

## Ideologies of the Expert in Discourses on Translator Training

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Abstract: Analysis of the term "expert" and its cognates in discourses on translator training finds evidence of a "boomerang" function whereby the term is attributed to an external subject whose enhanced status then reflects positively on the attributor. This function is located in hierarchical and lateral relationships within translator-training institutions, between para-academic organizations and projected geopolitical demands for expertise, and between translator-training research and the disciplines of cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence. It is concluded that little faith can be invested in such uses of the term and that critical and self-critical questioning might prove to be the most effective antidote to recent outbreaks of expertise.

Theoretical and promotional discourses on translator-training increasingly draw their authority from an elitist or specialized representation of the profession. One of the key terms is "expert", commonly found in collocations like "translation/interpreting should be left to the expert", or "the translator is an/the expert in cross-cultural communication". Recent developments extend the semantic field to include the term "consultant", as in Vermeer's suggested inclusion of translators in a "new profession, the 'intercultural management assistant' or 'consultant'" (forthcoming). In keeping with this trend, one of the aims of the European Society for Translation Studies (EST) is "to offer urgently needed *consulting services* on issues where *specific expertise* is required" (italics mine, here and throughout the citations). The EST thus organizes things like a Workshop on Curriculum Design conducted by "*experts* from various countries" (*EST Newsletter* 3, November 1993). Notice the impressive spread of the term. A certain ideology of the expert appears in descriptions of ideal translators, in certain institutionalized modes of training ideal translators, and in certain ways of promoting and reproducing such training. It represents a powerful ideal.

Appeals to expert status probably work well for as long as a restricted group of people mutually call each other experts, relegating the rest to some kind of inferior status. Yet many questions remain. How did these people become experts? What is the opposite of an expert? Are *all* translators now by definition experts? Is such a proposition falsifiable? How much of this "expertise" can be supported by the more substantial authority of empirical research? More to the point, how many of the world's 280 or so very different translator-training institutions qualify as reproducers of expertise? What degree of practical plurality is being suppressed? And what is an expert anyway?

I shall try to answer some of these questions, not on the level of actual quality assessment but through a minor application of discourse analysis. We all know, of

course, that some translators are more competent than others, some teachers are more effective than others, and some translator-training institutes are more demanding than others. The term "expert" might represent such differences. But I am more interested in the way it does the representing. I am interested in how it functions in discourses on translator training. My concern here is with its discursive function, no more and no less.

### **"Expert" as a Contentious Term**

One of my father's favorite jokes was a false etymology for the term "expert". The word came, he said, from the prefix "ex-", meaning former, and the base "spurt," which, as a small jet of water, is a kind of elongated drip. My father maintained that experts were drips who had been put under pressure.

As you might gather, my father did not like experts. His partisan definition may not be the best one available. Yet it does find certain correlatives within translation studies. For example, it might be compared with Armin Paul Frank's mocking description of particular schools or tendencies of translation theory who "insist on the indiscriminate use of those words that they think will enroll them in the band of *experts*" (1992: 374). Some make appeals to expertise, others mock their ambition. The term is by no means neutral.

These kinds of disputes have been described in fields where competing definitions of expertise have become a way of life, particularly in artificial-intelligence research and associated business-management studies. I shall later explain why these fields have concerned themselves with the term. For the moment, however, let me rock the boat just a little by citing one article in this vein.

Sullivan (1990) finds various kinds of conflict ensuing from the increasing role that experts play in business institutions. Much of what he has to say could be applied to translator-training institutions.

First, according to Sullivan, the role of expert tends to be fought over by two types: the "hot shot", who invents the class of new words and catch phrases that arouse Frank's disparagement, and the "cloud walker", who thinks all the problems have been solved on a level of abstraction that no one else can apply to any kind of practice. I leave you to identify the hot shots and cloud walkers of translator training.

Second, people called experts tend to enter organizations as outsiders. They can thus disrupt existing procedures that, no matter how inefficient, are based on tradition and consensus. One might imagine, for example, a translator-training institute buried in the depths of somewhere like Spain finding its traditional philological approaches being considerably upset by foreign teachers who want to teach translation rather than languages. Such foreigners might be called experts, by some in a pejorative sense, by

others in a sense of acceptance. Whatever the case, their presence can break a former consensus. Change might result.

Third, says Sullivan, the presence of experts can influence the internal politics of institutions. Smart dominant management tends to select the outsiders it knows will support the changes it wants to introduce. In this sense, the presence of people called experts can help create a consensus for change, albeit at the considerable risk of accentuating internal divisions within an institutional structure. In our hypothetical translator-training institute, one outsider might become an expert recognized by one clan, a second outsider becoming an expert for another. Once again, I leave the application to you. Just check how often French sections cite French experts, German sections cite Germanic experts, and English sections, *faute de mieux*, ironize all experts.

