

Specialised translation: a concept in need of revision

Introduction

Specialised translation and its corollaries – *general translation*, *scientific translation*, *technical translation*, *legal translation*, *medical translation*, and so on – are well-established denominations in our field, according to which many professional aspects have been organised: professional fees and standing, calls for employment, courses and degrees, academic events, etc. They are the result of attempts to classify the activity of translation (classifications, typologies or categorizations) and, as such, they should make thinking, communicating and acting on translation easier. My opinion is that, at this moment in time, they are hindering rather than facilitating our task and that some reflection on them is vital.

Categorization of translation

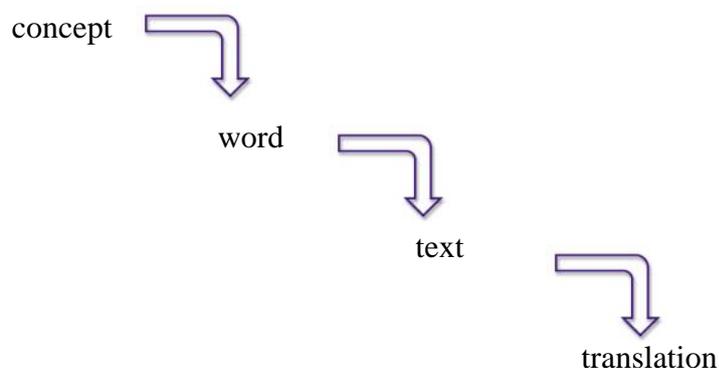
The activity of translation can be subjected to different kinds of categorization according to different criteria. If the criterion is the **medium**, we speak about translation and interpreting. If the criterion is the **situation** in which translating is developed, we can speak about audiovisual translation, official translation, court interpreting, translation for publishing companies, etc. We can also describe translation according to two different axes, both related in different ways, to the concept of **specialisation** of the texts translated:

- *Horizontal, extensive axis (subject matter of the texts)*: economic, commercial, legal, scientific, technical, medical...
- *Vertical, intensive axis (grade of specialisation of the texts)*: general translation, specialised translation.

Borrowed categorizations

Translation studies have not created these categories. They originated in other fields, older than translation, and have been inherited by us, in my opinion, through hasty and mechanical borrowing. They were adopted by translation studies from textual studies,

which in turn had borrowed them from Language for Special Purposes (LSP)/Terminology studies. Where did LSPs find these concepts? They took them from the current classification of knowledge, which establishes a correlation between concepts and words. Further correlating built up a cascade which covers these steps



The axis of grade of specialisation (dichotomy): general vs specialised

The vertical axis of the grade of classification (specialisation) represents an attempt to categorize realities according to the different participation of a single parameter or quality. Traditional approaches have observed reality as **digital** (yes/no dichotomy): facts participate of that quality or not (specialised vs general), whereas reality as a display of a single quality observed from more contemporary views is seen as **analogic**. i.e. a **continuum** with maximum and minimum poles at their extremes



each reality being allocated at a different point on the scale or continuum. Specialised communication is considered to be that which occurs among experts in the field, communicating on specific matters and using specific jargon, whereas general

communication is considered to be that which occurs among lay people, communicating on everyday facts and using the vocabulary shared by all speakers.

The former means that there is not a clear frontier separating general and specialised language, communication or translation, that every text and every act of communication include, in different proportions, elements which can be characterized as general, and elements which can be characterized as specialised. This is admitted by a growing number of experts in LSP, terminology and translation. Phenomena such as metaphorization, linguistic variation and idiolect which used to be thought specific of general communication, are easily detected in highly specialised communication as well. On the other hand, as specialised knowledge has increasingly spread over the whole community, parcels of knowledge (mechanics, economics, law, medicine...) which were exclusive to specialists have become common ground for larger segments of population and are found in everyday communication. In my opinion, any attempt to draw the line between general and specialized is doomed to failure.

Terminology studies used to reduce specialised communication to that which was taking place between experts but, interlocutors intervene in more varied combinations (expert to expert, expert to lay, expert to politician, expert to buyer, expert to learner, expert to user...; and the vehicles and situations for communicating specialised information also present a richer variety than the one admitted by the more traditional approaches to communication (when standardization of the communication between experts was their main concern).

The concept of specialization is also mainly **subjective**. The same text is perceived with different grades of specialisation according to the familiarity of the receiver with the subject matter and the field. A lecture given by an expert might be perceived as too specialised by a part of the audience, as “acceptable” by some and as too down to earth by others.

The axis of subject matter (1st typology): scientific vs technical vs legal vs economic...

The horizontal axis of classification (subject matter) is used when categorization of different realities is made subject to a variety of parameters. Here we can find not only

one classification but a variety of them. Reality is described reducing it to different diagrams or geometrical representations. This is a proceeding of metaphorization of reality, if we accept that geometrical forms (which in turn are named after everyday objects) can be used as metaphors of reality. We can also understand this proceeding as process of theorization of reality. Different diagrammatic representations have been offered as aids to categorization, such as patchwork (objectivist); layers (generative grammar); concentric waves (Rondeau); flower with petals (Picht); conduit (criticized by Lakoff); or tree (philogenetics).

In our field of translation, and in LSP studies as well, the most frequent way of categorizing translation is through the patchwork diagram. But it has proved highly inaccurate as no reality, not even biological realities, present clear cut boundaries with other contiguous realities.

