

IN SEARCH OF A NEW RATIONALE FOR THE PROSE TRANSLATION CLASS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

Anthony Pym
Universidad de Las Palmas

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ABSTRACT

In view of labour-market demands, greater flexibility is required of translators. This includes active translational competence in their foreign language(s), especially in domains where oral communication is more important than written communication. The present study investigates how to give a new rationale to prose translation classes, in the wake of a long-standing tradition whereby prose translation was given an ancillary status as a didactic means in foreign-language teaching. The increasing presence of foreign exchange students in translation classes creates an excellent opportunity to increase the importance of A-B directionality.

The prose class (*thème, traducción inversa, Hinübersetzung*) is ostensibly involved with teaching translation from the students' mother language to the students' second language (A-B). However, it has traditionally been little more than a rather laborious way of checking on B language acquisition, surviving as a relic from the days when translation was itself taught as little more than a mode of language learning. This traditional background creates serious problems when, as in Spain, prose classes exist in specialist translation institutes at university level. Although the old model would appear to be no longer valid (since translation students are now supposed to learn translation, not just languages), little thought has been given to the development of a new rationale. Indeed, most contemporary theories talk about translation as if directionality were not important; even theoretically developed syllabus projects like that of Amman & Vermeer (1990) give scant attention to directionality, preferring instead to consider "the translational problems of language pairs" where exercises are presumably to be carried out indifferently both to and from the mother language. This indifference on the level of theory might itself indicate the demise of the traditional rationale. But it leaves three very basic questions unresolved: [74]

- 1. Should one conclude that the prose class within the university translation institute has permanently lost its traditional specificity?*
- 2. What relation might such classes have to the professional practice of trained translators?*
- 3. Is there any correlation or contradiction between these two aspects?*

If a new rationale is possible, it will depend on coherent answers to all three questions.

1. THE ASYMMETRIC SPECIFICITY OF THE PROSE CLASS

A typically traditionalist rationale for the prose class would be that offered by Newmark: “Brief translations from native to foreign languages are useful for the consolidation and testing of spoken and written utterances” (1981: 144). That is, the prose class should reinforce and test linguistic competence in the B language. Ladmiral is even more explicit in his description of prose as a tool for language learning, since he makes a fundamental distinction between translation proper and the asymmetric pair “prose/version” - the latter being unabashedly described as, “pedagogical translations” and presented as modes of performance testing (1979: 40-41). Within this tradition, the prose class is purely for teaching purposes and should not be confused with translation as a professional practice.

Criticism of this rationale inevitably developed when, in the 1970s, communicative methods all but effaced translation from foreign-language programmes. The prose class has since been left institutionally stranded between foreign-language classes, which no longer need it, and the training of professional translators, where its traditionally pedagogical orientation does little to recommend it to those concerned with supplying a professional labour market. The purpose-based approach of Diller and Kornelius, for example, could see no reason why a translation should have to be produced for precisely the person who has no need of it, namely the teacher (1978: 5). For Kupsch-Losereit, pedagogical translation of the kind described by Ladmiral is simply a refusal to teach translation as a communicative act (1985: 169). Klein Braley and Smith further insist that prose translation is less than ideal even as a way of testing competence, since there are many more reliable and more communicative methods available (1985, 1987). There would thus appear to be no justification for maintaining such a retrograde pedagogical practice, particularly when, as Christiane Nord states quite bluntly, “basic training in foreign languages and cultures does not fundamentally belong in a university translation institute” (1990: 11-12). This is indeed the current trend. So what should one then do with the prose class?

It is worthwhile going back to Ladmiral’s careful if pedantic description of the [75] traditional prose class, particularly the fundamental asymmetry he underlines between prose (A-B translation) and its inevitable companion, version (B-A translation). This asymmetry is based on the assumption that the students’ competence is itself asymmetric, in principle greater in the A than the B domain. After all, if the students’ competence were equal in the two domains, there would be no reason for the prose class because it would simply be a version class going the other way: the two would be symmetrical and directionality would have lost all its importance. According to this logic, prose exercises can only be justified to the extent that they correspond to the asymmetry $A > B$ on the level of students’ competence. However, reasons Ladmiral, if this asymmetry exists, prose can never be justified as translation proper:

Le thème est en lui-même un exercice artificiel. S’il est déjà exorbitant d’espérer que l’enseignement d’une langue étrange parvienne à faire des élèves de réels ‘bilingues’ au terme de leurs études, il est proprement contradictoire de supposer qu’ils le soient déjà avant la fin de ces mêmes études. [...] Le thème est donc au mieux une espérance démesurée et de plus une exigence absurde. (1979: 47-48)

Ladmiral thus concludes that, strictly speaking, prose translation is non-translation: “le thème n’existe pas” (50). But his analysis is perhaps much better than

his radical conclusions. Two points are of particular interest with respect to the way tradition has been criticized:

1. Ladmiral shows that the pedagogical purposes of the traditional prose class must of necessity be separated from the purposes of professionally-oriented translations. But if one can accept this, one also avoids the major presuppositions underlying criticisms based on communicative methods or criteria of professional realism. Non-traditional analyses of discursive situations, text types, translational action and communicative purposes are all very necessary, but they sometimes risk obfuscating some rather more basic realities. After all, does not the teaching situation have its own purpose? Is not the transfer of competence in itself a communicative action? And is not the prose class then specially designed to address a real asymmetry existing in the teaching situation? That is, does it really matter if it is not “real” translation?

