recent years, remains inadequate unless it is supported by sound training in linguistics relevant to the tasks professional translators grapple with while translating texts. Besides translation, translators are required to edit and revise translated texts, hence the significance of equipping them with the linguistic tools and metalanguage that would enable them to evaluate translation assignments and draft the relevant reports relating to quality assurance.

***Key words*:** metalanguage, translation competence, syntax, morphology, pragmatics

Introduction

In recent years the focus in translator-training seems to be laid on various aspects playing down the role of linguistics in the development of translation competence. The trend in translation pedagogy has increasingly shifted to professionally oriented practice and the bulk of translation research that has been conducted relates to topics such as the acquisition of translator competence, creativity development, training quality assessment, translation universals, interdisciplinary cooperation, curriculum design, computer tools skills, and training the trainer (Kelly and Way, 2007). Nord (1991), for instance, claimed that training should focus more on professional realism. Kiraly (2000) proposed a social constructivist theory in reaction to the transmissionist teacher-centered approach. Such moves indicate that the focus has gradually shifted to the cultural, professional and technological dimensions rather than the linguistic dimension, which is quite often relegated to a secondary position (Al-Qinai, 2011). The objective of this paper is to show the importance of linguistics in the development of translation competence. The thesis of this paper is that descriptive linguistics (including contrastive linguistics) should be a kernel component in translator training, and more research should be conducted to integrate its teaching methods in translation pegagogy, for the reason outlined in this article.

Pym (2003) refers to the capacity to translate as a multicomponent competence, involving *linguistic*, cultural, technological and professional skills conducive to the objective of reaching the desired translation competence. Kussmaul (1995) believes that the translation business to a large extent draws on psycholinguistics, text linguistics, speech act theory, text typology and functional sentence perspective. Following these positions, it is argued in this paper that linguistics should be granted the place it deserves in the curricula of translation training programs.

In this article I will focus on the linguistic aspect of the competence to be developed in translator-trainees. For one thing, I taught the course of Linguistics for Translation on the Professional Translation Program (LEA-Translation) at the School of Humanities in Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, as well as the Translation Institute in Rabat, for five years (2005-2011). I realized that the importance of this skill for translator-trainees should not be masked by the trend advocated by many scholars, relegating this component to a secondary position. The structure of this paper can be seen along the following lines. Section 1 shows the importance of morphology and syntax to translator-trainees. Section 2 outlines the significant aspects of pragmatics and discourse analysis for the development of translation competence. Section 3 tackles the vital role of metalanguage to the translator in the evaluation of translated texts. It is a thesis of this paper that descriptive and contrastive linguistic studies involves comparing and contrasting source and target languages, so as to understand the structural variation that the translated text undergoes in the translation process at the grammatical, lexical and syntactic levels. Hence, linguistics seems to empower translation trainees to develop the essential analytical techniques and skills to evaluate translated texts and gain insights into the nature of translation as a cross-linguistic activity constrained by both the source and target language systems.

Evidence for the relevance of linguistics in translation comes from my own experience of teaching the course of Linguistics for Translation to trainees on the Professional Bachelor Program of Translation at the University. The conclusions I have come to indicate that linguistics, which is ignored in many translator training programs and granted a secondary importance in applied translation research, should constitute a kernel component in translator training programs. For one thing, translating involves both transferring the message in an

appropriate style and hence requires revision. If the trainee cannot measure the content of the target text, there is no way they can improve it. Linguistics provides the tools (principles of syntax, pragmatics and stylistics) to measure and improve the translated text. The choices they make in translating can only be explained and defended through in linguistics terms.

A good example of the relevance of linguistics to translating comes from subtitling. In this translation discipline the translator (subtitler) faces serious constraints of time and space. For example, she/he should not place more than 37 letters in a single line, and the synchronization of the written material (translation) with the speech in, say, a film, should be accurate and coherent with the visual material on the screen. Therefore, every single move of the translator (subtitler) should be explained and defended using the terms of linguistics, including even phonology and phonetics!

A remarkable outcome of the course of Linguistics for Translation that I have been teaching is that Semester 6 students develop the capacity not only to explain their choices in the translation process, but to write commentaries (using the tools of comparative and descriptive linguistics) on translated texts. This would contribute to the development of their translation competence as well as self-confidence, both much needed in this discipline.

Syntax and morphology

The grammatical aspect of language involves two major levels, namely morphology and syntax. Morphology concerns itself with the structure of individual words, the way in which their form varies to express specific contrasts in the grammatical system. (number, gender, tense, aspect ….). Syntax, on the other hand, concerns the grammatical structure of groups of words (clauses and sentences) as well as the linear concatenation of word classes (noun, verb, adverb, adjective etc.). It is undeniable that the syntactic structure imposes restrictions on the way messages can be organized. Hence it is crucial for translation trainees to be provided with a good introduction to descriptive linguistics, partly to be aware of this fact, and partly to develop the capacity to express themselves as to the issues of translation triggered by the issues related to these levels of linguistic analysis. In the absence of explicit knowledge of language in terms of syntax and morphology, translation skill development of trainees would be rather limited, since they would translate and evaluate translated texts rather intuitively. In translation criticism, however, well-informed decisions are needed to produce and evaluate translated texts.

