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Parameters in the teaching of translation

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Summary

There is scope for improvement in translation classes given at universities, in terms of their market orientation, their theoretical foundations, the order of progression and the pedagogical strategies used. Subjects could also be ordered on the basis of text types, extralinguistic determinants and professional tasks. Parameters are offered as a guide to developing a study plan.

Key words

Professional translation, university, pedagogy, market, principles

1. The current situation and its causes

One of the fundamental problems when designing a semi-attendance-based or distance-learning model for translation is concerned is that there are many things that we still do not know as regards the optimal manner of teaching translation in classrooms. In fact, while we may have a successful formula that makes it possible for us to provide students with a solid background in most cases, it can be said that we do not know how we learn to translate. At present, there is a lack of consensus in terms of objectives and pedagogical strategies for the fulfilment thereof. In the case of interpreting, the fundamental objective consists of training professionals for international institutions, and we apply a plan of progression that orders interpreting by types: firstly, bilateral or liaison, followed by consecutive and, lastly, simultaneous (for example, Alonso 1999). The objective of translation was, until very recently, the intellectual operation of translating, with two stages of progression, namely general translation and specialised translation. In this article, I will focus on questioning the grounds for establishing the aforementioned translation objectives and plans, in order to suggest a general pedagogical update. My aim is to highlight certain aspects of translation teaching which can be improved, so that they may at least be avoided in models of semi-attendance-based or distance learning.

Generally speaking, translation classes are good but leave room for improvement. They are still often taught in conditions that differ greatly from those of the professional world (in terms of the use of professional tools and reference documentation, for example), are not highly demanding (something that is directly related to excessive numbers of students), have confusing objectives (a result of the lack of coordination between classes within a single syllabus) and provide somewhat modest results, as demonstrated by the long apprenticeship on work-experience placements required by recent graduates in order to be able to market their skills. Regardless of whether or not teachers' pedagogical training has been updated, this is still not the case in all classrooms, in some of which work continues to be carried out jointly (rather than in teams), with magisterial solutions, and with the focus of classes being on teachers and / or interaction of an academic nature within a group. The assignments handed in, which are not likely to be numerous, are still sometimes performed by hand and are assessed by applying criteria based

on contrastive linguistics with alterations, addenda and nuances here and there, showing a lack of unification where correction criteria are concerned (Waddington 2000).

This is not only a Spanish problem; indeed, translation is better taught and learned in Spain than in other countries with more sizeable GNPs. However, we cannot take consolation from the fact that this problem applies to everybody. To begin with, we have to persevere with improving the methods used to teach a profession whose profile, nature and expectations are changing.

2. Areas in which improvements can be made

2.1. Scant relationship with the market

There are many reasons for describing the situation in this way. The first is that translation and interpreting in Spain has changed from being an area with a high demand for workers to a field in which professionalisation is urgently required. Specifically, there is a need for academic professionalisation, in terms of pedagogy and research alike, which also includes restricting or doing away with the ridiculous administrative obstacles that currently make it difficult to maintain permanent contact with a changing and continually expanding market, something sought after by teachers of applied studies with a clear professional focus.

2.2. Absence of a theoretical foundation appropriate to the situation

The second reason consists of the scarcity of convincing theoretical models that make it possible to understand the process and break it down into specific objectives, in order to establish a progression that is consistent with objectives. At present, the prevailing paradigm is that of functionalism, for which no developed pedagogical applications have been found, with the exception of the use of translation commissions to define the *skopos*. Functionalism is a rationalist paradigm, which tends to limit its scope to the conscious and intellectual operations involved in translation, overlooking issues related to professional production, such as teamwork or relationships with customers, which subsequently prove to be essential for operating successfully in the professional market. While certain functionalist advances introduced to classes have brought about improvements in quality, they have done so to the detriment of the realism of the task. This is the case, for example, of translation commissions. As a summary of all the determinants of every type which should govern the interpretation of the original text and the production of the new text, commissions make it possible to specify the task in question and are extremely useful in terms of initiation to translation. However, they are counterproductive in advanced courses, as customers rarely provide such information, nor are even aware that it is required, and it is the task of the translator to establish the commission of a text.

