THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH*  
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The place of translation in the communicative approach is a controversial question. Some people, perhaps, believe that translation should have no place in it at all, while others are at least doubtful about its value or uncertain as to how it can be used profitably.

Newmark quotes Catford as saying that

The chief defect of the now universally condemned 'Grammar-Translation Method' was that it used bad grammar and bad translation.

To which he replies:

No, it was not the chief defect. The chief defect was that the method left little or no time for anything else - on the whole, bad grammar and bad translation were all that was taught. (Newmark 1988: p. 183)

If this is so, then we must ask ourselves what is meant by good grammar and good translation. Obviously, for those who work within the context of the communicative approach, this means finding some use of translation that serves communicative purposes.

Let us start by asking ourselves the question, What is the communicative approach? It is sometimes identified with English for special purposes, although the term is also much broader than that. But if we adopt this standpoint, no one will disagree with the obvious statement that translation is needed by translators and interpreters, who need to learn the technique for their very special purpose or for entering the profession. But more generally, the communicative approach is one which focuses its attention not on language as such, but on what is done with language. It is interested in the transfer of meanings from one person to another. In a word, it is interested in communication.

But what is communication? And when is real communication taking place? Johnson (1979: 200) gives three conditions that a communicative methodology must meet: (1) it must be "task-oriented"; (2) it must involve information unknown to the learner; (3) the student must be permitted some choice in what he says. Real-life communication also implies a common field of experience, since understanding is possible only if people share similar experiences (see James A. Smith 1967: 32). The communicative approach also presupposes the use of authentic materials (Wilkins 1976: pp. 13-14).

Does translation meet these criteria? No more than do pattern practices if it is just a drill - grammar translation, often with bad Italian and literal renderings. As such, it neither involves information unknown to the student, nor allows him any choice in what he says, since the translation patterns tend to be rigidly codified. Nor do such grammar translation exercises make any real reference to actual experience; they are lifeless, and about as dull an exercise as one can imagine.

But translation does serve a communicative purpose if it delivers a message to someone who needs or wants that message; historically, translation has served a very important communicative purpose. Today too interpreters and translators look on translation as a service in communication. Someone needs to know a message that is encoded in a language he does not know or knows only imperfectly, so the translation is the vehicle of the communication.

If we take this as our model, then any class translation should attempt to mirror an actual communicative situation. It should deliver a message from one person to another. Essential requirements of any communicative use of translation are:

1) the person who originates the message must have something he/she wants to say;
2) the person who receives the message must be receiving new, unknown information;
3) the message must refer to a common background of shared experiences;
4) the student must have a certain amount of choice available in making his translation - the teacher must not propose one "standard" version and condemn all others as inaccurate. A certain freedom of expression is necessary, and in actual experience is always present.

Some researchers (Harris, Sherwood 1978: pp. 155-70) maintain that translation is an innate skill. But they have also found, for example, that when children translate they automatically go right for the gist, or meaning, of the message and ignore the literal translations of the words used. This might be a useful guideline also for student translators in the classroom.

Many set translation exercises do not meet communicative criteria. But one can attempt to imagine a sort of exercise that would meet these criteria. Let us take our model from real life. In real life there is an author or other person who commissions the translation; the translator; and the recipient of the translation, the one who needs or wants to know what the author has said. This suggests that one possible (and perhaps more realistic) type of translation exercise in the classroom might be to:

1) have a student write a short paragraph or essay in language A;
2) have another student translate it into language B;
3) have it delivered to a third student, the recipient, who reads it to the class (the audience).

The starting language could be either the students' native language (translation into the foreign language) or the foreign language (translation into Italian). This could also be done as a group exercise. That is, the original text
could be a group effort (particularly if it is written in English - this also gives the students excellent practice in writing English) and the translation could be done by another group. Obviously this works better with small groups of students (4-5). The final results could then be commented on and revised as a class exercise.

What do the students write about? Something of interest to them, of course. They may write about their lives or hobbies, or give a description of a place or object, or put forward an idea or a proposal that they have. It may be difficult at first to stimulate ideas, but once the flow of expression is started it may be just as difficult to stop it.

Translation activities may also be related to the notional-functional syllabus, with texts related to types of activities, such as describing, explaining, persuading, expressing emotions, etc. But this in and of itself does not guarantee any real communication, though it may provide practice in the rudiments of communication. Communication occurs only when the activity is purposive and is directed at the delivery of an actual message.

