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JEAN DELISLE

TRANSLATION:
AN INTERPRETIVE
APPROACH

*TRANSLATED BY PATRICIA LOGAN
AND MONICA CREERY*

FOREWORD BY DANICA SELESKOVITCH

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Foreword

The information explosion that is the hallmark of our age has resulted in a ferment of translation activity. Technical, scientific, administrative, and legal texts that in earlier times were never reproduced in another language are today being translated, while proportionally fewer works of literature are being translated. In order to keep up with this ever-expanding mass of multilingual information, researchers are trying to develop machines that can translate. Because the methods of text analysis that served literary translators so well cannot be applied mechanically, it has become necessary to translate language itself. As a result, a number of linguistic theories of translation have been put forward. Attempting to do more than explain machine translation, these theories have proposed models for human translation that completely ignore the extra-linguistic knowledge the translator automatically draws on in exercising his craft.

Theorists and practitioners have thus gradually separated into two camps, but the veiled hostility of the latter toward the former has not always had the result of producing theoretically convincing explanations of translation. Jean Delisle's work does. This professor of translation, who teaches at the University of Ottawa, has made a significant contribution to the theory of human translation. In his thesis, defended at the Université de Paris III in December 1978 and published here in book form, Delisle shows that, although knowledge of languages and their workings is essential to the translator if he is to understand the original text and render it intelligibly, it is not in itself sufficient to explain the translation process. That process involves innumerable cognitive complements that together with the linguistic significations create in the translator's mind the meaning he then attempts to re-express in another language.

The object of translation is meaning, taken in its full sense, which is much broader than semanticists and linguists have so far acknowledged. As the translators and interpreters associated with the École Supérieure

d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Université de Paris III, push their studies further, it becomes increasingly apparent that meaning is in fact the object of language and the focus of communication.

Jean Delisle is to be commended for having clearly defined his field of study. For legitimate methodological reasons, he sets aside literary translation, in which re-creating the text is as much a matter of sensitivity to language as of rendering concepts in another tongue, and "pedagogical translation," by which a foreign language is analyzed so that all its aspects and workings become apparent. The purpose of pedagogical translation is to teach a language, not to communicate messages contained in texts. Its goals are not the same as those of translation pedagogy.

Professor Delisle has chosen to examine texts in which the conceptual content, rather than the artistic form, prevails—texts whose primary purpose is not to appeal to the emotions but to convey information. He has done so because they account for the vast majority of texts translated today.

Delisle calls these texts "pragmatic," and shows that the meaning they carry is not embodied a priori in the linguistic signs—though these will, through their syntax, make a semantic contribution—but is constructed by the speaker/writer and hearer/reader "from linguistic significations combined with non-linguistic factors." He then rigorously demonstrates that implicit in the idea that translations can be proposed on the basis of a comparison between languages outside of any communication situation is the assumption that a priori equivalents exist when, in fact, equivalence is established through comparisons drawn *after* the process of translation itself has been carried out. Thus, neither contrastive linguistics nor comparative stylistics can properly be said to be a method of translation. As Delisle rightly says, "The linguistic analysis carried out after the fact in comparative stylistics bears no relation to the cognitive process of translation."

We can only hope that it will soon be considered a truism to say, as Delisle does with some courage, that "in order to compare, one must have a point of comparison. In comparative stylistics, the original utterance is placed side by side with an equivalent (usually transcoded) in the target language. But the translator has only one side of the equation at his disposal: the source text, composed of a series of interdependent utterances." For the time being, this eminently sensible statement remains an act of defiance, as it calls into question the linguistic and comparative theories of translation.

Once it has been established that, with the exception of a few set phrases, translation equivalents are creations and that translating and transcoding are two very different activities, it becomes clear that texts (as opposed to language) multiply the linguistic means the translator has to choose from in rendering the message in the target language. This explains why translation not only is possible, but is carried out daily by translators around the world: it consists of the creation of equivalences whose "accuracy . . . is measured

by how closely the concepts match, not by the similarity or dissimilarity of the forms in which the concepts are expressed."