2.3. Obsolete order of the progression of learning

The third reason involves the ordering of material and its progression, or, in other words, an outdated pedagogical tradition that has been unthinkingly and unreservedly adopted in Spain. As mentioned previously, progression in translation today tends to be established in two stages, namely general and specialised translation. The latter stage is usually subdivided into an introduction to specialised translation and specialised translation itself within a specific area, a notable example of which is “legal and financial” translation.

Firstly, attention should be drawn to the error of conceiving of general translation in the way that was the case until the nineties. This concept gives rise to translation courses that focus on disclosure, featuring texts intended for a wide audience and which are mostly extracted from the daily or weekly press. These courses appear to lack partial objectives, although they may have a vague overall goal, that of offering “an initial approximation to the complexity of the phenomenon of translation”. However, it must be pointed out that there is no such thing as a text that is common to everyone who makes up a given linguistic community. This means that the title of general masks a high degree of abstraction that is not geared to a specific, well-defined type of reader, as the variety of topics determines the subgroups that make up the intended readership; nobody reads a newspaper in its entirety. Particularly worthy of note among the consequences is the assumption of a broader basic knowledge than that held by those who make up the extreme and heterogeneous group referred to as the “general public”.

From a linguistic point of view, in the case of disclosure, which can be considered to be a stem of the public varieties of a language (i.e. those intended for use in public fields), it is necessary to highlight the greater variation and complexity of vocabulary and syntactic and rhetorical structures. This is due to a large percentage of texts for the purpose of disclosure being produced by professional writers of all types, which distinguishes them from other text types, such as those which are most widely used in specialised-translation classes and whose authors are usually non-professional writers. It is not surprising that many students find specialised translation more straightforward than its general counterpart; the fact is that it is. Although no formal study has been undertaken in this respect, we can state that, in final degree-course examinations at Granada, there is a clear tendency to obtain higher marks when working with specialised texts than with “general” texts.

The volume of business and the social importance of translation for the purpose of disclosure make it interesting in its own right and endow it with a significance that is not reflected in study plans, except through general translation. Whether alone or as a translation course focused on changes in register due to the adaptation of texts for another objective, translation for the purpose of disclosure should be part of translators’ education and should figure among the advanced courses therein; this is the status that we have given it at the Universidad de Granada. Additionally, the first steps in learning to translate should be geared to solving a range of the most common problems (those that appear in most texts of one type or another) and to doing so not only from a utilitarian perspective but also as a means of promoting reflection on the communicative peculiarities and needs of certain target groups, in order to encourage students to constantly consider the specific nature of the complex acts of communication that every act of translation and interpretation involves (Muñoz 1999).

Alongside this type of translation, and often regarded, if not defined, as its opposite, is specialised translation. Such translation usually places great emphasis on prior documentation, the efficient use of terminology and “correct” translation, i.e. free from the verbal artfulness that is not considered to be appropriate in texts of this “type” and focused on syntactic structures that are as simple as they are firmly established, and which bring Nida’s kernels to mind. Specialised translation tends to be defined on the basis of subject area, apparently (merely) due to market criteria (professional opportunities) but particularly as a result of other circumstances. For example, the importance given to “legal and financial” translation is unrealistically excessive (Schmitt 1998), because the title of officially-endorsed interpreter benefits from legal protection and confers prestige in the form of a state-backed guarantee. The effects of this perspective include detracting from the importance of commercial translation, which is much more significant than financial translation in terms of volume, and, where texts that involve officially-endorsed translation are concerned, restricting the topics to which such translation is applied to those related to legal matters. However, an officially-endorsed translation, understood as a type of translation characterised by its intended receivers, its use, its formal characteristics and the fact that it is signed by a notary public, may be performed for all texts.

“Scientific and technical” translation tends to be another popular speciality, and one which is defined in a manner that is as vague as it is broad. For example, the definition allows for the concurrence of texts for the purpose of scientific disclosure, instruction manuals for electrical household appliances and sheets of technical conditions for public tenders. The problem of a lack of scientific culture among students from a predominantly humanities-based background is compounded by the more difficult task of offering education that is valid for many, if not all, of the branches of scientific knowledge and their entire development and technological application. In some centres, such as the UJI (Universitat Jaume I) in the case of audiovisual translation and the UAB (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) where literary translation is concerned, other specialities are beginning to emerge.

