The fall and rise of translation as a teaching technique

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As a student I was taught foreign languages[1] (Spanish in Middle School, English in Upper Secondary School, and the four main western European languages at the University) via the grammar-translation (GT) method. Those were the years when the so-called 'direct methods' based on structural linguistics and neo-behavioural psychology were slowly becoming known in Italy and, much more slowly, they were beginning to be adopted by pioneering teachers.

When I started as a teacher of English in autumn 1964 I was lucky enough to find that the principal of my *Scuola Media* had adopted a textbook titled *Listen and Repeat* – one of the very first of the new generation. I gladly accepted her choice, mostly because I had experienced going to England and finding that I had had too little training in the oral skills, i.e. listening and speaking. Incidentally, I had had no training at all as a teacher – the idea was that if you mastered a subject then you were also able to teach it: Glottodidactics[2] had not reached Italian universities yet. It was only a couple of years later, when I was given the opportunity to attend in-service training seminars and courses, that I discovered the wealth of foreign publications on language teaching methods. I also joined the national association of foreign language teachers (ANILS), which had been active since 1947 and whose journal *Scuola e Lingue Moderne* was the only one dealing with

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1 In the jargon of methodologists, a 'foreign language' is not the main language used in the area where it is taught – e.g. English or French in Italy; a 'second language' is the local language taught to foreigners – e.g. English in Britain. In the latter case, if the learners have different linguistic backgrounds, the teacher has to adopt strategies where only the target language is at play, so what follows only applies to 'foreign language' teaching.

2 The term first appeared in Poland and Italy around 1966. For Italy, see Titone (1966), *passim*. Even today, an Internet search of 'glottodidactic' mostly finds Italian and Polish / eastern European sites.

methodological problems on a fairly regular basis.[3]

Just one more small point as a preliminary remark: most of the degree courses in foreign languages were born as (and a few still are) part of the Faculty of Arts; although the official name corresponded to [Modern] Foreign Languages and Literatures – notice: 'languages' first – and we styled ourselves as 'language students', the main subjects of those courses were (and frequently still are) the literatures. At the time, two-year courses of Italian, and of Latin as well, were also required and they, too, were mainly focussed on literary works along the classical tradition.

1. Why no translation in language learning?

The answer to the question above is well-known: parsing a sentence, applying a set of grammar-translation rules and producing the corresponding sentence in the target language (TL) is a slow process, barely acceptable when producing a written text but highly inefficient in oral communication – dialogues and conversations. Besides, the mere application of grammar rules ignores all the semantic and pragmatic constraints in the TL: producing a sentence that is correct from the morpho-syntactic point of view is one thing, producing one that is also functionally appropriate is another pair of sleeves.[4]

Anyone searching the Net can easily find millions of pseudo-translations of this kind. Many of them achieve the basic goal of providing a general idea of what the web page is about, and their number is rapidly increasing; nearly all of them contain serious mistakes of different kinds – some of them can be useful as humorous counter-examples in advanced language courses for translators.

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3 *Le lingue del mondo*, instead, launched in the 1930s but now extinct, mostly focused on the languages as such (i.e. mostly on morphology and syntax, and not so much on phonology and lexis), dealt with literary issues and, less frequently, with other aspects of foreign civilizations.

4 Italian-speaking readers will have recognised "another pair of sleeves" as the word-by-word rendering of the Italian idiom *un altro paio di maniche* meaning 'quite a different matter'; of course this is just an example of the problem I am referring to.

I regularly use the term 'pseudo-translation' when referring to what used to be performed in old-fashioned language courses because I want to emphasise that it should not be confused with translation proper. This point will be developed below; now I want to deal with another aspect of the GT method that was one of its weakest features: the so-called 'exercises'. As we understand them now, exercises of any kind – from very simple repetition drills to more complex activities – are 'practice / training' processes aiming to reinforce learning and based on appropriate teaching materials. Does the translation of unconnected sentences reflect this definition? If the first two or three sentences require applying the general rule but the next one, without any warning, expects the learner to notice that it contains an exception to the rule, and the one that follows is still a different case, and so on, then the learners are not being 'trained': they are being 'tested'.

