TOWARDS A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO TRANSLATION: A TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the teaching experience in 'Lingua Inglese e Traduzione I' at Udine University in the first year of the Degree Course 'Cultural Mediation'. The aim was to guide the students from a word-for-word approach to translation towards a communicative approach. A text is an act of communication and translation is a process to turn the message from one code into another across cultures. This account analyses and discusses a series of lessons in which mini-lectures were alternated with workshops, dealing with the following issues from translation studies: the problem of equivalence between languages, process in translation, text function and register. At the end of the article assessment criteria and first results are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching experience this article deals with took place over two years from 2012 to 2014 in the first-year of the Degree Course "Cultural Mediation" at Udine University. The 40-hour course "Lingua Inglese e Traduzione I" was planned on the assumption that, when students start university, most of them are aware of language as a cultural code, but they are rarely aware that the various components of different languages cannot easily be matched. In order to overcome this educational gap, the course was meant to help the students see the text as an act of communication, implying a complex interaction

between sender and receiver, and see translation as a process to turn the message from one code into another across cultures.

This aim was pursued through two different types of session: mini-lectures and workshops. The former introduced the main issues in translation studies, such as equivalence in meaning, process in translation, function and register, as well as the answers given by linguists (Halliday – Hasan 1976; Newmark 1981, 1988; Nida 1964; Reiss 1971; Vinay – Darbelnet 1958). The latter gave students the opportunity to put into practice the theory learned by doing translation activities, discussing the process and the results and, at the same time, developing the following translation skills:

- understanding the message of a Source Text (ST) through register analysis,
- using strategies of translation to overcome the difficulties in equivalence,
- checking that the Target Text (TT) is respectful of the reader's language and
- conventions,
- being aware of translation as a process.

The improvement in the students' English language skills was also an aim pursued throughout the whole course. However the present article focuses only on translation awareness and translation skills.

The first lesson started by drawing on the students' previous experience of translation in secondary school. According to the answers that were elicited and gathered, translation had been practised on a regular basis with classical languages, Latin and Greek, whereas it had been a marginal activity in modern languages. Although it was clear from their comments that they were not aware of their teachers' approach to translation, it seemed that the translation of classical language texts into Italian was often characterised by a word-for-word procedure sustained by the constant use of a bilingual dictionary. There were a few exceptions including understanding the gist of the text first and looking for the best words to express it after a first

reading. In this case the use of a dictionary was not encouraged. With modern languages the limited experience was named 'back-translation' and its aim was to reinforce the skills in the target language. Therefore the focus was on lexico-grammar accuracy, rather than on the overall meaning.

The initial interaction with the students worked as a springboard for the introduction of the first issue concerning translation: should a translation be faithful to the writer's language and culture code, or should it be adjusted to the receiver's to safeguard the quality of communication? The interaction of the students made it possible to touch upon the works of two linguists who questioned the belief that different languages could be matched word for word: De Saussure (1916) who discussed the difference between *langue* and *parole*, and Chomsky (1957) who introduced the distinction between 'surface' and 'deep structure' in language. This was followed by a discussion on Jakobson's first direct reference to translation issues: «on the level of interlingual translation, there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units [...]». For example «The English word "cheese" cannot be completely identified with its standard Russian heteronym [...]» (1959/2012: 127). Thus the discussion helped the students with an initial answer to the issue and introduced them to the works by Nida (1964, 1969), Newmark (1981, 1988) and Vinay – Darbelnet (1958), as accounted for in the following steps of the course.

2. 'EQUIVALENCE' IN MEANING

Nida played an outstanding role in the debate on translation in the 60s. Through his translation of the Bible, he gave evidence of two types of 'equivalence': 'formal', with the focus on the ST (Source Text) and the sender, and 'dynamic', with the focus on the TT (Target Text) and the 'receptor''s cultural need to understand the message (1964: 144-155). According to Nida, the TT should make sense, convey the spirit and manner of the ST, have at the same time a 'natural' form of

expression and produce a similar response in the recipient (1964: 134). As a consequence, translating became an act of transcultural understanding, implying inevitably a loss, a gain or a deviation of meaning.