The current idiosyncrasy of these so-called specialities turns them into courses of a different nature. While the aim of “legal and financial” translation is to provide students with a broad conceptual base that will allow them to understand texts and their purposes, the “scientific and technical” field focuses more on preparing students to tackle different complex texts with assistance from specialists in the topic in question. These objectives are complementary,

meaning that concentrating on one or another type of specialised translation conceived in this way has a detrimental effect in terms of the completeness of training for students. In contrast, both focuses seem to be complementary as regards training students to be flexible, which, as they will soon discover, is a market requirement. No other profession dispels the myth of a dichotomy between humanism and technology like ours. As can be seen, there are grounds for questioning the current criteria in terms of topics or, at least, their exclusivity within the order of the subject.

2.4. Unrealistic pedagogical strategies

The fourth reason, which is closely related to the two that precede it, is the widely held assumption that learning through practice (known as rotten learning) provides good results. It is undeniable that the emphasis given to the practical component of programmes is of vital importance; indeed, it should be greater. One concept of the applied aspects of a degree course consists of controlled exposure to realistic situations, making it possible for students to acquire a minimum level of relevant experience in order to prepare them to resolve the problems that occur most commonly in professional practice and the paradigm-related difficulties of where to develop generalisations as regards the optimal approach to translating. However, the gap in terms of real conditions as regards the use of technology, volume of work, deadlines, complexity of texts and other factors does not make it possible to include many of the most common problems, which leads to the involuntary distortion of the relative importance of those that are covered.

The above is not included by way of an excuse; it is rather an inventory of factors that justify my proposal for updating the parameters that define the way translation is taught in university institutions.

3. Learning

Fundamentally, learning consists of a modification of behaviour. It is mainly intuitive and is based on conditioning. Rather than being the object of a class, conditioning should therefore be incorporated into all classes as a working methodology. The manner in which classes are delivered has a direct influence on the mental and working routines that students adopt.

Behavioural modification is virtually automatic and occurs as a result of adaptation geared to obtaining specific results. This means that any manner of giving a class will encourage students to adopt mental and working routines. Consequently, in addition to the fact that traditional classes, as described previously, make it impossible to adopt realistic routines that can be transferred to professional activity, they also promote other routines whose usefulness is questionable (Séguinot 1991, as regards comparative translation strategies). Proof of this can be found in the difficulties that a significant number of students are still experiencing as regards adapting to a computerised environment that has been the standard for professionals since the middle of the eighties. One of the direct results of this analysis is the conclusion that translation classes should be given in realistic environments, in classrooms in which IT equipment is available, for example. To give another example, students also have problems when faced with large texts, as practical work undertaken in classes mainly focuses on short texts. These problems can be traced back to the manner in which the subject and its divisions are conceived, which is reflected in the criteria of order for the subject, something that I will deal with below.

4. Aspects of the subject's order

At this stage, it should be pointed out that the progression proposed in each of the following sections is divided into three stages. This is a somewhat simplistic reduction, due to the need to adapt progression in terms of pedagogy and teaching to the reality of university education. In Spain, there is no current study plan under which the beginning of practical translation is relegated to a point subsequent to the third or fourth four-month period of a course. Each stage could therefore correspond to at least two four-month periods. However, there is a more weighty theoretical argument in favour of this reduction: as we still do not have sufficient empirical material to allow us to establish learning-based progression, it is a good idea to stipulate the minimum number of stages in order to avoid ending up with an unnecessarily complicated plan. As one stage coincides with the beginning of the course, and another with its conclusion, an

approximation in three parts makes it possible to work on specific tasks in the intermediate phase and adds just a single stage to the minimum of two.

4.1. Text types

Topic-focused subjects within specialised translation do not usually encompass anything other than the text types that are apparently most representative thereof, such as contracts and patents in the case of legal translation, or dubbing where audiovisual translation is concerned. Many texts that appear to be peripheral but which account for a significant part of translation work are thus overlooked, such as computer games, in the latter of the cases mentioned. Furthermore, certain text types that are important in their own right transcend any single topic-focused area, whilst maintaining their homogeneity. This is true of research articles, of online help files for computer programs and of books. In fact, the publishing sector is an area of the market in which graduates are still not widely present, perhaps because this type of working profile is covered in very little detail in classes. As can be seen, there are a number of approaches based on text type which should somehow be reflected in training; after all, if demand is the touchstone of the market, these approaches constitute a criterion that is just as valid for organising learning as that of topic-focused areas.