Along these traditional lines, grammar learning was a high-level intellectual activity suitable for learners with a remarkable degree of ability in making abstractions. But then, this kind of intellectual power was a general requirement before the advent of mass schooling. The communicative competence shown by hotel receptionists, waiters and so on was usually looked down upon by teachers and scorned as wild, inaccurate empiricism. The idea that fluency could be privileged over accuracy was firmly rejected, along with the idea that effective communication can take place also when a speaker or writer makes a number of mistakes.

From the affective-motivational point of view, the outcome was that most people – including brilliant learners – were very shy and avoided using the foreign language, lest they should make grammar mistakes. This reduced real-life practice to a minimum, which was very bad because fluency can be attained and improved only through using a language in context for communication purposes.

2. If not translation, what else?

The typical teaching unit adopted during the 1960s began with a dialogue to be memorised and eventually acted out. The early dialogues were overly dependent on the point of grammar that was

to be developed in the unit but they also introduced standard greetings, thanks and other formulaic expressions. A remarkable improvement took place in the second half of the 1970s, when the communicative approach developed materials that emphasised the role of semantic notions and communicative functions while lessening the role of grammar as an organising factor. Any explanations on points of morphology and/or syntax came towards the end of the unit in order to systematise what had been acquired through practice. The rules of grammar were no longer the starting points of a lesson or chapter in the textbook.

Pattern drills were introduced, involving the repetition or transformation of whole sentences, following the idea that the minimal unit of meaning is not the word but the 'structure'.[5] We now know that the minimal unit of meaning is the text, but going beyond the isolated word was a big step forward in both linguistics and language teaching. Other techniques were introduced in drills and tests: the best known are multiple choice, blank-filling and matching – each of them with several sub-types – that share the common feature of doing without the learners' mother tongue.[6] In those years the national curriculum (*Programmi ministeriali per la Scuola Media*) explicitly demanded that the whole teaching process for foreign languages be carried out in the TL – a good suggestion, if taken with a pinch of salt, that was carried by some teachers to unreasonable extremes of non-communication with their pupils even outside the language class.

The neo-behaviourist principle "Language learning is overlearning" is still acceptable today provided that the role of reflection and awareness is also taken into consideration: "Language learning is 'not only' overlearning". And this is where translation comes back into the picture: most reflections arise through spontaneous comparisons between the learner's mother

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5 Pattern drills were called *esercizi strutturali* in Italian. 'Structure' (between quotes) is here used as an umbrella word covering a number of terms (e.g. sentence, clause, proposition, phrase, utterance and others) that cannot be dealt with properly here.

6 For the sake of simplicity, from now on I will assume that the learners' mother tongue (L1) is Italian and the language they are learning (L2) is English. This is an obvious over-simplification in today's multi-ethnic Italy; anyway the points I am going to make are generally valid for any pairs of European languages.

tongue and the TL at all levels: phonological, morphosyntactic, lexico-semantic and pragmatic. From the awareness that the English 'th' sounds are not part of the Italian system (and therefore they are difficult to produce and use fluently) to the surprise of discovering a 'dummy operator' like *DO/DOES/DID* to be used in certain types of interrogative or negative sentences – and up to the intricacies of vocabulary and advanced syntax – all the 'structures' of Italian are there, on the alert in the learner's mind. If a student asks "Does *KEY* also mean *TASTO*?", then the Italian word is obviously there, in the foreground of his or her consciousness: pretending otherwise is bad teaching, also from the relational point of view. A nod of assent is usually the best response in cases like this.

3. Translating is 'a natural fact'

In everyday life, whenever the question "What does that mean?" is asked with reference to an oral or written text in another language, the implicit request is "Translate it into my language, please" – where 'translate' may more specifically stand for 'paraphrase / summarise / explain it in your own words'. A complete and formal translation, as professional translators describe it, is seldom required, but an informal translation of the gist of the text is perceived as the natural way to solve the communication problem and bridge the information gap. This fact provides, by itself, a very good reason for not neglecting the cross-lingual processes (L2 to L1 and back) that are at work in the learners' minds all the time.

