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General Knowledge: A Basic Translation Problem Solving Tool

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ABSTRACT

Many theorists deplore the fact that since the 70's, in North America, education has been focused on specialized disciplinary knowledge, sometimes leading to overspecialization, to the detriment of general knowledge. As far as translation is concerned, overspecialization may lead teachers and learners to focus unduly on language skills and techniques, thus undervaluing the importance of general knowledge, rather than lexis only, as necessary to understand contexts and utterance circumstances. Some specialists of translation didactics insist on the role of "cognitive complements" and on the importance for translator apprentices to be able to "summon up" extralinguistic knowledge at the appropriate moment to produce a translation which is both acute and logical.

This paper examines what kind of general knowledge may be useful in translator training in order to provide learners with cognitive essentials and critical capacity on which they may rely when making discriminating translation choices.

KEYWORDS

General knowledge, translation didactics, cognitive processes in translation

Many translation didactics specialists deplore the lack of general knowledge among first year translation students (see Fiola 2003: 343). It may seem quite old fashioned to talk about general knowledge in an era when specialized knowledge and advanced technology are considered crucial; but in fact, a deficiency of general knowledge often compromises acquisition of specialized knowledge. Furthermore, localization, currently one of the most prominent fields in translation practice, deals mostly with general knowledge.

As far as translation training is concerned, overspecialization may lead teachers and learners to focus unduly on language skills and techniques and on specialized knowledge, thus undervaluing the importance of the general knowledge necessary to understand contexts and utterance circumstances. Some specialists of translation didactics (Delisle 2003: 185-188 and Lederer 1997: 14-15) insist on the role of "cognitive complements" and on the importance for apprentice translators to be able to "summon up" extralinguistic knowledge in order to produce an astute, logical and accurate translation.

1. General knowledge: a tentative definition

“General knowledge” is defined as “such knowledge and skills that are essential for everybody to be able to live as a human being and a citizen” (Lavonen & Meisalo 1998: 318). This definition seems somewhat vague, since many of its terms are open to subjective interpretations: opinions may differ on what is considered “essential” to “be able to live as a human being and a citizen”.

However, this definition of general knowledge suggests certain elements that should be taken into consideration:

- Firstly, as human beings, we acquire general knowledge through experience, gained through our interactions with the physical world.
- Secondly, as citizens, our general knowledge is expanded through our interactions in society and is therefore culturally marked and related to “general culture”.

Thus it appears that there are two levels of general knowledge: one that is closely linked to physical perceptions and everyday life, and one that relates to social life.

Moreover, general knowledge is widely identified as a very good indicator of what is termed “crystallized intelligence”, in opposition to “fluid intelligence”. This dual theory of intelligence was first formalized by Raymond Cattell in the 1930’s and refined in the 1960’s. Fluid intelligence, which is thought to be innate, “relates to how well an individual perceives complex relations, uses short-term memory, forms concepts, and engages in abstract reasoning” (Hiemstra & Sisco 1990: 24); crystallized intelligence “consists of acquired abilities such as verbal comprehension, numerical skills, and inductive reasoning. It is based on acculturation, including those factors learned in formal schools and in society” (Hiemstra & Sisco 1990: 24).

An important point is that fluid intelligence appears to be relatively static—although it tends to decline with age—and that, in contrast, crystallized intelligence tends to improve with age. Also, fluid intelligence seems to be independent of experience and education, while crystallized intelligence is, by its very nature, education and culture-based.

In short, fluid intelligence is the “ability to develop techniques for solving problems that are new and unusual, from the perspective of the problem solver” (Hunt 1995), while crystallized intelligence is the “ability to bring previously acquired, often culturally defined, problem-solving methods to bear on the current problem” (Hunt 1995).

2. The importance of general knowledge in the translation process and in translation training

It is generally required that candidates who wish to become translators have basic logical abilities, and admission tests to some translation schools include logic tests. However, as we saw earlier, logical skills involve fluid intelligence, which is innate and independent of education. While fluid

intelligence may involve common word analogies and verbal reasoning, it is not sufficient when it comes to treating general information, word lists, reading comprehension, and vocabulary tests, all involving crystallized intelligence and therefore referring to general knowledge.