In terms of a textual typology, progression can be established, first of all, by focusing on the texts that are translated most frequently. This covers everything from simple civil-registry documents to brochures for tourists, including press magazines and packaging for food and cosmetics. The second stage could focus on paradigmatic texts for each of the specialities encompassed by a study plan, which are assumed to be those that are most sought after in professional circles. A degree of polyvalence can thus be attained, making it possible to tackle varied texts, something that happens all the time, as it is the market (i.e. each professional's customer base) that determines specialisation. In this progression, the third stage would concentrate on common text types within a specific speciality. This would no longer involve the most typical texts from each field (such as instructions for usage in the case of technical translation, or academic records where legal translation is concerned), but rather a range of possibilities within a single speciality. Thus, legal translation could look at less common and more complex texts, such as contracts.

4.2. Extralinguistic determinants

Texts can also be classified according to the homogeneity of formal, non-linguistic determinants. It is thus possible to envisage courses, which actually exist, on officially-endorsed translation (independent courses, in this case), dubbing, subtitling and, more recently, localisation. To these prototypical examples we must add the much more numerous and subtle determinants that ascertain not only structure and content, but also the format of the text provided. If we consider the change in the production chain, which sees translators made responsible for more or less straightforward graphic-design work and the change of formats entailed by the increasingly common electronic versions of texts, we have to conclude that every text is, to some degree, subordinate. An example of these determinants is constituted by the publication rules of a given journal, which require the use or otherwise of margins of a certain width, specific fonts, standardised headers, abstracts of a particular length and a bibliography organised in accordance with a particular system.

A possible progression would begin with orthographical and typographical rules, as they affect all text types. A second stage would examine the influence of other semiotic systems that also function within the same communicative apparatus (cinema, comics, advertising, computer programs, etc.). The third stage could focus on situational determinants, such as customers and proofreaders, provided that we assume a certain degree of maturity and the development, although possibly incipient, of professional ethics, together with accumulated experience that allows for introspection.

4.3. Tasks

Previously, reference was made to the need to include disclosure as a speciality among advanced translation courses and, by doing so, we also established a new criterion of order for the subject, taking a specific task from those that translators have to perform as a basis. This

criterion can only be described as new within the field of translation; as we have seen, it is the predominant and traditional criterion where interpreting is concerned. Introducing this criterion to translation leads to the formulation of other possibilities, such as courses on textual revision (which already exist in certain places, while terminological courses, which constitute one of the specialities of the new study plan at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, are widely available), pre-editing for automatic processing, on-sight translations, etc. As all the tasks should converge in the final stage, and the combination of comprehension and expression should be the main objective in the first stage, the intermediate stage is best suited to courses geared to specific professional tasks. As can be seen, there are several pertinent criteria of order and, when seen in this light, the current situation seems poor.

5. Other pedagogical criteria

The criteria set out so far focus on the manner of organising the accumulation of experience in the process. There are other criteria that fall outside of this perspective.

5.1. Professional aspects of the processes of translation and interpretation

Translation is a social institution, in the sense that it is not a natural entity, which is defined by tacit agreement and maintained by tradition, subject to the oscillations of social change. Current study plans do not tend to do justice to the social aspects (which include the productive aspects) of translation. This is a complex perspective, as it has a bearing on other problems. For example, the inclusion of social aspects implies establishing, with much greater precision than is presently the case, the profile or profiles suggested for our graduates upon leaving and the knowledge that is essential for performing the tasks that correspond to each profile, ranging from how to divide work up within in an individual production chain to invoicing rules.

