CORPUS METHODOLOGY APPLIED TO TRANSLATOR TRAINING

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Abstract: Corpus-based Translation Studies emerged as a distinct study area from the fusion of methodologies pertaining to Translation Studies and Corpus Linguistics. Translator training occupies a place within the applied area of Corpus-based Translation Studies, the pedagogical potential of which is acknowledged in plenty educational settings that involve language studies. Translator training also benefits from invaluable pedagogic strategies deriving from corpus-based approaches.

This paper sets out to discuss the place of translator training within the larger context of Translation Studies, as well as its relation to the descriptive and applied facets of the discipline. It then narrows down to discuss the relevance of introducing corpora in the process of teaching and learning translation practices by highlighting the advantages of corpus-based methodology in the training of translation students both in terms of theory and practice. The final part of the paper advocates the usefulness of creating corpora tailored according to specific needs and resorting to them in the practice of translation. It also pinpoints the benefits of adopting a descriptive stance to translational learner corpora in which trainees and trainers are involved alike. The conclusions indicate that the translator training process and its results can be genuinely enhanced by means of corpus-based methodology applied on a large scale and in a dedicated and systematic manner.

Keywords: corpus-based translation, translator training, corpus-based methodology, learner corpus, descriptive and applied translation studies

1. Introduction: the place of training in Translation Studies

The dichotomy of theory and practice is generally the most overridden one among others that have been associated with Translation Studies. The fact that translation is, after all, a practical endeavour, the quality of which is strictly dependent on experience cannot be denied. Therefore, “[t]he real learning of theory, even for the self-learner, should be in dialogue and
debate” (Pym 2010: 5). However, “… in the training of translators, it is critical to include some theoretical input” (Hatim 2001: 163). Translation theory ensures a correct approach to the process of translation, enriching the translator with translation strategies and techniques. It also informs translators on tools and support that can be used to enhance translation quality and facilitate the translators’ work. The exposure to the theory in Translation Studies occurs mainly in educational settings that focus on translator training. Even though no training whatsoever can cover all the situations a translator will face during the work proper, it is essential in that it raises the trainees’ awareness of the need to view the translation process in its entire complexity. The effective teaching of translation has to do with using theory to open up a series of perspectives, of alternative ways of translating, and then to inductively question the alternatives in terms of the specific and general aims of translation. It also instructs on matters relative to the translator’s right and duty to make decisions.

As for the academic translation programmes, they are always expected to offer a theoretical basis, even if practice remains an essential component. A translator having attended academic training in translation cannot be expected to ignore the literature in the field. It is the translator trainer’s duty to indicate the relevant reference material to students, while stimulating short comprehension discussions in the classroom and focusing on guiding the practical performance of students. Indeed, a condition for good training is the prevalence of practice over theory.

Furthermore, the profession of translator entails issues related to ethics and deontology, which are first and foremost matters of theory before they operate in practice. Trainees in Translation Studies have the opportunity to acquire knowledge on ethical and deontological matters during the training period, which is preferred to learning from mistakes during their practice. The latter case might affect their prestige, reliability and ultimately their success and job satisfaction. There is a range of mistakes and errors endangering the translation work, which do not fail to occur since error prediction is never far-reaching enough and prevention works within limits. Faulty attitudes and performance can have negative consequences from the ethical and deontological points of view. While carrying out the profession, there are plenty of opportunities to learn lessons from mistakes. However, prevention can considerably diminish the
risk for major mistakes. The problems regarding the ethics of the profession are important parts of the theory of translation and should be acknowledged as such first of all by translator trainers.

Referring to the measure of translation effects, Lewis argues that a good translation is doomed to commit abuses (Lewis 2000: 268-273). But, in spite of the abusive nature of translation, there is an entire array of abuses that can be done away with. It is the systematic training in the field of translation that should aim at preventing abuses in this craft, by insisting on each and every component of this activity and thus guarding against ignorance and setting the issues of morality and responsibility right.

