What do translators do? seven popular myths debunked

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The problem

Skilled linguists who help others to communicate form an unbroken tradition of language service providers extending over many millennia - perhaps as long as two million years - and forming a crucial element in all known civilisations world-wide.

Yet, after maybe two million years, for the general public and even for the users of their services, both translators and interpreters still appear to be invisible, the activities they engage in ill understood, their job titles confused and often used interchangeably and their services valued at no more per hour than those of a contract cleaner. Consider the following anecdotal but none the less genuine scenarios:

Two heads of State are photographed speaking together with an unnamed person sitting between them who is referred to (if at all) as their 'translator' engaged in 'interpretation'.

Clients organising an international conference seek the services of 'translators' who ask - not unreasonably - how many documents will need translating and which languages and are told 'none' The perplexed language service provider is then told that everything that is said will have to be translated and asks what the deadline is for publication. The client says not to worry· presenters will be asked to send in final versions of their papers by an agreed date and the proceedings of the conference will be published in only one language. Pause for thought. Interpreters? Yes. Simultaneous or consecutive? What's the difference?......

A television executive asks for the translation of the soundtrack of a documentary film. subtitles, obviously. No. Questioned further he makes clear that what he wants is a voice-over: specifically, 'the translation should follow the miming (sic!) of the presenters' Dubbing, it would seem. Then he is told how long it will take and how much it will cost...There seems no end to distressing anecdotes such as these.

The dilettante 18th century translator and student of translation Lord Woodhouselee (Alexander Fraser Tytler) tells us (see Bell 1992 for an assessment of Tytler's contribution to translation theory) that translation is 'an art which has never been methodised', wonders why, when it has the important function of '...creating a free intercourse of science and of literature between all modern nations', there has been ' ..no attempt to unfold the principles of this art, or to reduce it to rules...' and sets the agenda for translation studies for the next two centuries; the discovery of 'general laws of translation' (see Lefevre, A ed. 1992 for a comprehensive survey).

For the next two hundred years most discussion of translation and interpreting was flawed by failure to address significant issues (such as discovering what translators actually do, reaching an agreement on the nature of the process and showing how it derives the output text from the input) and by attempting to devise sets of normative regulations for creating the 'perfect' translation, agonising over the assessment of translations in terms of their 'fidelity' to the 'original' text or author, engaging in the seemingly fruitless search for 'equivalents', pondering over the absolutely extraordinary question of whether translation - after four thousand years of examples of translated texts - was possible at all and, ultimately, sinking into despairing hyperbole over the impossibility of explaining translation: '...probably the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos' (Brislin 1976. 79).

Only in the last decade or so has thinking begun to move beyond prescription to description and from the (inevitably unfavourable) comparison of the product (the 'target' text) with the source text to a focus on the process itself. Instead of asking Tytler's question 'is this a good translation?', we are beginning to ask 'what has the translator done in order to produce this translation?' and 'are there common strategies which translators use from language to language and text type to text type?' (see Bell 1991 for extended discussion of these issues).

No profession can hope to establish itself until it has reached a consensus on its legitimate domain of activity and on the minimum acceptable knowledge and skills required to operate adequately in that domain. This presumes disciplined intellectual discussion which utilises an agreed metalanguage. With such conceptual and terminological agreement it is possible to delimit the field, share and reflect on experience, design appropriate training and assessment procedures, produce codes of ethics and guides to good practice and quality control mechanisms which ensure standards.