There are other good reasons. Suppose a learner comes across the word *HARE* in a reading and you want to make sure that s/he has understood it; what can you do? Could you possibly ask the learner to provide a dictionary definition, something like 'a hare is a quadruped of the rodent family, with a cleft upper lip'? The definition contains words like *QUADRUPED*, *RODENT* and *CLEFT* that are much less frequent than the *definiendum*, and therefore they are presumably not known to a learner who is suspected of having problems with *HARE*. Or would you expect your student to draw or mime a hare that can be recognised as such without any possible confusion with, say, a rabbit? I would be at a loss if I were asked to

do that, yet I am sometimes so bold as to consider myself a successful learner of English as a foreign language. Besides, an abstract word would probably baffle any attempt at drawing or miming.

Things can get much more complicated when we move from the isolated word into the field of multi-word items: polywords (as defined in Lewis 1993: 92), phrasal verbs, collocations, phrases, idioms, etc.; near-synonyms or easy explanations are seldom available. Grammatical concepts are also usually hard to describe using the L2 only. The problem is not just terminology: it is fairly easy to learn that *articolo determinativo* corresponds to "definite article". The problem is conceptual: in the sentence "The dog is a faithful animal" THE stands for ANY, whereas in "The dog is hungry" THE stands for THIS or THAT. Linguists have offered us the terms 'categorial' and 'deictic' respectively, but no sensible teacher would ever use them with beginners or near-beginners who are still trying to cope with the uses of the definite article.

So, not having recourse to Italian at all, i.e. explaining everything in easy English, is sometimes impossible and at other times a waste of precious time. Still, the presence of Italian during English classes should be kept to the bare minimum, so as not to reproduce the shortcomings of the grammar-translation method while pretending we are adopting a communicative approach. Just because translating is natural, it should be discouraged whenever it interferes with the development of skills in the language being learned.

4. What kind of translation?

Linguists performing a contrastive analysis between two phonological, morphological, syntactic or semantic (sub)systems tend to assign an equal status to the two languages: they, unlike teachers, need not distinguish between L1 and L2, nor, unlike translators, between a source language and a target language. The differences between language A and language B are mirrored by the differences between language B and language A. In other cases the linguistic analysis is totally endolinguistic and even an isolated

sentence, devoid of a plausible context, may be enough: just think of Chomsky's "colourless green ideas sleep furiously" as an example of grammatical utterance – 'grammatical' in Chomskyan terms.

Not so for us teachers: at the very least, we need to distinguish:

- between translations 'from' and 'into' the foreign language;
- between translations of 'texts', on the one hand, and of isolated, unconnected 'sentences', on the other hand;
- when teaching advanced students, we need further distinctions between literary and technical / scientific / professional translations.

As was suggested above, the main question then is "Who am I translating for?" Is it chemists who need an accurate version of a user's manual dealing with the handling of potentially dangerous substances? Or is it a friend who wants a brief summary of an article in a magazine?

This inevitably puts translation processes into a wider framework, as special cases of 'paraphrasing'.[7] Jakobson's theory (1966: 57) kept the two processes apart, the former being interlinguistic and the latter endolinguistic, but this distinction is not so relevant in language learning insofar as most instances of interlinguistic translation also involve a greater or lesser degree of paraphrasing.[8]

The second distinction above – between isolated sentences and texts – deserves further comments. Technically speaking, a text is whatever attains the speaker's or writer's communicative goal: a cry of "Watch out!" is a text a speaker may produce to warn a person who is not aware of some impending danger: it is a very short oral text (quite simply, in most real-life situations there is no time to add anything else) but it is complete in itself and potentially – and hopefully! – effective. At the opposite end we find very long written texts like Langland's *Piers Plowman* or Dante's *Comedy*.

In glottodidactic terms, instead, a text is normally a dialogue /

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[7] For a recent extensive analysis of paraphrasing and reformulations see Bruti (2004).

[8] The third type of translation suggested by Jakobson, i.e. 'intersemiotic' (between sign systems, e.g. 'translating' a novel into a film) is outside the scope of the present analysis.

conversation or a reading passage, thus excluding both the extremes recalled above. From a psycholinguistic perspective, the main feature is that texts are sequences of verbal material long enough to challenge the short-term memory of the learners; and from a (socio)linguistic point of view the main feature is that they are pragmatically – not just semantically – meaningful. This does not mean that formulaic expressions and literary texts are excluded from the glottodidactic picture; many of the former, in particular, are normally taught during the early stages of a language course because they are very useful. It just means that they are not what methodologists and teachers usually have in mind when they speak of 'texts'.

