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Translation in a Bilingual Situation

Whenever people of different languages have to conduct translations, there is a role for the specialist who can interpret and for the one who can translate. The form and content of messages in a given language interacting as they do; and the modes of communicating content as well as the forms of separate languages differing as they do; the translator is faced with a task calling for an equal sophistication of skills and delicacy of understanding in each language, and yet must maintain a personal resistance to their tendency to mingle in his own mind. Spilka, emphasizing the need for training in a demanding profession, illustrates and categorizes the characteristic problems facing the translator, with some especial mention of those peculiar to Canada and Quebec.

When different linguistic communities are brought in contact, ways of overcoming language barriers must be sought. Although there are several solutions to the problem, all of which are satisfactory, some solutions are more economical than others. Widespread bilingualism is one approach. A large proportion of each population learns the other people's language, thus affording many opportunities for direct personal contacts. An alternate solution consists in both populations adopting a *lingua franca*, that is, a third language which is used as a means of communication between two linguistic communities (and possibly with others). The most economical solution, however, is to select a few individuals whose task it is to relay messages between native speakers and foreign language speakers. Their profession is one of the oldest in the world, and one which is now attracting a growing number of young people in Canada.

Interpreters and translators

A point often requiring clarification is the difference between interpreters and translators. Interpreters translate orally. They listen to a speaker and then repeat his message in another language. This may be

done simultaneously — in reality, with a few moments delay — or consecutively — in which case the speaker is allowed to deliver his entire speech before oral translation is performed. In both cases, interpreters must be quick and flexible, their pace being set by the speaker, and they must possess great facility with words.

Good interpreters are not numerous, and excellent interpreters are rare, for interpretation requires special skills that are not common among the general population. These skills are little understood at present, but like the ability to sing or dance supremely well, they appear to result more from natural endowment than from formal training. This is not to say that interpreters do not require intensive training and rigorous discipline.

Translators, in contrast, work with written material. They receive texts written in the original language (called the source language) and rewrite them in the second language (called the target language). Time is on their side. They are in a position to look up missing information, consult with colleagues or specialists, correct their copy as needed, and have it revised before turning it in. This does not mean, in practice, that translators may work at a leisurely pace. Since they are in a service occupation, their schedules are largely controlled from without, and customers are always in a hurry. Average output, for a competent translator, is 2000 words a day, but many are pressed to produce twice and even three times this amount. The resulting decline in quality is not surprising.

Translators are employed by governments, business, and translation agencies. Many freelance. Unlike medicine or accounting, translation is not a restricted profession, and anyone who knows more than one language can have a go at it. Although some self-made translators are very good, the majority of professionals have received some formal training. Unfortunately, the profession also attracts self-styled, cut-rate, fast operators, who turn out ill-conceived and badly written texts that often betray the original copy. For this reason, the *Société des Traducteurs du Québec* (STQ) has petitioned the Quebec government for professional recognition. Indeed, some form of control appears to be desirable to ensure that quality is maintained and that the public is protected.

Spontaneous translation is feasible and probably satisfactory in everyday life situations, where communication is limited to familiar topics, and where immediate feedback is generally available. Professional translation, on the other hand, involves far more complex issues. The subject matter may be highly specialized, stylistic considerations are often important, and special situations often impose special constraints on translators. The various factors pointing to the need for formal training in translation may be subsumed under three headings: requirements of professionalism, problems in translation, and the Canadian linguistic scene.

Requirements of professionalism

Translation is more economical overall than widespread bilingualism, but to the consumer who must foot the bill, translations can seem expensive. Whether he is a sender or a receiver of messages, the buyer is therefore likely to demand quality in return for his money. What is understood by quality may vary, however, with the content and purpose of the text. A purely informative piece of writing need only be made intelligible to the reader, and when the receiver is the buyer, he may be satisfied with translation "for content only". On the other hand, when the buyer is the sender, he may wish to ensure that his message will be appealing to prospective readers, in addition to being faithful and accurate. As for literary works, they should be esthetically satisfying in any language. Style or form will then take precedence over reference accuracy, an extreme case being poetry, where the substantial quality of words would appear to matter more than their actual content.

