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A Classification of Errors in Translation and Revision

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1. Introduction

The fundamental idea of classification is conceptualizing and categorizing phenomena according to similarities or differences (Strauss/Corbin 1998: 66 ff.). Classification categories contribute to clarity when we have to describe and explain phenomena like, for example, errors and necessary changes in a translated text that has to be corrected. They facilitate description, explanation, communication and mutual understanding. At the Copenhagen Business School (CBS), where revision training usually comprises 2.5% of the translator training, we have worked intensely on a classification of errors which could be useful for professional translators and for translation trainers as well.

We started the revision training in 1983 because in organizations, businesses and translation agencies, it is usual practice that certified translators carry out linguistic and stylistic control. *Revision training*, in addition to translator training, aims at providing students with active knowledge and declarative competence concerning the categories and criteria of classification, as well as the relevant expressions (terms) they can use professionally, in situations where they have to identify, explain and justify necessary revisions of texts – often texts which have been written or translated by a colleague.

The CBS longitudinal study, which is described in section 4, has shown that a systematically trained revision competence, i.e. the ability to classify and describe errors and to justify changes,

reduces frustration, stress and bad feeling among colleagues in the working places of the 'professionals of today'. One reason for this may be that revision training seems to prevent "unwarranted changes", an often-mentioned problem and a source of irritation among translators/colleagues who have to revise each others' work. My observation is that the ability to classify errors and to argue for changes prevents over-revision.

2. Important factors influencing the classification and grading of errors

Several factors have an impact on the classification, evaluation and grading of errors:

- the need for and the purpose of the classification, and, especially, the purpose of the grading of the errors. The issue here is whether the revision and the grading is mostly text and client/reader-oriented or business-oriented (with the purpose of hiring and firing translators), a distinction made by Mossop (2007: 118);
- traditions, translation theories, ethical rules, attitudes, norms and standards concerning translation in the translators' countries, cultures and languages, and, additionally, the curricula of translator training including social, political and cultural aspects. Traditions of language acquisition and training in general, registers and terminology are also important;
- the environment in which the translation and revision processes are carried out, e.g. international organization, company, translation agency, freelance translator, or students' translations - and the kind and purpose of the translation task. Not all texts need full revision. Sometimes less than full revision is perfectly acceptable;

- the languages and language pairs involved;
- text types that have to be translated - legal texts, technical or marketing texts - with or without Translation Memory Systems (TMS).

3. Research in the field

In Translation Studies (TS), much work has already been done as to quality management and the development of criteria for quality and evaluation of both translation processes and target texts. Among others, the work of Gerzymisch-Arbogast (1997 and 2001); House (1997 and 2001); Brunette (2000); Lee-Jahnke (2001); Stolze (1997); Schmitt (1998 and 2001); Nord (1998); Mertin (2006); Mossop (2007) and Künzli (2007a and 2007b) can be mentioned. Mertin (2006) discusses criteria for business and text-oriented classifications and grading of errors, and she demonstrates their application for professional translation in businesses or companies. In Denmark, for more than 40 years, the title of "certified translator" has been protected by law and, thus, the focus of research in revision and revision training has primarily been on an improvement of the *quality of the texts* (Hansen 1996, 1999, 2006 and 2007). That is why the classification of errors which is described in this article is primarily text- and client/reader-oriented.

4. The CBS longitudinal study

Since 1997 I have worked on a longitudinal study of translation processes, profiles and products (Hansen 2006) in experiments where, among other aspects, the within-subject variance is tested by comparing the first experiments carried out in 1997, when the subjects were final year students, and the second experiments in 2006/2007 when they were professionals. Today the subjects work as translators and/or revisers in institutions, organizations, companies, agencies or as free-lancers. I visited them at their workplaces and their profiles, translation processes and translation products were investigated again. The objective of the study is to develop and improve quality standards.

