THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION DIARIES IN THE ACQUISITION OF THEORETICAL TRANSLATION CONCEPTS AT THE BEGINNER LEVEL

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Abstract: The paper gives an overview of translation problems as described in unstructured diaries by 16 3rd year students of English Language and Literature in order to show how this form of exercise in argumentation influences the development of students' understanding of translation problem, strategy and procedure. Qualitative analysis of entries in students' diaries shows that although they could correctly name the translation procedure they were applying, few could explain what constituted a translation problem and what the reasons were for applying one procedure and not another. This study confirms that diaries help students translate in a more reflective way and are a useful tool in aiding independent learning. Additionally, it is also shown that diaries can be more effective in the first year of translator training if they contain questions which pinpoint certain problems in the text and limit the range of problems students need to describe.

Keywords: translation diary, translation problem, translation strategy and procedure

1. Introduction

In the process-oriented training approach, the translation diary goes by several names: integrated problem and decisions report or IPDR (Gile 2004/Hansen 2006), translation journal (Robinson 2003) and written protocol (Gonzales-Davies 2005). Whatever the name, it requires the student to write about problems he or she encounters while doing the translation, explain why they solved the problem in the way they did and which sources they used. Instructions can be very detailed and done in writing (cf. Orozco and Albir 2002: 399-402) or quite general, i.e. students can be instructed to write whatever they find relevant.

It has been known as a tool which offers much information to the translator trainer. Specifically, it offers insight into individual progress and development which cannot be gained from translation revision discussions in the classroom, most obviously because, for various reasons, not all students get to express their opinion, their angle or their choice of problems. Furthermore, as Gile (2004:5) states, individual reports on translation problems can reveal subtler problems or relevant phenomena which may not be visible in surface translations, and therefore do not get to be discussed in a class devoted to the analysis of submitted translations. Adab (2000:221-222) specifies that such diaries offer insight into the students' reading of the text, sources of misunderstanding and inappropriate target language choices.

For students, diary writing is a good practice in argumentation which includes a problem selection, making conscious decisions regarding the choice of a solution and justifying it (Gonzales-Davies 2005:23). If written in parallel with the translation, it makes the process of translation more deliberate and less intuitive. It does not presuppose a thorough theoretical knowledge: understanding of the basic principles of the functionalist

approach, a definition of the translation problem and an acquaintance with translation strategies and procedures.

One major known drawback of the use of diaries for research purposes is that they cannot be relied on as being thorough and complete. This paper analyses which theoretical concepts introduced in the first translation course are used by BA students of Language and Literature in their argumentation of translation problems. The kind of argumentation used in the majority of analysed diaries can therefore be sufficiently indicative of the usefulness of unstructured diaries for this purpose at the level of beginners.

2.   Subjects and the educational context

The analysis includes 4 diaries written by sixteen 3rd year students of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad during the autumn semester of 2011. The total number of students taking the course was 36, but only students who wrote at least 4 diaries during the semester were included.

The first course in translation is obligatory for all students of English Language and Literature. Its aim is to provide students with hands-on experience in practical translation, to give them an opportunity to see whether they have any inclinations toward developing this skill and to make them aware of the difference between translation and foreign language competence. All subsequent translation courses are optional and they include practical courses on translation of general (E-S, S-E), scientific (E-S, S-E) and legal (E-S) texts, conference interpreting and a theoretical course in general principles of translation.

The first translation course is based on translation of simple excerpts from contemporary fiction. From a linguistic perspective, focus is placed on different ways of achieving grammatical cohesion in English and Serbian, especially in terms of distribution of tenses in narrative, descriptive and dialogic excerpts.