This has only very recently begun to happen in translation (see Adams, C. et al. eds. 1995 for a useful practical example), which has hardly moved beyond the pre-professional craft level of the medieval barber surgeon or dead-reckoning navigator

Before translation can take its place as a fully accepted and legitimate area of academic investigation and translators can take their rightful place alongside other communication professionals, consensus must be reached on the definition of, at least, such key terms as *translator, translation, interpreter, interpretation, interpreting* and some attempt must be made to clear away some of the confusion which surrounds them. That is the key aim of this paper

Translation, translating, interpretation and interpreting

Let us begin by disposing of seven of the many myths concerning translation, translating, interpretation and interpreting as a preliminary to engaging in meaningful and, it is hoped, fruitful discussion:

1. Translation consists of repeating what has been written in one language in another

2.   Translation can be spoken or written
3   Written translation is also called translation and spoken translation interpretation
4.   Translation is instantaneous
5.   Anyone can translate
6.   Anyone who can translate can interpret
7   A translator is a bridge between two cultures

Let us examine these myths one at a time.

The repetition myth

The translator (as yet unspecified as to type) cannot 'repeat' what is written (or said) and just exchange the words of one language for those of another Are, for example, the words

1)   'You live at where?' a translation of 'Tinggal di mana?' or

2)   'Safe morning' a translation of 'Selamat pagi'?

They are certainly a repetition and, indeed, translations; literal (word-for-word) translations which may in many cases be appropriate but not here. The two examples are both *grammatical* (in the absolute sense of the term. possible according to the rules of context-free Standard English *usage*) but inappropriate (unsuited to the context of *use*) and, therefore, unacceptable. They differ, however, in the kind of inappropriateness and unacceptability they demonstrate.

1)   'You live at where?' consists of a string of English words to be sure but in an order which no native speaker would use except as an incredulous checking question: 'You live at *where*?' The syntactic structure and the intonation pattern of this would be extremely marked in English but, of course, unmarked in Malay If it is intended as an unmarked translation of 'Tinggal di mana?', it is ungrammatical. We would expect 'Where do you live?'

2)   'Safe morning' is inappropriate is that the meaning (*as intended by the speaker and as normally apprehended by the hearer*) has not been transferred. The *social value* of what is said in the speaker's culture is that the words *count as a greeting.* The missing element that needs to be carried across from A to B is not the literal (or semantic) but the

metaphorical (or stylistic) meaning: what the speaker meant *by saying* 'Selamat pagi' The closest equivalent greeting in English would, naturally, be 'Good morning'

Translation is, then, much more than repetition. The translator takes the utterance (or 'signal' or 'text': the terms are, for practical purposes, interchangeable) apart, retrieves the meaning (s)he finds there, and constructs a new utterance which carries the meaning (s)he has found into the second language: the language of the client for whom the translation is being carried out.

The process is not, as the naive user of translation services supposes, a simple single step switch (words in A → words in B) but a much more complex two step process (words in A → ideas → words in B) This appears to be very straightforward but several further problems arise; how does the translator know 1) what the speaker intended, 2) what the hearer will make of the translation, 3) which words in B will best express the ideas in A, 4) how socially appropriate any choice will be.

For the time being (and with misgivings), we can settle for a traditional definition of translation (Dubois 1973 206: my translation) which conveniently distinguishes literal and metaphorical meaning:

> ...the expression in another language (or target language) of what has been expressed in another, source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences.

The ubiquitous translation myth

The suggestion here is both universalising and restrictive. It sees translation as universal in proposing that speaking and writing can both be referred to as 'translation' and restrictive by implying that no other modes of communication count as translation, thus excluding, for example, sign language interpreting.

Part of the problem arises from inconsistent usage within the profession, 'translation' being used to refer to the process (to translate) or the *product* of that process (a translation) or both. In order to resolve the ambiguity, we suggest that:

- 'translation' be employed as the *generic* term for the process of interlingual transfer (irrespective of mode) and modified as appropriate depending on the mode employed

- varieties of 'translation' would include: the processes of 'written translation' (written texts), 'spoken translation' (utterances: spoken texts), 'signed translation' (into or out of Sign Language)

- 'translating' be the preferred term for 'written translation', 'interpreting' (rather than 'interpretation. see below) for 'spoken translation' and 'sign language interpreting' for 'signed translation'

