

Reflecting on the comprehension process in the practice and teaching of translation

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ABSTRACT

Text comprehension is often ignored as a specific source of difficulty in translation. Yet it is an essential step of the translation process and for some texts it requires reading skills that only native speakers of the source language are likely to possess. This article proposes a brief overview of the variables affecting reading comprehension and then discusses source text difficulty as a possible cause of mistranslations.

KEYWORDS

Reading comprehension, source text difficulty, mistranslation, translation teaching, translation into a foreign language.

1. THE CONCEPT OF COMPREHENSION

Translation from the mother tongue into a foreign language has been and still is an important teaching subject in courses for interpreters and translators, even though there is always a slight ambiguity between teaching aiming at improving

the syntactical and lexical knowledge of the foreign language¹ and teaching aiming at preparing students to do professional translations into a foreign language, which should be the real/proper aim of teaching translation into the foreign language in courses of translation.

The ability to translate in both directions is a skill required for translation jobs in the widest sense of the term “language professions”. Even though, in principle, international organizations or large companies do not take into account translating into the foreign language, this practice is frequent in small companies requiring staff able to translate in both directions. Generally, translation into the foreign language concerns very specialized texts with repetitive and standardized language. On the other hand, translating literary texts, essays, criticism etc. into a foreign language can be practically impossible, because various stylistic components (e.g. rhythm or the choice of particular synonyms) cannot be reproduced by a translator whose mother tongue is not the same as that of the translation. Recounting an episode related to his first experience as a translator, Claudio Magris, professor of German literature and language and one of the most important contemporary Italian writers, admits that he had difficulties in translating a very simple sentence from German into Italian even though he perfectly understood its meaning; in particular, in the target language he could not really find the right position for a specific phrase so as to ensure that the flow was as clear and agreeable as in the source text (Magris in Ivan i 2013: 32). This difficulty can be even greater for a translator whose mother tongue is that of the source text and who lacks the sensitivity for certain elements of the language peculiar to a native speaker.

Apart from literary texts, there are, however, cases of translation into the foreign language of non-standardised texts, for example the translation of Niklas Luhmann’s works by Reinhardt Schmidt. Schmidt (1999: 103-104) maintains that the comprehension of complex texts (e.g., in the field of philosophy or social sciences) can be very difficult for people whose mother tongue is not that of the source texts and that they can be more precisely translated by people whose mother tongue is the language of the source texts.²

That the comprehension process is the first problem for translators is a truism, but this sometimes remains in the background in works about translation that focus on the best way to find an effective translation strategy and, above all, on the target text. Comprehension is considered a given, because it is generally assumed that professional translators are perfectly bilingual and bicultural, which is in fact rarely the case.

1 Gile (1990) underlines the role of translation and interpreting to test comprehension of texts written or spoken in a foreign language.

2 Schmidt (1986) collected an impressive number of examples of incorrect translations in German works of philosophy and social sciences published in Italian, showing how such errors can lead to misunderstandings in the elaboration of further theories in these two fields in Italy.

A large number of linguists, psychologists and philosophers have dealt with the problem of comprehension from different points of view. The linguist Wodak (1992: 495) stresses that understanding³ could be defined “as an integration into pre-existing knowledge, different types of knowledge [Wissenswelt] [...], or, more precisely, within preexisting frames and schemata”. However, Wodak believes that a definition of comprehension only based on the cognitive dimension is insufficient because it excludes the social psychological dimension, co- and context. She also stresses the importance of variables influencing comprehension and says that understanding is a dynamic process and above all context-dependent and she distinguishes between *Verstehen* (comprehension) and *Verständlichkeit* (intelligibility): “*Verstehen* applies to the listeners, their environments and motivation, their prior knowledge and listening habits, thus implying a dynamic process. *Verständlichkeit* refers to the text .. and is thus to be understood as a static concept.” (Wodak 1992: 504). She aims at narrowing down “[...] both aspects, the listener and the text [...]”. The interaction between reader and text is also stressed by Castello (2008: 41), who says that “the two of them continuously interact and should not be dealt with separately”.

Kußmaul (2010: 29) shares Wodak’s idea of comprehension: “*Verstehen* ist ein Zusammenspiel zwischen dem, was als geschriebener Text (oder als gesprochenes Wort) auf uns zukommt, und dem, was wir über das Thema bereits wissen“. From a translation point of view, Kußmaul (2010: 32) stresses the importance of Scene-and-frames semantics: “Diese prototypischen Szenen sind Vorstellungen in unseren Köpfen, und in der sprachlichen Kommunikation sind sie jeweils begrenzt durch einen Rahmen, d.h. eine sprachliche Form.“ and explains that „das Szenen- und Rahmen-Modell ist als Erklärungshypothese für die Verstehens- und Reverbalisierungsvorgänge beim Übersetzen gut geeignet.“ (Kußmaul 2010: 33).

Summing up, scholars share the idea that comprehension is the result of the matching of new information with preexisting knowledge and that it depends on a large number of variables that are very difficult to analyze separately.

