Exploring the Interface: Sight Translation in Translator/Interpreter Training

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Introductory remarks

More than ever before every-day life is being constantly modified by a multiplicity of factors which have a serious impact on work conditions and professional requirements. The world of translation and interpreting is not an exception to this rule; quite on the contrary, it is deeply affected by such changes, to the extent that the boundaries between written and oral translation, as well as between the classical modes within these modalities are becoming less distinct, if not blurred.

Jiménez (1999) and Hurtado Albir (2001) refer to this reality as the *solapamiento* of the categories, that is to say, the settings in which each category would traditionally occur are no longer as clear-cut as before.

A variety of scenarios

Bruce Downing, professor emeritus of linguistics and director of the Translation and Interpretation Program at the University of Minnesota, and Interpreters Division Distinguished Speaker at the ATA 2009 NYC Conference, presented a most interesting lecture, highlighting the need of regulatory measures regarding the limits of clients' demands on translators / interpreters who are asked do oral (and also written) sight translation (STr) in community interpreting, particularly in medical settings. He states that *"Interpreters are not translators, yet healthcare interpreters are often asked to read and orally transmit written texts or write out care instructions in the patient's language."* (ATA, NYC Conference 2009. Session Abstracts, p.29).

Professor Downing's talk testifies to a new configuration of the written/oral mode interface, with important repercussions on professional life. It also demonstrates that there is an increasing interest in STr, which until some time ago was hardly ever a topic in its own right in academic events.

Another point worth considering has to do with translation-interpretation courses. We might say that most of us believe that candidates to interpreter / translator training should, on principle, be adults with a compatible level of maturity, a high level of proficiency in the working languages, and sound general knowledge. Yet, we may be surprised to find out that to attend specific needs there are now courses especially devised for teenagers or very young adults.

Courtney Searls-Ridge, co-founder of the Translation and Interpretation Institute at Bellevue Community College, Washington, and a specialist in curriculum development is currently involved in a project for the Puget Sound Skills Center, near Seattle, Washington. There she helps to train students from a variety of ethnic origins *"to use their language*

skills as interpreters at social and informational school events." (ATA, NYC Conference 2009. Session Abstracts, p.41). On such occasions, depending on the circumstances, these novice apprentice-interpreters do consecutive interpreting and STr. She adds that:

"*In a self-reinforcing process, as their English and heritage-language skills improve, students see themselves as becoming increasingly competent and useful, and they work to improve their language skills even more. The program encourages students to direct their energies towards careers utilizing their ability, motivates them to continue language studies beyond high school, and prepares them for entry-level interpreter certification." (Id.Ib)*

Such initiatives are thought-provoking for they tell us of recent scenarios in which oral and written translation modes are mingled, requiring the necessary skill for professional translators/ interpreter to cope with the challenges imposed by these, until recently, quite unusual settings. Consequently, more than ever before, mastering different types of oral translation, including hybrid translational forms of expression, turns out to be a must in interpreter / translator training.

About sight translation (str)

Let us now direct our attention to some traditional scenarios in which the interface between written and oral translation occurs, and to what experts and researchers say about the taxonomy, nature and complexity of STr.

Jean Herbert, in his well known Interpreter's Handbook, published in 1952, defines STr, alongside with *Whispering* and *Telephonic Sinultaneous* as a variety of simultaneous interpretation:

"Translation at sight: when the interpreter is given a written text which he has never seen before, and directly or through a microphone , "reads" it aloud at normal reading speed in a language other than the one in which it is written." (HERBERT,1952, p.7)

Moser-Mercer (1991) states that *"Sight translation involves the transposition of a text written in one language into a text delivered orally in another language. Since both aural (sic) and visual information processing are involved, sight translation could be defined as a specific type of written translation, as well as a variant of oral interpretation"*

Mikkelson (1994) states that *"Sight translation is an oral translation of a written text.Thus, it is a hybrid of translation and interpretation."*

