

What Every Novice Translator Should Know

By Antar Solhy Abdellah
Ph.D. on a translation programme
for pre-service language teachers
Qena faculty of Education,
South Valley University,
Egypt

Introduction

The nature and importance of translation

Translation is ultimately a human activity which enables human beings to exchange ideas and thoughts regardless of the different tongues used. Al Wassety (2001) views the phenomenon of translation as a legitimate offspring of the phenomenon of language, since originally, when humans spread over the earth, their languages differed and they needed a means through which people speaking a certain language (tongue) would interact with others who spoke a different language.

Translation is, in Enani's (1997) view, a modern science at the interface of philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and sociology. Literary translation in particular is relevant to all these sciences, audio-visual arts, as well as cultural and intellectual studies.

there are eight types of translation: word-for-word translation, literal translation, faithful translation, semantic translation, adaptive translation, free translation, idiomatic translation, and communicative translation.

Translation is, in Chabban's words (1984:5), "a finicky job," as it has not yet been reduced to strict scientific rules, and it allows for the differences that are known to exist between different personalities. Translation is a heavily subjective art, especially when it deals with matters outside the realm of science where precisely defined concepts are more often expressed by certain generally accepted terms.

In the final analysis, translation is a science, an art, and a skill. It is a science in the sense that it necessitates complete knowledge of the structure and make-up of the two languages concerned. It is an art since it requires

artistic talent to reconstruct the original text in the form of a product that is presentable to the reader who is not supposed to be familiar with the original. It is also a skill because it entails the ability to smooth over any difficulty in the translation, and the ability to provide the translation of something that has no equal in the target language.

In translation, the richness of vocabulary, depth of culture, and vision of the translator could certainly have very conspicuous effects on his/her work. Another translator might produce a reasonably acceptable version of the same text, which, however, may very well reflect a completely different background, culture, sensitivity, and temperament. Such differences cannot, in Chabban's view (1984), detract from the merit of either translator. This is simply because translation is decidedly a more difficult job than creation.

Criteria for a good translation

A good translation is one that carries all the ideas of the original as well as its structural and cultural features. Massoud (1988) sets criteria for a good translation as follows:

1. A good translation is easily understood.
2. A good translation is fluent and smooth.
3. A good translation is idiomatic.
4. A good translation conveys, to some extent, the literary subtleties of the original.
5. A good translation distinguishes between the metaphorical and the literal.
6. A good translation reconstructs the cultural/historical context of the original.
7. A good translation makes explicit what is implicit in abbreviations, and in allusions to sayings, songs, and nursery rhymes.
8. A good translation will convey, as much as possible, the meaning of the original text (pp. 19-24).

El Shafey (1985: 93) suggests other criteria for a good translation; these include three main principles:

1. The knowledge of the grammar of the source language plus the knowledge of vocabulary, as well as good understanding of the text to be translated.
2. The ability of the translator to reconstitute the given text (source-language text) into the target language.
3. The translation should capture the style or atmosphere of the original text; it should have all the ease of an original composition.

From a different perspective, El Touny (2001) focused on differentiating between different types of translation. He indicated that there are eight types of translation: word-for-word translation, literal translation, faithful translation, semantic translation, adaptive translation, free translation, idiomatic translation, and communicative translation. He advocated the last type as the one which transmits the meaning from the context, respecting the form and structure of the original and which is easily comprehensible by the readers of the target language.

El Zeini (1994) didn't seem satisfied with such criteria for assessing the quality of translation. Hence she suggested a pragmatic and stylistic model for evaluating quality in translation. She explains that the model "places equal emphasis on the pragmatic component as well on the stylistic component in translation. This model covers a set of criteria, which are divided into two main categories: content-related criteria and form-related criteria" and expected that by following these criteria, "translators will be able to minimize the chance of producing errors or losses, as well as eliminate problems of unacceptability" (p. xvii).

Translation problems

Translation problems can be divided into linguistic problems and cultural problems: the linguistic problems include grammatical differences, lexical ambiguity and meaning ambiguity; the cultural problems refer to different situational features. This classification coincides with that of El Zeini when she identified six main problems in translating from Arabic to English and vice versa; these are lexicon, morphology, syntax, textual differences, rhetorical differences, and pragmatic factors.

Another level of difficulty in translation work is what As-sayyd (1995) found when she conducted a study to compare and assess some problems in translating the fair names of Allah in the Qu'ran. She pointed out that some of the major problems of translation are over-translation, under-translation, and untranslatability.

Culture constitutes another major problem that faces translators. A bad model of translated pieces of literature may give misconceptions about the original. That is why Fionty (2001) thought that poorly translated texts distort the original in its tone and cultural references, while Zidan (1994) wondered about the possible role of the target culture content as a motivating variable in enhancing or hindering the attainment of linguistic, communicative and, more importantly, cultural objectives of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education. Hassan (1997) emphasized this notion when he pointed out the importance of paying attention to the translation of irony in the source language context. He clarified that this will not only transfer the features of the language translated but also its cultural characteristics.

