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Translation Assignment in Professional vs. Non-Professional Translation: A Think-Aloud Protocol Study

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In recent years second language research as well as translation theory have started to employ introspective methods in studying language phenomena. Translation as a form of language use has frequently been involved in this type of research, either as the object of study or as the means of eliciting data. The introspective method most often employed in research has been *the method of thinking aloud* where "the subject just lets the thoughts flow verbally without trying to control, direct, or observe them (beyond certain instructions which an outside investigator may have given). Thus think-aloud data are, by their very nature, unanalyzed and without abstraction" (Cohen and Hosenfeld 1981: 286). "The data collected by this method are then transcribed into *protocols* which are a description of the activities, ordered in time, which a subject engages in while performing a task" (Hayes and Flower 1980: 4).

Even though using introspective methods in research is rather a controversial issue, particularly as regards the question of which mental processes are accessible to verbal reports (the arguments put forward by various schools of psychology are briefly summarized in Börsch 1986: 195-200), it is generally agreed that thinking aloud does yield data about the mental processes underlying, for instance, language usage, and that it is particularly suitable for pilot studies and for generating hypotheses (Börsch 1986: 201-202). Now that translation theory is beginning to show interest in what goes on in a translator's mind while he or she is translating, the method of thinking aloud is practically the only way of gaining access to the actual translation process.

The present paper is based on a series of experiments which were carried out at the Savonlinna School of Translation Studies in 1985-1986. In the experiments four students of

translation, two first year (non-professional translators) and two fifth year students (professional translators), translated an English text into Finnish and were asked to think aloud while they were translating.¹

The sessions were tape-recorded and later transcribed into protocols. There were some shortcomings in the setting of the experiment, most notably a lack of a preliminary think-aloud session and a follow-up interview. Both of these are recommended by Ericsson and Simon (1984: 375ff.), and in the analysis it became obvious that they would have been useful. Nevertheless, the study (reported in detail in Jääskeläinen: 1987) yielded considerable data about the translation process. As it was essentially a pilot study, its results should be considered as hypotheses to be tested in further research.

The purpose of the study (in addition to the general purpose of acquiring more knowledge of what happens in the translation process in general) was to find out the differences between professional and non-professional translators' (i.e. fifth year and first year students') translation processes as regards their sensitivity to the requirements of the translation assignment, as well as their use of dictionaries and other reference material. The present paper will concentrate on describing the subjects' behaviour in relation to the translation assignment.

The Assignment

The central importance of the translation assignment in a translator's decision-making process has been emphasised by Reiss and Vermeer. In their opinion it is more important to attain the purpose of the translation than to translate the text in a certain manner (1984: 100). Moreover, it is the translator's task to decide what will be translated, and this decision depends on the translator's evaluation of the translation situation, i.e. the translation assignment (1984: 86-87). In other words, if the

¹ Even though the fifth year students had not yet really worked as translators, their experience in translating was considered sufficient to call them "professional". By their fifth - and final - year at the university, they had attended several translation exercise courses, as well as courses on the theory of translation. Moreover, the two subjects were selected on the basis of their good marks in translation courses. The first year students were clearly non-professional: they had had no previous experience in translating (except short excerpts as grammar exercises at school), and they had not yet familiarized themselves with the theory of translation.

function of the target text is different from that of the source text, even great modifications may be justified. The purpose for which a text is translated plays a major role in the translator's decision-making and also forms the background against which the translation can be assessed. This view is stressed in translator training in Finland, and sensitivity to the requirements of the translation assignment is considered an important indicator of a translator's degree of professionalism.

In order to find out how the translation assignment is reflected in the subjects' translation processes and in their translation products, the target text was given a slightly different function from that of the source text. The assignment sheet contained, in addition to the source text, a description of the translation assignment and the source of the text, printed as follows (the latter two are translated from Finnish):

Source: New Scientist 21 February 1985, Science column
Translation assignment: To appear in the column "Maailman ihmisiä" ("People Around the World") in Helsingin Sanomat

Stay slim - eat garlic

Everyone knows that eating fatty foods is no good for you, especially if you have a dicky heart. However, the search for a miracle drug that could safely mop all the excess fats has been somewhat difficult ... but could garlic come to the rescue?

O. Sodimu, P. Joseph and K. Augusti at the University of Maidugari in Nigeria, fed an exceptionally fatty diet to rats. Not surprisingly, the creatures accumulated cholesterol in their blood, liver and kidneys. But adding garlic oil to the same high-fat diet prevented the rise in the fatty constituents: cholesterol, triglycerides, and total lipids (*Experientia*, vol 40, p 5).

