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TEXT ANALYSIS EXERCISES FOR SIGHT TRANSLATION

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Keywords: Sight translation, interpreter training, text analysis, public speaking, speed reading, paraphrasing

Abstract: Sight translation is a technique that is often given short shrift in translator/interpreter training programs, yet it is of vital importance both as a training tool and as part of the daily work of professional translators and interpreters. Sight translation shares some component skills with simultaneous interpretation, but it also has some unique elements. This paper begins with a definition and task analysis of sight translation, followed by a discussion of the role of sight translation in the training of translators and interpreters and in their professional work after graduation. The scant literature on sight translation is then reviewed. Finally, a series of practical exercises designed to enhance the component skills of sight translation is presented.

1. DEFINITION OF SIGHT TRANSLATION

Sight translation is an oral translation of a written text. Thus, it is a hybrid of translation and interpretation. Somewhat analogous to sight reading in music, the translator/interpreter is given a document never seen before, and with minimal preparation, is expected to provide a complete oral translation of the document. As González, Vásquez, and Mikkelson note,

Like accomplished musicians who play an apparently effortless version of a piece they have never laid eyes on, interpreters are actually drawing upon years of training and experience to perform this feat. The end product should be both faithful to the original text and pleasing to the ear (that is, in free-flowing, natural-sounding language).¹

1.1 When Sight Translation Is Used

The working translator/interpreter can never predict when s/he will be called upon to perform sight translation. An in-house translator may be accosted by a coworker with a document that just arrived in the mail, who pleads, "You don't have to translate it, just tell me what it says." A freelance translator may be

similarly accosted via fax. Translators who work for large international organizations commonly dictate translations for a typing pool, and must therefore be adept at sight translation. Court interpreters can expect to be handed a document in a foreign language to be read into the record in English, or to be asked to go over a form with a non-English-speaking defendant. A conference interpreter may use sight translation in conjunction with simultaneous interpreting skills to interpret a speaker who is reading rapidly from a prepared text (and has thoughtfully provided the interpreter with a copy five minutes before taking the floor). Or, worse yet, the conference interpreter may have to resort to sight translation, along with consecutive interpreting, when the simultaneous equipment breaks down.

Most of the instances when sight translation is required are unanticipated, but of course, the T&I professional knows always to expect the unexpected. Consequently, sight translation skills are essential for anyone wishing to enter this demanding field. The majority of T&I schools recognize this fact and include sight translation classes in their curriculum. Moreover, as will be discussed later, sight translation is regarded by many experts on T&I pedagogy as a valuable training tool.

1.2 Sight Translation Task Analysis

When performing a sight translation, the translator/interpreter first scans the entire document to get a general idea of the subject matter, the style, the purpose of the document, and the intended audience. Under no circumstances does the sight translator think, "How am I going to translate this or that term?" The focus at this point is on understanding meaning. After this "macro reading," s/he begins "brainstorming," calling up the schema in long-term memory that will aid in the recall of subject-related terminology in the target language. For some texts, visualization is a useful tool in this process. The next step is a "micro reading," in which the sight translator looks at the sentence structure and the relationship of clauses to one another, and searches for common pitfalls such as dangling participles and split units of thought. Then the oral translation begins: The sight translator reads a phrase and grasps its meaning, generates a target-language version, and expresses that version orally while scanning ahead to the next phrase or unit of meaning and beginning the cycle again.

As with simultaneous interpretation, the sight translator is expressing a thought that has already been processed while at the same time processing the next thought, working on two channels at once. The only difference is that the input is visual rather than auditory. The end product should sound smooth and polished, as if the translator/interpreter were reading from a prepared text in the target language.

The component skills of sight translation are similar to those of simultaneous interpretation: The sight translator obviously must have a full command of both the source language and the target language at all registers, and must be familiar with common problems that arise when translating messages from one language to

the other (e.g., heavy use of the passive voice in one language that is not acceptable in the other, or a subject-verb-object structure in one language and an object-verb-subject structure in the other). S/he must have the mental agility to analyze a message quickly and generate a target-language version of that message without hesitating or backtracking. S/he must be attuned to the finest nuance of the original and make sure the translation is accurate in every detail, not just superficially, but also in terms of style and tone--the overall impact the message has on the listener. The sight translator must also be adept at casting aside the structure of the original message and conveying the underlying meaning in a way that sounds natural in the target language, a task that is much more difficult when dealing with a written text than with oral input.