Jean Delisle uses his view of translation as a basis for developing a teaching method designed to introduce students to the translation of pragmatic texts. As any good pedagogue must, he begins by defining course objectives, and ensures that the exercises he proposes for limbering up novice translators' minds for the mental gymnastics involved in grasping and re-expressing meaning are indeed a practical application of his observations of the translation process.

The pedagogy of translation is a difficult discipline, for it requires that methods be found to impart not a body of knowledge but a particular skill. Jean Delisle has met the challenge successfully.

The ideas presented in this work are those of a theorist solidly grounded in the practice of the profession. The book contains none of the lucubrations so dear to the inhabitants of the ivory tower; rather, it is the product of experience and provides a rigorous analysis of the process of translation (in the true sense of the word) and, thus, of the workings of language itself.

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Introduction

The translation of pragmatic texts is an art of re-expression based on writing techniques.

This book is about the theory and teaching of translation. Its purpose is to set forth an original method for training students to translate pragmatic texts.¹ It was written for translation students, teachers of translation, and practising translators in the hope of laying to rest the notion that translation is something that cannot be taught. There are those who insist that translators, like poets, are born rather than made, and that it is impossible to inculcate the talent required for translation. While it may be true that education seeks to communicate knowledge, not impart talent, it remains to be seen whether education cannot develop the *ability* to translate, which is, after all, a skill—something that should not be confused with talent. In any case, as Henri Amiel said, talent is simply “doing with ease what others do with effort.”

This book, born of ten years' reflection on translator training, is an attempt to make the teaching of translation more systematic. Having worked as a professional translator and reviser and having taught translation at the university level, I am convinced that it is possible, and even desirable, to train translators in a more methodical way and to teach more effectively—without straying into extreme dogmatism. I agree with those who think that, in a university translator-training program worthy of the name, practical instruction need not be limited to group translation exercises or correction of translated texts. Surely it is possible to design a more imaginative curriculum than that. Pedagogy is poorly served by excessive empiricism. Hastily thrown together seminars consisting of group translation and correction of

1. “Pragmatic” is used here as opposed to “literary.” Literary texts do not have the same purpose as pragmatic texts, though some pragmatic writings resemble literature in certain respects. For a definition and justification of the term “pragmatic texts,” see p. 8 and p. 16.

texts cannot help but viliate students' motivation. The students feel, and rightly so, that they are simply marking time instead of progressing toward clearly defined goals. Without a course plan to guide them, instructors deal with translation problems randomly as they crop up in the texts. This haphazard type of instruction is not good enough. In its place we need a more methodical teaching strategy, one which is worthy of a university-level course.²

Some authors use the expression "translation teaching" to refer to both translator-training programs and the courses or practical seminars specifically devoted to the actual teaching of translation. It is important to distinguish clearly between the two notions. Translation programs usually include exercises in general and specialized translation; courses designed to improve language skills (grammar, vocabulary enrichment, comparative stylistics); workshops in revision and advanced writing techniques; courses in general linguistics and lexicology; and general-knowledge courses covering the institutions and economic, social, and political situations of the countries whose languages the students are translating.

The method that I describe in the following pages was specifically designed for use in practical translation courses at the introductory level. I have made no attempt to construct an ideal university program for training translators, for no matter how perfect such a program seems on paper, no program can really be universally applicable. Because the translation market is different in every country, translation programs must reflect national differences and, to a certain extent, be adapted to the particular needs of university students. Nevertheless, the general principles for introducing students to translation exercises can be applied quite widely.

Although human beings have been translating for thousands of years, they have only been teaching courses in how to translate for roughly the last forty. The increasing importance of international relations after the Second World War and the adoption of policies on official languages by bilingual nations such as Canada sparked a phenomenal growth in the volume of translation. The number of general translators has risen dramatically and in most countries far exceeds the number of literary translators. Specialized schools had to be created and training programs developed in order to quickly train these agents of communication. It is worth pointing out that these schools were not set up primarily to train literary translators, but translators of pragmatic texts.

