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BRAVE NEW WORLDS OF TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses changes which have been or are being introduced in practical translation in today's globalised world. These changes have far-reaching implications for Translation Studies, for professional translators, and for the teaching of translation. The article stresses that today few translators are working with elitist texts concerning literature and religion. Accordingly, much Western 'theory' is out of touch with reality.

Most innovations connect with the introduction of computers. The author takes a look at computers, at the influence of the Internet, and then presents an example of the 'Internet translation' system available in order to demonstrate that, in principle, it may be used by unscrupulous translators. Subsequently, attention focuses on the translatability of source texts. Most texts are not meant for translation, but the present increase in international and global exchanges implies that more (and more varied) texts than ever before, are to be translated.

The discussion now concentrates on phenomena that are new – at least in degree – in modern translation work such as: 'Translation Memories', 'controlled language', 'synchrony', 'short-lived source and target texts', and 'internationalised texts' which convey a 'core message' whereas the 'descriptive window dressing' can be adapted to local conditions.

Finally, the author stresses that in the future translators must be more conscious of their linguistic, cultural, and societal responsibility and obligations in order better to fulfil their roles in the societies in which they live.

Key-words: Globalisation; computers; the internet; short-lived source texts; short-lived translations; synchrony in translation; Translation Memories; controlled language; localisation, 'internationalised texts'.

Introduction

In today's globalised world, most practitioners and theorists focus on translation as a means of communication. This is legitimate but also restrictive. Here I shall concentrate on another role which is, it seems to me, too often overlooked.

Language professionals should be more aware that translation is a means for respecting and defending the specific and central defining values of both source and target languages and cultures, despite the enormous changes that are under way globally. These changes will affect all aspects of professional language work, and students, scholars, and teachers of translation should take them into account when they prepare for future careers in translation.

One major reason why scholarship pays little attention to these factors is that much thinking on translation, notably 'theory', is still concerned with issues relevant exclusively to translations of texts for cultural and religious elites. In general, academics fail to take heed of the fact that, at least since 1945, such texts have come to constitute an ever diminishing fraction in practical translation work – at present far below of 0.1% of all translation work worldwide.

The rules of the game in translation work have been changed radically. This is abundantly obvious when we consider that most modern utensils, appliances, and machines are made by companies that operate internationally and therefore market their products with manuals and instruction books in a multitude of languages. This involves much translation activity.

Computers and the Internet

Within the last twenty years, we have seen enormous changes in computers. I acquired my first one in the early 1990's. It boasted, I dimly remember, of 64K storage on a floppy disk.

Today's professional language workers will have electronic dictionaries in their computers and immediate access to the Internet: we should all be thankful to the Briton Mr Tim Berners-Lee who changed the world by inventing Internet and putting it online at everybody's disposal for free, without demanding royalties and applying for a patent. He created it on his own while working at the European centre for (civil) physics in 1990. The system was designed so that large numbers of physicists (sometimes several thousands) could closely monitor projects in which they participated. Approached with caution, the Internet of today offers much assistance to the language professional: corpora such as the British National Corpus, encyclopaedic access to 'Wikipedia.org', and immediate checks of many national databases to mention only a few. The very existence and depth of the Internet probably makes for the dissolution of copyright in the traditional sense, which hardly deserves a better fate, given the rigid ways it is often handled by legal experts in the West (see Chiu 2004).

In translation contexts, we may note that many search engines on the Internet offer instantaneous translation between e.g. English, Spanish, German, and French (but not Chinese (yet)). We may have a look at an example. I find an article in the Spanish national newspaper 'El mundo':

Tres soldados estadounidenses y un traductor han muerto y otros dos soldados han resultado heridos en dos ataques con bombas perpetrados en Bagdad, según ha informado el ejército de EEUU. En un ataque con bomba realizado el lunes en el sur de la capital iraquí murieron dos de los soldados y otros dos sufrieron heridas, según el Comando Central del Ejército. Junto con ellos también falleció el iraquí que les hacía de traductor. Previamente, el Ejército había informado de otro ataque, ocurrido el lunes también, en el oeste de Bagdad, en el que un soldado murió y otro resultó herido. (El Mundo).