2. Although Ladmiral presents his analysis in terms of an opposition between bilingualism ($A=B$) and mother-tongue dominance ($A>B$), his logic need not depend on the linguistic, communicative or cultural status of the competence concerned: we can just as easily talk about “competence” *tout court*. The actual specificity of the traditional prose class merely consists in its asymmetry with respect to the version class. This precision enables us to leave aside the historical [76] movement towards communicative competence and back, and to ask if there have been other significant trends affecting the prose class. Although it is clear that the classes we are giving in translation institutes are not - or should not be - the same as traditional prose classes, exactly what has changed? Is asymmetry still an acceptable basis for a rationale?

These two points lead to certain criticisms of the critics of tradition. First, does anyone really believe that the students entering university translation institutes are equally competent in both the A and B domains? And if there is no general symmetry $A=B$, then surely directionality is important and there must be some kind of asymmetry between A-B and B-A classes? The two cannot be the same. One cannot escape the asymmetry of prose and version. Moreover, since some pedagogical distinction must be maintained, one cannot simply do away with the notion of pedagogical translation. Thanks to its asymmetry with respect to versions, thanks to the fundamental asymmetry of students' competence, the prose class must surely retain its basic specificity within institutes of translation: it must still be asymmetric with respect to the version class.

In itself, this argument has a certain elegance but is not likely to be politically effective. Why, a critic might ask, should the prose class be the only way of responding to asymmetry? It is here that the second point in Ladmiral's analysis becomes important. What are the significant changes and trends affecting the current status of the prose class? Do these changes alter the traditional asymmetry of prose?

It must be admitted that contemporary translation institutes have more than one way of dealing with their students' lack of competence in foreign languages and cultures. One of the best and most efficient solutions is to make extensive use of student exchange programmes with other translation institutes. If your students are not competent, don't try to teach them prose: just ship them out for a while! This might effectively get rid of about half the asymmetry which would otherwise justify the prose class. But then, precisely because international exchange programmes are based on the symmetry of exchange, one is faced with the further problem of what to do with the incompetent students being shipped in from the B domain. That is, we can perhaps halve the difference $A>B$, but we gain just as much imbalance in $B>A$. As soon as they solve one problem, exchange programmes open up another.

Where I teach, exchange programmes are extensive and successful, but not in the classroom situation. Foreign students tend to sit at the back of translation classes for

a while, become perplexed or bored because no real account is taken of their presence, then discover that much more can be learnt from beaches, discotheques and amorous encounters. Little thought has been given as to how they could be integrated into the asymmetric practices designed for local students. Disturbingly, similar problems are reported from institutes where special classes are indeed organized for foreign students, thus going even further away from integration by creating or reinforcing social ghettos within the institution: if students do not interact in class, they are unlikely to do so outside of class. These are problems that [77] I cannot really address here except by hypothesizing the ultimate desirability of having local and foreign students interact and in effect act as mutual informants within translation classes in both directions.

What interests me is the possibility that, when used to their fullest interactive extent, exchange programmes could introduce a real if unexpected symmetry: $A > B$ and $B > A$ could ideally cancel each other out. This possibility is of interest because, as Ladmiral observed, the traditional prose class should lose its rationale as soon as there is symmetry of competence. The hypothesis would then be that, in addition to the asymmetry $A > B$ in the competence of the local students, we now have the asymmetry $B > A$ amongst foreign students, and that, put together in the same class and made to interact, these two student groups would ideally create a symmetry so beautiful that it should put an end to the specificity of the traditional prose class. That is, in practical terms, if I can get my Spanish students to work with English exchange students on translations from Spanish into English, the situation should be entirely symmetrical with the same students helping each other translate from English into Spanish. The students would in this case be taking over and doubling the traditional pedagogical asymmetry, creating a context in which tasks and exercises must be carried out in both directions. Directionality thus remains important but becomes symmetrical. The prose class will have lost its traditional rationale (its asymmetry with respect to the version class) but might now gain a new justification: $A-B$ and $B-A$ could now be of the same nature, but the $A-B$ direction has become far more important than before simply because of the presence of foreign students.