It seems generally agreed, then, that translation can be taught as a distinct subject in its own right. However, the addition of translation to the

2. This would be more than a conventional lecture course, for the classroom sessions would also usually include group discussions and practical exercises.

university calendar as an autonomous discipline has raised a number of epistemological and methodological problems that have so far defied solution. In which department, for example, does translation belong? Is it part of applied linguistics? Or is it part of psycholinguistics, semiotics, comparative literature, language learning, cognitive psychology, ethnology, or communication science? Despite the plethora of options, none has proven entirely satisfactory.

In pedagogy, efforts so far have been concentrated on curriculum content and length, admission requirements, and other general matters. It is now time to expend the same effort on refining the methodology of the practical courses. Researchers seem to have largely ignored this important aspect of translation teaching, judging from the paucity of the literature.

To my knowledge, no one has really tried to answer questions such as: Is group translation or correction of texts the best way to teach what is, after all, an art of re-expression? Can we do better than simply handing out texts to translate and then correcting the students' errors? How many of their errors are attributable to a lack of method? Could translation and writing techniques be taught together? What objective criteria can be used to determine the degree of difficulty of a text for a given group of translation students, so that the instructor can teach progressively more difficult material? What difficulties do all texts of a given genre have in common? Is a real translation manual even a possibility? If more systematic instruction is desirable, how could it be structured? What basic abilities, other than linguistic, must a successful translator have? How can these abilities be developed? Are translation studies and comparative linguistics one and the same? What are the roles of the teacher and the students in a practical translation course?

These are some of the questions that must be addressed if we are going to improve the methodology of practical translation courses. Another important, but thorny, question is the problem of evaluating the quality of translations. This area of research is waiting to be explored. If we truly wish to put the era of the cobbled-together translation course behind us, we must attempt to find answers to these questions.

Having excluded the entire field of literary translation, we can consider the translator of pragmatic texts as a specialist in written communication, a language technician, or a writer. The basic premise of the translation method described in this book is that *translation is an art of re-expression based on writing techniques and a knowledge of two languages.*

Teaching someone how to translate means teaching the intellectual process by which a message is transposed into another language; that is, placing the student in the centre of the translating operation so that he can understand its dynamics. It is the *meaning* of a message that is transferred from one language to another, and the transfer is accomplished by analyzing and then reconstructing semantic relationships. This interpretation of a text—

discourse analysis—is an act of intelligence much more demanding than the simple comparison of two linguistic systems. It requires a highly developed capacity to understand, in tandem with an ability to manipulate language.

For this reason, discourse analysis is more appropriate than traditional general linguistics for describing the act of translating.³ A review of the current major translation theories, particularly those attempting to explain the translation process by an a posteriori examination of equivalents from two different languages, will show quite clearly that translation is not comparison. In essence, translation is re-expression of an intended meaning embodied in a text with a specific communicative function.

The model for this intellectual operation is unilingual communication. The teaching of translation should, therefore, be based on the manipulation of language rather than on the study or description of language systems. I have defined four different levels of language manipulation required in translating: (1) observing conventions of form, (2) performing interpretive analysis, (3) interpreting style, and (4) preserving textual organicity. These four levels provide a framework for classifying the basic difficulties of translation and establishing the objectives for the introductory course—in short, for organizing the course material systematically.

In an introductory course, developing skills should take precedence over imparting facts or theoretical knowledge. This should be accomplished by having students wrestle with actual translation or writing problems so that they become adept at the mental procedure involved in translation. The fundamental question in translation pedagogy—and in this book—is: How should the teaching of translation be structured so that the student emerges *mindful* of how to go about translating rather than with a *mind full* of facts?

It is often said that translation teaching should not consist in providing recipes. But just what the “recipes” are is rarely made clear. Are they practical hints? Are they ready-made solutions that can be mechanically applied to particular translation problems? Such tricks of the trade, often discovered only after many years of experience, can be a very useful complement to translator training, for they give the students a short-cut to the destination they would have reached anyway. Translation is a craft practised individually, not collectively, and outside a classroom situation it is difficult for veteran translators to pass on the fruits of their experience. Recipes are helpful, but insufficient as the basis for a systematic university-level course.