The interpreting-interpretation myth

Again inconsistency of usage has led to confusion between the generic activity of 'interpretation' and the specific activity of spoken or signed translation. 'interpreting'

Interpretation is a central and essential step in 'making sense' of sensory input signals of any kind not just language. In order to 'understand' — to 'find the meaning' — the receiver has to interpret the input data in terms of expectations based on previous experience. This is the case whether we are listening to and understanding speech, reading and understanding what is written or watching and understanding signed communication, irrespective of the language. It is also applicable — since translators (in the generic sense) are, by definition, readers and listeners — to translating and interpreting. Without interpretation, there is no comprehension. Without comprehension, there is no meaning to transfer. Without meaning, there is no translation.

The instant translation myth

A moment's thought will make it obvious that translation, however defined, cannot possibly be instantaneous. Even the most skilled and experienced simultaneous interpreter (see below) who appears to be reproducing the meanings of the speaker as they are spoken is, actually, several seconds behind the speaker. This is inevitable if the interpreter is to decompose the original signal into its potential message and re-compose a new signal.

At the other end of the scale, written translations take at least one hour per page of single spaced A4 of the original. This is little longer than it would take to copy-type the original text or compose an original (which, after all, is what the translator is, in many ways, doing) International employers of translators (the United Nations, the Commission of the European Communities etc) recognise this and require six pages of finished translation per working day from each of their in-house translators. Private clients frequently expect the impossible: the 20-page contract by this evening...!

The universal translator myth

Strictly speaking, it is true that anyone who can understand-speak and/or read-write more than one language can translate and that such a task is a simple one for which no special expertise or training is required. It is also true that anyone can cook and that cooking is not difficult. But this is no more than a tautology and, as is the nature of tautologies, very unrevealing. The issue is whether the translating or cooking is done adequately.

Translation is an unusual type of communication event which differs from 'normal' events in a number of ways:

- participants do not share a common code for communication

- an intermediary (the translator) who is equally competent in both codes and conversant with the discourse conventions of both communities is required to make communication possible

- the translator responds to a third party rather than to the sender, with a message which has the same communicative content as that received and in a different form

In essence, then, translation shares many characteristics with monolingual communication. the shift of codes being the essential distinguishing feature (however, see Bell 1999b for an attempt to create a taxonomy of modes of communication which encompasses and distinguishes monolingual from bilingual and specifies the characteristics of sub-modes within each).

Competence in two languages and appropriate specialist knowledge are necessary but not sufficient conditions for successful translation (i.e. translating and interpreting). Translation exercises or examinations as part of a degree course in foreign languages may go some way to developing bilingual

competence but are inadequate as professional training which has to be geared towards the needs of the market and the expectations of the profession.

Compare the man who wishes to become a Hakim in a Shariah Court in Malaysia. He must acquire bilingual competence in Bahasa Malaysia and Arabic and deep knowledge of Muslim Law but these are no more than preconditions which will enable the individual to begin the process of becoming a practitioner. The professional translator or judge becomes a professional as a result of specialist training which teaches him how to apply the abstract knowledge he possesses in actual day-to-day practice.

The multi-function translator myth

All translators share a characteristic which distinguishes them from other communicators (competence in more than one language and the ability to shift between languages) but, just as it is by no means the case that everyone is capable of adequate translation, so not all translators are likely to be equally competent in all modes.

While sign language interpreting stands out as particularly distinct in using a highly sophisticated visual gesture system rather than sounds as the medium for communication and demanding very special motor skills of the interpreter, there are also distinctive characteristics which distinguish written from spoken translation: translating from interpreting.

Aside from the self-evident sharing of the characteristic of code shift and the distinction of mode (or channel) - translating consists of reading and writing texts: interpreting of listening to spoken or watching signed texts and responding appropriately - translating and interpreting also differ in several other ways: context, control, completeness and contact.

