



The church of the old monastery of 'Løgumkloster' (c. 1300), Denmark

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SYSTEMATIC FEEDBACK IN TRANSLATION TEACHING

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Translation classes and foreign language teaching

This article presents some methods and ways for systematically tackling a problem in translation teaching which is usually disregarded in genteel translation study society, namely the existence of a large interface, an overlapping area, between foreign language learning and translation work. As noted by Gideon Toury 'translation abounds in manifestations of interlanguage' (1979: 224). It is therefore no surprise that teachers are confronted with large numbers of foreign language errors in translation classes, notably in the beginning. If the existence of this overlapping is openly acknowledged, it follows that translation classes must strive to minimise this interface between foreign language teaching and translation, and to shorten it, in order to focus on translation as such. To be true, the specific

problems are not identical between all - or for that matter any two - language pairs, but the general problem is there.

The Danish background

The feedback system has been developed for Danish university students of English in their first three years at University.

Student backgrounds and the role of translation

Students of English have chosen English of their own volition. Translation is, however, mandatory, which means that classes will include both students who consider translation a waste of time as well as those who find it fun - and who may actually later come to work professionally with translation. In terms of language proficiency, undergraduates are good by international standards: they have had English in school for at least eight years, and in addition, Danish society is functionally bilingual in many respects thanks to a barrage of English language material on television, radio, in entertainment, foreign trade, and tourism.

Translation has always been an important part of foreign language study programmes in Denmark, for in some measure or other, university graduates were always be expected to be able to translate. Yet its role is not clear: formerly most graduates would become college ('gymnasium') teachers, and to this day 'translation' at college level is synonymous with grammar drills, a practice copied from the teaching of the classical languages of Latin and Greek. On the other hand, university graduates would also become editors, authors, scholars and professional translators, and they, too, would have acquired their first schooling in translation at university. ...// 122 ... The contents in translation classes was always practical work, but the ideology would differ according to teacher attitude. And today, with new attitudes on translation, there are enormous differences in teacher views on the objective of translation classes.

The persistence of the grammar drill attitude can, in no small measure, be attributed to the fact that English and Danish are closely related Indo-European languages which have basic syntactical and grammatical points in common. They also have numerous words in common both from Indo-European origin (such as 'arm', 'house'/'hus') and from Danish introduced by Danish settlers in England (8th to 11th century) (e.g. 'live', 'sky', 'egg', 'they'). These linguistic facts affect translation as well as views on translation: in many cases an interlinear translation between Danish and English will make sense, although the actual wording may jar.

Translation classes in Denmark must therefore, first and foremost come to grips with typical 'interlanguage errors' in the Danish-English language apposition; this must be done to further the main objective namely to emphasise translation as translation proper. Thanks to the proximity of the language-pair, translation can be based on careful textual study and a high degree of linguistic approximation between source and target-language expressions. In translation classes for

beginners, I do smuggle in some tasks illustrate fundamental translation problems. These often lead to class discussion of larger questions in Translation Studies. But by and large, the class format does not allow for taking up all general problems in translation theory in a systematic way. This must be done in more advanced classes and in other ways.

Class will comprise more than forty students. This is unacceptably high and found nowhere else in the Danish school system.

These sketchy comments serve to illustrate that the development of a systematic feedback is largely dictated by the needs to ensure teacher survival, a modicum of individualised feedback, and an open class discussion of points of communal interest. In some degree or other all Danish teachers develop their own way of surviving.

Some views behind the feedback system

In various ways, the system to be described is affected by my view that translation is a social activity, primarily in communication, but also in a larger social context.

As communication, translation, especially between closely related languages, must be a close semantic approximation to the source text, or, to put it in traditional terms: it must have a high degree of fidelity. This view involves a taxonomy of translation as communication which covers the spectrum: ...// 123 ...

- (a) the perfect translation;
- (b) the minor inaccuracy where the original meaning is preserved in the target language;
- (c) a distortion, but no more so than the original meaning can be grasped;
- (d) an incomprehensible rendering. It may confuse, but will rarely lead recipients astray;
- (e) a self-contradictory rendering which is misunderstood; and
- (f) a rendition which reads fluently and makes perfect sense in the source language but distorts the meaning of the source text. (Dollerup, 1982)

The last type is the gravest error which can be committed in translation work. However, it is doubtful whether it can also be stamped out. The best one can do, is presumably to call attention to it in classroom settings and hope to make students better at avoiding them in professional work.

