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## Language Transfer: What Gets Distorted or Deleted in Translation

### Why translate?

To a large extent, what can get distorted or deleted depends on how a translation is approached. If translation is considered to be a lexico-grammatical exercise, then what can get lost will be in terms of grammatical accuracy, appropriacy, and in particular *le mot juste*; that elusive word or expression that would perfectly translate the original. Translators in this case are craftsmen or women attempting to reconstruct that perfect copy. They are attentive to detail, and in particular to the lexico-grammatical pieces.

Detail is important, just as bricks are when building a house. But perfectly chosen bricks laid by the perfect bricklayer will not by themselves ensure a house fit to live in, nor one which fits into the general environment. What we need is an architect conscious of the local context. The translator as architect will be very aware of the general layout of the translated text, how it fits in with other texts (the genre), and how it will be received by the reader. S/he will have a keen eye for both internal and landscape design. What can get lost for this type of translator is in terms of received meaning, reader expectation (genre) and reader response (the perlocutionary effect).

Limiting the translator's freedom to act will be a number of factors: time, the client's specific needs, the publisher's and so on. The one group which does not usually apply any pressure is the target reader. It is, I suggest, the translator's responsibility to react primarily to the needs of the presumed reader, while taking due regard to those who exert more di-

rect pressure;<sup>1</sup> because the meaning of a text, and hence translation quality can be summed up in terms of the quality of reader reaction.

### Loss of text meaning

How much *meaning* that can get lost depends very much on the level of culture at play (Katan, 1999: 30–33). At a technical level, communication is explicit. This is the language of science, maths, and logical relations. There is no meaning outside the text. Hence a technical definition of, for example *a second* leaves no space for interpretation or further imagination and has the same technical meaning whatever language it is transferred to. There is, however, an interlocutor's interpretation or re-elaboration of what might sound like technical time; such as *Back in a second* or *Dinner's at 8 o'clock*. In these two cases, few people would read the times literally; but then, only when we know the situation, the type of person and his or her behaviour patterns could we have a clear idea of how long *a second* is, or at what time exactly the guests should start apologising for being late. Each country, and each culture within that country (context of culture) will have a generally accepted way of behaving in particular situations (context of situation).

Translations too are subject to a country's accepted way of doing things; and many seemingly technical texts, such as labelling,

<sup>1</sup> For an example of how the demands of the original author, the publisher and the needs of the target reader have been mediated, see Katan (forthcoming) *Miscellanea*, Trieste

guarantees and instructions, are subject to domestic rules, regulations, mores and style.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly clearly evident when comparisons are made, not of translations but of equivalent texts, original texts which are specifically written for particular language/culture readers. Small differences between them can have extreme consequences, such as the different printed warnings to be found on a packet of an Italian-made round of pistol caps (bold type as in the original in both the French and the English):

Not recommended for children  
under **8 years**

The warning in Italian (the original language) considers a very different age – 36 months:

Non adatto ad un bambino  
di eta' minore di **36 mese**

The Italian reading is much more liberal, which perhaps says as much about local mores as it does about following EU directives or other regulations. The translator is often restricted by his/her own *house rules*; or alternatively is too concerned with the lexicogrammatical considerations to consider the target country's particular needs or expectations. The following text is an example brick by brick translation from the Italian, congratulating the customer on his/her choice of *Blackwell shoe*:<sup>3</sup>

Compliments! You chosed the Blackwell shoes realised with materials of high quality.  
The leather, carefully selected in the

specialised slaughter-houses, after different proceeding of manufacture, becomes softer and supplier.

The analytical translator will notice immediately the grammatical inaccuracies. A more "correct" translation at the technical level would be as follows:

Compliments! You chose the *Blackwell* shoes made with high quality materials. The leather has been carefully selected from the specialised slaughter houses. The leather has been through a number of manufacturing processes which have rendered it softer and more supple.

However, what really *affects* the target reader in the UK or the US is not the grammar or the spelling but the Anglo-American sensitivity to animals. So, the translator aware of target-culture reader response should manipulate the text through subtle generalisation, distortion or deletion to orient the reader to an equivalent positive reaction. The most important change needed here is deletion of *slaughter houses* as the target readers are particularly sensitive about animal care, and do not wish to be reminded about how they die. A more culturally-sensitive translation would be the following:

Thank you for having chosen *Blackwell* shoes. They have been carefully made from the finest quality materials. The selected leather has been treated to make it soft and supple [...].

or

Your *Blackwell* shoes have been carefully made from the finest quality materials [...].