Regarding translation theory, at the beginning of the course (the first two or three classes), students are exposed to major principles of the functionalist approach to translation and major textual and extra-textual factors (Nord 2005) are briefly discussed. The notions of translation problem, strategy and procedures are all introduced through parallel analysis of original texts and good examples of published translations. After this introduction, the course moves on to a selection of descriptive, narrative and dialogic fictional excerpts, which the students individually translate for homework and write a translation diary, in which they present what they have found to be major translation problems, and explain how they reached the solutions. Each excerpt the students translate and write diaries for is carefully chosen to illustrate a particular type of text in English, and students are required to provide parallel texts by Serbian authors of the same type. From a considerable number of examples in Serbian, the whole class draw conclusions regarding the differences in distribution of tense and aspect in parallel texts in the two languages. Discussion of other translation problems in the excerpts depends on what is reported as a problem in student diaries. In the next class, the teacher prepares a summary overview of the problems which the whole class then discusses. Then, students in groups of three make a final version of translation, which is submitted to the teacher for feedback.

In this kind of scenario, classroom discussions are mostly informed by issues reported in unstructured student translation diaries.

3. What is a translation problem?

The ability to recognize a translation problem in a text is fundamental for translation as a deliberate rather than an intuitive activity. Existing definitions of what constitutes a translation problem all stress this impossibility of automatic transfer as its basic characteristic. Nord and Hansen define 'problem' in terms of action, referring to it as an 'objective transfer task' (Nord 2005, 1997:64-68) and a 'difficult (unsolved) task' (2005: 7), whereas Adab (2000: 222), Gonzalez-Davies and Scott -Tennent (Gonazles-Davies & Scott-Tennent 2005:164) describe it as a linguistic unit, speaking of "a unit of meaning", and a "verbal or non verbal segment". In terms of what can constitute a translation problem Nord (1997:64), classifies them as pragmatic, convention-related, linguistic and text-specific and makes an important distinction between a difficulty and a problem in that the latter is objective and unrelated to the translator's level of competence, whereas 'difficulty' is subjective.

Students in this study were given the following description from Newmark (1988:30-31) of a translation problem, as a reminder of what they were to report on upon having translated a text:

> If the translation of a sentence has no problems, it is based firmly on literal translation plus virtually automatic and spontaneous transpositions and shifts, changes in word order, etc.
>
> The first sign of a **translation problem** is where these automatic procedures from language to language, apparently without intercession of thought are not adequate. Then comes the struggle between the words in the SL – it may be one word like 'sleazy', it may be a collocation like 'a dark horse', it may be a structure like 'the country's government' (who governs what?), it may be a referential, cultural or idiolectal problem – in any event, the mental struggle between the SL words and the TL thought then begins.

The students were to name three to five translation problems they encountered, explain why they considered them problems and why they chose the solutions they chose. Although the students were instructed as to what kind of information to provide, this sort of diary is unstructured, as the instruction is very general.

It was also brought to the students' attention that Newmark's description of a translation problem does not differentiate between a difficulty and a problem as defined by Nord, and that it focuses on linguistic and textual problems. It might seem contradictive to teach students functionalist concepts while also giving them a linguistic definition of a problem as a guide, but this is motivated by the course type and the students' background. In this particular course on literary translation, which was the first they could take, the focus was on achieving textuality in the target text. The students were expected to acquire relevant theoretical concepts by doing concrete translation assignments. Since all excerpts were from contemporary fiction, there was no variation in function or text type. Translation briefs which involve a change of text function in translation were to be introduced in the next two semesters, when, again, practical examples could make a functionalist understanding of what constitutes a translation problem easier to understand and recognize in a text.

So, although the distinction between a translation problem and a linguistic difficulty is an important one to make for the students of language and literature, who tend to

equate translation with linguistic competence, for them in order to be able to write any kind of translation diary, the first step was to start thinking about where difficulties arise and try to explain why. Also, being students of language and literature, they were able to spot and explain linguistic and cultural issues in a text, which made writing a translation diary a less daunting task for them. In class discussions, the teacher and the students then determined whether what was reported constituted a subjective difficulty or an objective translation problem, and how the perceived function of the translation led to problems and influenced the selection of their solutions.

3.1 What did the students recognize as a problem?

Students did not report a wide variety of problematic issues (Table 1): in all diaries, the meaning of a word or a phrase in a particular context was most common, followed by difficulty in achieving idiomatic expression in the target text, and the problem of choosing an adequate translation procedure.

