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Remarks on (Purported) Translators' Tasks and Translation Teaching

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Translator training requires contribution by experts in a variety of fields. The article singles out language experts, who sometimes fail to realize that the linguistic behavior of translators need not necessarily follow the same principles as that of a different group of language professionals. Several examples are given of recommendations that could be heard at recent translator seminars in Zagreb that are not in tune with the prevalent contemporary understanding of translation process and translators' role. They involve insistence on a single pattern as 'the right one' and thereby ignore both the textual and the non-linguistic determinants of translation activity. The author favors a different understanding of translators' tasks and desired linguistic behavior, namely the one asserting translation as an intentional communicative process. The position implies that the translator should take note of and act in line with characteristics of the situational (including textual) context and the communicative intentions and expectations of the source and target participants in the translation process.

1.0. The Backdrop

Since mid-1900s the predominant understanding of translation (activity, process, product) has changed considerably. The same holds true of translation as a profession. The change there could rightly be called dramatic - both in quantitative (the number of professional translators and interpreters, the amount of work done) and qualitative terms (the diversity of texts translated, the variety of work contexts). One by-product of all such developments has been the appearance, in ever increasing numbers, of schools of translation and interpreting.

In contrast, the Croatian society has been rather slow in formal recognition of translation activity (it is thus still not included in the official list of registered professions), despite the significant amount of translation work done in Croatia over that same period by just as





significant a number of practising translators and interpreters. Coupled with the sporadic character of theoretical and research efforts focusing on translation, this has resulted in a considerable delay in the development of translation teaching in the country.

The situation has been changing over the last couple of years – primarily owing to the launch of, first, regularly held INTEGRA seminars and then of the postgraduate program in translation at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb. Further changes are expected in the coming years: a couple of courses are in preparation for autumn 2003, and translation studies will become a regular study program at the Faculty of Philosophy once the current university reform is completed.

Along with the relatively obvious repercussions that these changes may be expected to have, there are some that may be less conspicuous for the general public but should not escape the attention of various contributors to the process. One of the latter is the circumstance that has provided the main motivation for this article, namely the influence that the content and the main thrust of translation study programs – practically the first ever in the country – is likely to have on (future) translation norms, on the understanding of translation process, and the process of verbal communication in general.

As the final point in this introduction, I shall observe that the awareness of the profound difference that exists between linguistic and communicative competence still has to become common knowledge, not only in our midst. The same is, unfortunately, true of the difference between language, standard language, and speech¹. Consequently, translators are often exposed to pressures from non-translators to act in line with what the latter consider translation competence and what in reality amounts to, at best, linguistic competence *in abstracto*. This can be rather unpleasant at the individual level, particularly when it comes from people whose authority and/or presumptuousness come from sources that have nothing to do with any of the competences relevant for translation (but rather their managerial position, high esteem due to their expertise in a different field, prestigious status in society, etc.). Indeed, pressures of this kind are so common that comprehensive translation training should by all means address the issue.

However, more far-reaching and more relevant on a general level is the influence exerted by people who have respectful expertise in areas that do fall within the borders of translator's competence. This is particularly the case when they are involved in translator training, which often is and needs to be the case since they can provide a valuable input.

¹ This was a conspicuous theme in the series of articles written by prominent Croatian fiction writers in Saturday issues of the *Jutarnji list* daily (supplement *Magazin*) in April and May 2003. Most of the authors criticized Croatian language experts – in a rather undifferentiating manner but not quite unwarrantedly either – for their restrictive identification of speech (or, rather, the desirable linguistic practice) with the standard language variety, or even an immutable standard variety in more extreme opinions. One of the poignant expressions of that shared belief that the writers wished to communicate to the general public and to experts in the Croatian language reads as follows: 'The power of speech is contained in the fascinating integrative power of language itself, in permanent creation of synonyms, acquisition of foreign phrases and expressions and in ensuing development of shades and nuances. The power of speech stands thus in contrast to any idea of a restrictive linguistic norm.' (Jergović 2003:63, translation G.A.)