This raises an important point concerning a translator's obligations or responsibilities, and in particular his or her right to *manipulate* a text in this way.

<sup>2</sup> These differences are discussed in Schäffner & Kelly-Holmes (eds) (1995).

<sup>3</sup> This particular text was noticed first by Piotr Kuhiwczak (1995: 236), and is reported in Katan (1999: 137)

### Translation theory and practice

With regard to this question, currently popular translation theory in Europe has embraced the idea that manipulation takes place from the very moment that the (commercially strategic, political or ideological) decision is made to choose a text for translation. In a sense any deliberate change to the *status quo* entails a manipulation, in particular when there is no one-to-one agreed objective equivalent across languages to adhere to. The translator, in fact, has a wide choice in how to change, transform, and hence manipulate the original text. Ever since Cicero there has been a debate about whether the transformation should be *faithful* to the source text or should be *free*, to concentrate on the function of the text rather than the form. In the 1960's, Peter Newmark codified the two possibilities as *semantic* (respecting the original writer's source words and world) or *communicative* (aiming towards equivalent effect in the target culture). However, in both cases, judgement was based on the original text itself and the lexicogrammar very much more than the interplay of text, local context and reader interpretation.

More recently, the discipline of Translation Studies (see Bassnett, 1991) has changed the focus away from the original text to that of the target text and reader. Meaning, it is suggested, is not absolute, but rather is created through reference to what is shared between writer and reader. These two must not only share a common language, but they must also share the same background (context of situation and culture) to be able to add what does not need to be stated in the text.

Hence, the new text is no longer to be seen as a copy or imitation of the original text, but an *original* text in its own right. The translation scholar, Venuti (1992: 8) states that a translation "releases [the target text] from its subordination to the [original] foreign text

and makes possible the development of a hermeneutic that reads the translation as a text in its own right, ...". In short, as Arrojo (1997: 23) notes "the reader begins to be recognised as an active producer of meaning whose interference is not merely tolerable but inevitable".

So, returning to comparisons of equivalent texts, it is clear that in the past translators have been concerned with *translating* and crafting translations, rather than with *creating* original texts based on the interplay of text and the context. This has led to the formation of a new school of thought which talks about *how* rather than *whether or not to* manipulate the target text. The school is, in fact, called *The Manipulation School*. My understanding of manipulation is somewhat different to Venuti's in that he is very concerned about power and ideology in translation. My understanding is based on a negotiation of mutual needs and restraints.

As I see it, manipulation needs to be used by the translator to counter what Lefevre called *the refraction* that any text undergoes when it crosses cultural boundaries. At one extreme, such as the translation of a software manual, the translator should manipulate the text to such an extent that it becomes a local text. Nothing is left in the text to locate it outside of the target culture. At the other extreme, the translator may translate the text deviating from the form as little as possible, making the foreignness transparent. At this point the reader refracts the text meaning to fit his/her own world. Any part of the text which does not fit the reader's world is simply deleted or distorted until it does.

My understanding of the translator's task is to manipulate the text just enough for the reader to read and understand it without distorting or losing the intended cognitive effect. This means that every translation should be tackled on its own merits and be translated for

a particular readership. The translator should constantly monitor the degree of potential re-fraction and manipulate accordingly. The overriding criteria should be, first, that the target text reads as an original text – not as a translation; and second, that the reader's needs and expectations are respected as much as, if not more than, all the other pressures.

Let us take an example to see how this might operate in practice. Below is a good, "faithful" translation from a piece by Enzo Biagi, a well-known and highly respected Italian journalist and commentator.

I don't commemorate the Dead, as you can read in the calendars once a year and I'm not a devotee of cemeteries either: someone said that if you keep going there, you'll end up staying there. And I don't even have this paradoxical worry either: but I do believe that a memory, or a thought, counts as much as a

chrysanthemum. I understand the gentle gesture, the flower or the candle [...] and I also respect the consolatory conversation that takes place by a tombstone [...] but I've always been moved by Pirandello's choice [...]. And it's also our Spoon River. [...] On November 2<sup>nd</sup> I was a long way from home [...]

