

A Product-Based Approach to Translation Training

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Article abstract

This study seeks to demonstrate that active interaction between learner and teacher rather than passive reception by the teacher - as obtains in traditional teaching models - is essential. A product-based analysis of actual training makes it possible to identify a translation problem and subsequently apply theoretical considerations. Depending on the nature of the text being translated, error analysis can be used effectively not only for monitoring student progress but also for appraising general performance.

A Product-Based Approach to Translation Training

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude vise à montrer la nécessité de préconiser une interaction active entre l'enseignant et l'enseigné plutôt que la réception passive par l'enseignant d'un texte produit par l'enseigné. En situation de formation, l'analyse du « produit » permet d'identifier les problèmes et de chercher des solutions en s'appuyant sur des considérations théoriques. Selon la nature du texte à traduire, l'analyse des erreurs constitue un moyen efficace non seulement de suivre le progrès de l'étudiant mais d'apprécier son niveau de performance.

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to demonstrate that active interaction between learner and teacher rather than passive reception by the teacher - as obtains in traditional teaching models - is essential. A product-based analysis of actual training makes it possible to identify a translation problem and subsequently apply theoretical considerations. Depending on the nature of the text being translated, error analysis can be used effectively not only for monitoring student progress but also for appraising general performance.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

product-based analysis, error analysis, error evaluation, evaluation criteria

1. Introduction

Adopting any anticipatory approach to translation teaching entails two difficulties: taking into account the different needs of students (bilingual competence or degree of cross-linguistic/cultural variation) and the variability of text, therefore translation strategies.

The analysis of the students' errors, therefore, is a delicate task that requires a solid theoretical as well as practical background in order to generalize conclusions which may affect teaching. The acuteness of error analysis is similar to conducting a medical diagnosis. The teacher must first identify where the erroneousness lies in the text, look at the symptoms and then describe them. In this way, the teacher can diagnose/explain the reasons for the deficiency and assess their gravity accordingly. Only then, can the appropriate teaching therapy be devised. Effective assessment of the students' errors must first of all deal with effective identification, then description and explanation.

2. Preliminaries to Error Evaluation

2.1 Identification

Recognizing translation errors is not as easy a task as it may appear. Teachers usually find it difficult to define what is erroneous and what is not. In this respect Pym (1993:102) distinguishes

between errors and mistakes. A translation can be either rejected completely or considered true or right. For example, the Arabic expression:

عملية استشهادية (1)
amaliyya istiḥādīyya
(martyr operation)
is often rendered into English as:
(1a) suicide attack.

Back translation of the English text 1a into Arabic will produce a different meaning from the original text. This is likely to be due to a clash of cultures portrayed in the two linguistic texts. In Western culture such acts are often associated with violence, terrorism and even fanaticism whatever their reason or purpose. In the Arabo-Islamic culture, however, such acts of martyrdom are symbolic of sacrifice and courage, especially when they are committed against a so-called "enemy" or "occupier". However, despite the ideological shift in translation 1a, it cannot be judged as simply true because it deviates from the ST meaning or simply false because it has been performed in a manner that serves the TL reader's thought and therefore the communicative purpose of translation.

In this regard, translation teachers may differ as to which translation can be considered acceptable/accurate or unacceptable/inaccurate and consequently what can be considered as erroneous. An error sanctioned by a teacher as serious can be overlooked by another provided that the meaning is still expressed. Let's consider Sentence 2:

(2) war was declared on Iraq by America
(2a) الحرب أعلنت على العراق من قبل أمريكا
al-ḥarb u^clinat^c ala al-^cirāq min qibali amrīca
(2b) أمريكا قبل من العراق على الحرب أعلنت
u^clinat al-ḥarb^c ala al-^cirāq min qibali amrīca
(2c) العراق على الحرب أعلنت أمريكا
amrīca a^clanat al-ḥarb^c ala al-^cirāq
(2d) أمريكا أعلنتها العراق على الحرب
al-ḥarb^c ala al-^cirāq a^clanatha amrīca
(2e) أمريكا أعلنتها العراق، على أعلنت الحرب
al-ḥarb u^clinat^c ala al-^cirāq, a^clanathā amrīca

Passivized forms like Sentence 2 are acceptable in English while the acceptability of corresponding Arabic form from Sentences 2a to 2e vary according to the teacher and the context in which it occurs. This is because Arabic passives are typically agentless (Saad 1982:2). Translation of Sentence 2a, however, is acceptable in media discourse which is more open to Western styles and structures.