2.0 A Case in Point

Since linguistic competence in both the source and the target language certainly does essentially contribute to the overall translator's competence, linguists specializing in either of the two are often involved in translator training. It is, however, appropriate that they take note that the use to which the translator audience will be putting the knowledge offered by the lecturer is different from presumable future uses by linguists (or language teachers, or any other specific audience). Their failure to do so will not necessarily affect the truthfulness of the facts they are presenting but it may seriously jeopardize the appropriateness of attitudes and sets of values they are projecting and the genuineness of norms that they are implying.

The dangers of confusing translation as a method of foreign language teaching with translation proper (translation as enabling communication between speakers belonging to different linguistic and cultural communities), have already been highlighted in literature². There are however other, probably less obvious discrepancies between appropriate choices in linguistic behaviour in different contexts. The point may be illustrated by the use of less frequent words and phrases, which would readily be seen as a positive practice, an indicator of linguistic exquisiteness, in the language teaching or the creative writing context. In the translation context, however, its desirability can be anything from null to maximum, depending on the variables of the communication context. When judging the appropriateness of such items, the translator should be aware not only of the considerations that apply in monolingual communication and in the production of the original text (consistency of style, connotations etc.) but also of those that stem from his/her role of the intermediary in communication (regarding exquisite language one could then say that, unless some very specific circumstance is involved, uncommon words and phrases cannot be considered desirable when they, for example, distort the impression of the original text, when they do not reflect the original author's intentions, or when they exceed the readers'/listeners' linguistic competence to a baffling point³).

In view of the circumstances affecting the Croatian (standard) language in the 1990s and the resulting debates, another dilemma is bound to surface, and already has surfaced relative to translator training, namely that of translators' desirable linguistic behavior in their mother tongue (Croatian), and of the set of Croatian language norms they are expected to observe. Students sometimes get treated to (purported) golden rules of language use, such as 'domestic words are to be favored over the foreign ones'⁴, they are cautioned against the 'greatest lexical problem in our translations', which is calimed to

² The best known is insistence on contrastive correspondents as the most desirable translation equivalents. Regarding the difference between 'professional' and 'school translation', see Gile 1995:22

³ Think of an international conference where the interpreter's unwarranted display of his/her linguistic mastery can render the speaker's contribution incomprehensible for most non-native speakers in the audience, such an outcome could hardly have been the intention or the wish of either the speaker or the listeners, let alone of the conference organizer, who will be paying the interpreter's fee.

⁴ i.e. words with Croatian roots should have precedence over internationalisms



consist in the use of Serbisms and Anglicisms, in view of which they are instructed to oppose the aggression and create 'domestic' words of their own or promote others' creations. Just as the case is with the general public debate, statements of this kind are counterbalanced, to some degree at least, by lecturers who talk about functional styles and language varieties but they tend to speak in a softer voice, and it is not necessarily the same group of students that is exposed to both views⁵.

One might hope that most practising translators – the most common audience at today's courses – would take the golden rules with a pinch of salt (how many would actually produce⁶ a film subtitle containing 'perilica posuda' or, even less likely, 'svesmjernica' when translating the line uttered by this young American woman telling her husband 'Your turn to stack the dishwasher, darling' or instructing her child 'You need to use the joystick for this game, not the mouse'?!). However, one must wonder about the effect on undergraduate and graduate students, i.e. an inexperienced audience, once translator training becomes a regular university program. For, the out-of-context approach, which is what the golden-rule attitude amounts to, is often promoted as the way to exercise care for the Croatian language. The noble phrase could easily sound the appealing and motivating enough for (future) professionals whose main tool is language. Many would certainly not realize that care exercised in such a way is self-defeating since language indeed is the translator's main *tool*, the *means* used towards an end. And the translator's end could hardly be the development or establishment of what some would consider the (invariably?) correct Croatian linguistic repertoire appropriate in all situations at all times. Rather, if one should follow the theory and the practice dominating contemporary European culture, the desiderata of translation production would be defined in terms of successful communication and fulfillment of the intentions and expectations of participants in the communication process⁷.

