

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN TRANSLATION. A PROCESS-ORIENTED APPROACH

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Abstract: *The paper underpins a process-oriented approach to translation with a view to quality assurance at the internal level, i.e. raising translation trainees' awareness of the recurrent problems associated with referential, grammatical and lexical accuracy and, last but not least, compliance with stylistic conventions (text/discourse specificities, pragmatic use, etc.). Therefore, we advocate feedforwarding instead of feedback, acting prospectively rather than retrospectively.*

Keywords: *process-oriented, quality assurance, translation competence*

1. Introduction

Translation quality assurance and assessment seems to be a still underexplored field in spite of the fact that translation as a profession and translation studies have grown considerably. Epistemologically, we also witness a gap between (exact) sciences and humanities – in the latter case, to my best knowledge, no performance indicators are related to translation competence in a psychometrically controlled way.

The fact that translation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, whether we envisage it as a process or product, may explain why it is so difficult to validate and reliably measure translation quality and the translator's competence. In other words, the question may be crudely put as “how to tell that a translation is good or bad” (House 2012:534) by using well-defined criteria. Ardelean (2016:103) is fully aware of the necessity of relying on objective criteria in translation evaluation quality, advocating that quality “must result from the observance of a system of specific professional and ethical values”, although she mentions the divide between subjective criteria (quality seems to also lie “in the eyes of the beholder”) and objective criteria (as more or less flexible benchmarks rather than a yardstick).

On the other hand, other scholars (notably, Pym 2001, Suojanen et al. 2015) see translation quality as a transactional process – user-oriented approaches to translation quality assurance assimilate it to the client's satisfaction as resulting from the (perfect) match between expectations and product, although the translator as service provider will exclusively undertake the responsibility of safeguarding the translation overall functionality and quality.

Undoubtedly, both translating (a term that describes the process of translation in a more specific way, but which is not consistently used in mainstream literature) and translation (i.e., a rather loose term referring to the product and process indiscriminately) show norm-governed behaviour linguistically and socio-culturally alike. Furthermore, the macro-perspective should be

closely linked to the micro-perspective in telling that a translation is good or bad; translation underpins a complex relationship between the source language text and the target language text, a constellation of (communicative) circumstances shaping the translator's choices in a functional and operational way. A translation, especially in the making, will not stand alone, enjoying an independent status; on the contrary, the translator will move back and forth between the original and the target language text, interconnecting them so as to secure re-contextualisation.

2. Triangulating the Translator's Competence

Drawing on Anderson's (1983) distinction between *declarative knowledge* (*know what/that*) and *procedural knowledge* (*know how*), Schäffner and Adab (2000) argue that this twofold awareness will enhance the translator's conscious monitoring of the process of translation and the impact on translated texts.

Likewise, Alves and Gonçalves (2003) see these types of knowledge as directly linked to the dynamics of inferential processing (generating contextual effects since the translator acts as a communicator) and decision-making in translation, and, implicitly to the general translator's competence, varying cognitively and operationally. More specifically, in terms of knowledge management, they are equated to effective task management. Mainstream literature postulates that experienced translators are much more likely to make conscious decisions, to adopt a reflective approach all the way long, whereas inexperienced translators tend to rely on automatic processes.

However, one should bear in mind that translator's competence may prove more or less advanced according to different degrees of experience in particular knowledge domains. Depending on the demands and specificities of a translation task, cognitive changes may affect the performance of an expert translator, rendering certain tasks more challenging and effortful than others. (Alves and Gonçalves 2007: 52)