Disparity between teachers also arises when the error is due to cultural mismatch. For instance, the assessment of the translation of Sentence 3a below as accurate or erroneous may depend on whether the translator intends to introduce the TL reader to the SL religious culture or simply has failed to observe the cultural demands of the TL:

(3) Jesus, Son of God
(3a) عيسى ابن الله
isā ibn Allah

Nonetheless, not all translations failures can be clearly identified as either mistakes or errors. For instance, it would be hard to tell whether the deficiency in 3a lies in the producer's lack of the necessary linguistic (pragmatic) knowledge and should therefore be identified as a mistake, or if it simply reflects the producer's lack of the necessary translational skills to differentiate between a literal and dynamic method of translation according to situation and context, and should therefore be classified as an error. Only feedback on the producer's linguistic knowledge may clear up the confusion.

Having said that, feedback from the students being assessed is still an essential component of a well-informed assessment of their errors. In assessing errors, the teacher can use this type of feedback in two different ways. In an informal situation, the teacher may ask the students what they wanted to express with the erroneous translation in question. This can pave the way to discover whether the error can be traced back to either a misunderstanding of the ST or a lack of TL competence. In the former case, the teacher would be carrying out an authoritative interpretation of the student's erroneous translation (Corder 1981:37-38). The second type is often performed when no direct contact can be made with the student whose errors are being analyzed. The teacher should, therefore, infer the student's intention whenever possible from his/her knowledge of the idiosyncratic style and the strategies used. This process is referred to as a plausible interpretation (*ibid.*).

In translation practice however, some teachers tend to opt for a plausible interpretation of their students' translations, given the negative pedagogical implications the authoritative interpretation may have. Students often feel demotivated and may even lose self-confidence and feel embarrassed, if they are repeatedly pressed to explain their errors. I believe that teachers should be lenient when dealing with error analysis, particularly at early training stages, in order to allow students to grasp practical translation skills and strategies.

2.2 Description

Describing a translation error means describing the difference between what the student has done and what should have been done. This presupposes an evaluative procedure in which the teacher contrasts the student's construction with an ideal and unique reconstruction. Examination of different teacher assessments of their students' errors does not support this hypothesis. For instance, Pym (1992: 279-88) traces this to the non-binary nature of translation. This situation often results in confusion among students as to what is "the correct translation" or which teacher's method is "the correct way to translate" (Megrab 1999).

Bassnet-Susan (1991: 9) postulates that reconstructing a student's erroneous translation can be approached from one of two standpoints: the closeness of the translation to the SL text or the treatment of the TL text as a work in its own language. If the teacher assesses the error simply in terms of his own reconstruction of equivalence of the TT to the ST, the teacher then overlooks the non-binary nature of translation, i.e., that there are several possible translations to one ST. Therefore, while teachers may consider the student's erroneous translation as serious because it may be too distant from their own, the same translation may at the same time be closer to other possible reconstructions and, consequently less serious. The teacher should therefore be open to other possibilities and interpretations suggested by the students themselves.

الإجراءات الأولان (4)

(*al-ijrā? ān al-awwalān*)

(4a) the two first procedures

(4b) the first two procedures

(5) the lesson is not easy
(5a) الـدرس لـيس سهلـا
al-dars laysa sahlan
(5b) لـيس الـدرس سهلـا
laysa l-dars sahlan

Erroneous translations such as Sentences 4a, and 5a above may not be considered by some teachers as serious in so far as they do not affect the communicative meaning of the ST. Yet, other teachers may consider these errors as a reflection of the students' incompetence and suggest remedial teaching because as Kussmaul (1995:144) argues "[...] the more basic these errors are, the more heavily they are usually penalized".