Angelelli (1999) goes on to say that *"Sight translation is an oral translation of a written text that should sound as if the interpreter were merely reading a document written in the target language."*

According to Rappold (2000) *"Sight translation is the rendering of a written text as an oral presentation, converting one language to another. The 'translation' task is done as the text is read, that is, it is not prepared ahead of time"*

Agrifoglio (2004), in turn, adds that *"Sight translation emerges as a complex and unique technique, whose cognitive demands on the interpreter are by no means less than those of simultaneous and consecutive [interpreting]."*

Put together and alongside one another, such definitions provide a good idea of what STr implies and demands from the translator/interpreter.

Concerning a possible taxonomy of STR, Jiménez (1999: 198), who considers STr an oral translation mode, refers to the following types of STr: (i)Translation at sight (*a ojo*); (ii) Prepared Sight Translation (*traduction à vue*); (iii) Consecutive Sight Translation, which can be (a) Synthetic or (b) Explanatory: (iv) Sight Translation in Consecutive Interpretation; and (v) Simultaneous Interpretation with Text.

The last type, known amongst practitioners and specialists as *documented simultaneous interpretation, recited interpretation* or *sight interpretation,* is perhaps one of the most challenging and highly-demanding forms of oral translation (See Gile, 1995, p. 184-195; Seleskovitch & Lederer, 2002, p. 204-214).

Quite interestingly, as already suggested, most writings on interpreting include references to STr. Such references were mostly peripheral, and until some time ago this oral translation mode was not investigated more deeply.

Hurtado Albir (2001: 83) comments that *"A pesar de su importancia, en la práctica profesional y en la enseñanza de la traducción, [la traducción a la vista] ha sido hace poco una modalidad escasamente analizada."*

Jiménez (1999: 104) adds that *"La única modalidad pura constante que participa en todos los tipos de traducción oral es la traducción a la vista (...). La presencia constante de esta variedad de traducción marca su relevancia como actividad traductora (...)."*

Despite this, a most comforting notion is that presentations on STr in academic and professional meetings are growing in number. A recent example is the ATA 50th Annual Conference, in New York City, 2009, which featured a reasonable number of presentations on STr.

In Daniel Gile's well-known Effort Models in Interpretation (1995), there is a section about STr, where he describes the main cognitive demands imposed by this hybrid translational mode:

"In sight translation, the Listening and Analysis Effort becomes a Reading Effort, and the Production Effort remains, but there does not seem to be a

Memory Effort similar to the one in the simultaneous mode or the consecutive mode, since the information is available at any time on paper." (GILE 1995:183)

Studies about the cognitive load in STr highlight its complexity. Syysnummi (2003) says that in STr

"The interpreter has to read the source text, comprehend what he is reading, translate and produce the speech in another language, monitor his own speech, and as if these tasks were not difficult enough by themselves, the interpreter has to do all of them simultaneously." (SYYSNUMMI, 2003:7)

At the same time, quite recent findings stemming from the *Eye-Tracking Studies of Reading and Translation Processing* carried out at the Centre for Research and Innovation in Translation and Translation Technology (CRITT) of the Copenhagen Business School are fascinating.

The work of Jakobsen & Jensen (2008) provides objective further data about the complexity of STr. In one of the experiments, the *sight translation task* (Task 3) proved to be more difficult to perform than the *reading for comprehension task* and the *reading for translation task* (Task 2):

"Task 3 required more time, more fixations and was more cognitively demanding than the earlier tasks for two reasons. A sight translation had to be produced of the source text displayed on the screen, and while translators were in the process of articulating the words, their eyes were working to coordinate comprehension and translation processes; this involved both reading source text and monitoring what portions of text had been dealt with, and what portions were still waiting to be translated." (JAKOBSEN & JENSEN, 2008:121)

Such conceptual views related to the nature of STr, its varieties, its complexity and cognitive demands lead us consider their impact on translator / interpreter training. It is our contention that course designers and trainers should aim at providing a comprehensive view of the elements that constitute professional competence, encompassing not only traditional but also novel translation / interpretation combinations, so that professionals-to-be are duly prepared to face the challenges they will be confronted with in the exercise of their professional life as translators and/or interpreters, in a variety of contexts.

