

Competence and quality in the translation of specialized texts: investigating the role of terminology resources

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Introduction

The experiment reported here is part of a broader study (Antia, in press). Due to space constraints, the present discussion omits a number of relevant issues, which can however be found in chapter 3 of the broader study. Cognizant of this forum on empirical-experimental research in translation, the current discussion addresses certain issues that were not of primary concern in the main study. Now, that study was interested in determining how terminology resources created in order to extend the functional range of certain languages were actually meeting underlying goals (knowledge transfer, specialized communication, translation, etc.). With respect to translation, this interest must be seen against the backdrop of, on the one hand, complaints by translators regarding the inadequacy of terminology resources made available to them, and, on the other, the intuitive, pre-theoretical and retrospective basis for articulating these complaints.

1. Objectives of translation experiments

- a) To develop a methodology of situated analysis useful for the evaluation of terminology resources meant for translation, using a Nigerian glossary on legislative terms as a case study;
- b) to obtain process or on-line data on translators' interaction with a typical language planning-type terminology resource for the purposes of determining lines along which the resource could be optimized if such a need was established.

2. Hypotheses

Theoretical

With respect to the identification of terminological problems, protocols generated will not reveal any differences that could be correlated with the different working settings of a single translator versus several translators cooperating on the same task.

Working

- a) as the translation assignment involves specialized subject matter, experimental translators will have difficulties identifying and parsing multi-unit terms and LSP collocations, and the glossary will not be of much help;
- b) because the glossary has no definitions and is arranged alphabetically, the following will be expected: i) significant non-adoption of TL equivalents proposed by glossary; ii) considerable amount of time will be spent on the search for alternative equivalents; iii) translators' notions of success will be routinely wrong, that is, they will differ from intersubjectively verifiable facts in the subject domain;
- c) the effect of difficulties associated with processing terms will not be restricted to the lexical level, but will extend to textual considerations, notably cohesion.

3. Research design

Subjects

In all there were 4 experimental subjects —3 for the cooperative or dialogical translation (dTAP) and 1 for the individual translation (iTAP). In the dTAP, 1 subject is a university law teacher who was expected to be a major support for declarative or factual knowledge; the other 2 subjects teach language courses in the TL, including some *pedagogical translation*. For the iTAP, the experimental subject similarly teaches language courses in the TL, including some pedagogical translation. None of the subjects is a professionally trained/certified translator. No such training exists as yet in the TL (Hausa). (Implications of this profile are discussed in the main study.)

Stages

(For experimental subjects) Cognizant of this profile, subjects were briefed on aspects of procedural knowledge; there was a *pro forma* or warm-up experiment; the final video-taped experiment, which took place in university mass communication studio;

(For researcher) Terminological analysis of text to be translated into TL with the help of glossary. The text to be translated into Hausa follows:

Relevancy in debate

29. (1) Debate upon any motion, bill or amendment shall be relevant to such motion, bill or amendment, except in the case of a *substantive motion for the adjournment of the House*.

(2) When a motion is made for the adjournment of a debate or the House during any debate, or that the chairman do report progress or do leave the chair, the debate upon such a motion shall be confined to the matter of such motion; and a Member who

has made or seconded such a motion shall not be entitled to move or second any similar motion during the same debate.

(3) When an amendment proposes to leave out words and insert other words instead of them, debate upon the first question proposed on the amendment may include both the words proposed to be left out and those proposed to be inserted.

(4) On an amendment proposing to leave out words or to insert words debate shall be confined to the omission or insertion of such words respectively.