When accuracy or faithful rendition is essential, the translator must be in a position to interpret the original text correctly, which is to say that he must be familiar with the subject matter. Translating scientific, technical, legal, commercial, or any other specialized material requires training designed to familiarize the translator not only with words and expressions employed by scientists, technicians, lawyers, business people, or other specialists, but also with the concepts and objects referred to in various professional contexts.

Literary translation accounts for only a small proportion of all professional translation. It is generally done by people who are themselves writers, and is often a labour of love. In any case, it requires a knowledge and understanding of literature, together with a facility for stylistic expression beyond the ordinary requirements of plain writing. Some forms of translation, such as advertising, fall somewhere in between, requiring that copy be both accurate and appealing. For this reason, advertisers often resort to co-writing and to adaptation rather than to straight translation.

Problems in translation

Translation is a form of communication in which one party, the translator, acts as both receiver and sender. He can do this because of his ability to decode messages received in one language and recode them in another language. As a mediator, a link between two parties who would otherwise be unable to communicate, his function is to transmit messages without altering them. He is also a person in whom two languages come in contact. Although, as linguists and psychologists have abundantly demonstrated, linguistic contact inevitably results in linguistic interference, nevertheless the translator must strive to keep his two languages from interfering or mingling. Finally, the translator is a transformer, someone who performs operations on messages before relaying

them. Clearly, messages are not “the same” before and after undergoing linguistic transformations. And this is the paradox of translation, that a message must be changed without being altered. The question, of course, is not whether to change or not, but what and how to change.

Some insight into language mechanisms is necessary to answer this question. Linguistic communication rests on the use of signs, and functions on different levels. Linguistic signs are basically audible signals coupled with intelligible meanings. Linguists therefore refer to language as comprising form — perceptible signals — and content — what words can evoke or designate. Speakers agree that certain sign combinations are meaningful while others are not, and that some combinations, though meaningful, are incorrect or unacceptable. This, in turn, leads to a distinction between grammaticality — strings of signs that are understandable or meaningful are grammatical — and acceptability — the esthetic quality of utterances. Linguistic communities are rarely homogeneous, however, and what is grammatical and acceptable to one set of speakers is not necessarily so to another. This gives rise to dialectal differences, which are based on geographic location, and to linguistic stratification, which runs parallel to social stratification. To these differences must be added those arising from linguistic evolution: as any student of Chaucer knows, English has changed markedly since the 14th century.

Because language involves many levels and components, the translator is faced with a series of decisions. Should he choose to remain close to the original form and attempt to reproduce as faithfully as possible the sounds of the original message? What happens when transfer operations are performed by form alone is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in Luis d'Antin Van Rooten's *Mots d'heures, Gousses, Rames* (*Mother Goose Rhymes*, as a French speaker might pronounce them!), where original content is totally lost, while original form is clearly recoverable from the “translated” version. Translating content alone, on the other hand, might result in a mere mathematical formula such as *two and two are four: 2 + 2 = 4*. It can also produce a difficult, awkward text, full of paraphrases and circumlocutions. In a recent M.A. thesis (Chumfong, 1975), passages from a treatise on political economy were translated from French into Basic English, employing only about 2000 words, without serious loss of accuracy, but with considerable stylistic transformations.

These are extreme examples, and most professional translation involves only “adequate translation”, that is, translation in which content is kept intact. Yet form always plays a central part, since meaning cannot be conveyed without perceptible support. Good form is also important because readers obviously prefer to read well-written material, but, as mentioned earlier, what is considered good by some (and under certain circumstances) may not be good enough (or too good) for others, and on different occasions. A translator must therefore be aware of factors such as regional differences, historical variations, social distinctions, and special circumstances.