While selecting future translators on the grounds of their fluid intelligence may be valid because fluid intelligence allows them to better solve new problems, it may be more effective not only to select candidates on the basis of their crystallized intelligence, but also to help apprentice translators improve their general knowledge in order to allow them to use previously acquired problem-solving methods to deal with translation problems. At this stage, it is important to mention that general knowledge acquisition is crucial for first year students who are not yet required to deal with specialized knowledge—for example, in the financial, legal, medical, commercial fields.

In fact, since translation is a semantic process, it seems critical for translators-to-be to acquire skills to help them map and network information—precisely the object of crystallized intelligence. The wide range of translation problems a translator may face is better addressed by application of a method (i.e. a process) than by the mere memorization of information. Some theorists (Kaiser-Cooke 1994: 137 and Wilss 1996: 47) stress that translation is mainly a problem-solving activity.

Moreover, unlike fluid intelligence, crystallized intelligence is improved by experience and education. Thus, the only way to make sure that learners acquire translation problem-solving tools during their studies and derive maximum benefit from their training is to help them improve their general knowledge. Only crystallized intelligence may be improved by any training curriculum.

3. The role of general knowledge in the translation process

Many specialists of translation didactics have noted that a translator never takes on a translation with a mind empty of all knowledge (see Delisle 2003: 185). Like any reader, the translator understands a given text through his or her previous knowledge, or “encyclopaedic competence”, as Umberto Eco states (1985: 95-108).

But unlike an ordinary reader, the translator must understand the text, then reexpress its meaning in another language; he or she must not only transfer the meaning in the target language, but also formulate it. During this process, translators must free themselves from the “tyranny of form”, to use a term from Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), especially from the form of the source language, in order to produce an idiomatic translation.

Delisle discusses translation problems caused by the absence of cognitive complements. These problems actually result from the fact that during the translation process, beginners often “forget” their cognitive complements or their general knowledge. This is because they are either too obsessed by the linguistic form or they are not sufficiently familiar with lexical problems. Lacking self-confidence, students sometimes fear deceptive cognates and loan translations, so they adopt a rather “paranoid” translating attitude. In

contrast, when students are excessively self-confident, they are less cautious and commit the very “sins” their classmates try to avoid.

In both cases, the translation students focus on form, under the impression that meaning will naturally follow. Thus they sometimes produce strange translations and do not appear to take responsibility for the meaning, conveniently leaving this aspect to the person correcting their work.

An example in point is the phrase “litter after litter” in a text about mouse reproduction, which one student translated as “litière après litière” instead of “portée après portée”. In fact, *litter* and *litière* are partial deceptive cognates; but in any case, speaking spontaneously in French, this student would have never said *litière* instead of *portée* in to refer to “a group of young mammals comprising all those born at one birth” (*The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* on CD-ROM 2002). So the problem is definitely not a lack of general knowledge, but a failure to summon it up while translating.

General world knowledge is also in question when operating a *chassé-croisé* (or “interchange”) from English into French. A *chassé-croisé* is “a translation technique by which two lexical items permute and change grammatical category.” As Vinay and Darbelnet explain (1995: 103),

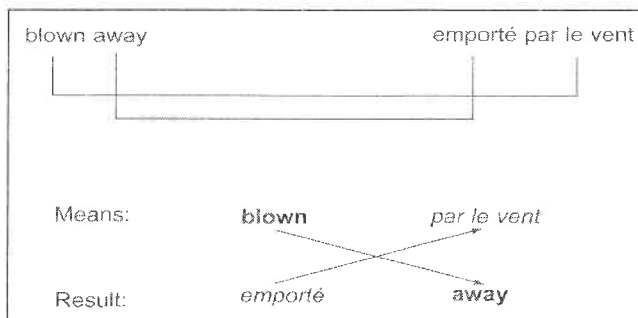
In the description of reality English normally follows a natural order, like the temporal sequence of an action film. Even in the domain of concrete expression, French does not necessarily follow the order of our sensations. In the following example French goes directly to the goal, i.e. the objective of looking.