As with any mode of interpreting, the sight translator must pay particular attention to the purpose of the message to be translated and the needs of the audience. Because, as the old saying goes, there's many a slip twixt cup and lip, self-monitoring is an extremely important skill; the sight translator must make sure that what s/he intends to say actually comes out of his or her mouth, and that it is expressed in a way that is understandable to the listener. Short-term memory comes into play in sight translation just as it does in consecutive or simultaneous interpreting; the sight translator has to retain long sentences and make sure the rules of grammar and style are observed throughout.

Public speaking skills are just as important in sight translation as in consecutive or simultaneous interpretation, if not more so. Particularly when the setting of the sight translation is a public gathering such as a conference or a court proceeding, eye contact, voice projection, clear enunciation, good posture, and smooth pacing are essential. The audience will be reassured by the sight translator's confident demeanor that the translation is accurate.

Another ingredient that sight translation has in common with simultaneous interpretation is prediction, "a strategy interpreters must employ in order to process the SL [source-language] message efficiently. Interpreters are able to predict the outcome of an incomplete message because of their knowledge of the SL syntax and style, as well as other sociolinguistic factors in the SL culture."² Although the sight translator has gotten a global view of the document by skimming it before beginning to translate, the skill of prediction becomes essential as s/he goes through the document phrase by phrase, rendering each unit of thought into the target language quickly and smoothly.

The ability to read quickly and to take in whole phrases at a time, analyzing at a glance how the words relate to one another to create meaning, is a component skill that is unique to sight translation. As Wilhelm Weber describes it, "During the reading process, the interpreter's eye is always ahead of what he is processing intellectually. During the actual sight translation, the interpreter's eye is always ahead of what he enunciates."³ This skill is analogous to the ability to lag behind in simultaneous interpretation, and serves the same purpose, i.e., to allow the sight translator to "chunk" the message into units of thought

rather than translating word-for-word. Because the time constraints imposed on the simultaneous interpreter are not as stringent for the sight translator (though the time it takes to deliver the target-language rendition is certainly not irrelevant), s/he has a little more flexibility for changing the structure of the message to suit the demands of the target language.

On the other hand, it is much more difficult to abstract meaning and abandon the structure of the original when the source-language message is written on paper in black and white than when it is an ephemeral auditory message. Karla Déjean le Féal points out that linguistic interference from the source language text is much more difficult to avoid in sight translation than in simultaneous interpreting, citing the old adage, "Verba volant, scripta manent."⁴ It is easy for the inexperienced sight translator to become "hypnotized by the words" and fall into the trap of a literal translation.⁵

Moreover, a message intended to be read is usually quite different from one intended to be heard; a more complex and turgid style is used in written texts. The units of thought are not necessarily contiguous, but may be broken up by intervening clauses. Not only must the sight translator be astute enough to identify units of thought that are fragmented or embedded in other clauses, but s/he must be able to convert the labyrinthine style of a written document to an oral style that is more accessible to the listener, while remaining faithful to the tone of the original. This may be done by shortening sentences and making implicit references more explicit, taking care at all times not to omit or add information.

In addition to the difficulties inherent in any translation or interpretation, the sight translator must contend with special problems such as deciphering handwriting (handwritten documents produced by unsophisticated, semi-literate individuals are a very common occurrence in court interpreting, for example) and providing instant summaries of complex documents ("Just tell me what this 20-page report is about so that I can decide whether it should be translated in full--I need to know before my meeting starts in five minutes").

In conclusion, because sight translation is a hybrid of translation and interpretation, it poses the same problems and presents many of the advantages and disadvantages of both modes. Using as a point of departure Brian Harris's comparison of translating and interpreting,⁶ we can identify the following differences: The sight translator has a little more time than an interpreter to generate the target-language version, but does not have the time for editing and revision that a translator has. The sight translator can read the entire document before beginning, and thus has a more global view of the message than the simultaneous interpreter does. In some situations, the sight translator can interact with the parties (sometimes the author of the document is even present) and adapt the translation to their needs.⁷ In general, there is a great deal of overlap in the skills and aptitudes required for sight translation, translation, consecutive interpreting, and simultaneous interpreting. Consequently, sight translation can be an invaluable tool for training translators and

interpreters, as we will see in the next section.

