

The element of subjectivity in the critique of translation

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Abstract: This paper attempts to offer a framework of reflection on the extent to which it is possible to assess the quality of a translation and explore certain general criteria that could help translators establish quality standards in order to self-evaluate and also revise the work of others. A major factor that will be considered is the purpose of the translation and whether the target text fulfills it, producing a 'fit for purpose' translated text. Within this context, Skopos Theory, which focuses mainly on the Skopos (purpose) of the translation, will be briefly discussed. Another parameter that will be considered is the type of text to be translated (Text Typology) which constitutes a basic criterion for translation quality assessment. In addition, my proposal will demonstrate how the effect of the translated text on the target readership and the "equivalent effect" principle constitutes one of the basic standards in defining and monitoring quality translations. In addition, a very important issue which needs further investigation regards certain features related to the translator's personality such as experience, knowledge and artistic competence as well as their effect on the outcome of the translating procedure. The overall intention of the paper is definitely not to dictate specific rules for the translator to follow, but rather to propose methodological approaches and appropriate techniques that would help professionals justify their choices and evaluate the quality of their own work and that of others.

Keywords: translation quality, critique of translation, purpose of translation, theoretical approaches to translation judgement.

The question of whether it is possible to define or perhaps more properly to identify a good translation is undoubtedly a subject of criticism on which there has been so much difference of opinion. There is certainly a number of different views regarding the particular question. On the one hand, there are those claim that it is almost impossible to distinguish between a good and a bad translation since every translation has both strong and weak points. Others claim that good translations exist and are those which meet certain standards.

My personal opinion is that it is possible to assess the quality of a translation to some extent. There are certain general criteria that a translation requires to fulfill in order to be characterized as "good". However, there is the element of uncertainty and subjectivity in any judgement about a translation which makes it quite difficult to draw the exact line between a "good" and a "bad" translation.

Some of the basic criteria that could be taken into account in the process of translation quality assessment are the following: accuracy is of major importance that is defined by Newmark (1981: 66) as follows: "the ability to reproduce the greatest possible degree of the meaning of the original". Indeed, the correctness with which the message of the original is transferred through the translation and the ease of comprehension by the receptor are of primary importance. Accuracy should be combined with clarity in order to prove the adequacy of the form of the translated text. In other words, the translator must not confuse the reader and he must avoid translating in such a way that the precision of the original author is rendered clumsy and confused.

Accuracy is definitely very important in the translation process but its importance varies according to the type of text to be translated. Lack of clarity can prove catastrophic, especially in certain types of texts such as an instruction manual where the function of the Target Text requires to clarify in a way that would be unnecessary and probably inappropriate to do so in some other types of text. In the same manner, a company requiring an advert to be translated will still see accuracy as important, but creativity more so. In cases where more than one meaning can be given to the same passage or expression, the translator is called upon to exercise his judgement and select the meaning which is the least ambiguous. As far as ambiguity is concerned, the translator has to bear in mind that sometimes ambiguity may be deliberate, in which case it is his job to reproduce and retain it in the translation.

His choices become even more difficult if the Source Text is less than clear and the translator has to cope with badly written material Newmark (1988: 6) mentions: "A translator must respect good writing scrupulously by accounting for its language, structures and content. If the writing is poor, it is normally his duty to improve it, whether it is technical or a routine, commercialized best-seller". The quality of the writing then has to be judged in relation to the author's intention and the requirements of the subject-matter, although deciding what is good writing is still subjective. To conclude, the translator should treat the formal components of a badly written text with some freedom, since by replacing clumsy with elegant syntactic structures or by tightening up the sentence, he is attempting to give in the text's full value.

Another important factor that should be considered in order to assess the quality of a translation is the purpose of the Source Text and whether the Target Text fulfills it. Skopos Theory (Reiss, 2000) focuses above all on the purpose (Skopos) of the translation, which determines the translation methods and strategies that are to be employed in order to produce a functionally satisfactory result.

If the purpose of the text is to sell something, to persuade, to prohibit or to express feelings, then this purpose is the basic criterion for evaluating a translation. The translator is then dependent on its function as a text implanted in the target culture, where there is the possibility of either preserving the original function of the source text or of changing the function to adapt it to specified needs in the target culture. Let's consider the case of advertising texts: the function of the text is preserved if the translation is an advertisement addressed to customers with an intention to sell the product. It changes if, for instance, the text is used for information purposes. It is then implied that a translation is directly dependent on its prescribed function, which must be made clear by the commissioner leading us to an observation made by Snell-Hornby (1988: 44) that the translation per se does not exist, and neither does the "perfect translation".

The purpose of the translation together with the type of text to be translated constitute a basic criterion for translation quality assessment. According to Reiss's text typology (Reiss, 2000), the most important invariant is the text type to which the source text belongs, as it determines all other choices a translator has to make. Her typology includes the informative, the expressive and the operative text types which derive from the descriptive, the expressive and the appellative functions of language respectively. Reiss then offers criteria for translation according to the text type: a metaphor in an expressive text, for example, must be rendered as a metaphor in the translation, but this is not necessary for a text in the informative text type. Similarly, while a news item target text would probably place grammatical criteria in second place, a popular science book would pay more attention to the individual style of the source text. However, the majority of texts are in fact hybrid forms and multi-dimensional structures: a biography could also have an appellative function and an advertisement, while normally appellative, can have an artistic, expressive or informative function. In brief, any attempt to identify a good translation must take into account text typology but only as a starting point and always in combination with other basic standards.