In the first diaries, one common way of reporting was to cite the problematic segment of the source text alongside its translation, or without it, as in the following diary entries:

(1) Problem: Italianate   Solution: I translated it as 'italijanski stil'.[Italian style][i]
(2) Problem: Flat face (of the house)   Solution: spoljašnost, lice kuće, anfas? [External features, face of the house, anfas?]
(3) Problem: stood over against   Solution: ?
(4) Problem: It was too tall for the neighborhood, with a flat face and a flattened roof and peaked brows over the windows.
    Solution: Bila je previsoka u odnosu na ostale kuće u komšiluku, lice joj je bilo ravno sa izravnanim krovom i zašiljenim obrvama iznad prozora. [It was too tall in relation to other houses in the neighbourhood, its face was flat with the roof levelled out and the peaked eyebrows over the windows.]

Although very scarce, this kind of information is useful for the teacher in the phase when students have not yet acquired the meta-language to describe problematic issues. A word, a phrase or a sentence picked out from the text is indicative of the nature of the students' difficulties, which in the given examples could be worded as following: where to search for the corresponding term (1), how to determine what is an idiomatic collocation in the target language (2), what is the meaning of prepositions in context and how literal the translation needs to be (3). The whole sentence reported as a problem (4) is indicative of the students' unit of analysis, which is an important theoretical concept as well.

In the first diaries there are few instances where the reported difficulty with the meaning could be interpreted as a result of insufficient source language competence. The issues were usually more translational, i.e. the meaning of a source unit in the context of a particular text, and not its dictionary meaning, as in the following cases:

(1) I am not sure what the author wanted to say.
(2) The sentence was very difficult to translate because the beginning sounded strange to me, as if something was missing.

The second most common issue throughout the course was related to achieving idiomatic expression in the target language, which in the beginning was worded as 'a natural way to say something' or 'sounding natural'. In the last diaries, this was referred to as a problem of achieving idiomaticity (4), a problem of reformulation (2) or of finding an idiomatic collocate (4) in the target text, which indicate development of meta-language.

In the last two diaries, students were able to classify problems as 'understanding the meaning of the source text' (15 students), 'achieving idiomaticity in the target text' (9 students), 'the distribution of tenses in the target vs. source text' (5 students), 'a choice of procedure' (5 students) and 'resolving structural differences' such as word order, or passive vs. active formulation of a sentence (4 students).

Some of these types (i.e. distribution of tenses) were noticeably more present when the translational assignment was introduced with questions focusing on the particular features of certain text types in the source and target text. This was especially the case with narrative texts, which usually have the Past Tense in English and a Present-Aorist-Past tense variation in Serbian.

What was the problem?	1st diary	2nd diary	3rd diary	4th diary
Understanding the meaning	9	11	10	15
Preserving the register/style	5	2	3	1
Finding an equivalent term	2			
Resolving structural differences	1	2	2	4
Resolving cultural differences			2	
Choice of tense in target text	1	4	5	1
Choice of procedure	8	12	5	6
Idiomatic collocation in the target text		3	2	9
What is the unit of translation			1	
total	*11*	*17*	*15*	*16*

Table 1. Translation problems reported in the diaries

4. How did the students explain their solutions?

The purpose of introducing the concepts of strategy and procedures (Newmark 1995:81-91, Baker 1992, Jovanović 1992, Ivir 1978) in this kind of hands-on course was to make students aware of the kind of interventions translators make at textual level, which was supposed to help students deal with interference between source and target languages in the process of translating a text. The definitions of translation procedures and the descriptions of situations when their use was justifiable also provided the meta-language students could "copy" when describing the solutions to the problems they identified in the text.

4.1 Translation procedures

The students were given a suggestion to include an explanation of the motivation for the application of a particular procedure, and in some diaries all problems were explained in terms of a procedure applied. A focus on procedures (cf. Table 2) was

especially prominent in the first diaries, when students were still struggling for words to explain the problems they encountered. As they got more accustomed to discussing translation problems in class, they turned to problems that were text-specific, i.e. 'understanding the meaning of the source text' and 'achieving idiomaticity in the target text'.

