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TRANSLATORS AND TEXTS

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to suggest practical ways translators can apply some of the things linguists have been learning about the structures and features of discourse. Essentially I will outline some methods I have used in translators' workshops in West Africa. Translations Consultants or Advisors may find that they can use this material in a similar manner, but I hope that many translators will be able to profit from it as well.

Nida and Taber, in *Theory and Practice of Translation*,[1] define dynamic equivalence translation as translation that is the closest natural equivalent to the source language text. My experience in West Africa has been that, while many translators grasp the idea of closest equivalent, they have difficulty in being natural. In an overwhelming majority of cases the reason for this is that translators are verse-bound. That is, they continue to translate more or less verse by verse. True, they read the whole paragraph in their preparation and in their own checking, but when doing the actual drafting they generally translate each verse in order.

The problem is that no language is spoken or written in units of just one sentence or verse. We write or read or speak in groups of several sentences which together form a unit. When we read or hear a series of sentences we generally do not have difficulty deciding if they form some sort of unified whole or are unrelated. When the sentences are related and form some sort of unit, we call that unit a text.[2]

The features that relate the sentences in a text are not easy to discover if we analyze a language by looking only at sentences in isolation, and translators who proceed sentence by sentence or verse by verse are unlikely to use correctly these features in their translations. The result is a receptor language text where the sentences are not well related to each other, making it difficult to understand or, worse, causing it to be misunderstood. In other words, equivalence is actually difficult to achieve without naturalness.

[1] London: U.B.S. 1969.

[2] See M. A. K. Halliday and Hasan Ruqaiya, *Cohesion in English*. New York: Longman 1976.

Consider some examples. A common pattern in narratives in many West African languages is for the first verb of the story line to be marked for past tense but for subsequent verbs to be unmarked, which has the effect of making them present tense in form. Verbs that are marked as past are therefore really pluperfect, past in relation to the past of the narrative. Yet Scripture translations in many of the languages have marked every verb form for tense as the source language does without using this type of ellipsis. The result is that readers are unable to comprehend all the "pluperfects" in a row. They give the passage whatever interpretation they can or they do not read any further.

I recently participated in a workshop for English teachers in Senegal. They reported that their Wolof-speaking students often wrote essays or stories in which the individual sentences were grammatically correct but the texts were somehow not good English. The problem stemmed from the Wolof practice of verb repetition which is a feature of cohesion in Wolof texts:[3]

1. . . . *Mu né la: Demal, nga waxtaan ak moom. Su nga demee*
   . . . He tells you: Go, you talk with her. When you go
   waxteen ak moom, mu né la: Waaw. Nga jox ko.
   talk with her, she tells you: Yes. You give it.
   Soo ko joxee, . . .
   When you it give, . . .

2. *Dafa amoon sunu benn mbokku Peul bu jëndoon ay dall.*
   There was once one relative Peulh who bought some shoes.
   Bu mu jënd dall yi . . .
   When he buy shoes the . . .

This structure does occur in English to be sure. But for it to occur more than once or twice in a passage generally is boring and so it is interspersed with other constructions.

Similarly, Wolof translators who are not aware of this problem and do not use the structure will inevitably have texts that sound abrupt, discordant, or stilted.

A third example, still in verbs, involves the serial verb construction where a continuous series of actions by one agent is expressed through several verbs in sequence with the agent appearing only once. (We see in this construction an example of nominal ellipsis.) Some Wolof examples are:

3. *Noonu mu def tanki neen, boq ay dallam, dem*
   Thus he makes feet-of bare, carries-under-arm his shoes goes
   wuti seen kër.
   looks for their house.

4. . . . *nga yobbu ko, waxtaan ak baay bi ak ndeyam né ko . . .*
   . . . you carry it, talk with father the and mother-his tell him . . .

I did a totally unscientific experiment by translating some Wolof stories into English and then counted the verbs in the two texts. I used seven verbs in

[3] All the Wolof examples are from texts recorded by Galen Currah.