Anthony Pym’s argument against separating the two components of the same whole – theory and practice – is that translators themselves are theorizing (Pym 2010: 5). Hatim (2001: 7) calls theory and practice “unhelpful dichotomies” and suggests their reassessment. This, the scholar argues, can be achieved by recognizing that ‘research’ and ‘action’ are in a dialectical relation and that they should be viewed as enriching one another (ibid.). He also discusses the ‘theory-practice cycle’ (Hatim 2001: 6), calling it further ‘the research cycle of practice-research-practice’ (Hatim 2001: 7). Indeed, research and theory in Translation Studies are inseparable, with practice lying at their basis. Additionally, since translators are nowadays mainly the outcome of specialist training, we suggest that translator training should occupy a place within the cycle. There is actually a tight link between research, theory, training and practice in Translation Studies. Research is an action nowadays presupposing an observant, a descriptive stance in front of the practical work, entailing a reflective behavior, further leading to the formulation of theories. These theories, in turn, have an impact on translator training and are then undoubtedly reflected back in the translation practice, which is again subject to research. Therefore, what results is a more comprehensive perspective of Translation Studies with its four interrelated components, which can be illustrated as follows:
Nowadays, increased academic concern for the systematic training of translation trainees can be witnessed around the world. Also, the preoccupation for research in translator training as academic pursuit is often set to debate within international conferences and scholarly work. This too means that there is some authoritative recognition of the need for a global, overall approach to the components making up the complex whole of Translation Studies, with training acquiring an increasingly stable status of its own day by day.

2. The use of corpora in translator training

Since the prescriptive approach to Translation Studies has been widely replaced by empirical, descriptive research and since the global communicative function of translation has been acknowledged, Translation Studies has turned into a highly dynamic field of research. Paradoxically, Translation Studies has acquired more autonomy than ever as a discipline even if it is related with several branches of linguistics, such as: contrastive linguistics, communication, discourse analysis, pragmatics, stylistics, etc. and, more recently, with computational linguistics and corpus linguistics both merging into Corpus-based Translation Studies (CBTS).

Corpus-based translation is superior both in terms of research and resource in the translation activity. The practices of CBTS can be the translators’ subject of self-study, but there is some uncertainty over the practitioners’ initiatives to strive and be always up-to-date with the latest findings and resources. What is sure, though, is that translators have been trained in institutional settings (universities usually) on a large scale for a number of years already and CBTS has been quite extensively introduced in their curricula. The presence of CBTS in the curricula hits two distinct areas: the training of students so as to get involved in translational corpus-based research, and, secondly, teaching would-be translators how to use corpora for enhanced translation performance. An education-oriented use of corpora would mean raising the students’ awareness as regards the benefits of using corpora, as well as teaching them about the availability of user-friendly and fast tools for constructing and accessing corpora (Bernardini and Castagnoli 2008: 39).

The teaching of translation based on corpora can be limited to the search for words, structures, as well as other types of equivalents or to documentation, but there is also the option of involving students in corpus-based translation methodology as early as the compilation stage.
Not only can this activity be used as a learning method of both language and content, but it is also meant to teach them how to design a personal open-ended corpus, i.e. one that is constantly been worked on. Their effort will be rewarded during further uses of the said corpus, especially if the translation trainee or future translator can anticipate the field s/he will have to deal in and focus on it. Moreover, working in teams (classes) will speed up the compilation of the corpus and will also enable access to it by several professionals. This makes the effort even more worthwhile.

Corpus research can be undertaken with trainees in translation by applying guided cooperative learning in class and subsequently having students conduct autonomous studies. By means of corpus study, learners in the trade of translation can acquire contrastive information in the two languages involved in translation. Even though the contrastive data is not provided in such a systematic and organized way as in reference books, the advantage of inferring similarities and differences between the two languages from parallel corpora resides in the possibility of depicting them in authentic contexts and in multiple hypostases. The acquisition of contrastive knowledge implicitly involves finding structural equivalents alongside terminological ones.

The applied studies so far have chiefly grounded their investigation on bilingual comparable corpora or monolingual target language corpora to retrieve data in empirical research or training settings. Such encounters have facilitated the acquisition of translation competences and target language skills. On the other hand, descriptive-oriented studies have rather based their experiments on parallel, monolingual comparable corpora and lately on single translational corpora (Laviosa 2002: 101).

