Thematic integration of German-English translation texts

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Abstract

The basis for this paper is an experimental course for advanced learners of German where German-English translation was integrated into a language course with the theme of socioeconomic problems in post-unification East Germany. The overall aim of the translation element of the course was to translate a variety of specialized texts while using translation theory in a practical way to inform the translation process. Content was a primary criterion for the selection of the translation texts, which included historical, economic, political, and literary texts relating to the theme of the module. An independent evaluation of the course was carried out; this showed an overall positive reaction to the use of translation in this way. The author argues that translation texts should both be relevant to the whole language course and also represent a wide range of text types, including examples of both functional and non-functional texts.

Introduction

The course in advanced German for final year students of Applied Languages and Languages with Computing at the University of Limerick, part of the series *German Language, Culture, and Society*, consists of four hours per week: a lecture, a tutorial on text analysis and discussion (*Textarbeit*), a tutorial on literature, and a translation tutorial. The translation tutorial was the second of a series held over three consecutive semesters with the aim of 'the systematic study of translation theory and practice, introducing students to a range of text types and registers'. The texts for the translation series are generally functional, from journalism and the scientific, technical, and legal areas, but as literature also plays a role in the Applied Languages course, some literary texts may also be incorporated. My own approach to translation practice, and consequently much of the theoretical input of this tutorial, owes much to the functionalist school that originated in Germany in the

1970s with Katharina Reiss and Hans Vermeer and was subsequently further developed by Christiane Nord.

In the past, the texts for the translation series have been selected mainly with the aim of introducing the student to a range of text types and registers, but in the academic year 2001-2002, the tutorial took a new direction in that content became the most important criterion. The reason for this was that the *Textarbeit* part of the course was held jointly with a group of students studying economics at the Pädagogische Hochschule Karlsruhe with a videoconferencing session linking the two groups every two weeks. The theme was socioeconomic problems in post-unification Germany. It was therefore particularly important in this semester that the students had as much exposure as possible to the relevant historical and economic texts in order to be able to cope with the demands of joint tutorials with a German-speaking group.

The problem in the translation tutorial was therefore to reconcile content-based course materials, in which content was more limited than for the usual very wide brief, with the stated aim of using a wide range of text types that illustrate translation approaches and problems of various kinds. An advantage was that texts from the other tutorials on historical, economic, and socioeconomic themes were readily available for the translation class. Most texts were written but one was in spoken mode (a talk given by Günter Schabowski, a member of the *Politbüro* at the time of the GDR's collapse); a video of the talk was used in the following semester as a basis for an interpretation session.

The functionalist approach to translation provides a useful basis for the categorization of texts and correspondingly appropriate translation strategies for them. Nord (1991) makes a fundamental distinction between two types of translation, INSTRUMENTAL and DOCUMENTARY:

> Documentary translations serve as a document of a source culture communication between the author and the source text recipient, whereas the instrumental translation is a communicative instrument in its own right, conveying a message directly from the source text author to the target text recipient.

Documentary translation would include most literary texts: the translation would be focused on the source text rather than the

target reader, who would be 'conscious of "observing" a communi-
cative situation of which he is not a part'. In the case of an
instrumental translation, on the other hand, the reader should be
able to receive its message without being conscious of a transla-
tion procedure, as if it had been written in the target language
(Nord 1991: 72). Many other translation theorists make a similar
distinction, Newmark (1988: 44-45), for example, describing his
two categories as SEMANTIC — for 'original expression', includ-
ing, for example, serious literature, autobiography, philosophical,
religious and political writings, 'personal effusion', and 'any im-
portant statement' where 'the specific language of the speaker or
writer is as important as the content', and COMMUNICATIVE —
for 'the vast majority of texts', including 'most non-literary writ-
ing, journalism, informative articles … textbooks … scientific and
technological writing … publicity … popular fiction'.

The following texts were used in the translation tutorial in the
order given below. They were all provided or facilitated by the
lecturers teaching the course; key excerpts of approximately 150-
200 words were selected for translation.

1 Hermann Weber, 'Niedergang und Ende der *DDR* 1981-
   1990', in *Die DDR 1945-1990* (Oldenbourg Grundriss der
   Geschichte 20, Oldenbourg).

2 'Vorwort: "Schabowskis Zettel" ', in *Chronik des Mauerfalls*
   (Hans-Hermann Hertle, 1996).