Baker (1992 & 2009) considers translation equivalence at the word level as the first element to be taken into consideration by the translator. In fact, when translators start analyzing the source text (ST), they look at the words as single units in order to find a direct 'equivalent' term in the target language (TL). The point to underscore here is that translator-trainees should not only be aware of this linguistic dimension, but should also master the language that would enable them to make statement about it, namely metalanguage. This can only be provided through a sound training in linguistics, particularly in morphology, syntax and pragmatics.

Options in language can be expressed grammatically or lexically. Choices made from closed systems (singular/dual/plural, pronouns, tense, aspect) are grammatical, while those drawn from open-ended sets are lexical (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs). Grammatical choices can be expressed morphologically or syntactically, by changing the order of words in a sentence. With regard to translation, grammatical choices are obligatory, while lexical choices are optional, depending on the rhetorical structures of the source and target languages.

Comparing and contrasting grammatical categories across languages enables trainees to detect both lexical and grammatical gaps in the languages they work on. For example, while

number is grammatical in English, expressed by an inflectional morpheme (+s), it is lexical in Japanese. Perhaps this is due to the fact that languages differ in the way they express various aspects of experience, as they attach a different degree of importance to such aspects.

In the process of translation, these differences between SL and TL often involve changes in the information content. When the SL has a grammatical category that the TL lacks, this change can take the form of adding information to the target text. On the other hand, if the target language lacks a category, the change can take the form of omission, depending on the rhetorical structure of the target language. At any rate, translation trainees need both the knowledge and tools to analyze language and the metalanguage to evaluate the translation based on such analysis, with a view to developing the experience enjoyed by professional translators (Taylor, 2006).

Syntactic structure analysis is also a valuable tool in producing adequate translated passages. The numerous studies that have been conducted on text analysis have interesting messages for translator trainees. For example, Hatch (1992) claims that in translation we should first try to reconstruct the macro-structure and rhetorical structure of the source text in the target language and then look for the appropriate words and structures; this is a procedure that skillful translators perform in the process of translation consciously or unconsciously (Taylor, 2006). A good example of the relevance of syntax in translation comes from ambiguity. Consider the funny translations below:

- We now have this shirt on sale for men with six different necks.
- You are welcome to visit the cemetery where famous Russian composers, artists and writers are buried every day except Thursday.[1]

These mishaps are clearly due to the lack of syntactic knowledge, related to how post-modification works in English, and how to move about syntactic units in the sentence to avoid ambiguity, which may lead to funny outcomes and communication breakdown.

It emerges from this short exposition that an adequate knowledge of morphology (number, gender, aspect, tense, voice …) and syntax (constituency, movement, modification ….) is essential for the translator-trainee, not only to find the appropriate equivalent in the target language, but to master the relevant metalanguage required in the evaluation process of translated material.

Discourse and pragmatics

Discourse analysis draws on a variety of disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, pragmatics, rhetoric, and sociology, to study language use. Discourse is a complex of social, psychological, and linguistic phenomena subject both to the rules of grammar, which all speakers of a language know implicitly, and to the general principles of discourse coherence, interpretation, and organization, which speakers of a language also master. A large body of academic research has developed which examines how writers construct and how readers interpret discourse. Within discourse analysis research, attention is typically focused on texts, both oral and written, and on the roles and strategies of the speakers (writers) and the hearers (readers) who participate in that text. As long as translators are supposed to be good communicators (i.e. good readers and good writers), they should receive the appropriate training

to analyze ST from a pragmatic point of view, and to master the metalanguage needed to evaluate translated passages from such perspective.

A stretch of language (text) is not just a concatenation of sentences, but rather it exhibits properties which reflect its organization, coherence, rhetorical force, thematic focus, etc. In written discourse, the writer constructs the text and provides it with a formal and coherent structure, often through the use of various linguistic, stylistic and rhetorical devices. Though readers draw on their own experience to understand a text, they are invited to come up with an interpretation based on the elements of such text. A significant aspect of text engineering is that the author guides the reader via the use of various linguistic strategies, for the reader to understand the meaning of the text and its message.

The discourse interpretation strategies that speakers and hearers (writers and readers) employ to make sense of a text include principles of pragmatics (the study of language use from the perspective of social, conversational, and psychological principles), discourse coherence and cohesion (the devices used to order parts of a text, establish causal links, maintain topic continuity and determine relations among discourse entities), lexical choice (the types of words that a writer uses can activate particular presuppositions, reveal speaker's attitudes and maintain topic coherence), information engineering (the ways in which the writer organizes propositional content into segments, including the devices used to signal given vs. new information, foregrounding vs. backgrounding, etc.), syntactic structure, (the ways in which clauses and phrases are structured and their contribution to semantic interpretation, as well as rhetorical organization (the types of discourse strategies used to advance a position, build an argument, refute an argument, etc.). For further details, see Taylor (2006).