One result of the longitudinal study is that the professionals of today still use the classification they learned during their translator training about ten years ago. They also still use the CBS translation and revision process model that we developed from 1983 to 2002. The CBS Model is based on linguistics, stylistics and the essence of as different translation theories as the Skopos theory (e.g. Reiss/Vermeer 1984; Vermeer 1996) and Koller's theory of equivalence (1979) (see Hansen 2006: 30f.). Several of the subjects from the longitudinal study, especially those who earn their living by translation, revision and editing for translation agencies and publishers, use the model and the classification when they carry out their corrections and talk with their colleagues. As there is a close connection between the CBS Model and the classification of errors, the model is shown below:

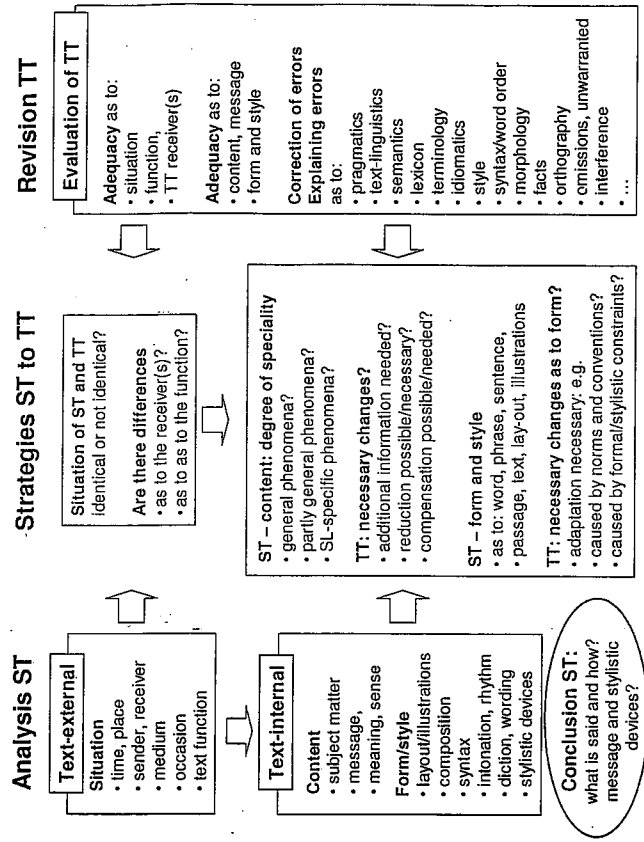


Figure 1: CBS Model

5. Levels of abstraction and translator training

The CBS Model comprises a number of headings, each covering much necessary background knowledge about, for example, pragmatics, semantics, terminology, grammar and style, as well as cultural knowledge and translation theory. Though translators usually work with actual texts in a communication situation, the linguistic and stylistic phenomena can be investigated at different levels of abstraction.

5.1 Levels of abstraction

We can look at linguistic and translation-relevant phenomena at the following levels of abstraction:

- the level of actual *use*, i.e. the “here and now” expression in a communication situation;
- the level of the *individual norm*, i.e. the usual manner in which a person speaks or writes;
- the *norm* level, i.e. for example what a text type *usually* looks like in the two societies (a study of parallel texts is useful here);
- the system level, especially in relation to linguistic elements and grammar.

The levels are illustrated in the following model of levels of abstraction. Phenomena in both languages, i.e. units like lexical elements, sentences, passages, as well as whole source texts and target texts, can be investigated at these different levels of abstraction – both separately in one language only, the SL or the TL, but as the model shows, also comparatively in relation to each other. (The “not implemented” under *system* means that also potential future expressions are part of a language system.)

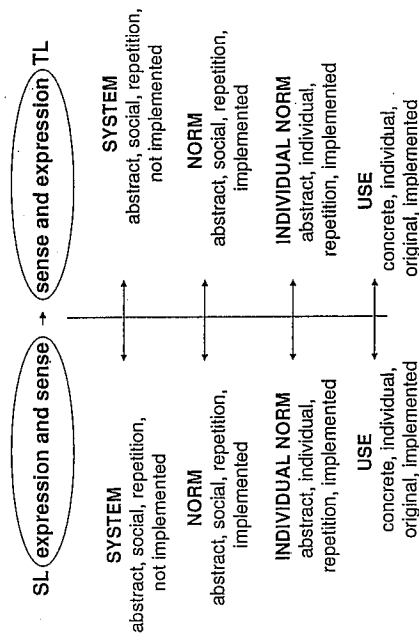


Figure 2: Model of levels of abstraction

5.2 Purpose of the revision training

The main goal of the revision training is to raise awareness – awareness as to all kinds of translation and revision relevant phenomena – and to enable description at different levels of abstraction. Apart from textual analysis and translation strategies, like all translation students, the subjects of the longitudinal study trained to *identify, classify and correct errors* and to *justify the proposed changes*. They practiced this collectively or individually with different tasks – sometimes under time pressure. The idea behind the revision training was/is that students shall be prepared to work as professional revisers in companies or translation agencies and be able to *spontaneously* revise all kinds of texts/translations in different languages. Before I introduced the revision training at the CBS, I had visited several companies in Denmark where I observed that professional translators need these skills desperately in order to command the respect of their colleagues.

