

TRANSLATION ERROR ANALYSIS AND THE INTERFACE WITH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Anthony Pym

Published in *The Teaching of Translation*, Ed. Cay Dollerup & Anne Loddegaard, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1992, 279-288.

If the fear of falling into error introduces an element of distrust into science, which without any scruples of that sort goes to work and actually does know, it is not easy to understand why, conversely, a distrust should not be placed in this very distrust, and why we should not take care lest the fear of error is not just the initial error.
Introduction to *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baille

Empirical evaluations of translation teaching and learning are generally hampered by the complexity of the many fields involved, the subjectivity of the assessment methods used and the difficulty of obtaining representative samples and control groups. These factors tend to restrict clear results to very basic linguistic levels, and even then the interpretation of results requires a mostly lacking idea of what translation is, to what precise end it should be taught and exactly what effects empirical research can have on its teaching. In this context, the identification and analysis of translation errors requires a strong conceptual framework before it can ensure any heuristic validity. This in turn requires conceptually elaborate formalization of the problems to be dealt with, and perhaps some initial humility with respect to what empirical methods can hope to achieve. But most importantly, it requires that the issues to be addressed be very specific and sufficiently problematic to warrant considerable intellectual work.

In what follows, I shall propose a definitional framework for empirical research on a question that is problematic both within and between most of our institutions: namely, how translation classes (and institutions) should relate to foreign language classes (and institutions) at university level. I shall suggest that the relation between these two general teaching activities can be formalized in terms of a simple descriptive distinction between binary and non-binary errors, and that this distinction can generate working hypotheses which are potentially useful for the tempering of conflict-laden institutional relations.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM

I have a personal interest in the interface between foreign language teaching and

translation because I currently teach English and Spanish-English translation as two separate courses in a Spanish university-level translation institute (“Escuela Universitaria”). But the problem is more than personal. A few years ago, the Spanish Ministry of Education published a green paper proposing a graduate programme in translating and interpreting to replace the three-year diplomas currently offered. All self-proclaimed experts and interested parties were invited to make submissions for or against the proposed programme. The result was an extensive public debate finally brought together in the form of a book (Consejo de Universidades: 1988) in which one finds German departments citing the German model as definitive, French departments citing the French model as more advanced, English departments not knowing what to cite but talking vaguely about “European levels” (still a synonym of superiority in Spain), and, more dangerously, non-English departments of language and literature (“filología”) generally complaining about translation institutes taking away their students and pointing out that they, the departments of language and literature, have traditionally taught translation anyway... so why should translation have a separate institutional location? The arguments for and against are as complicated and contradictory as they are short-sighted and politically motivated. The level of debate is mostly appalling. And nowhere, at no stage, is there any reference to concrete data or empirical research of any but the most haphazard kind. Spain has since made its centralized decision - a mediocre but democratic four-year model - on the basis of opinions, not data, for better or for worse.

The role of empirical research should not be to replace such processes. But research should at least put forward enough facts and figures for democratic debate to develop in a mildly intelligent way.

Unfortunately, when I became interested in this problem as a consequence of the green paper, I soon found out that the reason why no empirical research had been cited was that there was no empirical research readily available for citation. This may simply reflect the limits of libraries in Spain, but I suspect it also reflects a very real absence of useful investigation.

The main problem I faced with respect to empirical research was thus to determine not so much the best way to apply it directly to the teaching of translation, but the most useful way to address the existing institutions and their debates. This was no more than a principle of time-saving realism. Let us imagine, for example, that a piece of research hypothesizes and finds that translation should only be taught in specialized translation institutes. Its conclusion will almost certainly be ignored or dismissed as propaganda simply because the power structures existing in Spanish academia are such that translation is and will continue to be used as a way of learning foreign languages. A similar rejection, albeit from different quarters, would no doubt meet research hypothesizing and maintaining the desirability of using translation as part of a broad

humanist education rather than promoting early specialization. Or again, a conclusion requiring that students have a perfect command of foreign languages before learning about translation may be justified by as many facts and figures as you like, but it will not be adopted in Spain simply because it would mean teaching translation to virtually empty classes. No matter how solid the conclusions reached, there will still be goats with the sheep, sheep with the goats, and no simple examination is going to sort them out or even put the competent sheep and goats together. If research is to address such contexts, it has to be more cunning than confrontational. Initial definitions and hypotheses have to be formulated very carefully.

In the case of the green paper debate, there were two related questions to be answered. First, do courses in translation require a special institutional location? Second, at what level of university education should specialist courses in translation begin? Obviously, an answer to either question implies a basic response to the other; they are really the same question about the ideal relation between two teaching activities.