3.0 Translation Process and Translator's Competence

The choice of desirable contents of translator training is essentially dependent upon the understanding of the translation process – its nature, components and its purpose – and, on that basis, of the components of translation competence.

⁵ Both attitudes, as well as the above quotations, can be found in handouts prepared for Croatian language seminars in the INTEGRA series over the last two years. For contact see www.integra.hr.

⁶ that is, how many would spontaneously do so, before the intervention of a Croatian language reviser, or selfcensuring in expectation of such an intervention. 'Perilica posuda' thus does appear occasionally on Croatian national TV in contexts similar to the one described here.

⁷ Intentions and expectations which may but need not – and quite often do not – include humoring any particular attitude to language use except the one that is felt to be natural and 'standard' in the sense of 'usual and expected in the given context'. One of numerous statements in literature to that effect is given by P. Newmark: '(...) for the vast majority of texts, you have to ensure: (a) that your translation makes sense; (b) that it reads naturally, that it is written in ordinary language, the common grammar, idioms and words that meet that kind of situation. (...) Natural usage comprises a variety of idioms or





3.1. Intentionality of Translation

Depending on the perspective and the particular issue under consideration, translation scholars of our time may stress one or another aspect of the nature of translation process but there is a broad consensus regarding its following characteristics: translation is a communicative, interpersonal, intercultural, interactive, intentional process⁸. Intentionality is, in one way or another, seen as an obvious important aspect of the process by many ('... an act of verbal communication occurring in a professional translation setting is triggered by an *aim* or *intention*', Gile 1995:24⁹), and as the central determinant by some scholars, most prominently functionalists such as H. Vermeer, his theory is referred to as the *Skopos* *theorie* just because of its focus on the concept of purpose (*Skopos*). In literature 'purpose' is used along with 'intention', 'aim', 'function', sometimes interchangeably and sometimes not, and it is usually discussed with regard to texts (both the source and the target text), translation procedures and translation strategy, while it can sometimes be pointed out that there is also 'the general purpose aimed at by the translator in the translation process (perhaps "to earn a living")'¹⁰. It is, probably, in terms of the 'general purpose' that one might discuss deliberate influences on the target culture or the target language (such as were exerted, to mention a conspicuous example, with the translation of the Bible into national languages). While it is quite desirable for (future) translators to be aware of such potential purposes – or side effects, for that matter – of translation practice, in our age of mass-production of both original and translated texts the usual focus in translation practice and in translator training is on the *intention* of the sender, *expectations* of the receiver and the *function* of the texts. These are usually described in communication theory terminology ('informational', 'expressive', 'phatic', 'vocative' 'cathartic', etc), and in linguistic approaches often in the light of Jakobson's language functions.

When speaking of 'aim' and 'intention' in 'professional translation settings', Gile points out that those are multi-layered but also that 'not all layers are equally active in a speaker's or author's conscious mind, and not all are equally powerful in shaping the message which is eventually verbalized'¹¹. Focusing on 'informational discourse such as is generally processed in non-literary translation and interpretation', he says that 'the immediate aims behind (its) segments can be classified as follows: *informing*, *explaining* and *persuading*.' The translator should 'strive to produce his or her own target-language discourse in such

styles or registers determined primarily by the "setting" of the text, i.e. where it is typically published or found, secondarily by the author, topic and readership, all of whom are usually dependent on the setting.' (Newmark 1988:24, 26)

⁸ cf. Steiner 1975:414, Snell-Hornby 1988:81, Popović 1981, Nord 1997:16-25, Ivir 1991/92:89

⁹ Gile also quotes Graham (1983:99): 'With very few exceptions, the principal definitive indicator (for the translator's orientation) is the reason, purpose, or intention accorded to the translation.'