Methodological principles

We shall now refer to the rationale and pedagogical principles adopted in the Translator and the Conference Interpreter courses offered at the Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil, of which we have first-hand experience.

Both courses include a specific STr discipline.

In the B.A. in Translation programme, STr from and into English is inserted in the last semester of the course. Our purpose is exposing the future professionals to STr so that (i) they can experience for the first time the written /oral translation interface; (ii) they reflect about its specific requirements vis-à-vis their current translational skills; (iii) they are prepared, as translators, to tackle an eventual STr task in their professional life, should the need arise; (iv) they are prepared to use STR instrumentally; (v) they are motivated to do conference interpreting.

In the Conference Interpreting course, which is a two-year non-degree programme, the STr discipline comes in the second semester together with Consecutive Interpreting. Our objectives are (i) providing opportunities for interpreter-to-be to acquire and refine STR competence; (ii) enabling them to use STR as an oral translation mode proper, in a variety of professional settings.

Our methodology for building up STR competence in both courses can be divided into three stages.

The first stage encompasses exposure, reflection, underlying principles, what we aim at in STR and the means to achieve it. We emphasize the need of linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge, the role of cognitive complements and world knowledge. The principles of *deverbalization* and *transcoding* (Seleskovitch & Lederer) are introduced and applied, and the students' attention is directed to the necessary adjustments in the transition from the written to the oral modality, which is one of the specific challenges of STr.

From the very beginning students are made familiar with evaluation criteria, which comprise a series of fundamental elements, namely: (i) comprehension of the source text: omissions or misunderstandings, coping with facts & figures, coping with cultural issues. attention to contextual clues; (ii) Interpreter's output: clarity of ideas, hesitation / assertiveness, quality of voice, rhythm and fluidity; (iii) message reformulation / quality of translation: grammatical & lexical resource, range of structures, freedom from error, collocation and register, accuracy and completeness of sentences, idiomaticity, flexibility and resourcefulness (problem-solving skills), and discourse management.

The second phase includes intensive practice, exposure to a wide variety of texts, different topics, discourse types and registers, gradation of level of complexity, previous research of topics (semantic fields), use of parallel texts, and bi-directionality. In this phase there is room for live and recorded presentations. Continued evaluation is an intrinsic part of the process and the dynamics comprise peer evaluation, self-evaluation, evaluation by the teacher, and, for the Conference Interpreter program, formal evaluation by external examiners.

The third phase has to do with refining the process and honing the newly-acquired skills. It includes integrating STr with other interpretation modes (in the case of the future conference interpreters), dealing with more complex texts, follow-up activities suggested by the instructor, intensive practice outside the classroom (individual + peer group exercises).

Concluding remarks

Having in mind the complexity of the STr and its constant presence in translation/interpreting, as well as the need to prepare students to face the demands of professional life, we believe that, as trainers, we should (i) offer plenty of opportunity for students to gain an increasing awareness of the specificities and complexities of STR; (ii) provide suitable opportunities for the exercise of STR, leading students to identify their strengths and weaknesses, so that with the teacher's help they can gradually build up and refine their competence in STR; (iii) should guarantee that STR practice be integrated with other translation modes since this is the reality students will have to face in their professional life as translators and/or interpreters; (iv) should help students understand that the acquisition and refinement of STR competence is a continuous and never-ending process.

We expect that the ideas presented here will not only broaden conceptual horizons concerning the existing and the new configurations of the oral translation / written translation interface, but also provide food for thought regarding its possible implications for translator / interpreter training pedagogy.

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