Even within these types, there are variations in import: a distortion involving only a word will usually be less serious than the one affecting a sentence, and so on. Here, by way of illustration, are two examples from this category (f) from my classes:

Example 1:

Source text: Da ægteparret fik tømte skabene *for* en masse ragelse, fandt de obligationer for 150.000

Target text: When the married couple had emptied the cupboards *for* a lot of junk, they found bonds worth 150,000

In this case the distortion is caused by a ‘false friend’ in the translation of the preposition: in Danish the couple emptied the cupboards of the junk, whereas, in English, they were remunerated with the same junk. On the other hand, it only affects this segment linguistically; content-wise the error is subordinate in the context where the most pertinent point (which is identical in the two languages) is that the couple found some valuable bonds.

In another example we get a speciously correct translation in Danish of the English original:

Example 2:

Source text: Dublin’s modern progenitors were ”Black Tom” Wentworth, Earl of Stafford, a Yorkshireman, and James Butler, 2nd Earl of Ormond, an Anglo-Irish Protestant.

One Danish rendition goes: Det moderne Dublins fædre var Sorte Tom Wentworth, Jarlen af Stafford, en mand fra Yorshire, og James Butler, Den anden Jarl af Ormond, samt en engelsk-irsk protestant.

This fluent rendering has, however, transformed two persons in English into six in Danish. ...// 124 ... In this case, this is the only information about the founding fathers of modern Dublin and the distortion here therefore carries more weight than Example 1.

There is one further aspect that must be taken into account in an assessment of translations. In a strict sense all errors in translation violate the trust of senders and addressees. The continuum outlined takes a stand about the gravity and implications of these violations, but it disregards the social dimension, for the immediate social implications of translation errors are different.

I believe that in real life most errors at the worst level are not found out. Conversely, there are severe social reprisals for one particular subgroup of errors in the second type (b), namely the minor distortions which are fully understandable. Errors in this category divide easily into two types: those which are not obvious to most non-natives (and perhaps many natives), such as collocations and infelicitous phrases. And a second subgroup, namely formal errors that are spotted by every person with even the most superficial knowledge of the target language. Misspellings and syntactical errors typically lead to the immediate loss of respect for the translator with both senders and addressees. These latter errors may, of course, sometimes be identical with interlanguage errors: with Danes, for instance, errors in concord in English are ‘interlanguage errors’, because Danish has no distinction between the third person singular and other persons.

So, precisely because it stigmatises translation work, this societal parameter must also be taken into account in assessments of student performance and included in any feedback. On the other hand, errors of this type belongs to the social dimension of translation, for they have little to do with textual proximity and semantic fidelity.

The physical framework

In my translation classes for beginners, students get a booklet at the beginning of term. The booklet contains one page with the notation, i.e. signs, symbols and abbreviations used for correction, a sample of the feedback sheet, and all texts to be translated. All texts are authentic, unedited, run-on texts, selected from my reading because they seemed to present real-life translation problems. They are considerably more difficult than the texts given at the finals. Most of them have been used previously in class-work. The first texts are very short, down to fifty words and they tend to be non-fiction. Gradually they become longer - the longest ones have been of seven hundred words - and as we advance there will be more literary texts. The average length is 300-350 words. Translation work goes both ways, from Danish into English and from English into Danish. This is partly because usually most Danish translations into English will out of necessity be translated by Danes as the language is not known by many foreigners, partly because there is still an implicit understanding that graduates must also master Danish: ...// 125 ... Let me add that this comes as quite a shock both to Danish undergraduates, and to native speakers of English who elsewhere feel they have no problems in getting along in Denmark.

The first major problem in class is that undergraduates will know 'translation' from the *gymnasium*, *die Oberstufe*, *the lycée*, *high-school* or *college*. It means that they have got the impression that translation is a kind of disguised grammar drill, and, accordingly, that the main point is to figure out where the teacher set the traps - one, two or three - depending on the length of the sentence, and that the rest of the translation work of the source text - usually phrased in immaculate Danish - is to be tackled by a word-by-word rendering. The first texts in my classes are very short precisely because they are meant to illustrate that this procedure does not work in real translation.

Students do their translations and then hand them in for correction according to plan.

The feedback

The feedback is given in class and it has three components, namely

- (1) corrections in the translations which the students have handed in;
- (2) an oral discussion in class covering adequate as well as inadequate renditions that I have found in the student translations in that specific class; and
- (3) a feedback from that assesses the strengths and weaknesses of each student.

The feedback in the translation

The first one type of feedback is found in the student's own translation. This is returned individually to the students at the beginning of the session, with the signs and symbols listed and explained in the booklet.

Two student translations serve to illustrate this correctional part of the feedback system:

...//126-130

Two student translations with correction marks

The most remarkable thing about the church of Vestervig is the size. It appears enormous in the landscape. It is the second largest ^{Jut^{ish}}(landic) ashlar church. Only the cathedral in Viborg is larger. As a result of a necessary repair^{work} about 1920, it may appear glossy, but it is ⁺ definit- ^{repair or the} ^{fully} ly (~~is~~) one of the most important monuments of the Middle Ages. It is well worth a visit. Everything is influenced by [↓] tourist in cars : a fine parking ground is placed just ^{again?} across the church.

