

Chapter 13

The ATA Flowchart and Framework as a Differentiated Error–Marking Scale in Translation Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Translation evaluation remains problematic, with industry marking errors with points-off systems while teachers use points-off and rubrics. Many rubrics are not adequately operationalized. Needed is an error category and severity system sufficiently differentiated for useful feedback and streamlined to enable feedback to large numbers. The American Translators Association (ATA) Flowchart for Error Point Decisions and Framework for Standardized Error Marking has been adapted for the classroom. This chapter provides statistics on errors and severities marked in two groups: 63 translations by German>English graduate students marked by the author and 17 examinations from the 2006 ATA Certification Examination marked by ATA graders. The predominant categories assigned to students are Punctuation, Usage, Mistranslation, Addition, and Misunderstanding, while ATA papers show Misunderstanding, Omission, Terminology, Literalness, Ambiguity, Grammar, and Style. Misunderstanding rated as the most serious error for both. Transfer errors are more frequently marked and more severely rated than grammar or language errors.

INTRODUCTION

How do we know when a translation is good? This difficult question can be answered in a number of ways, depending on who is asking the question. Monolingual end-users of a translation, translation revisers, translation examination graders, translation teachers, and translation students may

all have different answers. Monolingual readers of a translation—insofar as they know that it is a translation—may think that a translation is good when it reads well in the target language, but are unable to judge whether it accurately or inaccurately represents any of the meaning or messages expressed in the source text. Translation revisers (often called “editors”) working for translation

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agencies may consider a translation good if they only have to make minimal revisions to it. Examination graders may similarly find a translation “good” when marked errors do not exceed a given threshold. Translation teachers may have a more differentiated view of “good” translation in the translation classroom as one that meets specific goals in an assignment, and need a method that provides effective feedback to students on errors in an efficient way. Finally, translation students may consider their own translations “good” when they receive a good grade on a translation assignment.

The methodology for assessment and evaluation of translations is far from a settled topic in translation studies. Points-off systems and rubrics have been developed by academics, examination bodies, and by industry, but there is no consensus on a single type or method—or indeed, whether such a method is even possible or desirable.

Over the past twenty years, the American Translators Association (ATA) has developed a Flowchart for Error Point Decisions and a Framework for Standardized Error Marking. The following pages provide detailed information and basic statistics on the errors and severities marked using these tools in two groups: 63 translations of a single assignment in commercial/legal translation over several years by German>English translation graduate students marked by the author and 17 original examination papers in the domain of business law from the 2006 ATA Certification Examination marked by the ATA graders. This information makes it possible to determine the categories where errors occur and which error severities occur most frequently. This is discussed for each group and subgroup and compared across the groups. Such a comparison suggests larger implications in terms of error categories that are important for translation teaching and for certification grading, and the differences between them. Selected examples are discussed to show trends and patterns in error severities, error categories, error distributions, and commonalities and differences between the two groups.

BACKGROUND

In recent decades, the development of translation evaluation has led to a number of different approaches. The variety of approaches can be exemplified by House’s (1997) discussion, which subdivides evaluation approaches into three categories: first, anecdotal, biographical, and neo-hermeneutic approaches; second, response-oriented, behavioral approaches; and third, text-based approaches. The text-based approaches are further subdivided into literature-oriented, post-modernist and deconstructionist, functionalistic/action and reception-theory-related, and linguistically-oriented approaches. House’s model makes the key theoretical distinction between *overt* and *covert* translation, which can also be roughly equated to foreignizing and domesticating approaches to translation. This distinction is necessary for evaluation purpose when evaluating how well individual translations comply with the translation brief. However, while House’s model is extremely detailed in terms of the dimensions analyzed, it does not provide an error-marking scheme or rubric. Martinez Melis and Hurtado Albir (2001) point out that “we currently have a substantial and varied body of proposals for the analysis of translations, although only a few (House, Larose) have been formulated explicitly for translation evaluation:

- The technical procedures proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958);
- The dynamic equivalence criteria proposed by the Bible translation scholars (Nida and Taber 1969; Margot 1979) based on the importance of reception;
- The situational dimensions put forward by House (1981) with functionalist criteria;
- The contextual dimensions put forward by Hatim and Mason (1990);
- The categories derived from the polisystem [sic] theory (Toury 1980; Rabadán 1991);

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