With parallel corpora made up of a translational corpus and a non-translational one, translation trainees can be inspired when making options for translation versions from the solutions offered by the translators whose work is included in the translational corpus. ‘Inspired’ is used in the proper sense of the word, meaning that a translator or translation trainee does not necessarily need to pick a given equivalent provided by the corpus as such, but is stimulated to become critical, creative and possibly suggest a better or a more adequate translation version to some item that has been translated beforehand. Despite the risk of translator trainees reproducing dispreferred patterns or solutions from the translational corpus as compared to naturally
produced language, a variety of solutions given by previous translators to an instance of language will definitely enhance their critical mind and will open up new visions in future translators. Just as with any aid that can be resorted to in translation, corpora too require sensibility on the part of their user. On condition they are used sensibly, it is acknowledged that good decisions can be influenced by corpus consultation in terms of collocational, contextual, stylistic factors and text-type (Schmied 1998). On a long run, this might bring the most precious benefits in translators and implicitly translation product.

While undertaking a pilot experiment with learners in translation, Bowker (1998: 631) hypothesized that students preparing to become professional translators in specialized domains face two major problems: (i) comprehension errors due to lack of sufficient content knowledge and (ii) errors resulting from lack of specialized writing skills in their native language. After having the undergraduate students translate some semi-specialized texts, Bowker could realize that the students’ use of a specialized corpus in the target language (their first language) generated greater correctness in their choice of words and idioms than a matched group of students could obtain by using only bilingual dictionaries. Furthermore, in the same study, Bowker found that a specialized monolingual native-language corpus assisted the learners in improving the frequent translation problems previously mentioned, which are two of the most relevant criteria of high-quality target-text production, namely: subject-field understanding and specialized native-language competence (Bowker 1998).

If Bowker’s study looked into the way the translation process into one’s native language can be assisted by using corpora, other research projects were driven by the need to produce target texts in a language other than one’s mother tongue or native language. Obviously, the risk here lies less in the comprehension of the source text, written in the translator’s native language, but in the production of a natural target text.

As hinted at above, in addition to providing students with data and helping at improving their translations, the use of corpora in translation classroom also fosters students’ learning autonomy. The idea of applying collaborative learning to translation was touched upon in several studies (Kiraly 2000; González Davies 2004; López and Tercedor 2008), which developed student-centred, proactive learning strategies. According to this new translation teaching
methodology, the trainer does not pass the knowledge to the students, but facilitates and guides the students’ learning process. The use of corpora and the electronic tools that support their processing play an important part in such an approach to the translation teaching-learning processes characterized by the students’ increased independence. López and Tercedor (2008) undertook a project applying the aforementioned teaching-learning methodology and suggested the following learner-focused activities: (i) students’ becoming familiar with corpora and their annotation; (ii) content and text-type knowledge acquisition; (iii) identifying problems in translations; (iv) establishing translation strategies; (v) assessing the solutions emerging from class (peer- and self-assessment) (López and Tercedor 2008: 3).

Zanettin (2001) considers the advantages of using bilingual comparable corpora in translating out of one’s L1. Pearson (2003) deems the use of corpora as offering insights into professional translation strategies, whereas Laviosa (1997) and Bernardini and Castagnoli (2008) recognize the benefits of avoiding the influence of the source language with monolingual comparable corpora. Also, Laviosa (2002) predicts that a target language monolingual corpus can represent a valuable source of linguistic, but also cultural knowledge for those who get trained to translate out of their mother tongue.

Proof thereof has resulted from Stewart’s (2000) findings subsequent to having learners (Italian natives) consult the British National Corpus (BNC) when translating from Italian into English. More specifically, due to using the corpus, Stewart’s students could produce appropriate collocations by means of the combined analysis of frequency lists and concordance lines of assumed target language equivalents of source language noun groups. Stewart’s important conclusion was that the procedure led to higher creativity as opposed to the general tendency to produce conventional target texts.

By means of concordancers and the concordance lines they provide, students are taught to acquire all the lexical, structural and semantic data that the co-texts incorporate. Teaching them how to use concordance lines actually means assisting them in learning by experiencing software operation as well as information retrieval and analysis. Any application on corpora of specific software tools can be introduced in translation classrooms.

3. Learner corpora in translator training
Besides the possibility of transferring the findings of research to translation training programmes, more concrete results referring directly to the group of students taking part in the training can be obtained by trainers by creating learner corpora and analyzing them with the students.