Fields of knowledge are not strictly isolated from each other, science, technology, economy, law; civil law, property law, marriage law, procedural law. And their categorization varies according to time and place. Even when translation is frequently divided into scientific, technical, economic and legal types, fuzzy boundaries among them are evident. Furthermore, categories such as *legal translation* prove ill-defined as

- sometimes this category is established according to the content of the texts and other times according to the legal frame of the activity
- the legal frame covers extremely different types of text, contracts, legislation, court procedures, registry documents, administration, treaties, etc., each of them liable to be chosen as the prototype of legal translation by different authors
- legal texts rarely present a single subject matter or thematic frame and almost all of them offer other information, technical, medical, etc.
- last but not least, there is no correlation between these categories of translation and specific ways of translating

In my experience, mostly, subject matter of the text has been shown to be **irrelevant** for translating.

Recently, new diagrams have been proposed trying to avoid the excessive simplification present in earlier diagrams: overlapping roof tiles (myself); overlapping scales (cognitivism, Rosch, Lakoff...); chains (Givón)..., and new approaches to categorization have emerged, such as gestalt (Snell-Hornby), family resemblances (Witgentstein), cluster analysis and prototype semantics.

Apart from that, any classification of a set of elements requires choosing which of them will represent it for each class, becoming the prototype of the class. If all the elements of the class present the same characteristics, any of them will do as prototype, but realities related to translation and texts are usually all different from each other. In this case, elements which are not selected as prototypes are peripheral elements and do not exactly abide by all the characteristics of the class/prototype. Furthermore, the choice of the prototypical element is **arbitrary**, as we can chose different criteria and personal preferences for representativeness (some authors offer the translation of legislation as the prototype of legal translation and extrapolate their conclusions to the generality of legal translation, whilst others may chose contracts, treaties, wills, court judgements or, other civil registry certifications, .

Is there any ground left for traditional categorization?

When a categorization has lasted for a long time, we should allow for some justification of it. I would not go so far as to deny any and all merit in traditional categories of translation. Observation of practice keeps suggesting that, given the above, there is a difference between the translating of the rough prototypical cases of economic-commercial-legal-administrative texts and that of the rough prototypical cases of scientific-technical texts. If this difference is not mainly based on the subject matter, which is its source? My opinion is that the difference between these two groups of texts, and accordingly between their translation, arises from the fact that they induce meaning in different ways. Prototypical scientific-technical texts aim to induce a single, fixed meaning and are supposed to allow a narrow margin for interpretation. Prototypical legal-economic-commercial-administrative texts allow for interpretation according to the different interests and ideas of the receiver, even when jurists claim that it does not,

and are accompanied by *the rules of the game*, a set of rules for its interpretation, the hermeneutics of legal text, rules which, in turn, are also open to interpretation. The consequences of this distinction for translation seem to be not only relevant but also dramatic.

A third axis of specialization (2nd typology): genre

There is one more possible axis for the categorization of “specialised translation” that I would like to comment on, and this is the introduction of the parameter of *genre*. The concept of genre has been borrowed from text and LSP studies, I would say that as hastily as the other concepts commented before. Genre is an ill-defined concept which admits several definitions. The one commonly adopted by translation scholars is that genre is a class of texts which is recognized as such by the receiver as they contain recognizable conventions regarding their structure and other linguistic elements and are produced in similar communicative situations. They propose genre as a crucial concept in translation as, in their opinion, it strongly facilitates the job of the translator through the knowledge of the distinctive features of the equivalent genre in the target language. They often intermix genre and subject matter in their analysis and classifications, excluding the possibility of *interthematic* genres.

The concept of genre was conceived for intralingual communication and only provides for one receiver. In the case of translation, there are at least two receivers, the translator and the reader of the translated text, and somebody should explain which of them is supposed to identify the genre of both texts, especially when genre is a question of perception and subjectivity and the ability to recognize a particular genre varies according to different readers and, particularly, between the translator, a linguist, and the reader. As in the case of subject matter, the designation of a certain text as the prototype for a genre is **subjective** and the characteristics assigned will not cover all the other peripheral texts. The alleged utility of genre in translation is seriously reduced when we consider that imitating the conventions of the text in the target language is only one of the possible strategies for translation and that, more often than not, the translated text imitates the conventions of the original text or tries to adopt an intermediate form between the source textual conventions and the target language ones. Finally, as with the parameter of subject matter, different genres do not seem to be related to different specific ways of translating and, as is often the case, distinctions

which are relevant for a disciplinary field lose at least a great part of their relevance and usefulness when borrowed by different fields.

Conclusions

Any attempt to categorize human activity –translation– oversimplifies it. This is the case of theorization, which, in many occasions, adopts the form of metaphORIZATION. Classification and theorization are useful, but cannot replace the reality from which they originate. A peculiarity of *human sciences* –as compared to natural sciences– is that the proposals of their scholars can modify the reality they are analysing, i.e. the process of *reification* of theory. Furthermore, classifications are not immutable, everlasting systems as they depend on the variability of the parameters used, such as specialisation and categories of knowledge. Classifications usually contain a strong subjective component. So, translation scholars should be aware that classifications of translation must evolve, that the activity of translation must be the hallmark for their proposals. We should also remember that, to date, classifications of translation are not straightforwardly related to different ways of translating, to specific problems, strategies and solutions and their usefulness is therefore rather limited when we think of translating and training translators.

Efforts should be made to provide a semantics of legal texts which is applicable to the work of translators since regular semantics is more easily applied to scientific-technical texts.

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