3. Awareness of Decision-making in Translation Quality Assurance

3.1 The dynamics of close reading and translational action

House (1977, 1997) proposes and further refines a far-reaching interdisciplinary model of translation criticism in which a successful translation is primarily seen as a semantically and pragmatically equivalent replacement of the source language text, i.e. one fulfilling the same function in a particular context of situation in the very Hallidayan sense (Halliday 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004): the text is embedded in the socio-cultural matrix in conjunction with the ideational and interpersonal levels; therefore, the context of situation may be analysed by breaking it into linguistically documentable and manageable parts – field, mode and tenor. Genre is a later addition to this formula (House 2009, 2012) in order to better capture the macro-context and the double linkage between textual features and human agency (author(ship), translator(ship) and reader(ship)). The process unfolds as follows: the translator reads the source text in order to produce a target text based on his/her comprehension of the source text, in turn determined by the translator's language competence, text analysis skills and cultural and background knowledge. The choices that he or she makes should be understood as meaning negotiation and are justified by the need to convey as closely as possible the multi-dimensional meaning of the source text in an appropriate form of the target text. Definitely, the lexical and grammatical resources of the two languages involved are not the same and work differently – the translator

needs to decide which aspects of meaning are most relevant considering the local/micro- and global/macro- contexts that determine the register of the target text.

Cumulatively, House endorses that the “relative match” of the translation and original textual profile (an aggregate of structural characteristics and expressive potential) and function is a measure of success or quality. The established continuum between a faithful translation adhering closely to the original and a less subservient one (rather than House's dichotomy *overt* vs. *covert translation*) reinforces the idea that there is no yardstick, and it enshrines tolerance for ambiguity.

On the other hand, we should acknowledge that nowadays translation is demand-driven, commissioned and that the translator is expected to meet the client's specifications. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the translator as a professional will not activate knowledge and conduct further research – in point of terminology, language evolution, cultural values, social and ethical questions, etc., refer to workbenches and show ideological and axiological affiliation with a certain direction of Translation Studies in order to secure quality. The dialogue between research and practice is supported by the development of the translator's analytical and strategic skills, by his/her deriving insights into ever more complex issues.

3.2 Determining *skopos*

Reader- or meaning-oriented perspectives are encountered not only in Translation Studies, as heavily theorised within the functionalist approaches, but also in a whole body of regulations shaping the translator's activity and the translation usability at the European level.

Skopos theory (notably, Reiss and Vermeer 1984; Nord 1997; Schäffner 1998) as well as *theory of translatorial action* (Holz-Mänttari 1984; Witte 2000), which seem to inform the work of standardising bodies, bring to the fore the question of translation quality by marking the passage from text reproduction to text production, and framing the complex network translator – client – writer of the source text – target readership in which the translator is empowered as a cultural mediator whose main duty is to make the source and target text “logically and culturally compatible for the specified purpose” (Schäffner 2003:97).

The *EN-15038, European Quality Standard for Translation Services*, effective since August 2006, is a bottom-up one, devised from within the translation industry (involving all the stakeholders – translators, translation companies, professional associations, academia, customers and standardisation bodies) with a specific direction, i.e. making reference to the translation process and assigning separate roles for translators and revisers on the grounds that every translation must be revised first by the translator and then by a second person. This means that the standard prospectively envisages an increased demand for translation revision while claiming to qualify as an objective metric to benchmark the overall execution of translation and translation quality of language/translation service providers.

Launched in 2015 and superseding the *EN-15038*, *ISO 17100* lays down the general principles of translation quality assurance making up the International Standard, irrespective of the translation type (literary translation, legal translation, technical translation, etc.). Under section 5.3.1, the process-oriented perspective is in focus:

Throughout this process, the translator shall provide a service conforming to this International Standard as regards: a) compliance with specific domain and client terminology and/or any other reference material provided and ensuring terminological consistency during translation; b) the semantic accuracy of the target language content; c) the appropriate syntax, spelling, punctuation, diacritical marks and other

orthographical conventions of the target language; d) lexical cohesion and phraseology; e) compliance with any proprietary and/or client style guide (including register and language variants); f) locale and any applicable standards; g) formatting; h) the target audience and purpose of the target language content.