In such situations, is it possible to propose any substantial definition of the term "expert"? I suspect not. Or more exactly, I suspect the functions of the term in situations of institutional conflict far outweigh its value as an isolated substantive.

Let's see how a few of these functions work.

### **Boomerang Expertise**

The term "expert" is an attribute. It is usually attributed to people, whether or not they themselves claim to be experts. Remarkably, my small corpus of usages in the field of translation studies includes no case in which any human person explicitly calls themselves an expert. Self-referentiality is sometimes possible on the institutional level (the Swedish Institute for Interpretation and Translation Studies calls itself "an *expert* organization", July 1994), yet something prohibits the rest of us from saying "I am an expert". Numerous ambitious people nevertheless want to become experts or something similar. They sometimes attain this attribute by throwing it at someone close at hand, who then sends it back to the thrower, wittingly or unwittingly. Several examples should explain the strategies of this "boomerang expertise".

The Conférence Internationale des Instituts Universitaires de Traducteurs et d'Interprètes (CIUTI) is a club whose full members are some twenty-one well established translator-training institutions, all of them in western Europe or North America. Its aim is to ensure the quality of these institutions, ensuring that the translators they produce conform to the standards of what is termed "the CIUTI label". The organization implicitly excludes other institutions and other translators. One might expect it to refer to some notion of "expertise". Sure enough, the term rears its head when the CIUTI attaches its exclusivism to an ideology of market service:

"Plusieurs *experts* des services linguistiques des organismes internationaux sont invités chaque année à cette partie de la réunion [relations extérieures] pour apporter leur point de vue d'utilisateurs." ("Présentation de la CIUTI", May 1993)

"Each year *experts* from the language services of international organizations are invited to the international-relations section of our meeting in order to present their views as employers of translators."

This is fine. Experts enter as the external guarantee of the "CIUTI label", the mark of prestige that separates a handful of institutions from the ruck. But who selects the experts and attributes the label "expert"? Why, the CIUTI itself! So where is the real authority behind the authority of the expert? The CIUTI, of course. Once this boomerang is thrown and received, the CIUTI itself looks like an expert organization. Its representatives can even participate in a kind of expertise transfer, setting criteria for prospective members and acting as consultants for new institutions all over the world. At no point, of course, has anyone had to put this kind of expertise to an empirical test. The ideology of the expert is self-justifying.

The European Society for Translation Studies (EST) provides a similar example. Why does it aim to provide experts in the text cited at the beginning of this article? Because, we are told, there is a rather specific demand for experts in "the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where new academic institutions are being established to meet the pressing need for professional translators and interpreters" (*EST Newsletter* 1, November 1992). The Society was apparently set up to supply this demand. By implication, the Society must be full of experts, even though no one has identified themselves as such. The attribution in this case comes from the demand, which has been selected and named by the supplier so that the attribute "expert" can return home. Once again, the ideology is submitted to no criterion of falsifiability. It justifies itself.

Other cases are more subtle. Here we have a recent theoretical text claiming that "in cognitive psychology, expertise is regarded as a specific cognitive phenomenon and in no way signifies a value judgement, as is often the case in everyday language" (Kaiser-Cooke 1994: 135). Do you recognize the strategy? In order to define "expertise", one asks the experts, in this case the anonymous external authority of "cognitive psychology" (let's not risk the possible diversity of actual cognitive psychologists!). This procedure furnishes the following definition: "An expert is someone who possesses a high level of competence in a given domain which results from interaction between structure and processing abilities, expert performance being characterized by rapid access to an organized body of conceptual knowledge" (135). This all sounds excellently neutral; it seems immediately applicable to translation; and it is of course supported by external authority (who are we to disagree with cognitive psychology?). Yet the boomerang comes back. Having appreciated the psychologists' expertise on expertise, our theorist goes on to declare that in translation, as some kind of consequence of the proposed definition, "the meaning has to conform to the linguistic

*conventions* of the target culture and not its linguistic *possibilities*, a point which is often overlooked by the uninitiated" (138, italics in the text). That is, experts translate in terms of target-side criteria. By implication, non-experts stick to source texts. This claim has some pedagogical justification (students do indeed tend to begin from rather literalist conceptions of translation). But does this mean that all believers in literalist or foreignizing translation, from Schleiermacher to Berman and Venuti, are automatically inexpert or "uninitiated"? Our theorist's definition of expertise might look neutral, but its discursive function is by no means even-handed. She has become an expert able to say what translation is and how it should be carried out. And the only basis of her expertise is her unquestioning attribution of expertise to cognitive psychology, to which we shall return in a moment.