This is only one suggested type of translation activity, which could be interesting and motivating for students. But it is by no means the only way in which translation can be used communicatively in the classroom. Even fairly traditional types of translation exercises can have a communicative content. In any case, they offer some practice in the mechanics of expression, which is part of communication: grammar, spelling, the choice of words, etc. They also offer excellent practice in the interpretation of texts, that is of trying to understand the communicative intent of an author, especially if the text is authentic and not contrived or manipulated. But more than that, they offer the opportunity to put the text in its larger communicative context. That is, before one translates a text, one should ask oneself (out loud, and to the students) in what situation or context the text was written, why it was written, for whom, and what was its intended effect or message. Then, before translating it one should ask: in what situation or context is a real translation possible or imaginable, why is it being translated, for whom, and what is the intended effect or message of the translation. If no real context or need for the translation can be imagined, then the translation exercise has no communicative relevance. A translation serves as a piece of actual communication only if I can imagine someone reading it (or listening to it) and wanting to understand it. Examples of failed communication are: an interpreter in the booth giving a translation that no one is listening to, or a book that no one ever reads. It is, however, obvious that such extreme cases are rather rare. In almost all real cases, a translation does communicate something to someone, and is useful to, and actually used by, someone, or perhaps even many people. An interpreter on television may reach millions of people simultaneously.

Not all translation exercises need to be done in writing; some of them can, in fact, be done orally to give the students oral practice and also to enable them
to cover larger amounts of text. But written translation exercises offer good writing practice as well.

The texts used for translation exercises should be ones that are of interest to the students. If the students themselves write the texts to be translated, this criterion is automatically met. If not, the texts should be chosen keeping in mind the students' interests and may be even chosen by the students themselves in some cases. They may also be related to other school subjects, as suggested by Widdowson (1978: 15-18, 158-160).

As I pointed out in a previous essay, translation involves four stages or processes: (1) perception; (2) analysis; (3) reformulation; and (4) expression (Parks 1982: 243). Perception and analysis (or understanding, the act of interpretation) are activities that occur in any real communication, every time I hear or read something; expression is also something that I always do if I wish to respond to what I have heard or read. The peculiar nature of translation lies in the reformulation of the message in another language. Normally, if we do reformulate what we have said or heard, we do so in the same language, as when we repeat the content to another person who was not present at the exchange or paraphrase a passage for the purposes of an essay we are writing. In translation, there is a shift in linguistic code, which may seem unnatural at first, but which is actually quite natural for all bilinguals (who do it automatically). In any case, training in these four stages of perception, analysis, reformulation and expression should help the students to become more aware of the language tools they are using, and of the means of expression at their disposal for saying what they too want to say.

One special type of translation occurs in the teaching of literature in the liceo. Here the translation of literary texts is almost obligatory; it may also seem that some of the communicative criteria are violated. But the teacher should make every effort to answer the questions mentioned above and also to make the texts as interesting as possible for the students. One intimidating aspect of this kind of translation is the sheer difficulty of the texts, which may be fully understood by the students only after the translation has been made; but every effort should be made to clarify the meaning of the text before the translation is made since, logically, one can only translate a text that one understands. Interpretation of the text must come before the translation of it; otherwise, the students are merely translating words blindly, and are not working with meanings or messages at all. To make literary translation communicative, the meaning or message of the text in question must be emphasized. Even dead authors had something to tell us, and the odd (for us) linguistic forms they used should not be allowed to stand in our way of appreciation of the message.

1 Widdowson comments on the use of translation as follows: "Translation here...aims at making the learner aware of the communicative value of the language he is learning by overt reference to the communicative functioning of his own language." (Widdowson 1978: 160)
Obviously, in translating old authors, modern language will be used, if we really want to get across the meaning of the original text. If contemporary slang is required to bring Shakespeare alive, then so be it!

The language teacher might well ask, though, why do translation at all? All right, he or she says, it is possible to do translation in a communicative way, but why bother? Aren’t the other types of language exercise quite sufficient?

They may well not be. Anyone who travels around the world or has contact with foreigners in any way will probably have to translate sooner or later, even if it is only a sort of rough-and-ready translation aimed at letting a friend or spouse know what someone else is talking about. People use translation far more often than they probably realize or admit. Often people translate mentally for their own use as well. And they may very well have to translate a letter to a friend or relative or as part of their business relations in a firm. So perhaps a little training in the art of translation would not be amiss, even as part of a general course. If people are going to do it, they might as well do it right. As Newmark points out,

The more people go abroad, the more the linguist can help them to profit from and enjoy their visit. His job or vocation is to translate. It would be ironical if the practice of translation were not a component of his training. (Newmark 1988: 181)

Alan Duff gives a number of reasons for doing translation. First he quotes Dr Ian Tudor as stating:

Translation, as the process of conveying messages across linguistic and cultural barriers, is an eminently communicative activity, one whose use could well be considered in a wider range of teaching situations than may currently be the case. (Duff 1989: 5)

He then points out that translation is likely to occur anyway, as all students of language have a mother tongue; that translation is a natural and necessary activity; that it can be used to develop students’ language skills, especially if the material is authentic; and that it develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility. (Duff 1989: 7)

On these points he is certainly right; also, translation does offer intensive practice in contrastive grammar, that is, in comparing the language forms of one language with those of another.

