

## SUCCESS IN TRANSLATION:

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### Abstract

*This article discusses a study which is a constituent part of a major project on the translation process, undertaken by a group of researchers at the Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. The article describes how Danish culture and society influence the way translation is taught at the Business School. As translation teaching is orientated especially towards domain-specific fields, tasks in translation classes and research into translation concentrate on 'functional translation'. The study discusses the individual translator's competence, and presents the results of the investigation into the translation processes and the written products of a number of translators.*

### Introduction

Translation is a 'cross-cultural communication activity', but 'communication', and especially 'cross-cultural communication', is a complex term. Each person has her culture-specific idea about what 'cross-cultural communication' implies. Despite the fact that everybody seems to know what translation is, the concept of translation is complex and differs from culture to culture. The concept of translation, the evaluation of the success or failure of translations and the training of translators, are culture-specific, time-specific, and sociolinguistically determined.

In 1986, Hans Vermeer includes translation in a concept of culture:

'Culture' is the sum total of norms, conventions, attitudes that determine the behaviour of an individual or of a community. 'Culture' determines people's behaviour - hence also the way people translate.' (My translation)  
 ['kultur' umfasst die Gesamtheit der normen, konventionen und meinungen, an denen sich das verhalten eines individuums oder einer gesellschaft ausrichtet. 'kultur' steuert das verhalten der menschen - daher auch das translatorische handeln.' (Inhaltsverzeichnis III.)]

Vermeer distinguishes between the norms, conventions and attitudes of an entire cultural community, his 'parakultur', those of a group of people (association, profession) 'diakultur', and an individual's norms and ideas 'idiokultur' (1986: 179).

Translation studies have always been 'studies in the context of other studies': philological studies, linguistic studies, communication studies, intercultural

studies and, recently, also cross-cultural studies. If one agrees with Vermeer's definition, it is obvious that, like all other human behaviour, translation and translation studies must be subsumed under the huge umbrella of 'culture' and 'cultural studies'.

However, from another perspective, 'culture', 'communication' and 'linguistics' can be regarded as a part of translation or translation studies. Not only do they determine translation, but they are also components of translation. Snell-Hornby points out that translation needs to be accepted as a science in its own right and not just as a subcategory of other disciplines. She regards translation studies as an integrated and independent discipline covering all types of translation, from literary to technical:

In this view, translation draws on many disciplines, but is not equal to the sum total of their overlapping areas and is not dependent on any one of them. As a discipline in its own right, translation studies needs to develop its own methods based, not on outside models and conventions from other disciplines, but on the complexities of translation. (1988: 35)

As the concept of translation and evaluation of translations is culture-specific, and in Vermeer's terminology, also 'diaculture-specific' (specific in just a special part of a society), a few words on my cultural background and area in translation studies are in place.

Researching 'success in translation' as part of a major project undertaken with a group of colleagues, I teach translation at the Copenhagen Business School. Translation teaching - and translation work in general - is orientated towards business texts: in the course of their three-year B.A. studies, students get a degree in business language in two foreign languages (apart from Danish). They can proceed to the M.A. level where they specialise in economic, legal, or technical language. Our graduates are employed in Danish business and industry, in foreign companies operating in Denmark, at the European Union institutions and so on. Our training program must constantly adapt to meet the changing demands of the public and private sectors. Consequently, our texts for translation are mainly of the type which we call 'user-oriented': Examples of such texts are manuals, advertisements, business letters, contracts, agreements, judgments, all kinds of documents, annual reports, patents, etc., but not fiction and the like.

### Functional translation

Our teaching aims naturally concentrate on 'functional translation' (Reiss and Vermeer: 1984). It is also associated with scholars such as Höning, Kussmaul and Nord, all of whom are German. The functional approach is receiver-oriented. The target text is adapted to meet the function, the new communication situation and the needs of the target text receiver. The most important parameter for the translation strategy is: the 'skopos', the purpose of the translation.

It has often been stated that this kind of translation is not a 'faithful translation' but a 'free translation' or an 'adaptation'. Functional translation, however, does not necessarily mean 'free translation' - it means translation in accordance with the target text receiver's presuppositions and needs in a given situation. For instance, the producer of a product wants that a translated text will market goods efficiently. Therefore it might be necessary to adapt the target text for this purpose and possibly change it totally to get the message across. On the other hand, in the translation of a document for a special purpose, the function might be to show precisely what the document looks like in the source language, that is, a translation which is close to the source text. Both are functional translations.

From a business point of view, a successfully translated text means a target text which results in business being successfully conducted and in goods being delivered without obstacles; it means that contracts are drawn up, agreements are made, and that the consumer can use products described in manuals without problems. All these requirements must be met.

Some scholars do not agree with this functional approach; they would never call a target text which has been deliberately changed in relation to the source text a 'translation', but rather an 'adaptation'. It is impossible to draw a border line between translation and adaptation. Undoubtedly this, too, is a question of the culture-specific concept of translation in a 'parakultur' or in a 'diakultur'.