To support the issue, the students were shown some of Nida's 'sets of renderings' (1969/1974: 2-3, 15-18) of the Bible, often containing the repetition of certain words, like 'flesh' and 'body', which were translated differently according to the context they belonged to. The linguist's main concern was to enable the reader to understand the message fully. The critical approach to the pre-existing translations of the Bible fascinated the students at this stage of the course: they saw it as a cultural mirror of that time that needs to be bent to different codes in order to be correctly understood.

A workshop followed to increase awareness of culture embedded in language and the problem that it poses to translators. The students were asked to translate British English expressions of politeness, a field that can be very challenging, since it refers to everyday cultural behaviour. See, for instance, the following expressions of politeness:

- requests, such as "I was wondering whether you could help me with...";
- disagreements, as in "I agree to some extent, but...";
- apologies expressed only with the word "Sorry".

Compared to English, Italian polite forms in a similar social context tend to prefer a more direct approach, which usually ignores softeners such as "I was wondering whether you…", and "I agree to some extent, but…", whereas the single word "Sorry" is often accompanied by an explanation. Thus it was seen that a word-for-word translation into Italian would not comply with Grice's cooperative principle (1975: 41-58): the result might sound awkward, even sarcastic, or might weaken the illocutionary force of the utterances (Austin 1962: 109).

In relation with these themes of translation studies, some concepts developed by Newmark were also discussed: 'Semantic' and

'Communicative' translation, the first closer to the transmitter's culture and language, with the translator's tendency to over-translate, the second closer to the receiver's norms with the tendency to under-translate (1981: 39). According to Newmark, the approach chosen for translation depends on the type of text: literary texts are more suited to a semantic approach, whereas non-literary texts are more effectively translated using a communicative approach. In the latter case the target language needs adjustments, in order to avoid awkward utterances and achieve a 'natural' effect. Regarding this topic Vinay and Darbelnet identified a categorization of procedures (1958/1995): 'direct' translation, such as 'borrowing', 'calque' and 'literal translation', and 'oblique' translation, such as 'transposition', 'modulation', 'equivalence' and 'adaptation'. During the workshops, these procedures were defined and applied, sometimes in a guided way, especially with complex procedures such as 'modulation', a concept described by Vinay and Darbelnet as «a variation of the form of the message that shows a very good command of the target language» (1995: 246). What follows is a selection of the outcome from the translation of various texts, which helped the students to understand the concept of 'modulation':

- This is […]: "Ecco";
- This is because […]: "Il motivo è";
- That was a typical reaction […]: "Si trattava di";
- On average this is […]: "In media significa che";
- This has been shown […]: "È stato dimostrato che";
- This suggests, she says, that […]: "Secondo lei";
- This suggests that […]: "I risultati indicano";
- Why this is so […]: "Perché questo avvenga".

Each translation choice was made with reference to its specific context, which is not reported here. The examples are only meant to emphasise the complexity of the process from ST to TT, in which 'modulation' is a high-skilled strategy.

3. PROCESS IN TRANSLATION

Thanks to the previous topics and activities, the students had learned that translation was not a straightforward process. Further awareness was achieved when they were given the opportunity to reflect upon their translation experiences in the workshops and relate them to a chronological presentation of models developed by the following linguists:

- Vinay and Darbelnet: identification of groups of words that express a thought, analysis of the ST and reconstruction of the metalinguistic context of the message, evaluation of the stylistic effects in context, production and revision of the TT (1958/1995: 20-27);
- Nida and Taber: analysis of the ST to decode the text, transfer of the message to the TT, restructuring, with all the language adjustments needed in the new context, and testing of the target language, possibly with the contribution of a 'consulting group' in activities including 'reading aloud' (Nida and Taber 1969/1974: 185);
- Newmark: reading to understand the ST, analysis to determine the writer's intention and the way the text is written, not as an end in itself, but to prepare for its reconstruction in a different culture (1988: 11-18);
- Hatim and Mason: interpretation, reception and production at more or less the same time, deriving from a model of textuality, where texture, structure and context are interwoven (1997: 29-43).

Although all the models included ST analysis, production and revision of the TT, the key-words used by the linguists showed the students the main changes in the history of translation studies from the word-for-word approach to the communicative approach: Viney and Darbelnet take a group of words expressing a thought as the unit of translation; Nida and Taber emphasise the requirements of the TT, which should be close to the receiver's code and, at the same time,

should guarantee faithfulness to the original reader's response; Newmark, in his analysis of the ST, focuses on the understanding of the writer's intention and its transfer to the target culture; Hatim and Mason find textuality a combined action of interpretation and production.