The thing you notice the most about Vestervig Church is its size. It looks hugely in the landscape and after Viborg Cathedral it is in fact the largest ^{the} church built out of ashlar ^{+ the} altogether. It may seem a bit finicky- a result of a by the way much needed renovation from around 1920, but it definitely belongs ^{among} with our most important monuments from the Middle Ages and it is worth a visit. They have planned everything for driving tourists as well- ^{fine} ✓ a supercool parking lot right across from the church.

The point of departure is the student suggestions in the target language. This means that the primary yardstick is the general linguistic competence of individual students as evidenced in that particular translation; in other words, the stick is held higher with good students than with poor.

In the same vein, teacher solutions suggested retain as much of the students' phrasing as possible in order to allow for a translation adapted to the student personality, rather than the best way out. Incidentally, I rarely suggest alternatives, or mention why a given solution is bad, unless I know that the student's problem

will not be discussed in the class session at all, because it falls outside any pattern which we have time to discuss.

With their corrected translations in hand, students get some general idea as to what solutions were brilliant, good and acceptable, or in what measure I object to them. On the other hand, students soon get the hang of the differentiation in the system, moving as it does from a plus (+) for fine phrasing over a dot for an objection of mine and a wavy line for unquestionable mistakes, to one straight line under the real howlers, i.e. the formal errors, for them to realise whether we are concerned with sophisticated points in syntax or something that must appear once only in a university undergraduate career. In actual class discussion, most signs only serve to alert the students to the fact that they must keep track of what is happening in class.

The oral analysis in class

The second component in the feedback is oral. It is a class discussion of solutions. This is done by showing the students all the options (e.g. on a transparency) so that can all discuss them on an equal footing:

EXCERPT WITH SOLUTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Danish source text: Det mest påfaldende ved Vestervig Kirke er størrelsen.

Adequate solutions: What is most remarkable
The most remarkable
striking feature

Inadequate solution: no prop-word

Danish source text: . Den syner kolossalt

Adequate solutions:

Inadequate:
bulk **seems**
dimensions **appears**
-ly
It looks huge in the -

deviate in terms of semantic content in the target language, this is pointed out. Thanks to the ‘model chart’ on which I have noted all student suggestions, attention then focuses on inadequate renderings. Like the correct suggestions, they are read out one by one, and the students are asked to specify why each of them is inadequate or misleading. This is usually done by explaining what the infelicitous rendering implies in terms of meaning. Both those who did not commit them and for those who did benefit from the class discussion: both parties get an explanation why the solutions were not adequate, and, hopefully, a heightened awareness of language use.

There are a few points here: first, I never, ever, identify students who have committed specific ‘errors’, but it often happens that students give themselves away, for instance by laughing when they realise what is wrong; and it is extremely rare for me to take up elementary howlers - because they are corrected individually in the written translations. Secondly, the approach will make for lively discussions where points in the translation may illuminate central principles and problems in translation, as well as confrontations between student views and mine, perhaps even corrections of the latter. And, thirdly, since I find it very depressing not to laugh at times, I will take in some tricky, or funny, errors made in previous classes.



The pulpit in the monastery church.

The feedback form

The third component is a feedback sheet. It is a systematic and individualised assessment so that all students get an evaluation of their translations. It looks like this:

EVALUATION SHEET

*No marks =
No problem for you, OR
Not checked in this translation*

	<i>VERY POOR</i>	<i>POTENTIAL PROBLEM</i>
1. TEXT		
omission	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
addition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
insufficiently checked	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> (Tense. Numbers. Other)

2. SPELLING

- capital letters [] [] [] [] []
- words..... [] [] [] [] []
- compounds [] [] [] [] []
- split words..... [] [] [] [] []

3. PUNCTUATION

- relative clauses [] [] [] [] []
- object clauses [] [] [] [] []
- other [] [] [] [] [] (Longish discourse. Adverbials. Other)

4. WORDS/ WORD KNOWLEDGE

- elementary [] [] [] [] []
- rare [] [] [] [] []
- idioms and phrases..... [] [] [] [] []
- constructs [] [] [] [] []
- plural vs. singular forms [] [] [] [] []
- calques..... [] [] [] [] []
- false friends [] [] [] [] []
- contaminations [] [] [] [] []
- equivalents [] [] [] [] []
- irregular verbs [] [] [] [] []
- change of word class..... [] [] [] [] []
- gender..... [] [] [] [] []