2.3 Explanation

Explanation of error has been one of the main concerns of foreign language teaching in general and one of the theoretical objectives of error analysis in particular. It is generally assumed that most errors committed by learners of a foreign language can be traced back to what is referred to as interlanguage transfer (Corder 1981: 65). It is held that errors are attributed to transfer from the SL which occur when the student confuses two systems, creating a new one foreign to both of them. The trainee translator's task is more complex than that of the foreign language learner. While the latter needs to use the thought patterns of the TL independently of the SL, the former is often faced with the problem of how to express the thought patterns of the SL in the TL without affecting the structure of either of them. Evaluation is therefore not a single independent operation, but a combination of procedures.

First, the errors must be detected. For this, the teacher must conduct an accurate critical analysis of the students' translations.

3. Possible Criteria for Evaluation

Although different criteria have been proposed in applied translation literature for eliminating the subjectivity of the evaluator, evaluation is still an area of controversy. It is not an easy task especially because the ideal aim is to produce the objective out of the subjective. A sound evaluation should go beyond intuition to achieve objectivity and accuracy (Kupsch-Losereit 1985: 177). In translation practice, however, the operation inevitably involves personal judgment and cannot be a pure mechanical process.

3.1 The Frequency Criterion

This criterion is quantitatively orientated and assesses errors in terms of the frequency of their occurrence. Most translation teachers would, however, opt for a quality assessment as translation involves a transfer of meaning which can be affected by the quality of the error. Yet, a high frequency of an error in a group of students can alarm teachers. Based on the frequency criterion, two ways for the assessment of the relative gravity of an error can be distinguished.

The first relates the gravity of the error to its frequency by the same student. This procedure is not easy to carry out since the teacher cannot possibly single out errors by individual students, determine their distribution and design re-teaching methods for every student.

The second concerns the frequency of errors within a group of students, the most recurrent being the most serious. It is not surprising that most of these errors are heavily penalized. Indeed, high recurrence of an error-type among students should prompt teachers to review their teaching methods and material. This is because high frequency of an error-type means that the teaching method either ignores the students' areas of difficulty or simply fails to address them correctly. Corrective measures should then be initiated depending on the type and source of error. Unfortunately, a discussion of remedial or corrective measures our subject teachers should adopt falls outside the scope of this paper.

With respect to the frequency criterion, some foreign language educators suggest statistical methods to account for the gravity of errors. For example, Norish (1983:103-4) proposes that we can calculate the relative frequency by multiplying the number of errors by one hundred and dividing the total by the number of words in the same text; a small quotient would represent a low level of seriousness, and vice versa.

As far as translation is concerned, such distributional methods, statistical or otherwise, cannot reflect the quality of the translation. They may give the teacher some pedagogical insight into what translation skills are unmastered by most students, but cannot provide a reliable measure for assessing the accuracy of the actual text being translated. In other words, the error should be assessed in terms of its occurrence because the same error can occur in different texts but may affect the quality of the translations differently. Let us consider, for instance, the translation of Sentence 6:

(6) he is studying linguistics

(6a) *yadrus al-luġa*

اللغة يدرس

Translation of Sentence 6a may be acceptable for a layman in the field of language and linguistics even if he recognizes the wrong selection of the *اللِسَانِيَّات* word "al-luġa" (language) instead of *اللِغْيَة* "al-lisāniyyāt" (linguistics). On the contrary, in a situation where distinction between "language" and "linguistics" is essential to the meaning of the text, the error can be regarded as serious.

3.2 Generality Criterion

According to this criterion, evaluation should be performed in terms of the major/minor rules infringed, the more general being the more serious. Major errors refer to failure to observe general grammatical rules such as case inflections in Arabic, or the use of the appropriate tense like the infinitive after a conjugated verb in English as in the Sentence 7:

(7) the birds are singing

(7a) *yūġarrid*

يغرد الطيور
[singing-sing. -fem.]

al-tuyūr

الطيور
[birds-pl.-masc.]

