Being a Translator is More than Just Being Good at Languages

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"Experience is the best teacher."

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1. Introduction

We all know that in every field when a graduate applies for a job, the employer asks first what practical experience s/he has. Theoretical learning and training based on laws or general principles obtained during the academic years is not enough for anyone in any field to get hired. Experience is of course essential for all people. Without experience of the world we would never learn anything, it is an integral part of our being in the world.

Referring to translation work, the question is what kind of experience is indispensable for a translator. Some translators have extensive experiences of one or more foreign languages from books, coursework at school. Others have a rich experience of the cultures in which it is natively spoken. They have been exposed to native people who speak those languages in different regions, and social classes. Some novice translators have only a superficial, poor experience of the foreign language and the subject matter but a rich experience with dictionaries. Which experience is necessary for a professional translator to be able to do her/his job at hand? A solid experiential grounding in a foreign language can get a translator through a difficult text when s/he has little experience of the subject matter. Sometimes knowledge of similar languages and a dictionary can help a translator to do her/his job if the text is fairly simple. The ability to compensate for failings in some areas with strengths in others is the translator's professional skill. The more experience of the world a translator has gained, the better and easier s/he will translate. The more words, phrases, and texts a person has translated, the better a translator that person is likely to be. It is true that a good, experienced translator always wants to know more, to experience more, and never feels satisfied with her/his job. In other words the translator is forever restless in search of more

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experience. The translator's experience makes it possible to translate faster, more reliable, and more enjoyable. The translator should take into consideration the experience of the world referring to people, professions, languages, social networks, and cultures.

2. Translator's intuition

During my classes of Theory and Technique of Translation students translate texts from different fields and of course there are some difficult passages to be understood and translated by them. While reading several times those difficult stretches of English language students rely on an intuitive sense, guessing the meaning of that word or phrase in the context and then they look things up in reference books or ask questions in class.

Douglas Robinson, professor of English at Lingnan University, Hong Kong, wrote in his book that intuition plays an essential part in the translation process. While translating an experienced translator can feel a problem word intuitively right in a certain text. This means that "the procedural memory of the translator has taken over" (Robinson 2012: 79). In previous translator's experience that problem word appeared in other contexts with the same semantic extension. The translator doesn't check the word in dictionaries any longer, because s/he trusts her/his intuition or experience and proceeds further with translation.

The same intuition can tell the experienced translator that the word or phrase s/he has come up with has to be checked in reference books in order to make it appropriate for a particular context. In that case the translator checks the problem word in dictionaries in order to stop doubting. When s/he is sure of the right meaning, the process of translation can continue.

The same author says that:

> …the semantic core of translation is a process of remembering and vetting words and phrases which is steeped in intuition. A good and experienced translator knows for sure when to trust her/his intuition and when to subject it to close scrutiny and testing (*Ibidem*: 80).

When the translation has been completed, the translator edits it with a careful eye. Translators should always solve all the problems in a text, and read and check twice their work before submitting a finished translation, to be sure that it is correct and reliable.

I shall quote Douglas' words, as follows:

> Not every translation revolves around the one and only accurate translation for a given word or phrase. In "free translations" or "adaptations" such as television advertisements or "retellings" of literary classics for children, intuition is important not in order to recall the "correct" word but to come up with an effective word or image that may well deviate sharply from the original. In these situations creativity and effectiveness are prized above accuracy, and the translator's free flow of imagination helps things flowing (*Ibidem*: 81).

I'll give an example of the use of intuition by one of my students when he attended the translation classes and wrote a very good translation:

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> Source text: You can dine "alfresco" in the summer on our open air terrace.
>
> Target text: Vara puteți sta afară pe terasă să serviți masa în aer liber.

Alfresco, "in the open air", is a loan word in English, and both words have the same propositional meaning. The student didn't know its meaning but he used intuition and translated it appropriately.

3. Deductive principles of translation: rules & theories

In his research book regarding translation, Robinson makes reference to the "deductive principles of translation that arise out of the translator's own experience" (Robinson 2012: 83), the checking of best guesses through a lot of individual cases. By intuition the translator tries something that feels right, without any clear sense of how well it will work. Robinson emphasizes that:

> By induction, in the pattern-building stage, the translator allows broad regularities to emerge from the materials s/he has been exposed to. By deduction the translator imposes those regularities on new materials by way of predicting or controlling what they will entail (*Ibidem*).

I shall paraphrase Robinson's words regarding the translator who should be receptive to new experiences being able to learn and grow. "The application of rules and theories to new material must be fed from below remaining flexible in response to pressures from new intuitive leaps and newly discovered patterns" (*Ibidem*).

