

Translation 'errors'

Gyde Hansen
Copenhagen Business School

What is an error and what is a translation 'error'? The term "error" usually means that something is wrong. In written texts – both in original texts and translated texts – errors can be classified as, for example, pragmatic, semantic, idiomatic, orthographic, linguistic or stylistic errors. But what is a 'translation error' – with focus on 'translation'? If we define a translation as the production of a Target Text (TT) which is based on a Source Text (ST), a translation error arises from the existence of a relationship between two texts.

Translations are carried out for many different reasons. The inter-lingual "real-life" translations we think of here are created in communicative situations which are defined by pragmatic conditions like sender, receiver, time, place and purpose of the translation, and also by cultural backgrounds and norms that may differ for ST and TT. Thus translation 'errors' occur because something has gone wrong during the transfer and movement from the ST to the TT.

Translation 'errors' can be caused by misunderstandings of the translation brief or of the content of the ST, by not rendering the meaning of the ST accurately, by factual mistakes, terminological or stylistic flaws, and by different kinds of interferences between ST and TT. Interferences are projections of unwanted features from one language to the other and from ST to TT. They occur because of an assumption of symmetry between the languages and/or cultures which may appear in some cases, but not in the actual case. Several levels of description are affected, i.e., interferences can be characterized as cultural, pragmatic, text-linguistic, semantic, syntactic or stylistic errors. The perception of what constitutes a translation 'error' varies according to translation theories and norms*.

1. Translation 'errors', theories and norms

By proposing that a translation error is due to a relationship between ST and TT, we touch on one of the crucial problems of TS. The perception and evaluation of an error as a translation 'error' depends on the theoretical approach to translation and the evaluator's ethical norms with respect to translation. In theories based on the concept of equivalence between ST and TT, a translation 'error' is regarded as some kind of non-equivalence between ST and TT or non-adequacy of the TT (Koller 1979: 216). The error can occur, for example, in relation to one of Koller's five frames of reference with respect to equivalence (*Bezugsrahmen*) (ibid.: 187). In functionalistic approaches* and approaches based on the 'skopos theory',

an error is defined as relative to the fulfillment of the TT-function and the receiver's expectations (Schmitt 1998: 394; Nord 2009: 190). These are stipulated by the translation brief, i.e., the communicative situation and the context in which the TT will be used.

Depending on the theoretical orientation, the evaluators' expectations and attitudes with respect to fidelity, loyalty, equivalence, norms and acceptability differ, especially with respect to the acceptability of changes of meaning and addition or omission of information. Should changes, omissions or additions be regarded as errors – and if not, when precisely are they warranted? This is a difficult balancing act which is also influenced by a society's norms concerning translation.

2. Translation quality: Classifying and grading errors

The concept of “quality”*, quality assessment and the perception errors have been discussed by, for example, Gile (1995: 31ff) and Hansen (2008: 255ff), and conferences like the CIUTI-Forum 2008 as well as several journals in TS have been devoted to this issue.

Definitions, classifications and also rankings of errors have been created for the assessment of the quality of translations depending on different purposes and situations. Nord (1998: 384ff) defines translation ‘error’ for translator training and she proposes a division between “real translation errors”, which are related to the translation brief, and other errors. Schmitt (2002) presents a classification and grading of errors for translator training, especially for technical translations*. Hansen (2006: 112ff) describes a top-down classification of errors for translator training, revision training and translation process research. Mertin (2006: 241) offers criteria for a classification and gradation of errors in professional translations, which has been developed in cooperation with the language service of DaimlerChrysler.

Not all errors in these classifications are genuine translation ‘errors’, i.e., errors based on the fact that there is a relationship between a ST and a TT. However, as *all* kinds of errors in a TT can have a considerable impact on the quality of the TT, the above mentioned classifications and evaluations of errors also include breaches of the target language system and idiomatic errors which must be regarded as ‘errors in translation’, i.e., usual problems of language and text production.

There is not always a direct relationship between the number and gravity of errors, the quality of the TT and the perceived acceptability and usability of the text. In some communicative situations, overall poor quality, involving all kinds of errors, is accepted. For the moment, this is the case with many machine translations (see Section 3). In some communication situations, errors are expected and regarded as acceptable and even “fun”. This is, for example, the case in Danish tourist brochures translated into poor German. In spite of the errors the brochures retain a high degree of usability. In other communicative situations, like translations of legal texts or business contracts, errors are not acceptable.

For the purpose of quality management in organizations, Didaoui (2007: 82ff) proposes "matching operations", i.e., a classification of texts according to their importance, and a ranking of the translators by level of reliability. Quality can then be assured by the maximum harmonization between the importance of the texts and the degree of translators' reliability and the allocation of texts for revision on the basis of the risk level. However, the concept of translators' reliability should be clearly defined. In her Work-Flow-Management System, Mertin (2006: 310ff) presents such a procedure of risk management as it was tested in practice by the language service of DaimlerChrysler AG.

3. Translation 'errors' in translation using electronic tools

In many areas of translation and especially in professional translation, computer-aided/assisted translation* (CAT), translation memory systems (TMS), electronic databases and machine translation* (MT) is used.

Translations of, for example, users' manuals, are typically translated with TMS. If they are compared with human translations, a larger concentration of specific types of errors can be observed. It is 'errors' on the *text-linguistic level*, for example, wrong segmentation, vague reference or co-reference or inconsistent terminology. On the *semantic level*, the translation of terms can be problematic as the system's proposals can be either too general or too specific in the context.

MT has developed to be a useful tool in spite of obvious flaws and errors. Several evaluation criteria like accuracy, fluency and informativeness have been formulated by, among others, White and Taylor (1998). The quality of MT is measured by the word-error-rate (WER) where a 'minimum error distance' is strived for. In order to achieve this, automatic evaluations of the quality score based on statistical models are used. These are continually fine tuned automatically. One of the most applied standards is the BLEU standard by Papineni et al. (2002).

Another statistical approach of MT which is based on the idea that 'more data means less errors' is Google Translate, where huge amounts of passages from human translations are gathered and combined in order to continually improve the machine translations of Google (see Och 2010).

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