

Chapter 2

How to Put the Translation Test to the Test?

On Preselected Items Evaluation and Perturbation

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ABSTRACT

Reliable and valid evaluation of translation quality is one of the fundamental thrusts in present-day applied translation studies. In this chapter, a thumbnail sketch is provided of the developments, in and outside of translation studies, that have contributed to the ubiquity of quality in translation discourse. This sketch reveals that we will probably never stand poised to reliably and validly measure the quality of translation in all its complexity and its ramifications. Therefore, the authors have only sought to address the issue of product quality evaluation. After an introduction of evaluation methods, the authors present

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the preselected items evaluation method (PIE method) as a perturbative testing technique developed to evaluate the quality of the target text (TT). This presentation is flanked by a case study that has been carried out at the University of Antwerp, KU Leuven, and Zuyd University of Applied Sciences. The case study shows that, on account of its perturbative qualities, PIE allows for more reliable and more valid measurement of product quality.

INTRODUCTION

Translation assessment and evaluation are two subdomains of Translation Studies that have been proven to be fraught with obstacles. In the past, the obstacles seemed mainly problematic to translation service providers (i.e. translation agencies and freelance translators), whose primary objective it is to sell (high) quality products and services as a means to attract new clients and maintain customer loyalty. The discipline of Translation Studies has kept quality at a safe distance for a number of years.

Before turning the attention to the sudden revival of academic interest in quality, it is worth pausing to consider the underlying reasons scholars had for skirting the issue. Quality was the main reason why the discipline had started off on the wrong foot. In the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of what some would call “Linguistic TS”, quality had been placed at the top of the agenda. The attempts of the early scholars to pinpoint the characteristics of an equivalent translation resulted in highly subjective and prescriptive ideas about translation quality. Still, this is not all there is to it: the prescriptivist tendencies even led to the unjustified equation of evaluative judgments and categorial judgments; in other words: texts that did not conform to a scholar’s theoretical preconceptions of a quality translation were simply denied the full status of “translations” (cf. Even-Zohar, 1990; Chesterman, 1997, p. 63). Although Popovič has been hailed by many scholars (amongst others by Holmes, 1988) as a renewer of TS, his lemma “Translation”, in his critically-acclaimed *Dictionary for the Analysis of Literary Translation* (1976) – originally published as an addendum in *Téoria umeleckého prekladu* (1975) and translated as such in *La Scienza della Traduzione* (2006) – bears witness to this unjustified equation of translation and high-quality translation. As an advocate of stylistic equivalence, he defines translation as the “passaggio dell’invariante da un testo all’altro osservando in modo ottimale le peculiarità stilistiche e specifiche del prototesto [etc.]” (2006, p. 174).¹

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, TS scholars have done their utmost to redress this unjust situation and to raise the profile of TS. First and foremost, this meant that emphasis needed to be placed on empirical findings. It soon dawned upon the new generation of scholars that the quality of a translation is always relative to the social-cultural context in which a translation is embedded. At the end of the century, no or hardly any doubt was entertained about translation quality: a correct translation was “the one that fits the correctness notions prevailing in a particular situation, i.e., that adopts the solutions regarded as correct for a given communicative situation, as a result of which it is accepted as correct” (Hermans, 1991, p. 166). It was up to TS to provide a full and unbiased overview of the norms prevailing in cultural systems of all times, all around the world.

Around the turn of the millennium, the call for quality became ubiquitous both in the field of translation and in that of TS. Translation service providers thus found a somewhat unexpected ally in their quest for quality: scholars. It had become clear that, although it need not work to the advantage of the theoretical branch(es) of TS, these scholars still had a vested interest in the assessment and evaluation of translation for the simple reason that most scholars are also teachers.

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