Il a regardé dans le jardin par la porte ouverte.

He gazed out of the open door into the garden.

Only in second place does French indicate the way of achieving the goal, i.e. the means. This is a common process of French expression: first the result, then the means.

There is thus an **interchange** between the two languages. In English, the result is marked by the the particle (pre- or post modification) in the same position as the adverbial expression which in French indicates the mode of action. In English, this mode is expressed by the verb, whereas the French verb indicates the result. This interchange appears clearly in the following figure:



Translating a *chassé-croisé* from English into French is sometimes more tricky because in many cases, the adverbial expression should not be included, especially when it expresses a means of locomotion or transport, which is generally explicit in French only when it is considered unusual (see Quillard 1990: 771-772). Extradiscursive assumptions allow interlocutors to complete implicitly the information conveyed by the utterance, without any ambiguity. These extradiscursive assumptions are in fact nothing more than general knowledge.

For example, when translating “The bird flew in through the window” into French, the right question is not “What does ‘fly’ mean?”, but “How do birds normally move along?”. The problem is not a lexical one; it is a “common sense” one.

The previous examples deal with trivial knowledge, the kind which is essential to be able to live as human beings. As we saw earlier, the second kind of general knowledge—or general culture—is that relating to our ability to live as citizens. In order to translate the phrase “the federal and provincial governments in Canada” into French properly, the translator must know that Canada has one federal government and ten provincial governments. So the only acceptable translation is “les gouvernements fédéral et provinciaux du Canada”. In this case, extralinguistic knowledge leads the translator to use one singular and one plural adjective to modify the plural noun (adjectives being marked for number in French, but not in English).

All these examples are somehow “progressive”, moving from a mere partial deceptive cognate problem (*litter/litière*) to more complex general knowledge issues. While general knowledge, considered as the ability to summon up extralinguistic knowledge, may help solve grammatical problems, primarily it leads to asking useful questions that actually help the translator to solve most translation problems.

As mentioned earlier, general knowledge is not a question of acquiring a particular amount of information but of structuring information, an ability based on personal experience, which allows us to question and doubt. As Cowling wrote in 1963, “General Culture means ... critical reflection and mental doubt, sceptical scrutiny of existing habits...” (Cowling 1963: 117).

So it appears that general knowledge leads to vigilance that can help translators avoid pitfalls. Furthermore, experience allows translators to gain speed and efficiency in solving translation problems—important benefits, considering the tight deadlines professional translators face.

4. A few ways to include general knowledge acquisition into translation courses

Jean Château, a French specialist in didactics, wrote in 1964 that, “when teaching general knowledge, the teacher must show himself/herself more as a person or as a coach than as a dispenser of prefabricated truths” (Château 1964: 9). In this role, the teacher must coach the learners so that they

become aware not only of what they do know—as trivial or mundane as it may be—but also of the fact that what they know is valuable and useful. It is important then to create a supportive atmosphere in the classroom so that students can develop both self-confidence and vigilance through their crystallized intelligence assets.

While it is difficult to teach general knowledge as such, it may be appropriate to give students tools to extend their culture and knowledge.

A bill presented by a French parliamentary group in 1973 states that general culture acquisition implies three links: between education and life, between theory and practice, and between study and technical work.

The link between education and life is quite easy to establish. The teacher acts as a coach and helps the students integrate the idea of becoming professional translators into their life project. It is important to tell them about the conditions of translation practice, including specialization, remuneration and status. Students seem to be much more motivated when they have objectives beyond the academic ones.

The link between theory and practice is also very important in professionally-based university training programs, since students must acquire theoretical tools aimed at improving their practical skills. But they are often prejudiced against theory, which they sometimes consider a waste of time; they must therefore be convinced of the benefits of theory and acknowledge it as legitimate and useful before even being willing to learn about it (see Collombat 2003: 421-428). This aspect is very close related to the third link, between study and technical work: the teacher must alternate theory and practical/technical work, the latter being performed in conditions that are as close as possible to real life contexts, including the use of computer tools.