2. THE ROLE OF SIGHT TRANSLATION IN T&I TRAINING PROGRAMS

As Barbara Moser-Mercer points out, sight translation "is a very useful pedagogical tool that helps students divorce themselves from the original text, increase their speed of analysis and manipulate a text syntactically as well as stylistically."⁸ Wilhelm Weber adds:

Through sight translation, students learn how to conduct themselves in front of an audience. They also acquire the basic reflexes required to transpose a message into another language (assuming that they have not had any translation courses beforehand). Moreover, they develop a swift eye-brain-voice coordination, which becomes vital in the process of simultaneous interpretation of speeches that have been prepared beforehand and are read at top speed by the speaker. Finally, it is a little easier to analyze a message that is presented visually than one that is presented orally.⁹

The two authors cited above have taught at both the University of Geneva and the Monterey Institute of International Studies, both of which have world-renowned T&I programs. Weber laments that sight translation was not taught when he was a student at Geneva, and states that now many interpreter trainers agree "that sight translation is an essential part in any curriculum designed to teach translation and interpretation."¹⁰ He goes on to assert that this mode "needs to be taught separately from the other modes of interpretation because it is both an integral part of the interpretation process and a basis for developing the more difficult interpretation skills."¹¹ Indeed, most T&I schools now include sight translation in their curricula.¹²

Even when it is not offered as a separate course, the techniques of sight translation are used as preparatory exercises to develop students' analytical abilities. For example, Ana Ballester and Catalina Jiménez at the University of Granada, Spain, use text analysis exercises to help students "to analyse the cohesion among the units of sense of a written text."¹³ They also use what they call "connective exercises," a type of drill which "is very useful in that it trains the student to give shape to ideas, to convey them more clearly and finally, and that is our main aim, they learn to build a text."¹⁴ Sylvia Kalina of Heidelberg University in Germany also reports using sight translation among a number of "[g]eneral preparatory exercises involving discourse processing in adverse processing conditions, as they typically arise during interpretation, especially simultaneous interpreting."¹⁵

After the techniques of simultaneous interpretation have been acquired by the students, experts recommend that they be given extensive practice with sight translation in the booth. For example, Karla Déjean le Féal notes that it is very common for interpreters at scientific and technical conferences to follow the text of a paper while interpreting in the booth, and she cautions that it is difficult for the interpreter to avoid becoming a slave to the structure of the original because the visual input tends to

take precedence over the auditory input. She recommends that conference interpreters view sight translation as a form of consecutive interpreting, reading the text over once and storing the main ideas for later recall, and referring to the original text only for names, dates, and statistics, just the way they would with consecutive notes.¹⁶ This avoids the danger of becoming too absorbed in the written text and failing to notice when the speaker strays from the prepared text.

Along these lines, and in connection with what was stated earlier about the difference between messages intended to be read and those intended to be heard, Wilhelm Weber notes,

Listeners normally have a natural "absorption threshold" beyond which they can no longer absorb and process information.

... It is the simultaneous interpreter's task to make even the most complicated written information sound straightforward and clear to the listener. Under some circumstances this may mean extracting the main points of information from a written text and presenting it in the form of a restructured "oral" speech.

This is where sight translation comes into play as the ideal means to achieve this goal ...¹⁷

Weber emphasizes the importance of sight translation as a tool for preparing for a conference, when the interpreter can go over the papers that will be read and sight translate them to make sure s/he knows the technical terms and can handle the more difficult passages, a kind of "dry run" before the actual conference.¹⁸

Weber also points out that sight translation is an ideal tool for helping students learn to read their notes smoothly in consecutive interpretation. "With good training in sight translation, the interpreter will learn to look at his notes up to a full page ahead of the idea he is actually interpreting."¹⁹

Sight translation is also considered a key element in the training of translators. At the Monterey Institute of International Studies, for example, all translators are required to take courses in sight translation, and the rigorous professional exams that students must pass to be awarded an M.A. in Translation include a sight translation component. Wilhelm Weber, former dean of the T&I program at Monterey, explains the justification for this emphasis on oral skills for translators:

Sight translation is the process through which every translator must go before putting anything on paper. Moreover, it is really what translators do if they dictate their translations. And, finally, translators are normally called upon to do sight translations in meetings and negotiations, because interpreters are not available to do this job.²⁰

There is a common misconception, particularly among interpreters, that translators have all the time in the world to complete their assignments. In fact, however, any translator can attest that the rush job is the rule rather than the exception; "yesterday" is the deadline most frequently given to translators. The speed and flexibility developed through sight translation are essential tools

for the working translator.

