

THE TRANSLATION PROFESSION – A SCIENCE, AN ART AND A SKILL

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Abstract

The present paper aims at defining the concept of translation and at debunking some myths related to it. Many newcomers to translation wrongly believe it is an [exact science](#), and mistakenly assume a firmly defined one-to-one correlation exists between the words and phrases in different languages which make translations fixed, much like [cryptography](#). On the contrary, such a fixed relationship would only exist were a new language [synthesized](#) and continually synchronized alongside an existing language in such a way that each word carried exactly the same scope and shades of meaning as the original, with careful attention to preserve the etymological roots, assuming they were even known with certainty.

A definition of translation can not very easily be given. If we were to look the word up in a dictionary (Webster's Dictionary) we would see that translating means changing spoken or written words into another language. The translation activity is very old. It has been generated by the existence of more than one language on this planet and will continue to exist unless humankind came up with a unique language to communicate in. People who have never translated often assume that it is a purely mechanical process. The translator, proficient in both languages, simply has to substitute one word in the source language for an equivalent word in the target language. To some extent this is true, particularly for texts with specific and frequently repeated terminology such as machine manuals, and especially if those texts are being translated into a language related to one's own. If you have ever read some of the incomprehensible manuals that have come out of Japan for VCRs or electrical appliances, however, you will realize that there is more to translation than owning a good foreign language dictionary.

In a simplistic acception one could say that to translate means to find equivalent words from the source language to the target language. In that vein, many assume all one needs to translate a given passage is to [decipher](#) between the languages using a [translation dictionary](#). Starting from the misconception that lexemes are just some sort of "labels" given to objects, phenomena, qualities, actions, etc., one can very easily reach the conclusion that to translate means to exchange "labels". Ferdinand de Saussure noted in this respect that some people reduced language to its essential principle, considering it to be nothing more than just a nomenclature that is a list of terms, whereas other researchers draw the attention on the fact that language is not just a "bag" filled with words. For

those who share these misconceptions, translation might indeed be very easy since all they have to do in order to translate is to put words from one language into another language. Translation is in fact a science, an art and a skill at the same time.

The most common misconception about translation is that anyone who knows two languages can translate. I am going to make an important distinction here. I believe there are translators and then there are professional translators. The former are people who translate on the side, using their knowledge of a particular field to translation work. Professional translators, on the other hand, are applied linguists who have a genuine ability to work with language and have a deep understanding of it. Professional translators are people who are dedicated to their languages and the nations, societies, and cultures which come with them. They are devoted to improving their ability to understand their source language and write in their target language. They recognize that translation is both an art and a skill. As such, they are also committed to deepening their knowledge of the fields they translate in, and to cultivating greater facility for writing about such matters. Finally, professional translators know that they can always improve and polish their translation ability.

Anyone who knows two languages to a certain extent can “translate” and by this I mean that anyone who knows two languages can put words from one language (the source language) into another one (the target language). Yet there is much more to translation than just the mere transferring of some words from the source language into the target language, and unfortunately many people do not recognize this. Translation is so much more and non-translators are often perplexed by this fact. Words are more than just meaning: words convey emotions and cultural concepts, which may exist in one language but not in another. Being able to read, speak and write a foreign language does not give anyone license to undertake translation work. Firstly, a translator must have indepth understanding and knowledge of at least two languages: a foreign language and a mother tongue. Secondly, translating is a skill. You must be able to write well and have an excellent command of the nuances in language use. Thirdly, language is not free of cultural influences. If the culture behind the language which is being translated is not appreciated, an accurate translation is extremely difficult.

Many times, a well-meaning person will think that the translator has incorrectly translated something in the translation. Nearly 99% of the time, however, their good intentions are ill founded. Not only does the translation quality decrease, but the translator's reputation can also be called into questioned.

It has often been argued that all it takes to be a good translator is to be a native speaker. To the surprise of those reading this article, let me just tell you that merely being a native speaker of a language does not ensure or guarantee that that person will be able to translate adequately. Translation requires discipline, study, and continual practice. A native speaker of a language does not inherently possess all (or even any) of these qualities.

Translation is a demanding process that not everybody who knows two or more languages can master. A good translator loves languages and is totally dedicated to his/her job. This includes the desire to constantly improve one's linguistic knowledge and to deepen the knowledge of his specialized field(s). Since the majority of required translations are “technical” ones, meaning translations in fields, which have their own specialized terminology, as opposed to literary translation, each translator is required to specialize in one or more fields (such as legal, financial, medical, IT-related, texts).

A turn-of-the-century Russian translator said: “Translation is like a woman, if she is beautiful, she is not faithful; if she is faithful, she is not beautiful”. I hope you will ignore the blatant sexism in the statement and instead see one of the kernels of truth in translation. Translators must strike a balance between fidelity to the source text and readability in the target language. We have all seen material that is so obviously translated as to sound awkward in our native languages, and in some cases as to bear enough hallmarks of the source language as to be readily identifiable as coming from it. The best translation is the one that no one recognizes as a translation. In other words, the document should read as though it were written in the target language originally. This implies, by extension, that the translator's time and effort are transparent, and the translator ends up being invisible. In other words, you do your best work when no one realizes you have done anything. Achieving this level of translation is challenging, to say the least.

Translation is occasionally taken too lightly by some. However, translation is in fact a serious business that should be approached sensibly in order to avoid poor results. Translation is far from easy. It can be very intricate, complex and arduous work. Having to simultaneously concentrate on two different texts is mentally exhausting. This is because a translator is continuously moving between two languages and mind frames. A translator must first read and register source information then manage to digest it and present it accurately in the target language. This means having an excellent vocabulary and appreciating the subtleties in language such as phrases, metaphors, tone and intention.

It may be true that professional translators are not always necessary, however if the translation is to be accurate and professionally prepared and presented then an experienced translator is crucial. Bad translations lead to many problems including people misunderstanding texts which ultimately reflect poorly on a company or organization. If you want your car fixed you take it to a mechanic, not a car salesman. He may know a bit about cars but not enough to address your problems properly.

Translation is ultimately a human activity which enables human beings to exchange ideas and thoughts regardless of the different languages used. Translation is a modern science at the interface of philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and sociology. Literary translation in particular is relevant to all these sciences, audio-visual arts, as well as cultural and intellectual studies.

In the final analysis, translation is a science, an art, and a skill. It is a science in the sense that it necessitates complete knowledge of the structure and make-up of the two languages concerned. It is an art since it requires artistic talent to reconstruct the original text in the form of a product that is presentable to the reader who is not supposed to be familiar with the original. It is also a skill because it entails the ability to smooth over any difficulty in the translation, and the ability to provide the translation of something that has no equal in the target language.

In translation, the richness of vocabulary, depth of culture, and vision of the translator could certainly have very conspicuous effects on his/her work. Another translator might produce a reasonably acceptable version of the same text, which, however, may very well reflect a completely different background, culture, sensitivity, and temperament. Such differences cannot detract from the merit of either translator. This is simply because translation is decidedly a more difficult job than creation. All translators have to strive for an ever higher level of professionalism to bring prestige and respect to themselves and the translation profession.

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