The effect of the translation on the target readership constitutes another basic standard in defining a good translation. The purpose of any translation should be to achieve the principle of "equivalent effect" which was introduced by Nida (1964: 166), in other words, to produce on the target readers the same effect as the one produced on the readership of the original text. Indeed, in the translation of vocative texts, "equivalent effect" is the essential criterion by which the effectiveness and therefore the value of the translation is to be assessed. However, if the text is informative, the emphasis is on information and readers are the qualities required for conveying information in such a type of text and are therefore the essential elements in achieving the similar response. The "equivalent effect" principle becomes even more complicated when the text is literary, where there are individual readers rather than a readership and the translator is essentially trying to render the effect the source text has on himself, not on any imaginative readership. The more universal the text, the more a broad equivalent effect is possible. On the contrary, the more remote in time and space a text is, the less is equivalent effect possible. To conclude, "the equivalent effect" principle is an important translation concept which could be used to identify a successful translation. However, although it has a degree of application to any type of text, its degree of importance varies to each text.

Naturalness is also a basic element for the quality of a translation since good translation of any type of text is the one that reads naturally. Naturalness in translation must fit the receptor language and culture as a whole, the context of the particular message and the receptor-language audience. A natural style in translating is essential in order to produce in the ultimate receptors a response similar to that of the original receptors.

It must be recognized, however, that it is not easy to produce or to identify a completely natural translation, especially if the original is literature, because such a kind of text mainly reflects the idiomatic capacities of the author's writing. A translator must therefore try to gauge the degree of the text's deviation from naturalness, from ordinary language and reflect this degree in his translation. He must also try to produce something relatively equivalent in the receptor language.

To summarize, although naturalness is one of the factors involved in the definition of a good translation, it is definitely not an absolute criterion. Naturalness is determined primarily by the setting of the text and secondly by the relationship between the author and the readership. There is no "universal naturalness", what is natural in one situation may be unnatural in another.

Since the translator himself is the focal element in translating and thus there cannot be any completely impersonal objectivity in his work. It is true that every translation process reveals a variability dimension which is connected with the person responsible for the respective translation. The translator in his turn, as every communicator, stands in a specific linguistic and extralinguistic experience. The extent of his knowledge, proficiency and perception determines not only his ability to produce the target text, but also his understanding

of the source text. He must not only be proficient in two languages; he must also be at home in two cultures. In addition, he possesses a specific range of translational interests which in turn controls his translational production. In his interpretation of the source language message and his selection of the corresponding words and grammatical forms, he will inevitably be influenced by his overall sympathy with the author and the message. At the same time, the translator leaves the stamp of his own personality on any translation and he sometimes feels inclined to improve the original, correct apparent errors or defend a personal preference by slanting his choice of words.

At times, the translator may think that the potential receptors of his translation lack experience and they need his built-in explanations. In other cases, he may think that their language is so deficient that only by certain improvements, often arbitrary, he will be able to communicate the message. In his need to accurate and effective communication through the translation process, the translator acquires a position of strategic importance. The quality of the translation is undoubtedly dependent on the translator and his personal knowledge, intuitions and artistic competence. Indeed, every translation carries the element of subjectivity which is closely related to the translator's personality.

The style of the translated text and whether it constitutes a criterion in defining a good translation should also be discussed. The question is whether the translator should reconstruct the style of the original work in his translations and to what extent this results in a successful translation. Theoretically, the factor of style is essential in producing in the target receptors a response similar to that of the original receptors. A good translator must discover the character of the author's style and must have the capacity of rendering it in the translation. It is essential that a translation incorporate certain elements of style which provide the emotional tone of the discourse. Elements such as sarcasm and irony must be accurately reflected in the translated text and features of social class and geographical dialect should be also reflected in the choice of the appropriate words. The field and mode of discourse should be easily deduced from the original and this must be continued in the translation, otherwise the style will be lost.

Even if the style of the original is attained in the translated text, in practice this prerequisite for a good translation is of secondary importance. In fact, the commissioners of the translation are those who govern our practice whether we are dealing with a literary text or an advertisement. Even if a translator is aware of the style and the tone of the original, he may also prefer to 'sacrifice' it in order to satisfy the expectations of his target readership. In other words, a "good" translation could be the one that satisfies the demands and wishes either of the commissioner of the translation, or of the target readers, even though it may not meet the strict criteria of academic translation. Moreover, live languages are constantly changing and stylistic preferences undergo continual modification. Thus, a translation acceptable in one period is often quite unacceptable at a later period.

To conclude, definitions of proper translating are almost as numerous and varied as the number of people who have undertaken to discuss the subject. It is certain that definitions or descriptions of a "good" translation are not served by deterministic styles, rather, they depend on probabilistic rules. One cannot, therefore, state the particular translation is good or bad without taking into consideration a great number of different factors, with in turn must be weighed in a number of different ways, with appreciably different answers. This diversity is in a sense quite understandable since the concept of the ideal translation is unreal. Translation is an endless procedure, except in the case of performative statements. Other transactions can never be finished and they can always be improved. Even for linguistically difficult passages there are often several different good alternatives. Furthermore, live languages are changing and since it is assumed that a translation is written in a modern language, there is always the case of revising it after some years.

However, although there are many different opinions concerning the important principles of translation, there are several significant features that should be taken into consideration: first of all, the type of text to be translated, the purpose of its publication and whether the target text fulfills it. In addition, we should examine whether the translation meets the needs of the prospective readership and if it has the same impact on its intended audience as the produced by the source text to the original receptors. Accuracy and the extent to which the target text conveys the correct information plays an important role. Naturalness and style are less important factors, though they should not be neglected. Hence, there is the element of subjectivity in any judgement about a translation, which makes it possible to assess its quality only to some extent.

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