I copy it and dump it on the 'language tool' of the English-language homepage of 'Google' and ask for a translation into English. Within a fraction of a second I get the following rendition:

Three American soldiers and a translator have died and other two soldiers have turned out to be injured men in two attacks with bombs perpetrated in Baghdad, as has reported the army of the USA. In an assault with bomb realized on Monday in the south of the Iraqi capital two of the soldiers died and other two suffered wounds, according to the Central Command of the Army. Together with them also there died the Iraqi who they was playing the role of a translator. Before, the Army had reported of another assault, happened on Monday also, in the west of Baghdad, in which a soldier died and other one turned out to be wounded.

Posing as a cynical translator, I revise this solely from the English version and within a couple of minutes, I produce the following translation:

The American army has reported that three American soldiers and an interpreter died and two more soldiers were injured in two bomb attacks that took place in Baghdad. In a bomb attack on Monday in the southern part of the Iraqi capital, two soldiers died and two others were wounded according the Army Central Command. The Iraqi acting as their interpreter also died. Previously, also on Monday, the Army had reported a similar attack in the western part of Baghdad in which one soldier was killed and another one wounded.

But will this procedure be used in the real world? Will professional translators base their work on poor machine translations? I doubt it. This type of translation makes about 80-90% of the contents clear to surfers on the Internet (Archer 2002). But most websites do not appeal beyond the limited clientele of surfers and will hardly attract serious translators. On the other hand, we should be aware that it is there: three years ago I heard the then estimate, namely that 10 million pages were translated in this fashion per 24 hours. The year before the figure cited was 5 million. The figure must be rising and it is probably astronomical by now.

It may be that this type of translation will never work with Chinese. I believe it will, since it seems that Internet translation is taking in more and more linguistic and contextual indications of individual words and phrases. So ... perhaps by 2015?

Source texts

Intended for translation or not meant for translation?

Source texts are also changing the status in terms of translation. I guess that most readers of this article have, at some stage or other in their lives, translated texts – for instance as students – that nobody would dream of translating in “real life.” In my lifetime I had to do many assignments in translation classes that were unrealistic, such as excerpts from literature that would never have made it into any foreign language in a “complete translation”. They would not have been translated in that form and never with the purpose in mind, namely to check my foreign-language command, in professional contexts. I suggest that this was not clear to anybody in previous ages, neither to translators, nor to teachers, nor to students.

Today more language professionals are aware that most messages in a given community are not intended for translation and will, in the vast majority of cases, never be translated (although the odd translation of this type may well be made e.g. to show something risible or unfavourable about another culture.)

Controlled language

This is particularly obvious to large companies which produce texts that are indeed intended for translation: a well-known means for making for easy translation is ‘controlled language.’ Controlled-language texts are produced mostly within large international corporations that produce many source texts that are to be translated.

Controlled language is characterised by strict adherence to a number of constraints: These are, for instance, that the lexicon is limited and field-specific. Furthermore the ‘senders’, usually technical writers, must:

- Keep sentences as short as possible
- and never longer than twenty words.
- Always use active verbs.
- Use the imperative, and
- Use only three nouns in a row. (See Mogensen 2004)

Exemplification

Let us have a look at an example of instruction written in controlled language, which often comes with an illustration (the figures in the parentheses below thus refer to a drawing).

Loosen hose clamp (1).
Remove hose (2) from connector assembly (3).
Remove bolts (4) and the washers from the connector assembly.
Remove connector assembly (3). Etc.

Let me add that I know of no non-Indo-European language targeted in the use of controlled language. But perhaps I should be cautious about saying so because of:

Translation Memories

It may well be that ‘Translation Memories’ can cope with controlled language outside the Indo-European languages.

The principles behind a Translation Memory are shockingly simple: once a given segment (a sentence or a period) in a source text has been translated, the source-text segment and the corresponding target-language segment are stored in the data base or computer.

