



Translation errors: A taxonomic approach and their contribution to translator training

Evanthia Saridaki

Lecturer in Translation Studies, University of Thessaly, Department of Language and Intercultural Studies, Greece

Received: 02 Jun 2023; Received in revised form: 28 Jun 2023; Accepted: 05 Jul 2023; Available online: 13 Jul 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— One of the issues addressed in translation teaching concerns translation errors and their contribution to translator training. Since the terms used to describe the range of translation errors lack commonly agreed distinctions or fixed points of reference, it is quite difficult to adopt a holistic approach to translation errors by simply providing a pure definition. This has a great deal to do with the tendency to consider as error any performance which falls short of the “ideal” (Pym, 1992: 2). Within this context, there has been an attempt in the present paper to approach errors in a taxonomic manner on the basis of how they actually appear in translated texts where elements of different text types are perpetually mixed. We will also briefly refer to a diverse variety of reasons that errors may be ascribed to, ranging from lack of comprehension to misuse of register, factors that may be located to a variety of levels such as language, pragmatics and cultural level. Finally, we will describe a positive approach toward translation errors and their contribution to translator training by offering to students the insights and experiences they need in order to become competent translators.

Keywords— translator training, errors in the process of translation, taxonomic approach to translation errors, translation competence development.



I. INTRODUCTION

In foreign language didactics, errors are usually defined as a deviation from a system of norms and rules related to the structure of the foreign language. Respectively, in a generalized approach, a translation error could be considered as a deviation of a norm in a certain language communication situation. In particular, Wills (1982) describes a translation error as an offence against a norm in a linguistic context situation. According to Baker (1992), errors in translation mostly result from the non-equivalence between the source and target languages indicating the quality of a translation. Moreover, they can reveal what is going on in the translator's thinking process (Séguinot, 1990). In addition, Sigrid Kupsch-Losereit (Nord, 1997: 73) defines errors as an offence against: a. the function of the translation, b. the coherence of the text, c. the text type or text form, d. linguistic conventions, e. Culture and situation-specific conventions and conditions, and f. the language

system. Pym (1992) relates the term translation competence to translation errors by stating that a translation error may be defined “as a manifestation of a defect in any of the factors entering into the above skills” (1992: 280). However, he stresses that the feature of “simple negation” of translation errors does not shed light to this very confused field of translation training that are attributed to various causes such as lack of comprehension or misuse of time and located to various levels such as the language, pragmatics and cultural level. The above definitions of translation errors certainly demonstrate their complexity of nature and the difficulties we might encounter in approaching them in a holistic manner since there are many different aspects involved in the cognitive area of translation errors.

1. Classification of errors in translation

1.1. The distinction between language, translation and functional errors

According to the main theoretical approach to errors in translation (Delisle et al., 1999/2008, Nord, 1997/2014), they are distinguished into three types: language, translation and functional errors.

1.1.1. Language errors

Language errors are the result of inadequate knowledge of the target text and they concern breaking of morphosyntactic, semantic, lexicological, stylistic or pragmatics rules and norms.

The most important language errors are:

- Inappropriate expression: a semantic error resulting when an inappropriate meaning is given to a word or an expression which deviates from the language prototype.
- Barbarism: a morphological error that is due to the erroneous use of a word inappropriately coined or unintentionally corrupted.
- Solecism: a syntactic error that results from producing a syntactic structure that does not correspond to the grammatical conventions of the target language.
- Repetition: the recurrence of the same word, expression or syntactic structure in a sentence or paragraph. Repetition can also be used as a rhetoric device in which case it is not considered as error but a special way of expression.

1.1.2. Translation errors

Translation errors are those that occur in the translated text resulting from a failure to apply translation principles, rules and techniques as well as from misinterpretation of a source text segment. They could be summarized as follows:

- Nonsense: it results by the translator's misinterpretation of the sense of a word or statement in the source text or by a methodological error which leads to an illogical formulation in the target text. This type of error is the most serious error that a trainee translator is likely to make in the translation process.
- Misinterpretation: this error results when the translator attributes to a word or segment of a source text entirely erroneous sense from that intended by the author that is caused by misunderstanding of the text or lack of general cultural knowledge.
- Incorrect meaning: it occurs when a nuance in meaning is attributed to a word or segment in the source text which is not attributed to the corresponding word or segment in the target text without, however, producing misinterpretation. This is not considered to be so serious a translation

error as nonsense is since it does not prevent entirely understanding of the paragraph in which the incorrect meaning is produced. The distinction between incorrect meaning and misinterpretation is difficult to make since incorrect meanings can easily enter the vocabulary of a language through frequent use.