¹⁰ Nord 1997:27

¹¹ Gile 1995:25





a way as to contribute to all these “aim-layers”.’ Thereby he/she is best serving the Sender, and ‘from the Sender’s viewpoint, communication is successful if he or she manages to achieve the aim: that is, in the case of non-literary interpretation and translation, if Receivers of the target-language Text are successfully *informed, understand* the point, and/or *have been persuaded*.’ Realizing that the Sender is not, certainly not necessarily, the only participant in the communication process to whom the translator should be loyal (‘(...) the Translator is working for the Sender, but also for the Receiver and the Client, whose purposes and intentions may not tally.’), Gile discusses the translator’s position in the process. He first states: ‘The basic and probably most widely accepted position is that the Translator is an alter ego of the author or speaker, essentially because such conflicts of interest [i.e. between the various participants in the process] are rather rare in translation and conference interpretation, though they may be frequent in legal translation and in court and community interpreting.’, Then he points out: ‘The Translator’s position is often defined as a neutral one. In my opinion, this definition should be changed into one of *rotating side-taking*¹². ‘Proponents of some variants of communicative translation go even a step further and claim that the translator’s allegiance is with the reader/listener. It would seem that this attitude is becoming prevalent in international business communication as well as in international organizations and institutions¹³.

Interesting as this issue may be, we shall not pursue it further but shall limit ourselves to the conclusion that the translator’s loyalty and the decisive determinants of his/her desirable linguistic behavior are nowadays predominantly described in terms of aims, intentions and expectations of the participants in the translation (communication) process. ‘(...) professional translation does not take place in a vacuum; it exists only as a service to be provided to other people’¹⁴.

¹² Gile 1995:22-29

¹³ Illustrating the point is the booklet *How to Write Clearly*, issued in the framework of the ‘Fight the Fog’ campaign (linguistic fog, that is) of the European Commission’s Translation Service. The title of its first chapter, that is the first hint for document drafters and translators, reads: ‘Put the reader first’. It is reiterated in the body of the text by recommendations such as ‘Try to see your subject matter from your readers’ point of view’, ‘Always bear in mind the people you’re writing for: not your committee, your boss, or the reviser of your translations, but the end users.’, etc. (EC Translation Service, p.1-2) The list of people that drafters and translators should not be writing for is quite interesting in the Croatian context: the position of Croatian language revisers is often such that it is not uncommon for translators to phrase their texts, even if reluctantly, according to the expected reviser’s requirements, rather than the intended reader’s expectations. So much so that benevolent mediators between the two groups, when teaching (future) translators, feel the need to address the issue (e.g. in the INTEGRA Croatian language seminar in spring 2003. The list of topics to be discussed contained: ‘How can the author help him-/herself to avoid the potential conflict with the language reviser’, ‘Introduction to Croatian language reference books with hints on exaggerations’, etc.)

¹⁴ Cary 1985:85, in Gile 1995:28



3.2. Translation Expertise

The question of what it is that a translator needs to know or be able to do appears in various theoretical and practical contexts. Difficult as it would be to draw up an exhaustive list of the necessary translator's competences, one need not hesitate to claim that it would have to include *linguistic competence* in the source and the target language, general *communicative competence*, *translation competence* (the specific form of communicative competence at work in the translation act, including the necessary technical skills and the translation-specific conceptual framework), *cultural competence* in the source and the target culture, and some degree of *subject matter competence* ('background knowledge'). In his discussion of translator and interpreter training, Gile offers an analysis of the components of translation expertise¹⁵. They include a. 'good passive knowledge of their passive working languages'; b. 'good command of their active working languages'; c. 'enough knowledge of the subjects of the texts or speeches they process; d. knowledge of 'how to translate'; e. certain mental aptitudes, or rather the ability 'to meet some intellectual criteria'. Obviously, all of these require further analysis and more detailed description if they are to be useful in planning or evaluating training programs.