A rather more interesting boomerang can be found in Justa Holz-Mänttari, who has presented a developed theory of the translator's "expert distance" (1984: 62-68). Holz-Mänttari declares that translators are experts in the sense that they have no personal, emotional or immediately intuitive involvement in the communication situation: the translator "ist *Fachmann* für Botschaftsträgerproduktion und tut bewusst und zweckbezogen effizient, was Laien üblicherweise *intuitiv* und lediglich orientiert an Handlungsmustern tun..." (they are "text-production experts who work consciously and purposefully to achieve what non-experts usually do intuitively, the latter being oriented by no more than behaviour patterns", 1984: 62). As outsiders, translators are thus often at a disadvantage with respect to the non-expert communication partners who have a more directly developed experience of the matter in hand. The result is a problematic distance that is at once a condition of the translator's professional status and the source of problems to be overcome. How should this distance be crossed? For Holz-Mänttari, the solution is remarkably simple: Expert translator-training institutions (*Experteninstitutionen*) should teach translators how to overcome expert distance with expertise (63-64). The real expertise, of course, thus lies in the theorists able to plan the advanced theoretical training required for such acrobatics, notably Holz-Mänttari herself. The boomerang comes back.

### **Experts in Artificial Intelligence**

Note that Holz-Mänttari (1984) and Kaiser-Cooke (1994), separated by some ten years, use slightly different notions of the term "expert". As we have seen, Holz-Mänttari insists that the translator's competence is conscious and non-intuitive, thus requiring theoretical elaboration and pedagogical transmission. Kaiser-Cooke, on the other hand, refers to experts as having "rapid access to an organized body of information" and deploying "cognitive routines which do not require applied reflection but occur 'automatically'" (1994: 137). The latter features would seem to minimize the

problematic distance at the heart of Holz-Mänttari's reflections, incorporating precisely the intuitive capacities that the previous theory had excluded from the domain of the expert. This difference can be tested by looking at the respective notions of non-experts. For Holz-Mänttari, the non-expert is a non-translator, perhaps the communication partner who has recourse to a translator. For Kaiser-Cooke, the non-expert is a "novice", someone who is "uninitiated", perhaps a trainee-translator awaiting the revelation of target-side purposes. The two theorists seem to be talking about different things.<sup>1</sup> Yet this difference is by no means gratuitous. Why should expertise be non-intuitive in 1984 and intuitive in 1994? The answer lies, I suggest, in the ten years of research and debate that have brought about significant developments in cognitive psychology and its more lucrative partner, artificial-intelligence research. Kaiser-Cooke could cite these developments; Holz-Mänttari could not. The difference between the two theorists might thus be explained in the field of what looks like empirical science.

My adventures in this direction have led to three simple findings. First, the term "expert" has been a major point of contention in scientific fields at least since the middle of the 1980s. Second, the bone of contention has been the huge funding accorded to research into artificial intelligence, which once promised to make machines think like humans and thus stimulated research into the way humans think (i.e. cognitive psychology). Third, most properly cognitive definitions of "expertise" now contradict Holz-Mänttari's theory of expert distance. Let's see how these three points are related.

In the development of artificial intelligence research, the terms "expert" and "expertise" have been exploited in two main ways. First, from the beginning of the 1980s, various opponents of artificial-intelligence funding claimed there was no reason to expect that computers would ever attain the modes of thought they considered typical of human expertise, notably a non-Cartesian *intuitive* involvement in decision making. This position, most saliently elaborated by Dreyfus and Dreyfus in *Mind Over Machine* (1986), directly contradicted the non-intuitive expertise that Holz-Mänttari advanced in a different world but at much the same time. For the Dreyfus brothers, the point of the argument was that artificial-intelligence funding should decrease and more research should be undertaken on humanist or non-Cartesian modes of thought. One wonders if Holz-Mänttari, with her diametrically opposed definition and box-and-arrow diagrammes, would have gone along with such an argument.

Second, to some degree in response to such critiques, artificial-intelligence research increasingly turned to the planning and production of so-called "expert systems", basically computer programmes that were supposed to perform like human experts. Such programmes would ideally involve field-specific knowledge, prototype modeling, the ability to suggest probabilistic alternative decisions, a capacity to explain why

certain decisions are desirable or possible, and enhanced user-computer dialogue. Research along these lines continued throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, producing a massive amount of literature and even more expectation (see, for example, Hart 1988, Ellis 1989, Walden 1992, Whitaker and Östberg 1992, Leary 1993). In a sense, expert systems were supposed to save the day for artificial intelligence.