How does the garlic work? The authors speculate that it knocks out some of the key enzymes involved in making fatty acid or cholesterol. Alternatively, garlic may nobble the energy-carrying compound NADPH (nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate hybride), which is necessary for making lipids.

The readership of the source text can be assumed to consist of people with a relatively high level of education, but not necessarily experts in medicine (i.e. interested laymen, too). This particular news item was written in a rather humorous style. The intended audience of the translation consists of average Finnish newspaper readers, i.e. a wide variety of people with different backgrounds and levels of education. *Helsingin Sanomat* is the biggest Finnish newspaper, and the column "Maailman ihmisiä" ("People Around the World") usually contains short and often humorous news items from all over the world.

The slightly different functions of the source text and the translation provide an opportunity to observe how the assignment is reflected in the subjects' protocols and translations. The hypothesis was that the fifth year students would take the assignment into account throughout their entire translation process, while the first year students might approach the assignment less systematically or ignore it altogether. This hypothesis was partly based on the results of Krings' study (1986) in which the subjects were eight advanced German students of French. They were studying for careers as language teachers in secondary schools, and not as translators, which makes them "non-professional" translators. Moreover, the subjects in Krings' study were not given any specific translation assignment, but were only asked to translate the text according to their normal routine. This point will be discussed a little later in this paper.

The Fifth Year Students

The results of the study confirmed the original hypothesis as far as the fifth year students were concerned. Yet there were some interesting differences in how the translation assignment was reflected in each of their protocols and translations.

Both Bertha and Emily (the subjects were given fictional names for purposes of anonymity) frequently used the translation assignment as a decision-making criterion, particularly in cases where they decided to leave out something from the source text that was not necessary or even desirable in the translation. They also used the translation assignment as a criterion when they made decisions on what kind of style they should use. This was not, however, verbalized in all the decision-making points, but once they had commented on the style at the beginning of the translation process, they followed this "rule" in their translations.

The translations were evaluated by an evaluation team which consisted of two teachers from the Savonlinna School of Translation Studies and a students' panel (three fifth year students of English). Bertha's translation was lauded for its selectivity. She decided to leave out the reference to "*Experientia*" in line 10 on the basis of the assignment, as shown by an extract from her protocol in example 1 (translated from Finnish; capitals indicate items that were originally in English in the protocol).

Example 1: oh yes that EXPERIENTIA (4.0)
but it is not really necessary there (4.0)
a reader of NEW SCIEN-SCIENTIST might go and
check it out but (1.0) researchers (1.0)
I won't put anything in brackets (4.0)?

Here Bertha stops to think about the reference and very quickly decides to leave it out. The second "but" in the extract seems to indicate that a reader of the column "*Maailman ihmisiä*" would not check the results in any source. This omission was certainly justified, considering the translation assignment at hand (see also example 2 below from Emily's protocol). Bertha also left out the list of various fatty constituents in lines 9-10 ("cholesterol, triglycerides, and total lipids"). On the basis of the assignment this omission was probably justified; the information given in the list is too detailed for the target column. However, Bertha's decision becomes somewhat problematic later on in the text (line 15), where "lipids" come up again and where Bertha decides not to leave them out. Due to the earlier omission, the "lipids" come up rather abruptly in the last sentence of Bertha's translation, but obviously she did not notice this discrepancy. This problem might have been avoided by adding a qualifier when "lipids" occurred again in the text, e.g. "harmful lipids". Bertha also omitted the long and awkward explanation of "NADPH" which was undoubtedly a good solution in this case. It should be noted here that the decision to leave out the reference to "*Experientia*" was very unproblematic for both Bertha and Emily, as indicated by examples 1 and 2. This shows that they both had a clear idea of what this kind of a translation assignment requires from the translator.

The evaluation team were particularly impressed by the style of Emily's translation. The language she used is colourful and colloquial, which is exactly the kind of style normally found in this particular column. Thus she translated, for instance, "a dicky heart" with a phrase "*sydän on taipuvainen reistailemaan*", which can be back-translated as "heart which tends to be on the blink" and "the creatures" with "*eläinparat*" ("poor animals"). She justified her translation of "a dicky heart" by saying that this variant was all right in this column, but not elsewhere in this newspaper. She made no further comments on the style with regard to the translation

2 The figures in brackets indicate the length of pauses in seconds.

assignment, but continued to look for colloquial and colourful translation variants. Emily also decided to omit the reference to "*Experientia*", as shown by example 2.