Context

The context refers to the setting in which the process takes place. Translators tend to work in private, while interpreters tend to work in public. Inevitably, the public-private distinction is not an absolute one but rather a matter of degree dictated by the circumstances of the assignment and 'public' does not necessarily imply a large number of clients receiving the service. On the contrary. The conference interpreter, who is providing a service for a potentially large number of individuals, is remarkably private, typically working from a darkened soundproof booth and speaking through a microphone to

the headsets of the participants. The Public Service Interpreter, on the other hand, in the casualty unit of a hospital or open court may be interpreting for only a single individual ('whispered interpreting') but is, none the less, very visible and public.

Control

This is concerned with the extent of control the translator exerts over the process: the time lag between input and output which sharply differentiates translating from interpreting. The translator of written texts is under far less pressure than the interpreter There are deadlines, it is true, but these can often be extended by negotiation with the client (who is usually more concerned to receive an accurate product than to see the deadlines adhered to rigidly). Translators are also able to work at their own pace, stopping and starting when they need to, in order to check information, try out alternatives and decide on the 'best' choice. Many days, weeks, even months or years can go by between receipt of the original document and the delivery of the final version of the translation. Translating is essentially and self-evidently a 'consecutive' rather than 'simultaneous' matter: a realisation which appears slow coming to many clients who still refer to 'simultaneous translation', absurdly implying the instant translation of written texts. True, many translators produce an initial draft by reading and writing 'simultaneously' but never the finished product, which typically goes through several drafts.

The interpreter, in contrast, must speak within a far shorter space of time and make a choice (which naturally can, though with some difficulty, be revised/modified/even reversed in a subsequent utterance) and is strongly constrained by the need to try to produce an utterance which achieves a balance between accuracy and fluency

Closest to translating, in terms of time, comes 'consecutive interpreting', where there are breaks between the input (during which the interpreter takes notes, in the second language) and the output (during which the interpreter produces an appropriate rendering). Consecutive is commonly divided into 'long' (where the 'chunks' of input are between 10 and 15 minutes) and 'short' (where they can be as brief as two or three sentences: 10 or 15 seconds). Finally, there is 'gist translation', where the translator reads the complete text through silently and then provides an on-the-spot spoken summary translation of it.

At the opposite end of the scale from these are located 'simultaneous interpreting', in which acceptable output is expected within three to six seconds of receiving the input, and 'sight translation' which comes closest to a simultaneous language shift between input and output: reading aloud in one language a text written in another

Completeness

This parameter measures the degree of *completeness* required of the product. It may appear that the goal of all translating and interpreting is the complete transfer of the content of the source text into the target text but this is far from being a universal requirement. 'Gist' translation, for example, demands no more than a summary translation of the key points in a text. Consecutive interpreting certainly aims for completeness and, when practiced by skilled professionals, tends to achieve it. The simultaneous interpreter, on the other hand, feels under more pressure to be fluent than complete: the receivers are more likely to tolerate omissions (which they are unlikely to notice) than pauses (which will be painfully obvious).

Variations in completeness also have the effect of distinguishing such monolingual activities as *paraphrase* (a complete rendering of the original using other words), *summary* (a reduced rendering of the original), dictation (where the input is broken up but the output is intended to be a complete rendering of the whole text and there is a switch of channel from audio to visual) or *note-taking* (where the input is complete but the output reduced and there may or may not be a switch of channel involved; notes can be taken in written form from a spoken or written source).

The implications for translator and interpreter training are very clear: many of the skills the translator/interpreter needs to develop - those listed above, plus research methods (including the use of dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopaedias, data-bases) word-processing, desktop publishing and editing skills - can be best perfected in the mother tongue. It seems perverse to insist on enhancing such skills and, at the same time, introducing the additional complexity of shifting from the first to the second language.

