Developing Translation Competence: Introduction
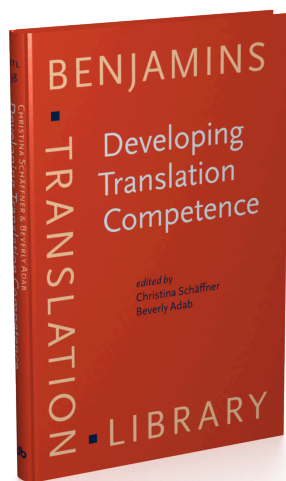
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Translation as performance

Translation as an activity leading to a product has a tradition reaching far back to the beginnings of recorded history and beyond that to the oral tradition. It has always been essential for trading and also a fundamental component of classical education. The movements and trends dominating this activity through the ages, particularly in Europe, are well documented, see, for example, Delisle and Woodsworth's (1995) account of the contributions of important individual translators; Robinson's (1997) anthology of theoretical reflections on translation; and Pym's (1998) study into translation methods through the ages.

It was not, however, until the second half of the twentieth century that developments in Translation Studies led to a more systematic view of the attempts to develop a theory of translation. This also led to a study of the way in which it could best be taught, in order to enhance the different skills acquired in one or more foreign languages and cultures, in relation to and in conjunction with the mother tongue, for the purpose of more effective communication. Systematic training of translators, as opposed to co-opting of competent linguists to perform the activity of translation, also began to be undertaken as a serious objective in the 1940s, with the establishment of programmes aimed at training professional translators and/or interpreters at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, in 1941, Vienna, Austria, in 1943, Mainz-Germersheim, Germany, in 1946, Georgetown, USA, in 1949, for example. Since then, the number of programmes offering such training has grown considerably worldwide. One result of this mushrooming of programmes, in response to the demands of globalisation of communication and the internationalisation of business, has been the move towards a more formalised approach, specifically aimed at training translators and interpreters. This training has come to see as fundamental to its success the achievement of certain objectives relating to

comprehension, transfer and message production from a socio-cultural perspective. The emergence and rapid progression of the field of Translation Studies has gone hand in hand with this development, the one making demands on the other and both co-existing in a symbiotic state of interdependence.

As we move into the twenty-first century, there is clearly a consensus amongst experts in Translation Studies that their object of study, i.e. translation, is a complex activity, involving expertise in a number of areas and skills. In order to fulfil their task, translators need to have knowledge of what is required, they need to have the skills: in a word, they need to be competent to perform the task.

Contemporary Translation Studies has established its credentials over the past few decades; it is also a discipline which is continually seeking to develop principles and research methods in different areas of relevance to those who study the discipline. Research activity in these different areas is intercultural in its focus, sometimes innovative, interdisciplinary and of course international. Organisations such as the European Society for Translation Studies (EST) seek to promote an exchange of scholarly views and research, mainly at the level of established researchers but also seeking to promote the work of new scholars. Papers in different international journals offer a wide range of foci reflecting the diversity of interests of Translation Studies scholars.

Optimal performance of any action, for example, driving a car, is based on a global competence which relies on the interaction of different subordinated competences, which are, of course, interrelated. Translation as a purposeful activity (e.g. Nord 1997) requires a unique competence which has thus far proved difficult to identify, let alone to quantify. There has not yet been a specific research focus within Translation Studies on how translation competence can be defined and developed, although the aspect of translation competence has been addressed more generally by scholars (for example, Wilss 1996, Risku 1998, and the contributions in Kelletat 1996). Nor has much been published on the organisation of translator training and how the systematic evaluation of translation competence, once defined, can be built into such programmes. The questions which this volume seeks to address, are therefore as follows:

> What is translation competence?
> How can it be built and developed?
> How can the product of the performance be used to measure levels of competence?

