This article was first published in Kinga Klaudy & János Kohn (eds). *Transferre necesse est. Proceedings of the 2ⁿᵈ conference on current trends in Studies of Translation and Interpreting*. Budapest: Scolastica. 1997.

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Translation Teaching:
Profession and Theory
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In this article, I shall address some issues arising from the maze-like relationship between the enlightened teacher, the worldly-wise professional, the ivory tower theorist, and the student of translation. I shall focus first on the dynamics of learning, then on professional translation, thirdly I shall dwell on the means of teaching, that is to say the institutions, teachers and their means. Finally, I shall address similarities between theory and classwork, and the potential for interaction between them.

Learning

Learning is intensely dynamic for the individual student. It is an initiation rite in which the move from language learning to translating as an independent activity is crucial. This awareness does not lead to a sudden improvement in the end product, but it does lead to a conscious need for guidance, often expressed in a demand for rules, for prescription.

The dynamic development is obvious: students pass exams, acquire more knowledge, and imbibe, by osmosis as well as by systematic learning, useful information and experience from peers, teachers and the world around them.

Practice

Eventually most students leave university to become translators. They enter a competitive world. If successful, they will gain experience and confidence. They will often have to specialise, and, in that process, they must transfer learning, be flexible, adapt and discard things learnt at university. But such an adjustment process, in which much of what one has learnt in the process turns out to be useless in 'real life' is not unique to translation. All training programmes in the sheltered environment of

educational establishment are different from real-life professional conditions.

In her CATLEGS model, Deborah Ruuskanen (1996) has specified some factors that the professional translator must establish for each commission in her CATLEGS model, such as deadlines, payment and the identity of the client and audience.

At an abstract level, translators must adjust to subtle systems in order to establish their professional identity. These relate to questions not normally posed at the conscious level, such as: How do translators relate to use and abuse of the binary language systems in concrete work? Do they, for instance, tolerate linguistic interference? What systems of previous translation and translational traditions do translators have to bow to? It is clear that if anyone producing the umpteenth translation of a manual, or the fifth version of an EU directive, should copy unchanged passages from previous translations. …// 292 …But why should Shakespeare be translated into blank verse in languages the rhythmic patterns of which are totally different from English? There are also rules of the trade. There are societal expectations about translator roles: are they active culture bearers or are they merely passive mediators?

And what is the senders' real influence on the end product? To what extent do clients, once they are assured of the translator's competence, allow the translator to adjust the message to the target language and culture? I would suggest: to a considerable degree. Professional translation will therefore focus on target language integration.

Institutions and teachers

The institutions teaching translation are supported financially, culturally and morally by the societies they work in. Their interests are filtered and realised in institutional study programmes, normally at a level so abstract that teachers have far more room for manoeuvreing than they actually exploit.

Societal needs tell in the directionalities and languages taught. It

makes sense culturally and geopolitically that the literary translation programme at ELTE in Budapest in Hungary includes English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and Russian. In some countries it may be political realities, in others industry, which dictate the inclusion or exclusion of specific languages.

Programmes tend to describe areas of study, text types, timetables etc. at length, and rarely mention strategies taught, underlying teacher attitudes and so on.

Yet, above all, institutions are teachers. They are not subservient to the institution. Although there are undeniably societal, budgetary and institutional limitations on their activities, teachers have a say in the making of the programmes and their implementation. For the individual teacher competence and self-confidence, acquired in a normal translational development, are essential for survival, whereas factors such as *class size* and *the text types* used are major restrictions on teaching activities. In other respects, it is largely up to teachers to define their own role.

Teaching and classes

In my view the most important approach in the teaching of translation is a dual orientation which encapsulates the source text as the central object of study and analyses these texts for the exploration of translation as a special type of communication, involving a sender, a source-language text, an interlingual mediator, a target-language text and audience. The teacher and students must approach a text and its translation as one part of a chain of equally valid elements. Once the whole communication chain has been analysed, they may conclude that some elements are more important than others. Although this is not truly 'objective', it can teach students to approach texts without a bias. This crucial textual analysis should be a simulacrum of reality, a construct that teachers and students use for setting up hypotheses about for instance, the sender's intention, its relevance for translation, and the way in which the text can be directed towards different audiences.

It is legitimate to ask students to 'translate Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" into a modern children's book and reduce it to 25°/o of the original length', …// 293 … for this bears some similarity to a real-life task. I also find that it instructive for students to translate strongly culturally bound texts to make them realise that, although such texts are translatable at the linguistic level, they are meaningless in terms of culture.

But I hold that the translation task for students at an exam should be as general as possible. At exams, future translators must prove that they can competently handle any situation, including the one in which there are no contextual clues. So a teacher may well act as if both sender and audience are well-known entities. This is also a fiction, for few teachers of translation contact authors to check their intentions, wordings, ambiguities, terminology and the like.

The strengths of a translation class are (a) a controlled environment where (b) the competence of the participants is under constant scrutiny. There is (c) selection, and there is (d) progression.

Theory

Theory hovers behind everything. Generally, it follows the class in dealing with the complete chain of interlingual communication. Theory in translation seems to balance uneasily between prescription and description. This is not the fault of theory. It is caused by users who may not wish to distinguish between prescription and description.

Professional translators may find specific rules interesting, but, as far as I know, rules do not constitute theory. For this reason, it is only theoretical description that is relevant. Nevertheless, the heightened awareness it conveys is an intangible good: this in itself is a problem since professional translators live on remuneration, not insight.