It may surprise the Slovene reader to know that it is clear from this English text alone (without recourse to the original) that much of Biagi's intended meaning will be distorted or lost when read in an Anglo-American cognitive environment. At many levels, what is shared between Biagi and his original *intended* reader, has not been transferred to the *target* reader. A Slovene reader would share much more of Biagi's world than any typical British or American reader. What then has been lost?

### Levels of Sharedness

#### *Environment and Behaviour*<sup>4</sup>

For the reader to fully understand, s/he will

need to have access to a similar array of encyclopaedic knowledge as the writer: technical, geographical, historical, literary, and so on. This means that a translator must not only be sufficiently bi-lingual but also sufficiently bi-cultural to share both worlds – and to be able to compare the different cognitive effects.

The text is always an abbreviation of a full semantic representation. And, in fact, we use abbreviations and acronyms specifically because there is an implicit assumption that their *full* meaning is shared. During a seminar on this very subject, a number of translators explained to me that pharmaceutical products are sold with two types of medical information leaflet inserts: one for the doctor, and one for OTC products. It took some time before it was realised that some intended meaning had been lost, due to the translator's assumption that I shared the full meaning of *OTC*. Like many other acronyms, the meaning must be made explicit in the text; usually through a translation couplet,<sup>5</sup> i.e. abbreviation plus full lexical meaning, with one or the other in brackets, such as: *over the counter (OTC) products*.

With regard to the extract above, the target reader will not attach any particular meaning to *the Dead* or *the calendars*. Importantly, as the Longman Dictionary of Language and Culture states "The *connotations* ... are often

<sup>4</sup> The Levels refer to the Logical Levels Model taken from NeuroLinguistic Programming, and discussed at length in Katan (1999)

<sup>5</sup> Peter Newmark's book (1982) is an excellent practical guide to translation procedures, such as the use of translation couplets and triplets, translation labels, transcription, through translations (calques) and many other. His more recent book (1988) covers much the same ground, but is less complete on this particular aspect.

essential to the full understanding of a passage [...] and so this information is clearly stated in the definition”. However, according to the dictionary, a *chrysanthemum* is not connoted to cemeteries or the Dead in any way whatsoever. It is only “a garden plant with large brightly coloured bushy flowers”.

The *candle*, on the other hand, represents more of a distortion. It is used in Britain and in America to commemorate the Dead, but is traditionally white and is not usually placed on gravestones. So, the picture entertained by Biagi comes across partially deleted and partially distorted – and in urgent need of manipulation.

We need to carry the reader from what is shared (the theme) towards what is new (the rheme), as follows:

Known: part of the shared TC cognitive environment Theme	Less known to the TC reader Theme-Rheme	Originally unknown to the TC reader Theme-Rheme
All Souls’ Day	(This is also a) traditional event	(it is a traditional event) and noted in all Italian calendars
A flower (placed on graves etc.)	(There is a particular) cemetery flower	(The cemetery flower is) a chrysanthemum

The addition of a coordinated adjective group complex is another possibility (e.g. *flickering red*). The pre-head elements create natural sounding additions, just large enough, in this case, to make explicit the mainly visual cognitive effect cued by the Mediterranean/Catholic visualisation of *candle*. One further qualification may also be provided by an extra cohesive tie, *cemetery*, clarifying not only the candle function but also, being in juxtaposition with the chrysanthemum nominal group, highlighting the importance of the two symbols: *cemetery flowers* and *flickering red cemetery candles*.

A final result might look like the following:

I don’t commemorate the Dead, according to the **November 2nd All Soul’s Day tradition marked in all the Italian calendars**. And

I’m not a devotee of cemeteries either. Someone said that if you keep going there, you’ll finish up staying there. And I don’t have this paradoxical fear either, but I do believe that a memory, or a thought is worth as much as **a flower**. Of course I can understand the *gentle gesture*, the **cemetery flower (the chrysanthemum)** or the **flickering red cemetery candle**. . . . I also respect the *consoling communion* over the grave. [...] But I have always been moved by the choice Pirandello made . [...] **It’s also our version of the Spoon River tombstone poems we know so well**. On November 2<sup>nd</sup> I was a long way from home.

*Strategies and Values*

Each culture has its own idea of what constitutes good style. Meaning can get lost in translation by adopting an inappropriate style, and ultimately a translated text runs the risk of not being read or not being treated seriously as an authoritative text. This is a further downside of the *brick by brick* approach to translating. Below is a short extract from a four sided leaflet which attempts to explain the ticket-punching system adopted by the Italian railways.