These questions will be addressed with specific reference to the training situation. The individual contributions are arranged in three sections: Defining Translation Competence (Part I), Building Translation Competence (Part II), Assessing Translation Competence (Part III). Given the interdependence of these three aspects of the question, there will inevitably be some cross-references to one or more sections in any paper.[1]

Defining Translation Competence

Just as with other complex performance tasks, in order to explain this unique competence, scholars tend to break translation competence down into a set of interrelated sub-competences, which can be studied in isolation, as well as in combination with others. A first priority is, therefore, the need to define more clearly the different sub-competences involved in the translation process, in order to try and identify a set of principles which could form the basis for a solid foundation for training in translation. Only then will it be possible to work on the interrelationship of these principles and finally to incorporate these into a programme designed to enable translators to achieve an overall (desired) level of translation competence.

The papers in the first section focus on the identification of such sub-competences. Among those sub-competences most frequently identified there is a consensus that language competence, whilst essential and fundamental, is not in itself sufficient. Translation competence is clearly seen as demanding expertise in various areas: these will include at least knowledge of the languages, knowledge of the cultures and domain-specific knowledge. *Albrecht Neubert* describes as many as five parameters, or sub-competences of translation competence: language competence, textual competence, subject competence, cultural competence, transfer competence. In other papers some of these, and other, sub-competences are discussed more specifically. *Marisa Presas* looks at aspects of bilingualism and at the relationship between bilingual competence and translation competence. She argues that, contrary to popular belief by lay persons, untrained bilingual competence is not sufficient to guarantee translation competence. On the other hand, translation competence is not simply an improved bilingual competence. *Jean-Pierre Mailhac* illustrates the importance of an awareness of the role of register, for the language-pair French and English, in the light of a contrastive analysis based on the translation of an English text. From this he draws consequences for translation strategies. *Janet Fraser* analyses the work of professional translators in everyday working life, by tapping into mental processes, using

Think Aloud Protocols. Based on the requirements of practising translators she draws conclusions regarding how these competences can be incorporated into translation programmes. *Gunilla Anderman and Margaret Rogers* also consider the requirements of the professional environment as the starting point for a training programme, illustrating how this approach is taken up in other countries by reference to the European POSI project (practice-oriented curriculum for the training of translators and interpreters).

In discussing translation competence and its sub-competences, the term *competence* is often linked to other concepts and qualities seen to be requisite for the task of translation, most prominently to the following: *knowledge, skills, awareness, expertise.* The term *competence*, thus, acts as a superordinate, a cover term and summative concept for the overall performance ability which seems to be so difficult to define. It encompasses a number of different elements or abilities to do specific (detailed) things, which are in turn based on knowledge. This knowledge (i.e declarative knowledge, *knowing what*) is applied on the basis of an evaluation of various factors affecting the translation situation, e.g. awareness of the communicative situation, of the purpose of the (translational) activity, of the communicative partners, etc. (i.e. operative knowledge, *knowing why and how to*). The ability to make use of this knowledge and to apply it is linked to awareness, which could also be described as conscious decision-making or transfer competence.

Building Translation Competence

There is widespread agreement that developing translation competence is a fundamental objective of any translation programme and that competence can indeed be developed. However, questions to be addressed in this respect include the dynamic nature of the learning process, an open-ended process which it is difficult to quantify. As a result, consideration is needed of not only *how*, but also *when*, translation competence can be developed, and through what stages.

The contributors agree that translation competence is most effectively developed at an academic institution. Different types of academic institutions provide courses leading to professional qualifications. Depending on socio-cultural constraints, their curriculum and syllabus may focus on translation theory, practical translation skills and more often than not, a combination of the two. Across Europe the question of how best to prepare translators for their future careers has been addressed quite specifically by means of a proliferation of different kinds of programmes purporting to prepare

translators for the professional environment. Thus, some countries offer undergraduate programmes specifically designed to train translators, others prefer to leave specialist training for postgraduate programmes.

When planning a programme intended to achieve the ultimate aim of developing translation competence as something far more complex than simply improving performance, the overall structure of the curriculum, the stages of progression and development of different sub-competences, the choice and timing of specific modules, components and courses all need to be taken into account. However, despite such programmes, in some countries companies continue to entrust translation tasks to people who have had no specific translation training. For example, in the UK, translation agencies prefer to employ graduates with a degree in a language. This is perhaps a reflection, as well as a result, of the situation for translation training in the UK, where very few universities teach translation on the basis of a theoretical approach to a professional task requiring specific translation competence (on this subject, see Sewell and Higgins 1996).