We thus find that the fundamental asymmetry characterizing the traditional rationale survives criticisms based on communicative methods and professional realism, but perhaps will not survive the development of international exchange programmes. One might thus look forward to an increasing tendency towards symmetry and perhaps an eventual union of prose and version classes.

But there are further factors to be taken into account.

2. PROSE TRANSLATION IN THE PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

The above conclusion, no doubt idealist, partly depends on the assumption that terminal competence in a translation institute - ideally the competence minimally required for professional work as a translator - should include at least some elements of prose translation. If this were not true, the rational response for the presence of foreign students should be to organize special classes exclusively for them, since there would be nothing to be gained from allowing symmetric but separate competences to contaminate each other.

Traditionally, it was generally assumed that professional translators would have passive B competence and work into their A domain. Indeed, it is precisely because Ladmiral broadly accepts this institutional precept (1979: 2) that he can formulate [78] the paradox of prose translation as non-translation. But can this assumption still be made? More recent developments, none the least of which is the constantly increasing

predominance of English as an international trade language, mean that a translator unable to work in - and into - that language is at a considerable professional disadvantage. As Henschelmann argues (adding French and Russian as trade languages), if passive competence in a language is already general among clients, the market value of professional translators requires that they offer active competence (1984: 80ff.). That is, they should be able to translate both from and into at least one of the major trade languages. More generally, it is widely recognized that the volatility of international relations and technological change at the end of the twentieth century is increasingly penalizing rigid labour markets, demanding greater flexibility and adaptability of professionals, including translators. It is no longer enough to translate in one direction well, nor indeed to specialize in one particular field. The socioeconomic bases for Ladmiral's assumption have changed. Or so says the theory of the market.

In practice, however, the competence of the Spanish students available to me is such that I tend to find myself telling terminal students not to do what I have trained them to do. I intimate something like "I'll give you a pass as long as you don't ever translate into English," or more exactly, "as long as you always have your work checked by a native speaker." So much for the dictates of the market!

There are two reasons for this somewhat disparaging attitude. First, if I waited for all my students to attain a professional level in the prose class, I would accumulate so many students that it would be impossible to teach them anyway. Second, disastrous translations by non-natives are to be found everywhere in the social environment in which I live and work. Precisely because popular belief projects linguistic or translational competence as symmetrical ("If you have studied Spanish and English, you can translate from and into Spanish and English"), I must openly insist on its fundamental asymmetry ("Just because you translate well into Spanish, don't believe you can do the same into English"). The result is that I am training students to do something that they should apparently never do.

We thus find the theory of labour market demand in contradiction with the practice of translation institute supply. Should one then conclude that the labour market will just have to make do until our institutions catch up? But professional translation is not a question of "making do" or even of "doing the best you can"; translators do not "pass" because they are 50 % or 65 % correct. A professional technical translation must be 100 % reliable; a professional literary translation ideally presupposes 100 % competence in the target language. Talk of "making do" simply will not do.

I believe the solution to this problem is not to abandon the prose class, but to isolate and focus on aspects of professional practice where active competence in the B domain can fairly be less than 100 %. These areas not only include obvious cases like highly formalized or formulaic texts, but also numerous situations involving [79] work in close collaboration with B-domain technical experts, relations with clients, public relations, conversation interpreting and non-intensive conference interpreting, where a foreign accent and a few grammatical slips are far less disconcerting than would be their correlatives on the written page. The simple hypothesis I want to extract here is that the main general feature distinguishing these "non-100 %" situations may well be the predominance of *oral* over written communication. If the prose class is to find some of its rationale in relation to the professional practice of translators, it should retain asymmetry with regard to the version class, and this asymmetry should probably be based on a greater emphasis on oral work.

3. THE INSTITUTIONAL ROLE OF THE FOREIGN TRANSLATION TEACHER

So far I have answered two questions in contradictory ways. Searching for the contemporary specificity of the prose class, I have argued that we should probably develop to a point where the traditional specificity will disappear: if exchange students are used effectively, the A-B class should become symmetrical with the B-A class. However, when searching for the professional relevance of prose translation, I have proposed that, far from disappearing, the specificity of the prose class should be increased and developed in a particular direction, towards oral communication. How might these contradictory responses be resolved?

The most obvious solution to this problem is to distinguish between pre-terminal and terminal prose classes. If it can be assumed that exchange programmes ideally take place at pre-terminal level, this is the level where one should tend towards pedagogical symmetry, coordinating closely with the version class (and indeed with language classes) and encouraging students to act as mutual informants. The terminal class, however, should ideally have fewer exchange students and can thus come closer to professional requirements, concentrating on the asymmetric specificity of prose translation, including the oral emphasis we have hypothesized above. The theoretical answer to the apparent contradiction is thus to make a fairly radical distinction between the pre-terminal and terminal classes. But in practice, this simple answer often turns out to be rather simplistic with respect to symmetry at the pre-terminal level.