English for every eleven in the Wolof stories. Any Wolof translator who proceded sentence by sentence from the source language would have difficulty in using this feature of Wolof texts naturally.

What can translators do, then, to become more aware of some of the features of discourse that are relevant to their work? Below is an outline of one possible approach.

I. Pre-workshop preparation

It is rarely possible for me to spend much time doing linguistic research in a language before a workshop. So I ask someone familiar with the area to record receptor language texts for me. I try to have recordings of conversations, narrations, descriptions, court arguments—as good a variety of speakers in as many different kinds of situations as possible. In a Moslem area recordings of sermons by the Imam, often broadcast over the radio, are useful.

These need to be transcribed and a literal back-translation put underneath. I ask the translators to go through the receptor language texts to identify the features of cohesion and the structures that are there, and I do the same before the workshop.

II. Related kernels

A. In the workshop itself I begin by putting a series of simple kernels on the blackboard as below:

(i) John went out of his house.
(ii) John looked for Peter.
(iii) Peter was the friend of John.
(iv) John and Peter played together.
(v) John and Peter played a singing game.
(vi) John and Peter sang loudly.
(vii) Andrew is John's brother.
(viii) Andrew is a baby.
(ix) Andrew was sleeping.
(x) Andrew woke up.
(xi) The mother of John and Andrew spoke to John and Peter.
(xii) The mother of John and Andrew said, "Stop making noise."
(xiii) John and Peter stopped singing.
(xiv) John and Peter went somewhere else.
(xv) John and Peter still played together.

B. Workshop participants then examine these sentences from several points of view:

Could sentence (ii) be the first sentence in a discourse? If not, why not?
Is sentence (i) any better as an opening sentence?
What do we know about John from these sentences?
What can we assume about where John and Peter were playing at the beginning?
What can we guess about the attitude of the mother?
What would be the effect of reversing (xiv) and (xv)?

What would be the effect of reversing the participants in (iii) (John was the friend of Peter)?

If we were to write this story in good style, what are some of the things we would do?

What ways of referring to John, Peter, and the other participants could we use?

How do we keep John in focus?

It is often valuable to discuss this first from the point of view of whatever the language of instruction is and then from the point of view of the receptor language.

C. The workshop participants actually write a story in their language using these kernels. I sometimes give them a model to get them going, but I do not accept work that is a copy of my model:

> John went out of his house to look for his friend Peter. They played together a singing game until the noise woke up Andrew, John's baby brother. Then John's Mother came out and told the boys to stop making so much noise. So they stopped singing and went to play somewhere else.

III. Receptor language texts

A. I play some of the recorded texts for the workshop. We examine openings and closings of the texts and note, for example, how the setting of a story is given. I play the tapes two or three times until the participants have identified the examples of these features that there are in the texts.

B. The translators consider which of these features could or would be used naturally in their translations. In that connection, we look at Mark 1:1, Mark 1:14–20, and John 1:19–28. The translators write out the major kernels of the passages in the receptor language and then restructure the passages. Small things often emerge naturally, such as the fact that in the John 1 passage most languages (but not all) will put verse 28 (the setting) before verse 19.

C. I play more of the recorded texts, looking this time at what kind of transitions there are (*then, thus, after that, because of that*, and so forth) and how they are used. At a workshop in Guinea Bissau it quickly became evident that in the Balanta language, transitions of this sort were used extremely sparingly but in Papel from the same country there was a considerably greater array. Not surprisingly, the order of events in a Balanta narrative was quite carefully controlled and it was this ordering that showed the relation between events.

D. The participants also look at the uses and non-uses of direct and indirect speech in the recorded receptor language texts.

E. How is focus maintained? From the recorded texts we try to answer questions such as, "What does the receptor language do to mark the subject of a sentence, or to mark the subject or theme of a paragraph?"

F. At this point the workshop participants do some more practice translation. In each of the passages they write out the main kernels of the whole passage and indicate the relations between these kernels before transferring them and restructuring them.

1. Philippians 2:1–18. The points to study include:

What is the relation between verse 1 and verse 2, and how can this be shown in the receptor language?