With regard to the issue taken up in section 2.0, i.e. translator's desirable linguistic practice regarding the target language, we may focus on Gile's component b., namely good command of the translator's active language. It would be obvious that there is no ceiling, no upper limit as to how good the command might be. Gile chooses not to discuss any lower limits either, displaying thus his reluctance to discuss linguistic competence in absolute terms. His simple, seemingly may be even naive, description is indeed far more appropriate and instructive: 'In top-level interpretation and translation, in particular this requirement [i.e. requirement b.] is set at a very demanding level. Technical translators are required to be able to write publishable texts, that is, to have professional writing skills besides being able to perform the transition from one language to the other. As for literary translators, their writing skills must indeed be similar to those of literary writers. Likewise, conference interpreters are required to be able to make speeches at a linguistic level commensurate with that of the personalities they interpret, be they diplomats, scientists, politicians, artists, or intellectuals'¹⁶. The emphasis is, then, on the ability to match the expected linguistic behavior of the member of a social group, and the actual linguistic behavior of the individual writer/speaker, rather than on familiarity with and loyalty to a single pattern of linguistic behavior, selected beforehand and in no relation to the communicative situation in question. In contrast to the latter, Gile's description of the linguistic component of translation expertise is commensurate with the requirement for *adequate* linguistic performance, *appropriate* to the situation in question and *adapted*

¹⁵ Gile 1995:4-5, with some elements of d. further elaborated later in the book.

¹⁶ Gile 1995:5



to the purpose of the process and the intentions of its participants, and is thereby more sophisticated and more demanding.

4.0. Developing a discipline and a new course of studies

As was suggested in section 1.0, both translation theory (as a full-fledged discipline) and translation teaching are yet to be developed in Croatia. Both processes have been initiated and the current dynamics suggest that, once again, the applied effort shall overtake theoretical studies and develop much faster. The order is in many ways logical but it is certainly not the safest. An obvious way to alleviate the discrepancy is to take note of the findings of the theoretical discipline in cultures similar to our own, certainly of the well-founded and broadly accepted principles prevalent within the relevant supracultures (the European, for one).

The nature of the translation process, and consequently of translator training, is genuinely multidisciplinary. An input from experts from a variety of fields is not only welcome but indispensable. However, the transfer to the new discipline should not be done mechanically: while facts remain the same, attitudes, priorities, implied values require some rethinking. All of us involved in the effort and with a background in other disciplines might want to keep the following mistranslation from a French hotel in mind as a guiding principle:

*Please leave your values at the front desk*¹⁷

[and adopt the discipline-and activity-specific ones as you are entering the world of translation teaching].

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¹⁷ One of the funny mistranslations of public notices that are sometimes published in magazines and popular journals and then distributed widely among friends and colleagues. This one, reportedly observed in a hotel in Paris, has reached me by e-mail.





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ZAPAŽANJA O (TOBOŽNJIM) ZADACIMA PREVODITELJA I POUČAVANJU PREVOĐENJA

U situaciji kada se pojavljuju prvi redovitiji oblici obrazovanja prevoditelja u Hrvatskoj te se očekuje uvođenje prevoditeljskog studija kao redovnog diplomskog programa, čini se neophodnim ponnije razmotriti pitanje poželjne prevoditeljske kompetencije i prevoditeljskih zadataka. U članku se to čini s obzirom na povremenu praksu postavljanja pred (buduće) prevoditelje zadataka koji se ni u evropskoj praksi stručnog prevođenja ni u radovima teoretičara prevođenja ne pojavljuju kao bitan aspekt prevoditeljskog djelovanja.

Članak se usredotočuje na jezičnu kompetenciju prevoditelja te navodi primjere jezične prakse u hrvatskom i u stranom jeziku kakva se ponekad preporučuje prevoditeljima, iako za to nema oslonca u dominantnom suvremenom poimanju prijevodnog procesa. Ukazuje se da se praćenjem takvih nefleksibilnih jezičnih obrazaca ignoriraju osobine konkretnog teksta i situacijskog konteksta te se negira priroda prevođenja kao svrhovite komunikacijske aktivnosti, čija svrha nikako nije uvijek ista i unaprijed zadana. Autorica prednost daje stavu da se poželjno (jezično) ponašanje prevoditelja određuje prema osobinama konkretne komunikacijske situacije, među kojima značajno mjesto zauzimaju komunikacijske namjere i očekivanja sudionika u komunikacijskom procesu.

