

The Written Press:
A Good Case for Translation
in Language Teaching

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The aims of a language-teaching course are often defined with reference to four "language skills": listening, speaking, reading and writing. What are the students expected to understand when we refer to these four skills? A selection of lexical items combined with syntactic structure? An ability to produce correct sentences? According to Widdowson, "usage" is language viewed as isolated items of grammatical structure and "use" is the language used to express ideas in meaningful communicative behaviour and to achieve some kind of communicative purpose. That is, language is a vehicle for communication. Speaking and writing have been said to be active or productive skills, and, listening and reading, passive or receptive skills.

The role of Translation: So now, the questions are: where do we place Translation? Is it only an activity within the reading and writing processes? The answer for me is that translation is a fifth skill because it is impossible to produce an acceptable translation without a good deal of reading, writing, speaking and listening taking place. A properly designed translation task, provides as natural a focus for practice in these skills as any classroom activity - a focus which will, furthermore, draw all of the skills together, especially if students work in groups so that they can engage in discussion, problem pooling, etc. The teacher could act out the roles of client and subject experts, who must be contacted for some of the information the translator requires. So, we see that translation is both independent of the other four skills and, at the same time, dependent on them, and, in translating, learners are forced to practise them.

It is now the right moment to provide a clear and suitable idea of the role of translation, and, I'll do so by first quoting Jorge Luis Borges in George Steiner's book "After Babel", where he says in Spanish: "Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción". ("Las versiones Homéricas" Discusión. 1957). The translation follows: "No problem is as completely concordant with literature and with the modest mystery of literature as is the problem posed by a translation". Our definition would be to say that it is any transfer, for any reason, of any text from one language code to another language code. And, in another definition, translation is the production of a text which must fulfil a specific purpose, for a specific readership, in a specific setting. Even a simplified description of the translation process such as this should make clear that a knowledge of the standard language may not be enough in many circumstances. We may be impelled to study more specialized registers and varieties related to specific areas of English. These varieties called ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in the professional teaching jargon, focus on specific and closed fields of the language. Such specialization enables us to learn and understand technical, medical or mathematical English. And, I am not referring to incompatible types of English, because all of them share the same phonetics and grammar. We simply consider those specialized terms and those syntactical peculiarities that characterize certain domains of the English language.

The translation of these specific "Englishes" involves the bulk of texts transferred into Spanish every day. I say this because as we all very well know English is nowadays accepted as the language most widely spoken and studied by non-natives in the world. It has become not only a worldwide language of communication and social interaction, but also the lingua franca of business, politics, arts and sciences. Most written texts, with the exception of the literary ones, concern technical treatises, scientific information, operating instructions, advertising, etc. That is to say, they refer to very specific areas of the language. Many times, translating certain specialized English business registers, for example, should not be especially difficult if we deal with terms fixed and used in a lasting business tradition. Expressions like "bull market" or "bear market" (mercado alcista ó bajista), are so common that nobody would think they refer to a particular kind of cattle or wildlife market. Everybody knows they describe upward and downward tendencies in the Stock Market. These terms would not, then, present any difficulty provided the translator uses the right dictionaries, and in fact, they appear in most dictionaries of Business and Commerce. But, this is not only the case, because translators are very often faced with brand-new terms and expressions arising from fields of knowledge they are unfamiliar with. This implies that a considerable effort is needed to understand highly technical concepts not only in the SL (Source language) but also in the TL (Target language).

Translation of Texts and their Contexts: Moving on to the translation of texts and their contexts I have to say that, above all, translation activities should deal with texts as a whole, from the global or holistic point of view and not only with fragmentary words or phrases since the translator goes beyond these words and sentences unless they have acquired a status of being texts (Headlines. Titles. Dialogues...) In other words, he will start with a general survey of the text (scanning, skimming, finding the gist, reading between the lines, etc.) trying to see the trees through the forest,- the details through the meaning, and then proceed to translate specific material. Isolated sentences will always remain pragmatically vague since they lack the interactive dimension necessary in communication. Rather, communication can be seen as the sum total of sentences known as discourse. The assumption is that discourse reveals certain structural and linguistically recognizable patterns which cannot be accounted for within the boundary of the sentence. Approaching translation by simple matching surface elements without due regard to the realities of discourse, in other words, without looking at these elements in context, would most likely yield inadequate results. It follows from all this that translation should be a discourse-oriented process and approached from a text-oriented perspective.

Text types: Taking all this into account, it can be emphasized that while attention should be placed on contextual factors embodied within the texts, special emphasis should also be placed on the type of texts. The fact that translation deals with different types of text, led Albrecht Neubert to classify them into: 1) Easy texts. 2) Intricate texts and 3) Literary or dramatic texts. The criteria taken for such classification is their degree of translatability. That is, texts can be easily translat-

able (technical and descriptive ones), intricately translatable texts which display textual, as well as non textual complexity, and which the learner-translator may not find easy to convey into the target language (Scientific ones) and, the literary texts involving fiction and non-fiction material. Out of these 3, I am now going to concentrate on the first and second ones: the easy or casual texts and the intricate ones because boundary lines between the two groups are sometimes difficult to draw.

