Developing the Sensibility to Language Effects in Translator-Training Courses¹

Paola Faini, University of Roma Tre, Italy

What proves positive and fruitful in any theoretical discourse about translation is that it allows the formation and diffusion of global views and perspectives about the act of linguistic and cultural mediation which help to cross the institutional “borders”. At the same time, however, one should admit that a general theoretical approach cannot necessarily deal with the specific problems originating with the range and diversity of the target languages. In fact, whilst the language and the cultural setting of the source text (English, for instance) may represent a common field of action, the target texts are the expression of the various target languages, each working according to and within its own requirements and cultural context. It ensues that, if the final product (i.e. the translated text) in a given language is the result of a linguistic and cultural “adaptation”, the full appreciation of its rendering is intended for those who are acquainted with that language. Failing this competence, only a proportion of the adaptation strategies and practical solutions may be shared, since a fairly good part of the decision-making process depends on the features of the target language, namely structure, lexis,

¹ I have purposely chosen to preserve the features of orality that characterised my contribution to the ESSE Seminar 9/46. The practical aspects dealt with often allow (and sometimes even suggest) a degree of unconventionality, since their main usefulness is to be found in the results of practical experience and in the suggestions they can offer.

Material


phonological and rhythmical traits, etc. In short, one can discuss, or analyze to the last detail, the elements of a source text which are relevant with regard to translation; one can also agree upon which strategies are to be used in order to preserve this relevance in the translated text; nonetheless, one must also accept the fact that these strategies vary depending on the requirements of the target language. When practical methodology is at issue, it is essential to be aware of the limit imposed by the shift in perspective that takes place when the focus is on the target language and its structures, on its stylistic conventions and cultural requirements.

In the didactical perspective, this shift mirrors the second stage in translator training courses. After evaluating the nature and function of the source text, and after analyzing its distinguishing features, the teaching activity then concentrates on both the potentiality and demands of the target language, aiming at developing the ability to “make decisions”, in order to bring out a target text which is meant to be as “equivalent” as possible to the source text. The decision-making process implies choosing, among the options of the target language, the ones that best realize this ideal outcome. This means focusing on the development of the students’ professional abilities: taken for granted a good knowledge of the source language – English, in this case –, other skills need to be developed, and these skills are concerned with the command of the target language. If a good mastery of English is an indisputable requirement, what is even more essential (though it is often a somewhat neglected detail), is the excellent mastery of the target language, and consequently the full awareness of its potentiality.

The variety between target languages makes it difficult to share the more specific and analytic aspects of a target text. This limit inevitably reverberates on my contribution, which has to resort to the stratagem of back translation in order to highlight some key points and comment on the solutions offered by the translator. Despite this limit, I hope that the general principles underlying my considerations may be shared in the name of flexibility, a quality necessary when adapting any strategy or solution to different contexts and requirements. It is therefore within these limits that I am going to discuss a feature which is only seemingly marginal in literary translation. I am aware that the appealing, though sometimes despairing, activity of the literary translator is a sort of niche, and that it represents just a small proportion of the great amount of professional translations produced yearly around the world. Nonetheless, I also believe that, whichever specialized knowledge and skill translation students are expected to learn, the literary text is a good training ground, because – among other positive aspects - it strengthens the attention and helps to refine the sensibility to language structures and effects. These qualities are essential for the full awareness of what this transition, this movement of ideas, words, structures, linguistic and cultural experiences that we call translation implies.

