LINGUISTIC INTERCOMPREHENSION IN VOCATIONAL TRANSLATION TRAINING (THE CASE OF ENGLISH, SPANISH, RUSSIAN)

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Abstract

According to a common adage, translation is not about translating words but about translating meanings. One and the same meaning, thus, in different languages can be rendered by different linguistic means. Mastering the art of translation often means juggling a variety of these linguistic means in two or more languages.

Traditionally, translators for international organizations have worked from a foreign language (so-called languages B/C) into their native language (so-called language A). Today, however, in the increasingly global world, translators are more often than not required to be able to work into at least one, usually two, foreign languages. Moreover, sometimes translators may find themselves tasked with working from language C into language B, i.e. from one foreign language into another, leaving their native language out of the equation altogether. Schools of translation do not normally offer this kind of training. To respond to the growing professional demand, however, there emerged a need for research and teaching strategy development for such a course.

This paper outlines a sequence of teaching activities for a group of Russian speaking students majoring in International Media and Communication Studies at MGIMO-University (Moscow State Institute of International Relations). The students, all of whom are native Russian speakers, have reached CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) C1 level in English and CEFR B2 in Spanish, and are currently taking two professionally-oriented translation courses, from English into Russian and from Spanish into Russian. The paper puts forward a lesson plan where the students are taught translation from Spanish (language C) into English (language B). The activities are aimed at identifying syntactical and lexical differences and similarities between English and Spanish, as well as conducting a comparative analysis of the students' native language, Russian.

The paper argues that translation from one foreign language into another is facilitated by linguistic intercomprehension, a field in linguistic research that emerged relatively recently and has so far mainly focused on intercomprehension in language teaching.

Keywords: Translation, intercomprehension, directionality, vocational translation training.

1 INTRODUCTION

Translation is not about translating words but about translating meaning. However, different languages often render one and the same bit of meaning by radically different linguistic means. Being locked in the frames of two languages (i.e. depending on the nomenclature, A and B, native and foreign, source and target etc.) students of translation lose sight of the existing language diversity and, by extension, of the infinitely diverse ways of rendering the same meaning. In this article, we will suggest a classroom routine of employing two foreign languages that students are learning to demonstrate to the students a variety of patterns employed by different languages to denote the same meaning.

As the result of the class the students will translate at sight a text in one foreign language into another foreign language, bypassing their native tongue (nevertheless, we design a follow-up activity to take home and perform individually that makes use of the native language). Our hypothesis is that through a contrastive analysis of two texts in two foreign languages translation students develop better awareness of language diversity and avoid calques more effectively.

The practice when translators and interpreters work into their foreign language is commonly known as directionality. Other widely used terms include le theme [1], «service translation» [2], «inverse translation» [3] etc. Traditionally considered outside of a translator's expertise, translation into a

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foreign language is increasing recognized as a necessity, and there is now a growing body of scholarly work investigating its work and teaching practices [4].

Intercomprehension can be defined from different angles. In its broadest sense, it is the ability of one speaker to understand a text (be it oral or written) in another language without having studied the language. However, today intercomprehension has acquired at least two more specific meanings. Firstly, it has acquired a certain political dimension, as evidenced in the following: “The term ‘intercomprehension’ has been used by the European Union in order to identify a broader approach to language education, particularly the use of underlying language proficiency to enable access to other languages.” [5].

Furthermore, intercomprehension has been gaining popularity in foreign (second) language teaching: “Intercomprehension is an approach to educating future language teachers. It aims to develop knowledge and understanding of what language is and how it works. Individual knowledge and use of languages and language varieties are examined together with relevant theory and pedagogical practice in order to achieve shared understandings and practical approaches for future language teachers.” [5].

Claims have been made that intercomprehension studies may have a larger application, such as: “The intercomprehension between related languages is the speakers’ capacity to understand those who speak or write in a related language by referring to the similarities between their mother tongue and that particular language. Ever since the dawn of language, intercomprehension has been a day-to-day reality as well as a communicative strategy for millions of people. However, its potential is still latent. Indeed, exploiting intercomprehension on a larger scale will bring about bigger stakes, beyond language itself, involving teacher training and politics.” [6]. Indeed, in the experiment conducted, intercomprehension facilitates translation process in students — speakers of second and third languages.

2 METHODOLOGY

The idea of the experimental class is to use the text in a more familiar language (i.e. English) as a source text to later translate into it from a less familiar language (i.e. Spanish). Potentially problematic language (lexis and syntactical structures) are sources from the English text, matched to Spanish, and then rendered back into English.

