THE PRAISE OF SIGHT TRANSLATION
(AND SQUEEZING THE LAST DROP THEREOUT OF)

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I am convinced that the processes of translation and simultaneous interpretation differ fundamentally (as fundamentally, to begin with, as written and oral speech), and that the demands on memory and attention unique to simultaneous interpretation set it quite apart from all the other forms of mediated interlingual communication. But I am also convinced that translation and interpretation have much that is even more fundamental in common: they both deal with speech, and they are both forms of mediated interlingual communication. Precisely because of the specific psycho-motor adroitness interpretation demands, which has nothing to do with translational competence, there can be no assurance that a superb translator can make a passably good interpreter; but I do not know of any single bad translator who has turned into a good interpreter. That interpreters and translators are born is true, as true it is that musicians are also born. That interpretation and translation cannot therefore be taught is as false as it is true that music can. Interpretation can and must be taught and learnt, and translation (itself to be taught and learnt) is a crucial first step. I now realise that even as a translator, unaware of the existence of simultaneous interpretation, I was already becoming an interpreter. When I used to eke out a living translating books on sociology and linguistics back in Buenos Aires some twenty years ago, I soon discovered the cost-effectiveness of dictating my translations and having them typed later. I would just leaf through the book and start translating (an absolute no no for my students of translation, mind you); whatever editing was needed would come later. I still translate pragmatic texts into the microphone, and I can vouch that one hour of translating makes me much more money than one hour of interpreting. If I had a steady flux of translation jobs, I would be much richer — and possibly more stooping — than I am as an interpreter.

Translation I studied — if not systematically or mainly — at the university. Interpreter I became by dint of sight translating and empiric, i.e. chaotic and inefficient, practicing with tapes. With few and rather recent exceptions, I have done no consecutive interpretation, so I cannot really appreciate its didactic value. Personal experience, on the other hand, has led me to believe that sight translation in general is perhaps the most effective and complete prelude to and
preparation for attacking simultaneous interpretation. In my courses, though, I stick to sight translation of basically pseudo-oral texts (what Chris Taylor calls 'second orality'); texts written, granted — but to be spoken, not read. Their advantage over genuinely oral texts (the transcriptions of impromptu speech) lies in their greater coherence and cohesion, plus the absence of the imperfections, redundancy and ellipsis typical of spontaneous speech. Sight translation of pseudo-oral texts shares basically only one feature with simultaneous interpretation: it must be done in real time, without the possibility of a global perspective. This lone common trait is, precisely, what makes it so useful. As Viezzi rightly points out, sight translation and simultaneous interpretation have their crucial differences: mainly the absence of phonic input and the possibility of 'cheating,' by either leaping forward or backward to see what is coming up or checking what has already gone by. To my mind, these differences are a blessing, since they allow the student to concentrate on language and sense, without burdening memory or distracting attention to make out the acoustic equivalent of handwriting. As a matter of fact, the objectives to be accomplished through sight translation could not realistically be set in the booth. Let us remind ourselves and our students that before they can get it together and quick, they must get it together and right; and in order to get it together and right, they must first try it separately and slow. Another crucial advantage of sight translation, for both would-be translators and interpreters, is that it fosters the marriage of translating and the spontaneity of oral speech. As observed by Michel Rochard, "Les traducteurs doivent à tout prix se réapproprier l'oral pour retrouver le naturel de l'expression qui fait qu'ils seront capables de s'exprimer dans un langage moderne."

Let us not forget either about another by no means negligible difference: sight translation does not require any equipment whatsoever, it can, therefore, be done in any room and with a large number of students. Of course, the larger their ranks, the less effective any practical class becomes. Nevertheless, what I normally do when overwhelmed by numbers is work by chunks of two or three sentences for full translations, to a paragraph for abstracts, by turns, giving as many students as possible the opportunity to try it in class. Those who remain passive listeners can still learn a great deal from the mistakes made by their classmates and the relevant comments and corrections.

1 A similar view is held by Weber and Ilg (whose article I have not read, though). For additional details on my views and practices, may I refer the reader to Viaggio, 1988.