However this may be, the functional approach to translation requires highly developed skills on the translators' part. If they are to communicate, they must be able to identify with the target text recipients. They must know the target text culture and the target text receiver(s) well. Occasionally they may be assisted by the 'clients' but, on their own, they must often decide what information from the source text should be transferred to the target text, and where to give explanations. It is also the translator who proposes or decides the 'necessary degree of precision' (Kussmaul 1995:129). The translation of business texts or technical

texts requires much expert knowledge and responsibility.

Given our multi-faceted goals, our graduates have to be experts in cross-cultural communication and in advanced and specialised translation. In addition, our training programme must be able to meet the demands of the future, i.e. those of the next 20-30 years.

Accordingly, students must be given methodological tools and knowledge in domain-specific areas, in communication and linguistics, and in social and cultural studies. In other words, we have to give them translational tools which can be used for many purposes, and research at the Copenhagen Business School is not only conducted in the field of domain-specific communication, intercultural communication, terminology, lexicography, linguistics, computational linguistics, pragmatics and business communication, but also in the field of translation itself.

#### The project about the translation process

In our research project we wish to study texts produced under different conditions in real communication situations, involving different people, several languages, and both directions of translation. We are interested in recurring processes in translation, both with respect to the comprehension of meaning and the production of meaning.

We shall attempt to benefit from the advantages of the interdisciplinary approach which was proposed by Snell-Hornby in 1988: we tackle the problems of the translator not only from a linguistic point of view, but we also draw on the findings of cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, as well as culture and communication studies. In addition, we are interested in second language acquisition research.

In our project we focus on individual translators' profiles. Amongst other things, we study the relationship between translational competence and the evaluation of translations (Danish-German); the extent to which the quality of a translation is influenced by the use of dictionaries (Danish-English); and the process of decision-making by professional translators when translating into the foreign language (Danish-Spanish).

#### Types of competence

I have concentrated on the *individual translator's competence*. The relation between external demands of target text recipients and individual translational com-

petence is clearly very important. I have listed the general requirements needed by successful translators: they must possess an array of general abilities and special skills in the mother tongue and the foreign language: Namely talent, courage, self-awareness and independence, alertness, empathy, tolerance, open-mindedness, precision, creativity, the ability to select, judgement, responsibility and a critical attitude. Together with the general and professional background knowledge these abilities constitute translational competence.

*Competence is the combination of abilities, skills and knowledge which are manifested in specific actions in situations.* This concept of competence is broader than Chomsky's famous 'competence'; since it comprises both competence and performance.

The translator cannot make do with one type of competence only. She needs to be in possession of a complex of competences. In my view the most important types of competence are the following ones:

- *Translational competence*
- *Social, cultural and intercultural competence*
- *Communicative competence*, which can be subdivided into:
  - *pragmatic competence*
  - *linguistic competence*.

In the definition of competence, it is fruitful to distinguish between:

- *implicit abilities/ knowledge*
- *explicit knowledge*.

These types of competence are described below.

*Translational competence* consists of:

1. *implicit translational competence*, which is the ability to extract the relevant information from the source text bearing in mind the commissioner's intention, and to produce the target text in such a way that the intended function is fulfilled. In order to create a functional translation, translators must thus be able to strike a balance between the interests of the commissioner, the source text sender, and the expectations, interests, and needs of the target text receiver. They must take into account the values, norms, and cultural conventions - both of the source text and of the target text society. Only then can they produce target texts which are successful communicative acts.

2. *explicit translational competence*, comprising explicit knowledge of

- a) translation methods (for instance, literal translation and idiomatic translation, and the ability to choose the appropriate type),
- b) translation strategies (for example the strategies of inferencing and reduction), and
- c) strategies for recognising and solving translation problems, such as assessment strategies for the evaluation of target texts (that is, strategies for assessing the relationship between the form and function of the target text and the cultural and linguistic background of the target text recipients and their expectations).

*Social, cultural and intercultural competence* comprises two factors, namely:

- an implicit socially and culturally conditioned understanding of one's own social and cultural background as well as the background of other societies; and
- an explicit knowledge of social and cultural norms and differences, e.g. living conditions, values, norms, customs, attitudes, feelings, prejudices, intentions, motives in different societies.

*Communicative competence*, that is the ability to communicate, presupposes both pragmatic and linguistic competence:

*Pragmatic competence* is

- an implicit ability to use language appropriately in specific situations. This means understanding a text and appreciating the author's intentions. It entails the ability to produce coherent texts in accordance with the purpose of the message, the needs of the receiver, and the text type conventions, and
- an explicit knowledge of communicative structures and patterns, e.g. speech acts, speech norms and text types, and a knowledge of reception and production strategies and the way they are used.

*Linguistic competence* comprises:

- an implicit linguistic knowledge in mastering the language systems, the stylistic means, and the devices of the mother tongue and the foreign languages; and
- an explicit knowledge of the grammatical and stylistic rules of the mother tongue and the foreign languages.

These types of competence interact and it is important to strike a balance between them.

### Individual competence patterns

#### Thesis

I submit that every translator has her individual combination of abilities, skills and knowledge. I shall refer to this as the 'individual competence pattern'. I also submit that this individual competence pattern can be recognised and identified in both (a) *her translation products* and, (b) *her behaviour in the course of the translation process*.