2.1 Group profile

The group in the experiment consisted of seven (n=7) advanced students of English and Spanish. The average English CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, [7]) level was C1, and Spanish was assessed at CEFR B1-B2. The students’ major is International Journalism, so they are not professional translations and / or interpreters. However, they are enrolled in compulsory translation classes both from English and from Spanish into Russian. The students started their English-to-Russian translation classes and Spanish-to-Russian translation classes simultaneously, five months prior to the experiment.

2.2 Principles of text selection

The texts selected for the activity must be on a topic familiar to students both in terms of language and contents in both languages. Solid background knowledge and well-practiced language skills are necessary to avoid further confusion and interference. In the experiment, Environment and Current Agenda were chosen, as in the months leading to the experiment the students had been studying the topic in both English and Spanish language classes. The text in English is a TIME article *California Pledges 100% Clean Electricity by 2045* [8] (436 words), and the Spanish text used is an EFE article *California usará energía 100 % limpia en el año 2045* [9] (382 words).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Pre-teaching: Text Analysis

The working hypothesis is that a comparative analysis of the two texts will reveal three possibilities:

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a) some information will be structured / phrased identically in English and in Spanish, i.e. using the same syntactical patters or same-root vocabulary;

b) some information will be structured / phrased very differently in English and in Spanish;

c) some information will be only be present in on of the texts, either in English or in Spanish.

The analysis must be carried out by the teacher before the class, in order to be able to design a worksheet (see below) for the students to fill out. In a stronger group, however, the task may be outsources to students themselves.

Direct matches can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Direct matches.

English	Spanish
to sign a bill	firmar una ley
to obtain electricity from … sources	obtener energia de fuentes …
It's not going to be easy and it will not be immediate, but it must be done	No sera fácil. No sera inmediato. Pero se debe hacer.
to put California on a[n ambitious] path	situar a California en el camino para …

Direct matches include lexis of the same root (*obtain / obtener*) and syntactical structures of the same pattern, such as two transitive verbs (*sign a bill / firmar una ley*).

Examples of parts of the texts that cannot be rendered from one language to another without transformations are shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Non-matches (Transformations).

English	Spanish
climate change summit	la cumbre mundial de acción climatica
to meet the goal	cumplir los objetivos
to exceed the standards	superar los objetivos
a decision introduced by …	impulsor de la medida
Whatever "naysayers" might suggest	Le guste o no le guste a Trump …
Regardless of who occupies the White House	Le guste o no le guste a Trump …
California will always lead on climate change	California es el líder mundial en energías renovables

As it can be observed, the differences include noun-verb transformations (*to introduce smth / impulsor de algo* and *California will lead / es un lider mundial*), words of a different root, even in those cases where Spanish and English vocabulary systems have same-root words (e.g. *exceed / superar*, despite the existence of the verb *exceder* in Spanish). Grammatically, the Spanish *Modo Subjuntivo* is rendered in English through modality (*Le guste o no le guste / whatever sb might …*).

3.2 Lesson Stages

The actual classroom activities sequence is organized in eight stages, with an optional follow-up stage.

- Stage 1:

  Students read a text in English on a familiar topic (in this case, Global Warming agenda / Environment-related legislature).

- Stage 2:

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Teacher checks comprehension (content-based questions, group work etc.), if necessary takes care of critical language issues.

- Stage 3:

  Students translate the text into Russian (native language) at sight. The teacher makes a note of problematic bits.

- Stage 4:

  Students read a text in Spanish, on the same topic but not a parallel text as such.

- Stage 5:

  Teacher checks comprehension (content-based questions, group work etc.), if necessary takes care of critical language issues.

- Stage 6:

  Teacher offers students a worksheet where they are to search both texts and discover English / Spanish equivalents. The worksheet is organized in two sections, so students are guided to select (a) items that are structured or phrased identically in Spanish and English; (b) items that are structured or phrased differently. Pair work, group work or individual work are all possible here depending on the group.

- Stage 7:

  Teacher draws the students' attention to parts of the Spanish text that do not have a direct or indirect correspondence to the English text that students have read and elicits possible English translations for them.

- Stage 8:

  Students translate the Spanish text at sight into English using their worksheets.

- Stage 9: (optional)

  Homework / Follow-Up: Students are asked to expand the worksheet by finding a text on the same topic in their native Russian and add a Russian example to each section (identical and different phrasing / structure).

4 CONCLUSIONS

The whole group successfully completed the tasks and reported a higher satisfaction from the translation compared to translating into Russian, their native language. The same activities can be used in any group that has mastered two foreign languages even if translation is not the main teaching aim. The benefits of comparative language studies and analysis have been described in a number of works, see, for example, [10].

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