TELESCOPE VISION - OR WHY CAN'T TRANSLATOR TRAINEES COMMUNICATE?

INGE LIVBJERG

Copenhagen Business School

Modern teaching in translation at the CBS, which provides degree courses for professional translators, takes place with much weight on the *communicative function* of the translation product. Nevertheless, students have difficulty in regarding their translation process as an act of genuine communication and therefore find it difficult to live up to their role of conveyer of the ST text's intended meaning to a given recipient in a given situation.

This paper discusses one possible reason why the message that translations should be communicative does not seem to get through to students. The examples quoted in the paper and the retrospective data supporting them are based on an empirical study of the translation products of a 1995-class of 29 third-year students in a translation course, who handed in eight general purpose translations, four from L1 to L2 (Danish-English) and four from L2 to L1 (English-Danish). The examples illustrate prototypes of error. They are, therefore, not language specific.

The study of the translations was supplemented with collective retrospection, i.e. class discussions. Notes were taken in class during retrospection, but the retrospection itself was not taped. Ongoing research using think aloud protocols confirms the findings of the study.

The inspiration for the investigation was surprise at the fact that semi-professionals make many errors that hamper the communicative function of their product although they do in fact have the linguistic, pragmatic or strategic knowledge necessary to avoid them.[1]

The hypothesis was that these errors had something in common, although on the surface they seemed to be very different, seeing that they were found at all linguistic levels from morpheme over word, collocation and clause to sentence. Moreover they concerned different areas, i.e. syntax, semantics, pragmatics.

The immediate aim of the study was didactic — a belief that if I could find a common denominator for the errors, this could be used pedagogically to help the students reduce the number of such errors. Production results in two later classes taught on the basis of the findings of this study indicate that this is the case.

A common denominator for the errors *was* found and termed *telescope vision.*

[1] It should be pointed out here that the focus of attention was those of the students who were judged to have a linguistic and pragmatic level of knowledge in tune with the requirements of a class of third year translation students — and not those who clearly did not meet these requirements and who would therefore need a different kind of training. It should also be noted that when I refer to student reactions and comments it is the observations of members of the 'knowledgeable' group that I quote.

Lengua y Cultura. LIVBJERG, Inge. Telescope vision - or why can't translator tra...
Centro Virtual Cervantes

TELESCOPE VISION

As the name implies, *telescope vision* means that the students' focus is too narrow: either they concentrate on too small a unit or they focus on one linguistic area to the exclusion of others. This means that their focus is on the task of solving the translator's own individual problems with source text reception and target text production rather than on the situation of the recipient who will typically see only the finished product, not as a set of units, but as a whole text in its own right.

Typically students concentrate on *either* lexis or sentence syntax at the cost of matters of context. Let me demonstrate telescope vision by means of a few examples:

Although it manifests itself in both L2 - L1 and L1 - L2 translation, for reasons of time, I shall limit myself to giving examples from L1 to L2 translation.

Example 1

Assuming that very few of my readers know Danish, I shall begin by showing the relevant part of the English target text:

> The noise in Rome is so bad that it can wake the dead. It continues into the night, now caused by *returning* drunkards ... and heavily loaded *lorries*. In the daytime you are shoved or run into and risk getting a whole load of marble dumped on you. At night you are robbed ...
>
> Juvenal writes this — in the year one hundred AD It is the same today... In spite of [all this] Rome has still kept her magic charm.

There are two telescope vision errors here:

One is the use of *lorries* as a translation for Danish "*vogne*" which may stand for any vehicle and the other is the use of *returning* for Danish "*hjemvendende*" (literal translation: [homereturning])

In both cases the students concentrate on lexis at the cost of context, i.e. they concentrate on translating a word but do not look beyond the sentence in which the word is found. Once the error has been pointed out to the students, they have no difficulty in realising that in the first case the result of their telescope vision is that the recipient will be puzzled to hear about lorries in Rome in the year 100 and in the second that, even though these locations are not important in the context, the recipient will wonder where these persons were returning to or from.

Four students out of 22 committed the first error[2] and 11 out of 22, i.e. half of the class, committed the second. The important thing to notice is that in both cases the erroneous translation results in English sentences that are perfectly acceptable communicative sentences *when seen in isolation* i.e. when the translator regards them with a telescope vision.

Grotesque errors like the lorry example showing the consequences of not viewing the text from the point of view of the recipient are remembered by those who commit them. Contrary to the basic pedagogical principle that students learn by encouragement (suc-

[2] It should be added, however, that quite a few students said that their choice of the time-neutral term vehicles was unconscious — they had not realized the double time perspective of the text. As can be seen, telescope vision does not always result in errors of communication.