**Just for you, a ticket office that looks like a leaflet.**

## FS SINGLE TICKETS

These tickets can be used for up to two months from the date of issue inclusive.

Different periods and conditions may be based on other tariff regulations. Tickets are only valid if they are stamped prior to train departure by means of the appropriate ticket-stamping machines or if passengers, of their own initiative, pay a charge of Lire 10,000 to the train staff before departure. In the event of the machine being out of order or unavailable, passengers can validate their tickets at the FS ticket office or else, by asking the train staff of their own initiative without having to pay any extra charge.

Otherwise, besides the charge of Lire 10.000, a fine of Lire 30.000 will be imposed.

This style follows the Italian (which in some ways is very similar to the Slovene). The strategy is based on the belief that good writing style is formal and, more importantly, should be oriented to the expressive needs of the original text producer. The producer needs to assert his or her authority or expertise, and does so by creating a rich and complex style, which includes all the details and eventualities. It is up to the reader to make his or her way through the text and to decide what to focus on. It is very important that an appropriate distance is kept between the (informed or expert) writer and the (uninformed or non-expert) reader. This is done through the use of *insider style*: specialist vocabulary, high information load and also high-context language.

High-context language takes us back to the idea of sharedness. If an expert is writing, s/he cannot explain everything, but must assume a certain pre-acquired knowledge. Hence there will be a tendency to presume that the simple concepts are obvious. These would be explained to children not to adults.

The use of this style tends to reassure the reader that the writer is indeed an expert – and not just anybody. The intended reader will tend to respect a use of language which is slightly above his or her usual register, and which is rich enough to be to be worked at and to be returned to to glean further information. In many ways, it is a verbal corollary of an oil painting, and when crafted by masters of this style is indeed quite remarkable.

This style, with regard to transactional writing is in almost in net contrast to what is considered good style in the Anglo-American culture. Any Anglo-American text book on written style will stress the overriding importance of clarity, concision and reader's needs; in short *KISS* (Keep it Short and Simple). The more Mediterranean style on the other hand might be abbreviated (by a *KISS* oriented writer) to *KILC* (Keep it Long and Complex). The best known literary quotation in the English language is a perfect example of the *KISS* approach:

### *Syntax:*

infinitive	To be
conj. + adverb	or not
infinitive	to be:
Pronoun subject	that
Verb	is
Complement	the question

The basic principle for good writing in English is: one sentence, one idea. The value behind this is the orientation to the reader. The text should be *reader friendly* (which, logically, is a notoriously difficult expression to translate into writer-oriented cultures). There is a general unconscious belief that in technical and scientific writing, as well as in other expert writing a true expert can also write simply.

Following this *reader friendly* approach,

the translator's task is to first *context*<sup>6</sup> the readership and the target context of culture. Like the conscientious architect, the translator should compare his or her translation with the overall style (genre) of the local target environment. Clearly, individual cases will call for increased *domestication* of the text, which will then blur totally into the local landscape, whereas there will be other cases which will call for more *foreignisation* or focus on the unusual. In all cases the translator should work within the bounds of reader expectation and *tolerance range*.

A cursory look at any English rail information leaflet will reveal what the reader will be expecting from a leaflet explaining Italian trains. First, there is a Anglo-American orientation to common or colloquial expressions (e.g.: "Kids just love travelling by train" rather than "children thoroughly enjoy travelling by train"); active rather than the passive tenses (e.g.: "You can buy a Railcard ..." rather than "A Railcard can be bought ..."); and a serious effort to engage in a conversation with the reader, anticipating the reader's possible worries or concerns. This is done in a number of ways. The reader is addressed personally: "you" rather than "one" or recourse to the passive tense. Most importantly, in this publicity/informational genre, is the use of FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions). The question is highlighted in bold, and is then answered immediately below, for example:

**What do I get from the Network Railcard?**

**33% off the normal adult fare in the Network railcard area on all these tickets:**  
Cheap Day Singles and Returns

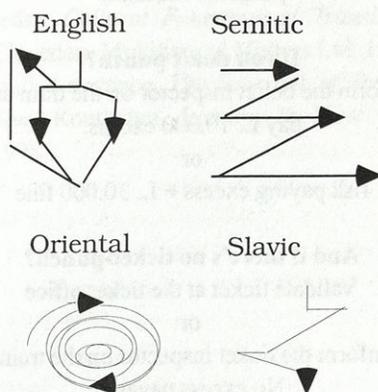
<sup>6</sup> This term comes from E. T. Hall (1983: 61) and refers to how much information or knowledge is shared between reader and writer.