2 In his two articles (Viezzi, 1989a & b), as well as in his answer to David Snelling in The Interpreters' Newsletter, 4, Viezzi questions the usefulness of sight translation, pointing out that written texts differ markedly from oral ones, and also that, unlike the interpreter, the sight translator has the whole text before him. I think my rules would at least partially dissipate his qualms.

3 "Translators ought at all costs to re-master orality in order to recover naturalness of expression, which will allow them to re-express themselves in a modern language." (my translation, Rochard, 1990, p. 224)
Although I have not been able to try it yet, I do suggest that sight translation proper be preceded by a session of cognitive clozing⁴, whereby the students would be given two or three progressively less clozed versions of the text. The exercise offers several advantages: it develops competence at instant discourse analysis, it forces the students away from the linguistic forms of the original, it allows them to see how, in actual practice, the more 'words' of the original remain in sight, the less idiomatic and fluid the translation.

I shall now briefly explain the rules of the sight translation game as I have my students play it. First, they are not allowed to cheat and look forwards or backwards (they will, of course, but less than if not forbidden). Second, they must translate in real time (although they can choose their speed). Third, once a tempo has been chosen, it cannot be slackened: clear and even elocution must be kept, so they are discouraged from starting too fast. They are nevertheless allowed to speed up, since, provided they do it right, the quicker the better. Fourth, all manner of verbal hesitation is forbidden; they may pause, but not stammer. Fifth, self-editing is also banned: they are discouraged from opening their mouths without at least a well-planned syntagm on the tip of their tongues. Sixth, whenever there has been a false start, they must find their way back into sense without going back on their words. Seventh, the translation must be 'said,' i.e. it must be delivered as a bona fide piece of oral speech, with the right intonation and the proper pauses. Whenever any of these rules is violated, the student must start all over again. For instance, if he has corrected a false start, he must go back and pick it up from there, incorporating the false start and atoning for it with the rest of the utterance: if the speaker has said 'Karl Marx' and the student 'St. Francis of Assisi', he is prompted into something like 'St. Francis of Assisi didn't say it, but Karl Marx did: Proletarians of the world unite.' (Not that I would ever actually go for such extremes, you must remember this is, after all, a game.)

This last rule is of crucial methodological importance. To begin with, an interpreter (or any other speaker, for that matter) who is constantly editing himself soon becomes quite unbearable. Also, it teaches students the hard way not to open their mouths too soon. Next, it forces sense upon and even despite language. Finally, it greatly helps develop rhetorical competence in the target language.

The game itself is played five times (by the same or by different students, depending on their number and prowess): A full, basically semantic, translation, where they are relatively free to do as they please; a second full translation where they may not repeat any of the words used the first time around; a third, semantically full but formally maximally condensed translation, choosing the most economic TL words, forms and constructions; a maximally abstracted and condensed translation; a hybrid translation with the syllables reduced by some 30% with respect to the original. As a supplement, I lead them into ad hoc

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⁴ The exercise and its rationale are developed in my *Cognitive Clozing to Teach Them to Think* (1992b).
exercises in discourse synonymy, from isolated words to whole syntagms and constructions, whereby they have to come up with as many different 'ways of saying it' as possible.

Each version is thoroughly analysed in the following order: 1) comprehension (has the student understood everything and right?), 2) re-expression (has he made any syntactic or lexical mistakes?), 3) style (could it have been expressed better?). I delve minutely into every detail, dissecting each rendition. My motto is "the higher your best, the less abysmal will be your worst." Ideally, I think, a soldier's training ought to be more difficult than war.

Let us take a closer look at each exercise:

1. **Full, basically semantic translation.** Objectives a) come up with a plausible translation in real time; b) analyse comprehension mistakes (linguistic and, more importantly, sensic); c) analyse translation mistakes (awkward renderings, linguistic and sensic mistakes due to weak command of SL); d) burn all cognates and awkward fixed equivalents ('challenge' = 'desafiar'; 'commitment' = 'compromiso'). This first time around, I let them say more or less anything, which means all manner of cognates and dreadful cliché equivalents.