The short exposition above indicates that the translator-trainee should be fully aware that the interpretation of any particular text draws on a variety of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors, that a meaning representation of a text usually goes beyond the literal meanings of words and sentences, that both explicit and implicit information are used, that pragmatic knowledge is exploited, that a variety of rhetorical strategies are employed, and that participants' attitudes influence interpretations. Notice that translators need to develop this knowledge in both reading to understand properly and writing to transfer the message in the appropriate style.

Kussmaul (1995, p. 83) provides a lengthy discussion about the relevance of discourse and pragmatics in translator-training. He takes it that we should "sharpen our students' awareness of pragmatic dimensions, and this will help them produce a "functioning" translation." A more specific set of reasons for the importance of discourse analysis to the translator-trainee are provided by Fraser (2003) and can be seen along the following lines. To begin with, the analysis of texts in terms of the discoursal levels (dimensions of language users such as geographical origin, social class and time; and dimensions of language use such as medium, participation, social roles...) provides the translator with additional clues for understanding a difficult source text. It helps the translator maintain the spirit of the source text in a conscious way to meet the requirements of the target text. Knowledge of how cohesion operates in the source language facilitates the comprehension task involved in the translation process. Cohesion devices guide the translator to identify the overall message that the writer purports to convey. They narrow down the range of potential interpretations of the source text. Knowledge of texture also assists the translator in accounting for the full force of the argument in the translation.

Secondly, analyzing source texts in terms of cohesion, coherence and thematic structure enables the translator to grasp the central points in a text fairly quickly. It is useful in checking the main points which constitute the core message of the source text, and grasping the structure of ideas

in the passage as intended by the writer of ST. Once the structure of ideas is clear to the translator, then they can concentrate on delivering the appropriate style in the translation.

Thirdly, discourse analysis provides the translator with the tools to make an objective judgment of texts. This benefits translators and revisers alike. To objectively assess a text, the appropriate tools and metalanguage are needed. Such tools are used to evaluate both source and target texts to the extent to which they work as vehicles for the intended message. The discourse metalanguage is used to state what is wrong or right about a (translated) text.

Fourthly, the principles of discourse analysis help translators avoid "translationese", and instead compose natural idiomatic (socially accepted) texts. The conscious use of the principles of discourse analysis assists translators in text engineering in the writing stage. For translators who use translator software programs or internet-based translation programs (machine translation), they can rely on the principles of discourse analysis such as cohesion to repair the raw texts generated by the machine.

Another piece of evidence for the relevance of discourse analysis (text-linguistics) to translation is that they are both concerned with the text, not as a set of disconnected sentences, but as a complex, structured entity. Sentence-based grammars cannot account for all aspects of language. This is because a text, as defined by Beaugrande and Dressler (1981, p. 3), is a "communicative occurrence which meets seven standards of textuality." These are cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality and intertextuality. For both understanding the source text and producing the target text, translators should work along the same lines as discourse analysts with a view to delivering a target text identical in meaning and rhetorical effect to the message intended by the composer of the source text.

Again, the development of these skills can only be achieved through exposure to linguistics, for translators to make informed choices and be able to defend them, as well as to be equipped with the appropriate language (metalanguage) to criticize other translation in the evaluation process, such as revision, editing or writing reports relating to translation project management.

Concluding remarks

Integrating a component of linguistics in the curriculum of translator training involves many benefits. For one thing, the analysis of texts in terms of morphology, syntax and discourse guarantees a better understanding of source texts and composing target texts. A corollary of this practice enables trainees to consciously upgrade their proficiency in the languages they working on. This is because they would be exposed to, and engaged in, the mechanics of language. Secondly, it would equip trainees with the necessary metalanguage to criticize their own texts and those of others. Translators not only translate, but they perform revision and editing tasks, and they have to write reports about the quality of translated passages. In the absence of the metalanguage provided by linguistics, they would be unable to express their views appropriately in this connection. Their judgments should be expressed in linguistic terms, hence the significance of a component of linguistics in the curriculum of translator training. The current debate on the cultural, professional and technical aspects of translation competence should not hide this fact, giving the impression that it is less important.

Conversely, the position put forward here is not intended to claim that linguistic training should be granted priority over the cultural, technical and professional dimensions. Nor do we claim that translation training should be based exclusively on linguistic skills. The point is that the current debate in translation pedagogy should not play down the importance of linguistics

and its relevance to the development of translation competence. The translator is a language professional after all.

More empirical research should be conducted to measure more accurately the contribution of linguistics to the development of translation competence. More importantly, empirical research should be conducted in applied translation studies to work out ways to best integrate the relevant insights in translation pedagogy.

Notes

[1] http://www.exceptionalenglish.com/Samples_miscellaneous.php? (accessed on 12/4/2013)

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