Most difficulties are probably encountered in the general area of grammar. Every language forms a structured system with a set of rules, that is a grammar, of its own. Contrasting two languages helps to bring structural differences into focus. These are often most evident in the lexicon, the list of forms known to speakers and found in dictionaries. Where one language might express a notion or concept by means of a single word, another will use two or more words, since languages "lexicalize" differently. A simple example will serve to illustrate this point. To express the opposition *deep* vs. *not deep*, English employs two separate lexical items, *deep* and *shallow*, while French uses a syntactic device: the base lexeme *profond* is modified as needed to obtain *pas profond*, *peu profond*, *guère profond*.

Differential lexicalization accounts for varying degrees of flexibility, since meaning is not set in a precast form once and for all. English has no special noun to designate a small round table with a single leg, called *guéridon* in French. Speakers are thus at liberty to refer to the class of objects in question as *end table*, *incidental table*, *lamp table*, *candle stand*, and naturally, *small round table*, each expression emphasizing a different aspect. From English to French, something is lost in translation; but in the opposite direction, the translator is faced with making a decision as to which aspect the original writer would have chosen to emphasize, had he been forced by the source language to make a choice.

Words in the lexicon form sets or paradigms, and these may be arranged in different ways. Hierarchical organization is one possibility. Several words having more specific meanings are subsumed under one word with a more general meaning, a superordinate, which serves to identify the entire set. Thus, in English, any moneys received in payment for work done, whether in the form of wages, fees, pay, or other remuneration, can be subsumed under *salary*. French, by contrast, has a vast collection of specific terms, but no superordinate for this particular set. In spite of the phonic resemblance between *salaire* and *salary*, both terms have different meanings since they have different extensions. At times, each language does possess a superordinate, but a different element of the set is selected for the purpose. In speaking of domestic fowls, both English and French make parallel distinctions between male and female, as well as between adult and young: (Engl.) *rooster*, *hen*, *chicken*; (Fr.) *coq*, *poule*, *poulet*. Yet the generic or unmarked term is *chicken* (young) in English and *poule* (female) in French.

Paradigms may also be based on synonymy. There are no true synonyms or equivalents, however, and certain constraints prevent specific forms occurring in some constructions. While *exam* and *examination* may be used interchangeably in a scholastic context, only the latter may serve in a medical context. Distinctions of this nature must be borne in mind when translating, since paradigms are not likely to be symmetrical in two languages. The number of synonyms in a set is often different. English has only one word corresponding to the French pair

connaître and *savoir*, and French has only one word for *to like* and *to love*.

The lack of exact correspondence between lexicons has several consequences. When the source language makes finer distinctions than the target language, something will be lost in translation, unless the translator is careful to make the necessary compensation. This, however, may prove to be difficult, and to yield clumsy results. When the source language is less specific than the target language, the translator is forced to make discriminations not found in the original and requiring personal, sometimes arbitrary, decisions. Most of all, he is likely to be influenced by his dominant language and to allow foreign patterns to intrude. This is known as interference, and is one of the constant threats to good translation.

There are many other lexical problems in addition to those mentioned above. Homonymy is one. How, for example, do you translate *son beau-père l'aimait* in the absence of any contextual indications as to sex and relationship? *His/her step-father/father-in-law loved/liked him/her?*

Syntax may prove even more vexing, for languages differ not only in the set of elements they contain, but in the ways they allow these elements to combine. This is particularly evident in so-called idiomatic constructions, but even simple sentences exhibit cross-linguistic differences. Consider the pair (1) *quand j'étais enfant, je mangeais des huîtres*, and (2) *quand j'étais enfant, j'ai mangé des huîtres*. The first sentence expresses the fact that as a child I ate oysters regularly and as a matter of course, while the second one states that I only did so either once (a) or occasionally (b). French can express this difference through morphology, in this case by varying the verb tense, while English does it by introducing different lexical items: (1) *When I was a child, I used to eat oysters*; (2, a) *When I was a child, I once ate oysters*; and (2, b) *When I was a child, I sometimes ate oysters*. Once again the lack of symmetry between the paradigms of English and French, or of any other pair of languages, makes literal translation impossible in all but a few cases. Homonymy, synonymy and hierarchical organization are at work in syntax just as in the lexicon, and force the translator to make decisions concerning the meaning of the original text and the best available form in the translated text. Unfortunately for translators at this time, no complete contrastive grammar of English and French is yet available. Intuition, based on a keen sense of observation for linguistic form, is still the translator's best friend.