In Arabic, the verb preceding the subject is always inflected for gender agreement. In Sentence 7a, the verb should take a feminine prefix number because it governs a non-human plural as in Sentence 7b:

(7b) *tūġarrid al-tuyūr*

الطيور تغرد

On the other hand, minor errors refer to failure to observe exceptions to major rules which most often result in overgeneralization. Foreign language students are more prone to such errors than translation students. However, these errors are still apparent in the work of Arab students translating into English. Consider the following erroneous translation, Sentence 8, done by an Arab trainee working into English,

- (8) *jamma^ct kull al-ma^clūmāt*
جمعت كل المعلومات
(8a) I gathered all informations.

The student has overgeneralized the rule of the plural morpheme “s” although "information" is an uncountable noun.

According to the generality criterion, grammatical errors are more serious than lexical ones as error gravity is determined in terms of the syntactic structures they violate. In this respect Norish (1983:32) distinguishes between two types of error. The first involves local errors which are evaluated as less serious since they involve single lexical items which are unlikely to affect the understanding of the entire message. The second involves global errors which occur in main clauses and are likely to affect the meaning of the whole message. I disagree with this distinction for translation quality assessment. An error relating to a single lexical item can be more detrimental to the meaning of a message than a breach in a general grammatical rule at the main clause level or otherwise.

However, grammatical errors in translation should not be overlooked, as supported by most translation theorists (e.g. Newmark 1988 & Neubert 1990). The increasing frequency in grammatical errors committed by Arab trainee translators is a source of irritation for teachers, and can be detrimental to the credibility of the profession, once these trainees begin practicing.

3.3 Intelligibility Criterion

The generality criterion discussed above implies that the acquisition of lexis is a less fundamental skill for the translator than the mastery of grammatical structures. The intelligibility criterion, however, holds that we are more likely to be understood using words without syntax than with syntactic structures without words. That is, the communicative goals of a text are more seriously affected if the breaches involve wrong selection of words rather than syntactic structures.

According to the intelligibility criterion, lexical errors can affect the intelligibility of the translation in two different ways; first by making the intended message totally unintelligible thus causing a breakdown in the communicative function of the text; second, by distorting the meaning without impairing communication; the TL reader therefore understands something other than the original author's intentions. The importance of this criterion to our analysis lies in the fact that it determines how teachers assess differently distortion of meaning and disruption of communication. For instance, the translation of Sentence 9a below is likely to be unintelligible or nonsensical to a TL reader while the *Hadith*¹ translation in Sentence 10a distorts the meaning:

- (9) يحتاج الى عملية نقل دم
yahtāj ilā^c amaliyyat naql damm
(9a) he needs an operation of blood transport
(9b) he needs a blood transfusion

- اليد العلي خيبر من اليد السفلى (10)
al-yad al-^Culyā xayr min al-yad al-suflā
 (10a) the upper hand is better than the lower hand
 (10b) the giving hand is better than the receiving hand.

TL readers will probably be able to understand what the actual SL message is about. In (10a), however s/he is likely to associate "the upper hand" with power and authority which is completely different from the ST intended meaning successfully conveyed in Sentence 10b. Nida and Taber (1969) among others recognize the impact of lexical and cultural words which tend to be etymologically obscure or unrelated to any corresponding words in the TL on the quality of translation. They suggest componential analysis as a technique to handle the lack of cross-linguistic correspondence between words.

However, the lexical division of labour within the text does not often determine the quality of translation nor the gravity of the error. As words are lexical units with a referential and/or pragmatic meaning, componential analysis may be useful to identify these components and even establish semantic limits so as to make translation possible. For example, the word *وثير* "*waθīr*" can stretch to (comfortable) but not to *فخم* "*faxm*" (luxurious). Yet componential analysis paradigmatic segmentation of meaning is not usually successful as it fails to account for the fact that the meaning of a word is determined via its content and context. For instance, the components of the word "interesting" in English cannot be determined unless its con-text (co-text and context) is taken into consideration. Let us consider Sentence 11:

- (11) the story is **interesting**

The word "interesting" in Sentence 11 can convey different meanings depending on con-text. It can be rendered *مفيد* as "*mufīd*" (useful), *مهم* "*muhimm*" *ممتع* (important), "*mumti^C*" (amusing), *مسلي* "*musallī*" (entertaining). Componential analysis on its own cannot solve this problem of multiple choices with which translators are often faced. Only the context can help discover the intended meaning of the original author. That is, the meaning of a word is dependent on other words which precede and follow, in and outside the text, and cannot be just atomized into semantic units irrespective of the linguistic and socio-semiotic occurrence. This would make intelligibility a complex criterion as the ways in which it can be affected are varied as is the seriousness of each change.