It may sound tautological to use the adjective expressive in connection to literary texts. This adjective may of course be applied to lots of texts of various natures and functions, but its implications are of peculiar significance whenever literary language is involved: in fact, the language of literature expresses much more than the structural organization and lexical implications that the text seems to communicate. Literary texts are highly expressive; their effects are to be found in their global meaning, which implies that every feature has to be taken into account. The careful approach and skilful treatment they require also find their motivations in the fact that, far from lasting for a short time, most literary texts have a long life expectancy. The translator’s responsibility cannot be underestimated: the reception, or even the acceptance, of a text within a different culture largely depends on the outcome of the translator’s professional mediation. This helps to account for the advantage in training translation students to be able to perceive stylistic variations, such as sound or rhythm for instance, which are part of the global communicative effect, and represent two of the basic elements in literary communication. In fact, sound and rhythm, by positively affecting one’s sense of hearing, contribute to the enriched perception of meanings created by both the textual architecture and the narrative plot.
Let’s take rhythm, for instance. Rhythm is the natural melody each language has. It is how the language flows. To attempt at a practical definition, one might say that rhythm is produced by the flow of words or, better, by the flow of syllables which are uttered in a continuous emission of voice. This continuous flow generates a sequence, or melodic unit, i.e. a meaningful part of speech with a “musical” form. The span of the melodic unit may differ not only between languages, but also within the same language, though in this latter case there seems to be a relatively recurring trend. Indeed, each language has its own music, in more ways than one.

As a rule, but not out of necessity, punctuation sets the pauses (long or short, according to the marks) thus denoting the beginning and the end of the melodic unit. By “not out of necessity” I mean that the pauses may be re-distributed when read aloud, or even mentally: longer units are sometimes divided and made shorter, whilst two or even more units may be brought together. Subjectivity plays its role, of course: the use of pauses is functional both to a physiological necessity (taking a breath) and to the planning of speech. What should not be forgotten, however, is the relevance of the author’s choices with regards to his/her rhetorical planning, employed specifically to contribute to the creation of original effects. These effects may vary, of course, according to the style of punctuation: the grammatical use, which was typical of the “classical” prose of the late 18th century and 19th century in particular, usually results in a harmonious balance between the syntactical and phonological units.

On the contrary, modern prose-writing often uses punctuation with different aims in mind, and therefore with different features.

Contemporary literary prose, in particular, either tends towards a continuous flow in the effort to reproduce the stream of consciousness, or, towards fragmentation, breaking up sentences to focus on more than one element. These strategies clearly reveal a psychological use of punctuation: on the one hand the correspondence between syntactical and phonological units characterizing classical prose is seemingly lost, whilst what is gained is a more original and expressive effect, that is felt both in the oral production and in the mental act of “oralizing” the written text.

The significance of these aspects cannot be underestimated: rhythm is an essential feature in modernism, for instance, but also 19th-century prose shows interesting – though somewhat different - examples of a rhythmical use of the language. Despite the undoubted worth of these features, however, a certain degree of carelessness (or perhaps indifference to these details) is shown in some translations which testify to the tendency to introduce unnecessary changes that inevitably modify the span of the original melodic unit. Indeed, if a text has its own balanced structure, and if there is a purposeful aim in its melodic units, should one be allowed to alter its structure and its aim? Is it fair to neglect the meaningful side effects of its melody? In an attempt to answer this, I will look at two short passages from the works of two quite different writers, Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf.

Austen’s prose is not only an outstanding example of the grammatical use of punctuation but also shows how this use can be meaningful. The passage is from Emma, 1815.

Emma could not bear to give him pain. He was wishing to confide in her – perhaps to consult her; cost her what it would, she would listen. She might assist his resolution, or reconcile him to it; she might give just praise to Harriet, or, by representing to him his own independence, relieve him from that state of indecision which must be more intolerable than any alternative to such a mind as his. They had reached the house.  

---

3 Interesting studies on this aspect (in particular Tomás Navarro Tomás, 1939, “El grupo tónico como unidad melódica”, Revista de Filología Hispanica, I, 3-19, and G.L. Beccaria, Ritmo e melodia nella prosa italiana, 1964) try to define the standard span in some languages. Italian, for instance, tends to a medium span between 4 and 9 syllables; German between 4 and 12, and English between 4 and 8. The maximum span may be over 20 syllables in Italian and German, but it only borders on 18 in English and Spanish.

Austen’s grammatical – but also partly psychological - use of punctuation results in the parallelism of the syntactic and phonological units I have already mentioned. A peculiar feature is that the span of the units (by convention the number of syllables) tends to decrease, and this movement is defined by her use of punctuation marks. Let us analyze the passage with this in mind.

