

Professional Translation: Can it be Taught?

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Perhaps I should begin rather by posing and trying to answer the question: "Is or was there a need for professional translation to be taught?", in other words: "Is or was there an unsatisfied market for professional translation?" At one time, say in the first two or two-and-a-half decades after the Second World War, the translation needs of industry and other organisations seem to have been satisfied in an ad hoc manner by the availability of two categories of linguists. First, there was the pool of skilled linguists of a variety of nationalities, many of whom had been displaced by the European cataclysm and whose careers had to be started anew. A number of these people were virtuoso linguists whose reputations and performance led them to be regarded as star performers. Secondly there was the pool of newly trained linguists coming from the universities with bachelor's degrees in foreign languages, who, in the manner of those days, looked for jobs in languages - other than teaching, which even then required a postgraduate qualification - immediately on graduating. Those were the days when graduates were operating in a seller's market.

By the late 1960s/early 1970s it became clear that this system, if it can be called a system, was no longer appropriate to the needs of the day. As regards the personnel available, the pool of polyglot linguists emanating from the European upheaval was obviously finite and by then more or less depleted, while the nature of the higher education provided for undergraduates studying for foreign language degrees was proving to be no long-term solution to the national and international needs for expert translation. Indeed, the growing level of professionalism, and the growing demand for professionalism, in a wide range of specialised fields whose needs had previously been satisfied by holders of only bachelor's degrees who had acquired their expertise 'on the job', exerted a profound influence on the provision of higher education at the postgraduate stage. Increasingly the bachelor's degree came to be regarded as only an essential first - and general - stage, which needed to be followed by a period of specialised postgraduate training sharply focused on particular career branches. This was just as true of law (for those who had not studied law for their bachelor's degree), of work in the social fields, and of business management, as it was of professional translation.

At the same time, that is in the late 60s and early 70s, there was something like a geometrical increase in the demand for expert translation, resulting from the growth in international trade, especially within Europe, and in international cooperation. The foundations laid by the creation of the United Nations Organisation in 1944 and of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 and the Common Market in 1957, along with the general trend towards breaking down the barriers to trade, signalled by the foundation of GATT in 1948, meant that after two to three decades international communication in political and commercial fields of a radically different order of magnitude compared with the early postwar decades was required.

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There was, I hope I have established, a need for professional translation and a need for it to be taught. For how else was it to be acquired, to be learned? Could it be taught, and, if so, how.

It was clear at the outset that the personnel would be drawn from the same source as the second group I mentioned in my introduction - graduates in modern languages. What was it that made such graduates unsatisfactory entrants to the profession and what, then, would they have to learn in the additional phase which would constitute their vocational training? (I will deal with the how of this learning in my final section.)

The new language graduate, whose only experience of translation is drawn from the translation exercises and examinations performed as part of a degree course, has to acquire a new attitude to translated language. The translation exercises done on the degree course will have been regarded as linguistic exercises done for their own sake, or as one of a variety of methods of learning more about the language, or - if the source texts have certain literary qualities - as a method of achieving insights into the aesthetic function of language. The trainee professional translator needs to achieve an altogether different approach to translated language - namely to regard it as language for use, for application, for directing human behaviour. This notion confers upon translated language a status which is both inferior

(because the translated material will manifestly be ephemeral) and superior (because human fates may depend on the translated material) than language translated as part of an educational process or, for this gives the point greater clarity, translated literary material, which is how the language student has frequently come to perceive the function of translation.

The graduate trainee translator must divest him- or herself of two preconceptions about translation which will have been acquired during the degree course.

The first is the acceptability of translating into the foreign language (assuming that the student is not a native speaker of that language). 'Prose composition', as it used to be called, still constitutes a highly respected exercise and examination component of modern language degree courses, and it sometimes comes as a shock to the trainee translator to discover that clients wish to buy only authentic translated material and that such authentic material can issue only from a native speaker of the language concerned.