And, one of the best choices is authentic material from newspapers and magazines, particularly useful for students dealing with ESP, both intermediate and beyond, as well as for would-be translators who will have to cope with exercises in legal, business or technical English in a Translation course of studies.

These texts usually contain journalese, the language typical of newspapers and magazines (*jerga periodística*), which presents colloquial expressions and cultural references alternating with passages of straightforward description or narration. On the whole, these texts provide excellent practice for scanning and focused reading as well as innumerable translation opportunities. "The Random House Dictionary" defines *jornalese* as: "a manner of writing or speaking characterized by clichés, occasional neologism, archness, sensationalizing adjectives, unusual or faulty syntax, etc. used by some journalists, especially certain columnists, and regarded as typical journalistic style".

Of course, the word may be used derogatorily if we say:

"Get that *jornalese* out of your copy! That word's not English- it's *jornalese*!"

(No use / evite la *jerga periodística* en su versión.

Esa palabra no corresponde al inglés / no es inglesa - es (parte de la) *jerga periodística*.)

An article from *Time* magazine entitled "Jornalese for the Lay Reader" presents the following example:

"Every cub reporter, for instance, knows that fires rage out of control, minor mischief is perpetrated by Vandals (never Visigoths, Franks or a single Vandal working alone) and important matters are always "crucial issues", dealt with in "dramatic confrontations" over "stunning breakthroughs".¹

Todo reportero/periodista novato sabe, por ejemplo, que los incendios hacen estragos, todo delito/daño/contravención menor es obra de vándalos (nunca Visigodos, Francos ó un solo vándalo sin otra compañía/trabajando en forma individual) y cuestiones/asuntos importantes son siempre temas cruciales que se tocan en confrontaciones dramáticas sobre descubrimientos/inventos maravillosos/sensacionales.

Often English words mean exactly the opposite in *jornalese*. Such is the case of the adjectives "high-minded", which means inept or, "multitalented" which means untalented, and, "arguably" which is the most useful adverb of all because it introduces an idea of generality and lack of conciseness that no one will be able to understand.

1- *Time*, March 18th., 1985 ("Jornalese for the Lay Reader").

The same journalist ends the same article on an ironical note when he says: "After all, journalism is a crucially important field that attracts high-minded, multitalented professionals, arguably the finest in the land".

Después de todo, el periodismo, es un campo/sector/actividad de importancia crucial/crucialmente importante, que atrae a profesionales nobles/dignos/de principios altruistas, y muy talentosos, discutiblemente, los mejores del mundo.

So, when the time comes for intermediate and advanced learners to catch up on world news and practise their English while at the same time try their best at translating some of the headlines, paragraphs, whole articles or even columns of magazines and newspapers, it often happens that their original enthusiasm is dampened by a sudden awareness that they can hardly make head or tail of a large part of the magazine, despite being fairly competent with other "real" texts they come up against. I am now referring to two of the most easily available sources of written English: the American news magazines "Time" and "Newsweek" in particular.

There is no denying that if we explore the language of these two weekly publications, also known as "Timespeak" or "Timese" for Time and "Newspeak" for Newsweek, we will come across coined words and expressions and even new constructions that they have been generally credited with. Such is the case of inversion of the initial reporting clause as in:

"Says Harold Vogel, "The fact of the matter is, the movie business is not that profitable".²

Dice Harold Vogel: "La realidad/ la pura verdad es que el negocio cinematográfico no es tan lucrativo".

Indeed, teachers and translators alike, not to mention students and the general public, find their style excessively up-to-date and even a little bizarre, but we should bear in mind that many of the features used by American news magazines are also to be found -perhaps in a toned-down form in other "modern" texts from all parts of the English-speaking world. (The Economist, US News & World Report, Business Week...). And, because we know that articles from Time and Newsweek rank high in students' list of especially difficult written texts, we should try to anticipate such problems and actively help them cope with the style of language since almost any issue will surely reveal a good few words that are not to be found in ordinary dictionaries.

Going back to the word "Newspeak", we may say that it is a rather sarcastic pun on the insidious language of propaganda that George Orwell invented in 1949 for his novel "1984". Tom Mc Arthur provides the following definition in his book "The Oxford Companion to the English Language". "Newspeak is a simplified artificial language based on English devised by Orwell to meet the ideological needs of English socialism" and by means of which almost any Newspeak word served as any part of speech. Hence, the verb "think" did duty for the noun "thought": affixes were common: ungood, goodwise, etc.:

- compounds were frequent: double think, oldthink, Oldspeak. Indeed, Newspeak has become a term in the language at large for misleading (especially

2- Newsweek, August 12th., 1996 ("Early Warning").

political) jargon, and is the source for a large number of words modelled on it, such as "nukespeak" (the language of nuclear weapons "teenspeak" (the language of teens), etc.