Standard Day Singles and Returns  
Standard Singles and Open Returns  
Network Awaybreaks  
Network Stayaways  
All zones One Day Travelcards  
(subject to a minimum fare)

**Up to 3 adults can travel with you for the same discounted fare each.**

**Up to 4 accompanying children (aged 5-15) can travel with you for a full flat fare of £1 each.**

Other elements to note are the use of graphics (bullet points, font size and bold) to highlight the more important information. The reader is constantly shepherded through the text, and is given the essential information in a sequential, "logical" order, an approach which is highly favoured. According to Kaplan (1972) culture-preferred rhetorical patterns vary immensely. The Anglo-American approach tends to operate linearly with an "and/but" or pros/cons" division acting in parallel:



A KILCy approach (Oriental and Slavic) will tend to add more detail or background information as the text progresses, widening, rather than focussing on, the main issues. In this way a KILCy text can cover more eventualities, while a KISSy one is obliged to simplify the reality. It is no accident that William

of Occam, the Medieval Franciscan scholastic philosopher, was born in England. His thesis, known as *Occam's razor* was that all unnecessary facts or constituents in the subject under analysis should be eliminated.

My suggestion with regard to the Italian railway leaflet is to follow suit and make the text not a translation but an original text, constructed for a possibly harassed and confused rail traveller:

### Italian rail tickets.

#### What you need to know.

#### SINGLE TICKETS

##### Validity:

Unpunched, 2 months  
unless otherwise specified.

##### What to do:

Punch ticket in the platform ticket-punch.  
They are yellow and are placed close to  
platform entrance.

##### If you don't punch?

Inform the ticket inspector on the train and  
pay L. 10.000 excess.  
or  
risk paying excess + L. 30.000 fine

##### And if there's no ticket-punch?

Validate ticket at the ticket office  
or  
Inform the ticket inspector on the train.  
No excess payable

### Orientations

We have already mentioned orientations in the previous section as values. Values relate to what we aspire to. We judge our values to be better than others. For example, Chesterton (1997: 150) in the volume *Translation as Intercultural Communication*, states: "I will

stick my neck out and claim that clarity will survive as an ethical linguistic value long after the postmodernist textual anarchists are dead and buried". Orientations on the other hand are not readily open to points of view. They are, instead, the basic filter through which we organise our understanding of reality. Very rarely is this aspect of meaning taken into account when translating, usually because it is so much part of a particular language and culture that it is difficult even to imagine a different way of orienting towards reality – let alone attempt to translate the particular meaning involved.

At times the orientation surfaces in text, rather than lying in the shared context. A good example is the attempted translation of the Nike slogan: *Just Do It*. This slogan con-jures up, through the syntax, semantics and stress, strong American orientations (among others) towards activity, environment, individualism and time.<sup>7</sup> In short: *the American Can Do* way.

Orientation	focus	<i>possibilities</i> (US in bold)
Activity	being	<b>doing/action</b> being-in-becoming
Environment	victim	<b>conqueror</b> partner
Individualism	low	<b>high</b> mid
Time	past	<b>present</b> future

No other language-culture shares the same packages of orientations, nor can they create the same dramatic effect, immediacy or possibilities translating *the words* brick by brick. In fact the Nike team involved in appraising the translations were either "dismayed" or, in the case of the Japanese translation: "horrificed".

<sup>7</sup> Cultural orientations are explained in detail in Part 3 of Katan (1999: 161–242)

“We said ‘No’ Don’t translate it!”<sup>8</sup> Another possible answer to this problem would be to leave the syntax and the semantics, and to concentrate on the orientations and associated feelings which *can* be carried across to the target culture. This is discussed further in Katan (1999: 155–157).

I should like to conclude by leaving the reader with the following translation of *Just Do It* into Slovene suggested by Anton Omerza. The reader's response is the best guide to what has been deleted or perhaps gained with the adoption of the nicely assonant obstacle-removing: *Nema problema*.

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<sup>8</sup> *Business Week* (25/4/1992: 32)