The translator's work

These problems, and others, direct our attention to the work and the character of translators, how they attack a text so as to translate, and the processes they follow to arrive at the final product of a well-translated text in the target language.

Enani (1994:5) defines the translator as "a writer who formulates ideas in words addressed to readers. The only difference between him and the original writer is that these ideas are the latter's". Another difference is that the work of the translator is even more difficult than that of the artist. The artist is supposed to produce directly

his/her ideas and emotions in his/her own language however intricate and complicated his/her thoughts are. The translator's responsibility is much greater, for s/he has to relive the experiences of a different person. Chabban (1984) believes that, however accurately the translator may delve into the inner depths of the writer's mind, some formidable linguistic and other difficulties may still prevent the two texts from being fully equivalent. Therefore we do not only perceive the differences between a certain text and its translation, but also between different translations of the same text

On the procedural level, El Shafey (1985:95) states: "A translator first analyzes the message, breaking it down into its simplest and structurally clearest elements, transfers it at this level into the target language in the form which is most appropriate for the intended audience. A translator instinctively concludes that it is best to transfer the "kernel level" in one language to the corresponding "kernel level" in the "receptor language."

Translation skills for novice translators

The present study suggests four main macro-skills for any translator who begins his/her work in the field of translation. These are: reading comprehension, researching, analytical, and composing skills. These macro-skills include many sub- or micro-skills that need to be mastered.

Reading comprehension

While we are translating, we do not think of our activity as being broken down into phases. After doing our first translations, many automatic mechanisms come into play that allow us to translate more quickly; at the same time, we are less and less conscious of our activity.

Osimo (2001) indicates that in order to think about the translation process and to describe it, our essential task consists of analyzing its phases, even if we are aware of the fact that they do not always coincide with perceptibly different or distinguishable moments. If we want to describe a process that often is beyond the translator's own consciousness, we are forced to divide the process into different phases which, in the everyday practice of translation, can reveal the inter-twining, almost entangling, of these phases. The first phase of the translation process consists of reading the text. The reading act, first, falls under the competence of psychology, because it concerns our perceptive system. Reading, like translation, is, for the most part, an unconscious process. If it were conscious, we would be forced to consume much more time in the act. Most mental processes involved in the reading act are automatic and unconscious. Owing to such a nature-common and little-known in the same time-in our opinion it is important to analyze the reading process as precisely as possible. The works of some

perception psychologists will be helpful to widen our knowledge of this first phase of the translation process.

When a person reads, his brain deals with many tasks in such rapid sequences that everything seems to be happening simultaneously. The eye examines (from left to right as far as many Western languages are concerned, or from right to left or from top to bottom in some other languages) a series of graphic signs (graphemes) in succession, which give life to syllables, words, sentences, paragraphs, sections, chapters, and texts.

Simply reading a text is, in itself, an act of translation. When we read, we do not store the words we have read in our minds as happens with data entered using a keyboard or scanner into a computer. After reading, we do not have the photographic or auditory recording in our minds of the text read. We have a set of impressions instead. We remember a few words or sentences precisely, while all the remaining text is translated from the verbal language into a language belonging to another sign system, which is still mostly unknown: the mental language.

The mental processing of the read verbal material is of a syntactical nature when we try to reconstruct the possible structure of the sentence, i.e. the relations among its elements. In contrast, it is of a semantic nature when we identify the relevant areas within the semantic field of any single word or sentence; and it is of a pragmatic nature when we deal with the logical match of the possible meanings with the general context and the verbal co-text.

The difference between a reader and a critic is negligible: the reader trying to understand has the same attitude as the critic, who is a systematic, methodical, and self-aware reader. While reading, the individual reads, and perceives what he reads, drawing interpretations and inferences about the possible intentions of the author of the message.

Holmes (1988) suggested that the translation process is actually a multi-level process; while we are translating sentences, we have a map of the original text in our minds and, at the same time, a map of the kind of text we want to produce in the target language. Even as we translate serially, we have this structural concept so that each sentence in our translation is determined not only by the original sentence, but also by the two maps—of the original text and of the translated text—which we carry along as we translate.

The translation process should, therefore, be considered a complex system in which understanding, processing, and projection of the translated text are interdependent portions of one structure. We can therefore put forward, as does Hönig (1991), the existence of a sort of "central processing unit" supervising the coordination of the different mental processes (those connected to reading, interpretation, and writing) and at the same time projecting a map of the text to be.

Novice translators as well as student translators are advised to master the following basic reading comprehension skills.

