European Masters in Translation – possible contributions from research

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The Directorate General for Translation is to be congratulated on the setting up of the European Masters in Translation. Any multilingual organization needs to guarantee a supply of competent linguistic mediators.

I see this as a special demand, with a special economy. The EU institutions currently employ some 4930 translators (TLC 2009). If there are an estimated 700,000 professional translators worldwide (Beninatto & DePalma 2008), we are talking about 0.7% of the global sector. Further, if the Directorate General produced some 1.8 m pages in 2008 at an estimated cost of 300 m euros (DG Translation 2009a), the price was about 166 euros per page. There might thus be some justification for shifting specialized training costs to the universities.

As a trainer, however, I tend to work for a wider range of employment opportunities and for sectors where overall costs are lower.

So I will speak here as a researcher, to envisage where future roads might lie and how research could help us along the way.

I see at least three signposts: competence research, process studies, and new technologies.

1. Competence research

The Directorate General is basing its Masters planning on a combinatory logic of six "minimum professional competences" (EMT 2009a, 2009b). The competence approach is legitimate if restricted to a description of an idealized "final product", understood as the person you want to employ, even though it has no pedagogical dimension (how does one get better at these things?). When compared with the developmental cognitive concept of "expertise", the competence approach might also find a certain justification in the idea that translators who write also have to do a lot of quite different things. The resulting list, however, remains a discourse of accumulated opinion. I am aware of no valid empirical research that can isolate any one competence from the others; I am thus unable to list the criteria by which competencies are separated; and I cannot say to what extent the development of any one competence will also help develop all others. Indeed, if we were

to compare the current logic with that of chemistry, which also seeks to isolate and combine elements, we are still at the stage of alchemy, with all attendant wizardry.

The truly remarkable thing is not that the experts promise to turn lead into gold, but that they reached consensus on a model with no empirical basis beyond their accumulated experience. And consensus can always be valuable, no matter where it comes from.

Let us imagine, however, that the basic problem to be solved is the provision of adequate translators for the EU institutions. It is not at all obvious how consensus among academics can solve that shortcoming, even while it might patch over assorted political tribulations like the fragmentation of translator training and indeed of the translation industry itself.

Now, one alternative approach to the problem of providing adequate translators is surely to ask intergovernmental institutions what kinds of things they are *not* getting and thus feel they need more of. In pilot research being carried out by Anne Lafeber in the United Nations system (the project will shortly be extended to other intergovernmental organizations), revisers are asked to indicate the kinds of errors that new recruits most make, and to assess the institutional impact of those shortcomings. If we can identify the errors, we should have indications of the things that current training programs are not doing well, and thus a basis for proposing changes to those programs (or specialized post-employment courses and the like). The kinds of lists produced this way are not initially modular but hierarchical (the most important skills at the top) and employment-specific (each Masters program should be able to target a specific range of employment opportunities). So here is what we are finding to be the most common shortcomings among recent recruits at one United Nations duty station (from Lafeber 2009):

1. Failure to adhere to in-house style conventions
2. Insufficient specialized/technical knowledge
3. Failure to detect inconsistencies, contradictions in the ST / failure to capture the nuances of the ST
4. Inability to work out the meaning of obscure passages in the ST / failure to produce translations that flow smoothly.

Turn the negative expressions into positive competencies, and you might find out what advanced training has to focus on, and with which priorities. Isn't that what any training program needs? Further, once we analyze a few hundred recruitment exams and identify strong co-occurrences of particular failings, and once we have longitudinal studies of the same co-occurrences (after Orozco and Hurtado 2002, Göpferich 2009), we might have an empirical basis for actually identifying the competencies to be cultivated, and thus reducing the alchemy.

In passing, I urge the DG Translation to support Lafeber's ongoing research, which is mainly focused on improving recruitment tests.

3. Process research

Another kind of input should come from empirical studies on translation *processes* (rather than products), using think-aloud protocols, keystroke logging, screen recording and eye tracking. Since students are relatively easy to muster as experiment subjects, there is a growing body of data on how they compare with professionals. In principle, the differences should give a developmental view of translation competence, thus mapping out the skills that translators need to be trained in (for useful overviews, see Jääskeläinen 2002, Göpferich 2008).