4. Results and discussion

Although differences were noted between the dTAP and iTAP subjects, in how the translation task was approached, their protocols reveal a common and recurring set of problems in relation to more or less special word combinations (multi-unit terms and those that are less clearly so). In adopting the approach of multiple triangulation (i.e. between-person and between-method strategies) through the use of the dTAP and iTAP procedures, the practical concern was to ensure that results obtained with respect to the glossary were not a fluke or merely the artifact of a particular setting with a given set of subjects. This decision of course implied that I was taking a theoretical stance. Indeed, underlying the first hypothesis was the question as to which dialogical think-aloud and individual think-aloud yields more or relevant data (see Stefanink 1995 on Lörcher 1991; House 1988 and Kussmaul 1995 on Krings 1986). My hunch was that both procedures were equally flawed, but for different reasons: relatively speaking, monologue is not a normal communication situation; *dialogical translation* is a rarity in professional practice, etc. Proceeding from this observation was the suspicion that both methods were equally useful, but perhaps not always for the same purposes. The finding in respect of the theoretical hypothesis suggests that attention needs to be focused on more specific points —e.g. problem identification, rationalization of solutions, etc.— rather than on discrediting one procedure by attempting to reach general, almost *manichean* good or bad, conclusions. So much for the theoretical hypothesis. Now, to the working hypotheses.

From the interaction of both groups of translators with the glossary, it emerged that 1) the glossary did not always enter multi-unit terms or special word combinations (e.g. underlined term in §1); and 2) when word combinations were entered, the glossary failed to justify to the users why equivalents proposed ought to be favorably considered. The consequences of the foregoing are varied. In the dTAP, point 1 above was a factor in the wrong identification (e.g. in §3 *first question* instead of *question proposed*) and parsing of terms, and this error had consequences that went beyond lexis and reached into matters of discourse and readability. For example: in the term underlined in §1, *for* is rendered in the TL in a way that expresses cause/consequence (because of), rather than the genitive sense (of). In the Hausa TL text, *substantive motion* is seen as the cause of adjournment of the House; conversely, *adjournment of the House* becomes a consequence of the former.

Because the wrong solutions were not always arrived at immediately after the glossary had been consulted, more or less lengthy time periods went into their pro-

cessing. The latter point can also be made in respect of the observation in 2 above. Point 2 was also a factor in the setting aside of glossary proposed equivalents for idiosyncratic or subject's own solutions, as is the case with the TL processing of *adjournment* (§2) in the context of *debate* and *House*. These solutions were often time-consuming, and were not always correct. Put differently, because the glossary did not offer definitions it had no way of influencing the intuition, or pre-knowledge, of experimental subjects. Such intuitions were generally based on general language and knowledge.

5. Conclusion: implications for the relationship between terminology and translation competence

Based on this on-line data, the broader study (Antia, in press) discusses challenges of multi-unit terms, orientation in specialized knowledge spaces, etc., in addition to developing a resource that implements these findings as a means of illustrating how terminology resources could be optimized to better serve language planning goals. Below, the experiments are reviewed from the very specific standpoint of competence in translation.

The findings of this study with non-professionals fit into a description model that views competence as a continuum and as self-updating, in other words, as a constant and dynamic confrontation between virtual, abstracted or previous knowledge and current, specific realities or challenges. In terms employed by De Beaugrande (1997), the former *specifies constraints* (or creates expectations, attitudes, etc.), whereas the latter *manifests constraints* (validates, modifies or invalidates expectations, attitudes, etc.). De Beaugrande speaks of the 'vital importance of this dialectic for every mode and event of experience, perception, cognition, and communication, however abstract or concrete.' (De Beaugrande 1997: 86). Applied to translating, the foregoing suggests that to be useful for practical purposes, virtual competence in translation, or the entire intellectual baggage possessed by a translator, must stand in a dialectical or mutually reinforcing relationship with the objects to which it is applied (texts to be translated and translation aids). Underlying this view of competence are the concepts of control, balance, interactivity involving virtual systems and current systems. One could in fact hypothesize that control or balance is inherent in all language mediation irrespective of the qualifications or circumstances of the mediators. With respect to what has been called factual knowledge, control is necessarily exercised in two spheres: 1) in the relationship between the translators' pre-knowledge and domain knowledge as recorded in a dictionary (and as related to a term/concept abstracted or taken out of its textual context); 2) in the relationship between knowledge recorded in a dictionary in respect of an abstracted term/concept on the one hand, and co(n)textual instantiations of this term/concept on the other.