2. **Second full translation.** Of necessity, it will be freer, sometimes better and often much more awkward than the first. Objectives: a) expand active vocabulary and flexibilise syntax; b) get rid of all cognates and awkward fixed equivalents; c) force a greater freedom from the SL forms. Naturally, for this stage, the tempo and hesitation rules are somewhat relaxed.

3. **Full but maximally condensed translation.** Unlike real translators, we will be minding not the amount of words, but that of syllables. Intonation becomes crucial, since it can act as a supra-segmental, viz. non-lexical marker of cohesion and carrier of modal information. Objectives: a) help have the most economic forms come first to mind; b) start the road to instant deverbationalisation; c) break with the SL forms; d) strengthen TL competence; e) refer basically to the level of sense; f) develop the 'semantic' use of intonation as a substitute for linguistically coded information.

4. **Maximally abstracted translation in the most condensed form.** Objectives: a) identification of macropropositions; b) identification of propositions; c) incorporation of proper lexical and elocutionary cohesion markers; d) proper use of intonation for cohesive and sensic purposes; e) complete deverbationalisation (i.e. divorce from any given linguistic framing of sense).

5. **A reasonably condensed/abstracted translation.** TL syllables must be reduced by some 30% with regard to the SL - the kind of interpretation one ought to resort to most of the time so as to speak more precisely, more elegantly and with more poise than at full steam. Objectives: a) get the student used automatically to condensing and abstracting whenever possible; b) develop a pleasant, even delivery; c) develop an elegant, precise style; whilst d) concentrating simultaneously on the content of the original and the content and form of the interpretation; and e) not losing sight of the form of the original, where relevant.
Exercises in discourse synonymy. The students are required to come up with as many discourse synonyms as possible. The exercise can be done with words and constructions. Objectives: a) maximum flexibilisation of syntax; b) maximum development of vocabulary; c) maximum freedom of expression in TL.

Another advantage of the exercise is that it can be a lot of fun - i.e. the contortions sometimes needed to find an implausible synonym or the ingenuity required to mend some false starts; and fun, in my experience, is the most efficient didactic tool.

May I now proceed to a practical example: the speech by Malaysia on the hot issue of Antarctica I have used to illustrate my game of 'Cognitive Clozing', which, as already pointed out, can ideally be combined with this one (Viaggio, 1992a).

"Antarctica is our last continental wilderness. We all have to work together to preserve this. Its extreme climate and isolation have created a wonderland of global significance, a remarkable bastion of purity and rich haven for wildlife. Seventy percent of the world's fresh-water reserves is locked in its massive ice-cap, while in the surrounding oceans the last of the blue whales roam. Indeed Antarctica is the largest wilderness area of this planet, and in many ways the most fragile. [...] Normally, an ecosystem has a wide range of levels and interrelationships. It is this variety and depth that give the ecosystem stability. However, Antarctic ecosystems contain very few levels despite considerable interrelationships. Consequently, impacts on these ecosystems have more profound effects. One single species of krill may comprise about half the plankton biomass. This biomass feeds seals, whales, fish and birds. Reduction through human exploitation of any of these components of the marine ecosystem can cause an imbalance. Such imbalance in the Antarctic is not easily restored by man or by nature. The most striking feature of Antarctica is its ice sheet, formed by the accumulation of snow over the past 100,000 years. It covers approximately 98 percent of the continent with an average of 1,600 meters and contains 90 percent of the world's ice." (218 words; 380 syllables)

I shall try and reproduce a good first semantic translation:

1. "La Antártida es nuestro último continente silvestre. Todos tenemos que trabajar juntos para preservarlo. Su clima y aislamiento extremos han creado un maravilloso paraje de importancia mundial, un notable bastión de pureza y refugio para la vida silvestre. Su masiva capa de hielo guarda el 70% del agua dulce del planeta, mientras que en los océanos circundantes nadan las últimas ballenas azules. La Antártida es, sin duda, la última región silvestre del planeta y en muchos sentidos la más frágil. Normalmente, todo ecosistema tiene una amplia gama de niveles e interrelaciones. Estas variedad y profundidad son lo que le dan estabilidad. Sin embargo, los ecosistemas antárticos contienen muy pocos niveles a pesar de interrelaciones considerables. En consecuencia, los impactos en estos ecosistemas tienen efectos más profundos. Una sola especie de krill puede abarcar casi la mitad..."
de la biomasa del plankton. Esta biomasa alimenta focas, aves y peces. La reducción por explotación humana de cualquiera de estos componentes del ecosistema marino puede producir un desbalance. Tal imbalance en la Antártida no es fácilmente restaurado ni por el hombre ni por la naturaleza. La característica más notable de la Antártida es su capa de hielo, formada por la acumulación de nieve durante los últimos 100,000 años. Cubre aproximadamente el 98% del continente con una profundidad media de 1,600 metros y contiene el 90% del hielo mundial.” (221 words; 480 syllables)5

The above rendition is more than passable as a sight translation, improvable as it may be. Few of my students would have come up with anything approaching it, though. But let us assume one of them did. These would have been my qualms in order of appearance: the repetition of 'silvestre'; the rhyming 'variedad', 'profundidad' y 'estabilidad' (yes, I go into minutiae such as that); the ungainly cognate 'impactos'; the awkward 'abarcar'; the tautological 'biomasa del plankton' (even if in the original); the rhyming 'reducción' and 'explotación', added to the cumbrous nominal construction; the faux ami cum non-existing 'desbalance'; the equally faux 'imbalance'; the unidiomatic and wrong 'no es restaurado'; the infelicitous 'hielo mundial'. That, and the unnecessary prolixity of both original and translation, except that the students had been instructed to be as prolix. Note that although barely three words longer, it has 25% more syllables, and may be therefore unutterable.

Let us proceed to a possible second version.

2. “Ya no queda más área continental intocada por el hombre que el extremo austral. La comunidad internacional entera tiene que esforzarse para protegerla. Las tremendas condiciones climáticas, lo tan aislado que está han originado un sitio espléndido y de significación planetaria. Su gruesa y gélida cobertura contiene dos tercios del fluido potable de la Tierra, al tiempo que en las aguas que lo rodean viven los pocos cetáceos azules que quedan. Fuera del Continente, a no dudarlo, no existen ya áreas impolutas ni tampoco más delicadas. Lo usual es que cualquier sistema ecológico disponga de una extensa diversidad de estratos e interdependencias. Tales estratos e interdependencias lo hacen estable. Pero los sistemas australianos disponen de escasos estratos bien que de no pocas interdependencias. Como corolario, toda incidencia en ellos posiblemente entraña secuelas de mayor hondura. Apenas una variedad de minicrustáceos acaso represente el 50% del plankton, que nutre a mamíferos, aves y especies marinas. De reducir la actividad del hombre el que sea de tales elementos, quién sabe resulte un desequilibrio. Desequilibrio que si nosotros no la madre natura serán capaces de restablecer.

5 In my Teaching Beginners to Shut Up and Listen (1992a), I suggest the utility of counting syllables rather than words, since that is what we actually utter. As in that piece, here I have counted most natural synaloephae as one syllable. Of course, the shorter the version, the more it has to be 'spread out,' not least because intonation gets more and more important as a marker of cohesion and modality. That is why in the case of the abstract there are bound to be less synaloephae than in the other versions.
The Praise of Sight Translation

El rasgo distintivo por excelencia del Continente es su cobertura congelada, producto de mil siglos de nevadas. Se extiende por la casi totalidad de la superficie con un espesor medio de más de 1,5 km., equivalente a las nueve décimas partes del agua congelada del orbe.”