But a false friend it often is! By virtue of constant exposure to a foreign language, translators are eminently susceptible to linguistic interference and may eventually lose their sensitivity to what constitutes naturalness in their mother tongue. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in style. Style, in contrast to grammar, is the result of the choices one makes when a series of possibilities are offered by

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the language. Whether to use an active or a passive construction is often a matter of stylistic preference. To use coordinate or compound sentences, to repeat or not, to be literal or to employ figurative expression, to choose more or less formal constructions, these are but a few of the decisions confronting translators every day, whether they are engaged in technical or literary translation. Since style is to a large extent conditioned by personal preference, it remains largely uncodified. General guidelines apply within various genres, but specifying the exact set of conditions under which a given term or construction would be preferable to another is extremely difficult, and the difficulty is compounded when contrastive stylistics is involved. Thus translation problems increase exponentially as we move from the lexical through the syntactic to the stylistic level, as ever finer discriminations involving larger numbers of elements are required, for which no firm sets of rules have yet been worked out.

The Canadian linguistic scene

The need for formal training in translation and the nature of translation problems are general phenomena, but being a professional translator in Canada presents additional problems.

The very factors that cause the burden of translation to fall mainly on Quebecers also account for the fact that the proportion of bilinguals is higher in this part of the country than in other provinces, and that bilingualism is more frequent among francophones than among anglophones. As mentioned earlier, interference and borrowing are frequently associated with bilingualism. The French spoken in Quebec is thus likely to reflect the influence of English. In addition, because of the great distance which separates Quebec from France, and the many years during which no contacts occurred between the two countries following the Conquest, the French language has evolved somewhat differently in Quebec and in France.

Because bilingualism is widespread, a translator's customers are often in a position to check his production. They seldom, however, have his training or share his knowledge of language functioning, and they approach translation with all the prejudices of the naïve. Why, they want to know, is the translated version shorter or longer than the original? Why weren't things "said the same way"? How come it sounds so much more formal or informal? And of course, why does it cost so much, since "I could've done it myself"?

Because Quebec French is not identical to international or standard French, Canadian translators must be aware that their customers' words may not have the meaning or value indicated in dictionaries prepared and published abroad.

Some words and expressions are indigenous, such as *magasin de*

fer (hardware store) and *avoir hâte à*, as in *j'ai hâte à Noël* (in standard French, *Vivement Noël!*). Others have simply retained the meaning they had in the French provinces in the eighteenth century. Finally, some words, though pronounced and spelled in French, are given English meanings. A French Canadian text containing the adverb *éventuellement* is ambiguous as a result of interference; to use *éventuellement* in a French translation for Quebec is to risk being misunderstood. A French pharmaceutical translator working in Montreal was heard to say that he never dared write *prendre trois cachets, éventuellement quatre*, for fear patients might take three pills for a few days and then increase the dose to four. In standard French, the sentence simply means that the usual dose is three pills, but that four may be prescribed as required. Finally, many French expressions in current use in France are unknown on this side of the Atlantic: *vacataire* (a person employed to perform a specific task) draws a blank stare in Quebec. Yet many French Canadians would prefer standard usage, and the Quebec government, through its *Office de la Langue française*, encourages this tendency. Thus translators working in French are placed in the awkward position of trying to write standard French, while ensuring that they will still be understood by local readers.

Summary

We have just briefly reviewed some of the problems of being and becoming a translator. Some have to do with the general difficulty of communicating at all. Others result from language contact, both on the psychological level (keeping one language from interfering with the other within the person of the translator), and on the linguistic level (attempting to deal with and compensate for linguistic asymmetry). To these must be added the requirements of professionalism, with its demands for high productivity coupled with an insistence on certain quality standards. Finally, there are specific problems arising from the particular linguistic configuration of Canada, where one language happens to be one of the dominant languages of the world, and the other is a non-standard vernacular, subjected to various pressures from within as well as from without.

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