On the whole, the magazines have been able to maintain their distinctive style, a style which is usually referred to as "dynamic" or "racy". That is to say, a language that presents a great deal of variety in vocabulary choice especially, and, which is also considered lively, whimsical and unusual.

I will now consider different areas that should be looked at more closely:

A) **Problematic Vocabulary:** A simple way of showing students the vocabulary spread is to ask them to sort out a number of words taken from an article, according to register, and then attempt at translating them. In a recent article about Spielberg's film "Jurassic Park", words and expressions such as: "applied science" (ciencia aplicada), "imperiled" (puesto en peligro/expuesto, "capitalist exploitation" (explotación capitalista) and "visionary" (visionario), could easily be classed by students as belonging to a high register, whereas items such as: "gawkers" (papamoscas/papanatas), "foxy grandpa" (abuelo taimado, astuto), and "megahit" (éxito millonario), clearly belong to a much lower, informal register, often bordering on the colloquial.³

A mix of registers can also be seen in headlines as in: "Hell-driving Citizenry" (una ciudadanía que maneja como el demonio/ de manera infernal).

Then, neologisms or newly coined words such as the expressions "sci-fi" movies (películas de ciencia ficción), or the familiar term "hi-tech" (de alta tecnología) which may well be the basis for invented expressions like "lo-tech" (de baja tecnología) ó "no-tech" (sin tecnología).

Puns based on popular film titles, are particularly common, a recent issue included the headlines:

"Live Poets Society" (for Dead Poets Society) (La Sociedad de los Poetas Muertos) - "Birthing a Nation" (for The Birth of a Nation) (El Nacimiento de una Nación).

Wordplay is also evident in this headline: "100 Days of Attitude" (for "100 years of Solitude") ("100 Años de Soledad"), making reference to the never-ending discussions-almost 100 days-of Congressmen last year in Washington, and, under the leadership of the Republican Gingrich for the restoration of a balanced budget in the United States.⁴

Shortened or abbreviated forms of words may also cause problems to the initiated translator, as in:

"Cable channel "E" has hit the Web to offer reviews, daily news updates and star bios. Our fave: the "Melrose Place" chart..."⁵

(El canal de cable "E" ha llegado al Web para ofrecer artículos, noticias de última hora y biografías de estrellas/celebridades. Nuestra favorita: la sección "Melrose Place"...).

3- *Time*, June 14th., 1993. ("Jaws").

4- *Time*, April 10th., 1995 ("100 Days of Attitude").

5- *Newsweek*, August 19th., 1996 ("Cyberscope-Online").

But register and coinages are not the only keys to appreciating the vocabulary spread of American news magazines. In fact, other lexical areas are to be found such as the current clichés, catchphrases and buzz words which show up, often in adapted form, as when the name of the popular film "Fatal Attraction" was exploited in a feature on European road safety, entitled "A New Summer of Fatal Traction" (Un nuevo verano de choques fatales/de tracción fatal).⁶

The learner-translator should also be aware of another rule of the language, and, that is that Timespeak and Newspeak are also rich in euphemisms, especially those for the adjective "fat" which are understood too quickly by the public, and are, therefore, in constant need of replacement.

Indeed, a Washington writer scored by praising a woman's "Wagnerian good looks" (de atractivo aspecto/agradable apariencia wagneriana), which is far more polite than saying she is not bad looking for a massive Brünnhilde, (no está mal para una Brunilda imponente) when referring to one of Wagner's leading opera singers. In fact, the compliment is particularly deft for the occasion.⁷

How can learners cope with problematic vocabulary? We know that pupils are likely to be put off reading and translating any more articles when they realize the wealth of vocabulary to be faced. But, we must not forget that few native readers will fully understand all the less common words they come across, and some may be completely new. A very useful pre-translation exercise is to identify some of the "whimsical" vocabulary items, and make an intelligent guess as to the meaning. They can also draw inferences, put forward hypotheses and use their ability to work out and decode the meanings of unknown lexicon from context. At this stage I would like to quote Eugene Nida in a section called: "Basic Requirements of the translator", where he says: "He must understand not only the obvious content of the message, but also the subtleties of meaning, the significant emotive values of words and the stylistic features which determine the "flavor and feel" of the message..."

The best strategy is to brainstorm aloud possible synonyms and common collocations or simply collect ideas as close as possible to the original word or phrase. Brainstorming is best done in a group, and it therefore both benefits from, and contributes to a cooperative approach to learning.