Example 2: I won't put that reference anywhere = = nobody is interested in it or if somebody is he can look for it himself .hh (11.0)

Example 2 illustrates how self-evident the decision to omit the reference was for Emily; it created no problem. However, Emily did not omit the list of fatty constituents nor the explanation of "NADPH". Considering the intended readership of the translation, the explanation of "NADPH" should have been left out in the translation, and its inclusion can therefore be regarded as a mistake. In spite of this, Emily's translation was unanimously rated as the best by the evaluation team.

However, as one of the members of the evaluation team pointed out, even the fifth year students were too faithful to the forms and expressions of the source text in their translations. This was particularly obvious in the unimaginative headlines of all the translations. This point will be discussed a little later in this paper.

First year students

The first year students were expected to largely ignore the translation assignment, as did the subjects in Krings' study. However, even though the first year students, Clara and Dorothy, were clearly inexperienced as translators and therefore ignorant of the implications of the translation assignment, they showed a far greater degree of awareness of the possible implications than did any of Krings' subjects. There were, however, some differences in how each of the first year students responded to the translation assignment.

It seems that Clara did not pay any attention to the translation assignment to begin with, but once she encountered a problem that could only be solved on that basis, she used it in her decision-making. This happened when she wondered how to translate the explanation of "NADPH" (lines 14-15), as shown by example 3.

Example 3: wouldn't dare to translate at all because (3.0)
it could be that (.) A T P but 'cos it's not (1.0)
I don't remember all that biology stuff (8.0)
or naturally I might translate these how this (2.0)

N A (2.0) D P H is then something (1.0) nicotine adenine lidio- (1.0) eh (6.0) or maybe it could be left just like that if this yes (2.0) yes this won't appear in any (2.0) actual (2.0) any science (.) scientific publication (21.0)

Clara was not quite sure of what the translation of "NADPH" was, and when she noticed that the translation was not intended for scientists, she suggested that perhaps the explanation could be left in the translation in English. This is what she decided to do eventually: she put the explanation in the translation in a footnote in English. This shows clearly that Clara was not aware of the most basic principles in translation. Leaving the explanation in the translation in English would perhaps be justified if the translation were intended for experts. Here it should have been left out, or at least translated into Finnish.

On the other hand, Dorothy seemed to be aware of the possible implications of an instance in which the function of the translation differed from that of the source text, but for some reason she failed to notice the translation assignment at hand. This became evident when Dorothy was trying to figure out how to translate the explanation of "NADPH". When she was translating the explanation, she was wondering whether she ought to add "nicotine acid" in the explanation, since such a long list of words means little to ordinary people. This is illustrated by example 4.

Example 4: I think that if this is (3.0) a paper that (.) is meant for ordinary people then you might add an explanation there that it is nicotine acid = = and not or that (.) such a long list doesn't say anything (7.0)

A little later Dorothy noticed that the text had been taken from *New Scientist*, and she pointed out that the addition would be "too much". In the end she decided to add nicotine acid after all so that even a layman might be able to understand it, "if one happens to read this". It would seem that Dorothy simply failed to notice the translation assignment description on the assignment sheet. However, she had a fairly clear general idea of what might be necessary when the readership changes.

Nevertheless, both Clara and Dorothy had great difficulties in trying to translate the reference to "*Experientia*", because

they did not realise that on the basis of the translation assignment it could, and even should, be left out. Moreover, Clara seemed to pay little attention to the style of the translation. She was only concerned about the translation being "good Finnish". Dorothy, however, spent quite some time pondering more colloquial variants for, e.g., "to mop" and "to come to the rescue", as shown by example 5.

Example 5: I'll have to think about it (.) later because if (1.0)
I suppose I should get more colour into it = = if I
use (1.0) such words that (1.0) remove fats and (1.0)
garlic becomes the right alternative then it will
become terribly boring (.)

On the basis of several extracts from Dorothy's protocol, most clearly the remarks concerning the addition of "nicotine acid", it is fairly safe to assume here that she is not reacting to the requirements of the translation assignment, but to the style of the source text, since it is obvious that she did not notice the translation assignment at hand. Anyway, a follow-up interview would have been useful for clarifying such unclear instances.