By providing nothing but SL terms and TL equivalents, the glossary used by translators made it difficult to achieve that balance or control between convention and idiosyncrasy which is critical to the postulation of competent translation behavior. With respect to the first sphere of control, many of the *adjournment* terms

showed that the glossary failed to influence the idiosyncratic scenes activated in the translators' minds by corresponding term frames; in other words, the glossary failed to mediate between the translators' world knowledge and domain knowledge as reflected consistently in the text. With respect to the second sphere: if the glossary had provided descriptive information on concepts, then the conjecture might have been that it was this information that occasionally helped experimental subjects to see discrepancy or inconsistency between textual instantiation (*current system*) and system description (*virtual system*). In this regard, a reading of Gerzymisch-Arbogast (1996) is quite rewarding. The iTAP subject's reaction in one instance ('it is not *halting* they are doing. Close is what they are doing') would have implied that this subject had *competently* identified and dealt with what Gerzymisch-Arbogast would refer to as 'term contamination in text'. Because the glossary provides no such supporting or descriptive information, we see things spin out of control; specifically, we see the dominance of idiosyncratic interpretation—even while we note in the iTAP subject important signs of virtual competence (of the reading/text-analytical type that reminds of the so-called global strategies). Competence defined as control suggests that the translator needs to be empowered to *controllably* exercise his or her discretion of choice, to *controllably* justify to himself or herself why certain decisions are being taken.

Now, with respect to definitions in lexical resources (that claim to be especially useful for translators), procedural competence might be served better if the information provided was made to take into account the following: 1) that in a number of so-called specialized fields, knowledge and expression would reveal varying degrees of continuity with general knowledge and expression, and that between the two spheres there would occasionally be false cognates at the expression level; 2) that however specialized the domain in which a translator has to work at any given moment, s/he would a) seldom come to the task with a clean knowledge slate, and b) s/he would, at some point at least, balance off previous knowledge with information in a dictionary. The foregoing invites investigation into, or a review of existing research on, definitions—particularly from the perspective of persuasion, *marketing* novelty or modifying previous knowledge (as may sometimes be the case in language planning contexts). Mindful of the continuities and the context of innovation described above, it might be worthwhile conducting comparative research on how translators react to definitions that have explicit *instructional* frames (e.g. 'PROPOSITION'... is called X; by X is meant 'PROPOSITION', etc.) and those that do not have such frames. These frames do not necessarily have to be equated with discriminators (e.g. of subject field) that dictionaries sometimes provide in brackets when a headword has several senses.

Paradoxically, the need to control or to enhance procedural competence may not always be well-served when teachers unqualifiedly describe certain specialized dictionaries as *authoritative*. A dictionary so described for whatever reasons easily becomes *authoritarian*. It becomes authoritarian in the sense that the esteem with which it is held by the student creates a situation and an attitude of *deference* rather than *reference*. Only the latter, which involves control in the sense of the second sphere discussed earlier, is conducive to the development of that compe-

tence which one may situate at the intersection of procedural knowledge and subject knowledge. The dynamics of all text production (including specialized texts) and of meaning in text progression should by now suggest caution in the use of *fact resources* in the translation process. Such resources may not always account for text-immanent meaning.

The veracity of this proposition can be investigated further and, if confirmed, used as basis for sensitizing students as well as producers of dictionaries. In this regard, initiating or intensifying research in two areas could be helpful. First, probing for conflict between verbalized tentative decisions (outcome of text analysis, thus procedural competence) and decisions based on entries in dictionaries that are held in high esteem. Needless to say, the goal here would be to find out how otherwise adequate tentative decisions are dropped in favor of dictionary solutions. The second area of research would involve probing for conflict between a subject expert's notion of interlingual concept/term *equivalence* and that of the translator who is fairly knowledgeable in the subject field and who bases his or her decisions of interlingual equivalence on other considerations in the text being translated, rather than basing them purely on domain (extratextual) knowledge. A practical and perhaps pedagogically-sound project arising from both research strands could be mini-dictionaries of *strange* equivalents, or of fleeting/ephemeral equivalents so well known in interpreting.

The hypothesis would be that competence is probably enhanced when expert resources (both human and documentary) provide information that enables the translator to balance off virtual systems of knowledge with the constraints manifested in a current task, and when such resources are presented to students as intermediary control mechanisms, against which both textual reality (sphere 2) and prior knowledge (sphere 1) have to be balanced off.