5. Testing and teaching: is the tail wagging the dog?

'Objective' endolinguistic testing techniques were introduced in the 1960s[9] because they were coherent with a structural / neo-behavioural approach and they were perceived as a viable replacement for the pseudo-translation of isolated sentences. During the next decade, some of these techniques were criticised for being atomistic insofar as they isolated a grammar point or a lexical item and tested it with a minimum of co-text and little or no reference to communicative competence.

There is a world of difference between a blank-filling item of the "matter ____ fact" type (where the immediately adjoining words are enough to show that the preposition required is 'of') and a cloze procedure that calls for a variety of strategies, ranging from relying on the immediate co-texts to having recourse to the testee's 'encyclopaedia', in order to reconstruct a passage of some length.[10] The late 1970s saw the development of integrated / pragmatic testing (see Oller 1979), which evolved into communicative testing (Carroll 1980, 1985).

Another point that has been the object of analysis and research

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9 These dates refer to the Italian developments in language teaching and testing methods and techniques. The early stages of language testing in Italy are reported in Porcelli (1971, 1975) and Amato (ed.) (1974).

10 The fact that too many teachers nowadays use cloze for both types is irrelevant here, although it is an important issue in in-service teacher training.

for decades is the influence of guessing on test scores. This concerns multiple-choice formats most of all, but there are several other instances where guessing plays an important role. A few years ago a teacher reported a significant experience of hers to me: after administering a reading passage followed by a comprehension questionnaire she found that she had some time left so she asked her students to translate the passage into Italian – not as part of the test (the learners were informed that it would not be counted in assessing the mark) but just for the sake of practice. She found a few cases of testees who had got a good mark or at least a pass mark in the questionnaire but showed a serious lack of comprehension in the translation. They had obviously relied on the fact that in that type of test the first question normally refers to the first lines of the passage, the second question is about the next few lines, and so on, and somehow they had managed to find a number of correct clues leading to acceptable answers.

The first interesting point is that the teacher's choice was technically correct: the other choice, presenting questions at random, would introduce an extra element of complication that is not usually acceptable with 14-year-old learners in their third year of English in an Italian middle school. However, following the 'natural' order gives rise to the shortcomings that have just been described. The second point is that the problem came to the light through the use of translation – and this brings us back to the main topic.

According to Oller, translation

> still remains in at least some of its varieties as a viable pragmatic procedure. [...] If it is used in ways that approximate its normal application in real life contexts, it can provide valuable information about language proficiency. [...] the technique is a special kind of pragmatic paraphrase task (Oller 1979: 50).

These words were largely neglected during the past thirty years mostly because of the fear that they might be misunderstood as an encouragement to go back to what R. Lado had long before styled as

> A degeneration of successful medieval practices in teaching Latin

> by abandoning the speaking and reading practice and keeping only the rote memorisation of grammar rules and the analytical translation of selected items (Lado 1964: 216),

i.e. the grammar-translation method.

The recent years have been marked by a growing interest in the practical results of language learning, that is in communicative competence in everyday matters, not just the intellectual awareness of interlinguistic and cross-cultural differences. To that end, the families that can afford the costs send their children on study holidays abroad and/or to extra courses leading to the various 'certificates' awarded by more or less qualified international agencies.

This tendency is also favouring the introduction of 'certificate-type' exercises and activities in textbooks that aim to be adopted for the curricular language courses, not just for the extra classes leading to certificate exams. In other words, the way in which the learners will (or might) be tested influences the way in which they are taught. This is nothing new: the 'washback effect' has been known for a long time and is one of the constant issues in language testing.[11]

In general educational terms, allowing the teaching to be conditioned by the testing is a serious mistake – "putting the cart before the horse" or "a case of the tail wagging the dog" are the usual metaphors describing it. Assessments of any kind ought to be coherent with 'what' has previously been taught and 'how'. But is it really so in actual practice? When there are specific goals to be achieved and/or well-defined levels to be attained, then such goals and levels naturally influence or even determine all the efforts in that direction. The first example that comes to my mind, in the year of the 2008 Olympic Games, is the training of the athletes, where every single choice – from food to dress to psychological counselling – is oriented towards winning the medals.[12]

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11 For a fairly recent study see Cheng, Watanabe & Curtis (2004).