Teaching may use both prescription and description. Many students want prescriptive rules. It may not be desirable for later life flexibility to do rule-governed translation, but, if used in class, competent translators later seem to discover that it is of limited use in real life. In the same vein, descriptive theory may not lead to immediate improvement of practical translation. Yet students at academic institutions accept that their programme should impart a heightened awareness of their field.

Theory can therefore contribute to teaching, but at another level than students and practitioners normally clamour for. I have also argued, throughout this article, that *teaching*, informed, confident, and visionary teaching, will lead to improved professionalism, although I have not used these exact words.

The classroom as a testing ground for theory

The uses of teaching for theory are based on the precept I have already noted: it is only in a classroom that a translator, be he or she a student or a teacher, is in complete control of the whole transfer process. This is deception and a fiction, but it is immensely useful.

The classroom can thus be used as a laboratory for testing real-world conditions and hypotheses. The students are not only future translators, they are also, for instance, users of translations and citizens of a society. Students are better than elderly readers in computer literacy, in navigating the Internet. These are all part of the sea changes taking place in translation. …// 294 … In the classroom we can conduct experiments the purpose of which is to pose questions and provoke answers from students rather than impose teacher authority.

Andrew Chesterman has set up a model inspired by Karl Popper (Chesterman 1994). It looks like this: *P1> TT> EE> P2.*

In brief, this model illustrates the way in which the initial 'Problem 1' leads to a Tentative Theory or a Tentative Text, which in turn can be subjected to error elimination (EE) and consequently gives rise to a new problem, 'Problem 2'. One of the beauties of this model is that it is easily demonstrated in class, for instance as follows. One student translates a sentence on the blackboard. I ask for one emendation which is therefore an Error Elimination: this provides us with a new text, a P2, and subsequent student emendations quickly catapult us to P3, P4 and so on. Other theoretical work can also be used: there is innovation and challenge in such approaches.

Common notions can be put to the test: we know that, according to translators, poets and critics, only poets can translate poetry. My freshman students invariably agree. We test this hypothesis when, among their early assignments, they have to translate a poem: lo and behold, this traditional view is not true, for, while some students may indeed hand in what the late André Lefevere (1975) termed literal translations, most hand in something which looks like a poem in terms of layout. In addition, there will be two or three competent poetic renditions. I now pick out five or six of these 'versions', including the poetic ones, blot out the names of the 'translators', and photocopy the lot for everybody to read. The subsequent discussion needs no teacher prompting. Later in term, there is another

poem. Now we end up with versions of which more than half are considered poetry by a majority vote, like this one:

I kiss your lips
my hand plays with your hair but in your eyes I see a language strange and fair

In other words the commonly held tenet that only poets can translate poetry is wrong (Dollerup # 163 (on this homepage)). Students can, too. There is also agreement in class that these 'poems' have become autonomous entities in the target language. The 'translator-poet' may have moved through Chesterman's Popperian formula in the process of translating, but the final poem cannot be 'improved', only destroyed if tampered with: although one may easily theoretically imagine later Error Elimination (also termed 'improved versions') at a later stage, the end of classroom work is not at all a bad reflection of the fact that under real-life conditions, deadlines (imposed by clients or publishers) put an end to the otherwise interminable dynamics involved in Chesterman's formula. Similarly, Lefevere's work is also shown to have shortcomings: poetry translations by students are not inferior to those by poets, and what's more, they are not easily bracketed into Lefevere's categories.

Profession and teaching
Professional translation also affects teaching, so that, for instance, teaching takes into account new scenarios: witness, for instance, Vienne (1994).

However, the major sea change is yet to come. It is connected with internationalisation… .//295 … At the same time that English is now accepted as the lingua franca of the future, languages of small diffusion are asserting themselves. Increased internationalisation makes for more interlingual contacts. Increased wealth means that the number of transitory texts which would not have been translated previously is augmented. These factors will make for an enormous increase in the demand for

translation.

The translation market is changing in other respects, too: many young people will, for reasons of war, of peace, of love and family, end up living abroad. They will change the translation markets as they become translators - at present often untrained - for they will translate and revise into their mother tongue. This will revolutionise the teaching of translation.

In traditional uni- or bidirectional classes, teachers know both languages and use the fiction that they can span the entire chain from sender to addressee. In future, there will be classes of students with different mother tongues. This is already becoming obvious, particularly in community interpreting, in many European societies. As this tide swells, there will be many translation classes in which the teacher will know only the source language or the target language. It is obvious that assessing the adequacy of translations will be infinitely more difficult than it is today, and perhaps we may have students help examine the adequacy of translations. The questions concerning a translated text must, furthermore, be based on the common language. When the source text is common the questions will be "How have you rendered 'xxx' in the target language?" whereas when target texts are rendered in the common language, the question will be "What was this in the source language?"

In that intricate context, theories of translation will have to adjust to the coming realities and also accept that we are not dealing with one binary chain of communication but with a multiplicity which cannot be straddled easily either in class, or in the profession or in theory. Yet it may be that theory can expand the consciousness-raising which will be needed to make up for the immediate textual control with which most of us were brought up and for which, I suggest, prescriptive theory may not have been quite disastrous.

However, both now and in the future, good and well-formulated theoretical assumptions can be tested in the classroom and, if not

disproved, can be used as part of the consciousness-raising which is central to theory as well as to teaching and is also, I think, of vital importance to the self-confidence of the professional.

An evening view across the Danube towards the Pest side of Budapest, Hungary

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