Translators believe that it is important to translate the meaning of the original text, not individual words and phrases. This is the fundamental axiom of all mainstream translation all over the world. Translators always learn more things in rich experiential contexts. Experience remains important in every filed even when being taught someone else's deductive principles. At faculty of foreign languages the beginning student translator, for instance, who was told by the teacher to translate the meanings of whole sentences, not individual words, will still have to test the principle in practice. This experiential testing process will be channeled by the rule or model given by the teacher and it will move more quickly and effectively toward its goal than it would if left to develop on its own. The novice translators will progress much more rapidly toward professional competence than they would out in the working world on their own. This also helps them to broaden their sense of the translation field.

The translator is a lifelong learner, eager to experience new things in order to broaden her/his world. Translators know that intuition, pattern-building, and rules and theories are important items of experience and learning. Each of the above mentioned items has a special and invaluable contribution to make to the learning process: intuitive guesswork is creative, pattern-building and rules and theories are essential to professional competence and have an expansive effect on the learner, opening up wider horizons of translation.

4. Comprehension in translation

As we all know, the propositional meaning is the meaning of the word is its use in the language. This means that for the translator words and meanings are important in the context. The most reliable way to learn a new word is in context, as

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used by someone else in a real situation. A word learnt in a dictionary will feel awkward, even if its dictionary meaning is correct. An example of this situation is the student paper full of words taken straight out of a dictionary, words that the student has never used in a real conversation or written sentence. The words are used mechanically and without attention to the nuances of actual human speech or writing. The more situational and personal associations a translator has with a word or a phrase, the more complexly and flexibly s/he will be able to use it in translation work. The more complexly and flexibly a translator uses language, the better a translator s/he will be. I shall give an example from my personal experience when I worked as a student-guide with German groups in Romania. I learnt that during meals it was polite to tell the tourists "guten Appetit" ("enjoy your meal"), but the delegate of the group told everyone "Mahlzeit" ("grind time"), that meant "to cut food into very small pieces." My German teacher advised me then to work during holidays as a guide among native speakers, tourists from the travel office in Bucharest, as much as possible, in order to learn German language better and to be fluent in speaking. I practiced both languages English and German during my holidays at faculty working as a guide in the national travel office in Bucharest.

Among translator's instructors and theoreticians it is well-established that translation work involves comprehension of the source language beyond the simple recognition of words and linguistic structures. The main reason for the requirement of comprehension in translation lies in the fact that languages are not isomorphic, since they are not modeled on the same lexical and structural patterns, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the words and structures of any two languages. There are words in one language that have no exact equivalents in another. There are subtle differences that relate to stylistics or pragmatics: the use of particular type of word or structure may mean one thing in one language and something else in another. This means that word for word translation even if it is linguistically possible, may result in a target text that is clumsy, erroneous or even nonsensical.

Comprehension in translation varies from non-comprehension to full comprehension. Besides knowledge of the language comprehension implies knowledge of the outside world, called extra-linguistic knowledge or encyclopedic knowledge or background knowledge. The subjective feeling of comprehension that arises in translator's mind is not always a reliable indicator of the actual level of comprehension. When first reading a text before agreeing to translate it, the translator may feel that it poses no comprehension problems, but difficulties crop up when s/he starts working on it. It is the phenomenon of recognizing words and phrases but not their understanding. The comprehension increases when knowledge increases. Comprehension of the source language must be very high, because errors in word usage and grammar can arise. For the translator it is essential to understand the functional and logical structure of the sentences so as to be able to reproduce them in the target language.

5. Comprehension of specialized texts

There are two different opinions regarding translating of specialized texts: some bilinguals believe that translating technical or scientific texts is simple,

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provided one knows the words. Others believe that it is difficult to translate texts in the fields they are not familiar to. The basic principle is that a translator cannot translate what s/he doesn't understand. The specialists in technical or scientific fields grasp the meaning of the terms in a specialized text quicker and more accurate and they can relate the terms and the new information to the information they already possess. The translators must understand the functional and logical structure of the sentences in order to be able to reproduce them in the target language. Then it is sufficient for translators to know the proper terminological equivalents of words in a specialized text to produce a good translation in a field they don't know very well. Technical and scientific glossaries and dictionaries are never exhaustive or reliable, and cannot always provide non-specialized translators with the appropriate solutions of their terminological problems. It may happen sometimes that the problematic source-language term may be missing in a dictionary, or several possible equivalents may be listed without sufficient indications to allow the translator to determine which the right one in the translation context is or an equivalent is given but is later found to be erroneous or inappropriate. When the translators don't understand a few terms in the source language, or the equivalent terms in the target language are not quite appropriate, then they ask experts to help them with scientific or technical terminology.