It would therefore be useful and relevant, in the interests of the profession as much as in the interests of those participating in the training process, not only students but also academics, to look more closely at current practice in the different institutions around the world which offer translation programmes, to see if some fundamental principles can be found which underly programme development. The papers in this second section discuss some of these issues relating to translation training in the academic environment in some (mainly European) countries. Some of them focus on the developmental stages in the learner, others on how best to guide the student's learning process.

Andrew Chesterman argues that the learning task for translator trainees is to internalise concepts and to become experts in applying these appropriately. The challenge for teachers is to create conditions under which this internalisation can take place and to raise trainees' awareness of fundamental conceptual tools. In his hierarchy of stages, based on Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), students progress from the *novice* stage to that of *advanced beginner*; from there they move to the *competence* stage (characterised by conscious decision-making), then on to the *proficiency* stage, culminating in the *expertise* stage. These stages could be related to the design of a translation training programme. For *Jean Vienne*, the most important skills for a translator are, firstly, the ability to analyse a variety of translation situations, and secondly, the ability to decide on a strategy for resource research which is adapted to the translation situation. He illustrates a training method which imitates real-life situations. In a similar attempt to anchor learning in a real-life environment, *Agnes Elthes* also looks at the different didactic phases of the translation class,

from pre-translational exercises, such as text analysis, to comparing different possible translation decisions and critically evaluating solutions. *Olivia Fox* shows how developmental aspects of the process of acquiring translation competence are captured in students' diaries. Diary writing and peer conferencing are elements of a process-oriented translation methodology which is learner-centred and needs-based.

Catherine Way considers wider questions relating to the structure of specialised translation courses, such as the degree of specialisation, the choice of fields, and the choice of genres and texts at different stages of the training process. *Christina Schäffner* outlines fundamental principles for the design of a translation programme at undergraduate level in the UK context. She argues that it is in fact possible and advisable to develop basic transfer competence concurrently with language and cultural competence. *Dorothy Kelly* discusses criteria for text selection in the learning process, illustrated with text types of the tourist sector. She relates the demands of the professional environment, especially the need for a high-quality finished product and the imposition of time constraints, to the actual learning process. *Ronald Sim* concurs that studying the translation situation in the African context has a specific contribution to make to the development of our understanding of translation competence. In Kenya, for example, translator training is integrated into theological training institutions, due to the importance of Bible translations into African ethnic languages. Thus, specific linguistic and cultural constraints need to be considered in the training programmes.

Most contributors to this volume agree that trainee translators need not only to understand theoretical principles of TS but also to develop an awareness of different types of translation strategies which can be applied to different text types for different domains and/or for varying purposes. Decision-making should be driven by an understanding of the way in which the intended purpose of the target text relates to the target reader's assumed knowledge, thus by extension, decision-making depends on perceived target reader needs. The rapidly mushrooming field of information technology offers an increasing range of powerful tools which, if properly used within a systematic approach to translation, can enable a non-specialist translator to work competently and reliably in different semi-specialised domains, provided that training has been given in how to use these tools to best advantage. The relevance of information technology tools for the development of translation competence is referred to implicitly in several papers, although none focus specifically on this aspect.

The final question that this volume seeks to address is how to assess effectively the different aspects of translation competence and the students' progress in acquiring these.

Assessing Translation Competence

Most papers discuss how to develop competence, but an equally important issue is the question of how to find out whether the aim has been achieved and where best to look for evidence of this. Translation competence can be studied from two perspectives: from the perspective of the product (i.e. the target text, its quality, its appropriateness for the specified purpose), or from the perspective of the process (i.e. the efficacy of the decision-making process). Most papers in this volume look at the product, considering which criteria can be applied to the product and how such criteria would exemplify an understanding of the definition of translation competence. If this is an abstract concept only measurable through performance, the question is whether it is in fact possible to take the product of the performance, i.e. the target text, and evaluate it on the assumption that it is direct evidence of a given level of competence. In other words, can we assume that the concept of translation competence is a valid notion, as is the case in translation criticism, for example in evaluating the product of a professional translator to determine commercial usefulness? Alternatively, is it possible to quantify the development process itself? Can we measure progress at different stages on the way to achieving translation competence? *Janet Fraser's* focus on processes of decision-making is one way of doing this.