But there is an even more fundamental question at stake here. After all, if one cannot say what translation is, it is very difficult to say where or when it should be taught.

A DEFINITION OF TRANSLATIONAL COMPETENCE

The Spanish translation institutes have worked hard to have their teaching classified as part of “applied linguistics” and their area of knowledge described as “linguistics applied to translation”. However, from the perspective of the questions at stake in public debate, this is as good as shooting oneself in the foot, since linguistics is minimally a description of languages, and translation should thus forever remain under the tutelage of language learning: the answers are thus given before the research has begun. To avoid such pitfalls, let us describe not translation itself, but the specifically translational competence that is presumably to be imparted within the tertiary education system. Avoiding reference to linguistics, this competence may minimally be defined as the union of two skills (cf. Pym: 1990):

- The ability to generate a TT (target text) series of more than one viable term (TT1, TT2...TTn) for a ST (source text).
- The ability to select only one TT from this series, quickly and with justified confidence, and to propose this TT as a replacement of ST for a specified purpose and reader.

Together, these two skills form a specifically translational competence to the extent that their union concerns translation and nothing but translation. They have little to do with strictly linguistic competence. There can be no doubt that translators need to know a good deal about grammar, rhetoric, terminology, world knowledge, common sense and

strategies for getting paid correctly, but the specifically translational part of their practice is strictly neither linguistic, common nor commercial. It is a process of generation and selection between alternative texts. This is presumably what should be taught in the translation class. More interestingly, it is not what is usually taught in the language class.

A DEFINITION OF BINARY AND NON-BINARY ERRORS

The definition of translational competence may be used to define a translation error as a manifestation of a defect in any of the factors entering into the above skills. But such simple negation puts relatively little order into a very confused field, basically because errors may be attributed to numerous causes (lack of comprehension, inappropriateness to readership, misuse of time) and located on numerous levels (language, pragmatics, culture), but also because the terms often employed to describe such errors (over-translation, under-translation, discursive or semantic inadequacy, etc.) lack commonly agreed distinctions or fixed points of reference: “equivalence” has been used and abused so many times that it is no longer equivalent to anything, and one quickly gets lost following the wanderings of “discourse” and associated concepts. Although it is relatively easy to produce a terminological system of three or seven or perhaps twenty odd types of translation error and then find examples to illustrate the phenomenal level and presumed causality of each, it is quite a different matter to classify errors as they actually appear in translated texts, where elements of different types are perpetually mixed and numerous cases straddle the presupposed distinctions. Such classifications will always have either too few or too many terms, at least for as long as there is no clear awareness of why translation errors should be classified in the first place.

When faced with this problem - I was operating with a list of some fourteen types of error, which is a wholly unsatisfactory number -, I was eventually forced to retreat to the bunker, working out the above definition of translational competence and then reasoning why I wanted to classify errors. This meant bracketing off all questions of phenomenal level and presumed causality. Whatever the nature and provenance of translation errors, my working definition of translational competence implies that they should all have the same basic form: they should all involve selection from a potential TT series of more than one viable term. This is what I want to call the non-binarism of translational errors. A binary error opposes a wrong answer to the right answer; non-binarism requires that the TT actually selected be opposed to at least one further TT1 which could also have been selected, and then to possible wrong answers. For binarism, there is only right and wrong; for non-binarism there are at least two right answers and then the wrong ones.

I should insist here that the terms binary and non-binary are not at all technical. They

simply describe the most elemental forms of the errors one encounters when correcting a translation. In fact, they correspond to what I was doing before I attempted to rationalize my corrections, since binary errors were earning a simple line through them (“It’s wrong!”), whereas non-binary errors were graced with wavy or straight underlining and the need for further discussion (“It’s correct, but...”). I suggest that, like prose and verse, most of us are using binarism and non-binarism without knowing it.

This very basic description of two kinds of error is of interest in that it offers an elegant way of dispatching certain very naïve approaches to translation teaching. If, for example, a literalist approach can only locate the TT “faire un discours” for the ST “make a speech” and is not willing to consider any alternative TT1 or TT2 (cf. Newmark: 1985), then that approach might concern languages or a terminologist’s paradise, but its fundamental binarism has nothing to do with translational competence.

The basic definitions I am outlining also present the peculiar advantage of discrediting the simplistic hypothesis that the correction of binary errors belongs to the language class and that of non-binary errors to the translation class. Although all translational errors are non-binary by definition (my definition), this does not mean that all non-binary errors are necessarily translational. Obviously, non-binarism is going to enter the language class at anything beyond the most basic levels, just as binary errors are going to occur in the translation class. Both kinds of error should be corrected in both situations, wherever students need it and teachers are able to do it. The distinction to be hypothesized must then concern not where these errors occur, but how one should proceed with their correction. The analysis of translation errors inevitably leads to an analysis of translation teaching.