Anyone working in a university translation institute knows that a pre-terminal A - class will never be the mirror image of a pre-terminal B - class. After all, if this were possible, why should we have separate classes now? Why should we not be going in both directions equally well within the one class, or having the two classes so well coordinated, according to modules or parallel texts or whatever (cf. Gallagher 1987), that they would in fact be the one class in two parts? But our practice mostly fails short of this ideal. The asymmetry of the prose class seems to return, even when most unwanted or apparently unnecessary.[80] Obviously, you can take the same mixture of local and foreign students, work on the basis of the same combinations of parallel texts, but the prose and version classes will still tend to be different to the extent that they are controlled by different teachers. The asymmetry that can be done away with on other levels tends to reappear on the level of the teaching staff. Increasingly, one teacher will be an A native, the other a B native; each will tend to be more competent or more at ease going in one particular direction than the other (and even when this is not the case, the model is generally recognized as a desirable division of labour). As such, the differences between teachers might appear simply to reinforce symmetry, with the foreign teacher acting as a kind of correlative of the exchange student. But there is an important catch here: in the prose of the world, the pragmatic differences in background tend to involve different professional experiences, different knowledge of the labour market, different approaches to teaching and, particularly these days, different ideas about what translation is. Or should we pretend that there are no fundamental divergences between the ways translation theory is approached in French, German and English, or virtually not approached in Spanish? Are the bases of our discipline really as international as we like to imagine ourselves to be? A glance at any bibliography on translation, including the works listed at the end of this article, would suggest that the cultural differences in this domain are considerable.

The specificity of the prose class may thus partly be associated with the specific social role of foreign teachers within the translation institute. In principle, much of this role is to diversify and enrich the insights and experiences available to students. From this perspective alone, the prose class should be expected to embody quite fundamental differences with respect to the version class. And from this basis, it is of course entirely

legitimate to pursue asymmetric aims such as the professional concentration on oral communication.

It should be added that, whereas the asymmetry of the traditional prose class was ensured by its being taught by a teacher with a native competence in the A culture (that is, the same teacher profile existed for both the prose and version classes), a new rationale would have to elevate this asymmetry to a higher level where, in terminal classes at least, different teachers have symmetrical competences but different cultural perspectives on translation. At an intermediary model, the more symmetrical pre-terminal class should have a less urgent need for teachers with a native B competence, precisely to the extent that part of their informative role can be taken over by exchange students.

4. SIX ARGUMENTS FOR A NEW RATIONALE

We have seen that a revision of the traditional rationale for the prose translation class has been made necessary not only by communicative methods in language teaching, but also by the need for greater flexibility among professional translators, the [81] increase in student exchange programmes, and a perhaps less evident trend to ensure that prose classes are given by teachers with native competence in the B domain. Consideration of these factors in relation to the traditional rationale has led us to a contradiction which we have sought to resolve by distinguishing between terminal and pre-terminal prose classes. The main orientations for a new rationale thus largely depend on which of these two cases we are talking about. The following arguments seem to be of special importance to the terminal class:

- 1) Labour markets are such that the greater flexibility required of translators includes active translational competence in their B domain, above all when this concerns the major trade languages. Prose exercises in the terminal class should thus be more than merely pedagogical or artificial.
- 2) Active competence in the B domain is particularly required in areas where oral communication is more important than written communication. The terminal prose class should focus on these areas.
- 3) As the mainstay of foreign teachers within the translation institute, the prose class - particularly at terminal level - should be used to complement and enrich students' outlooks on the nature and role of translation itself.

It should be noted that none of these three points radically challenge the traditional specificity of the prose class: they merely add further reasons for accepting asymmetry with respect to the version class.

However, with respect to the pre-terminal class, the arguments we have advanced are not quite as respectful of traditional asymmetry:

- 4) The increasing presence of foreign exchange students heightens the need to teach translation in both directions of a given language pair. In this context, the pre terminal prose class should be used as a way of integrating foreign students into the learning community. This could in turn lead to a degree of apparent symmetry between the prose and version classes. Traditionally specificity is thus challenged, although directionality is still important and A-B directionality should in fact increase in importance.

- 5) The fact that initial students have mostly not attained acceptable active competence in the B domain means that pre-terminal prose exercises must retain at least some of their legitimacy as pedagogical translation, although not primarily as testing procedures. The traditional asymmetry may thus remain as a formal defining feature, albeit within a wider symmetry when allowed by the presence of exchange students.
- 6) The pre-terminal prose class in principle lends itself to high degree of coordination with the version class through the use of thematic modules and blocks of parallel texts. But as terminal level is approached, this tendency towards symmetry should carry less weight than the specific tasks and virtues of the prose class as [82] such, especially with respect to professional use of active B competence and the range of outlooks derived from the presence of foreign teachers.

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