When, say after a couple of years or weeks, an identical source-language segment is to be translated, the previous translation is automatically displayed on the screen. It can then be used, rejected, corrected or improved by the translator, no matter whether this translator is the one who originally made it or another user, be it a successor or another translator working under totally different circumstances and with totally different texts and who has access to the same data base (e.g. in the same international organisation or corporation).

Exemplification of Translation Memory work

In order to see how Translation Memories function, we may have a look at an excerpt which repeats the same sentence once in a (hypothetical) manual:

Press the black button on the left hand side of the panel to turn on the player. When the player is switched on you insert the CD-ROM. If the player does not start: **call our repair workshop**. The warranty covers only repairs done in our repair workshop. Press the red button on the right hand side of the panel in order to turn off the recorder. If this does not happen right away: **call our repair workshop**.

It is rendered as follows:

- 请按下仪表板上左手边的黑色按钮以打开播放器。当播放器开启后，请插入光盘。如果播放器未能启动：请联系我们的维修部门。保修范围仅限于在我们的维修部门所进行的维修行为。请按下仪表板上右手边的红色按钮以关闭播放器。如果未能立即响应：请联系我们的维修部门。

(Please do whatever you can to make the two sentences in Chinese stand out. Cay Dollerup)

There is no doubt that Translation Memories will affect future translation work. There are Translation Memories in China but I do not know the extent to which they are used. In the West, they are used by all international firms that have in-house translation, all international organisations, and virtually all commercial translation agencies, including many that work with ‘cultural texts’ except ‘high literature’.

Although they are ultimately based on human labour, they are also labour-saving, and they are largely ‘anonymous’.

This also corresponds to modern source texts. Today most of them have not one, but many senders – just think of an innocent instruction manual: it is actually based on the work of engineers, of people who have designed the tool in question, etc. in the country in which the machine was produced. Their information and knowledge has, in turn, been encoded in a linguistic form and edited by many hands.

This anonymity or lack of personality is also found with target texts. As a rule of thumb one might say that this becomes more and more evident, the longer and more complex the target texts are. It goes without saying that a tender of 2 million words for a factory is not made by a single translator but by a team.

Sometimes this combines with a multiplicity of target languages: in the European Union which has, at present, 23 official languages – most products are packaged with multilingual manuals, etc. A product destined for the Scandinavian countries only may be marketed with a brochure in three languages.

At the other extreme, my personal record is a staggering 40-language booklet! No single agency, let alone one single translator, can handle such a multiplicity of target languages. The translation work is outsourced by the manufacturer, the distributor, or some intermediary agency: the translation assignment and all previous translations that may be relevant are passed on to the free-lancers or agency translators; and all this material is to be handed back, together with the translational product, because it is all the property of the company that paid for the translation.

Translation Memories, clients, and translators

Many clients see a major advantage in Translation Memories: they do not have to pay translators for doing a whole translation once again, just because the manufacturer adds a new button: In principle, the clients can pay the professionals for translating only the one period or paragraph that describes the new feature. Of course, they may send along the context for supplementary information.

Conversely, translators who work into their B-, C- or even D-languages will see a major chance of improving translations: Provided clients are aware of it! If clients fail to see this advantage, for instance, because they are swayed by financial considerations and therefore do not allow translators to revise previous translations, there is no potential for improvement and stylistic gain.

Synchrony and translation

Today much translation is synchronous and I believe that this will apply even more to translation work in the future.

In recent years, we have seen a number of internationally successful films that have appeared worldwide on the very same day. This has involved incredible amounts of translation work among subtitlers and translators (and actors) who have rendered the speeches of these films into national languages. The possibility of simultaneity in publication has even been vented in the field of literature (Chiu 2004).

It is not obvious to the layman that it also applies to political life:

There is simultaneous publication in all official languages in European Union legislation and United Nation resolutions, the latter appearing in six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. Once again, I have to add, in principle.