DEFINITIONS OF LIMITS TO TRANSLATION TEACHING

The teaching of translation may be described as the transfer of translational competence from teacher to student. But we may now also describe it as the sum of communication acts by which translational non-binary errors are produced and converted into their opposite, namely translational knowledge. The range of such acts may be seen as bounded by a lower limit, their interface with language teaching. But there is also an upper limit beyond which translation should no longer be taught. This is perhaps best explained through an example.

A Spanish restaurant in the Canary Islands wanted its menu translated into French, English and German. One of the more problematic terms was “tapas”. In the hands of students, and with a little fudging, this gave rise to the series “covers”, “lids”, “hors d’oeuvres”, “something to nibble while you’re having your drink”, “amuse-gueules”, “snacks”, “small portions”, and the transcription “tapas” (the slightly more complicated French variants are analyzed in Caminade and Pym: 1991). None of these terms would

appear to be ideal, but there are obviously various quite different degrees of incorrectness at stake. The first attempts - “covers” and “lids” - are clearly wrong and there is little else to be said; they are binary, and thus not properly translational. But each of the remaining terms could be described as adequate on one level or another; they are non-binary, subject to the form “It’s correct, but...”. Numerous considerations may follow this “but...”. Why use “hors d’oeuvres” when the same term is needed elsewhere in the same menu to translate “entremeses”? Why resort to paraphrase (“Something to nibble...”) when the printer’s full-colour layout does not allow space for more than about fifteen letters? Why sell Spain to English-speakers in French (“amuse-gueules”)? Why equate “tapas” with the non-equivalent rituals of “snacks” (a packet of crisps might be a “snack”, but not really a “tapa”)? And so on.

Each of these properly non-binary errors gives rise to something more than just a correction. The form “It’s correct, but...” could be followed by a discussion of anything from printing procedures to the functions of texts for tourists or comparative gastronomy. The translation class allows one to begin with something like “It’s correct, but perhaps too long...”, whereas the language class would probably tend to foreclose discussion with the inverse pragmatic weighting: “It’s perhaps too long, but correct”. So much for the lower limit of translation teaching.

Let us suppose that the discussion of non-binary errors is a way of teaching translation, producing translational knowledge. But there are obviously limits as to how much knowledge can be produced on the basis of each error, and thus how much time should be used for each discussion. In our example, there are only relatively slight advantages and disadvantages to distinguish between “snacks” (referentially adequate but somehow too multiculture-specific), “small portions” (alongside “petites portions” and “kleine Portionen”, since the menu then lists the actual contents of each “tapa” such that the ST heading in fact only indicates quantity) and “tapas” (surely English tourists like to take home a few Spanish words with them?). Different professional translators would very probably choose different terms and, as Quine supposes when explaining indeterminism, “one translator would reject another’s translation...” and yet they could all be correct (1975). On this level, arguments between translators could be continued indefinitely. However, as Katz has replied to Quine, the difference between two different but equally correct translations should be insignificant anyway (1978: 234). It is not easy to see how discussion of their nuances can be fruitful.

There is then an upper limit to the range of communicative acts by which translation can effectively be taught. This limit might be defined in terms of a point of diminishing returns beyond which each successive unit of time corresponds to a decreasing production of knowledge. The communicative act should terminate once there is nothing of significance to be communicated; one must know when to move on to the next problem.

The lower and upper limits of teaching in the translation class may thus be represented in terms of an unequal distribution of time. Binary errors should be subject to very quick punctual correction. The time used for the correction of non-binary errors, on the other hand, should extend for as long as significant differences remain, terminating quickly at the point of diminishing returns.

The notion of limits to translation teaching allows the interesting hypothesis that it is possible to teach translation even when students are making even quite numerous binary errors: since the binary level can be treated far more quickly than non-binary errors, any impediment to teaching will come not from the total number of errors, but from the total time required to correct them.

