

Traduttore, traditore?

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In many parts of the world commercial translations are performed only by native speakers of the target language, that is the language into which a document is being translated. The obvious implication of this is, ignoring the quality of the 'translation' process, it is extremely unlikely that the resultant text will have errors of orthography or syntax. A person who cannot write reasonably well in his own language is hardly likely to last long as a professional writer.

There are cases of minor languages where there is a shortage of people competent in both 'source' and 'target' languages, the two languages involved in translation. For example, the EC has problems in providing translators from Flemish to Basque, or from Finnish to Welsh, and has to do what it can with who is available. One might be hard pressed too in Buenos Aires to get a technical document translated from Arabic into Hindi, and these are certainly not minor languages. One obvious solution is to go through English as an intermediary language, and this is in fact what is commonly done in such cases. The Danes laugh last.

But what about the situation here in Argentina, where vast amounts of documents are translated from English into Spanish and *vice versa* every day of the year? Spanish and English are not minority languages, in fact they are, after Chinese, the second and third most spoken languages in the world. Hindi and Arabic are fourth and fifth. There is no problem about translating into Spanish - as I said earlier a translator who were to produce a sloppy text in Spanish would be unlikely to get more work from his/her client. It is what happens to the texts translated into English that bothers me.

The problem is obviously the sheer volume of work being translated. To meet this demand, it is necessary to call on locally trained translators who are not native speakers of English. This is not a failing on their part, it is a fact, and it is unsurprising that they cannot produce a text written as if by a native speaker. This should be recognised by clients (and generally is) as a local fact of life. But what interests me here is the 'why'. Why is it so hard to write a text in a foreign language?

It takes time and experience for a skilled translator to be able to get far enough away from the original to reflect it faithfully. A good analogy for what s/he has to do would be to think of the elements of the sentence (ideas, parts of speech, implications, etc.) as balls. Throw all the balls in the air so they get all mixed up, catch them and reassemble them in the target language. What happens? Words which were previously nouns become verbs, subjects become objects, the last clause in the sentence becomes the first, etc. As any bilingual person can tell you, English and Spanish have a fundamental difference in thought sequencing and word order and if the sentence is to sound natural in the target language the translator has to hear this difference.

Text editing a passage that has been imperfectly translated (sometimes dismissed as 'polishing up a text') is often a more time-consuming job than the actual translation. At times, if the original text is not available for consultation, it can be impossible. This is because the 'translation' often bears the stamp of the original in its word order and the way the ideas have been conceived, and the text editor then has to struggle to recast ideas he can't quite grasp clearly although they are "in English". There is a certain sense of desperation in looking at a sentence of English words which all make individual sense but collectively defy interpretation.

Words may have been mistranslated (typical examples are 'substitute' or 'hardly') so that the passage means the opposite of the original. The position of a comma may reflect Spanish usage rather than English, making the whole passage hard to disentangle. And as translation means conveying not just the 'meaning' but also the 'flavour' of the original it may be necessary to recast the whole style, tone and register of the 'translation'. For a skilled translator working into his first language it is of course only natural to settle all that as s/he goes along (more likely before even starting to translate).

There are very skilled translators into English in this country. My work brings me into contact with quite a few of these and one thing I have noticed is that they are all highly sensitive to language and

keen to learn from experience. This does not only mean filing away their work and setting up glossaries for future reference - they are also concerned with learning about those nuances of the language that are only mastered through experience. They would be the first to recognise that they are not native speakers and are doing their best to counter this disadvantage.

I have recently been involved in text editing for an international firm which asked me to tighten up and standardise texts written in English or translated into English by a number of native and non-native speakers. As I was working, I began to keep a mental check of persistent 'errors' in these texts. They were translated well on the whole, but the same points came up again and again, and I started to make a note of some of the more persistent ones.

The list is comprehensive, and I hope eventually to turn it into a more useful piece of teaching material. However, I should like to make a few observations on the nature of the more frequent errors I encountered.

By far the most common problem was the matter of register and style. One example, caused perhaps by the training of sworn translators, will suffice. There is a move towards plain writing in official documents in most of the western world which outside certain legal contexts does not have space for the permanent third person use of 'shall', nor the constant use of 'said' and 'such' every second line of the document. In many non-legal texts I read the words 'shall', 'said' and 'such' were used inappropriately, and 'will' and 'these' would have been better.

Many sentences were winding and verbose. An example "... will be transported on ships which will leave every week and will have the port of Buenos Aires as their destination". The underlying Spanish is transparent here - it's tighter (and easier to understand) to say "... will be shipped weekly to Buenos Aires". English is a more synthetic language than Spanish and any translator will tell you that after translation into English a text is usually about 20% shorter.

There were many false cognates: *conveniente* ≠ 'convenient', *adecuado* ≠ 'adequate', '*a cargo de*' ≠ 'in charge of'; some English words were confused: 'scope' and 'range', 'select' and 'elect'; English prepositions were problematic: 'provide for'/'provide with', 'responsible for'/'responsible to', 'as from'/'as of'/'as at', etc. I have no space for further examples.

This is not meant as an attack on local translators, rather as a suggestion they attempt to profit from their experience. Translation, like any profession, is something you get better at as you go along. But translators must be able to write, firstly in their own language and, if they are going to translate into a foreign language, in that language too. They have to be able to translate too, a matter I haven't touched on here, but that's another skill altogether - just speaking two languages doesn't make you a translator. If the need for translation into English continues to grow in this country many more translators are going to have to make the effort. Then text editing would become a much faster and easier business, and a less significant business expense.