

# NOTHING IS INHERENTLY BORING – REFLECTIONS ON TRAINING TRANSLATORS IN TERMINOLOGY

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**Abstract.** *In this paper we look at a problem that must be faced if humanities faculties are to continue to train translators and other languages services providers to deal with specialised language and terminology: the generally inadequate response to the language of science, technology and other specialised areas such as law, economics and government. Although introductory courses are of interest, we would argue that the translators should be trained in how to specialise, and encouraged to make the acquisition of knowledge of any kind an end in itself. This learning process is more likely to lead to the use of good terminology than simply consulting reference books, and it should also include an appreciation of the conventions of text and context in different situations and genres. We shall show how our Master's degree in 'Terminology and Translation' aims to fulfil these requirements.*

There is no doubt that *boring* is a word many humanities trained teachers and students will apply to the language of science, technology and other specialised areas such as law, economics and government. Yet, if the truth be told, it is more likely that they are intimidated by the fact that they find it difficult to understand and appreciate the subject matter of the texts. The reason they claim it is boring has more to do with a long-running antagonism between the Arts and Sciences than any inherent quality of the texts.

A search of a large newspaper text (approximately 20 million words) with a concordancer for instances of *bore*, *bored* and *boring*, in the sense of 'to weary by dullness, tedious repetition, unwelcome attentions etc.' (Webster's: 1994) gave the following results:

- Bore = 32
- Bored = 294
- Boring = 402
- Examples of active verb use = 19

These results reflect the semantics of *bore* as follows:

- *To be/become/get/grow/look/feel/seem bored*  
= S Experiencer + (O Phenomenon)
- *To be/become boring*  
= Quality of Phenomenon (according to Experiencer)
- *To bore someone*  
= S Phenomenon + O Experiencer (rare)

OR

- = S Agent + O Experiencer (anti-social!)

If one analyses the concordanced results one can see that, although a sizeable number refer to the *boredom* felt or shown by the Experiencer, the majority refer to the quality of being *boring*. Although it is obviously arguable that some things can be boring for most people, one must also accept that the quality of 'being boring' is essentially in the mind of the Experiencer.

## 1. Arts v. Sciences

It is quite commonplace to find that those dedicated to the study of the Arts are convinced that they are fascinating to all. Since they are dealing with the expression of the more personal and intimate areas of our humanity – art, music, literature, – they assume that everyone must be interested in what fascinates them. Those dedicated to the study of the Sciences, on the other hand, usually accept their limited appeal to outsiders and perhaps even take pride in studying 'difficult subjects'. Although attitudes have changed a lot since Carl Sagan, David Attenborough and others set out to popularise science, there is still a bigger queue for university places in the humanities than in the sciences, despite the fact that there are more jobs at the end of a degree in engineering than in one in art.

The differences in attitude between the Arts and Sciences were well illustrated during a conference entitled 'Disciplinary Dialogues – the Sciences and the Arts at the end of the Millennium', which took place in Lisbon, 25-27 May 1994. Both the papers presented and the ensuing discussions demonstrated how the practitioners of the Arts felt secure in a sense of superiority, and there was little attempt to work constructively with the Sciences. The representatives of the Sciences, on the other hand, were genuinely interested in the way the sciences can move towards or learn from the Arts. The general lesson learnt by the discerning was that both sides could learn from each other.

Nowadays, we frequently hear about the need for inter-disciplinarity, yet few people know how to work towards such an objective. The emphasis on specialisation in the recent past has left most people feeling that it is a major effort to keep up with one's own discipline, let alone one from a different academic area. We somehow have to work towards giving value to those who opt for the wider view, even if this means less depth in a narrow specialisation.

## 2. Translation and Literary Texts

Ever since literary theory realised that a translation was an alternative interpretation of the original text, a favourite occupation of academics in modern language departments has been that of analysing and criticising literary translation, although actually doing a literary translation is less frequently seen as a necessary objective. The result is that literary translation is considered to be the most difficult form of translation because of the complex cultural, psychological and aesthetic factors involved, - at least in the modern language departments, and thus by the people who tend to have the monopoly on teaching translators.

Yet, despite all the criticism focussed on literary translation, many people feel quite happy doing literary translation and defend their right to produce their own version of the original. The theory itself defends such an attitude. The best result of this is that students translating literature into their own language will find they learn a lot about being creative in their own language. A fact less frequently mentioned is that, although the result rarely approaches excellence, students of translation often have fewer lexical, syntactic and text organisation problems translating modern literary texts than other types of text.

### **3. Translation Training and the Non-literary text**

Translating specialized language is often thoroughly under-estimated by translator trainers who come from the Humanities. There is a tendency to believe that ‘you just have to find the right words/terms, and the rest is easy’. Students are encouraged to use specialised dictionaries, consult an expert, and use EURODICAUTOM, but that is far as it goes. The feeling is that no one can seriously expect a humanities trained translator to be interested in tribology or oscilloscopes, but provided they get their terms right, the translation will take care of itself.

The result is that specialised translation done by Humanities-educated translators often produces ridicule and despair from its consumers. The reasons for this are various. Specialised dictionaries, databases and even ‘experts’ are not always infallible. First of all, terms are not as static and fixed as those involved in normalisation would have us believe, and often vary according to the register, or level of communication, and from specialist to specialist. Besides this, the use of apparently more general language words as specialised language items can lead the unsuspecting translator to choose the wrong synonym or metaphor (see Temmermann, 2000) or the wrong collocation of words appearing in these contexts (see Palumbo in this volume).

The other important – and also thoroughly underestimated – factor is the difference in acceptability of style and register in different cultures. For example, an ex-student of mine was once asked to translate some doctors’ reports on their interviews with patients from English to Portuguese, for a book used for teaching purposes. The original English interviews reflected the doctors’ personal relationship with their patients, gave the patients’ names, referred to possible family problems, and were written rather informally. She was expected to change the information so that the personal approach was omitted, and reference to the patient’s symptoms and illness were referred to in clinical detail using formal medical terminology.

Although most books on translating now refer to the need to produce a translation which performs the same function in the TL as the original did in the SL, not that much research has been done on what constitutes this ‘same function’ in the many translation situations with which the translator is faced. When the different problems of terminology and textual conventions are ignored, or solved incompetently, the customer blames it on

the badly trained – or untrained – translators, probably rightly. The next time a translation is needed the customer opts for the solution of giving it to a subject specialist, in the hope that s/he will at least get the terminology right, even if the ‘style’ is not fantastic. High-level scientific, technical, and legal texts are often given to specialists, rather than to trained translators for this reason. For example, the Gulbenkian Foundation usually employs university teaching staff to translate its academic publications.

#### **4. Attitudes, the resultant problems and ‘solutions’**

Among one of the major teaching problems is that many teachers of translation are not primarily professional translators. Those institutions that advertise their staff as being ‘professional translators’ should be realistic as to the actual balance the individual establishes between the two professions, and to which they feel the most allegiance. The professional translator who teaches and is also a subject specialist is even rarer, as such a person is usually far too busy translating to find time to teach. The truth is that many teachers of translation are language teachers whose real ambition is to teach literature, history, culture, linguistics or whatever. Such people often despise (are afraid of?) non-humanistic subjects and communicate this attitude to their students.

It is a commonplace to hear people say that engineers, doctors, and other specialists do not know how to write well. Such people will themselves admit that style is not their problem, since their objective is to convey the facts as clearly and simply as possible. The fact that some specialists actually do write well, and that others do not manage to be factual clearly, is beside the point. For either side to take refuge in such arguments is not a solution on one level, and for translation teachers and translators to use them as an excuse for not doing a good job is not acceptable at another. Training students with a wide variety of ‘scientific’, ‘economic’, ‘legal’, and ‘technical’ texts, however conscientiously done, is only a partial solution.

Few problems have no solution, and there are ways in which humanities teachers can use the strengths of an academic training that emphasises acquiring, synthesising and organizing ideas to advantage. Information nowadays is readily available, but it needs to be turned into knowledge. Introductory courses to economics, law and other subjects have their value, but they remain only introductions to these subjects and not specialisations. On the other hand, it is manifestly impossible to provide information on every subject a future translator may have to face in the future. We therefore believe that the most sensible objective is to train students ‘how to specialise’. For this, teachers can and should admit openly that they are not experts in special subjects and they can allow the student to know more than they do on any special subject. Their objective should be to develop strategies that encourage the students to explore any subject in depth and, when necessary, enlist help from colleagues, acquaintances and friends who are specialists. This is not so difficult as one might expect, providing that it is done tactfully and sensibly.

The perceived generally poor quality of written language in all areas is another problem that needs to be addressed. Whether it is any worse than it was in the past, or whether it is simply more obvious now that, with the advent of the word-processor, more and more people have ventured to express their thoughts in print, is something that would merit investigation. However, there is increasing support for the proposal that more attention should be paid in schools and universities to training in the use of language in every field of knowledge. The dynamics that led to the interest in Technical Communication as a discipline could also lead to improvements in other genres.

Translation curricula, and the teachers that implement them, should be encouraged to provide students with serious training in how to write good original texts in their mother tongue, and then, as their command of the other language(s) improves, to produce original as well as translations in their other languages. There is plenty of scope for disciplines like Creative Writing, Technical Writing and others that could be developed with other types of texts. The future of the translator as a language services provider offering a much wider range of skills than previously contemplated, including revising or re-writing originals, makes such a development imperative. Only in this way can students be trained to have that fascination with making language explain and express things that is the mark of a good writer, translator, interpreter, or reviser.

A further problem that needs to be addressed is that of making work done in the area of specialised language the subject of research. There is a generalised notion in modern language faculties that literature, culture and linguistics are the only areas in which serious research can be done, and translation research tends to be carried out under the auspices of one of these areas. If communication studies grow any further in scope, no doubt translation will play its part here too.

It is well to remember, however, that there is a growing interest in the study of non-literary language and texts and there is no reason why translator trainers should not engage in research specific to these areas. There is a lot of research in genre analysis, (See: Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Wright, Sue Ellen & Leland D.Wright, 1993; Martin & Veel, 1998; Trosborg, 2000; and others) contrastive rhetoric (see: Connor, 1996; Beeby, 1996; Hoey, 2000; Myers, 1999; and others), and the analysis of specialised corpora for various aspects of terminology, linguistics, texts, and knowledge engineering (See: Biber, D. 1995; Biber, D., S. Conrad, & R. Reppen. 1998; Wright, Sue- Ellen & Gerhard Budin, 1997 & 2001; Pearson, 1998; Charlet et al, 1999, and Bourigault et al., 2001). This is only a small selection of the bibliography available, but it all adds up to exciting new areas of research that may only seem tangential to the interests of more conservative academic institutions, but which are essential for producing effective communication in the world today.

## **5. A specific teaching solution**

Teaching students how to transform information into knowledge is an essential aim of any educational process and not just for translation students. At a post-graduate level this can be organised in a way that goes further than the general solutions proposed in the previous section. At the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto (FLUP) we have made some attempts to explore the possibilities in this direction. These efforts were prompted by several factors, amongst which was the understanding among colleagues and students that our present undergraduate curriculum is insufficient as a qualification for translators. After several attempts at undergraduate level to overcome the lack of any discipline in specialised language, we decided to develop a programme at post-graduate level.

For this we sought the advice and opinions of members of our faculty translator's association and other ex-students, who all stressed the need for something related to the real world of translation work. We received encouragement from students from a former Master's in 'Translation Studies' who had turned away from the more literary programme towards linguistic analysis and terminology research. We also noticed that there was plenty of room for serious terminology work, particularly when we attempted to establish interdisciplinary relationships. Subject specialists are far more conscious of the problems of terminology than are teachers of modern language courses. And the objectives go far beyond Languages for Special Purposes.

The result of much discussion was the following Master's programme in 'Terminology and Translation' (2000 – 2002):

*1<sup>st</sup> Semester*

- Semantics and Syntax
- Translation Theory and the non-literary text
- Introduction to Information Technology applied to Translation
- Lexicology and Terminology

*2<sup>nd</sup> Semester*

- Translation and the non-literary text
- Terminography
- Introduction to Special Subjects: Engineering, Geography and History
- Project work in one of the Special Subjects

The general objective of the curricular part of the programme was to train students to produce terminology work with the help of experts, but within the context of translation work. For this, certain specific objectives were set, including a terminological database, specialised corpora, and a report on the process and problems involved. The second stage in specialization will be Master's dissertations on the theory and practice of terminology, the non-literary text and translation, in-depth analysis of the Special Subjects and the development of databases. Our hope is that this course will lead to serious work for its graduates as terminologists and as specialist translators.

The special subjects that have been used for training this year are from the area of Engineering – Composites, Instrumentation, Statistics and Quality, Tribology and Machine Elements, Fatigue and Fracture of Engineering Materials; Geography - Demography and Environment; and History - 'Vinho Verde', the Wool Industry, and Romanic castles. For this we have had the cooperation and goodwill of specialists in these areas.

There is no doubt that terminology projects must be multi-disciplinary and, preferably multi-lingual. This means that an ideal situation will require cooperation, not only between different departments or faculties in a particular university, but also between universities in different countries. Whenever possible, international organisations and industrial and commercial partners should also be involved. Our Master's degree in Terminology and Translation will function on a bi-annual basis, but we hope that the lessons will also be used to create post-graduate diplomas in specialised translation and lead to master's and doctoral dissertations in the related areas.

## 6. Endnote

Never has so much information been so easily available to so many, and we must learn how to turn it into knowledge and use it. For this we must explain the semantics of *boring* to our students and teach them that whereas translating 'blind', without knowledge and well-researched terminology IS BORING, translating with access to knowledge is not. Why? Because no real knowledge is boring.

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