3. Discourse is a unit of language higher than the sentence; it is the message taken as a whole. In this book the term “discourse” refers to written as well as spoken language. Similarly, “utterance,” which in everyday usage refers mainly to speech, here covers both spoken and written language. For a discussion of the polysemy of the term “discourse,” see Maingueneau, *Initiation aux méthodes d'analyse du discours*, p. 11. Discourse analysis is sometimes called text linguistics.

The systematic course I have developed has two overall objectives. The first is to provide a framework for the analysis of the linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts of a message, and the second is to encourage greater ease and flexibility in the manipulation of language in order to enhance communication. The introductory course concentrates on discovering the general principles that govern the act of translating rather than getting bogged down in the details of particular examples. It also does not waste time on arbitrarily selected problems that are not likely to recur.

The novice translator is often unable to re-express a passage, even when he understands what it means. Preoccupied with the unfamiliar forms of the original text, he has difficulty finding the corresponding words, phrases, or structures in the target language. When one is poring over a text in the source language, comprehension does not lead automatically to spontaneous re-expression, and often the search for an idiomatic and meaningful expression is unsatisfactory or even fruitless. Translators are all too familiar with the frustrations of the trial-and-error method. When a block occurs, it is a failure by thought to organize expression. Learning how to translate is, in the final analysis, learning how to think in order to communicate accurately the ideas of another person. An introductory course in translating pragmatic texts should therefore include a variety of exercises whose aim is to teach the student to re-express thoughts more easily, more accurately, and in the end, more rapidly. These exercises can be seen as a training program for the mental gymnastics of translation.

As I originally developed it in French,⁴ my method included such exercises. It consisted of two parts—a basic approach to translation (an interpretive, or discourse analysis, approach with a concomitant emphasis on the manipulation of language), and pedagogical objectives and exercises that are directly related to this approach and its theoretical basis. The original French version of my book describes twenty-three pedagogical objectives and provides practical exercises enabling students to develop the specific skills needed for translating from English to French. This English version of my book is intended for a wider audience and includes only that part of my method that applies to the translation of pragmatic texts between any two languages, that is, the basic approach and its theoretical justification. The principles governing the act of translating and the four levels of language manipulation can be used to teach translation from any source language to any target language.

The second part of the method, the twenty-three objectives, is not dealt with, for many of the objectives relate specifically to differences between

4. *L'analyse du discours comme méthode de traduction : Initiation à la traduction française de textes pragmatiques anglais, théorie et pratique* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1980).

English and French and the problems encountered in passing from the one language to the other. Objectives such as "French Superlative and English Comparative" and "Deixis in English: 'this,'" were inspired by characteristic differences between French and English and would be of limited use to instructors working with other languages. Some objectives, such as "Text Explication" and "Extracting Key Concepts," are more general and lend themselves to adaptation. It is my hope that teachers of translation will use the basic approach described in the first part of my method and, drawing on their intimate knowledge of their source and target languages, will develop pedagogical objectives and exercises for translation between the languages they are working with. To this end, the twenty-three objectives I defined for the introductory course in English-to-French translation are listed in Appendix 3 as a model for teachers of translation between other languages.

My aim in this book is to prove that it is both possible and necessary to identify the most important characteristics of the cognitive processes of the translation operation. I try to illustrate the complex movements involved in these mental gymnastics so as to make the teaching of translation more effective. I will start by defining the scope of the method and discussing its theoretical foundations and then move on to describe the four levels on which language is manipulated.

