



Translation Memory at work

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### **Sea changes in Translation Studies: A vision**

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It is not that often that a scholarly journal (in this case, *Perspectives*) has a couple of blank pages to spare for the wandering scholar to record the overall impression from observations and roamings over the globe within four months and before they are committed to more detailed articles to a professional journal of the trade (*Language International*). Yet, in this particular issue, a delay of some reviews offers the opportunity for a few meta-level remarks on translation practice and Translation Studies in the world of the future.

Within the last 10-15 years, language minorities have established the right to speak their own languages to an unprecedented degree. There have been some nations which were 'always' multilingual (Switzerland), or bilingual (Belgium). Although language minorities have been persecuted, there have also been countries which accepted that there were isolated groups which for some reason held on to the language of the culture from which they derived, sometimes without any official encouragement at all: Slovenes, Danes, Afrikaans in Argentina; Italians, Chinese, Hispanics in the USA. But immigration in the latter half of the twentieth century brought to the fore linguistic problems and issues in legal and liaison contexts and led to the recognition of non-native speakers and their right to be present not only physically but also linguistically in Sweden and in Australia, and subsequently in a host of other nations. In the postcolonial world, individual nations, such as South Africa have come officially to comprise many languages, more than traditional translation services can actually handle with ease (eleven); so have international organisations such as the European Union (eleven official languages; two working languages), and the UN (six official languages). The official policy of the European Union demands that all produce should have instructions in the language of the countries where they are marketed, a policy which has created an enormous need for translation work virtually overnight, completely dwarfing the bilingual Canadian instructions which previously struck us with awe.

Corpus linguistics has, within the same period, brought to us treasury, indeed an overwhelming flood, of information about the ways languages are actually used, mostly, to be true, uncritically describing a state of affairs, paying less heed as to whether they also carry sensible, comprehensible messages and, I feel, none at all, as to whether they are stylistically and linguistically 'sound' however wobbly these latter parameters are. // ... 146 //

Computers have led to the development of grammar programmes. They are cumbersome, to be true, and hardly all that wieldy for the individual. Spell-checkers are infinitely easier to handle, although, once again, discrimination is called for in their use.

Voice-recognition is now an accepted component part in translation work in several contexts. It works with major languages and will soon function with languages without major differences between pronunciation and spelling: in other words, German and Finnish will see it before Danish which has a five-hundred year history of separate development for spoken and written language.

Translation memory has also churned over so vast amounts of material that it is now showing the strength of combining mute and, it seems, infinite retention, to bear on huge masses of often monotonous, repetitive and boring material.

The future of the human translator, however, is ensured in that there will be a continued need for localisation of technical, legal, and other texts; the suggestions stored and consequently made by translation memories must be constantly checked to make sure that these suggestions for translations fit in new spatial and temporal contexts. They can probably, as they appear for approval for the umpteenth time, also be improved by humans who select or come up with superior alternatives. And texts with strong cultural imprints, jokes, puns, literature, will still call out for human linguistic creativity in the foreseeable future.

The number and the nature of documents translated has increased manyfold over the last decades: previously few letters were translated, now many are.

Most momentous of all: the internet translation is, within only one year and a half of its first beginning, clearly a force to be reckoned with. I tried it out cautiously in the spring of 1999 and found the result so risible that I downloaded it for the entertainment of a class. I tried it in January this year with a couple of languages and saw the obvious weaknesses, but certainly also that it has already done away with the need of the kind of 'spot' translation in which translators give the gist of the source text: the 'translation was adequate' for that purpose although based on outmoded dictionaries.

Today (28 May 2000), I asked 'Sytran' on Altavista to do a French translation of the articles we have published in *Perspectives* 1993-1999. This translation was good: with major language pairs the internet translations have entered the lists, even when, as my local experts assure me, the version is the poorest and cheapest one within the 'Systran' family. But what then about the minority languages: Will they not be forgotten? // ... 147 //

It is my qualified guess that the internet revolution I just described, is one in which spell-checkers, corpora, grammar checkers, and translation memories will ensure a reasonably high quality in many documents, mostly so, I believe, after some human control. The small - and quite a few major - languages are, at present, in many cases left behind: they do not have the hardware, e.g. enough computers (Russia); they are small markets; they do not have the prerequisite software (e.g. electronic dictionaries between language pairs, say, Icelandic and Portuguese). But they will catch up: all languages and cultures have their champions who will gladly work round the clock for the mother tongue or for the sheer fun of the challenge.

Similarly, it is obvious that nations which now seem backward in terms of development in translation studies will soon be on a par with Western countries. Let me point to the 1999:2 issue of *Perspectives* which showed how the Hispanic world has caught on to Translation Studies. When I was a student in the mid 1960s in Valladolid, Castilla la Vieja, Spain, hardly a soul in the student body had French and none had English. And now Spanish scholarship is on a par. Partly because of politically favourable winds, but, most

importantly, because the Spanish translation community has leapfrogged quite a few stages in the tortuous Western development of Translation Studies. Similarly Romania, Russia, South Africa, and other nations now with only a low status for language professionals, a weak infrastructure for translation practice and little Translation Studies can within a few years reach some of the cutting edges in practice or research. They do not have to be bogged down in fruitless discussions about untranslatability, equivalence, and the like but will, with more ease, identify pertinent and do away with irrelevant views from their separate perspectives. They will need the hardware, the software - but these will be coming. And, of course, so will the internet.

Spring 2000 may well be remembered for a small group of Filipino boys who sent 'I-love-you-letters' all over the world, thus also convincing us that there are limits to what can be done in cyberspace and that the internet is vulnerable. The long-term lesson from the *vira* is probably that the internet is excellent for fast but transitory communication and messages.

Durable stuff will have to be preserved beyond the reach of irresponsible individuals. But internet translation has come to stay. In the long run it will mean that we do not all have to become bilinguals in order to communicate interlingually and internationally. In all likelihood, the machines will, contrary to what I personally believed only a couple of years ago, not do away with, but actually preserve and strengthen minor languages, strengthen the tongues of minorities in // ... 148 // major language communities, and even the languages of the largely monolingual majorities in the major language communities. The very rise of these target groups will ensure that there is enough work, challenging work, in the future for human translators.

In addition to divisions into haves and have-nots, literates and illiterates, we shall also see a world with a new social, linguistically orientated stratification: those who are language professionals (translators, interpreters, subtitlers, voice-over translators, etc) and who must be linguistically and culturally competent; those who must master one foreign language in order to manage and negotiate internationally (without a doubt mostly English for the next fifty years); those who learn a few foreign words for reasons of politeness or whatever; and then the vast majority of the world's population which will comfortably pass most of their lives in their own language cultures, hopefully with a better understanding and toleration of other cultures thanks to mediation undertaken by linguistic middlemen. There is a great challenge in translation in the future. It is also a challenge for Translation Studies. We trust that 'Perspectives', our publisher, editors, contributors, and our indispensable reviewers will meet that challenge and keep the journal at the cutting edge of research.