The second preconception is that the quality of a translation depends on reflection as one of its major factors, indeed that the quality will be in direct proportion to the amount of reflection injected into the work. (This may indeed be true of undergraduate translation exercises, particularly of prose composition.) During the period of traineeship, however, the intending professional translator has to learn that clients wish to buy only translated material and not reflection; furthermore that while speed, spontaneity, and immediacy of reaction are crucial to the successful professional translator, so too is quality. These two characteristics of professional work - quality and speed - are only achievable by means of an impeccable knowledge of the source language, by working only into the native language of the translator, and by a range of other skills which I shall now mention.

Paramount among these is the capacity to handle the subject field of the material to be translated. Here lies one of the greatest obstacles to be overcome by the trainee translator. It has long been taken for granted - so much so that as far as I know the matter has never been debated - that professional translators are linguists who have learned to operate in specialist fields of industry, technology, science, international relations, or what have you. Translators are not graduate mining engineers, industrial chemists, and so on, who have

subsequently been trained in languages with a view to their being turned into translators. The former, however, the linguists, are in our system on the arts side of the cultural divide which C.P. Snow identified almost forty years ago in the 1959 Rede Lecture given in Cambridge entitled The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution. I quote:

"... the separation between scientists and non-scientists is much less bridgeable among the young than it was even thirty years ago. Thirty years ago the cultures had long since ceased to speak to each other; but at least they managed a kind of frozen smile across the gulf. Now the politeness has gone, and they just make faces."⁽¹⁾

After observing that highly educated members of the non-scientific culture were not able to cope with the simplest concepts of pure science, he continued as follows:

"It is unexpected, but they would be even less happy with applied science..."

Note the relevance to the fields in which translators often operate.

".. .How many educated people know anything about productive industry, old-style or new? What is a machine-tool? I once asked a literary party; and they looked shifty. Unless one knows, industrial production is as mysterious as witch-doctoring. Or take buttons. Buttons aren't very complicated things: they are being made in millions every day: one has to be a reasonably ferocious Luddite not to think that that is, on the whole, an estimable activity. Yet I would bet that out of men getting firsts in arts subjects at Cambridge this year, not one in ten could give the loosest analysis of the human organisation which it needs."⁽²⁾

There are today a few degree courses which provide for a science or branch of technology to be studied in tandem with a language, but the number of graduates from such courses who go into professional translation is insignificant compared with those from wholly arts-type foreign language degree courses. A vital component of training for professional translation is, therefore, a conversion course, not with a view to turning the graduate linguist into a half-baked scientist or technologist, but in order to enable him or her to follow scientific or

technological argument, and to recognise where scientists or technologists will have to be consulted if the translation is to be a reliable product. Of course it is important to try at the interview stage to identify any would-be translators who appear to have either no aptitude or no inclination to venture into the subject areas where translation is most required. They need to be encouraged to try to apply their talents elsewhere.

Unlike the polyglots I referred to in my introduction, today's modern languages graduate generally knows at most two foreign languages, so in order to compete in the job market the trainee should if possible acquire a translator's knowledge of one or more further languages during the period of traineeship. In a survey such as this there is not the opportunity to discuss the question of which languages should be available to enhance the trainee's array of languages. It should be observed, however, that while on the one hand the trainee will be by definition a fairly able language learner, on the other, if the trainee knows only French, difficulties are likely to arise if that trainee is confronted with languages which are markedly different from French (and of course English) in structure or morphology, by for instance having a comprehensively marked case system or a radically different order of elements. Nevertheless, it is entirely feasible to provide within one academic year an introductory course which results in a genuinely usable knowledge of a new language, provided that the basis is primarily one of recognition, as required by the professional translator. Incidentally, I have always considered that the successful learning of one or more new languages at the postgraduate stage provides good evidence for an employer that a young translator's facility for language acquisition has not atrophied at the juvenile stage of foreign language learning; in other words that a potential versatility can be called on if required.