However, even the above considerations about the target text show that the first year students were working with production, rather than pure comprehension goals in mind, and in that sense they were more professional than the subjects in the two major think-aloud protocol studies influencing this study, namely the studies of Gerloff and Krings. In Gerloff's study only one subject, a competent bilingual, was concerned about the target text, trying to find the best way to express the original French text in English. The rest of the subjects (five intermediate-level students of French) concentrated on pure comprehension purposes in the analysis of the source text (Gerloff, forthcoming, 11). On the other hand, Krings criticizes the subjects in his study for what he calls "inadequate translational problem awareness" (*fehlendes übersetzerisches Problembewusstsein*). This is manifested, for instance, by their tendency to translate without really understanding the text first, not paying any attention to the quality of the target text - even when they were translating into their mother tongue - and their indifference as regards the intended audience of the translation (Krings 1986: 468-478). Due to their inadequate translational problem awareness, the subjects resorted to rather peculiar translation principles, which included, for instance, the following: "If all competing potential equivalents turn out to be

equally appropriate or inappropriate, take the most literal one!", or alternatively, "Take the shortest one!" (Krings 1986a: 273). Using such arbitrary criteria in choosing a variant in the translation shows that the subjects were not interested in the quality of the product, i.e. the target text, but were solely concerned about getting through the source text one way or the other. In comparison with Gerloff's and Krings' subjects, the first year students could be described as "semi-professional", since they did pay quite a lot of attention to the quality of the target text. As could be expected, they were not familiar with the basic translation principles, and were therefore not always very successful in their efforts.

Conclusion

In the discussions on which mental processes are accessible to verbal reports, it has been emphasized that "only cognitively controlled processes can be reported, whereas automatic processes are not accessible to verbalization" (Börsch 1986: 202). Therefore, "what is available to the novice may be unavailable to the expert" (Ericsson and Simon 1980: 235). For this reason professional translators' translation processes inevitably include thought processes and decisions which cannot be verbalized. It would seem, on the basis of the present data as well as Tirkkonen-Condit's data (1987), that professional translators' decisions concerning the translation assignment are in the majority of cases automatized and therefore not observable in the protocols. This is the case, for instance, with Emily's decision on what kind of style she is going to use. After mentioning at the beginning of the translation process that the style seems to be fairly similar in both columns, she consistently looks for colloquial translation variants without referring back to the translation assignment. In other words, after the initial decision to use a certain style, for instance, a professional translator creates a set of rules which he or she then follows throughout the translation process. Examples 1 and 2 illustrate another difficulty concerning almost automatized processes. In examples 1 and 2 the fifth year students made decisions to omit the reference to "*Experientia*". This decision was apparently very unproblematic for both of them. Now, Krings' pioneering protocol analysis is based on the notion of a translation problem (it was also used in Jääskeläinen: 1987), which is operationalized by various problem indicators (see Krings: 1986: 121). This approach might leave some essential features

of the professional translation process unnoticed, if the notion of translation problem is not defined broadly enough. On the whole, it is extremely difficult to study the professional translation process on a more or less numerical basis, counting the number of translation problems, etc. Nevertheless, studying the automatized processes in professional translators' translation processes seems a very interesting area for future research (this has been suggested also by Börsch 1986: 207).

As was mentioned earlier, the subjects in Krings' study ignored the possible audience of the translation completely. But in fact, there was no specific translation assignment description in his study. It was left out on purpose in order to find out whether any questions in that respect would arise (Krings: 1986: 468). However, as the subjects were instructed to translate "the way they normally do", they did in fact have a specific audience in mind when they were translating: their normal audience, a university teacher. Considering this, it is possible that Krings' subjects were not as "unprofessional" as they appeared to be, and perhaps students of translation are not so much more sensitized to problems of this kind right from the beginning of their careers. The results of the present study, as well as the results of Tirkkonen-Condit's study (1989), indicate that even non-professional translators start asking questions about the intended audience of the translation once they encounter problems which can only be solved on that basis. This hypothesis should be tested in further research.

One of the members of the evaluation team criticized all the translations for being too faithful to the source text, which is probably a justified criticism. This problem is associated with the fact that students of translation are not free to use their imagination and the reason for that is obvious: there is too little variety in the translation assignments in translator training. Even though the translation exercises always have a translation assignment description, this is often so similar to the function of the source text that no major changes are necessary. But as Toury points out, "it is only natural that each type of translating situation should produce a *different* set of constraints and norms. Consequently, the greater the variety of situations that a translator is put into, the greater the range and flexibility of his or her ability to perform, or adapt to changing norms is going to be" (Toury 1984: 191). Therefore it might be a good idea to have more translation exercises with a clearly different function from that of the source text to encourage the

translators-to-be to forget the confines of the structure and the style of the source text.

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