Along with these models, through discussion activities, the students elaborated on the idea of translation as a multi-step process and were given the framework to prepare for later issues. The activities were centred on journalistic texts containing an 'argumentation-disguised-as-exposition' (Hatim – Mason 1997: 32), therefore characterised mainly by an expressive function (issue and personal opinion) with an informative section on the outcome of research (evidence). The texts were chosen in order to show the students how two different registers can interact within the same extract. During the first step of the process, the analysis of the ST, a frequent task was:

What is the writer's attitude towards the reader? Is it friendly and involving? Is it detached? Both? Support your answer referring to the language in the article.

The aim was to help the students go beyond the surface level of the ST language and identify, usually, two main types of language: colloquial and emotional, when the writer is expressing his/her opinion; detached and subject specific, when he/she is showing research data as evidence. After the first draft of the translation, students had the following tasks to complete in order to raise awareness on some specific issues:

- *Edit your first draft paying attention to the appropriateness of colloquial and formal register.*
- *Read the result aloud to your workgroup, discuss the feedback you receive with them; accept the modifications you reckon appropriate.*
- *Compare your response to the TT to your initial response to the ST: has it changed?*

4. FUNCTION AND REGISTER

Theory and application during the course were dealt with in a spiral way, so that a touch-and-go approach was later followed by more in-depth work. For example, the previous reference to the writer's attitude towards the reader was developed later through Reiss's typology of functions and the specific language features of each function (1971/2000):

- 'informative', meant giving information through referential language, focused on content;
- 'expressive', meant showing the sender's attitude by means of emotional language, focused on the sender's viewpoint;
- 'operative', meant making an appeal to the receiver by means of persuasive language, focused on the receiver's behaviour.

Some examples of the tasks used in this phase were:

- *Where is the main focus of the text: on the writer/sender, on facts or on the reader/receiver? Support your answer with reference to the language in the ST.*
- *After translating, apply the previous questions to the TT, to make sure that the features of the original text have been maintained in the translation.*

A more comprehensive framework of analysis of the ST language was available to the students after an explanation of Halliday – McIntosh – Strevens's idea of register (1964: 86-98), later developed in Halliday – Hasan (1976: 22) and in Halliday (1985/1991: 29). The key concepts are:

- 'Field', the 'ideational strand', which refers to the 'total event', also including the subject matter with its subject-specific lexico-grammar;
- 'Tenor', the 'interpersonal strand', which refers to the 'role interaction' among the participants involved, as reflected by the language;

- 'Mode', the 'textual strand', including both the channel (spoken or written language) and its genre, with all the elements of cohesion and coherence.

This linguistic approach was a development of the traditional use of semantic and grammatical norms. House used Halliday's concepts of 'Field', 'Tenor' and 'Mode' to compare ST to TT and assess the quality of the communicative effect of translation (1977: 45).

What follows is a more detailed example from a course workshop that shows the students' analysis of the ST register and their comparison with the TT register. The text comes from an article by Sugata Mitra about children's access to the internet[1]. Each task is followed by the answers given by the group.

Task 1: Identify all the elements of register, organizing them into field, tenor and mode.

Field
- The Internet: 'Internet', 'the Web', 'access', 'screens', 'users', 'net', 'computer';
- Learning: 'learn', 'by themselves', 'self-organised', 'gain', 'self-confidence', 'retain', 'traditional rote learning';

Tenor
- Reference to personal experiences: 'I have learnt';
- Modal verbs that express possibility, wish and prediction: 'can', 'should', 'will';
- Emotion words and phrases expressing the writer's viewpoint offered to the reader: 'as harmful as we want it to be', 'deadly, subversive, filthy, perverse', 'collective consciousness', 'not always pretty', 'most beneficial friend', 'almost anything', 'full of

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[1] http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/03/child-safety-internet-web-access. The first five paragraphs of the article were used. The partial use is justified by the fact that the first section includes a synthesis of the argumentation.

rubbish', 'very little rubbish', 'incorrect things', 'invariably', 'actually'.