It is obvious that the main concern lies in fully meeting the client's requirements and target language conventions at the expense of the translator's subjectivity and creativity in providing adequate solutions to more or less frequent translation problems.

In the same line of approach, the Directorate-General for Translation (DGT), European Commission, acting as a management authority for the translation market and translation training programmes, puts forward the *DGT Translation Quality Guidelines* (2015) as intended to enhance communicative fitness for purpose with respect to “the expressed or implied needs and expectations” of “direct customers”, “the end-users, and any other relevant stakeholders”. DGT also makes specific provisions for drafting in different publications (for instance, *How to write clearly* 2015) aiming at a broader category of language users: drafters of the original texts, translators and revisers, while admitting that drafting conventions may be language – or text type-dependent. Although not stated explicitly in the first part of the document, the quick references to text typology (EU law, political documents, working or internal documents, etc.), practical information sheets for translation quality control and risk management prove the immediate and rather limited relevance of these guidelines.

At the same time, DGT professes that there is no error-free translation and that translation quality assessment is basically concerned with risk management, i.e. the impact of the errors and the likelihood of errors occurring monolingually (in reviews) and bilingually (within the scope of revision). These claims are worth considering as broader with respect to text type and readership expectations.

The paramount importance of quality control ‘as an added value’ is visible in the above mentioned documents in the active encouragement of translators to globally re-read and self-assess the output during a separate workflow step, besides checking for accuracy and fluency while translating.

Florea (2016) draws our attention that translation quality assurance at the DGT is a three-stage process: pre-, while- and post-translation. At the first stage, the source text is drafted and translators undertake preparation work (including the “How to write clearly” campaign). During the second phase, cooperation with experienced translators, terminologists, etc. and reliance on available resources (technology included – CAT tools, MT, multilingual databases, etc.) become vital. The last stage joins the efforts of translators (with respect to editing) and language administrators (ensuring proofreading, feedback provision, etc.).

From a more detail-oriented perspective, we shall provide the translation assessment grid applied by DGT (also used to give feedback) as exemplified by the DGT's *Guide for external translators* (2006, 2016) and Buzdugan (2016):

- Completeness - no additions and omissions are permitted;
- Transfer of meaning in a faithful, accurate and consistent manner;
- Check of reference material and EU-specific terminology/usage;
- Coherence of terminology throughout the text, i.e. internal coherence;
- Spelling and grammar (accuracy);
- Style and register;
- Clarity of expression (naturalness, included);
- Layout and formatting;
- Meeting the deadline.

Needless to say, this code of (institutional) practice incorporates aspects of language administration and resource management, pointing out to the complex role and expertise of the professional translator. Furthermore, errors fall into two categories: high relevance and low relevance ones, their seriousness being assessed according to the extent to which they affect the accurate and natural delivery. The descriptors of translation quality range as follows: Very Good – Good – Acceptable (new) – Below standard – Unacceptable; starting from the Acceptable value, all translations are subject to significant revision or upgrading to be performed by the external translator (contractor) himself/herself or by the DGT staff.

4. Conclusion

The holistic approach to the translator's competence and translation quality assurance from a process-oriented perspective highlights the need for “optimisation and harmonisation of translation strategies and of quality standards with respect to experiential learning and professional development, and individual accountability, translated as (self-)monitoring, (self-)assessment and strategic planning.” (Vîlceanu 2013:198)

Translation quality assessment in the 21st century, when globalisation and multilingual text production have brought about tensions between cultural specificity and universality, between domestication and foreignising strategies, when the English language impact is ever stronger beyond the lexical level, affecting discourse patterns and practices and resulting in hybrid structures, is still striving to determine whether the translator's subjectivity or readership orientation should become the overriding principle.

Moreover, in my opinion, translation evaluation should become a genuine research focus in order to assess translation systematically, determine its scope, design its conceptual and methodological toolkit more precisely and achieve a unified theory going beyond empirical considerations and codes of practice.

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