Procedure cited (Newmark's classification)	1st diary	2nd diary	3rd diary	4th diary
Descriptive equivalent	3	4	2	2
Negated contrary	4			
Paraphrase	6	4	3	2
Over-translation	1	1		
Transposition	3	2	2	1
Literal translation	1		1	
Synonymy	1	1	2	
Componential analysis	2	2	1	1
Expansion		2		1
Naturalization		3	6	
Reduction		2		2
Total No of students who reported this as a problem	*10*	*13*	*9*	*6*

Table 2. Translation procedures reported in the diaries

The choice of procedure was often cited as a problem related to resolving cultural differences, as in the following example:

Problem: CliffsNotes
Solution: I did not know how to translate this, I was thinking whether to transcribe it or simply leave it as it is. In the end, I decided to leave it as it is.

Sometimes, the reason is given for choosing a particular procedure, as in the following case:

Problem: CliffsNotes
Solution: I just transcribed this word because there is no adequate cultural equivalent, and if I tried to explain it, it would not mean anything.

Most often, however, this was not the case, as the student would just identify the procedure he or she used.

4.2 Translation strategy

A choice of a translation strategy (termed as 'global strategy' in Jääskeläinen 1993, Palumbo 2009:132, Kearns 2009:283) involves looking at the original text as a whole, recognizing its recurrent and prominent idiosyncratic features and making a conscious decision about whether and how to make them visible in the translation. It may, for example, be a decision of whether to make a certain character's linguistic features prominent in the translation or to tone them down, how to preserve a particular

recurrent element of the author's style, what to do with the names of the characters, etc.

The problem of choosing an overall or a global strategy was never reported in diaries, as the students found it to be too abstract and not directly applicable in the translation of excerpts. So, although the students were required to familiarize themselves with the extratextual and intratextual factors relevant for the translation of books from which the excerpts were taken, this was not enough for them to recognize which of the problems they did recognize were actually related to the choice of overall strategy.

5. Conclusions

If done thoroughly, a translation diary usually takes more time than the translation itself does, so in my experience, this has not been a very popular requirement, especially if it is understood as secondary to the main task, i.e. translation of a given text. This task is especially demanding in the first translation courses, when students lack adequate terminology and are still learning the characteristics of the functionalist approach. Even the most rudimentary form of a diary entry, when the problematic segment of the source text is just cited alongside its translation, without any explanation, is therefore useful as a guide to which segments of the text to focus on during classroom discussions. What is reported and what is omitted are also good indicators of which meta-language students lack to describe particular types of translation problems.

The diaries analyzed here have also shown that the problems related to the norms of the target text type like the distribution of tenses in narrative texts in Serbian or pragmatic problems in general were discussed only when they were explicitly pointed out by the teacher. So one way of sidestepping the problem of informativity of the students' diaries could, therefore, be to focus on solutions instead of problems. In the beginners' courses on translation, it might help if the instructions for writing a diary are specific and relevant to each particular excerpt. In the educational context of this study, for the purpose of recognizing the distribution of tenses as a problem in translation from English into Serbian, this role could be fulfilled with the instructions like the following:

(1) Detect cohesion pattern in the source text and report on any problems with achieving lexical or grammatical cohesion in the target text.
(2) Reflect on the choice of tenses in the source text, the role a tense has in the development of the narrative/descriptive/dialogic sections of the source text, and decide which tenses and aspects to use in the target text to achieve the purpose defined in the brief.

To incite thinking about the choice of the global strategy (domestication or foreignisation), students can be asked to specify which extra-textual / intra-textual factor is the source of a particular pragmatic problem.

Such instructions could also contain citations of relevant references which would be a source of adequate terminology that can be used in the explanations of the logic behind the solutions to the identified problems.

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[i] As students wrote their diaries in Serbian, my back translations are given in square brackets.