A point of particular relevance for the market is the “gross” translation capacity of recent graduates. The market seems to fix daily production at approximately 2,000 or 2,500 words. Some localisation companies look for 2,500 words / day for the translation of on-line help files and 1,500 where the translation of programs themselves are concerned (interface, dialogue windows, etc.). As regards university tradition, which revolves around education, the relative importance assigned to a particular aspect is gauged on the basis of the number of hours dedicated thereto in a study plan. This criterion is correct, as it reflects the perspective that is its source (it is an objective means of establishing and ordering priorities in study plans). It is also useful, because it allows for student mobility and a minimum degree of consistency between centres. However, it is neither appropriate (indeed, the Bologna Declaration represents the end of the concept of credits) nor sufficient, just as it is insufficient to indicate the number of years spent translating in a CV without referring to the volume of work undertaken. From a professional point of view, it is helpful to establish minimum levels of productivity and to guarantee that recent graduates are capable of attaining them. Thus, learning progression should be accompanied by an increase in speed or the capacity to translate. The optimal level for a recent graduate currently stands at around 500 words / hour, in order to reach the desired output in five hours and to have three more for documentation, terminological checks and graphic-design work. Intermediate objectives should be established within each stage of progression which, until more detailed knowledge is available, can be expressed in terms of regular increases from one four-month period to the next. Moreover, as the volume translated is of greater relevance for the market, a study plan or the development thereof should also establish an overall quantity of words to be translated, which would then have to be distributed between different types and classes. It would thus be possible to offer the industry a guarantee of quality in terms that it finds relevant.

From a professional point of view, meanwhile, students should begin by learning the different profiles of university leavers. A second stage would correspond to actual but general professional routines, from the use of templates for translation commissions to mastering the most commonly used professional tools, encompassing improvements to documentary and terminological strategies along the way. A final stage could correspond to relationships with customers, from quoting costs to delivering work. In general, all these aspects can be conceptualised as a progressive transfer of responsibility, geared to producing graduates who are capable of taking the first steps in the market.

In any case, this perspective involves a close approximation to the reality of the market. The complexity of the task of getting to know this market has, until now, been cited as a reason for avoiding laborious attempts at such an approximation. It is clear that the participants in this symposium are unanimous in the belief that a general and thorough study of the market is required, as opposed to the lack of interest of some of our colleagues, who choose to emphasise other aspects of translation. This attitude results in the space designated for these social aspects being covered by psychoanalytical and literary analyses whose incidence in cultural, social, political, professional and financial reality is practically zero. They are undoubtedly of interest, but to those who work in the field of translation studies rather than to translators.

5.2. The intellectual scope of the profession

Nonetheless, all university studies (public studies, at least) should also be geared to human training. It is therefore necessary for subject syllabuses to include theoretical aspects and / or aspects that reflect upon translation. On the basis of my own experience as a student, a professional and a teacher, I can state that the first step required consists of questioning ideas related to language, communication and the very tasks involved in translation and interpreting, which students unconsciously accumulate as a result of the culture in which they are immersed. The second stage, which is necessary as it is to be applied immediately, is that of understanding the translation and interpreting processes in order, with accumulated experience, to finally engage in reflection upon the implications of the work of translators, ranging from the ethical circumstances involved to its place within all the intellectual work of a linguistic community or a polysystem. Naturally, it can be argued that such content is dealt with in greater depth in subjects dedicated exclusively thereto, such as Linguistics Applied to Translation and Translation Studies; however the concept being advocated here is not so much that of these topics being dealt with directly in practical translation classes as that of the coordination and consistency of these classes with the aforementioned subjects. Practical translation classes clearly present the task in an ideologically-neutral light, which is unrealistic, even where the translations that appear to be most “inoffensive” are concerned, such as that of an instruction manual for an electrical household appliance. There are resources, such as the analysis of published translations, that are pedagogically useful in their own right, but which can also lead to the beginning of reflection that is not only necessary in order to enrich university studies, but which is also essential in order to develop other aspects of professional and personal life, which are less tangible but no less important in a social situation involving great changes, where the developed countries are beginning to question established concepts such as intellectual property and national borders.

5.3. Mental aspects of the translation and interpreting processes

Additionally, translating and interpreting entail the development, reinforcing, diversification and speeding up of a series of mental operations that are already present in untrained speakers, although not to the same degree as is expected from professionals. As well as the criterion of precedence as regards the types of interpreting referred to previously, there is also the concept of progression based on the complexity of tasks (an increase in the number of statements from speakers in the consecutive mode, shadowing and paraphrasing activities prior to beginning simultaneous-interpretation exercises in ecologically valid conditions). There is not a great deal of justification for using this order, but it has proven to give results in classes.

