

TESTING THE TRANSLATION SKILLS¹

Rationale

Translation is an interlanguage activity. It is the integration of receptive and productive skills in comprehending and reproducing the decoded message via either the graphic medium or the oral medium. Besides being the integration of skills, translation involves the integration of two cultural systems and thought processes of the source language and the target language (the language into which the source language is translated). Therefore, the messages to be transferred from one language to the other are linguistic, socio-psychological, stylistic and cultural.

Translation Techniques

The two main techniques for translation are semantic and communicative.

Semantic translation is straightforward focusing on the original text and source culture. It is text-oriented and is the Saussurian "langue" aspect of language use whereby the linguistic components of lexis, grammar and phonology are emphasized.

Communicative translation, on the other hand, is pragmatic and functional. Its focus is on the receptor of the message; therefore, the socio-psychological dimension of language use or Saussurian "parole" is emphasized. The task of a translator is to bring in the target culture whenever mention of cultural points comparable to those of the source culture is made. Communicative translation renders the flavor authentic to the target culture by avoiding foreign expressions and alien cultural points. Semantic translation, on the contrary, preserves cultural shades of the source language. For example, the English expression "to carry coal to New Castle" may be translated communicatively into Thai as "to carry coconuts to a coconut grove for sale." By using cultural equivalents, the sense of relevancy is real in communicative translation.

Testing Techniques

Testing translation skills is primarily a production test involving both language comprehension and production skills of the testees. It is an integrative test. In its written mode, the reading skill is integrated with the writing skill, whereas in its oral mode the listening skill is integrated with the speaking skill.

Written Translation: Rebecca M. Valette suggested two types—complete translation and partial translation. In a complete translation test the entire passage

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is given in the source language. In a partial translation test, certain portions are in the native language of the testees, the other portions are in the source language containing selected language problems to be tested. The latter technique requires longer time for preparation but is easier to grade since only the problem points are tested, not the entire passage.

Oral Translation : John Oller reported a research conducted in Canada by Swain, Dumas and Neyman on *elicited translation* in which sentences were orally given one-by-one by the test administrator and the testee translated the sentences one-by-one after each was given. Elicited translation was discovered to be as effective in tapping the testees' errors, as *spontaneous translation* in which a whole flow of speech was translated.

Self-Assessment ; Rating scales for self-assessment can be used as measures of the students' written and oral translation skills. Various scales have been developed. The rating scale below was developed by the author and two co-researchers. There are five skill levels beginning at Level Three, the "threshold level", the most basic of communicative competence :

Level 3 - Able to translate groups of words, simple sentences and formulaic expressions such as 'Good morning,' 'Thank you', and 'The house is expensive'.

Level 4 - Able to translate short and simple statements with no idiomatic expressions. The translation is word-by-word which is at times incomprehensible to the receptor of the message.

Level 5 - Able to translate more complex statements. Uses of words and structures are still awkward and unnatural causing some confusion to the receptor.

Level 6 - Able to translate various styles such as descriptive and explanatory. There are still traces of the source language styles in the message. However, the receptor is able to comprehend the message fully.

Level 7 - Able to translate all types of discourse. Choices of words, idioms, structures, expressions and styles are appropriate for the topic and situation. The receptor can comprehend the message fully and is able to appreciate the language flavor rendered.

The above scale can be used by students to rate their level of translation proficiency before and after instruction to evaluate their progress in translation skills.

Marking Scheme for a Translation Test

For written translation, R. Valette recommended three steps and for each step a certain portion of marks is allocated :

Step 1 - impressionistic marking-the rater reads the whole text and gives the score based on his impression of the quality of the translation.

Step 2 - analytical marking-the rater uses grammatical scale, lexical scale and phonological scale (for poetry translation) to mark the text sentence by sentence.

Step 3 – A certain portion of the marks is given to tone and fluency, i.e., whether the piece conveys the language flavor such as urgency, tentativeness, menace, sarcasm, flattery, etc.