What would be a natural way to lead from verse 5 into the hymn of verses 6–11?

How can verse 12 be related to this hymn and therefore to the theme of verses 2–5?

What is a natural way in the receptor language to link verses 12 and 13?

2. Philippians 3:4–11. The focus of Paul's argument and the build-up of his case should be carefully considered by each translator in light of what his receptor language does in arguments.

3. Mark 6:14–29. There are several things to look at in this passage:

It may not be natural in the receptor language to mention Herod in both verse 14 and verse 16.

Essentially verses 14–16 form the setting for the story. The participants of the workshop write out the kernels and consider how to restructure them in ways natural for the receptor language. It is important to keep the focus on Herod at this point.

In verses 17–20 it is necessary to have an idea of the chronological order of the events. In restructuring, some languages will require an order of the events different from that in the source language text, but others will use relator words to mark the relations and the sequence of events and thus have an order similar to that of the source language.

Some languages can let verse 29 conclude the story as in the source language; others repeat parts of verse 16 to satisfactorily conclude the story. In either case there usually needs to be some marking of the closing of the story since verse 30 picks up the theme left off in verse 13.

4. Luke 8:26–29. Again in this passage one of the main things to examine is the chronological sequence of events. It is complicated by the single spirit and multiple spirits in the story. Some languages can recount the events more or less as in the source language text, marking the flashbacks by phrases such as, "He said this because Jesus had said . . .", but this is unnatural in other languages. In those cases it is a common practice to introduce the man in verse 27 and give there the information we have about his possession from both verses 27 and 29, linking that information with a phrase such as, "One of the spirits . . .", or, "That evil spirit force . . .". Then translators in these languages return to verse 28, with Jesus ordering the spirit out, the spirit begging Jesus not to punish him, the question of his name being brought up, then verses 31 and 32 and on to the end of the passage.

5. Other passages that translators can practice on include Mark 1:2–3, John 1:12, and Romans 1:18–23.

G. Cohesion through verbal ellipsis, verbal repetition, nominal ellipsis, especially in serial verb constructions, is something else to look for in the recorded texts. (I gave examples of all three of these in the introduction.)

H. It is also important to see what kinds of personal and descriptive reference there is in the receptor language (*I*, *me*, *his*, *him*, etc.; *this*, *these*, etc.) Every language will have a variety of ways of referring to nouns that have already been introduced in a text. This is called lexical cohesion. Some of the ways used to maintain this cohesion include general nouns, synonyms, pronouns, and repetition of the noun.

I. We look at the rhetorical questions in the recorded texts, if there are any. Often there are none since their occurence is somewhat restricted. I have the workshop participants look at Philippians 2.1, 2 in the King James Version, TEV[3], and TEV[4] as a way of introducing the meaning and use of these. Then they consider what would be most natural in their receptor language.[4]

Conclusion

As the workshop participants study several texts in their own languages they become aware of many of the features of their texts. I do not want to suggest that the ones I have listed here are all there are, or even that they are the only interesting ones. But these have proved sufficient to give the participants the idea. Generally by the time we get to point III. G they have caught on so well that they can identify other features of discourse on their own. Using all these in their translations renders the translations more natural and consequently easier to read and understand.

As they practice translating some of these passages, the workshop participants discover that they cannot easily incorporate these features if they translate verse by verse, and thus they are forced to write out at least in rough form the kernels of the whole passage they are translating. Nida and Taber teach this, of course, but few translators ever really believe it is necessary except when learning how to translate or when faced with a particularly stubborn verse.

I do not want to give the impression that translators end up re-ordering verses all over the place. In fact, they generally do not re-order things a great deal. But when they do, it is because their study of the receptor language shows that re-ordering is necessary to achieve naturalness.

I might add that my experience in teaching this material in workshops has been that participants actually do get the vision of naturalness and translate paragraph by paragraph or even by larger units.

[4] Readers will find other examples of rhetorical questions in Nida and Taber, *op. cit.*, 30.