- Omission: it results from the translator's failure to render to the translated text a necessary piece of information of the source text. Omission should not be confused with the technique of implicitation that involves the justified exclusion of a source text element from the translated text.
- Undertranslation: it results from omission in the target text of any additional words and amplification required in order to produce a translation that conforms to the conventions of the target language and the expressive forms that are used by its users.
- Addition: this error results when the translator introduces to the translated text superfluous information or stylistic elements absent in the source text. Addition should not be confused with neither the technique of explicitation which is a justified translation decision aiming to clarify an element of the original text nor the technique of compensation which intends to maintain the style of the original text.
- Overtranslation: it results from unjustified introduction to the translated text of source text elements that should be cut off since they are implied.
- Barbarism: it arises when the translator uses unsuccessfully a loan word or the technique of literal translation which does not sound natural in the target text. Barbarism as a translation error may be a temporary characterization since with time passing by arises a sort of familiarization with terms and words that initially come as loans.
- Word for word translation: this is literal translation that results from transferring the elements of the source text without changing the word order. It can cause distortion of sense and intelligibility of the source text. Word for word translation is not always very productive, especially, when dealing with figurative meaning.
- Inappropriate paraphrase: this error results from inappropriate length of a target text segment in translating a source text segment.
- False friend: it results from the use of a word of the source text whose form resembles to a word in the

target text but whose meaning or one of its senses are different.

1.1.3. Functional errors

According to functional theories (Reiss 1971/2000, Vermeer 1987, Nord 1997/2014), the concept of functional error must be defined according to the purpose of the translation process and it is basically related to the function of the translated text. In other words, a translation is not judged to be inadequate by itself but in relation to the expected communicative function. Nord (1997) defines translation error as breaching of:

- The function of the text
- The consistency of the text
- The text -type or the form of the text
- The language conventions
- The specific conventions and conditions that are related to different civilizations and circumstances

Within this framework, Nord (1997/2014) considers that the translation error is defined as a failure to carry out the instructions implied in the translation brief, that is, failure to achieve the communicative purpose of the translation. She classifies them to four categories (Nord, 1997: 75):

- Pragmatic translation errors, caused by inadequate solutions to pragmatic translation problems such as a lack of receiver orientations.
- Cultural translation errors: they result from an inadequate decision with regard to reproduction or adaptation of culture-specific conventions.
- Text-specific translation errors, that are related to a text-specific translation problem. In such cases the translator has to act creatively since the solutions provided in specific translation problems cannot be generalized and applied to similar cases.

Nord also uses a hierarchical scale in order to evaluate the degree of significance of translation errors for the translation result. According to her hierarchical scale, the consequences of pragmatic translation errors are serious, since the recipients tend not to realize that the piece of information they receive is wrong. In this respect, pragmatic errors are classified among the most serious ones that a translator can make in the translation process. The significance of cultural and language translation errors depends on whether or not they influence the function of the target-text. If the purpose of a translation work is to check language skills in the context of language teaching, then language errors are definitely more serious than cultural

errors. On the contrary, if the purpose of a translation work is to check cultural skills, then cultural translation errors will be considered more serious, even in comparison to pragmatic errors. Furthermore, the seriousness of cultural errors depends on the extent to which cultural conventions of the source text are adjusted to the stereotypes of the target-culture.

1.2. Pym's approach

Pym (1992) suggests that the identification and analysis of translation errors requires a strong conceptual framework and, most importantly, requires "the issues to be addressed to be very specific and sufficiently problematic to warrant considerable intellectual work". His approach is based on his own concept of translation competence that avoids reference to linguistics and can be defined as the union of two skills: "a. the ability to generate a target-text series of more than one viable term for the source text and b. the ability to select only one target text from this series, quickly and with justified confidence, and to propose this target text as a replacement of the source text for a specified purpose and readers.

Based on his definition of translation competence, translation errors are defined as a manifestation of a defect in any of the factors entering into the above skills. However, Pym stresses that such a definition makes things more complex basically because errors may be attributed to numerous causes and located on various levels such as the language, pragmatics and the cultural level. In addition, he observes that although it is quite easy to classify odd translation errors by finding relevant examples, it is quite difficult to classify them as they actually appear in translated texts where elements of different translation types are mixed making it hard to distinguish one from another.

According to his approach, translation errors should all have the same form: they should all involve selection from a potential target-text series of more than one viable term, calling this "non-binarism" of translation errors. On the other hand, there is the "binarism" of translation errors that opposes a wrong answer to the right answer. Non-binarism requires that the target text actually selected be opposed to at least one further target-text which could also have been selected, and then to possible wrong answers. For binarism, there is only one right and wrong; for non-binarism there are at least two right answers and then the wrong ones.

