

In search of a definition of translation competence: the structure and development of an ongoing research project

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Introduction

The research project presented here has been designed by a team of researchers of the Graduate Programme in Linguistic Studies of the Faculdade de Letras at UFMG (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais). Using a psycholinguistically oriented framework, the research aims at determining the main aspects of what accounts for *Translation Competence*. The starting point of the project design was work carried out by Alves (1995) in an attempt to describe cognitive traits of the translation process. The book *Zwischen Schweigen und Sprechen: Wie bildet sich eine transkulturelle Brücke?* introduces the results of empirically oriented research into the translation process carried out among Portuguese and Brazilian informants of different proficiency levels both in terms of language and of translation competence for the language pair German-Portuguese. Later on, another research project examined the validity of the results presented in Alves (1996) for another language pair, namely English-Portuguese. The analysis published in Alves (1997) also confirmed the preceding findings. The present work builds on Alves 1995/1996/1997 and was presented for discussion in a panel in the *First PACTE Seminar on Empirical-Experimental Research in Translation* organised by the PACTE group at the Facultat de Traducció i d'Interpretació of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in June 1999.

1. Theoretical framework

The literature on Translation Studies lacks a consistent description of the abilities and skills required from a professional translator. According to Shreve (1997: 121):

There is general agreement in the literature that translation ability is not an innate human skill, but there is considerable disagreement about the nature and distribution of translation ability. What this boils down to is a question of what knowledge and skills it takes to translate and the number of people who can be said to possess them. Several positions have been taken.

Our belief is that translation, as many other professional areas, involves not only innate skills but also theoretical learning and practical training. We assume that translation competence is not to be understood only as a repertoire, but rather as a role-specific competence. In this sense, competence includes not only the means (repertoire) but also the purported result, that is, competence is defined as the appropriate use of specific abilities according to surrounding demands (McClelland 1973), i.e., as a goal-oriented behaviour. In the domain of *Translation Competence* it includes and specifies the notion of competence as ability. The development of such a competence is precisely what is argued for by Toury (1995) with his notion of internalisation of translation norms. Toury believes that the intersection of dual language competencies does not necessarily create translation competence; it is an additional competence that does not appear solely because of bilingual abilities. Toury called this a *transfer competence*, an ability to transfer texts. The ability to transfer texts implies knowledge of structures that are not usually considered part of bilingual competence. In this respect, shared notions are a necessary step towards a comprehensive account of translation competence.

Because we believe that innate skills are an integral part of this competence, the project will deal with questions related to memory processing and the role of inferential mechanisms. Along the same line, due to our assumption that *Translation Competence* requires theoretical learning and practical training, we will also focus on empirically oriented experiments to measure the changes in the memory and inferential mechanisms of our informants before and after a training period. Bearing in mind a pragmatic (as investigated by Gonçalves) as well as a cognitive approach (as investigated by Rothe-Neves), we present below the investigative steps of this research project.

3. Objectives

General

- To set up parameters for a definition of *Translation Competence* and investigate its development in the training of translators.

Specific

- to evaluate the role of memory as a decision-making tool within the scope of the translation process;
- to establish the role of memory as a language-subsidary processing component for *Translation Competence*;

- to obtain empirical evidence for the development of a cognitive model of *Translation Competence*;
- to investigate different levels of *Translation Competence* and/or its sub-competencies;
- to determine under which principles and parameters *Translation Competence* and/or its sub-competencies operate;
- to propose a model of *Translation Competence* based on empirically validated evidence;
- to use the research findings for the development of translators' training programmes.

4. Hypotheses

Theoretical: Both memory and inference play a crucial role in the development of *Translation Competence*. The investigation of the relationship between memory and inference as solving problem tools for translators may shed light in the development/acquisition of *Translation Competence*.

Working: Concentrating the training of translators on the development of memory as well as of inferential operations may lead to a higher degree of efficiency and accuracy skills in translation tasks.

5. Research design

Samples/subjects (characteristics and size)

40 professional translators and students in the field of Translation Studies in the language pair English-portuguese chosen among:

- 10 Professional Translators in English-Portuguese, (Group 1);
- 20 Students of Translation in English-Portuguese, (Group 2);
- 10 Students of Translation in English-Portuguese (Group 3).

Corpus

- Two similar texts in English of about 300 words each to be translated into Portuguese by each informant in Phase 1;
- One text in English of about 300 words to be translated into Portuguese by each informant in Phase 3.

Experimental and control groups

- Two experimental groups, one of 10 professional translators and another one of 20 students of translation (Groups 1 & 2);
- One control group of students of translation which shall not be exposed to any formal training as proposed below (Group 3).

Phases

- Phase 1: Data gathering using a combination of instruments detailed in 5.5 before any formal training on working memory and inferential operations (Groups 1, 2 & 3);
- Phase 2: Formal training based on Alves (1997) aiming at the development of working memory skills and inferential operations (Groups 1 & 2);
- Phase 3: Data gathering using a combination of instruments detailed in 5.5 after formal training in Phase 2 for groups 1 & 2 (Groups 1, 2 & 3).

Data collection instruments

- Think-Aloud Protocols
- Recall Protocols
- Translog
- Working Memory Assessment Battery (verbal subset)

Data treatment instruments

- Content Analysis

6. Results obtained

Still under investigation.