No. No student will ever come up with such a version, but I will use it to show them that it is actually possible. Needless to point out, only the strictest compliance with the rules of a game will have me utter ‘aguacongelada’ [‘frozen water’] instead of ‘hielo’ [‘ice’], but the fact remains that they mean basically the same thing. What I find interesting, though, is not the inevitably dismal moments (not that many or that dismal, by the way), but the actual improvements forced by the need to say it some other way: the beautiful ‘estupenda’, ‘impoluto’, ‘intocada’, ‘cetáceo’, ‘enlañar’, ‘secuela’, etc.; the absence of rhymes and twisted nominal constructions; the disappearance of ‘impactos’ and ‘des/imbalance’; etc. I know I am praising myself, but the point is that I only thought of these beauties because I forced myself to find synonyms: I actually improvised both versions as I wrote them. Another interesting device is the use of fractions as synonyms of percentage figures and vice versa, the switch from hundreds of thousands of years to thousands of centuries, from thousands of metres to kilometres, and from figures to concepts (98% = almost all). Also, words are replaced by constructions: ‘último’ = ‘que queda’ [‘remaining’], ‘Antártida’ is referred to as often, but never by name... The students have normally no idea that their language actually offers such an inexhaustible array of possibilities. And that is due to the fact that they do not know it as well as they think, as all of us are so painfully aware.

We shall now say it all, but short:

3. “La Antártida es el último continente silvestre y preservarlo es responsabilidad de todos. Su clima y aislamiento extremos la hacen importantísima por su pureza y como refugio de especies. La cubre, congelada, el 70% del agua del orbe. En su torno nadan las últimas ballenas azules. Es, sin duda, la última región silvestre y quizá la más frágil. Todo ecosistema tiene muchas interrelaciones y niveles que le dan estabilidad, pero aun siendo muchas las interdependencias, los niveles son pocos. Y por eso toda inercia la afecta más a fondo. Una sola variedad de krill puede representar la mitad del plankton que alimenta a focas, aves y peces. Si el hombre reduce uno de esos elementos puede causar un desequilibrio que ni él ni la naturaleza podrán restablecer sin más. Pero lo más sorprendente es la capa de hielo, fruto de 100.000 años de nieve, que la cubre casi entera a un espesor medio de 1.600 metros con el 90% del hielo del planeta.” (158 words; 310 syllables)

[Antarctica is the last wild continent and preserving it is the responsibility of us all. Its extreme climate and isolation make it crucial for its purity and as a haven for species. It is covered by a frozen 70% of the freshwater in the planet. Around it the last blue whales swim. It surely is the last wilderness and perhaps the most fragile. An ecosystem has many interrelationships and levels which give it stability; but there, although the interdependencies are
many, the levels are few. And that is why any impact affects it more deeply. A single variety of krill may comprise half the plankton upon which seals, birds and fish feed. Should man reduce any of these elements, he can cause an imbalance not easily restored by him or nature. But the most striking is its ice sheet, a product of 100,000 years of snow, covering almost all of it at a mean thickness of 1,600 metres with 90% of the planet’s ice.

No semantic component is missing, except that none is repeated, save for 'last wilderness.' It is in fact, the first rule of condensing: the theme need not be repeated, since, once mentioned, it remains presupposed throughout the utterance. That is why 'Antarctica' becomes just the third person singular in all its pronominal configurations. The newly gained concision necessitates combining sentences so that the text does not sound like a shopping list, which in turn demands specific cohesion markers. If all the information is there, little remains of the original's words, which is very much for the better: the new version is linguistically and rhetorically apter. Unshackled by English, Spanish begins to blossom: it even sprouts its superlatives, which it seldom does in translation and almost never in the booth. It could hardly be otherwise, since the delegate of Malaysia is not a professional linguist, whereas I am. Indeed, the translation and interpretation of pragmatic texts should well-nigh systematically be better than their original, since very seldom are they really competently put together.

The most important objective, however, is for the student to come up systematically with the shortest equivalent. For instance 'en su torno' is four syllables long, against the five of 'a su alrededor'; there is no shorter synonym of 'causar'; 'sin más' is also shorter than 'fácilmente' or 'con facilidad'; 'congelada' ['frozen'] goes for 'su masiva capa de hielo guarda' ['locked in its massive icecap']. Note that the condensed rendition is just 20% shorter than the original; only such a version could be delivered intelligibly if the original is being read fast.