Another basic difference between binary and non-binary errors is that the first should be subject to very quick punctual correction whereas the time used for non-binary errors correction should extend for as long as important differences remain, terminating quickly at the point of diminishing returns. Since the binary level can be treated more quickly than non-binary errors, any impediment to

teaching can come not from the total number of errors but from the total time required to correct them. He adds that the proportion of non-binary errors does not increase smoothly, but at some point, undergoes a rapid increase revealing that translation is not simply a matter of literalist fidelity. Finally, the problem with non-binary errors is that there is not a readily available authority for their immediate correction. Quine (Pym,1992: 286) suggests that even if translators could systematically be brought into the classroom, equally authoritative translators will give equally correct but different translations. Pym adds that correction on the non-binary level cannot be authoritative but should be based on the principles of discussion and negotiations, that could finally lead, if not to full agreement but at least to "agreements to disagree". To conclude, in developing a scheme for the analysis of errors, Pym builds on the assumption implied of his definition of translation competence: a translation error must be non-binary which implies that a wrong answer is not opposed to a right answer but that the choice be made may be seen also alongside at least one further choice that could also have been taken up but was not, and alongside an endless number of possible wrong answers.

1.3. Errors in the process of the analysis of the source text

One of the major steps in the translating process is the fact that the translator has to read the original analytically and interpret it in the target language. A translator is prone to errors at this stage due to his weak reading and analytical ability. According to Suksaeresup and Tipa Thep-Ackrapong (2009), errors found at this stage can be divided into the following categories:

1. Miscue: this is a term coined by Goodman (1969) referring to an incorrect guess made by a reader when reading a text. Usually, such errors are done by beginners but as they further practice translation such errors are usually avoided. In translation, translation students with poor reading skills tend to transfer the miscues into their translated text.

2. The translator's wrong assumption of some background encyclopedic knowledge affect negatively the translated result. Hatim & Mason (1990: 106-107) suggest that a translator must be always inquisitive and critical by searching for general encyclopedic knowledge in order to be able to interpret correctly the source text without making embarrassing for the target readers errors.

3. Errors in propositional meaning: The propositional meaning refers to the relationship between a word and what it refers to or describes as conceived by the speakers as true or false (Baker,1992). An example of such an error is the wrong alternate meaning of a word. Consequently, the

translators will have to practice in reading a text carefully and learning at the same time how to use a dictionary effectively.

2. Errors in translating expressive meaning: another aspect of lexical meaning is expressive meaning. Baker (1992) defines expressive meaning as a word that cannot be evaluated as true or false because the word in question has to do with the speaker's feelings and experiences. Therefore, expressive meaning can become the source of producing errors in the translation process. Errors in this respect are further classified into wrong translation of idiomatic expressions and of terms of address:

- Translating idiomatic expressions after their propositional meaning. To address the problem of misinterpreting idiomatic expressions, again, the translators are recommended to read and write in English extensively. Fiction such as novels, plays, TV series and movies usually has a lot of idioms. These genres certainly will familiarize the translators with a great variety of idiomatic expressions. Therefore, a competent translator has to constantly keep up with new idioms.
- Translating terms of address after their propositional meanings. In certain cases, terms of address are wrongly translated.

II. CAUSES OF ERRORS IN THE PROCESS OF TRANSLATION

As previously mentioned translation error may be defined as any discrepancy, wanted or unwanted, of pragmatic, cultural, linguistic or textual nature, between the target and source texts. made during the translation process. Within this context, the causes of translation errors are diverse among which the human factor is one of the most neglected and less recognized since any intellectual activity such as translation leads to physical exhaustion which materializes in low level of concentration and distraction. More specifically, factors such as self-concentration, speed of work, efficiency, analytical thinking and high resistance to stress as well as deadlines imposed on the assigned work or pressure on behalf of client certainly restrict the translator's capabilities.

Lack of general encyclopedic knowledge can be another serious source of translation errors since the translator is definitely not an expert specialized and proficient in all narrow domains. It is suggested that the translator develop his research skills in order to extract general background information on various different subject areas and also

consult his colleagues and other experts on relevant subject areas he is not familiar with.

Moreover, defective analysis and understanding of the source text may cause translation errors, probably the most dangerous ones, since it provokes diversion of meaning, misinterpretation and incorrect message.

In addition, omission or insufficient of the revision stage in the translation process may as well cause serious translation mistakes that could be avoided if the translator conducted a detailed revision and proofreading in the assigned work in various levels such as the lexical, grammatical, cultural and syntactical level.

Finally, the use of machine translation without revising the finite product of translation can be a source of errors and finally lead to mistranslation. It is generally noticed that there is too much reliability on behalf of students on machine translation without being aware of the restrictions it poses to the act of translating.