Lengua y Cultura. LIVBJERG, Inge. Telescope vision - or why can't translator tra...
Centro Virtual Cervantes

cess) and not by criticism (failure),[3] the students themselves say that having such errors pointed out and explained is highly motivating. This may be because — paradoxically — it can give them confidence to realise that they did in fact possess the linguistic, pragmatic or strategic knowledge to avoid the error, if they had only removed the telescope from their eye and checked for context beyond the sentence. The author does of course realise that the mechanisms triggering motivation and confidence are far more complicated than can be credited in this paper and that among others they depend on student personality.[4] What the study does show, however, is that a confrontation with the results of their own telescope vision can *a*) sharpen the student's sense of the role of the recipient, i.e. make her or him understand what it really means to step into the shoes of the recipient and *b*) facilitate students' understanding of their own translation processes. Examples like *vogne* ("vehicles") rendered as *lorries* can be used to make knowledge of these processes explicit and — most important — at the same time they can give students confidence by pointing out to them that, irrespective of the error, the basic principle they employed for understanding and interpreting a text was appropriate. In retrospection one student said that she had deliberately chosen *lorries* because of the mention of unbearable noise and heavy loads in the sentence. So she did look at context. The basically appropriate principle that she employed can be explained in a framework taken from Kussmaul[5] in which Fillmore's scenes-and-frames model[6] is interrelated with the concept of top-down and bottom-up processes: the mention of *støj* ("noise") and *tungtlastede* ("heavily loaded") in the sentence may be said to have evoked a scene in the mind of this translator that top-down (i.e. based on earlier experience or "world knowledge") makes her come up with *lastbil* (lorry) as an appropriate word to fill the frame in the translated text. The rendering of *vogne* as "lorries" is perfectly adequate when checked bottom-up, i.e. checked with the context — provided her vision is limited to the immediate context, i.e. the sentence in which the word is found. The minute she enlarges the frame by looking beyond the sentence for more context (i.e. more bottom-up material) it becomes obvious that "lorries" no longer fits the frame, as it is incompatible with the double time perspective of this particular text. In other words students should be told that it is not their basic procedure that is responsible for such errors but their telescope vision.

Below follows an example of telescope vision in which the students concentrated on the syntax of a sentence disregarding the consequences for the context beyond the sentence in question. But first a description of the syntactic problem behind the error:

The position of certain adverbials is not the same in Danish and English. Errors in this field are frequent, especially in translations into English, which is probably one reason why rules for the position of adverbs are frequently accessed consciously even by semi-professionals. Among the differences are that Danish adverbs of definite time and pre-

[3] Cf. Anna Trosborg: *Interlanguage Pragmatics,* Berlin-New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 1995, p. 458; Steven H. McDonough: *Psychology in Foreign Language Teaching,* London, Allen and Unwin, 1986, p. 151.

[4] Compare McDonough, o. cit., p. 10.

[5] Paul Kussmaul: "Semantic Models and Translating", *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies* (1994), ed. G. Toury and J. Lambert, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, V, p. 10.

[6] Cahrles J. Fillmore: "Scenes-and-Frames Semantics", in Antonio Zampolli (ed.): *Linguistic Structures Processing,* Amsterdam, North Holland, 1977, pp. 55-81.

Lengua y Cultura. LIVBJERG, Inge. Telescope vision - or why can't translator tra...
Centro Virtual Cervantes

positional adverbials often occur in mid-position in Danish, whereas this is unusual in English: A typical example would be

> Danish: *Da han igår/onsdag aften besøgte sin mor* ... Literal translation: [when he yesterday/Wednesday night visited his mother]
> Normal English syntax: when he visited his mother yesterday/on Wednesday night or yesterday/on Wednesday night, when he visited his mother.

As illustrated by the above example, a useful rule of thumb is: *move the adverbial to the beginning or the end of the clause/sentence* — This is exactly what seven out of 24 students do in the example below.

But first a literal translation of the essential part of the Danish source text:

> [A series of events which became defeat upon defeat... was the motives *which Wednesday night made* the 52-year-old first mate to decide to hijack the Anholt-ferry].

As can be seen from this direct translation, the definite time adverbial is found between the subject and the verb in the relative clause (underlined).

Now the problematic translation:

> A series of events that developed into a succession of frustrating experiences ... was the motive which made a 52-year-old first mate decide *to hijack a small Danish ferry on Wednesday night. On Thursday morning he hijacked the ferry...*

Once again the sentence created by the translation is a perfectly acceptable English sentence when seen in isolation. But seen in the context of the next sentence, the word order of the students' rendering with the adverbial moved to end position creates a rather odd context for the recipient, in which the man seems to hijack the ferry two days running.