Once this part of the learning process has been duly mastered, the learner-translator is ready to plunge directly into his work of translating the SL text, use the dictionary and face the challenge before his eyes.

B) Sentence Construction: The next area that I am going to deal with is sentence construction. One of the first features to be noticed is the way that the subject is very often delayed. In many articles, fewer than half of the sentences start with the subject, and, this is because Time and Newsweek do seem to inflate this feature, often delaying the subject by a number of lines. Here is a typical example of what is also known as a Periodic Sentence, the not-so-common device but well-constructed sentence used in standard writing for the purpose of achieving emphasis:

6- Time, August 15th, 1988.

7- Time, March 18th., 1985 ("Journalise for the Lay Reader").

"Instead of blocking a vote that called one more time on Pyongyang to allow inspection of its nuclear sites, Beijing merely abstained".⁸

(En vez de bloquear el voto requiriendo una vez más que Pyongyang permitiese la inspección de sus instalaciones nucleares/ el permiso de Pyongyang de inspeccionar sus instalaciones nucleares, Beijing simplemente se abstuvo).

Connected with this feature I can also mention word combinations often leading to strings of adjectives and attributive nouns; a style that began in *Time Magazine* as early as the 1920's with the aim of providing impact and colour and of giving as much information in as short a space as possible. In fact, this is a feature that *Timespeak* has taken to extremes either to pre-modify nouns or post-modify them, as in:

"The daughter of a well-off Salisbury, N.C., wholesale florist, Elizabeth nicknamed Liddy..." (Mrs. Dole) (La hija de un acaudalado vendedor mayorista de flores de Salisbury, Carolina del Norte, Elizabeth/Isabel apodada Liddy...)⁹

Another pre-modification, as in:

"Indeed, any passerby could have read a Moscow police officer's eyewitness account of the aircraft's touchdown". (En efecto, cualquier transeúnte podría haber leído el informe ocular del (oficial de) policía moscovita sobre el aterrizaje del avión).¹⁰

Or, post-modification, as in:

"Zsa Zsa Gabor, seventyish, eight-times married, Hungarian-born celebrity..." (Zsa Zsa Gabor, setentona y ocho veces casada celebridad húngara...)

One or two last features must be mentioned. One of them has to do with the senior editors of these two American magazines who re-write reporters' stories in a co-ordinated house style just before publication. This fact partly explains how the magazines maintain their distinctive style which I mentioned before: that of being dynamic and racy. These writers seem to have an enthusiasm for sharp images and a love of sound in language known in literature as alliteration or assonance, but here it is more simply a question of using sound for a playful effect:

"Once the precinct of elegant stone edifices, Paris's finest shops and stateliest homes, the Champs has become a chrome-and-glass jumble, a jangle of outlets for "le fast food", neon signs and porn emporiums" Good for pronunciation practice, too! (Los Campos (Elíseos) alguna vez el barrio/ distrito de elegantes edificios en piedra y de los más finos negocios y magníficas casas, se han convertido en un conjunto desordenado de cromo y vidrio/cromático desordenado, y comercios ruidosos de comidas rápidas, letreros luminosos y tiendas porno.)¹¹

A final feature that cannot be ignored is the use of figures of speech (metaphor, personification or simile), especially very striking figures.

8- *Time*, May 24th., 1993 ("The Week").

9- *Newsweek*, August 19th., 1996 ("The Woman behind the Unwavering Smile").

10- *Time*, June 22nd., 1987 ("Catching Glimpses of Glasnost").

11- *Time*, August 15th, 1988.

"Environmentalism increasingly resembles a holy crusade addicted to hype and ignorant of history". (El (problema del) medio ambiente se parece cada vez más a una cruzada santa adicta a la publicidad/exageración, e ignorante de la historia.)¹²

To conclude, it is my belief that translation contributes to the purpose of language learning in that it represents language in use; that is to say, language in a meaningful context and being used for a purpose. I am now going to quote Fernando Valls, who visited Argentina last year and who both teaches Contemporary Spanish Literature in Barcelona and is also a well-known literary critic. He said this in Spanish: "De ninguna manera se aprende mejor la lengua que traduciendo. Si se traduce con seriedad se recorren todos los niveles posibles de una obra. Nadie lee tan profundamente como un traductor. Ni siquiera un crítico." (Revista "Voces". Octubre 1995). In this case, the translation of news magazines should be seen as a practical tool for improving the other language skills of students. Whichever strategy is followed, the end result is that students will have broken through the psychological barrier that prevented them from trying to understand and translate the written press. In addition, they will be a little more acquainted with the culture of the speakers and writers of their target language. So, what could be a more authentic approach to this than through reading magazines?

12- *Newsweek*, June 1st., 1992 ("The End is not at Hand").

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