III. A POSITIVE APPROACH TOWARD TRANSLATION ERRORS IN ASSESSING STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Translation errors could be used in a constructive and positive manner in the learning process that would help students develop the various subcompetences deemed to be necessary for the translator's profession. A positive approach toward translation mistakes has been proposed by Hewson (1997) who relates linguistic errors to translation problems. Within this context, Hewson suggests that any student assessment process in translation should not just penalize linguistic errors but should give students credit for identifying and solving translation problems. He further proposes a double marking scale; negative for errors and failure to identify translation errors and positive for identifying and solving translation problems. This is also recommended by Nord (1997) whose proposed system of assessment requires the identification of translation problems prior to students being involved in the act of translating.

Similarly, Séguinot (1990) criticizes the prescriptive approach to translation errors that considers them as a simple violation of translation norms and rules by proposing instead a non-prescriptive approach identifying errors as "carriers of meaning" helping to investigate in depth the process of translating and even predict in her words: "better predictions about what kind of errors are likely to occur in translation, where they are likely to occur, and under what conditions" (Séguinot 1990: 74). She also points out that the errors conducted by translation students make up an indication that essential learning is taking place that helps

students to improve the various aspects of translation competence: "attending to specific aspects of translation may be a way of learning to improve, and the errors that result from this focusing of attention are not necessarily a reflection of overall competence" (Séguinot, 1990: 79). Finally, she characterizes translation errors as "windows into the translating process" observing that the assessment of translation errors is a less interesting activity than the interpretation of the source of errors.

IV. PROPOSALS

A translator training model is proposed that emphasizes the analysis of both intratextual and intertextual parameters involved in the translation process. In order to motivate trainees and prevent them from potential failures, it is important that they receive a holistic theoretical and methodological training on certain notions of translation such as function and purpose of the text to be translated, text-type that the source text belongs to, the communicative circumstances of the assigned text, the determination of the target readership it is addressed to and, finally, the cultural aspect of translation.

In the process of translator training where trainees do not possess excellent command both of the source and the target language, the functional definition of translation errors can have many advantages. Language is always used in a particular communicative circumstance. According to Nord (1997), trainees tend to make less language errors when they are aware of the function and the communicative situation for which they translate; on the contrary, if they cannot assume to whom they address to and for which purpose, they tend to attach to the superficial structure of the source-text. Trainees need to be aware that determining the purpose for which the original text was written is of primary importance in the process of translation and that translation errors arise when they fail to achieve the purpose for which the text was written and the function it aims to serve. A functionally adequate translation can be achieved by the person who takes into account the communicative circumstance the translation is placed as well as the existing communicative conventions in the target-culture.

In addition, the role of an in-depth analysis of the source-text should not be degraded in avoiding translation errors since it functions as a point of reference for providing the necessary information from the source text. Indeed, the analysis of the source-text directs the translation process as a basis for decision-taking related to the following matters: which units of the text are related to its function and which translation methodology could lead to a target-text that would correspond to the purpose of the original text.

Within this framework, it is recommended an approach that would combine both the prescriptive and non-prescriptive notion of translation errors where errors (Pym, 1992: 2) by themselves are not the only criterion to translation quality but one of the main factors in judging translation quality together with other important criteria such as the extent to which the purpose and function of the source text has been achieved successfully in the target text. Translation errors could also function as a source of potential information regarding student progress as well as the process of translation learning. As Pym suggests (1992: 287) difficult texts could cause serious errors that could finally lead to “moments of revelation or a sudden awareness that translation is not simply a matter of literalist fidelity” offering to translation students useful experiences on their way to developing their translation competence.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baker, Mona. 1992. *In other words: A Coursebook on Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- [2] Delisle & al. 1999/2008. *Translation Terminology*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia. John Benjamins.
- [3] Goodman, Kenneth. 1969. Analysis of Oral Reading Miscues: Applied Psycholinguistics. In *International Literacy Association* 5 (1), pp. 9-30.
- [4] Hewson, Lance. 1995. Detecting Cultural Shifts: Some Notes on Translation Assessment. In I. Mason & C. Pagnouille (eds). *Cross-words, Issues and Debates in Literary and Non-literary Translating*. Liège Language and Literature, pp. 101-108.
- [5] Nord, Christiane. 1997. *Text Analysis in Translation*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- [6] Pym, Anthony. 1992. Translation Error Analysis and the Interface with Language Teaching, In C. Dollerup & A. LODDEGAARD, eds. *Teaching Translation and Interpreting. Training, Talent and Experience. Papers from the First Language International Conference, Elsinore, Denmark, 31 May 2 June, 1991*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, PP. 279-288.
- [7] Sêguinot, Candace. 1990. Understanding Why Translators Make Mistakes. In *TTR (Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction)* 2 (2), pp.73-102.
- [8] Wills, Wolfram. 1982. *The Science of Translation: Problems and Methods*. Tübingen: Gunter