The recent literature on expert systems nevertheless recognizes a certain commercial failure. Some writers now view the supposed progress as an illusion or even as a "coming out of the basic deficiencies of knowledge-based programmes" (Malsch 1991: 4). Far from being the *dernier cri*, expert systems might be seen as a collective admission that computers cannot reproduce the tacit or intuitive aspects of human knowledge. The general development is perhaps similar to that of machine translation, which has gone from pretensions to general automatic translation to the modest but useful workstation software we have available today. From this perspective, the Dreyfus critique seems largely justified. The attempts to make machines imitate human experts have proved unsuccessful. But that is not all; new doubts are now coming to the surface. Researchers are asking if we really want expert systems anyway. Indeed, do we really need more experts, be they humans *or* machines? One result is the kind of critical sociology that we found in Sullivan at the beginning of this paper, where expertise is counterbalanced by the humanist values of democracy, consensus and affective relationships. A further result might be the asking of similar questions about translator training.

Two broad lessons are to be learnt from this brief excursion into artificial intelligence. First, the term "expert" is by no means neutral, even in the apparently calm fields of serious science. Second, the very desirability of experts should be viewed in a critical light. This is why I have taken the liberty of pointing out the boomerangs by which expertise is attributed and underhandedly reclaimed.

### **What to Do with Expertise**

In the end, "expertise" may prove to be no more than a collection of tricks for the distribution of authority in a given domain, ultimately returning to the scholastic *magister dixit*. This is perhaps an excessively pessimistic conclusion. Yet what real escape can there be from the boomerang plays of expertise?

The editors of this volume, who just happen to be the President and Vice-President of the European Society for Translation Studies, have asked me to explain "where I speak from to look at experts". Am I with them or against them? After all, aren't I pretending to be just as much an expert as anyone else?

In all honesty, I am left perplexed by boomerang expertise. As a passably mid-career academic, I tend to find myself on both sides of the divide, variously excluded and included as an expert. At a recent conference, I had one of my more discomfiting questions deflected by the phrase "Experts do differ on this point, but you must understand that...", which basically meant the speaker was an expert and that non-experts like myself should not disrupt the proceedings. On other occasions, however, especially when lecturing to groups that see themselves as being somehow peripheral, I have been introduced as an "expert in translation", not gratuitously tagged as coming from some apparently more central location like Paris. Some people use expertise to shut me up; others use it to make people listen to me. I'm mostly floundering in the middle, struggling to make sense of my situation. But that is no solution.

For some, empirical science can offer a way round the outright manipulation of subjective expertise. Intersubjectively testable hypotheses, contrasted empirical experiments, data bases and, more pragmatically, a wide direct experience of many different situations could all be factors underlying a more substantial approach to translator training. So-called "descriptive translation studies", which might talk of anything from polysystems to EEG probability mapping, could offer a way out of boomerang expertise. I am suspicious, however, of the kind of gung-ho positivism that immediately offers an unshakeable scientific alternative to merely "personal theories". The problem is not just the notoriously inept standards of much empirical research in our field. It is also that the appeal to science is itself often a major strategy for shoring up expertise. After all, the above trip into cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence suggests there is always some personal or collective interest at stake in the setting up of any scientific research. Why focus on one particular area (e.g. conference interpreting as opposed to community interpreting)? Why choose some hypotheses and not others (e.g. national polysystems instead of intersections between cultures)? What is the authority of the person organizing the research (how can expert status be attributed prior to the actual results)? Who is paying for the research, and why are they paying (doesn't the training of translators strengthen a Europe of national and nationally subsidized cultures)? Although I am very much in favour of empirical research, it is by no means an automatic escape from boomerang expertise. If there are always personal and collective interests at stake - I would say there *should* be -, numerous self-critical questions must be asked as we take our hypotheses out into the world in search of falsification, and even more critical questions must be asked whenever a lab-coated expert presents the results of translator-training research in a way worthy of a washing-powder advertisement. Despite all the science, thought is still a legitimate intellectual activity.

In the absence of any extensive awareness on this level, perhaps the best I can do is spread suspicion. Every time someone claims to be an expert or is attributed such



status, watch out. Try to find out how they became experts, in the interests of whom, and through how many devious boomerangs. If this critique can be undertaken, we might eventually find that translator training needs a few less experts, a little more testing of overtly partisan hypotheses, and even some good old humanistic involvement in the problems of our age.

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### Notes

\* This paper was written with the assistance of a fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for work at the Special Research Center in Literary Translation (Sonderforschungsbereich 309) at the University of Göttingen, Germany.

1. There is obviously no pressing need to choose between these two theories. One can quite easily describe translative competence as comprising both kinds of expertise: intuitive for the fast run-of-the-mill decisions, explicit and principled for the solving of radically new or unforeseen problems, the latter being the stuff of what Brian Mossop calls "the 'bump' mode, when things go wrong" (1995: 12). Nor is there any urgent reason to divide the world into two: a Peircean or a Freudian would no doubt prefer a three-tier model of translative processes, an Aristotelian might opt for four. The point here is simply that our two theories of expertise were ideologically motivated when assuming a basic binarism and leaning one side or the other.

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