The papers in this section refer to the evaluation of the product in relation to (more or less) pre-determined or expected levels of translation competence. Based on a comparison of target texts, produced firstly by translator trainees and secondly by general language students with no specific translation training, *Allison Beeby* offers evidence that a training programme which targets specific sub-competences can help students to achieve better results (i.e. more appropriate texts). *Mariana Orozco* aims to bring new insights to the process through which students acquire translation competence. She outlines a project to build and test measuring instruments for translation competence acquisition at each stage. *Beverly Adab* argues for a clearly defined set of criteria for evaluation, which would also form the basis for decision-making, providing a training in awareness of choices and selection of translation strategies, leading to increased critical judgement as part of transfer competence and overall translation competence. *Gerard McAlester* links assessment and evaluation to

basic standards for professional accreditation. He argues for a criterion-referenced evaluation framework for translation, and he identifies revision time as a highly important criterion in this respect.

In conclusion

In any professional environment, performance is judged according to certain clearly defined objectives and needs, which demand a specific type of competence - the translation environment should be no exception. Highly competent translators are essential in order to meet the rapidly evolving requirements of the professional environment. There is agreement in all contributions that universities have a responsibility to train specialists in translation. Aims and objectives, as well as programme structure and content, should be designed in such a way that the demands of the profession are fully met. This volume shows that there is awareness across nations and cultures of the need for a core of principles which can inform and guide translator training. All contributors are active translation scholars and translation trainers. This allows a comparison of what is done in various countries and/or institutions, mainly in Europe, but also in an African country. The papers focus strongly on the lessons to be learned from academic practice, accompanied by personal recommendations based on experience. The aims are to present a methodology for discussion, to share experience and good practice and to offer individual, tried and tested teaching methods for discussion, as well as in order to permit further testing and evaluation of the wider implications.

This volume presents therefore the concrete experience of different contributors in curriculum design and delivery of translator training. This overview highlights common aspects and identifies common concerns, as well as pointing to differences. The individual chapters reflect the fact that the authors come from different backgrounds and represent various approaches to translation. Since the discipline of Translation Studies is characterised by a variety of approaches, arguments and concepts, we, as editors, have made no attempt to homogenise the individual contributions.

This volume seeks to stimulate debate. It illustrates how theory and practice are interdependent in the field of Translation Studies. Not only does it demonstrate that practice requires reference to theory to provide a supporting conceptual framework: it also shows that theoretical studies can incorporate findings of empirical studies into ongoing research relating to the processes of translation and explains how translation competence, as a cognitive tool, defines and is defined by these processes. Translation theory feeds into

academic course design, and academic experience raises questions for scholars of how to define competence in order to apply a systematic form of measurement or evaluation.

It is thus expected that this volume will contribute to the on-going discussion of the nature, development and assessment of translation competence. Intended addressees include, firstly, other trainers and scholars; also, students of translation, and decision-makers in academic settings. It is hoped that the volume will also raise awareness of this discussion on the part of translation initiators and users, who depend on the expertise of competent translators. Finally, the volume seeks to engage the interest of those Translation Studies scholars who focus on theoretical aspects of translation, inviting them to take up the challenge from their own perspective and contribute to the development of a definition of translation competence which can then inform a wider audience of translation scholars, translator trainers and trainee translators.[2]

Notes

1 Earlier versions of all the papers included here were presented at an International Conference on *Developing Translation Competence*, held at Aston University in Birmingham, from 17-19 July 1997. This conference was organised to launch translator training programmes both at undergraduate and postgraduate level at Aston University.

2 Support for some of the clerical work required in the production of the camera-ready copy was provided by the Aston Modern Languages Research Foundation. Thanks are also due to Julie Ramsden, Judith Morley and Suzanne Carter for their help.

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