*Emma could not bear to give him pain.* The first melodic unit consists of 9 syllables, most of them rhythmically vibrating (but not, to, him are weak forms). Then there begins the upward and suspended intonation of the next sentence (4 units, 9,6,5,4), finishing with a fall in intonation in the final unit:

*He was wishing to confide in her,* up and pause
*perhaps to consult her;* up and pause
*cost her what it would,* up and pause
*she would listen.* down and conclusion.

The downward tonal movement is foreshadowed by the decreasing number of syllables (9,6,5) which culminates in the sharp definiteness of the last unit: *she would listen.*

A game of contrasts characterizes the next sentence, with 6 melodic units: the first, second and third are relatively balanced (9-7-8), *She might assist his resolution,* or reconcile him to it; *she might give just praise to Harriet;* then the isolated connective, or, is placed between two commas, which give emphasis. There follows a longer unit, 13 syllables: *by representing to him his own independence,* taking to the core sentence, an unusually long unit of 32 syllables, which represent a very high span for any language and a sort of endurance test for one’s vocal chords: *relieve him from that state of indecision which must be more intolerable than any alternative to such a mind as his.* There are no punctuation marks in this unit, and ideally there should be no pauses when reading it aloud, or mentally. What is interesting is the conscious strategy employed by the author to impose this stretching of the voice, thus creating more emphasis on the words being read and the psychological effect that is in turn produced. In fact, the narrative focuses on two words, *indecision* and *intolerable*:

Emma’s *indecision* finds its counterpart in the worried attitude of the reader, who looks in vain for a pause and is forced, almost *intolerably,* to hold his/her breath before reaching the end of the unit. Thus, the reader’s physiological unease echoes Emma’s psychological unease. The extract finishes with a final sentence comprising of five chanted monosyllabic words: *They had reached the house.*

The author’s search for a formal balance results in an evident symmetry between the syntactical and phonological units. This harmonious symmetry is the effect of the grammatical use of punctuation, as well as of the fundamental role played by the phonetic features of the English language, *i.e.* a very high proportion of monosyllables and disyllables. This harmonious balance also contributes to the cadenced succession of the protagonist’s thoughts.

Despite all these considerations, even good translations show a tendency to alter the rhythmical balance of the melodic units. Some of these alterations cannot be avoided, since they are often due to the features of the target language, Italian in this case. Unlike English, Italian is rich in polysyllables, and the obvious consequence is the increased span of the melodic units. A few figures may help to catch at first sight the variation in rhythm present in the translated texts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Translated 1</th>
<th>Translated 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ST: 9/9,6,5/9,7,8,1/13,32/5</td>
<td>TT1: 16/14,7,11,9/16,10,19,1,17,14,30/12</td>
<td>TT2: 18/16,9,7,8/13,9,16,13,23,9,9/9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The increase in the span of the melodic units is only too evident. As already discussed, it is partly ascribable to the different features of Italian, but it is also due to the changes and adaptations introduced in translation. In order to eliminate any possible ambiguity, for instance, TT2 starts by replacing the personal

---

5 The slash and the comma separating the figures stand for the full-stop and other punctuation marks, respectively.

6 Suffice to say (I am not quoting the translated passages, therefore I am not providing any bibliographical details) that I am referring to two sophisticated and esteemed – though somewhat dated – translations.
pronoun with the subject’s name, Mr Knightley; it introduces conjunctions; and it modifies the span of the 32-syllable period by altering the order and introducing an interpolated clause.

A back translation into English may help to highlight the additions and alterations, emphasized in bold in the quote below:

But Emma could not bear to give him pain. Since he was wishing to confide in her... and perhaps to consult her, she would listen to him, cost her what it would.

The changes are not irrelevant, and their consequence is the loss of the rapid succession of units which reproduced the rapid succession of Emma’s thoughts. The neat melody characterizing this part of the original text dissolves, as the figures show: 9/9,6,5,4/ change into 18/16,9,7,8/ (in TT). In all, this represents an increase of 25 syllables, from 33 to 58.