5. SYNTAX/GRAMMAR

- concord (subject - verb)..... [] [] [] [] []
- concord (other)..... [] [] [] [] []
- genitive..... [] [] [] [] []
- pronouns..... [] [] [] [] []
- article..... [] [] [] [] [] (Indefinite. Definite)
- preposition [] [] [] [] []
- adverb, form..... [] [] [] [] []
- adverb, position..... [] [] [] [] []
- prop-word..... [] [] [] [] []
- tense [] [] [] [] []
- modal verbs..... [] [] [] [] []
- parallelisms [] [] [] [] []
- relations..... [] [] [] [] [] (Parataxis. Hypotaxis)

6. EXPRESSION

- collocations [] [] [] [] []
- calquing..... [] [] [] [] []
- construction of sentence..... [] [] [] [] []
- idiomatic usage [] [] [] [] []
- style [] [] [] [] []
- precision..... [] [] [] [] []
- word order..... [] [] [] [] []

7. OTHER COMMENTS

Comprising a total of more than 40 problem areas in interlingual transfers between Danish and English, loosely grouped as collation, spelling, syntax, and expression, they cover most errors generated in translations between Danish and English, and, in my opinion, they also move from formal errors and interlanguage manifestations, to points which are more pertinent for 'good' translation work. Each area is assessed on a five-scale differential which is filled out for each translation: I have a look at the student translation, and, then, taking into account the overall possibilities for committing errors of a given type, I then indicate all problems revealed in the translation. If, for instance, I know that it is possible to commit, say, five errors in concord, and I find two in one translation, this is marked in the middle category: a warning that this may be an overall weakness. The feedback is thus individualised at this point and no two feedback forms are filled in the same way. The point to note is that no one translation exercise will generate all points, nor indeed will individual students make the errors to the same extent in every exercise. But when students compare these feedback forms after, say, ten translations, they can pinpoint their own problem areas and do something about them.

My usage of the evaluation sheet is not the same in freshman and advanced classes: in the beginning, the top points which cover formal points are used fairly frequently, and it must also be stressed that I mark only errors. In the advanced classes, it is the stylistic points at the bottom which are marked more often than not, and here I actually change my practice and fill in strong points as well.

Doubtless, it has been noted that I have not discussed the use of computers in class in this type of feedback. I certainly know they exist and they are constantly changing the workplace for translators. Yet we must also assume that we are educating specialists who can manage on their own without access to tools – which is precisely what happens in real life. In addition, old-fashioned hands-on models do show both abysses of ignorance but, fortunately also creativity in translation. This must be praised.

Discussion

Now, the procedures presented here are not the be-all and the end-all of Translation Studies, for despite all the technicalities there is still subjectivity galore. I am not infallible, and I do not catch all student errors. Students will, sometimes with reason, ask me why I have not corrected an error I discuss in class. Also, it may turn out that in the course of my correction work, I change my mind. Fortunately, in the recorded history of Dollerup classes, no more than one grade, but nevertheless enough to make students aware that protests may bring forth some public teacher contrition which can be used for individual self-repair and face-saving. Similarly, it does happen that students catch me out on solution which I have classified as wrong, and point out that they are correct, for instance, by interpretations overlooked or in dictionary entries I missed in my work. Or it may

be that their and my language usages differ, or perhaps even that we are dealing with semantic shifts due to language change. In these cases my way out is to have a public vote.

As far as the evaluation sheets are concerned, students will turn up to ask probing questions about why I haven't marked particular types of error which they have noted they have - where the only proper answer is a blush of shame. The model translated is actually the eighth one. I occasionally find weak points with it - things that I have not included, or that the sheet covers things which are unnecessary. But then the next batch of translations makes me change my mind again. But these are minor details: what matters most in translation classes is that students become aware of linguistic problems, formal as well as semantic ones, and use this knowledge in subsequent translation work. It is more useful to heighten the undergraduates' general linguistic sensibility than to correct one specific error, so if I overlook something or judge too harshly, it is all done in the pursuit of that higher and honourable goal.

It is in the nature of things that all teaching must work, otherwise life as a teacher would be hell. As far as I can make out the feedback does work: My students appear to do away with the formal errors; they seem to fare a bit better at exams, and some of them remember classes years later. But of course this may be illusions.

Finally, no two classes of students are the same: procedures, advice, and teacher performance may change - or may have to change - with new classes. So there is a subtle interplay between teacher personality, teacher feedback, student personality, teacher and student idiolects and sociolects, class size and general knowledge of the languages used and the translations done.

These differences are large even in my country. Therefore it would be presumptuous to suggest that the procedures presented in here are applicable in other classrooms than mine. On the other hand, some of the features and some of the ideas may inspire others operating with other language pairs to do something, either along the same lines or in radically different ways, to improve feedback in translation classes possibly in different climes and under foreign skies.

Works Cited

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The christening (baptismal) font in the monastery church