Translation of specialized texts may go like this: you project yourself imaginatively into the professional activities of the source author and you will gain an intuitive guide to individual choice of words and phrases. This guide is based on guesswork and imaginative projections, not actual experience. No one, not even the best translator, is ever perfectly proficient on every job s/he does; all translation contains an element of guesswork. Most translators have to guess at some words in almost every text they translate. I would like to give a personal example when I helped a friend of mine, a surgeon, who needed help in a translation of a medical text from English into Romanian. He was able to understand all the medical words present in the text and I was able to make the connections between different words in the text. If I had to translate that text alone I wouldn't be able to do that without his help, because I couldn't understand the terminology and the medical descriptions and phenomena which were difficult for my comprehension. Even if I knew the words I was not familiar to that field.

Summing up, in order to translate a sentence in a specialized discourse translators have to understand its functional and logical structure, and to have available the appropriate equivalents or paraphrases to express the same message in the target language. Translators look for the necessary information in various written sources. They are helped by the context provided by the specialized texts and thus they gain more knowledge about the subject and improve their comprehension of terminology used in that field.

6. Terminological knowledge

As I mentioned in the motto of the present paper, experience is the best teacher. Besides experience a translator needs to attend classes in specialized terminology, to work theoretically on terminology management, to work with

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dictionaries and glossaries and other reference sources. All of them are useful for translators. Everything is experience but some experiences are richer and more memorable than others. Working in a specialized field is an experience; so is reading a theoretical study of the terminology used in that field. The former is more likely to be memorable than the latter, because interacting with people in actual use-situations and seeing the practical applicability of the terminology to real objects and people and contexts provides more channels for the brain to process the information through; the abstract theorizing is stimulus-poor.

The management of terminology is one of the most important aspects of the translator's job. Terminology study is a key sub-discipline within the field of translation studies. Learning specialized terminology is one of the main emphases in any course on legal, medical, commercial, or other technical translation. The terminology is most easily learnt, and stored in memory (so as to facilitate later recall) in context, in actual use-situations, in which the people who use such terms in their daily lives are talking or writing to each other.

Translation has been called the profession of second choice; if your first choice was something different, you are in an excellent position to specialize in the translation of texts written by practitioners of your previous profession. You have an advantage over other translators because you have already the terminology knowledge. Most translators must specialize in a given field – medical translations, legal translations, etc., or take coursework in a given field and read in it widely.

The more experience a translator has of a given profession or workplace or job-related jargon, the better able s/he will be to translate texts in that field. For instance, we can imagine three different situations in which job-related experience can help the translator translate.

A. You have actually worked in the field, but the terminology has dimmed in your memory. You open the dictionary and from among three or four possibilities, the right word jumps off the page and into the translation. Your term-management software offers you a word that you instantly recognize as the right one, and you use it.

B. You have never done the job before, but you have lived and worked on the peripheries of the job for many years: as a secretary in a notary public office, as a nurse in a hospital, etc. Or you have good friends who work in the field, and hear them talking about it very often. Or you are an acute observer and a good listener and draw people out whenever you talk to them, so that, after a chance encounter with a pharmacist or a plumber or a postal worker you have a good sense of how they talk and how they see their world.

C. Or you have read about the field extensively, watched shows about it on television, and imagined yourself as a practitioner in it. Even if you have no firsthand experience of the field, your stock of second-hand information is rich and varied.

Pretending to be a practitioner in the field, therefore, is relatively easy for you, even though there are large gaps in your terminological knowledge. When you look up a technical term in the dictionary you stare at different equivalents and don't recognize any of the words, but one feels right. It is the intuitive rightness that helped you to choose it in your translation.

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7. Interpreting and types of interpreting

The profession of interpreting has a long story. According to Bible at the dawn of human civilization all people spoke one language but when God got angry with people he mixed their languages in such a way that they couldn't understand each other. And since that time the need in interpretation appeared. The first device for simultaneous interpretation was developed in 1926 in America.

In *synchronous* interpretation the interpreter is supposed to be able to give her/his translation while the speaker is uttering the original message. This can be achieved with special telephone equipment. The interpreter receives the original message through her/his ear-phones and simultaneously speaks into the microphone which transmits her/his speech to the listeners.