Some more alterations can be found in the next unit:

The source text reads: (…) relieve him from that state of indecision which must be more intolerable than any alternative to such a mind as his.

And the back translation: (…) relieve him from a state of indecision certainly more intolerable, to such a mind as his, than any alternative.

The new syntactic string in the Italian translation proves how the changes in punctuation and word order can modify the rhythm, by introducing pauses which alter the flow of words characterising the source text. The translator seems to remove any obstacle that threatens a lexically- and grammatically-accurate translation, focusing more on the fluency. The problem is that his choice alters the melody and nullifies the psychological effect that, as has been observed when analysing the original text, was produced by the balance between the span of the melodic unit and the focus on the two key words, indecision and intolerable.

A final remark on the closing sentence, They had reached the house. 5 rhythmical syllables communicate the conclusion of the action in the source text, whilst there are 9 in TT. This time, however, despite the syllabic increase (although a relatively reasonable increase), the translator senses the rhythmical effect, and tries to reproduce the beats, three in English and three in Italian: They had reached the house and Erano davanti a casa: (back translation: They were before the house:).

The syllabic span is different (5 vs 8), the number of words is different (5 vs 4), but the effect is most similar, and the search for this effect seems to account for the deletion of a meaningful word, the Italian equivalent of the verb reach. What remains is simply a stative verb, which implies no motion, as the back translation has shown, thus extending the duration of the action. The use of the imperfect tense in Italian (instead of the English past perfect) also results in the longer duration of the action, and communicates suspense and expectation, almost heralding the use of the colon which, in the translated sentence, replaces the full stop. Despite the changes, the translator has clearly demonstrated his skill: he has preserved the melody by reproducing the right beat; he has created a pause by interrupting Emma’s thoughts and hinting at a necessary change in her behaviour. Finally, by changing the full stop into colon, he has suggested a projection towards the future, thus bridging the gap between two very different psychological conditions.

Time is relevant, indeed. And any passage in Woolf’s novels proves this relevance. Ordinary everyday words are part of a harmonious structure, and they acquire their weight in relation to the span of the unit they belong to. Let it suffice to give the following example:

The audience was assembling. They came streaming along the paths and spreading across the lawn. Some were old; some were in the prime of life. There were children among them. Among them, as Mr Figgis might have observed, were representatives of our most respected families – the Dyces of Denton; the Wickhams of Owlswisck; and so on. Some had been there for centuries, never selling an acre.\(^7\)

At first glance, even without counting the syllables, the structure looks well-defined, and clearly arranged. The second unit is approximately double the first (from 7 to 15 syllables); the third reduces the number of syllables to 3, whilst the fourth and fifth reinstate the original length (7). A rhythmical alternation then begins, which culminates in a central long unit (were representatives of our most respected families) and concludes in a short unit (and so on). The final two units show a decreasing trend. This articulation is consistent with the meaning conveyed, which is even more evident if one considers the reinforcing effect of sounds which is so typical of Woolf’s prose. The perception of the audience that was assembling is emphasized by the self-contained length of the unit. The unit that follows defines this perception, through both the semantic and the phonological value of its verbs: the recurrence of fricatives, in fact, contributes to the effect. In short, the range of the units is functional and not incidental.

Relying on these principles, it is important that when a translation is undertaken, these aspects are taken into due consideration. Modifying the length of the units can modify the effect. What I mean is that there is a difference if the translation (back translation in this case) gives the following outcome:

**ST** Some were old; some were in the prime of life. There were children among them. Among them […]. Some had been there for centuries, never selling an acre.

**TT** Some were old, some √ in the prime of life. There were also some children there among them. Among them […]. Some had been there for centuries and had never sold an acre.

The shorter pause (a comma) in the TT reduces the emphatic effect produced by the semicolon in the ST. The deleted (√) were, though implicit, had a meaningful function in the ST because it gave the second half of the period, therefore the second group of people (the ones in their prime) the same emphatic status as the first group: this effect is less evident in the TT. The redundant use of also and of the second there both modifies the span of the melodic unit and reduces the emphasis. New paragraphs have been introduced, as the back translation shows, and the original pause in the final sentence gives way to the rapid succession granted by the use of and.