- Read for gist and main ideas.
- Read for details.
- Identify the meaning of new words and expressions using one or more components of the structural analysis clause; prefixes, suffixes, roots, word order, punctuation, sentence pattern, etc.
- Identify the meaning of new words and expressions using one or more of the contextual analysis; synonyms, antonyms, examples, etc.
- Identify the writer's style: literary, scientific, technical, informative, persuasive, argumentative, etc.
- Identify the language level used in the text: standard, slang, religious, etc.
- Identify cultural references in the choice of words in the text.

Researching skills

Enani (2002b) notices that "the most commonly heard advice to translators is 'if you don't know the meaning of a word, look it up in *the* dictionary.' It is the commonest and the vaguest insofar as the definite article suggest that the dictionary is known to both speaker and listener." He indicates that there are different kinds of dictionaries that a translator should refer to; a bilingual dictionary, a dictionary on a historical basis, dictionaries of current English, dictionaries of idioms, specialized dictionaries (dictionaries of common errors, dictionaries of idiomatic usage, slang dictionaries, technical dictionaries) encyclopedic dictionaries, dictionaries of neologisms, and monolingual dictionaries.

Despite this long list of different kinds of dictionaries, it is a single dictionary that the translator is supposed to refer to each and every time s/he translates. The choice of the *best*, or the most appropriate, dictionary depends on the style of the protext (original text, text before translation) and on the different types of users of the translation.

Calderaro (1998) indicates two major users of the meta text (text after translation) who may use the translated version; the specialist user and the lay user. Identifying the prospective users of the metatext is very important in the process of researching, as this will determine which kind of dictionaries the translator will refer to, which level of information should be presented and to "detect the exact moments when it is necessary to establish a balance between the scientific level of the author and the knowledge the user supposedly has."

Novice translators, as well as student translators are encouraged to use the following basic researching tips;

- Use bilingual dictionaries for looking up meanings of new words.
- Use monolingual dictionaries to check the usage of the new words in the source language and in the target language.
- Use related encyclopedias and glossary lists for specialized terms;
- Use software dictionaries if necessary and available.
- Refer to specialized magazines and journals to help you familiarize yourself with the text, particularly when it is a technical text.

Analytical skills

The translation process is characterized by an analysis stage and a synthesis stage. During analysis, the translator refers to the prototext in order to understand it as fully as possible. The synthesis stage is the one in which the prototext is projected onto the reader, or rather, onto the idea that the translator forms of who will be the most likely reader of the metatext.

The text, according to Bell (1998) is analyzed in two ways: micro- and macro-analysis of the actual text: monitoring for cohesion and coherence, and checking for coherence between the actual text and the potential text-type of which it is a token realization. Micro-analysis has the purpose of verifying text cohesion and inner cohesion of the single units of text. Macro-analysis is aimed at checking for coherence and cohesion between the created text and the model in the category to which the text belongs. For example, if the text is an instruction booklet for a household appliance, or a story for a newspaper, often there are models for such types of text to which we frequently (consciously or unconsciously) adhere.

Such an analytic exam was necessary in order to identify the individual mental processes involved in the above-mentioned activities; we know, however, that such activities are actually carried out in very short time span. During this mental work, there is a constant shift of focus between micro-analysis and macro-analysis, between micro-expression and macro-expression, i.e. a constant comparison between the meaning of the single utterances and the meaning of the text as a whole, or, on a larger scale, a constant comparison between the sense of the specific text and the comprehensive sense of the corpus which forms the "intertext," whether or not the translator is aware of this fact. In this context, "intertext" should be understood as the intertextual universe in which a text is located.

Translators are advised to use the following strategies in the analysis stage:

- Identify beginnings and endings of ideas in the text and the relationships between these ideas.
- Identify the "best" meaning that fits into the context;

- Identify the structure in the Target Language that "best" represents the original;
- Identify transitions between ideas and the "best" connectors in the target language that represent the original.

Composing skills

At this point, the mental construction resulting from interpretation seeks an outer expression.

Osimo (2002) suggests that, in this expression stage, there are two substages. One is aimed at expression, the other at cohesion. The translator, having finished his/her interpretative work, has two needs: first, to externalize the set of impressions caused by the text and translate into speech elements the impressions the mind produced by contact with the prototext; and second, to make this product coherent within itself, i.e., transform the set of speech elements into a text (the metatext).

He describes the passage from mental content to written text in these terms:

- pinpointing elements useful for discrimination of the content to be expressed from similar contents;
- pinpointing redundant elements;
- choice of words (lexicalization) and attention to their cohesion (inner links);
- choice of grammatical structure(s);
- linear order of words;
- parts of speech;
- sentence complexity;
- prepositions and other function words, and
- final form.