In *consecutive* interpretation the translating starts after the original speech or some part of it has been completed. The interpreter follows the original speech and if the segment to be translated is too long, then s/he must take notes of the original message.

Interpretation is made for real-time oral communication, in which accuracy is as important as in translation. While processing the speeches interpreters familiarize themselves with the subject matter and gain a better understanding of the speaker's speeches.

Legal and court interpreting

This activity is done in courts of justice, tribunals and jurisdictions where a legal proceeding is held. Legal interpreting can be either consecutive or simultaneous and is done by court interpreters who have formal authorization from the state to work in the courts, and they are called certified court interpreters. Legal translation is not a simple task. Only professional translators specializing in legal translation should translate legal documents, proceedings or witnesses' testimony for example. Legal translation may involve certificates of accuracy, witness statements, depositions, trusts, wills, articles of incorporation, litigation documents, immigration documents, and property/exhibit labels and of course attendance in court by translators/interpreters in some cases. The translators/interpreters should master the source and target languages; otherwise they may have lexical gaps during this difficult activity. All conventions in the source language are culture-dependent and may not correspond to conventions in the target language. Linguistic structures in the source language may have not direct equivalent structures in the target language. It is essential for translators to ensure precise correspondence of these structures in the source text and in the translation.

Media interpreting

This activity is conducted in the simultaneous mode and is provided for live television coverage such as press conferences, live interviews with political figures, artists, sportsmen or people from the business field. The interpreter sits in a sound-proof booth where s/he can see the speaker on a monitor and the set. The interpreter working for the media has to sound as slick and confident as a television presenter. Media interpreting is more stressful than other types of interpreting as the

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interpreter has to deal with a wide range of technical problems coupled with the control room's hassle and wrangling during live coverage.

Escort interpreting

The interpreter who accompanies a person or a delegation on a tour, on a visit, or to a meeting or interview is called an escort interpreter. This is liaison interpreting.

Public sector interpreting

This type of activity is also called community interpreting and occurs in legal and health fields and in local government, social, and education services.

Sign language interpreting

In this activity the interpreter renders the speaker's meaning into the sign language used by the deaf party. When a deaf person signs, the interpreter renders the meaning expressed in the signs into the spoken language for the hearing party, which is sometimes referred to as voice interpreting or voicing. This can be performed either as simultaneous or consecutive interpreting. Sign language interpreters have formal training in an Interpreter Training Program (ITP).

Marketing interpreting (Focus Group)

In focus group interpreting, an interpreter sits in a sound proof booth or in an observer's room with the clients. There is a one-way mirror between the interpreter and the participants of the focus group, wherein the interpreter can observe the participants, but they only see their own reflection. The interpreter hears the conversation in the original language through headphones and simultaneously interprets into the target language for the clients.

Conference interpreting

Conference interpreting is the interpretation of a conference, either simultaneously or consecutively. Conference interpretation is divided between two markets: the institutional and private. International institutions (EU, UN, etc.) holding multi-lingual meetings, often favour interpreting several foreign languages to the interpreters' mother tongues. Local private markets tend to bi-lingual meetings (the local language plus another) and the interpreters work both into and out of their mother tongues; the markets are not mutually exclusive. The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) is the only worldwide association of conference interpreters. It was founded in 1953 and it assembles more than 2,800 professional conference interpreters in more than 90 countries.

8. Conclusion

A translator converts written material such as articles, statements, books from one language into another, and an interpreter converts spoken material such as

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speeches, presentations and the like from one language into another. The best translators are not good interpreters and great interpreters are not good translators. While many professional training programs require interpreters to develop some skill in translation, professionally trained translators often have no exposure to the skills of interpretation.

The profession of an interpreter/translator, especially, conference interpreter is prestigious, well-paid and respected. But the person who wants to be a good translator/interpreter should overcome all obstacles and learn all stages of this profession from the simple interpreter when s/he is young and it is not difficult for her/him to meet the guests at the airport and be their guide up to the conference interpreter. It's one of the most interesting professions because very often the interpreter can see all spheres of our life not as an outsider but from inside.

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Being a Translator is More than Just Being Good at Languages

This paper focuses on the practical experience and theoretical teaching or training that are necessary for the professional translator. The real question is what kind of experience of the world is indispensable for the translator's work. Is experience of the culture or cultures in which it is natively spoken essential? How important is rich experience of one's mother tongue? Is it essential to be exposed to people who speak it in different regions, social classes, and professions? Is it enough to have read in it widely and attentively? Bridging across English and Romanian languages, the reader-based shifts in translations aim perhaps at two ways of seeing and understanding the world.

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