6. Some remarks to the CBS classification of errors

The classification is based on a classification described with German and Danish examples in Hansen (2006: 113ff.). As can be seen, the errors caused by interference are categorized separately – even though several units and levels of linguistic and stylistic description are affected. I realized already in 1996 that this separation made it much easier for the students to apply the classification and to explain the errors.

The classification is a general classification and the types of errors can cover several subtypes. The classification can be used for all kinds of texts including the revision of translations of literary works. In my experience, the assumption that literature texts should be so very different from other kinds of texts with respect

to description and linguistic or stylistic categories does not really hold. The classification of errors presented here is an open classification – if necessary, it may be supplemented with *business-oriented* criteria to assess the translator's service – keeping deadlines, following style-sheets, etc.

6.1 CBS Classification of errors

A. Classification of errors in relation to the affected units and levels of linguistic and stylistic description

Pragmatic errors (pragm) – misinterpretation of the translation brief and/or the communication situation, e.g.:

- misunderstanding of the translation brief: wrong translation type (e.g. documentary-informative translation instead of communicative-instrumental translation, often a *deixis* problem)
- not adapting the TT to the target text receiver, the TT function and the communication situation: lack of important information, unwarranted omission of ST units (*omis*)/too much information in relation to the ST and/or the TT receiver's needs in the situation, e.g. dispensable explanations (*disp*)
- disregarding norms and conventions as to genre, style, register, abbreviations etc.

Text-linguistic errors – violation of the semantic, logical or stylistic coherence:

- incoherent text: not semantically logical, often caused by wrong connectors or particles (*sem.log*)
- wrong or vague reference to phenomena, e.g. incorrect pronouns or wrong usage of articles (*ref*)
- temporal cohesion not clear (*tense*)
- wrong category, e.g. indicative instead of subjunctive mood, active instead of passive voice (*cat*)
- wrong modality, e.g. via inappropriate modal particles or negations (*mod*)

- wrong information structure, often caused by word order problems (*word order*)
- unmotivated change of style (*change of style*)

Semantic (lexical) errors (sem): incorrect choice of words or phrases.

Idiomatic errors (idiom): words and phrases that are semantically correct, but would not be used in an analogue context in the TL.

Stylistic errors (style): incorrect choice of stylistic level, stylistic elements and stylistic devices.

Morphological errors – also “*morpho-syntactical errors*” (*msyn*): wrong word structure, or mistakes in number, gender or case, etc.

Syntactical errors (syn): wrong sentence structure.

Facts wrong (facts): errors in figures, dates, names, abbreviations, etc.

B. Classification of errors in relation to the cause “interference” or “false cognates”

Interferencè is regarded as a projection of unwanted features from one language to the other. These errors are based on an assumption of symmetry between the languages which appears in some cases, but not in the case in question. Several levels and units of linguistic and stylistic description are affected. The errors can also be characterized as, for example, pragmatic, text-linguistic, lexical-semantic, syntactic or stylistic errors. Considering the language pair German and Danish, the following kinds of interference prevail:

Lexical interference (int-lex): words and phrases are transferred from SL to TL. This is especially often the case with prepositions.

Syntactic interference (int-str): the sentence structure or the word order is transferred.

Text-semantic interference (int-ref): the use of, for example, pronouns and articles is transferred.

Cultural interference (int-cult): culture-specific phenomena are transferred.

6.1.1 Language pair and translation direction

The present classification reflects typical errors in translations from German to Danish, and vice versa. An attempt to apply the classification to translations between English and Croatian was made by Natasa Pavlovic (2007) in her PhD thesis. The study showed that some of the typical errors, for example the use of articles, had to be classified differently. An error which in relation to the language pair Danish-German can be categorized as a primarily text-linguistic error has to be categorized as a lexical error when the language pair is English-Croatian. Though the same units and levels are relevant – the structure of the languages and language pairs (in relation to each other) have an impact on the most appropriate classification of the typical errors.