As far as reading comprehension is concerned, Alderson correctly underlines that

identifying text variables which consistently cause difficulty is a complex task. Clearly at some level the syntax and the lexis of texts will contribute to text and thus to task difficulty, but the interaction among syntactic, lexical, discourse and topic variables is such that no one variable can be shown to be paramount. Moreover, even the ability to guess words from the context has to be seen in context: the context of reader, and other variables in the text (Alderson in Castello, 2008: 18).

From a translation perspective, the awareness of the existence of elements (such as syntax and vocabulary) that can be analyzed separately is also important for a translator who has realized that he or she has difficulties in understanding/

3 Wodak uses comprehension and understanding as synonyms.

interpreting a sentence already at the microlevel:⁴ it is in fact at this level that the translator can begin with the reconstruction of the meaning and decide on a particular translation strategy.

Again referring to Alderson, Castello lists variables related to text complexity; these are

text topic and content; text type and genre; literary non literary texts; text organization; text readability; typographical features; verbal and non verbal information; the medium of text presentation; traditional linguistic variables (syntactic complexity; opacity and heaviness of the constituent structure of sentences which make it difficult for readers to parse sentences, vocabulary difficulty) (Castello, 2008: 18).

Probably, ordinary readers only become aware of all these variables (or some them) when they do not understand parts of text that are of special interest for them. A translator, however, is not an ordinary reader,⁵ but rather a reader whose reading is very much task-oriented – a necessary strategy when a person depends on the comprehension of written texts to solve communicative or non communicative tasks (Heinemann & Heinemann, 2002: 171). The translator cannot afford to understand the text only partially and has, therefore, to pay particular attention to each of the above-mentioned variables before deciding on the translation strategy. Yet, despite the attention paid to various aspects of the text, there can still be comprehension errors in a translation, and they can depend on different variables.⁶ This is inevitable, because – as Wodak (1992: 496) says – “[i]n interaction and in everyday-life, we know that conflicts, inequality and misunderstanding are the rule rather than the exception” – an idea that had already been clearly expressed by Schleiermacher.⁷ One of the aims of a translation course is to improve the awareness of the risks attached to comprehension and of the necessity to analyse texts at the microlevel during the translation process.

4 The features to be analysed to ensure comprehension include: connectors, especially with reference to their textual meaning; conjunctions, particularly in their interaction with other elements of the co- and con-text; and idioms, which must first be identified as such and then interpreted in relation to the context.

5 Kußmaul (2010: 33), among others, wonders whether a translator can be considered an ordinary reader.

6 See Magris (2005: 45-59).

7 “Ich ergreife mich sehr oft mitten im vertraulichen Gespräche auf hermeneutischen Operationen, wenn ich mich mit einem gewöhnlichen Grade des Verstehens nicht begnüge, sondern zu erforschen suche, wie sich wohl in dem Freunde der Übergang von einem Gedanken zum andern gemacht habe ... Ja, ich gestehe, daß ich diese Ausübung der Hermeneutik in der Muttersprache und in dem unmittelbaren Verkehr mit Menschen für einen sehr wesentlichen Teil des gebildeten Lebens halte, abgesehen von allen philologischen oder theologischen Studien” (Schleiermacher in Rega, 2009: 52).

2. EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS

As already stated, analysing the single components or steps of the comprehension process is a very difficult task. First of all, the translator must recognize what he or she has not understood and adopt an appropriate strategy to reach comprehension. Also, a text can be judged to be clearly written from the point of view of syntax and lexis, but it can still present comprehension difficulties in the source language because it requires a further, more complex interpretative step from the reader, for example when irony is used. In this case, the translation can be easy, but the interpretation/comprehension problem remains.

In an article about the equipment of the German army, the journalist mentions the “Theory of Thirds” (*Dritteltheorie*):

- (1) Die Staatssekretärin ist eine Anhängerin der Dritteltheorie. Bei Veränderungsprozessen gibt es ein Drittel, das etwas will. Diese Leute müssen auf die entsprechenden Posten gesetzt werden und Freiräume bekommen. Das mittlere Drittel muss man dazu bringen, dass es zumindest in die richtige Richtung geht. **Und das dritte Drittel? Tja, das ist eben das letzte Drittel** (Hammerstein, 2016; emphasis added).

The last sentence can be translated literally (**And the third third? Yes, that’s exactly the last third**), but the comprehension problem of the irony remains, both for the source and target readers, and must be solved by them through the above-mentioned interaction between reader and text – not to mention that the potential ambiguity has to be retained in the target text as much as possible.

In the framework of translation, the difficulty of comprehension is often exemplified at lexical level: Kußmaul (2010) presents a large number of such examples in his reflections on comprehension and translation. That vocabulary is the main obstacle to comprehension, above all for non-native speakers, is a universally accepted fact.⁸ Translation agencies are now seeking reviewers whose mother tongue is the language of the source text because translations – even when they qualitatively acceptable from other points of view – often present too many comprehension errors (for example regarding idioms).

