TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction

The role and nature of specialized writing in a translation-specific writing program

Ingrid Meyer et Pamela Russell

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

The role and nature of specialized writing in a translation-specific writing program

Ingrid Meyer and Pamela Russell

I. Introduction

The great majority of professional translators work with texts that are «specialized» in the sense that they can be differentiated from «general» texts according to four parameters: purpose, target audience, subject matter, and structural conventions. The importance of specialized translation in the working world is reflected in the curriculum of Canadian translator training programs, which typically offer a number of courses in specialized translation.

In this paper, we argue that an important complement to specialized translation courses should take the form of specialized writing exercises in the dominant language. We first examine the role of specialized writing in the translation curriculum (Section II), and then discuss the nature of specialized writing exercises (Section III), giving some concrete examples in the Appendix.

Our reflections draw on experience in teaching writing courses within the translation-specific writing program offered at the School of Translators and Interpreters at the University of Ottawa. By *translation-specific writing program*, we designate a group of writing courses that are part of the translation program, i.e. that are designed for, and usually restricted to, translation students (for a detailed justification of this approach, see Meyer 1989). A program naturally implies an underlying organizational structure, which at the University of Ottawa is based on three categories of writing activities (see Meyer 1987 and 1989 for a detailed description): 1) error identification and correction, which includes problem-specific exercises and short texts, proofreading, and revision (both intra- and inter-lingual); 2) composition, both unilingual and parallel; and 3) summarizing, in the form of the précis (written and oral, intra- and inter-lingual) and the abstract

(intra- and inter-lingual). As discussed in more detail in Section III, specialized writing exercises can occur within any one of these three activities.

II. The role of specialized writing exercises

Specialized writing exercises are relevant to translation from two points of view, which are both examined in greater detail below: translation as a process and translation as a profession.

Relevance to translation as a process

The translation process has both an inter- and an intra-lingual dimension. On the one hand, translators are intermediaries between source and target languages and cultures. On the other hand, however, they are in a sense «creators» of the target language text, which as Toury (1980, 16) has pointed out, «goes on to serve as an *ordinary* message, in a regular *intra*systemic act of communication». It is this second dimension of the translation process that specialized writing courses address.

A first goal of specialized writing exercises is to develop a certain versatility in the translation student by providing writing practise in a number of specialized fields. As Darbelnet (1966, 159) has pointed out, translators must be even more skilled than normal, i.e. unilingual, writers in the sense that they have less control over what they write, given their mandate to submit to the thoughts and means of expression of someone else. Specialized writing exercises aim to give students a *method* for acquiring the specialized concepts and writing conventions of different fields of knowledge, rather than the concepts and conventions themselves, since they cannot hope to become writing experts in all fields.

A second goal of specialized writing exercises is to shore up writing confidence in the dominant language, so as to reduce the risk of interference during translation. This is important since certain specialized text types follow different conventions in source and target languages. In commercial writing, for example, one finds significant differences between French and English in texts such as minutes (past tense in English, present tense in French) and letters (differences in punctuation, openings and closings, formulae of politeness). It is hoped that, by doing a certain amount of specialized writing in a unilingual context, students will be less «hypnotized» by source texts during translation.

Relevance to translation as a profession

More and more, professional translators are being seen as writing experts in a general sense, rather than simply inter-linguistic mediators. In many cases, their jobs may require them to do many other things besides translation in the narrow sense of the term. This tendency is reflected in the fact that some competitions include summaries, and sometimes even compositions, grammar questions, revision, etc., as well as translations. In effect, all three categories of exercises described in Section 1 are relevant to translation as a profession, and are discussed in turn below.

Error correction and identification. Even beginning translators may be required to do proofreading on the job, and students must therefore be taught the proper techniques and conventions. Normally only more senior translators do professional revision, but some practise in revision will help translators revise their own work, as well as give them an understanding of the work of their revisors. (See Thaon 1984, Thaon and Horguelin 1980 for a more detailed justification and description of didactic revision.)