Contact

The term *contact* refers to the range of individuals involved in the process. No communicator - and translators and interpreters are, by definition, communicators - works alone. Translation is not a private and secret activity but

a public and social one. Very little translating or interpreting takes place because the translator has nothing else to do and wishes to spend a few hours translating rather than gardening or sleeping or cooking! The days of the dilettante translator are long gone. Most translating and interpreting is carried out at the behest of, for the benefit of and at the expense of, others. Translators are individuals who earn a living by providing a professional service to clients. Let us consider who is involved in this. (see Nord 1991 and 1997 for a comprehensive treatment of the relationship of action- and goal- theory to translation)

No less than *eight different* individuals or groups of individuals may be involved in the translation process. Several of these must, of necessity, belong to different speech communities and each individual will have different goals, intentions, expectations for the project and criteria for making judgements about it.

A comprehensive set of participants would include:

1)   an *initiator* who commissions the original text,

2)   an *author* who creates it but uses the services of

3)   an *animator* to type/word-process the text,

4)   a *client* who commissions the translation,

5)   a *translator* who translates the original text (thus becoming a second author), perhaps using,

6)   a second *animator* to type/word-process it (or, in the case of dubbing or a voice-over, 'speak' the translation) and transmit the translated text to

7)   an *agent* (perhaps the editor, publisher, distributor of a newspaper, journal, magazine or book; the producer of a play, director of a film) who distributes it to the

8)   *end-user(s)*: the ultimate reader(s)/listener(s)/viewer(s).

Naturally, it is possible for each role to be played by one or more different individuals or for a single individual (the translator) to play all eight.

There is no reason, in principle, why I, for example, should not take an article I had previously written (initiator, author and animator) and translate it myself, word-processing it and not sending it to anyone else (being my own, second animator) and doing so just because I wish to (being my own client) and reading it later (not sending it or showing it to anyone else: I act as agent and end-user) for my own amusement.

However, other than as a remarkably sterile academic exercise to practice my translation skills in a particular language and with a particular type of text, I cannot imagine why I should wish to do such a thing. The social element is missing and the whole enterprise would be about as socially communicative as talking to myself.

What is far more usual is that although a few roles (author-animator and translator-animator are not unlikely) may collapse into each other, most would remain distinct and some (end-users, in particular) are likely to be represented by several - perhaps a very large number of - role-players.

This adds levels of complexity which go some' way to explaining why translation is so difficult and why those who engage in it are constantly frustrated by conflicting requirements. Each individual has personal (and not infrequently institutional) reasons for being involved and contrasting criteria for judging the value and adequacy of a translation. The intentions of the author of the original text, those of the client who commissions the translation, those of the translator who carries out the commission and those of the end users cannot possibly coincide in full.

The initiator, author, animator and translator all judge the original (input language) text within the conventions of the community in which it was created (the input language speech community). So will the client if (s)he belongs to the same community. Conversely, the translated text will be judged, not as a text translated from the input language but as a text in the receiving (output) language, assessable in terms of the conventions of the receiving community Again, the translator has, by definition, to belong both to this and the original community and the client may belong to one or the other or, possibly, both.

The translator as bridge myth

This, on the face of it, is rather an attractive analogy. The translator is certainly a linguistic *intermediary* between individuals and communities who do not share a common means of communication and, as such, acts as a *link* between them just as a bridge links individuals and communities who are physically separated.

However, we need to be very wary of this progression of analogies and the change of status implied. *Intermediary → link → bridge*: animate → inanimate → inanimate. The problem is in no way diminished by replacing the metaphors and referring to *conduits* or (more recent and pretentiously pseudo-high tech) *modems*. The translator is equated with either a static concrete object or a passive mechanical or electronic device. An intermediary is a person who comes between two parties with the intention of helping them resolve a problem. Close synonyms for 'intermediary' are 'go-between', 'mediator', 'conciliator' No one would dream, one imagines, of referring to an intermediary such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as a bridge or a conduit or a modem, though her interpreter may well be labelled in this way We recognise that the High Commissioner's role is a highly active, even pro-active one. Is the translator's so very different?