3.4 The Interpretation Criterion

The interpretive criterion uses the ST as a point of departure. It is precisely about how far the trainee's interpretation of the ST personified in the TL is correct or deviant. The teacher checks on the basis of a comparison between ST and TT to see whether all the information is included; nothing is added, omitted and/or different (Larson, 1984:489-90). In other words, the criterion relates to the traditional paradigm of faithfulness in translation. Failure to be faithful to the ST can be either conscious or unconscious and the distinction between the two is essential in translation quality assessment. If the trainee consciously deviates from the ST in order to fulfill demands of the readership, the assessment procedure should be rather appreciative unless the circumstances are not appropriate. Consider, for instance, Sentence 12 below quoted from a Republican on the day of the American presidential elections:

- (12) America has got a cold but this is not the time to change the doctor.

Without sufficient con-text information, the reader of Sentence 12, let alone the TL reader of its translated version, is unlikely to understand its meaning. In the absence of such information the translator is required to decipher and interpret the ST in a way that makes its meaning less ambiguous for the TL reader as in Sentence 12a compared with Sentence 12b:

(12a) صحیح أن امریکاء تعانین من بعض المشاکل و لكن لم یحن وقت تغیری الرئیسی
ṣaḥīḥ anna amrīkā tu^cānī min ba^cd al-mašākil wa lākin lam yaḥīn waqtu taḡyīr ra?īsihā
(It is true that America has some problems, but the change of the president has not come yet)
(12b) أصاب امریکاء مرض الزکام و لكن هذا لیس بالوقت المناسبت تغیری رئیسیه القید
laqad aṣāba amrīkā maraḍ al-zukām wa lākin hāḍa laysa bi-bwaqt al-munāsib li-taḡyīr ra?īsihā
(America had caught cold, but it is not the right time to change president)

But there are indeed cases where the translator must not shift from the ST using his/her own interpretation. For example, as Hatim and Mason (1990:7) illustrate "[...] at crucial points in diplomatic negotiations, interpreters may need to translate exactly what is said rather than assume responsibility for re-interpreting the sense".

On the other hand, if the translator unconsciously shifts from the ST, the effect on the quality of translation is likely to be serious and the error is, therefore, to be assessed as such. Such errors are most often a result of misinterpretation of the ST which in turn produces a "betrayed" version of the ST.

This criterion is, therefore, ST-centered in the sense that it maintains that "[...] first loyalty is at all times with the source text" (*ibid.*:17). Thus, the quality of translation, according to this criterion, lies in the ability to comprehend and interpret the ST correctly. The comprehension and correct interpretation of the ST will enable the trainee to provide an acceptable and accurate translation.

3.5 The Naturalness Criterion

No single criterion can deal with all aspects of translation quality assessment. The four criteria discussed so far have not dealt specifically with the extent to which translation should be integrated and read as a natural TL text. The translator may understand the ST correctly and even convey a discernible message easily to the TL reader. However, the TT may not reflect the natural and idiomatic forms of the receptor language (Larson, 1984:478). This means that the TT does not read naturally for the TL reader as the ST does for the ST reader.