Now for the telegram:

4. “La Antártida es el último continente silvestre y, por ende, responsabilidad de todos. Bastión de pureza, refugio de especies, reserva del 70% del agua dulce. Y además frágil, pues, a diferencia de otros ecosistemas, tiene muchas interrelaciones, sí, pero pocos niveles. Una sola variedad de krill representa la mitad del plankton que alimenta a toda la cadena. Si el hombre reduce uno de estos componentes, el desequilibrio no lo podrán restaurar ni él ni la naturaleza. Pero lo más sorprendente es que guarda el 90% del hielo terrestre.” (85 words; 180 syllables)

[Antarctica is the last wild continent and, therefore, the responsibility of us all. Bastion of purity, haven for species, reservoir containing 70% of the fresh water. And, besides, fragile, since, as opposed to other ecosystems, it has indeed many interrelationships but few levels. A single variety of krill represents half the plankton feeding the rest of the chain. Should man reduce any of these components, the imbalance cannot be restored by him or Nature. But the most striking is it contains 90% of the planet's ice.]
The text is indeed much shorter (less than a quarter of the original in words, about half in syllables), but no less coherent or cohesive. Nor is it that much less informative: nothing has been omitted that the audience do not really know and are able to evoke upon hearing it. The principle of synecdoche works wonders when the shared knowledge is as wide. If the original shows us Hitler extending his arm over a seemingly unending parade of the Nazi army in full regalia, we just show the swastika: the audience's shared knowledge and imagination will take care of the pictorial minutiae. As a matter of fact, I find it much better than the original and any of its versions, especially if vehemently and clearly uttered. A couple of observations: the 'single species of krill' becomes 'variety' because otherwise the word would be repeated in the same paragraph, the use of 'chain' for 'seals, birds and fish' is a typical conceptual hyperonymisation.

My middle-of-the-road rendition would go roughly as follows:

5. "La Antártida es el último continente silvestre y todos debemos preservarlo, importantísima como es por su clima y aislamiento y como reserva animal y de agua dulce. Es además la región más frágil, pues a diferencia de otros sistemas tiene si muchas interdependencias pero pocos niveles, por lo que toda incidencia la afecta más a fondo. Una sola variedad de krill puede representar la mitad del plankton que alimenta toda la cadena. Si el hombre reduce cualquier elemento, el desequilibrio no será fácil de restablecer. Pero lo principal es la tan vasta y espesa capa de hielo que contiene el 90% del hielo del planeta." (103 words, 210 syllables)

[Antarctica is the last continental wilderness and we all must preserve it, crucial as it is for its climate and isolation and as an animal haven and fresh water reservoir. It is, besides, the most fragile region, since as opposed to other systems it has indeed many interdependencies but few levels, so that any impact will affect it more deeply. A single variety of krill can represent half the plankton feeding all the chain. Reduction by man of any component can cause an imbalance not easily restored. But the main feature is the so vast and thick ice sheet, containing 90% of the planet's ice.]

A third of the words, but only 30% less syllables. Again, this text is linguistically and rhetorically better than the original. It can be seen, now, that as soon as the (good) interpreter — or translator — lets go of the words and forms of the original and finds himself on his verbal own, he will come up with an utterance better, though not necessarily, than the original, but certainly better than any more literal rendition. This is a point to be hammered into the students even as they are leaving the School with their diplomas rolled up beneath their arms.

Finally, the discourse synonymy exercises this fragment would give rise to could be as follows:

* The students must come up (in Spanish) with:

a) Synonyms and paraphrases of 'Antarctica,' 'wilderness,' 'last,' 'seal,' '70%,' etc.
b) Synonyms and paraphrases of 'exploitation by man,' 'is not easily restored,' 'accumulation of snow,' etc.
c) The closest hyperonym, if any, or more general expression.
d) The shortest available synonymic word or construction.

So this is the plentiful juice I squeeze out of sight translation, I hope you have not found it too sour.

Bibliography