A very interesting case of difficulty of comprehension, and one that can lead to mistranslations, is syntactic complexity. The following example, which is part of a novel (*Vienna*, by Eva Menasse) often proposed to students of literary translation in the MA Degree Programme in Specialised and Literary Translation at the University of Trieste, is regularly misunderstood by students and was also misunderstood by the translator of the published Italian translation.

- (2) Die ältere Generation, die den früh verstorbenen Bankdirektor noch persönlich gekannt hatte, versuchte sogar seine rührend zufriedenen Mundwinkel aufzusetzen,

8 Tauroza and Allison (1994: 36) underline that lexical ignorance is the main obstacle to listening comprehension with advanced foreign language learners, that this problem is educational as much as linguistic and that it may affect both first and second language users.

wenn sie einen Satz mit der Wendung „wie der Königsbee gesagt hätte“ begann; **die jüngere Generation hatte damit zu kämpfen, daß dieser Einleitungssatz irgendwann wegfiel, weil die Urheberschaft allen hinreichend bekannt schien.** So unterlief es meiner Schwester in ihrer Kindheit immer wieder, daß sie Formulierungen wie „um den Preis fleischen“ oder „mit der Kirche ins Dorf fallen“ verwendete oder Mitschüler als „Pharisäure“ beschimpfte, wie es innerhalb der Familie üblich war (Menasse, 2005: 33; emphasis added).

I rappresentanti della generazione più vecchia, che avevano conosciuto di persona il direttore di banca prematuramente scomparso, cercavano persino di imitarne la commovente soddisfazione con gli angoli della bocca, nel momento in cui iniziavano una frase con la formula “come avrebbe detto il Königsbee”. **La generazione più giovane dovette lottare perché questa frase introduttiva venisse tralasciata, dato che la paternità dell’opera era sufficientemente nota a tutti.** Così, durante l’infanzia a mia sorella sfuggivano spesso espressioni come “stirare sul prezzo” oppure “cadere dalla frittella nella brace” oppure insultava quei “farisari” dei suoi compagni di classe, come dicevamo spesso in famiglia (Menasse, 2006: 24; emphasis added).

The translator has very skilfully reformulated the plays on words in the third sentence in the passage but has misunderstood the meaning expressed by *dass* in interaction with *damit* and *irgendwann* in the preceding sentence. The meaning is not that the younger generation had to fight for the “formula” (i.e., *wie der Königsbee gesagt hätte*) to be cancelled, but that the young generation had its problems because the formula was omitted from a certain moment on. With his attention probably more focused on the wordplays involving idioms, the translator did not reflect enough on a textual-syntactic construction in the preceding sentence that seems, at a first glance, harmless. A native reader would have immediately understood the sentence. By contrast, a foreign reader/translator should have consciously recognised that *dass* does not introduce a purpose but a result clause. Obviously, the reader of the Italian published translation will probably read the text without even noticing the error. However, the example is interesting in that it demonstrates the necessity to monitor every component of a text during the translation process. The translator needs a cold, detached analysis of the source text, especially at the beginning of the translation process. The empathy between author and translator often evoked for a successful translation of literary texts is of course an important element for literary translation,⁹ less so for specialized translation, but it must always be accompanied by an in-depth analysis of the source text.

9 On the concept of empathy, see Kohlmayer (2004), cited in Ivancic (2013).

3. CONCLUSIONS

Translating into the foreign language cannot be said to be preferable to translating into the mother tongue, even though the comprehension of the source text is definitely better. However, translating into the foreign language can be seen as possible, acceptable and sometimes necessary, even if the final product is possibly inferior from a stylistic point of view. One of the first handbooks on translation techniques is *La traduzione dall'italiano in tedesco*, originally published in 1947 by two Italian professors of German language and literature, Guido Devescovi and Guido Cosciani (1964), who were brought up and educated in the multicultural and multilingual Habsbourg Empire, where a large part of the population was aware of living in a multilingual situation and approached the problem of translating in a very practical way. As Devescovi and Cosciani remind us, and Claudio Magris reiterates,¹⁰ translating is impossible but necessary.

Kußmaul (2010: 12) correctly says that “[b]eim Verstehen machen wir von dem in unserem Gedächtnis gespeicherten Wissen Gebrauch. Oft reicht dieses Wissen nicht aus. Dann müssen wir recherchieren.“ But the problem is very often to recognize the parts or elements of the source text that we do not understand. Translators sometimes believe they understand, which depends on various factors: they pay too much attention to an element of the text or activate the wrong scenario in their memory, which can distract them from other, at first sight less important and less striking elements that are in fact the real basis to avoid misunderstandings – as in the case of example 2, where the source text – neglected in its textual-syntactic features – has taken its revenge.

10 See <http://www.wuz.it/intervista-libro/97/Intervista-Magris-traduzione.html> (last accessed on 30 July 2016).

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