It seems that problems relating to naturalness often arise when the text is of a covert type, which necessitates handling the text in a way which meets the expectations of the TL audience. The risk of modifying the original text producer's intentions and discouraging inter-cultural understanding is often higher with naturalistic approaches to translation. A naturalistic approach usually seeks a domestication of the ST into the TL and culture, thus compromising the culture-specific meaning of the ST. This process of acculturation often prevents the TL reader from becoming acquainted with foreign thought patterns, and violates the fundamental principle of historical fidelity in translation (Beekman and Callow 1974:203). On the other hand, encouraging a non-naturalistic approach to translation has the benefit of enriching the linguistic repertoire of the TL. In other words, the incorporation of SL features into TL features helps TL readers develop their potential for new terminologies, the whole process is referred to by Neubert (1990:100) as translational cross-fertilization.

Naturalness is, however, a necessary risk that the translator has to take sometimes in order to produce an equivalent effect to that of the original. This view, reflected in teachers' assessments of the student errors as attempts to acculturate the ST into the TL, was rarely pointed out by teachers. It should be noted here that naturalness of a text can be checked only by native speakers of the TL. Errors relating to naturalness are often a result of cross-linguistic differences at the discourse or stylistic level, such as the organization of information in Arabic and English. This can be clearly seen in rhetoric and stylistic differences between the two languages. Arabic utilizes repetition and parallelism as tools to enhance the meaning and give the language its unique ornamental value; this utilization, however, can be seen as awkward in English because of its straightforward nature (Kaplan 1966:6-10).

More peculiar to Arabic (than to English) is the tendency to combine repetition and parallelism to create a stronger effect. Consider Sentence 13 taken from a speech made by the Libyan leader on 16 April 1983:

(13) *يجب أن يسقط تحت أقدامنا الآن أن الذي يتعالى على الجماهير ويتعالى على الشعب بعلمه أو برتبته أو بدرجةه*
inna allaḏī yata^Cālā^C alā^C l-jamāhīr wa yata^Cālā^C al-šša^C b bi-ilmih ?aw bi-rutbatih ?aw bi-darajatih yajib ann
yasquṭ taḥta aqdāminā l-?ān.

(He who looks down upon the masses and who he looks down upon the people because of his knowledge or rank or position...)

Notice here that the positive response which the repetition of form and meaning

الشعب على يتعالى الى يتعالى على الجمهير (He who looks down upon the masses and who looks down upon the people) may generate at the SL level is unlikely to be preserved if it is kept as such in English the translation above. Cutting down the repetition load in the Arabic ST when translating into English will produce, as in Sentence 13a, a more natural translation as far as the TL is concerned:

(13a) those who look down upon other people because of their knowledge or position...

From what precedes, it seems that the ways parts of language contribute to the form as well as the meaning of text should be checked cross-linguistically in order to maintain naturalness. It may be necessary, whenever the need arises, to choose TL patterns over SL ones.

4. Conclusion

The criteria discussed here is an attempt to investigate different approaches to assessing error gravity in translation. Much controversy in translation-error assessment can be resolved by a better understanding of how the different criteria relate to each other. Each criterion, apart from the frequency criterion, represents a particular translation competence but there are also significant interdependencies. For instance, it is often assumed that those who make grammatical errors tend to commit lexical errors as well, and those who lack critical skills in dealing with the ST are likely to face the same at the TL level.

Thus, assessment of translation errors should not be determined in terms of a rigid typological division of skills but on the basis of their impact on the meaning of the text as an all-inclusive communicative unit. The entire translation should be checked and, therefore, all the criteria taken into account.

It is held here that if productive translation research is to continue, we must consider the usefulness and availability of error evaluation to advance translator training and address the concerns of teachers. Although error analysis has been traditionally criticized for being retrospective and result-oriented, recent research (e.g. Kussmaul, 1995) shows that it can be both product-and process-oriented.

However, it should be noted that errors are just part of the student's development process. Any sound account of this process should involve the other part of the student's performance which does not involve errors. In other words, "the role of the teacher/translator is that of a decision maker in a problem solving-situation. He has to diagnose the problem, assess its gravity, and recommend the appropriate solutions" (Aabi & Megrab 2003:49). The teacher's analysis, therefore, should not be limited solely to those areas that are problematic to the students but can be extended to those mastered skills in order to draw a complete picture of the training process.

NOTES

1. Sayings and deeds of the Prophet of Islam Muhammad.

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