The current findings (summarized in Pym 2009a) generally suggest that the more experienced translators tend to:

1. Use more paraphrase and less literalism as coping strategies,
2. Process larger translation units,
3. Spend longer reviewing their work at the post-drafting phase but make fewer changes when reviewing,
4. Read texts faster and spend proportionally more time looking at the target text than at the source text,
5. Use top-down processing (macro-strategies) and refer more to the translation purpose,
6. Rely more on encyclopaedic knowledge,
7. Express more principles and personal theories,
8. Incorporate the client into the risk-management processes,
9. Automatize some complex tasks but also shift between automatized routine tasks and conscious problem-solving, and
10. Display more realism, confidence and critical attitudes in their decision-making.

This is a very rag-bag list, without overwhelming validity (the experiment groups are small, the findings overlap and in some cases contradict each other, and the methodologies may affect the cognitive processes). What is surprising, however, is the extent to which these things are absent from the current EMT model, which perhaps only picks up on points 8 and 10 (awareness of the client, and "realism"). That is, the EMT list has almost nothing to say about specifically translational cognitive processes.

We might thus hope that the growing body of process research will alert planners to the most translational part of translation competence, particularly with respect to speed, the capacity to distribute effort in terms of risk, and the key role of revising/reviewing.

Those things can then be blended with the lists we get from frustrated institutional revisers.

3. New technologies

Insistence on the cognitive dimension should obviously not just be in response to research. There is a more powerful reason in the works: what was once called Computer-

Aided Translation is now a huge misnomer, since all translating (and a lot of interpreting) is computer-aided, and the aid is not just added help (as in the competencies list) but is changing the very nature of the translator's decision-making processes.

The Directorate General has traditionally invested in the Trados translation-memory suite and in Systran machine translation architecture, both of which have been late to embrace data-based machine translation. The beauty of data-based systems is that, like democracy, the more they are used, the better they become, and they can only improve as new online interfaces are developed. That is why they will seriously shape our future and deserve close attention.

Initial research on the way translators revise output from data-based systems suggests that in specialized domains those systems can be more efficient than both human translation and the use of translation memories (Guerberof 2009), and that in general domains there need be no significant loss in time-on-task (Pym 2009, García forthcoming) and no significant loss in quality (García forthcoming). In other words, there is currently nothing to lose, and perhaps something to gain. The translators of the future will probably be revising automatically generated output.

This is why, with respect to translation competences, we might surmise that revision techniques will become more important, as will the capacity to identify high-risk items that require careful human attention. Training programs that do not address those skills will possibly put their graduates at a serious disadvantage. And that is why, with some urgency, we need more empirical research on actual uses of the new systems.

Of course, there is a wider revolution in the wings here. Interactive data-based technologies are bringing us closer to a Europe in which everyone can translate, automatically, in their electronic communications. Our communities will increasingly learn to live with "good-enough" everyday translations; interlingual communication will become a place for fun, experimentation and perplexity; translation will blend into experience and learning; the multilingual may yet form an organic political society. Absolutely no research is needed for this; it should simply happen. At the same time, however, translation professionals must become to translation what opera singers are to those of us who sing under the shower: everyone can do it, but some do it so much better.

Under those circumstances, I see no justification for seeking to "prevent the burgeoning number of translation programmes in the EU" (EMT 2009a). All training can serve a social purpose, at one level or another – the range of activities must be part of a dynamic self-translating Europe. But there is every justification for using research, rather than mutual attributions of expertise, to ensure that the European institutions can find translators with the competencies they require.

And the six pillars of the EMT model should not be immutable.

A final consideration

One hopes that the success of the EMT will be measured by periodical reviews of the qualities of translation graduates, especially those entering DG Translation. If there is no improvement after say five years, then perhaps you might consider a Plan B.

Plan B, I suggest, should be a strong international system of translator certification, based on cognitive performance in the areas mentioned above, with public exams and public money, quite independent of any system of translator training.

Perhaps you should have thought about that in the first place.

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