The only genuinely popular doctrine where translation is concerned is that of translation strategies, whether this be the comparative versions thereof, which can be shown to be incorrect, or their more modern forms, which are derived from think-aloud protocols and are by no means exempt from problems that are just as serious as those that affect the former variety (Muñoz 2000). To this it is only possible to add the points made when analysing the current distinction between general and specialised translation. In order to provide a solution for this situation, it would be necessary to develop a typology of translation problems and establish a hierarchy of priorities or a logical succession that makes it possible to build upon the foundations. It is certainly true that it does not seem possible to place all translation problems in a simple typology. One possible solution consists of combining all the problems that can be

placed in a typology in initial courses, leaving anecdotes or case studies for a later date. Courses geared to initiation inevitably contain a great deal of contrastive linguistics and false-friend identification. The final stage should be that in which all aspects converge, in order to practice in an extremely realistic environment. The intermediate stage thus corresponds to specific subjects related to students' conduct and background.

6. Conclusions

In an ideal world, training would cover all the previously-mentioned criteria and possibilities separately, and more besides. However, study plans are not ideal but possibilistic, and they entail an inflexible prioritisation of interests. If we regard the aforementioned criteria of reorganisation as being necessary, we have to begin to develop proposals geared to standardisation among them, in order to include as many as possible in a single study plan. The optimal solution is to assign different objectives to each class, but the most realistic option involves combining various criteria within a single class and establishing concurrent progression in successive classes.

In the case of orders based on topics, western intellectual tradition prescribes beginning with general subject matter and working towards more specific topics, although it should not be forgotten that disclosure is another speciality. General subject matter, which is no longer identical to texts for the purpose of disclosure, should be developed as a range of the most commonly translated texts. It is unlikely that this approximation accounts for the full wealth of the phenomenon, but that does not necessarily have to be the objective of an initiation to translation. In fact, the wealth of the phenomenon should be apparent when studies have been completed and not before, as we assume that each subject provides a meaningful insight within the general picture.

Each translation class can also be given the objective of covering certain text types, depending on the frequency with which they occur and their importance, in harmony with all the other variables (for example, it is illogical to deal with books as a text type in a class on legal translation). Such an order can be maintained in all the courses within a degree syllabus. Furthermore, courses organised on the basis of extratextual determinants and specific tasks seem to be suited to an intermediate stage of training, if the goal of the final year is to consist of accentuating the realism of educational activities. To sum up, the parameters outlined here can be regarded as governing principles for organising learning progression in a way that attempts to cover all possibilities, this being the only option open to us, introducing multidimensional progression that is better suited to the basic elements of distance learning, such as the personalisation of content and the tutoring of students, than to regulated, presence-based teaching.

Up to this point, I have set out a mixture of knowledge and more-or-less justified opinions as regards the updating of the criteria that determine the content of translation classes, and I have attempted to propose progression that is justified or justifiable from each perspective. I believe that the time is right to establish a translation pedagogy in its own right, with generally-accepted empirical bases. The introduction of various levels of distance learning could represent a touchstone from which attendance-based education can also benefit. The proposals outlined herein thus constitute an ambitious research programme in which we can, and should, all participate.

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ASPECT	STAGE	initial	intermediate	final
	<i>topic</i>		general	introduction to specialities
<i>text types</i>		most common	paradigmatic	most frequently occurring
<i>tasks</i>		comprehension / expression	single professional tasks	complete professional tasks
<i>extralinguistic determinants</i>		orthographical and typographical	semiotic	situational
<i>professional</i>		profiles of leavers	<input type="checkbox"/> actual general routines <input type="checkbox"/> tools	relationships with others who make up production chains
<i>output</i>		300 words / hour	400 words / hour	500 words / hour
<i>theory</i>		critique of ideas received	study of processes	reflection on the product and process
<i>mental</i>		<input type="checkbox"/> classifiable problems <input type="checkbox"/> standard solutions	<input type="checkbox"/> specific tasks <input type="checkbox"/> justified reasons	<input type="checkbox"/> convergence of tasks, case studies <input type="checkbox"/> analogy-based solutions

Diagram: organisational criteria for learning progression in translation