#### Procedure

In a first step, I have studied the individual competence patterns of 40 students in their final year at the Copenhagen Business School. They were Danes who have been learning German for at least 11 years and who had studied and practiced translation for 5 years. I collected and analysed all their written products, namely (a) their translations in both directions between German and Danish, and (b) their 'essays on their own' (free composition = Danish: 'fri skriftlig fremstilling') in both languages. These texts were then categorised according to the types of competence listed. All were based on real-life tasks and included a commission. The products were evaluated in relation to the commission and the intended function of the target text.

#### Preliminary results from analysing the translation products

One would perhaps assume that the relationship between the three main types of competence is simple, so that, provided translators are able to manoeuvre socially and culturally in both speech communities (that is, *their social, cultural and intercultural competence* is good) and provided they master both languages pragmatically and systematically (that is, *their communicative competence*, and *their pragmatic and linguistic competence* is good) - then their translational competence is also good and their translations are successful. However, this is by no means always the case. In functional translation, the translational competence is not simply the sum total of the two other competences. It comprises aspects which go above and beyond the other types of competence. These additional elements are translation methods and strategies, which must be acquired explicitly

before they can be applied automatically. An example is the knowledge of methods and strategies for producing functional translations of cultural concepts familiar only in the source text culture. A translator is not automatically capable of translating such concepts though she possesses the other competences. One question I have in mind here is whether target text recipients need explanatory footnotes or explanations added to the text and, if so, in what ways these should be incorporated into the text. These methods and strategies can be learned.

My preliminary findings have indicated that there may be another aspect of translational competence that should also be considered. Some of my informants who are communicatively competent in both languages find it difficult to transfer information from one language to another. They possess social, cultural and intercultural competence, and they are aware of socially and culturally conditioned norms and customs. They move effortlessly in both communities and know the differences between them. But when, in the translation process, they have to deal with *two languages at the same time*, their ability to distinguish between them and to distance themselves from the source text is poor. Additionally it seems that they find it difficult to imagine the presuppositions and expectations of the target text receiver who is not likely to know the source language. This means that, when translating, they are also pragmatically insecure. Their essays in either language bear no or just a little evidence of this insecurity. Thus it can *not* be assumed that a translator possessing competences in the languages individually will automatically be able to use these competences when she is dealing with both languages at the same time. In other words, translational competence is not necessarily available to persons fully conversant with both source and target languages and cultures.

Conversely, it appears that if translators do not possess some particular competence in one of the two languages, this competence will not be available either when they are dealing with both languages at the same time, that is in the translation process.

This is most clear with *communicative competence*, specifically the subcategory of *pragmatic competence*. Lack of pragmatic competence is often manifested by:

- Lack of precision in terms of content and style
- Lack of coherence
- The omission of information which is important for target text receivers

- A failure to adapt the text to the text type conventions of the target language.
- In my study there are informants who have no fully developed pragmatic competence even though they may have a high-level linguistic competence. As a result, they cannot produce a coherent, functionally adequate text in accordance with the text type conventions of the target language. Furthermore, they appear to lack this ability both in the foreign language and in the mother tongue, even when they are writing texts without a source text, 'free composition'.

If *linguistic competence* is deficient, the consequences depend on the extent to which it is lacking. Minor transgressions against the linguistic system of the target language may be relatively unimportant in certain text types and are often not noticed by target text receivers; they hardly have any bearing on translational competence. Grave grammatical errors, on the other hand, have an immediate effect on the other types of competence. Translators lacking linguistic competence devote all their energy to finding words, expressions and remembering grammatical rules. This requires so much mental effort that little energy is left for adapting the target text to the receiver and the function (that is pragmatic competence) in terms of content and idiomatic expressions. The translator's attention is drawn away from social and cultural conditions or differences, so that the social, cultural and intercultural competence hardly come into play. Such a translator is unable to distance herself from the source text; instead she clings to its words, terms and syntactic structures. In other words, the translational competence is affected negatively by this chain reaction.

### Conclusion

One of the main goals of our research is to obtain information about how to improve translation teaching so that it becomes more effective. It is essential that we help our students reach the highest level of translational competence within the field of domain-specific text. My research on their written products has shown that students at the same educational level have very different *individual competence patterns*. The next step in my research program is studying the behaviour of the same students *during the translation process*. I hope to be able to find reasons why, for instance, students fail to adopt appropriate translation strategies, why cultural differences are neglected, why the clues to textual coherence are not noticed, why translation problems are ignored, or solved unsuccessfully, why a poor translation is not identified and corrected, and why

a successful translation is rejected. In my research on the translation process, I store process data by means of a computer program *Translog*,<sup>1</sup> which records precisely all steps during the translation process.

#### Note

1. *Translog* has been developed by Arnt Lykke Jakobsen of the Copenhagen Business School and Lasse Schou. It is designed to generate real-time process information about the production of a text, including a translation, on a personal computer. It is possible to either repeat the writing process on the screen dynamically or to display a linear representation of all cursor movements in the writing process.

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