What follows from the dehumanisation of the translator is a string of unreasonable expectations and demands, many of which we have been discussing but to which we might add the particularly difficult requirement of 'fidelity' on the part of the translator and neutrality and impartiality on the part of the interpreter.

All this is, effectively, a denial of the active role of the translator (without whose knowledge, skill and experience and, above all, creativity and imagination no cross-language communication could take place) and a diminution of his/her status from an appropriately professional level to para-professional or ancillary This is particularly apparent in legal settings where the interpreter is seen as the *servant* of the *process* rather than any of the individuals who are involved in it and lawyers and others find themselves speaking of 'using interpreters' do doctors speak of 'using nurses' one wonders?

It would be to the advantage of all to recognise that the requirement of neutrality and impartiality is no more than a special case of the requirement that the scientist should *attempt* to be objective in carrying out research or, more germane to the argument, the mediator who facilitates dialogue should

attempt to avoid partiality i.e. a *goal* to be aimed at: an *ideal* which may, in an absolute sense, never be reached. How far carrying out such an injunction is actually feasible, when the translator cannot possibly do other than articulate in the second language what (s)he has interpreted of the initial text, remains a moot point (see further discussion of this in relation to Court Interpreting in Bell and Ibrahim 1997)

Add to this the complexity of roles, relations, goals and values discussed above and the almost total exclusion of the translator (in strong contrast with the interpreter) from any control over the form or use of the final product (which is often 'improved' by well-meaning meddlesome amateurs after delivery) and we have the well-known phenomenon of the 'invisible' translator, shorn of responsibility and then accused - *traduttore: traditore* (translator· traitor) - of irresponsibility through 'lack of fidelity to the original'! Responsibility combined with impotence and invisibility hardly seems an ideal starting point for a new profession but a start must, surely, be made somewhere (see Bell 1998a and 1998b for suggestions on how to proceed from this point).

Conclusion

We would close with two interlinked pleas for support 1) to hasten the end of the marginalisation of translation studies and to encourage its acceptance, alongside the already well-established discipline of foreign language education, as a major component of applied linguistics and 2) for the professionalisation of language services (and, in particular, translating and interpreting) and for giving practitioners no less a degree of responsibility and status than is given to the doctor, lawyer or academic.

If we accept that

Any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance.

In short: *inside or between languages, human communication equals translation.* A study of translation is a study of language

Steiner G 1973 *After Babel*
page 47 *original emphasis*

we have a justification for translation as a legitimate field of study and if we wish to go further and press for the recognition of the crucial position of the translator and the interpreter in the new multilingual world of the 21st century, we could hardly do better than quote the words of *Vision 2020*:

> In the information age that we are living in the Malaysian society must be information rich. It can be no accident that there is today no wealthy, developed country that is information-poor and no information-rich country that is poor and undeveloped.

In any society the quality of the information available to the population depends on the professionals who handle information, librarians, journalists, teachers, lawyers...In a multilingual society the ability of these professionals to cope with the information they receive hinges to a high degree on linguistic competence. Frequently texts - written or spoken - are not available in a common language and are not, therefore, available in any real sense until they have been re-issued in a common language. That is the task of the translator and interpreter on whose professional competence information enrichment ultimately depends.

While we totally reject the bridge metaphor of the translator as an inert, inanimate structure which we believe derives from the confusion of the *product* of the translation process (the translated text or interpreted discourse) with its *producer* (the skilled manipulator of the process: the translator), we wholeheartedly endorse a metaphor which equates the translator with the dynamic, human bridge-*builder*. The translator-bridge-builder creates the means (no simple structure but highly sophisticated and complex mechanisms) for communication and contact and, thereby, functions as an enormously potent active agent of change and as a defender of our common humanity.

If the words of Thomas Mann had any truth to them at the end of the 19th century, they must be truer and even more relevant today:

> Speech is civilisation itself. The word, even the most contradictory word, preserves contact   it is silence which isolates

Thomas Mann 1875-1955

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