For oral translation the rating scale for self-assessment described above can be used by the teacher or rater. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) Scale for oral interview can also be used for both elicited and spontaneous translation. The Georgetown University Oral Rating Form for Rating Language Proficiency in Speaking and Understanding English which contains the following criteria for rating: comprehension, pronunciation, grammar and word-order, vocabulary and general speed of speech and sentence length, can also be used to mark oral translation.

A Research on Translation Testing

Translation testing is pragmatic since it brings into play the linguistic, psycho-sociological and cultural contexts of language interaction. The author has developed a macro-language testing matrix for translation testing by incorporating the contextual dimensions of language use. To test the construct validity of the matrix, a research project was conducted using five Thai undergraduates in economics as subjects. Both the graphic mode and the oral mode of the skills were tested.

The Matrices

1. Graphic Mode : English --- Thai

“The Lion Who Wanted to Zoom” by James Thurber’s *Fables of Our Time*.

Discourse : The Lion Who Wanted to Zoom				Components	
Field	Tenor	Mode	Genre	Lexis	Grammar
Over-Ambition	Humorous/ Moral	Graphic	Fable	√	√

2. Oral Mode : English --- Thai, Thai --- English (Elicited Techniques) Leo Jones’ *Functions of English*

The Procedure

Each subject translated in writing James Thurber’s “The Lion Who Wanted to Zoom.” Each piece was scored on language use and language flavor which received equal weighting (50 : 50). Then they did oral translation of conversations selected from Leo Jones’ *Functions of English*. The subjects’ oral translation skill was rated on the Georgetown University Oral Rating Form for Rating Language

Proficiency in Speaking and Understanding English. In addition, each subject rated his own proficiency in translation on the Translation Skill Level described previously as a self-assessment device.

Discourse : Functions of English				Components		
Field	Tenor	Mode	Genre	Sound	Lexis	Grammar
- Making a date	- Friendly Formal	Oral	Conversation	✓	✓	✓
- Getting and giving information	- Formal	Oral	Conversation	✓	✓	✓
- Getting people to do things	- Intimate Casual	Oral	Conversation	✓	✓	✓
- Offering, asking permission giving reasons	- Friendly Formal	Oral	Conversation	✓	✓	✓

Data Analysis

To find out the relationships between various components of the translation skill the Pearson Product Moment Correlation was performed on the following data :

subject	Written Translation			Self Rating Level	Oral Translation
	Language	Flavor	Total		
1	40	35	75	5	56
2	30	25	55	4	72
3	35	40	75	4	80
4	30	25	55	4	80
5	40	35	75	5	78

Correlation Matrix

	Language	Flavor	Total	Self-Rating	Oral Translation
Language	1.00	.593	.778	.881	-.755
Flavor	.593	1.00	.953	.408	-.081
Total	.778	.953	1.00	.667	-.252
Self-Rating	.881	.408	.667	1.00	-.557
Oral Translation	-.755	-.081	-.252	-.557	1.00

Although none of the value was statistically significant due to a very small sample size ($n=5$), conclusions could be made as follows :

1. The relationships between written translation and oral translation were negative.
2. The relationship between self-rating and oral translation was also negative.
3. On the contrary, the relationships between written translation and self-rating were positive.
4. The strengths of positive relationships among the variables were as follows :

Rank	Variables	r_{xy}
1.	Flavor & Total Written Translation	.953
2.	Language & Self-Rating	.881
3.	Language & Total Written Translation	.778
4.	Total Written Translation & Self-Rating	.667
5.	Language and Flavor	.593
6.	Flavor and Self-Rating	.408

Conclusions

The macro-language testing matrix can specify the elements and contexts of all language skills even in the non-social or minimally social translation skills.

The correlations between written and oral translation skills and between self-rating and oral translation skills were in all cases negative, indicating that the two types of skills may go in opposite directions. This may be because while written translation is rather static, oral translation based on conversations is more spontaneous, requiring alertness and awareness of cultural and psycho-social aspects of language interaction. The written translation skill, on the other hand, requires carefulness in the selection of vocabulary, conscientiousness and a more polished language form. It should also be noted here that the subjects were accurate in rating their own written translation skill while they either over-estimated or under-estimated their oral translation skill.

REFERENCES

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