Composition. Many of our graduates report being asked to write texts in their dominant language, particularly commercial texts, publicity, and sometimes technical documents. Interestingly enough, some of our graduates have even moved from translation to writing (particularly technical writing) as a career. In some institutions, parallel writing is preferred to translation for certain texts.

Summarizing. Précis-writing and abstracting, particularly of the inter-lingual variety, may be required of the translator for texts that are very long (and thus expensive to have translated in their entirety) and not crucially important. Summarizing skills are also important in consecutive interpretation, and some practise in summarizing will enable students to judge whether they should pursue further training in interpretation after completing studies in translation. (See Russell 1981, 1988 for a justification and description of summarizing, and Cremmins 1981 for more details on abstracting.)

III. The nature of specialized writing courses

This section describes the way in which specialized writing is presented to students in four translation-specific writing courses offered as part of the University of Ottawa's three-year Honours B.A. Translation Program. We first outline a set of parameters according to which students are taught to analyze specialized texts, and then give examples of types of specialized texts that students work with.

For the purposes of our writing courses, we define specialized writing as the production of non-literary, pragmatic texts designed for use in a specific field or discipline, such as science, technology, law, business, administration, or journalism. The purpose of the specialized text is primarily informative, and the writer's concern is for clarity, precision and effectiveness in the transmission of information. The text usually contains terminology and concepts particular to the field and often follows conventional formats.

Considerations in the Writing of a Specialized Text

Four parameters that the student should consider in any specialized writing assignment are the purpose of the text, the target audience, the subject matter, and the conventions of the field.

Purpose. The specialized text is often a vehicle of research, instruction, clarification, or dissemination of information. The student must determine whether the text is purely informative, or whether it has other purposes as well, such as to attract the reader's attention or to promote sales.

Target audience. The target audience is usually a specific subgroup of readers. The student must determine who the reader is and how the reader will use the text. Will the target audience be sympathetic to the text? Is the text designed for a specialized or non-specialized readership? Popularizations (see example in Appendix) are particularly useful in teaching the student to adapt a text to a particular readership.

Subject matter. The subject matter in most specialized texts is itself specialized. The student will not have the same level of expertise as a subject specialist, but should have a general knowledge of the field and be able to understand the concepts and vocabulary used in the text. Most assignments require the student to work with an existing text (for example, to revise or summarize it), or to draft a text based on a series of facts. Students must consider the complexity of the information to be conveyed and weigh the relative importance of the various ideas. Complex material may require a particularly clear and structured format if it is to be effectively communicated.

Conventions. In specialized writing, conventional formats are usually followed. It is important for the novice to consult similar texts for examples of layouts and the use of terminology. Text structure is particularly important in specialized writing, since the pattern is generally more rigid and the cues to the pattern more explicit than in non-specialized writing. (One exception is the journalistic news story, in which the organization of paragraphs is particularly unsystematic.)

Types of Specialized Texts

Students in our specialized writing courses can work with technical, scientific, business, legal, and journalistic texts. (For examples of the classroom exercises, see the Appendix.) Although our courses will not produce full-fledged technical writers or journalists, they aim to sensitize students to the types of texts used in specialized fields, and to help them develop skills that can be applied when writing in such fields.

Technical and Scientific Writing. Students study samples of technical writing, such as formal reports, technical descriptions, or operating manuals, to become familiar with the style, formats, and subject material of the texts. For assignments, students are asked to edit technical or scientific articles, write technical descriptions of objects or procedures they are familiar with, or write abstracts of technical documents. A recommended reference textbook is Ron Blicq's *Technically-Write* (1983).

Business Writing. Letters, memoranda, and minutes of meetings are types of writing that are covered in this field. Students are required to write business letters that would be appropriate in a given situation, or to revise samples of correspondence. The formality, tone, and content of the text are determined by the relationship between the writer and reader and the purpose of the correspondence (for example, the same information would be conveyed quite differently to a customer, a supplier, and a business competitor.) For numerous examples of exercises, see William Schutte's *Communication in Business and Industry* (1983).