Mode
a. cohesion
- deixis: 'it', 'this', 'that', 'these', 'ones who',' they', 'that'
- repetition: 'children', 'the Internet, 'rubbish', 'learn'
- substitution: 'net' and 'web' replacing 'internet'
- collocation: 'rote learning', 'access the internet'
- syntax: 'and-clauses'; 'when-if-because-that-who-what-clauses'

b. textual coherence
- first paragraph: the main issue, the negative effect of the Internet on children according to a general perception;
- second, third and fourth paragraphs: the counter-argument about the beneficial effects on children's learning and evidence of this;
- fifth paragraph: conclusion with reference to specific learning benefits.

Task 2: Identify the main function of the ST according to Reiss's typology.

It is an expressive text. Control over the register and the topic, including subject-specific language and structure of the text, is due to the writer's professional background and professional skills.

Task 3: Compare the register in the ST with the TT to show possible translation shifts.

- Substitution of a pronoun with a noun: 'that it can be as [...]' was changed into 'che la rete può essere';
- Replacement of an adjective with an adverb: 'deadly, [...] perverse place' became 'un luogo terribilmente perverso';
- Reduction of clauses and loss of a partitive phrase: 'There is a perception that the internet is full of rubbish and that children will

learn incorrect things from it [...]' was translated into 'Secondo una percezione diffusa, internet è piena di spazzatura e insegna ai bambini cose sbagliate';

- Change from an explicit to an implicit partitive phrase: 'I have seen no evidence of this' was turned into 'non ne ho trovato conferma';
- Replacement of a pronoun with a noun: 'This is because [...]' became 'Il motivo è che';
- Reduction of repetitions: 'and there is, actually, very little rubbish on it that is not marked as rubbish by millions of users' was translated into 'e, in realtà, resta ben poco di quella spazzatura che non sia già stata segnalata come tale da milioni di utenti';
- Loss of contraction as marker of informality: 'Children who access the internet [...] gain immensely over ones who don't' was changed into 'I bambini che hanno accesso ad internet [...] sono avvantaggiati immensamente rispetto a quelli che non lo fanno'.

Task 4: Read the TT and analyse the register again to check that the text function and the reader's response have not been altered.

The search for 'naturalness' in the TT had resulted in a slight shift in register, making it more formal: several colloquial forms in the ST had been removed and replaced with a subjunctive form, a reduction of repetitions, some coordinated sentences and verb contractions, the shortening of a chain of adjectives and the replacement of pronouns with nouns. These changes would have had an effect on the TT reader's perception of the overall interpersonal strand, had the following language compensations not been introduced by the students to balance the loss of colloquial expressions:

- '[...] children [...] research a subject or topic' was translated into 'i bambini [...] fanno una ricerchina';
- '[...] children [...] correct erroneous notions [...]' was translated into 'i bambini correggono gli errori che fanno';
- '[...] they gain in self-confidence [...]' was translated into 'si sentono più sicuri';

- '[...] what they have researched [...]' was translated into 'ciò che hanno trovato'.

5. CONCLUSION

The final assessment was designed following these criteria:

A. Written exam: translation of a journalistic text
- suitability of ST communicative function,
- fluency of TT register for target culture.

B. Oral interview on the written exam
- discussion about ST: register and writer's communicative intention;
- discussion about the translation process: from response to ST to analysis of the
- communicative force in TT;
- discussion about TT: register choices and language procedures.

The results showed that most students had improved their language skills in ST analysis; for example they were able to identify subject-specific and colloquial registers and identify the function and the ultimate message. However, some had been misled by the presence of research data with statistics in the informative section of the article, not understanding its function in the subjective reasoned argument.

With regard to the TT, the students tended to choose a more formal register, revealing some reluctance to use colloquial phrases and idiomatic language. But the most critical aspect was found in the use of 'modulation'. Rather than rearranging the expression from a different angle, to make it sound natural according to the Italian code, they often kept the English pattern. This feedback proved that for the groups of students the concept of translation as a transcultural process had not been completely grasped. A possible reason could also be the need to revise the translation after a suitable break, in order to limit

the temporal reverberation of the ST on the memory of the translator, a requirement that cannot be met during an exam.

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