6.1.2 Grading

As to grading – in written exams or when errors are used to evaluate the work of students or professionals, the evaluation can be done in a dialogue where the involved evaluators discuss the criteria in relation to the translation brief, the task, the purpose of the translated text, the level of difficulty, the translation theory (theories) and ethical rules, which have been taught or which colleagues at a working place have agreed on, and then evaluate all the products accordingly and equally (see Hansen 2007). What seems to be even more difficult than identifying and grading errors is defining, identifying, describing and grading *good* translations. Operable criteria for creative or just good solutions need to be found in order to give proper credit for good translations. Perhaps workplace frustrations could be diminished or avoided and the profession could become more attractive if successes were mentioned more often.

6.1.3 Errors with TMS

The classification of errors has also proved to be useful in an investigation of differences between errors produced in human translations and errors produced in translations supported by TMS. In her MA thesis under the author's supervision, Kristina Sommer (2006) identified new kinds of errors with TMS and a larger concentration of some kinds of errors, compared with human translations. Examples from cars' manuals show that on the *pragmatic level*, in translations into Danish, inconsistencies and errors appear; one example is inconsistency in addressing the reader – sometimes with "Du" and sometimes with "De" – where in German manuals it is always "Sie". Errors typical for translation with TMS also are found on the *text-linguistic level*, where segmentation, reference, co-reference, inconsistent terminology, and wrongly expressed directive speech-acts play tricks. The problem is that the proposed strings do not always fit the context. On the *semantic level*, the translation of terms shows to be problematic. The proposals are often either too general or too specific in the context.

7. Combined model of the translation and revision competence

A necessary attitude regarding revision is *fairness*, and necessary skills are *attentiveness* as to pragmatic, linguistic and stylistic phenomena and errors, the *ability to abstract or distance oneself* from one's own and others' previous formulations and the ability to *explain and argue* for changes. These skills can be trained at university, either as part of the translator training or in separate masters' courses on revision and editing. As can be seen from the interviews with the professional translators of the longitudinal study who have been trained in revision procedures, being familiar with

revision processes makes it easier for them to give and take constructive criticism. Being well grounded in theories, tools and procedures – not only for translation but also for revision – is an excellent starting point for the profession – the rest can/must be left to experience and practice. In relation to translation competence, competence in revision requires additional skills, abilities and attitudes, and/or enhanced levels of competence in certain areas. In the following combined model, which is based on (Hansen 2006: 27/238), the revision competence is shown to be closely related to the translation competence, but with certain important differences.

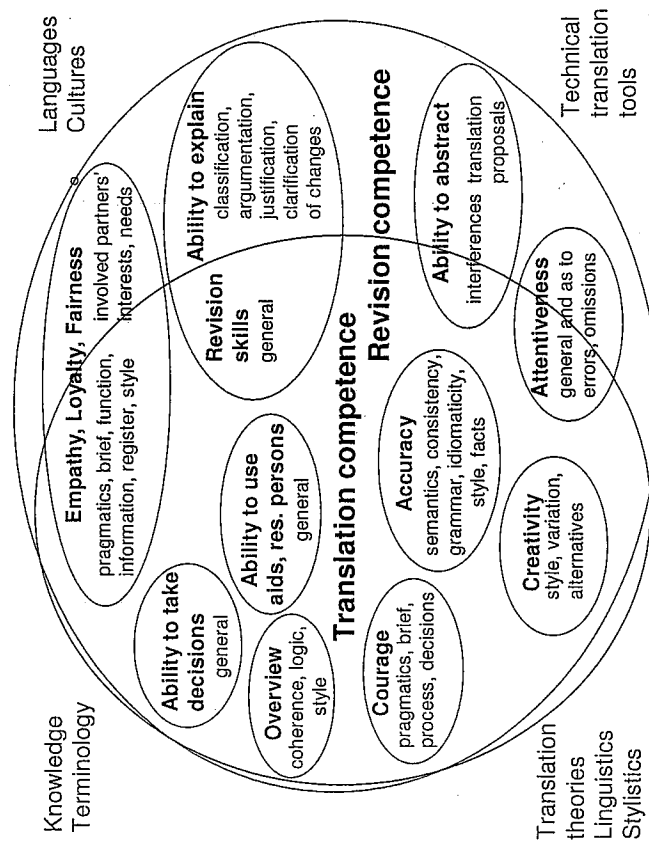


Figure 3: Combined Model of the Translation and Revision Competence

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