What I hope these few considerations have illustrated is that literary translation requires an awareness of the effects that may be produced. This awareness also implies a necessary compromise between what a text is and what a text is going to be, which entails - among other issues - finding a new balance between the syllabic value of words, and the span of the melodic unit, in short, finding a rhythm that may somehow reproduce the original effect. This awareness should help to avoid unnecessary redundancies and unwarranted modifications in punctuation, and prevent altering the global rhythmical effect.

To conclude, there are acceptable changes and changes that should be considered unwise or, at least, unsuitable. Only a careful analysis of the original text, together with a conscious and skilled use of the target language, can help the translator in his effort to give new life to a text that is meant to reproduce, as far as possible, the original semantic and communicative effects.
Introduction

The use of translation as part of the English classes represents a common practice, and the work generated in this context is usually evaluated according to linguistic and stylistic criteria. However, with the development of the translator training programmes, the type of work being assessed has taken more elaborate forms and, consequently, the teachers must use different criteria of evaluation. The need for a new assessment scale is also obvious from the perspective of the translation students, who must be made aware of the standards expected from their work now and in the future.

The truth is that students often feel confused when their translations are assessed and their mistakes are corrected, because, in most cases, teachers do not reveal their criteria of evaluation. And, if they do, they often restrict themselves to rules of grammar, while various semantic, stylistic and pragmatic aspects are decided on in a rather ad hoc manner or by the authority of the teacher’s <<feel for the language>>. Such subjective methods of evaluation are certainly of not very much help to the students, because they will not be able to learn something they can apply when they are faced with a problem next time.

Kussmaul (1995, 33) stresses the fact that <<the ability to discuss translations in an objective way is central to a translator’s
In other words, it is part of the translator trainers’ job to provide their students with professional arguments and a very good opportunity of doing that is represented by the evaluation stage of the training process. Therefore, statements such as <<it sounds better>> or <<I found it in the dictionary>> are completely useless when it comes to issues of evaluation and errors in the professional translator training process. Professionalism implies the ability to rationalize one’s decision-making processes in an objective way, and an important step in this respect is to provide the students with objective criteria according to which the quality of their work is to be judged.

The aim of this paper is to discuss aspects regarding the process of evaluation in the field of professional translator training, starting from two basic questions. Firstly, since it is not the students’ language skills that represent the focus of assessment, then what do we, as translator trainers, evaluate? And, secondly, how should the process of evaluation be performed so that it would teach the future translators something relevant about the standards that their work must meet in the real world?

**What do the translator trainers assess?**

Even if, in most of the cases, the assessment is based on one or several texts translated from a source language into a target language, researchers (e.g. Martinez Melis & Hurtado Albir 2001) generally agree that, in broad terms, the focus of evaluation in the context of professional translator training is represented by the translation competence. More specifically, the translation competence is a complex of knowledge and skills that a person needs in order to be able to translate. Starting from the models offered by Bell (1991), Neubert (2000) and Martinez Melis & Hurtado Albir (2001), I consider that translation competence can be best described in terms of the following parameters:

1) **Language competence**

A good linguistic competence can certainly be defined as a sine-qua-non condition of translation. It represents a near-perfect knowledge of the subtleties of the grammatical and the lexical systems of the two languages involved in the translation process. Translators should be also aware of the continual changes at work both in the source language and in the target one, an aspect which is only partially reflected in dictionaries and other reference books.

2) **Discourse competence**

Words and structures, though existing and describable by themselves as systemic elements, follow significant patterns when they feature in texts or, rather, in text types or genres. Therefore, translators should have the ability to combine form and meaning in order to produce unified spoken or written texts in different genres.

3) **Thematic competence**

Translators should be familiar with what constitutes the body of knowledge of the domain to which a translation belongs. Even if this knowledge is not necessarily active, translators should have the capacity to access the encyclopaedic as well as highly specialized information whenever they need it.