Methodological Approaches

It would be difficult to imagine an introductory course in any field that did not simplify the subject matter somewhat in order to make the basic concepts easier to understand and assimilate. To simplify is to define; it is to discard what is secondary in order to penetrate to the essence of something. In the case of translation, the "subject matter" is, in fact, an intellectual process. Translation is an abstract exercise in analysis and synthesis, and cannot, therefore, be as easily divided into steps as a concrete activity can be. Its many stages overlap, and the twists and turns of thought involved in the search for equivalent concepts are difficult to follow. The translator's mind teems with ideas, images, associations, analogies, and trial solutions that he must order according to the thread of meaning he has followed through the original text so that the translation will match it point for point. Translation is a difficult activity to analyze; it owes its complexity to both the intricacy of language and the multifaceted nature of communication.

Because the process itself cannot be simplified, effective teaching of translation involves simplifying the material involved. The intellectual mechanisms of translation are the same, regardless of the nature of the text to be translated, but the professional qualifications required of the translator vary. Some texts demand that the translator master a particular register of language and have a sensitivity to the arts (for literary texts); others, that he possess specialized knowledge (for technical and scientific texts); and still others, that he be able to manipulate the spoken word (for translation for the theatre and for film dubbing). The translator is often thought of as a one-man band, and this is true up to a point, but he must respect the limits dictated by his professional conscience. Rare is the translator who can move with equal competence from literary to scientific translation, from a legal document to a medical treatise. In short, there is always a limit to the versatility of a professional translator.

To make analysis of the translation process within an introductory course simpler, the method I outline in this book applies only to pragmati

(non-literary), general (non-specialized) texts, formulated according to the rules of written (not spoken) language.

SCOPE OF THE METHOD

Source and Target Languages Used

The intellectual process of extracting meaning and reformulating it in another language is the same whatever languages are involved, because the process is no different from the functioning of language itself. At least, no one has yet demonstrated that translation between different pairs of languages requires different cognitive and memory processes. The teaching method must, however, take into account those specific differences between languages that pose problems during transposition. As Georges Mounin said: "A given translation problem is not the same between two languages *in both directions*."¹ In other words, the interlinguistic reformulation of a message cannot be accomplished with the same linguistic tools or even the same number of words as in the original, because every linguistic community has evolved its own pattern of language customs. In this book, all the examples chosen to illustrate the processes underlying interlinguistic transfer are translations from English into French. English will be the original, or source, language, and French will be the language of the translation.²

Pragmatic Texts

An introductory translation course should deal with pragmatic texts, that is, texts whose fundamental purpose is to convey information and in which aesthetics are of secondary importance. Finding a clear, simple, and convenient term to cover all such texts was not easy. The expression "functional texts," modelled on expressions such as "functional language" or "functional French," would have added yet another definition to a term that already has many different meanings in science, mathematics, and everyday language. In general and applied linguistics alone, one finds not only "functional language," but also "functional linguistics," "functional education," and the "functional approach" to language teaching. However, I rejected the expression "functional texts" in favour of "pragmatic texts" largely because, in the field of language education, "functional" covers everything that is not everyday French; it applies to "apparently specific areas within

1. "Un problème donné de traduction n'est pas le même entre deux langues *dans les deux sens*." Mounin, *Les problèmes théoriques*, p. 240. (Mounin's italics)

2. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of quotations are our own.

the French language such as scientific, technical, and economic discourse—in short, anything that is neither literary nor ‘touristic’ (of the ‘Where is the post office?’ type).³ While the term “pragmatic texts” excludes literary texts, it does *not* exclude everyday language. The term “functional texts” might have been confusing. The terms “scientific texts,” “technical texts,” “specialized language texts,” and “specialized texts” seemed too narrow and were also rejected.

Of the other solutions considered, the term “utilitarian texts” deserves mention. The problem with it is that “utilitarian” has a pejorative connotation, evident in expressions such as “purely utilitarian materialism” and “crassly utilitarian interests.” According to Henri Bénac’s *Dictionnaire des synonymes*, “utilitarian” is used to describe articles that are designed solely for utility at the lowest possible price and with no regard for aesthetics. “Vehicular” and “vernacular” would not do either. A “vehicular language” is a foreign tongue shared by several groups with different native languages, while a “vernacular language” is an indigenous language or dialect little used except by those for whom it is a mother tongue. Neither expression could be used to designate a category of texts. “Informative texts” was not altogether satisfactory either, because essentially, any text conveys information; the expression is tautological. Nevertheless, in this book, “informative” will sometimes be contrasted with “aesthetic” in order to emphasize the conceptual content of pragmatic messages. This is not meant to imply, however, that literary works are pure form and do not communicate anything.