Many laws and resolutions refer to texts and segments in prior translation retrieved by means of Translation Memories. The wording of such previous translations often has to be followed precisely. This makes for very closely knit combinations of texts in which it is hard to distinguish between cause and effect, source and target texts.

The short-lived texts

As I put it above, virtually all human utterances are transitory and will be heard only by a few others before they fade into oblivion.

In the field of translation, this perspective on texts and translations is new because traditional Translation Studies thinking has not prepared us for this reality: today we must learn to live with the fact that many source texts in the modern world are short-lived. Sometimes this involves both source and target texts at the same time: a technical manual is outdated the moment a new feature, such as a new button, is added to the product, and the second the sentences describing the functions of the button are published in the source- and target-language versions of the (new!) manual.

The targeted texts

I mentioned that many technical texts are often made for products sold in many countries. Yet national guidelines may differ. Local and national salesmen and lawyers know this. They add to translations or they delete features as necessary. At the same time, the 'core text' as it were, will be accompanied by, to take two extremes: a national text (from the country of origin), or an internationalised text. In the latter case, it may be 'denationalised' in terms of, for instance dates, measures etc. so as to allow for easier localisation (Esselink 2000); yet it may also be a blend of English and some other language (usually that of the producer); or it may be a 'core' that offers only the essentials and expects local experts to fill in the 'nationally required' information.

International texts

In our time and age, there are also articles circulating in the international commercial market place that deal with e.g. photographing birds. Such articles are so technically sophisticated that the 'beautiful stuff', the 'window dressing' about the colours of the birds and their environments is immaterial to the core message. In these cases, there is no 'translation' in the traditional sense either. The local, national editors or journalists who acquire the right to 'nationalise' the 'core message' (e.g. what kind of photographic material to use and the information about favourable lenses and angles for taking pictures of birds) merely add material of their own on the species of trees and flowers that birds flock around in the local woods, forests, or urban parks.

The (non-)tasks of the translator

I do not see any tasks for future translators in the area covered by the present-day Internet translations. This is clearly a mode of translation that is useful for surfers, but since the Internet is exploding, no sane translator will try to keep up with the pace at which it is expanding.

Nor do I see any tasks with the internationalised texts that are edited beyond 'translational recognition'.

The tasks for responsible translators

will, in my view, connect with a respect of the cultures, languages, and nations involved in peaceful intercultural communication and exchange in tomorrow's globalised world.

Translators will concentrate their efforts

- on culturally loaded texts, including translations that connect with source texts which are revised e.g. from instruction leaflets to international law.

The translators of the future will have to be socially responsible individuals who enter societal contexts much more actively than has been the case so far. Translators must be fully aware that they must act as

- language and communication specialists, and

- communicate to clients that it is necessary for all parties that messages and translations must be checked.

In relation to each assignment, translators will have to work **text-internally** to ensure that it makes sense in its totality: if many constituent segments have been translated separately and in isolation, some texts may no longer constitute coherent wholes.

Translators will also have to be more aware of **text-external** obligations. These are complex societal contexts which are not always of the translator's choice: just think of the poor Iraqi interpreter mentioned in the article used for the Internet translation who had to mediate between Iraqis and American troops. In other contexts, there is less personal danger, but the task may still be extremely challenging even to teams of translators and legal specialists who must make sure that all references to target-language legislation are correct in instructions for experts.

Language change

Above all, this also implies that translators must be aware of the inexorable force of 'language change': translators will, more than ever before, have to be language and cultural specialists who ensure that international, indeed, global laws and agreements are still written in a way understandable to national audiences - which sometimes include every citizen in a country.

This is actually a problem which is close to us today – closer than most people are aware of: many of the international agreements that form the basis of the United Nations date back to the late 1940's and are creaking with age in some of the six official languages. In the European Union, some founding documents go back to the 1950's, and here, with 23 official languages, the problem is enormous: the *acquis*, that is, the common legislation of the European Union, now constitutes approximately 100,000 pages per language.

Let us hope that we can prepare the translators of the future well to face the challenges ahead.

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