12 Towards the end of March 2008 there were reports of athletes being already secluded from the world because their country wanted them to perform at top levels the following August. This did not only apply to China, the organising country, but to many other national teams as well.

6. Valid testing vs. lazy testing

Recent years have seen an unexpected development of language testing practices. Quite a number of teachers find it nice and easy to use test papers found in various textbooks and/or on-line, sometimes adapting them slightly, to administer them and to confine themselves to checking whether the answers to those multiple-choice or blank-filling items are correct. In this way they ignore guessing and covert errors and assume a certain percentage of good answers (sometimes as low as 60%) as a token of adequate achievement. All this I summarise with the label 'lazy testing'.

Marking this kind of papers is much faster and easier than marking more complex types of tests but the information collected is scant and often misleading. I collected ample evidence (mostly through tutors or teacher trainers) of students who had no idea of what a given sentence meant, although their answer to the item based on it was correct – in particular, they were not able to translate it into Italian.

At times, even the techniques adopted are not technically correct. The weight of guessing in 'true / false' items is so relevant that they should be replaced with multiple-choice items of the 'true / false / the-passage-doesn't-say' type. The diffusion of such lazy testing practices seems to be on the increase and in the worst cases it may try to conceal the awareness that one's learners are underachievers. A pass mark based on a lazy test may disguise a really unsatisfactory performance.

As the title of this section suggests, lazy testing is the exact opposite of valid testing. Validity is the key issue when talking about tests and exams. In broad terms, it is the adequacy of the means to the ends, and it entails several aspects. Coherence with the contents and method of the course has already been mentioned; besides, a valid test must meet the requirements of acceptability, economy, gradability, comparability, and so on (see Porcelli 1998:39-53 for a discussion of these points). But one cannot overemphasise the basic requirements of 'diagnosis' and 'coverage' – in simple words, the importance of detecting the learners' strong and weak points as regards 'all' the relevant aspect of the subject

matter being tested. Lazy testers are those who do not ask themselves what they are getting from their tests and, above all, what they are missing.

7. Going back to the past?

Yes and no. No, if it means going back to the GT method with its pseudo-translations and 'non-exercises'; yes, if it means reviving the tension towards full-fledged communicative competence that was so vital thirty years ago. Any suggestions that translation may somehow come back to the foreground in language teaching must indeed take into account the fact that it cannot be just a swing of the pendulum: the whole clock has been moved into another room in the meantime. Within the wider framework of communicative-affective approaches, translation should not be rejected *per se* in language teaching or testing but its role is strictly limited to those cases in which it can really help.

There are cases when a paraphrase in Italian – intended to favour the learners' understanding of grammar – is the source of misunderstanding: "a friend of mine" corresponds to *un mio amico* but the word-by-word rendering is *un amico dei miei*. As I reported and discussed elsewhere (Porcelli 2002, 2007) some learners misunderstood the latter phrase to mean 'un amico dei miei genitori / parenti'. In colloquial Italian, this is indeed what *i miei* normally refers to: my parents and/or other members of the family. A gloss that was offered by the teacher as a form of explanation led to an error.

It is not uncommon to find conflicting goals in glottodidactics. It is absolutely true that our learners should hear and read the target language as much as possible and practice it only – and in these phases we do not want their mother-tongue to get in the way. However this is not the whole picture: an awareness of how the foreign language works is, more often than not, an awareness of the dissimilarities between the two languages. Besides, Italian is frequently the only tool that both teacher and learners (especially beginners) have at their disposal to communicate about the classroom activities.

Some tests were found to be invalid because the tasks were described in the foreign language and the instructions were more difficult than the items themselves. If the procedure is not obvious or well-known to the testees, then it must be described in the learners' mother-tongue. We may call this an 'instrumental' use of the mother tongue.

The second use belongs to the cognitive domain and as we have just seen it is connected with 'awareness-raising'. The third aspect is the 'diagnostic' use of the mother-tongue whenever we must make sure that we the teachers are not like those who think they have sold something that nobody has bought.

The conclusion I can draw from all this is that methodologists advocating direct methods went overboard with their ban on translation in all its forms and at all costs; and indeed the ban was hardly ever strictly adhered to by foreign language teachers, as it is essential for teachers to establish good relationships with their learners. At long last, this outlook is now getting recognition in 'official' circles and a much more balanced view is emerging in the glottodidactic horizon.

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