“A learner corpus is a collection of texts – written texts or transcribed spoken language – produced by language learners, and sampled so as to be representative of one or more combinations of situational and learner factors” (Borin 2004: 67). The study of the interlanguage with translational learner corpora has many benefits. First, the corpus has the advantage of being homogeneous due to the fact that the texts it comprises usually come from learners being educated in a similar (or in the same) educational environment. Thus, the analysis of such corpora produces more reliable specific data.

A disadvantage is that the data are most of the times derived from a small-size corpus and from only one educational setting. Nevertheless, learner corpus investigation represents a dedicated and reliable teaching method in a particular educational context due to its quality of revealing internal states of fact directly from the students involved in it.

Learner corpora can be processed just like any other corpus. The entire range of methodology and linguistic analysis tools can be equally applied to either parallel or comparable learner corpora. Despite their lack of universal value, the data retrieved from the analysis of translational corpora have relevance beyond a particular educational environment. Other similar translator training contexts, which focus on the same pair(s) of language(s) can benefit from such data. That is why the dissemination of experiments with learner corpora is so important. Especially the exchange of ideas and results of learner corpora-based studies inside a territory where the same language(s) is (are) used will be beneficial to other translator training programmes.

A useful hint at how corpora can be used in the translation classroom is Varantola’s (2003) suggestion of a methodology through which trainers may facilitate the students’ acquisition of specific skills via corpus translation. The creation of a Student Translation Archive and the Student Translation Tracking System were put forth by Bowker and Bennison (2003) in relation to learner corpora. This is supposed to be achieved by means of the trainees’ submitting their translations electronically to be then included in the Archive. Extracts from the Archive are
evaluated by the trainer using the Student Translation Tracking System. Longitudinal studies are also possible for the observation of the students’ evolution based on different teaching methods. This constitutes a data base from which the trainer can extract information to formulate further teaching strategies.

Some small-range empirical research projects based on a parallel bilingual learner corpus have been carried out at Transilvania University of Brasov, the Faculty of Letters, with the involvement of MA students. The topics have covered learner corpus-based investigations on matters relative to reviewing translations for naturalness, the issue of preserving the register and style in the target-language text, the students’ ability in dealing with collocations and ellipsis in translation. The findings proved to be highly useful in translator training and provided the trainer and the trainees with unexpected results. Such precise information on student translations could never be obtained before the advent of learner corpus research. Moreover, having the trainees’ own translations subject to assessment based on empirical, non-debatable data represents the most convincing way of teaching them about their own deficiencies; it is also one of the safest ways of error prevention in translation. CBTS with learner corpora proved to be the most effective manner of improving the translators’ performance so as to become professionals in the field (Arhire 2014).

4. Conclusions

Given the proven superiority of CBTS as compared to traditional methodology, this distinct branch of Translation Studies is expected to continue its fast development with a view to being extended over the academic and ultimately the professional contexts as a new specific form of intercultural communication. If we regard the learning process in translation as an ongoing and long-term, even life-long process, it can be safely stated that working with parallel corpora, but also with comparable ones, enhances the trainees’ translating and writing skills, as well as their accurate, fluent and natural way of expression. The learners’ awareness and reflectiveness are stimulated by corpus-based approaches. They favour the development of the trainees’ ability to practice, store and adopt translation strategies and procedures. Also, they bring about the future professionals’ ethical attitude towards the translators’ role (Laviosa 2012: 247). Moreover, translation corpora are assumed to play a part in reviving translation practices
within language pedagogy (Cook 2010 in Laviosa 2012: 247) and in tightening the relation between training and education. This can be achieved by educating trainees to reflect upon how corpora can be used in translation and in the learning process (Aston 2009: ix in Laviosa 2012: 247).

It is a fact that corpus analysis tools have been widely used for research purposes worldwide. Access to corpora, together with handy software tools, represents a means to improve the trainees’ language and cultural competences in diverse registers and to improve translation skills. It seems though that the systematic use of these tools as translation aids has not yet been sufficiently explored in translator training.

The results of some research projects can be used as a starting point and can be added to the translator training process. Any finding can be tried out in any other educational settings even if it was obtained on the basis of other languages. But, obviously, findings with direct reference to a certain translator training environment can be obtained and further applied in a dedicated manner for enhanced effectiveness. Corpus-based projects in translator training have the merit of enabling investigation on a large scale and in a systematic manner. Such an approach is most effective for a particular group of trainees if conceived also in a dedicated way.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:


