The Hidden Life of Translators
The quest for the roots of quality

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Introduction

This article deals with three different aspects of translating. The material it contains has been collected, developed and condensed from a series of workshops for translators which we have been conducting at the European Commission.

Our main purpose in these workshops has been to explore translating from the angle of **internal observation and experiencing of a process** rather than **external observation and measurement of a product**. This is because we are convinced that the secret of "quality translation" is to be found not so much in the constituents of the end-product but in the process by which it is arrived at.

Our method has been to ask professional translators how they work and how they react to descriptions of working processes that are given by other translators. Our descriptions are as clear as we can make them on the basis of inner self-observation. It is perhaps worth stressing that we have avoided "think-aloud" protocols because we believe these are still likely to be structured and censored by unconscious presuppositions. The hope is that other professional translators will recognise the processes described and - by virtue of having them described in words - be able more easily to access their own internal processes and so improve or change them if they wish.

The three themes of this article reflect different levels of detail in the translating process. The first section is concerned with how our perceived identity as translators influences our performance. The second section will look at the meta-processes which provide a framework for the specific act of translating. The third will deal with more detailed micro-processes, which we will relate to the wider contexts discussed in the first two sections.

Section 1: The translator as professional and craftsman

Knowing where you are

Translating cannot be seen in isolation. The translator’s role is embedded in the broader context of a communication process whose purpose will be different in each instance and where the number and identity of the interlocutors will also vary. Indeed, the very same text can sometimes be made to serve different purposes on different occasions and can therefore require a different translation each time.

To do full justice to any text, we have to think and feel ourselves into the relevant context. The more thoroughly we can steep ourselves in the background, the more

effortlessly and naturally we will be able to produce the quality of work which is required for each occasion.

There is more, however: the ultimate success of the communication process depends on understanding not only the **content** of the message and its context but also, wherever possible, the **identity** of the sender and receiver and the **relationship** between them, as experienced on both sides.

Knowing who you are

As translators, our position in the communication process is unusual. We are "in the middle".

Being neither the sender of the message nor its receiver, the translator is not so much an interlocutor in the communication process as *part of the process itself.* In this capacity, we are supposed to be invisible.

The translator rarely comes face-to-face with either the sender or the receiver of the message. **Our** investment in the process is to ensure that the message from the sender is relayed as faithfully as possible to the receiver. Sometimes, the receiver need not be taxed with the knowledge that the message originated in a different organisation, a different language or a different culture. At other times, the receiver wants to understand the circumstances in which the message originated.

As translators, our role in the process is also more complex than that of either the sender or the receiver. Part of our role must be **'chameleon'**. For if we are to be sure of faithfully and effectively transmitting the message, we will need to spend time in other people's shoes.

We have all been senders and receivers of written messages ourselves, so we know what it means, as an author, to ask ourselves "How can I make sure my audience understands what I am trying to say?" and, as a reader, "I wonder what the author was trying to tell me when she wrote these words?" Since we often have no access to the actual reader or author, in order to answer these questions we instinctively project ourselves into the position of the other in the communication loop, as the only place where we can glean the information we need.

As translators we must cover double the territory, being required to 'inhabit' first the author, to check we have understood his intent and the context from which he is formulating his message, and then the reader, to check that the message is pitched at a level she will readily understand. And for the actual act of translating, of course, we must fully inhabit our own selves if we are to have all our resources at our command as - for a while - we become the original author of a new text.

We need to be more consciously aware of these special features in the translator's role in the communication process. Always being an intermediary, aspiring to invisibility or at least window-like transparency while having to spend so much time inhabiting other people's identities can be a recipe for rapid burn-out unless we are soundly anchored in our own role in the process. Conversely, if we remain in touch with our sense of vocation as we translate we will find that playing the chameleon gives a deep authenticity to our work which is the hallmark of the truly inspired translator.

Knowing what you do

The translator's art is made up of hundreds of different internal strategies and substrategies. Very little is known about this phenomenon - only exceptionally perceptive translators ever even become aware of them[1]. Scientific study of such internal, subjective experience would be so complex that it has not really been started. Moreover, such strategies are rarely, if ever, taught in translating courses, which tend to concentrate on the more straightforward external, empirical observables such as the finished product and the original text.

But whether we consciously know what we are doing or not, we already use most of these subconscious language routines as a matter of course; we just do not understand from the inside how they work (like we don't know how we understand language itself). Individual translators spend their professional lives developing and refining their personal strategies, but rarely do they share or discuss them with colleagues. Often the strategies never even break through into awareness.

The present authors would like to see this state of affairs redressed, because you can't solve a problem if you don't understand how you got into it. You can't improve your performance if you don't know what it is you're doing (or not doing) **at this moment**, unless it is by accident. One of our tools as professional translators must therefore be the ability to observe our own performance in as much detail as possible and steadily refine it over time. This takes practice and self-discipline. You don't wake up one morning competent in conscious self-observation: it is a capacity you develop gradually. However, it is worth the effort because it is something you can practice in every area of your life and the benefits are by no means restricted to your professional activities.

Because this area of strategies is so crucial, yet so complex, we prefer to concentrate here and in Sections 2 and 3 on "enabling strategies" that can help translators to bring into awareness and develop the routines they use unconsciously already, in ways that will help them to access them more easily and at will.

State control

You need only listen to a sports commentary for five minutes to know that what makes a golf champion or a world-class sprinter is not so much their technical competence (highly competent sportsmen and women are remarkably common) as their ability to consistently control their internal state. The winner of the Wimbledon tennis final, for example, must sustain a state of acute but relaxed concentration under extreme pressure (also created by the mind - after all, no-one's survival is at stake) - and a touch of joy and humour will win them the crowd into the bargain.

This applies equally well to translators. We all know what it is like to have to function under pressure. Keeping that deadline is more important for some documents

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[1] In a recent book, Douglas Hofstadter discusses some of the background processes which run semi-consciously like subroutines in the translator's mind: he mentions the 'syntactic regrouper', the 'semantic substitutor' and the 'phonetic substitutor'.

than for others. Extremely high quality is more important for some documents than others. General presuppositions among translators include the belief that speed and quality cannot go together. This generalisation might be too simplistic, however. One key to professionalism in translation is the ability to control one's internal state so as to be able consistently to produce top style and accuracy, even under time pressure.

Examples of internal states (and components of states) which translators can learn to access at will:

* Immersion (translating state)
* Critical distance
* Naiveté (seeing with fresh eyes)
* Concentration
* Relaxation
* Focusing on the big picture
* Focusing on small details

Continuous learning

Translating is one of the most demanding and difficult intellectual pursuits that exists. Over and above the level of linguistic competence, general knowledge of the world and mental flexibility that is required, translators must also be almost **entirely self-motivated** if they are to stay in the business long enough to gain worthwhile experience, **self-critical** if they are to maintain high standards and continue to improve the quality of their work, and, on top of all that, **able to self-train**.

The translating world has probably changed more in the last ten years than it had since the beginning of written texts (the advent of printing was a mere blip). The introduction of PCs has created an intense learning situation for almost everybody in the profession. Translators who wish to stay on top of the market are having to learn new methods at a rate and volume they may never have experienced before in their professional lives. Yet while there is **constant change** in the tools and media which translators are required to master in order to work satisfactorily with the full range of clients, the actual act of language transfer seems to remain **stubbornly and eternally the same**. It is a task which must (we believe) be carried out by the human mind in the way it always has been, since biblical times and before.

Seen in this light, it is tempting to restrict our learning to mastering the new tools. It is hard to go on working at basic skills which have already been mastered to the best of one's ability and it is easiest to continue applying our native creativity to translating itself (the content of our translations) rather than **how** we translate (the process of translating). This is because we may never have acquired the habit of observing our working selves. Many of us live with an assumption that what we do is not observable and cannot be brought into conscious awareness without it slipping dream-like through our fingers. And yet, by the end of every translation we have added new knowledge to our repertoire - knowledge about the world, the subject matter treated by the text, document structure in general, new tips about manipulating computer software, new sources of reference material or terminology, etc. By consciously inventorising and integrating these learnings

as we end one job, we effectively deepen the experience and competence which we can bring to bear as we start out on the next.

Professionalism: not product but process

No one writing seriously about translation these days would claim that it is a scientific activity; it remains essentially a craft. But what is it that makes a good craftsman? One element is certainly knowing the materials and tools and what effects can be obtained with them. But because most of the key tools of translating are invisible, i.e. mental processes, discussion of what makes for more professionalism is often inconclusive. And because, as human beings, our relationship to language and thinking is so intimate, most of the areas that fall within translating professionalism are extremely private and sensitive, and therefore not willingly discussed by translators themselves.

Nevertheless, we believe that the exploration of the translating process as experienced from inside by the translator is crucial, because **it is in the processes that the quality is created**. While our clients are interested in the product, as professional translators we need to pay as much attention to the process as to the product, if not more.

Situating quality inside the process in this way frees us from the 'uncomfortable truth' widely accepted in professional translating circles that better quality needs more time. In our view, there is no direct relation between quality and time: what takes time is the **process** in itself, regardless of whether it leads to a good result or a poor one. As we shall see, what generally distinguishes a good translation from a mediocre or poor one is not the length of time taken but the **attention and commitment** invested by the translator in the process of translating it.

In the next section we describe some of the meta-strategies that provide a 'substrate' for the more detailed strategies of the translating process. Once we master these strategies consciously, we can powerfully augment the effects of any adjustments we might make to the micro-strategies that can help us to guarantee the quality of the finished product (dealt with in the final section).

Section 2: Dwelling in the glass house

The first section described how our perceived identity as translators can influence our performance. This section deals with some of the ways we can and do create mental frameworks that structure our way of translating, and some of the consequences these frameworks can have. We have chosen such a seemingly obscure subtitle for this section because these mental frameworks can be likened to a glass house: they provide an invisible structure in which it is easy to give our entire attention to the view outside, or to the furniture inside, but a conscious effort is required to adjust our focus in order to examine the walls (unless, of course, they draw attention to themselves by being badly smeared!).

As we also saw in the first section, a key skill for translators who wish to continue developing throughout their working lives is **self-observation**. It is this skill that the authors have been encouraging translators to exercise through the Workshops for Translators[2]. These workshops have highlighted just how many of us live with an assumption that what we do as translators is not observable and cannot be brought into conscious awareness without it slipping through our fingers. It has also demonstrated, however, that such self-observation is possible and can be taken very deep, and to excellent effect. But getting started with the habit is not so easy: after all, it is difficult to see something you can't see. In this part we would like to offer some guidelines in embarking on this demanding path.

To begin with, let us look at some general unconscious patterns that recur constantly during the translating process.

- It is important to be aware of the **frames of reference** we use in our thinking. We often limit our resourcefulness by operating on unconscious **presuppositions** that are not always well anchored in reality.

- Our **internal state** is a central factor at all stages of the translating process. Yet it is widely perceived to be mostly dependent on external/environmental factors and beyond the individual's control. In fact, a translator's performance consists of a set of discrete skills that can be developed. The further the translator develops across the full range of these skills, i.e. the greater his/her **competence**, the greater will be his or her **confidence**. And two of the most vital components of a resourceful translating state are **trust** (in our resources) and **confidence** (in ourselves).

- Although translating is often said to be a solitary task, **relationship** factors and the need for effective communication with others must not be underestimated.

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[2] For readers in the Commission Translation Service, see our intranet website at http://www.cc.cec/SDT/workshop/files/index.htm

- Possibly the most vital skill in the translator's repertoire (presupposing, of course, linguistic competence) is the ability to ask relevant/effective **questions** of other people and of ourselves.

Frames of Reference

Frames of reference are filters through which we look at the world. However, our choice of which frame we use is more often than not unconscious. Indeed, we are seldom even aware that there is a filter separating us from the 'reality' we observe. Applying this concept to translating, there are a number of very basic filters which, if used judiciously, can radically alter the product of our labour. The filters we have singled out as being most influential all turn out to belong in pairs, like coins with two sides. This suggests that when you are operating through any one of these frames of reference, there is an either/or choice of how to look at things. If this does not suit you, you can free yourself by becoming aware of the filter and electing to set it aside.

The most important frames of reference we have identified so far are:

- task/relationship
- nearness/distance
- inclusion/exclusion
- form/content
- foreground/background
- freedom/responsibility

a) Task/relationship

Any activity will look different depending on whether your focus is on the task to be carried out or the relationship with the other people involved. The activity of translating is no exception. It is easy to think of translating as a solitary task in which the translator is alone with the text: the job is to get to a satisfactory end-result. Translators accordingly tend to approach their work primarily through the task frame. However, the translator is always **also** part of a team, whether actual or virtual: not only are we working for a client or a requesting department and using dictionaries compiled by armies of specialists, we are also a link in the chain between a writer and his audience, a government and the governed. This is true even of the solitary freelance translator, let alone staff translators working in the Translation Service at the Commission, for example, who are hard put to count the number of different teams they belong to depending on the aspect of their work under consideration: terminology, technology, teamwork with peers of the same language, of the other Community languages, the role within the hierarchy, the virtual team which changes for every document and so on.

Like it or not, we are players in the game of human communication in all its complexity. Remaining aware of the relationship aspect of our work while we engage

in the task of translating is bound to affect both our choices as to how we set about the task and the result of our labour.

b) Nearness/distance

Some of the time we are immersed in the text, completely steeped in the world of the document to the exclusion of all else. At other times we take critical distance from our work, stepping back mentally from what we are creating to get a better perspective on it. Taken one stage further, this is also one of the keys to mastering the art of self-observation. There are moments when we are immersed in our work, but we reach a more empowered stage when we can also sit back and observe *ourselves* as we toil away.

So it is also with the translating process - only how often do we take sufficient distance from ourselves to really take stock of how we operate? How often, when translating a text, do we feel that we are wading waist-deep through thick mud without realising that much of the resistance we are encountering comes from wavering concentration? That we are not managing to immerse ourselves sufficiently in this text? How often do we stop and ask ourselves what we can do to make things easier? Similarly, how often do we realise, when utterly immersed in the flow of translating, that we are losing all objectivity and straying too far from the necessary register? How often to we consciously disentangle ourselves from our text and take some distance before continuing, just to make sure we are producing what is really needed by the client?

The process of translating a document from beginning to end is an *evolutive* one of *approaching* a text, discovering its context, style and purpose; *becoming one* with it as we uncover its message and transfer it into our language; *differentiating* our critical mind from it so as to see it in its larger context and judge its quality, appropriateness and adequacy. The final read-through completes the process, the translator has *integrated* the text into his or her world experience and releases it to a separate existence.

c) Inclusion/exclusion

One prime example of inclusion and exclusion in action is the distinction translators often make between terminological resources which they can access from inside their workplace and those they have to leave their workplace to consult. Superficially, this appears to relate to convenience and ease of access. For some, "workplace" means just their own desk, for others it may include the colleague in the office next door or a fellow translator working for the same agency. It is likely that our dividing line between inside and outside, near and far, varies depending on the situation. Using a resource in my workplace can mean not interrupting my concentration, while paying a visit to the library can be a 'welcome break' which allows me to distance myself from the text.

At a deeper level, however, this frame of reference also has much to do with the question of *relationship*: who we mentally include in our team. Here we are talking about 'my' resources versus 'outside' resources (self/other - Us/Them). The dividing

line between self and other varies from one individual to another and from one context to another. It can also depend on other frames of reference being used. Implicitly, however, there is always the question of **trust**: the sources which a translator considers as "internal" have been *validated* to that translator's satisfaction and she can therefore use them with *confidence*.

d) Form/content

Often as we translate we are so taken up with the content or the story that we neglect to attend to the form in which the story is told. This can make for a finished product which hangs together rather uncomfortably. Every sentence contains clues and pointers to form in its cohesive devices, which we often overlook because they do not seem to contribute to the content of the story, yet without them the reader would undoubtedly lose the thread! As translators it is part of our job to pay attention to the cohesion, and hence the 'comprehensibility index', of the message.

e) Foreground/background

If the text we are translating is in the foreground, the context in which it was written is in the background. If the words of the text express certain ideas explicitly, other ideas remain implicitly present in the background, without which the text cannot be understood. Every communication, written or verbal, contains some given information (whether implicit or explicit) and imparts something new.

At another level, translators are often taken up with the **task** of rendering a text in another language (foreground). However, on days where we have less inspiration, this task can be heavy going. The problem here does not lie in the task, but in our **relationship** with the task, which determines the internal state in which we tackle it. This relational aspect is usually left in the background, but can usefully be brought to the foreground if there is a problem of motivation to be solved.

f) Freedom/responsibility

Herein lies a basic paradox. The tram runs on rails, and bemoans the fact that it has so little freedom of movement, never able to depart from the route laid out for it. The bus is free to run wherever it chooses, but sometimes wishes it were restricted to rails, because of the weight of responsibility it carries for having to choose where it will travel. Without freedom there is no responsibility. And yet, without responsibility there can be no real freedom.

It is said of translating that there is no creativity in the task, since the translator is not free to express his or her own ideas, only to render those of others. However, 90% of the content of practical translation textbooks seems to revolve around how to develop judgement on when to depart from the tramlines. The way the present authors see it, it is our responsibility as translators to render the message of the original both accurately and in the manner most appropriate to its intended purpose. Within that remit, we are free to use all the resources at our disposal, indeed it is our duty to do so.

Presuppositions

By ‘presupposition’ we don't mean the **conventions** we make with ourselves or others about reality ("assuming X is true, let us explore doing Y") but the hidden **assumptions** we make at work or in life which we mistake for solid fact. As in the case of exploiting frames of reference, the emphasis is on **awareness** of what we are doing.

It is important to make the latter type of presuppositions explicit when they emerge so that they can be questioned. Otherwise, they have a habit of closing doors to options. Often when problems seem insoluble it is because our presuppositions about reality make us blind to the options available.

For instance, a fundamental presupposition which most of us make is that a translation has to be approached linearly. A text seems to be a series of characters one after another, making words one after another, making sentences one after another ...

This is the direction of the physical act of reading, starting with the first sentence and carrying on until you reach the end. It is also, incidentally, the way a machine translation program might be assumed to work. But texts are not actually like strings of pearls. There are internal references backwards and forwards within any text (from simple pronouns, referring back to an antecedent, to the recurrent thematic ideas expressed in recurrent key terms). There is no reason why the process of translating a text should not weave back and forth in a zigzag pattern, and in fact most of us would admit this is actually what we really do. Equally, there is no reason why we should not work through the text from start to finish in several passes, like painting a wall with primer, undercoat and final coat or putting together a lasagna. This is more like the way a machine-translation program works procedurally. Once again, when asked about it most professionals would admit that this is exactly the way they work too, e.g. leaving the looking-up of difficult terms to a second pass or third pass and making at least one complete read-through before finishing. If this were not so, most translations would be word-for-word, phrase-for-phrase renderings that read a little like machine translations.

We have suggested (report on Workshop 1) that translators might like to try starting in the middle or at the end of a document, or by translating its headings and subheadings first to gain an overview of what it is about. Interestingly, the advent of translation memories and workbench-type applications is naturally producing new ways of processing texts along these lines, where you start for example with the bits already translated in other contexts and then apply various other computer tools in successive passes through the whole text.

Another example of unquestioned presuppositions we have encountered about translating concerns the relationship between quality and time (see Section 1 as well): “You cannot translate fast and well”. Yet most of us would hesitate to say that it is impossible to translate slowly and badly! Another presupposition along the same lines is “A difficult piece of research takes a long time”. But perhaps it is just a matter of choosing the right first step to dramatically shorten the time needed. By the same token, research that takes a long time may not be inherently difficult at all, just laborious.

At an organisational level, we can see pervasive presuppositions underlying the professional principles which have been sacrosanct for years:

a) Translators should translate only into their mother tongue.

b) Translators should restrict themselves to translating the words on the page.

c) Staff translators and freelance translators fulfil the same function.

We believe that these principles (by no means universally held) no longer remain workable in their current form and must therefore be called into question[3].

Clearly, when such presuppositions are brought into the light of day and challenged, they often appear ridiculous. But when left to lurk in the shadows, entire edifices can and often are constructed upon them without anyone stopping to wonder whether the foundations are secure. We have lost the habit of critically examining our thinking.

Prerequisites for a resourceful internal state

We have already mentioned the important role which our internal state plays in our performance. We have all experienced a state of concentration in which the translating process flows smoothly, efficiently and with optimal results. Although each of us will experience this optimal state differently, it seems to have certain common components. Certain conditions must be met in order for all the necessary components to be present so that we can access this state while working. One of these components is **confidence.**

Confidence and competence

Translating is a **continual decision-making process**. It starts off with major decisions about context, message, register, treatment, processing. During the actual process, scores of micro-decisions are taken every minute (yes I understand, no I don't understand, choice of word, turn of phrase, time to research, time to rephrase or restructure, time for a break, time to go home).

Without confidence, indecision rules. The necessary decision-making process is paralysed. Translating without confidence is therefore highly stressful and leads to a mediocre or poor product. So it is worth spending the time it takes to gain the confidence we need to make competent decisions.

Confidence is not an absolute. Our confidence levels fluctuate according to multiple factors which interact to form a fairly complex moving picture. Some examples of the factors which influence a translator's confidence are:

- comprehension (how well you understand the message and context of the document you are translating)

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[3] See our paper on Enlargement, the Language Regime and the Translation Service, annexed to the report on the 7th Workshop for Translators (Teamwork and Training Design) - available from the authors on request (and inside the Commission at http://www.cc.cec/SDT/workshop/files/ws7/an1.htm)

- ability to formulate (how well you can transfer the message, in its context, into the target language)

- knowledge of the subject matter

- trust in the resources at your disposal (the degree to which you trust the sources of the terminology and background materials at your disposal).

Obviously, you cannot be confident unless you are, to some degree, competent. However, performance is undoubtedly impaired if confidence is lacking, no matter how competent you are. So there is no easily reversible causal relationship between confidence and competence. None the less, like many mind-body phenomena, this is a double-sided coin which we can exploit to our advantage. By adding more competence we can increase our confidence, while increased confidence can in turn improve the application of modest competence beyond recognition; our performance so often depends more on our beliefs about what we are able to do than it does on our objective skill level.

An example: very few translators are as confident when translating from their fourth language as from their first. It is harder to take the decision to depart from a literal (and stilted) rendition of the original for fear of having not understood, or of having misunderstood, the meaning. However, while it is not helpful to have false confidence in one's ability, nor it is useful to be crippled in a task which one is going to have to carry out anyway! At such moments it can be useful to 'map across' a feeling of confidence from your experience with your first or second language, which can help you to make bolder decisions. It is still possible to retain a critical attitude ensuring you make no silly mistakes, and you are likely to want a colleague more competent in that language to check your work at some stage.

False confidence, when you think you know enough and don't question your understanding, is surely just as common. True confidence enables us to call ourselves into question continually and to forgive our errors. It enables us to take responsibility for our mistakes and "do it differently next time".

The importance of questions

Questions are a key part in any intellectual process. We might not be **aware** that we are continually asking ourselves questions, but whatever stage we examine in any of life's processes, questions are **presupposed** without which the whole process would disintegrate. The following simplified description of the mental steps involved in translating any document demonstrate just how crucial questions are.

- The process commences with a **test**: *Do I have a clear goal? What is it*?
  - Example of a typical goal: "Produce a perfect translation by lunchtime".

- Without some idea of our goal we don’t know what operations are needed to attain it: *What do I need to do first?*
  - Answer: "Make a first rough draft".

- Once we have completed the operation, we need another **test**: *Did what I did bring me closer to my goal?*
  - Answer: "Yes, I have my rough draft in front of me".
- On the basis of this test, we **decide** what we need to do next in order to proceed: *What do I need to do next?*
  - Answer: "I need to solve a terminological problem" .
- Here we repeat the loop at a finer level of detail:
  - Q: *What is my goal?*
  - A: "To find the correct translation of a certain term".
  - Q: *What do I need to do first?*
  - A: "Check in my technical dictionaries and databases".
  - Q: *Did that bring me closer to my goal?*
  - A: "No, I couldn't find the term anywhere".
  - *What do I need to do next?*
  - "Call the requester..." The requester solves the problem in a way clients often do: "Oh, we don't need that degree of perfection, the experts will be able to understand the technical terms, we just need a rough version for the meeting on Friday."
- It is important to have an **ongoing re-evaluation**, after every major operation: *Is my goal still valid*?
  - In our fictitious and over-simplified example, the initial goal of "a perfect translation" can be adjusted in the light of the additional information gleaned (by accident) from the requester.
- There are often times when you might have to decide, for example, to skimp on a goal because of the circumstances. This suggests that there must be a "**meta-goal**" in the background, which is more important than the immediate goal we have for the current translation. **Flexibility is required in shifting what is in the background of our attention to the foreground and vice versa**.

All the tests and decisions required to perform the act of translating are based on questions. **Ask the wrong question and the test is irrelevant and the decision inappropriate.**

Clearly, these questions are being mysteriously and magically asked and answered inside us, whether we are paying attention to them or not. However, the ability to ask

questions *consciously* is particularly useful at points in the process where we get stuck and don't know what to do next. At such moments it can be useful to start by examining our entire mental approach by calling into question the points mentioned above (including our goal):

- What **frame of reference** am I using in trying to understand this text? Is it the most appropriate one?
- What are the **presuppositions** underlying my reasoning?
- Am I in the best **internal state** for tackling the job at hand? If not, what state would be better?
- Am I at the appropriate **distance** for the task at hand?
- What is in the **background/foreground**?
- and so on.

Section 3: Getting dirt under your fingernails

In this final section, we turn to the smaller-scale strategies that come into play as we work our way through a particular translation job. First, though, we would like to provide some context by reiterating the basic model of the translating process which we outlined in Section 2.

In our view, good professional translators will set out to become intimately acquainted with their source text (one workshop participant called it 'undressing' the text), internalise its form and content, and then launch their new version into the world. Or to put it more succinctly: take it in, make it one's own, put it out.

Yet another way of regarding the process is to treat the translator as a special kind of reader: as well as 're-creating' the text in his or her own mind (i.e. what a reader normally does), it is as if the translator is also required to render a detailed written account of their personal 'reading' of the text.

We can use this model as a frame in which to set the various micro-strategies which a translator needs to have at his or her fingertips. And, inevitably, this entails getting dirt under our fingernails! Moreover, a crucial feature of the model we are presenting here is that it involves not just our minds, but our bodies as well.

When we translate, it is our body which is the vehicle for the ‘sensibility’ which tells us whether or not we like what we have done. As we have seen, every process can be described in terms of operations, tests and decisions (see the part on questions in Section 2). In the case of translation, the test could be a question like ‘am I satisfied with what I have done?’ and the first, semiconscious answer on which the decision is based appears to be supplied by the body, before it is justified by the mind. The body makes its decision very rapidly, while the mind takes much longer looking for grounds on which to rationalise it.

As we saw in Section 2, the process of translating a document from beginning to end is an **evolutive** one which involves **approaching** a text, **becoming one** with it, **differentiating** from it and **integrating** it into our world experience and **releasing** it to a separate existence. Here, we have split the process into three parts to illustrate what happens. However, it is important to bear in mind that we are offering a theoretical model, and our division of the process into a number of discrete segments is an artificial one. The distinctions in real-life translating are not and cannot be expected to be that clean: the phases can occur simultaneously or more than once within the process, for instance, or even in a different order However, we do believe that the basic model is a valid one. More important still, we believe that it explains how the quality of the end-product can only be guaranteed by the process by which the product is created.

Engaging

We have all known tourists who spend their holiday looking through the viewfinder of their camera, obsessed with the idea of capturing every last experience on film to take home and show their family and friends. They end up not experiencing the holiday itself! A similar trap awaits translators, who may manage to translate their texts at arm's length, paying so much attention to words and syntax that **meaning** and **purpose** pass by unnoticed. If we choose this approach, there is a real danger that we can live an entire professional life without being touched by all the acts of communication that have gone through our hands (but not through our hearts). This is the **translator functioning as a catalyst**, effecting the transformation of a text from one language into the other while remaining unchanged by the end of the interaction.

In contrast, the translating process being described here does not allow the translator to remain a mere catalyst, but rather requires us to commit fully to the process of translating each document, to bring its world of meaning within us rather than keeping it at arm's length, and to allow ourselves to be **changed** by what we translate.

When we work in this way, we do not translate by transposing words or sentences from one language into another. We read and understand a passage, allow it to sink into us until we understand its structure, its **raison d'être** and its message, and then, holding the intention of the text in our minds, we **reproduce** the message in our mother tongue.

In order to generate the kind of motivation needed to commit to our work in this way, it can be helpful to start any new text by embarking on an inner search to find some way, however slight or seemingly trivial, in which the subject of the document touches on our own lives. Clearly, this is easier when our document concerns dioxins in poultry and eggs than micro-components in a nuclear power plant. Nevertheless, how many times a day do we switch on a light?

Much of the 'engaging' phase takes place before we even start translating our document[4]. Examples of micro-strategies that operate in this phase are:

- *the translating brief*: it is surprising how often translators are expected to "just translate" a document without knowing what it is for, who is to read it, where it came from, in what form it is to be delivered, etc. Clearly, having this information will make a great difference not only to our confidence as we start work but also to the actual words, phrases, presentation and register we decide to adopt. Even if a useful brief cannot be obtained from the client, it is still important to have some idea in our mind about the purpose of our work before we embark on it. Indeed, research by Janet Fraser of the University of Westminster has shown that professional translators will always tend to **invent** a brief for themselves where one is lacking or inadequate[5].

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[4] We have covered this area in some depth already in the report on our fourth Workshop, entitled "The translating state" - see T&T 1/1997.

[5] Janet Fraser: "The Translator Investigated", in The Translator, Volume 2, Number 1 (1996), 65-79.

- *thinking/reading around the context:* while it is tempting under time pressure to launch straight into translating a document as soon as it lands on our desk, it is helpful (and often time-saving in the end) to spend some minutes reading the text itself and any background material relevant to its subject matter. This activity can contribute to filling in an inadequate brief, although most professional translators are wisely reluctant to spend too much time hunting in vain for illusive reference documents. However, we often have a 'hunch' that there might be more useful background material than what we have been given - again, it is often a felt-sense in the body that lets us know we have a hunch in the first place.
- *The art of not starting too soon (and not stopping too late):* we have already mentioned the importance of body sensations as information from our unconscious mind about when things are going well and when things are going wrong. Knowing when we are ready to start translating and at what point to declare a job finished are both cases when this sensitivity to our intuition is a key. Our feeling-sense can be used as an excellent indicator that we are "ready to go". Translators who consistently make an initial examination of the document for translation report that there is often a powerful surge of energy when the context becomes clear and missing pieces of the meaning fall into place. If we were to wait more often until receiving this signal from our subconscious creative minds before launching into a translation, how much better the results would be. We suggest you try this and see for yourself: try holding back until you are bursting with inspiration, with choice words and elegant phrases oozing from your fingertips. The actual translation goes much faster and more effortlessly and the quality of the final result is usually in another league.

Integrating

Every document we translate contains some information that is familiar to us (given) and some that is new. As we engage with a text and bring the new information it contains inside our inner world, that new information will penetrate our existing body of knowledge and understanding of the world, filling in gaps but also subtly (or even radically) and **irreversibly** adjusting what was already there in order effect a seamless integration into a new and coherent whole.

Part of the process of internalising a text as we translate it involves what Karla Déjean Le Féal calls **deverbalising**[6]. This is stripping away the words of the original document until we are left with only the representation of what the words describe. This process takes some time, particularly in the beginning, but it is a failsafe way of ensuring that we really do internalise our work, rather than just skimming along on the surface and

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Ms Fraser was also a guest speaker at a recent seminar organised for translators at the European Commission as part of a series entitled "Theory meets Practice".

6 See Section 5 of "Pédagogie raisonnée de la traduction" by Karla Déjean Le Féal in T&T 3/94, pp. 18/19.

playing word games with the lexis and syntax. In an ideal world, we should not begin generating words in the target language until the meaning of the text is completely free from the original carrier medium of the source language.

One of the dangers of many of the new translating tools like the Translator's Workbench (TWB) is that they provide the translator with ready-made segments of text in the target language (lifted from earlier documents), making it much easier to stay on the surface of a document. And yet in our hearts we know that what was an adequate translation for the document from which the segment originated is unlikely to be as adequate for the document we have before us now.

So many translators cry "but how can we be sure that the segments we are offered by the TWB have been properly **validated**"? The answer is "No previous translation can ever be assumed to be valid for the document you are working on now: it is our job as translators to **re-validate** every word or phrase we use." And how does this re-validation happen? Often enough, it is our bodies that tell us whether we can safely re-validate a term or a phrase, or when we have adjusted it satisfactorily to the present context and purpose. But our bodies can only give us this information if we have made the extra effort to internalise our translating process, brought it down out of our heads and into our hearts and guts.

So much of the process described here takes place unconsciously that it is important to stop and take stock, before we finish, of what has changed in our inner world. What do we know now that we did not know before? In what way does the world seem different to us now than when we started translating this document? What will I do differently in future as a result of what I have learned here today?

Releasing

The cut-off point, the moment when we finally decide that enough is enough and we can let our translation go out the door will probably depend on a number of criteria which might themselves vary from job to job.

- **Context** is as usual a key factor (What is this translation wanted for? How important is absolute perfection? What will happen if it is not ready on time?).
- **Time** is another (there is not always the option of “I’ve started so I’ll finish” when the buzzer goes at time-out!).
- The **additional effort** required to make the translation that much better can be another factor. Is it really worth the effort in terms of the difference in result? This will often depend on context and time factors.

Some translators seem to have more difficulty than others with putting the finishing touches to their translations, thereby suffering the agonies of perfectionism. We find ourselves holding onto our 'baby' until the last possible moment and actually relinquishing it into the hands of the client or a reviser can be a stressful moment. Most examples of this phenomenon can be reduced to two underlying causes:

(a) *'perfectionism':* "With a little more time I could make this even better". Such perfectionism is often accompanied by a fear of criticism for any unspotted mistakes or infelicities, an over-identification with our handiwork which prevents us from letting go even though this particular job might not call for the level of perfection that we are comfortable with. (This phenomenon arises from the prevailing paradigm that quality takes time (see Section 1);

(b) *'under-confidence':* "I'm not happy with the results of my research so far, there are still some points I need to clear up"; sometimes we need our solutions to be confirmed by others we consider to be more expert before we feel confident enough to let a job go.

As we have seen throughout this article, it is important to make a distinction between the translation as a product and translating as the process whereby the product is arrived at. When we 'release' a document we have finished translating, we will find ourselves looking at it in a different way: we will have moved on from the translating process to be able to view the finished translation as a product destined for our client.

In order to be able to produce a document from our own depths in the way we are describing, we need full access to all our internal resources and knowledge. When we act as a mere 'translator as catalyst', it is easy to keep an arsenal of notes, cards, documents, books, dictionaries to help us in our work of transposition. When we come across a new word, we make a card, or a MultiTerm entry, we file the finished product for future reference. However, all these resources are **outside** us.

When we have worked intimately and internally with a document, the process of recording our learnings is rather different, as described above. How can we be sure we have truly integrated what we have learned? One sure test (sure because the answer comes from our bodies, not our wishful thinking) is the degree of comfort with which we are able to loosen our grasp on the document and everything connected with it when the time comes to release it into the world. If we find ourselves clutching onto external forms like a copy of the translation to file for future reference, terminology cards, etc., etc. this is an indication that the integration process is not yet complete. It is feedback that we did not absorb this document quite so completely as we might have done[7]. Often we can be pretty sure that the text we have just finished will return in a fresh reincarnation some time in the future. How will we recognise, when the time comes, that we have seen all this before? The final step in the process of releasing a translated document into the world is to review the communication process that it is part of, and to take stock of our own contribution to that process. This is particularly important for translators, since if we don't recognise our own contribution, it is unlikely that anyone else will.

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[7] Obviously, we are not suggesting that translators should dispense with collecting 'external' translating aids in this way, we are simply using the degree of attachment to them as a gauge of how fully we have integrated what we have learned.

Tentative conclusions

By writing this article, we have been continuing the process of digesting our workshops to date, seeing yet more underlying connections and homing in on what we believe to be the really fundamental issues. We summarise these issues below by way of a conclusion.

- Although **quality** of the finished product is created in the *process* of translating, there is no direct relation between quality and time spent. What generally distinguishes a good translation from a mediocre or poor one is not the length of time taken but the **attention and commitment** invested by the translator in the process of translating it.
- **Professionalism** in the field of translation has to do with taking the broadest possible view of the communication context in which our work is situated. Only when we do this can we be sure of providing our clients with what they really need.
- Enormous benefits can be reaped from cultivating our awareness of the "**meta-contexts**" within which the translating activity unfolds. This means:
  - being aware of the modes of thinking and presuppositions we habitually use,
  - knowing which other modes are available, and
  - understanding which are the most appropriate in any given translation context.
- The **three-part model** of engaging/internalising/releasing described in Section 3 is a first step towards formulating a method that can systematically help us to bring these insights to bear in practice and put the production of quality within our grasp, tangibly and on a practical, day-to-day basis.