Journalism. Journalistic texts are designed to attract the reader's attention as well as to transmit information. Students study the conventional formats used in the news story, the feature story, and the editorial, and analyze the organization and style of samples of each type of article. As assignments, students write news stories based on a given set of facts, or editorials based on a series of chosen news stories. As a reference, see John Hohenberg's *The Professional Journalist* (1973).

Legal Writing. There are limits to the extent to which legal writing can be covered in our courses, since legal drafting requires extensive specialization. Precision is a paramount concern, and legal documents must allow no possibility of accidental or deliberate misinterpretation. Students study by-laws, statutes, and contracts to become familiar with the vocabulary, style, and format used in this field. As assignments, they are required to revise paralegal texts or to write popularized versions of legal documents. A recommended reference textbook is David Mellinkoff's *Legal Writing: Sense and Nonsense* (1982).

Concluding remarks

The specialized writing component of a translation program is intended to provide an important complement to specialized translation courses. Interestingly enough, in the case of some students at the University of Ottawa, the writing courses have produced results beyond those intended: some students have chosen to work as specialized writers rather than translators upon graduation. We interpret this phenomenon as an indication of the success of our writing program.

University of Ottawa

Appendix

Examples of Specialized Writing Exercises

I. Error correction

Edit the following text, making the changes that you think are necessary. Be prepared to explain your reasons for making all changes.

To facilitate analyses and to interpret results, the 10 participating countries agreed to follow standardized experiments, materials, methods, and sampling procedures. The aim of the working group was to develop a better knowledge of the corn borer and of its relationships with its main host-plant *Zea mays* L. in different environmental conditions. The project's first objectives were primarily to study the survival of the corn borer population on several inbred lines at research stations in the cooperating countries, to determine the type and extent of damage inflicted on host plants, and to obtain more knowledge of the insect and its adaptation to maize plants under different environmental conditions.

(excerpt from journal article)

II. Composition

1. Journalism

Write a news story based on the following series of notes. Your story should include a headline and a lead. Use a standard news format.

Power was out from 6:15 p.m. until 11:00 p.m. last night throughout the town of Perth; thousands without electricity; this was third power outage in area this year; cause was fire at nearby power station; cause of fire under investigation; two stores broken into during blackout; traffic jams in downtown area; all off-duty police officers called into work; hospital used backup generator, experienced no serious problems.

2. Business Writing

You have insured your car and home with the same insurance company for ten years without problems. This year, however, you received your policy renewal notice and invoice ten days after the renewal date; in the week that followed, you received two reminder notices

of payment due as well as a letter expressing concern that your payment had not yet been received. Write a letter to the company expressing your dissatisfaction with this billing procedure.

3. Technical Description

a. Imagine that you have just invented the corkscrew. Write a clear description of your invention and describe how it works. Include a diagram of the corkscrew. 400 words (Adapted from exercise in Norman Levine's *Technical Writing*, 1978)

b. Write a description of the intersection of X and Y streets, based on the information shown on the attached diagram. Include a description of the properties surrounding the intersection and the traffic flow on the two streets. 400 words (Adapted from exercise in Ron Blicq's *Technically-Write*, 1983)

III. **Summarizing**

1. Abstracting

A typical abstract is given below; this particular abstract is taken from a 1986 issue of the journal *Language and Language Behavior Abstracts*, and describes the content of an article on child language acquisition, entitled «Children's Sensitivity to Comprehension Failure in Interpreting a Nonliteral Use of an Utterance,» by Brian Ackerman. Notice how the material is organized into the following pattern: purpose; methodology or scope; results; and conclusions or recommendations. See Cremmins (1981) for guidelines on abstracting.

> The relative sensitivity of children and adults to both their own and another listener's failure to understand literal and nonliteral uses of utterances is studied. Three separate experiments, each involving 3 age groups (7 years, 10 years, and adult) were conducted. Ss'interpretations of stories containing either a literal or a nonliteral utterance and responses to those stories provided by other listeners were assessed. The results showed that, while the 7-year-olds did not evaluate the listener's understanding effectively, both groups of children understood well the speaker's nonliteral intent and were quite sensitive to instances of their own lack of comprehension. It is speculated that the difficulties encountered by the younger children may have stemmed from their failure to use their own interpretations of the speaker's intent as an evaluative standard.

Examples of texts assigned to students to abstract:

B.F. Hoffman, «Contemporary Ethical Issues Surrounding Electrocon-vulsive Therapy,» in *Psychiatric Journal of the University of Ottawa*, XI (2) 1986.

R.B. Charlton and C. Park, «Observations of Industrial Fog, Cloud and Precipitation on Very Cold Days,» in *Atmosphere-Ocean* 22 (1) 1984.

2. Popularizing

Write a popularized summary of the following passage, reducing it to approximately 85 words.

The finding of an inverse relation between socioeconomic status of parents and impaired mental health is particularly significant because it indicates that successively lower parental status carries for the child progressively greater likelihood of inadequate personality adjustment in adulthood. The finding that one's current socioeconomic status is even more closely related to one's mental health suggests that the effects of low socioeconomic status are probably cumulative in that the vulnerable personalities developed by some low-status children prevent their upward mobility and destine them to the further burdens and stresses that low socioeconomic status adults typically encounter in the United States. Moreover, lower-class persons tend toward socially disturbing psychotic adaptations that further complicate their adjustment to an already stressful environ-ment, while higher-status persons tend to respond to stress with neurotic responses that are socially more adaptive. Thus, the cumulative effects of unfavorable childhood and adult experiences on the lower-class person may result in a higher degree of vulnera-bility not only to mental illness but also to the development of more serious psychiatric symptoms.

(from *International Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, ed. D. L. Sills, MacMillan, p. 224)

References

BLICQ, Ron (1983). *Technically-Write*. Scarborough, Prentice-Hall Canada.

CREMMINS, Edward (1981). *The Art of Abstracting*. Philadelphia, ISI Press.

DARBELNET, Jean (1966). «Réflexions sur la formation générale du traducteur». *Meta*, 11(4), pp. 155-160.

HOHENBERG, John (1973). *The Professional Journalist*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

LEVINE, Norman (1978). *Technical Writing*. New York, Harper and Row.

MELLINKOFF, David (1982). *Legal Writing: Sense and Nonsense*. St. Paul (Minn.), West.

MEYER, Ingrid (1987). «The Usefulness of Writing Courses in the Dominant Language in a Translator Training Program». *Proceedings of the 28th Annual Conference of the American Translators Association*. 8-11 Oct. 1987. Ed. Karl Kummer. Medford (N.J.), Learned Information.

MEYER, Ingrid (1989). «A Translation-Specific Writing Program: Justification and Description». In *Translator Training and Foreign Language Pedagogy* (American Translators Association Monograph Series, Vol. III). Ed. Peter Krawutschke.

RUSSELL, Pamela (1981). «The Importance of Précis-Writing in a Translator Training Program». In *l'Enseignement de l'interprétation et de la traduction: de la théorie à la pédagogie*. Ed. Jean Delisle. Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press.

RUSSELL, Pamela (1988). *How to Write a Précis*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press.

SCHUTTE, William M. and Edwin R. Steinberg (1983). *Communication in Business and Industry*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

SÉGUINOT, Candace (1987). «Some Rhetorical Principles in Technical and Scientific Writing in English and in French». *Technostyle*, 6(3), pp. 1-15.

THAON, Brenda (1984). «The Role of a Revision Course in a Translation Program». In *la Traduction: l'universitaire et le praticien.* Eds. Arlette Thomas and Jacques Flamand. Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, pp. 297-301.

THAON, Brenda and P. Horguelin (1980). *A Practical Guide to Bilingual Revision.* Montreal, Linguatech.

TOURY, Gideon (1980). *In Search of a Theory of Translation.* Tel Aviv, Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, Tel Aviv University.