4) **Cultural competence**

It involves a variety of means and strategies for identifying and solving problems related to a cultural context other than that of the translator and his/her target audience. More specifically, the translator’s task at this level is to mediate between the culture of the sender and that of the recipient.

5) **Professional competence**

It involves knowledge and skills relating to professional translation practice: knowledge of documentation sources, new technologies, professional conduct, responsibility for his/her own work, etc.
6) Transfer competence

The truth is that translators may have very good language skills, great specialist expertise and deep understanding of the two cultures, but, if this excellent equipment is not matched by the transfer competence in order to produce an adequate variant of the source text, they have failed. The transfer competence involves the ability to perform the entire process of transfer from the original text to the translated text: comprehension, re-formulation, selection of the most appropriate translation method, etc.

How is the translation assessment performed?

It is obvious that translation competence represents a very complex phenomenon, and, consequently, the manner in which it is assessed can by no means be a simplistic one either. In other words, in the process of professional translator training, the assessor should take into account a wide range of criteria meant to capture the multi-faceted nature of the translation skill.

My suggestion is that the assessment criteria to be used in the process of professional translator training can be established in close correlation with the sub-skills defining each of the sub-competencies that a particular training programme is meant to build in the future translators. The separate assessment of the various features displayed by the translation work does not only increase the objectivity of the evaluation process, but also represents a good manner of raising the students’ awareness of what exactly is required from a good translator.

Staring from the sub-competencies underlying the general translation competence as they were described above, I designed an assessment scheme that can be used in the context of professional translator training. Before I present it, I would like to mention that the scheme is the result of the preliminary stage of a larger research project meant to highlight, on the one hand, the competences that the professional translator training institutions in Romanian are meant to build and to develop, and, on the other hand, the criteria according to which the future translators are assessed in these institutions. Therefore, the scheme is open to improvement.

Translation assessment scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRANSLATION SUB-COMPETENCY</th>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| LANGUAGE COMPETENCE | grammar (e.g. verb form, countable vs. uncountable nouns, choice of word class, word formation, sentence and phrase structure, etc.)
general vocabulary (appropriate use of words and phrases)
mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization) |
| DISCOURSE COMPETENCE | cohesion and coherence (e.g. use of connectives, use of pronouns vs. lexical reiteration, lexical chains, etc.)
style and register (e.g. formal vs. informal, neutral vs. emotional, etc.)
appropriate for the ST consistent within the TT structure awareness (at the level of text, paragraph, sentence) |
| THEMATIC COMPETENCE | ST term rendered by the officially accepted TT term
consistent terminology within the TT correct decoding of the ST due to field awareness |
| CULTURAL COMPETENCE | awareness and appropriate treatment of culturally-embedded words and phrases (e.g. proper names, various titles, euphemisms, units of weight and measurement, etc.)
according to the purpose of the translation and the prospective readership, the translator preserves, explains or adapts the culture-related issues
awareness of the TL conventions for the genre to which the translation belongs |
| PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE | use of various documentation sources
use of new technologies
conforming to the instructions given in the translation task
ability to justify the translation decisions |
Final remarks

In any educational context, the process of assessment is closely related to that of grading. The importance accorded to each of the criteria suggested in the scheme above does not have an absolute nature, depending on two main factors. On the one hand, it depends on the particular sub-competence(s) that the translation teacher intends to highlight at a particular stage of the training process. Consequently, it is possible that the criteria regarding the language competence may weigh more at the beginning of the instructional process, while, towards its end, the criteria of professional competence should predominate in the process of assessment and grading. On the other hand, as Kussmaul (1995) suggests, the assessor should take into account the effect that a certain inappropriate translation solution has on the target reader, that is whether the error distorts the intended meaning, whether it somehow impedes communication or weakens the psychological effect. In other words, teachers must be aware that, in certain situations, <<what looks as a simple orthographic error does in fact change the meaning of a whole sentence, and what looks as a simple error in word meaning distorts the meaning of the entire text>> (Kussmaul 1995, 130), and that they are supposed to grade such errors accordingly.

Bibliography