3 Günter Schabowski, *Abschied von der Utopie* (Franz Steiner
   Verlag, 1994).

4 Gerlinde and Hans-Werner Sinn, *Kaltstart. Volkswirtschaft-
   liche Aspekte der deutschen Vereinigung* (dtv, 1983).

5 Ingo Schulze, *Simple Storys* (dtv, 1999).

6 Franz Loll, 'Der Untergang der DDR aus der Sicht ihrer
   EDV-Berichterstattung', in *Die Zeit* (Nr. 39, 22.09.95).

7 Wolfgang Thierse, 'Fünf Thesen zur Vorbereitung eines
   Aktionsprogramms für Ostdeutschland', in *Die Zeit* (2001/
   02).

8 Wolf Wagner, 'Jugendarbeitslosigkeit und Rechtsradikalis-
   mus in Ostdeutschland', in *Die Neue Gesellschaft – Frank-
   furter Hefte* (August 1998).

It can be seen from this list that for a topic such as socioeco-
nomic problems in post-unification Germany, a wealth of material

is available as far as text types are concerned, ranging from historical or economics textbooks (Texts 1 and 4), popular history (Text 2), literature (Text 5), journalism (Text 6), political persuasion (Texts 3 and 7) to an academic paper on a sociological theme (Text 8).

As appropriate for an Applied Languages course, most of these texts fit into the instrumental/communicative category, where an appropriate translation strategy is to adapt the text to the recipient (as there is usually no actual recipient of a text translated in a translation class, a hypothetical one or ones may be defined). An example is provided by the problems encountered during the tutorial on how to translate terms such as *Politbüro* and *Volkskammer*. Possible solutions, presumably taking into account different target readerships, are provided by parallel texts such as the *Area Handbook of the US Library of Congress* — 'Politburo' and 'Volkskammer' — and *Encarta* (2003) — 'the party's political bureau' and 'East Germany's unicameral parliament, the People's Chamber (German *Volkskammer*)'.

Two of the texts, however, fit better into the documentary/ semantic category, the literary text (*Simple Storys*), a disturbing, documentary-style portrayal of life in a small East German town shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall, and the article by Schabowski, *Abschied von der Utopie* ('Farewell to Utopia'), an indictment of Marxism well characterized by Newmark's semantic category: a mixture of (important) political statement, autobiography and 'personal effusion'. In both these texts the highly characteristic personal style of the author is of paramount importance in their translation.

There appear to be good reasons for biasing the content of a translation tutorial towards the content of the other parts of the course, not only in order to add immediate relevance, but also because looking at even a very short excerpt of a text in depth, as is necessary in the translation process, ensures that the student has understood the precise, as opposed to the general, meaning, and encourages, for example, an awareness of and necessity to verbalize about subtle nuances of style that might otherwise be overlooked. I would furthermore argue that if students are to gain insight into the translation process as a whole, then content-based translation forming part of a non-specialized language course can

and should include a wide range of text types, including some from both the major categories described by translation theorists.

Evaluation

The course was evaluated by the University of Limerick's Centre for Teaching and Learning. As the course was experimental, our main aim at this stage was to identify potential problems and issues, and for this reason open-ended questions were added at the end of the standard questionnaire. Twelve students out of a total group of 15 took part in the evaluation, clearly not enough to generalize from, but nevertheless enough to formulate some initial opinions. When asked to comment on the overall quality of the module with regard to integration of tutorials, 10 out of 12 indicated that they thought the tutorials were well integrated. Some typical responses were:

1   Integrated well – the subject in this course – DDR – ran through all tutorials
2   The tutorials link up pretty well with each other, the general topic of the material studied is constant – it's a good idea – helps us to fully analyse and understand the topic
3   We use texts from textwork tutorials to translate in translation, which also helps us to understand the texts better.

There was a more negative comment in a section on suggestions for improving the module:

Translation: Some of the texts are extremely technical and not exactly relevant to us – as we are not students of economics/ politics etc. I think we could have worked on some more literal [sic] texts also.

This comment typically reflects the conflicting interests of a heterogeneous group. In fact, many of the Applied Languages students take politics as an elective throughout the course, and others take marketing, which includes modules in economics. Students in this group often express an interest in studying more literature but some also complain that literature is over-represented.

Conclusions

In summary, it is clear that the focus of a language course should be relevant and meaningful to the students taking the course. Using the course content as a basis for the selection of translation texts does not necessarily compromise the objectives of a translation course to draw on a variety of text types. I would also argue that not only a translation course, but any general language course should include in its linguistic content a comprehensive range of text types, not neglecting or over-representing either literary or functional texts.

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