There were two further reasons for choosing “pragmatic.” According to the *Petit Robert*, the term applies to things that have practical applications, that are related to everyday life. Pragmatic texts generally do have a practical and immediate application. As instruments of communication, they are more or less ephemeral, at least as far as the useful life-span of their content is concerned. Seen in that light, such texts are “utilitarian,” while literary texts usually exist in and of themselves, without, however, being any less necessary. Each type of text simply has a different purpose.

The second reason that weighed in favour of “pragmatic” is that it applies, in formal logic, to the use of language in actual situations of communication. While translation, as distinct from interpretation, concerns itself only with written texts and not with oral productions, it does deal with language in use (*parole* in the Saussurean sense), as does pragmatics. Syntax and semantics are concerned with language as a system (Saussure’s *langue*). Some linguists do not even consider pragmatics to fall within their domain.

3. “domaines apparemment spécifiques à l’intérieur de la langue française : discours des sciences, des techniques, de l’économie, bref de tout ce qui n’est ni littéraire, ni ‘touristique’ (du type : ‘Où est la poste?’).” Galisson and Coste, *Dictionnaire*, at entry for “fonctionnel.”

As we shall see, reflections on the theory and pedagogy of translation extend far beyond the concerns of the linguist, which for the most part are centred on syntax (the set of rules governing the combination of symbols) and semantics (the confrontation of those symbols with reality or with the symbols of another language). The translator must take into account the origin of the text to be re-expressed, its nature, and the audience for whom it was intended (its future readers). Those who study the theory or pedagogy of translation, therefore, cannot restrict themselves to the linguistic components of the text—they must draw on pragmatics in order to include in their analysis of the translation process the cognitive and situational complements that are not part of the linguistic signs.

For these two reasons—the first stemming from the nature of the texts chosen as teaching tools, the second from the theoretical foundations of the method—the term “pragmatic” seemed the most appropriate. It covers, among other things, newspaper articles, general correspondence, non-technical brochures, tourist information, and official reports and documents—in short, general texts dealing with topics like pollution, fitness, consumer affairs, drugs, leisure, economics, or sports.

Several characteristics distinguish pragmatic texts from other types of texts, such as literary or biblical texts. One is anonymity. In a pragmatic text, the focus is not on the author's impressions, as it is in a literary text, but on relatively objective facts. Pragmatic texts are therefore often anonymous, and in many cases, it would be of no use to the translator to know who wrote them. That said, it must also be recognized that the author, anonymous or not, can be a factor in how the text is interpreted. This may depend on whether he is, for example, the official spokesperson of an insurance company or the representative of aggrieved policy holders. The author of a pragmatic text is not a mere abstraction. It might sometimes be useful—or even necessary—to know who he is. For example, it might be important to know the political leanings, professional experience, and usual tone of a politically committed journalist in order to better interpret his articles. Without this knowledge, the translator might miss the journalist's allusions, innuendo, or irony. Sometimes the main point of a message is not stated explicitly. Translation is then fraught with danger, because both what is said and what is merely implied must be rendered in the target language.

The selection of texts is inevitably a subjective exercise. Because there are no objective criteria by which to accurately assess the difficulty of a text and the pace at which a group of students is progressing, the teacher must rely on his intuition and his experience as a teacher and a translator to choose the best instructional tools.⁴ By going beyond the translation and correction

4. Difficulty of translation is both a statistical and a subjective concept (see p. 94). Translation education would benefit from research into assessing the difficulty of texts and ensuring that there is a step-by-step progression through the curriculum. In order for this to happen, translatology (see p. 28) must become experimental.