As a novice translator, or a student translator, you are invited to make use of the following basic strategies:

- Use correct word order as used in the target language.
 - Use correct sentence structures as used in the target language.
 - transmit the ideas of the text in clear sentences in the target language.
 - Rephrase certain sentences to convey the overall meaning translated;
 - Make changes to the text as a whole to give it a sense of the original without distorting the original ideas.
 - Try one or more of the following strategies when facing problems of untranslatableity.
- a. Syntactic strategies:
- Shift word order.
 - Change clause/sentence structure.

- Add or change cohesion.
- b. Semantic strategies:
 - Use superordinates.
 - Alter the level of abstraction.
 - Redistribute the information over more or fewer elements.
- c. Pragmatic strategies:
 - Naturalize or exoticize.
 - Alter the level of explicitness.
 - Add or omit information.

Conclusion

This study described the basic skills and strategies that novice translators as well as student translators need to master in their daily experiences with translation tasks. The main skills proposed are: reading comprehension, researching, analytical, and composing skills. The study suggested other sub-skills and strategies for planting one's feet firmly in the land of translation. The skills and strategies presented in this study represent just the basic level for beginners and students. However, advanced and professional translators may find them relevant as well.

References

- As-sayyad, S.,M., (1995). "The problem of English Translation Equivalence of the fair names of Allah in the Glorious Qu'ran": A Contextual Study." MA thesis, Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University.
- Attia, I.,M.,(1975). "A classification of some common Erodes involved in the process of Written Translation from Arabic into English and some Suggestions for Remedial Measures.", MA thesis, Faculty of Education, Al Azhar University.
- Bell R. T.(1998). Psycholinguistic/cognitive approaches. In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. London, Routledge.
- Calderaro, Lic Denis C. (1998). "Considerations on Teaching Translation". *Translation Journal*, Vol 2 No. 3, July 1988. (On-line). Available: <http://accurapid.com/journal/05educ.htm>.
- Chabban, I.,G.,(1984). "An Analysis of the techniques of translation based on some literary material translated from English into Arabic", Ph.D. thesis, Faculty of Al Alsun, Ain Shams University.

El Menoufy, A. (1982). "A Communicative Approach to Translation". *Discourse Analysis: Theory and Application*. Cairo :CDELT, Mar30-Apr3.

El Shafey, F., A., M., (1985). "Compounding in English and Arabic, Implications for Translation Methodology" M.A Thesis, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University.

El Sheikh, A,A. (1990). "Towards a Systematic Approach to Evaluation of Translation Examinations" *Teaching English : The Decade Ahead, Proceedings of the Tenth National Symposium of English Language Teaching in Egypt*, CDELT, Ain Shams University, Cairo.

El Zeini, N., T., (1994). "Criteria for the Evaluation of Translation : A Pragma-stylistic approach". PhD. Thesis, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University

Enani, M., (1999). *Graduated Exercises in Translation from Arabic to English*. Cairo: Anglo Egyptian Bookshop.

Enani, M., (2000b). *Dictionaries for the Translator, An Introduction*. Cairo: Anglo Egyptian Bookshop.

Enani, M., (2001). *English-Arabic Translation, An Introduction*. Cairo: Anglo Egyptian Bookshop.

Hassan, A., H., (1997). " Verbal Irony in Arabic and English: A Discourse Approach". MA thesis, Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University.

Holmes J. S. (1988). *Translated Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies*. Amsterdam, Rodopi, . ISBN 90-6203-739-9. cited in Osimo, B. (2000). "Translation Course" part one. On-line Book. Available: <http://www.logos.it> (25 April 2002).

Hönig h. G. Holmes(1991). "Mapping Theory" and the Landscape of Mental Translation Processes, in Leuven-Zwart and Naaijken (ed.). *Translations Studies: The State of the Art. Proceedings of the first James S. Holmes Symposium on Translation Studies*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, . ISBN 90-5183-257-5, p. 77-89. cited in Osimo. B. (2000). "Translation Course" part one. On-line Book. Available: <http://www.logos.it> (25 April, 2002).

Massoud, M. (1995). "*Producing Realizable Translations in a Culturally-globalized world*" English Language in 2000, Proceedings of the 14th National Symposium of English Language Teaching, CDELT, Ain Shams University, Cairo.

Massoud, M., F., (1988). *Translate to Communicate, A Guide for Translators*. New York: Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.

Osimo, B. (2000). "Translation Course" part one. On-line Book. Available : <http://www.logos.it> (25 April 2002)

Osimo, B. (2001). "Translation Course" part two. On-line Book. Available: <http://www.logos.it> 25 April 2002)

Osimo, B. (2002). "Translation Course" part three. On-line Book. Available: <http://www.logos.it> (25 April 2002).

Zidan, A.,T. (1994). "An Exploratory Study of the Acceptability of Target Culture content in EFL Instruction: A Cross-cultural Perspective". *Global Age: Issues in English Language Education, Proceedings of the 13th National Symposium of English Language Teaching*, CDELT, Ain Shams University, Cairo.