AN UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF AUTHORITY

Although these few ideas accept highly imperfect teaching situations, they are by no means neutral with respect to the way translation is most often taught. In fact, they have a lot to do with some of André Lefevere's more perspicacious comments:

... translation is mainly taught on the locutionary level and this fact explains, in its turn, why so many textbooks purporting to teach translation turn out, after some scratching of the surface, to be little more than a rehash of currently dominant linguistic theories, combined with a dosage of stylistics and remedial language learning. (1985: 239)

One could equally say that translation is mainly taught as the correction of binary errors, below our lower limit. But Lefevere goes further in his analysis, attributing a certain causality to prolonged binarism:

The teacher is supposed to make competent translators out of his or her students, and the only level on which the teacher can judge that competence, inside the classroom, is that of language [...]. The teacher tends to limit competence to the only kind he or she can more or less safely circumscribe in his or her capacity of first person of an (un)holy trinity consisting of teacher, grammar and dictionary. (1985: 239-240)

In other words, what we are calling binarism is based on the authority of the classroom situation and standard reference texts. Right is right and wrong is wrong because there are unquestionable or at least unquestioned authorities who say so. This is as it should be. The dictionary, the grammar and the linguistic competence of the teacher are there to ensure that the language class starts from a binary base. However, these authorities are also there so that when the same binary errors appear in the translation class, correction can be as quick as it is authoritative: a simple line through an error should be enough to tell the student to look up or check the correct form. The distribution of

authority thus reinforces the unequal distribution of correction time in the translation class.

The problem with non-binary errors is that there is no readily available authority for their immediate correction. Catford's early belief in translation equivalents had to assume "the authority of a competent bilingual informant or translator" (1965: 27), but Quine's indeterminism, not to mention our definition of translation errors as non-binary, posits that, even if informants and translators could systematically be brought into the classroom (and exchange programmes should go some way to making this possible), equally authoritative informants or translators will give equally correct but different translations. Simple reference to authority is thus not enough to resolve a non-binary situation. Correction on the non-binary level cannot be authoritative, but must instead be based on the principles of discussion and negotiation, eventually leading if not to full accord then at least to agreements to disagree.

But authority moves in curious ways. If it should not extend too far beyond the binary level, it nevertheless threatens to return at or beyond the point of diminishing returns. There is a style of authority given to the prolonged paring of subtly nuanced variants, flaunting presumed expertise in the potentially endless search for the exact term, or giving lengthy explanations of details that apparently cannot be explained because untranslatable. This would be, at worst, the traditional authority of Hispanic "filología", whether applied to the teaching of foreign languages or to translation. I have no qualms at all in naming authoritative pedantry as the reason why it is necessary to recognize an upper limit on translation teaching: the land beyond the point of diminishing returns might be for academic experts, but it is not for professional translators with time constraints, nor for those employed to train professional translators with time constraints.

FIVE HYPOTHESES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The above definitions and considerations should be rich enough to permit the generation of testable hypotheses concerning the relation between the teaching of translation and the teaching of languages.

At their simplest level, such hypotheses may be based on the ratio of binary to non-binary errors in a translation or series of translations. This ratio will obviously vary according to the nature of the text and the proposed translation purpose, but should also reveal general tendencies able to characterize the learning process. My own limited empirical research suggests that the following hypotheses could describe these tendencies in a way of interest to the institutional problem to be addressed:

Progress towards non-binarism: Even though the language class should reduce binary errors at the same time as the translation class reduces non-binary errors, students'

overall progress may be measured as an increasing proportion of non-binary errors (that is, a decreasing proportion of binary errors).

Principle of ultimate convergence: The general tendency towards non-binarism should appear in both the language class and the translation class, such that completion of an adequate learning period may be associated with the point where both classes eventually deal almost exclusively with non-binary errors (my final-year language class is based on the analysis of parallel texts converging with those dealt with in the translation class).

Principle of revelation: The proportion of non-binary errors does not increase smoothly, but at some point undergoes a rapid decrease, indicating a revelation or a relatively sudden awareness that translation is not simply a matter of literalist fidelity.

Provocation of revelation: The moment of revelation may to some extent be provoked by the translation of texts for which the proportion of non-binary errors is initially very high. This particularly concerns authentic and authentically badly written texts to which literalist fidelity is impossible or at least open to prolonged and fruitful discussion.

Transferability of translational competence: The structure of an early decrease within a general increase in the proportion of non-binary errors is not specific to language pairs, but is highly transferable from one translation situation to another. As basic educational psychology suggests - and as I have had occasion to prove -, students deprived of translation classes in one language pair may nevertheless make significant progress in that pair by applying the awareness and general principles learnt with respect to other language pairs. This in turn suggests that there is no strict correlation between progress and the syllabus of any one class.

The main thrust of these hypotheses is the suspicion that effective coordination between classes is probably more important than ensuring coherent syllabi within individual classes. This argument, based on adequately falsifiable premises, in turn directly addresses the divisions between translation and language teaching: whatever the mediocrities of democratic decisions, the general suggestion is that, if translators are to be trained, we simply cannot turn our institutional backs on the teaching of foreign languages.