But there is another, more fundamental, reason why translation exercises should be included in a language course. They not only offer intensive and very active practice in interpreting texts and messages, but they also force students to become aware of the cultural differences between one language and another. It is not necessary to adopt a strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to
recognize that the way a language is structured reflects, and is intimately connected with, the way the culture itself is structured. Whorf is reported to have said:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. Language is not simply a reporting device for experience but a defining framework for it. (Duff 1989: 97)

Duff (1989: 98) suggests that “language does not dissect nature, but rather combines experience in different ways.” In any case the relation between language and culture is a very close and intimate one.

Take, for example, the organization of time and space. Not all cultures (and thus languages) organize them in the same way. What for English is morning is night in Italian (“three o'clock in the morning” is translated as “le tre di notte”) (Beljaev 1968: 164-175); and the perception of living space is also different. If an Englishman or an American talks about painting his house, he probably means the outside walls of it; for an Italian, the inside walls would be intended. Not to mention all those types of social organization which vary from one language to another. Just think, for example, of the different ways in which the school systems are organized in Italy, England and America. What, exactly, is the translation of “high school” in Italian? What is “fuori corso” in English? There are no easy answers, but the exercise of translation forces one to come to grips with the problems. The fact that there are no obvious answers may itself be the most significant lesson.

It is mistaken to assume that all languages are “equivalent maps” of the same social reality (Grace 1987: 3-15), so that a complete correspondence can always be found between expressions in one language and those in another; to some extent, the realities expressed by different languages are, in fact, different, constructed by the concepts we use to talk about them, and the means of expression use to talk about them are also different. But it is also true that all languages have the means to express all the basic human feelings and ideas in some way or another. It is the translator's task to find those means; and it is our task as teachers to help students discover the necessary means of expression for what they, as individuals, want or might be expected to want to say.

Any language sample is a microcosm of a cultural macrocosm, and has implicit and explicit cultural references that must be understood before any translation can be made. Texts are windows into the world that has expressed the language our students are learning; in learning that language, they must also learn the culture behind it. To quote Newmark once again, translation offers a particular insight into the nature of language as well as contrastive linguistic and cultural studies. (Newmark 1988: 185)

I am not here referring only or mainly to literary texts, or to Culture with a capital C; if students look at, read, and translate newspaper articles or pop songs or TV commercials, they are entering into the foreign culture every bit as much
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as when they read and translate Dickens. Perhaps even more so, since this is the
culture of our times, and the one that young people can more easily identify
with. Lessons about British culture must include the Beatles and Lady Diana as
well as the House of Lords and the Stock Exchange.

As Duff comments:

The texts offered for translation in class are not always those offered
in the market-place. What the market offers is not (usually) the essays
of Hazlitt, Ruskin, or Lamb, but cartoons, cheap thrillers, instructions
for washing machines, abstracts for scientific articles, business
letters, interviews, documentary films, conference
programmes, and introductions to catalogues. Much of this material
will contain a mixture of spoken and written language. In addition, it
may also be badly worded, badly presented, and needed in a hurry.
(Duff 1989: 124)

The communicative approach implies that people have something to say and
want to say it. Sometimes they have to say it across language barriers as well,
and that is where translation comes in. Translation is just a means for
facilitating communication between people who otherwise would not be able to
communicate at all, or only poorly. It is said that translation is not a
communicative exercise because, in doing it, I am not expressing my own
thoughts and feelings, but those of someone else. This is only partly true. I am
the vehicle by which someone else's message is transmitted to a third party,
though my own thoughts and feelings inevitably color the way in which I
transmit that message. In certain cases, I can also choose which texts I want to
translate, and so my own thoughts and feelings come into play also in the
choice of materials. (This is one more reason for allowing students to suggest
texts for translation.) But in any case, if in doing a translation I am thinking
about the intended message and trying to get it across to another person, I am
performing a valuable human and communicative function - one which,
historically, has been very valuable in making possible the spread of ideas from
land to land and through time, and one which, today, is ever more important as
the barriers between countries crumble and the world becomes one big global
village.

In our modern tower of Babel, translation is a must.

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