The trainee needs not only to add languages but also to have a fresh look at the language of the translation, that is at English. The possession of a good honours degree in modern languages is no guarantee of the trainee's command of English, which has probably not been subjected to systematic scrutiny since the earlier years of secondary school. Since the translated material, as I said earlier, comprises language for use, for practical application, such material must be efficient. Above all, the trainee needs to learn to stand back, look critically at the English translation that has been produced, and answer such questions as: "Is this absolutely clear to anyone who has not seen the source text? Have any obscurities in the

source material been sorted out by the translator and presented unambiguously in the translation, or have they been fudged? Is the degree of formality or informality appropriate to the intended readership, usership, or function? Is the translated material presented in the form and expressed in the terms required by the conventions familiar to the target usership?" This degree of objectivity on the part of the trainee can only be achieved by the inculcation of a cognitive relationship to his or her native language. This will not only cover items where otherwise sloppy practices might intrude, such as the scope of nominal compounds in English and their adaptation to source language structures, or the crucial decision to be made in English between defining and non-defining relative clauses. It will also deal with areas in English which lend themselves to distortion in translation through the influence of the source language.

Finally, the trainee translator needs to learn the paramount importance and therefore the techniques of the presentation of work. Like the quality of English, standards of presentation will have come under no more than random scrutiny and control during the trainee's previous education, throughout which his or her experience of current techniques is likely to have been equally random. The trainee will therefore have to learn such aspects of computing as are necessary for work-processing and other facilities required in the presentation of work. This sector of the trainee's learning should obviously be expanded to include other computing requirements of the translation process itself such as access to data banks and dictionaries.

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Lastly I come to a very brief 'How' in respect of the teaching required to satisfy the seven learning requirements I have listed - brief, because in most cases the teaching solution is fairly obvious once the learning requirement has been identified, the only difficulty then being the availability of personnel, skills, or other resources. I will not claim that all desiderata have been satisfied on the postgraduate course of which I have been Director at the University of Kent for almost twenty years, but a good many of them have been, and at least some distance has been travelled towards achieving the remaining goals.

The aim of changing the trainee's attitude to translated material is best achieved by maintaining the strongest possible link between the linguistic material and, as it were, the 'real' world in the form of, for instance, technological artefacts or assimilable background information. This also helps to achieve the further aim of demonstrating of the trainee that it is only in the mother tongue that such items can be handled convincingly.

Speed, spontaneity, and immediacy of reaction are progressively increased not only by increasing expectations of text-lengths to be processed but by on-sight translation, oral translation of written - and indeed of oral - source material, and, on a more informal basis, by liaison interpreting.

Achieving the conversion of the trainee into a person who can operate, as it were, in alien fields - and not just in one specialist alien field, for no one can predict where the qualified translator will land up - is a tricky business and needs a varied approach. A contribution can be made, for instance, by linking (as I mentioned in connection with attitudes) the linguistic exercise of translation with a familiarity in the translation class with, at first, fairly straightforward products of technology. Or, as we have also done at Kent, hands-on technology classes for trainee translators are taught by well-briefed technology teachers, and in parallel with these and in the same fields a professional translator teaches technical translation. This way, confidence grows in handling what would be remote subject areas for arts graduates. The ultimate aim is well expressed in a 1993 Observer review by Mary Warnock of a reprint of The Two Cultures:

"The fact is that to bridge the gap between science and the arts, we need to broaden the concept of science, not as Snow thought, teach arts people to mouth propositions about the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Those attracted to a newly comprehensive subject could become specialists later. If they did not, they could form exactly the body of scientifically literate managers, civil servants, journalists, teachers and industrialists..."

- and I would add translators -

"... whom Snow, albeit dimly, perceived that we need."⁽³⁾

The trainee's acquisition of new languages needs to be provided for by specially designed introductory courses, not by catch-all courses. These courses need to move fast, as they can with learners of proven ability, to have an early translation input, and to concentrate, as I mentioned earlier, on recognition.

The quality of the translator's use of English requires, in my opinion, a tailor-made component, which at Kent we have called The Translation Process and the Use of English, with sub-components entitled Problems of Translation, Thinking about Translation, and Efficient English for Translators.

Finally it is clear that trainee has to be provided with instruction in the use of computers and in word-processing, at the same time being required during the trainee period to present work to professional standards.

Yes, professional translation can, I believe, be taught.

(1) C.P.Snow, The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution (The Rede Lecture 1959), Cambridge 1960, p. 17

(2) op.cit., p 28

(3) The Observer. 3 October 1993

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