POSTSCRIPT: ERRORS AND GLASSES HALF-FULL

If the success of a conference can be measured by the extent to which it modifies the participants' attitudes and practices, I have no hesitation in recognizing my debts to Elsinore. Since returning, I have had to correct final examinations in English language and Spanish-English translation courses. That is, I have had to identify and penalize errors. But I have done so bearing in mind some of the criticisms and commentaries made with respect to the above approach. Christiane Nord, amongst others, was

unhappy that my paper focused on the notion of error instead of the far more positive notion of students actively solving translation problems: “Instead of saying the glass is half empty, why not say it is half full?”. In other words, why not give marks for what is done well, instead of taking them off for what is done badly? And so I have indeed, for the first time, given marks as well as taking them away, and I feel much happier about it. But is it not remarkable that this principle applies so well to translations and not so well to the essays and summaries written for the language exam?

My grading of exams has also been altered by some very practical considerations. Having located ratios of binary to non-binary errors, I am usually quite prepared to weight these errors such that the translation exam accords far more importance to the non-binary pole (cf. Kupsch-Losereit: 1985). But in the case of final exams, when my products are about to be released on the world and perhaps assume limited authority as formally qualified translators, how many basic language errors should I put up with? Recognizing that final exams mean it is too late to sit down and discuss errors with students anyway, I have had to apply the principle of ultimate convergence to mark the translation and language papers according to the same scale, refusing the weighting system which would otherwise indicate students’ aptitudes for the next translation class. That is, in the situation of final exams, I believe that all errors should be identified and marked as such. It is sometimes necessary to insist on the half-emptiness of glasses, since turning a blind eye to errors is not going to make them go away.

I could probably have kept everyone happy about this paper simply by saying “variant” in all the places I have said “error”. But terminological evasion would surely leave the notion of error intact, untouched, virginally inscrutable, and that is not how I want it. I instead hope that the above definitions, in insisting on the non-binary nature of the errors that most concern the translation class, tend to decriminalize the notion of error itself. There is, after all, no reason to fear translation errors in the teaching situation. There is no overriding reason to insist on perfect linguistic competence or extensive text analysis before getting down to translating, since errors are going to be made, and the best way to learn is often to start making them. We all fall into error. As a teacher I frequently admit to my own, benefiting from an overtly unequal distribution of authority and often learning from my students. So, despite quite justified criticisms in *Elsinore*, I still tend to distrust the positivistic distrust of error, and quietly indulge in the humble pleasure of applying a playful Hegel to the tedious business of correcting final exams, here in the cloud-covered Canaries of June 1991.

Escuela Universitaria de Traductores e Intérpretes
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain

WORKS CITED

- Caminade, Monique, & Anthony Pym. 1991. "L'analyse des erreurs traductionnelles et l'espace-temps de l'enseignement". Paper presented to the I Congreso internacional sobre la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, Barcelona.
- Catford, John Cunnison. 1965. A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics. London: Oxford University Press.
- Consejo de Universidades. 1988. Reformas de las enseñanzas universitarias : Licenciado en Traducción e Interpretación. Propuestas alternativas, observaciones y sugerencias formuladas al informe técnico durante el período de información y debate públicos. Madrid: Secretaría General, Consejo de Universidades, Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1931. The Phenomenology of Mind trans. by J. B. Baille. Second Edition. New York: Macmillan.
- Katz, Jerrold J. 1978. "Effability and Translation". Meaning and Translation. Philosophical and Linguistic Approaches ed. by F. Guenther & M. Guenther-Reutter. London: Duckworth, 193-234.
- Kupsch-Losereit, Sigrid. 1985. "The problem of translation error evaluation". Translation in Foreign Language Learning and Testing ed. by Christopher Titford & A. E. Hiecke. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.
- Lefevere, André. 1985. "Why Waste our Time on Rewrites? The Trouble with Interpretation and the Role of Rewriting in an Alternative Paradigm". The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation ed. by Theo Hermans. London & Sydney: Croom Helm.
- Newmark, Peter. 1985. "Literal Translation". Parallèles: Cahiers de l'Ecole de Traduction de Genève 7, 11-16.
- Pym, Anthony. 1990. "A Definition of Translational Competence, Applied to the Teaching of Translation". Paper presented to the 12th World Congress of the FIT, Belgrade.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman. 1975. "Reply to Harman". Words and Objections: Essays on the Work of W.V. Quine ed. by D. Davidson & J. Hintikka. Revised Edition, Dordrecht-Boston: Reidel.