3. PAUCITY OF RESEARCH AND LITERATURE ON SIGHT TRANSLATION

In spite of the importance attributed to sight translation in most T&I training programs, no research has been done on this mode of interpreting. The term does not appear at all in the bibliography on interpretation by Ronald and Diane Henry,²¹ and occurs just once in the bibliography on T&I pedagogy and research by Etilvia Arjona-Tseng²². The single entry is Wilhelm Weber's article,²³ which appeared in an ATA monograph. The only major textbook on interpreting that devotes an entire chapter to sight translation is the one by González, Vásquez & Mikkelson.²⁴

Though these two writings provide some valuable information about sight translation and its importance for translators and interpreters, they do not report any empirical research. Works that do contain at least some references to research on interpreting²⁵ mention sight translation only in passing, if at all. At the end of his article, Weber urges "colleagues who are more actively engaged in research" to take up the challenge of investigating this little-noticed aspect of interpreting.²⁶ Because sight translation is such a visible process (the text is already in writing and does not have to be recorded and transcribed, and the sight translator can be videotaped so that all aspects of the communication, both verbal and non-verbal, can be recorded), this mode of interpreting can easily be studied. Because sight translation overlaps with all other forms of translating and interpreting, as we have discussed in this article, conducting research on both students and working professionals as they perform the task can provide some valuable insight into the interpreting process.

4. EXERCISES TO DEVELOP SIGHT TRANSLATION SKILLS

The following is a list of suggested exercises to help students develop the various component skills of sight translation:

4.1 Public Speaking

1. Give students passages from plays, children's stories, and other texts containing dialogue, which they must read aloud with no advance preparation. This give them practice with different speaking styles and tones of voice (they must also read ahead to determine what the most appropriate tone of voice is).
2. Give students texts with a strong emotional content (political tracts, for example), which they must read aloud, conveying the author's message convincingly, without allowing their own opinions or attitudes to come through.
3. Give the students dense, convoluted texts (e.g., legal documents or technical manuals), which they must read aloud, conveying meaning accurately by stressing the appropriate words.

In these exercises, emphasize good public speaking habits such as eye contact, proper breathing and posture, clear enunciation, and voice projection. All exercises should be performed at a lectern.

4.2 Linguistic Flexibility

1. Practice brainstorming with the class by naming a subject (architecture, surgery, automobiles, etc.) and writing on the blackboard all the terms that come to mind on that subject in both (all) of the class's working languages.
2. Play word association games with the class, speeding up reaction times and building vocabulary by having them quickly name as many synonyms as they can think of for a given term.
3. Emphasize word affinity by having them name five adjectives associated with a given noun, five verbs for a given noun, five adverbs for a given verb, etc.
4. Emphasize problem-solving by having the students construct inclusion hierarchies for given terms (tools, furniture, etc.)
5. Give the students passages which they must expand (i.e., make more verbose) or condense spontaneously on the first reading.
6. Give the students passages which they must read aloud, altering the register as they go along.

4.3 Text Analysis

1. Give the students a dense and convoluted text and have them identify the subject and verb of each main clause and each subordinate clause. Then have them "chunk" the text, i.e., identify the units of meaning.
2. Give the students a complex text and have them summarize each paragraph in one sentence. Alternatively, have them take notes on the text on their first reading, and then summarize it.
3. Type up a text in which a key phrase is omitted in each sentence, and have the students read the text aloud, filling in the missing phrases as they go along.
4. Type up a text in which all punctuation has been omitted, and have the students read the text aloud, conveying meaning accurately by providing the correct intonation.
5. Give the students a text written in a very convoluted style, and have them turn each clause into a separate declarative sentence, adding subjects and verbs where necessary, without changing the meaning.
6. Give the students passages which they are to paraphrase (i.e., reword) spontaneously on the first reading, without altering the meaning.

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