The intended meaning will probably be understood when the recipient employs Grice's co-operative principle of rejecting the first hypothesis with the adverbial modifying "hijack" in favour of a second with the adverbial modifying "decide" in accordance with ST meaning.[7] However the phrasing is not felicitous. This type of telescope vision error proved unexpectedly frequent. In examples like this the students admit in retrospection that it simply did not occur to them to check their change of syntactic pattern for effects beyond the scope of the sentence. In fact one of the more surprising findings of the investigation is that it seemed to be completely new information to many students that there is danger that such changes in the position of adverbials carried out within the scope of a given clause or sentence may have effects on meaning in a wider context.

IS TELESCOPE VISION TEACHER INDUCED?

The answer is probably "yes" — at any rate to a degree. In the field of syntactic errors, at least two arguments in favour of this assumption could be brought forward:

[7] H. P. Grice: "Logic and Conversation", in Steven Davis (ed.): *Pragmatics, A Reader*', Oxford-New York, OUP, 1991, pp. 305-316.

Lengua y Cultura. LIVBJERG, Inge. Telescope vision - or why can't translator tra...
Centro Virtual Cervantes

1. For practical reasons, examples given in text books of grammar are mainly in the shape of individual sentences.[8]

2. In their work in grammar courses, students often have to take a metalinguistic approach to language and language production, i.e. to recognise and produce sentences that illustrate grammatical rules. Hence when they become aware of problems of syntax in translation work, they use a similar method of concentrating on the form of the problematic sentence forgetting at the same time to consider its content and its place in the larger context in which the recipient sees the sentence.

It was characteristic that students who reproduced the source text meaning adequately by violating the rule of thumb — by writing, for instance:

> which, on Wednesday evening, made the... mate decide to hijack the ferry said that they had done so unconsciously.

As early as in 1986 Færch called for "research on grammar in the study of Foreign Languages at University Level".[9]

The hijack example and others like it prove that this is still a topical issue.

Also in the case of lexical telescope vision errors there might be some connection with the teaching situation.

As pointed out by Kussmaul[10] and Krings[11] students seem to prefer solutions nearer to the source text elements to more elegant solutions employing other strategies. This is seen in the "returning"-example where some students who — correctly — started by discarding home-returning as un-English chose *returning,* which they found in the dictionary, instead of spontaneous first choices such as *drunkards* "on their way home". Ongoing research supported by TAP protocols supports the finding that students often discard spontaneous — and adequate - context-oriented solutions in favour of a less felicitous or even erroneous telescope-vision solution when they get access to a dictionary. According to some students this may have to do with the fact that in the CBS where the focus is on translation of texts within fields of language for special purposes (i.e. economic, legal and technical language, a lot of work must necessarily be spent on terminology. Such terminology can to some extent be provided by experts (including the teacher) or be documented in specialist dictionaries and glossaries and in typical texts from these specialist fields. A good deal of translation work and translation feedback must necessarily concentrate on a discussion of terminology. Students know e.g. that the consequences for the recipient of calling a gadget a thingum can be catastrophic in a technical text and that it is of vital importance to give a legal term an adequate translation. This may be the reason why also in translations of general English texts, students seem to focus of vocabulary, and to prefer words found in dictionaries to other solutions. Comments made during re-

---

[8] See e.g. John Eastwood: *Oxford Guide to English Grammar,* Oxford, OUP, 1994; Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum: *A Student's grammar of the English Language,* London-Bath, Longman, 1990.

[9] Claus Færch and Gabriele Kasper: "Strategic Competence in Foreign Language Teaching", in Gabriele Kasper (ed.): *Learning, Teaching and Communication in the Foreign Classroom,* Aarhus, Aarhus UP, 1986, p. 139.

[10] Paul Kussmaul: *Training the Translator,* Amsterdam-Philadelphia, Benjamins, 1995, pp. 28-31.

[11] Hans P. Krings: *Was in den Köpfen von Übersetzern vorgeht,* Tübingen, Narr, 1986.

Lengua y Cultura. LIVBJERG, Inge. Telescope vision - or why can't translator tra...
Centro Virtual Cervantes

trospection show that they even feel that they cheat a bit if they use other strategies. Tap protocols from ongoing research confirm this.

CONCLUSION

This pilot project indicates that a confrontation with grotesque errors like the above examples may counteract the student's — possibly teacher-induced — tendency to focus on units that are too small and on their own situation as translators rather than that of the recipient of their product. It demonstrates that an understanding of the concept of telescope vision and its consequences for the communicative adequacy of their translation product, together with the realisation that they often do possess the linguistic, pragmatic and strategic knowledge to cure this defective vision, may pave the way for a deeper understanding and a better use of basic translation processes and strategies. Teaching results in later classes of the same type as the one in the study seem to confirm this. It is expected that my ongoing systematic research on students' use — or rather abuse — of dictionaries will throw more light on aspects of this complicated area.

Lengua y Cultura. LIVBJERG, Inge. Telescope vision - or why can't translator tra...
Centro Virtual Cervantes