In practical terms, some specific strategies can be used to promote the acquisition of general knowledge among apprentice translators:

- Throughout a given course, it is pertinent to refer to previously studied and translated texts or exercises, with a view to teaching or reviewing not only translation strategies but also acquired information. The instructor may, for example, simply ask factual questions, such as “What is the capital city of Pakistan?” a few weeks after translating a text about Islamabad. It is also worthwhile to ask students to provide further information about texts being studied in class, such as “Who is this sentence about?” when translating the sentence “He composed his first concerto at the age of four”. In this way, students become accustomed to translating texts not only with a linguistic approach, but to consider ing them as information-conveying communication devices allowing them to broaden their general culture and not merely develop linguistic skills. This is a rather simple but very

efficient way to help them network information. It is also a good way to help them take a step back from linguistic problems and avoid focussing unduly on lexis only at the expense of global meaning: experience often shows that at first, novice translators tend to consider translation as a matter of mere word substitution.

- Since information structuring is the key to acquiring general knowledge, it is also crucial to refer to other courses in the program; such linking between different didactic approaches expands the network of knowledge. It also helps the student become explicitly aware of the differences between teachers and thus benefit from diverse experiences and approaches.
- Another way to enhance students' general culture and show them how translation problems often relate to general knowledge is to have them do translation commentaries, focussing for example on cultural equivalents. It is beneficial to have students work on texts where they have to comment on the translator's choices, indicate what they think is the best translation solution, and explain why they think so. The text below, full of cultural allusions, is well adapted for this purpose.

Are The Suburbs Really So Bad?	La banlieue, est-ce vraiment si moche?
Article by Shelley Youngblut published in English and in French in <i>En Route</i> , Air Canada's bilingual magazine, May 2004	
<p>It's the ultimate turf war. In one corner are the Urban Guerillas, who will tell you that living in the burbs is death by La-Z-boy. They proudly proclaim their liberation from strip malls and peach walls, SUVs and DirectTV, Stepford wives with Gap card lives. In the other corner (which, by the way, comes with a great room, a kitchen island and a soaker tub), are the Tract Homers, whose capital crime appears to be outgrowing the notion that life is a beer commercial.</p> <p>But before we blow up Richmond and move everyone to condos in Yaletown, let's pause for a reality check. The inner-city few may be in vogue, but they're also in denial. You don't lose your soul the moment you step on a commuter train. Living next to a bagel shop does not make you Leonard Cohen – or even Carrie Bradshaw. And you don't qualify for sainthood just because you shop at Granville Island instead of Safeway.</p>	<p>C'est le combat royal par excellence. Dans le coin gauche: les bobos, qui affirment que la vie en banlieue équivaut à une lente agonie dans un fauteuil à bascule, et qui clament fièrement leur émancipation des commerces en rangée, des rocailles bien arrangées, des VUS et d'ExpressVu, des épouses modèles abonnées aux Ailes. Dans le coin droit (qui abrite d'ailleurs une chambre immense, un îlot de cuisine et une baignoire hyperprofonde): les 4-5-0, dont l'offense impardonnable serait d'avoir compris que la vie n'est pas calquée sur une annonce de bière.</p> <p>Avant de faire sauter Brossard et de déménager tout le monde dans des condos sur le Plateau, voici une dose de réalité. Les rares élus résidant au centre-ville sont peut-être dans le vent, mais ils ne voient pas la vérité en face. On ne perd pas son âme en montant dans un train de banlieue. Vivre à côté d'un magasin de bagels ne vous transformera pas miraculeusement en Leonard Cohen (ni d'ailleurs en Mado Lamotte). On ne gagne pas non plus sa place au paradis en faisant ses emplettes au Marché Jean-Talon plutôt qu'à IGA.</p>

Generally speaking, translation teachers should act as Socratic facilitators to help students be aware of what they already know so that they can build their knowledge on strong foundations and become self-confident enough to, paradoxically, become more vigilant and able to engage in what Descartes calls “methodical doubt”, a very useful tool for solving tricky translation problems. After all, the best teaching tool is the interaction between the teacher and the learner. The teacher is not merely a “knowledge distributor”, but a motivator and a coach. As a Chinese proverb says, the teacher opens the door—the student enters by himself.

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