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THE BEACON OF LIGHT: ON THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING LANGUAGES

Abstract. Translation is so invaluable a part of modern language education we have practically ceased to appreciate its real practical value. Its potential for teaching, however, can be overwhelming. In this paper, we argue that the didactic possibility of translation goes far beyond routine home task or exam activities.

Keywords: mother tongue, foreign language, translation, grammar, worldview.

Tasks in translation have long been considered an essential part of linguistic education. The role of translation is no less important in teaching a language to non-linguistic students, though in a slightly different way.

It is a widely held belief that languages are not among the strong points of non-linguistic students, especially those being educated in life sciences. A cursory look at textbooks on the curricula and exam programs reveals that translation makes up a considerable part of the tasks at both Soil Science and Biology Faculties at Lomonossov MSU, and for good reason. There is no reason to think, however, that all students get to make the most of it. Most often, they successfully cope with such tasks regardless of their actual level of English because they use their knowledge of the subject rather than language itself. Speaking or writing in a language turns out a lot harder as it requires something more than bits of professional lexis and guesswork. To produce an original statement, a student has to master essential grammar and learn sentence building. This is really important at the above-mentioned departments where many students in their first year tend to experience serious difficulties learning English for various reasons, the major one being lack of basic linguistic competences, such as article, parts of speech, members of sentence, etc.

Another serious issue concerns a conventional yet unfair division into general English and English for specific purposes (ESP). In fact, the key difference between the two Englishes lies in vocabulary and only few grammar aspects. Common to each of them is the grammar of English, which is and has always been the same. This issue aside, language alone is insufficient. Our first and foremost task is to teach our students to communicate in a language, which requires them to be able to participate in an academic discussion. The subject of discussion is determined by the academic subject they are studying, i.e. soil science or biology in our case. Communication, in other words, should center

around immediate reality. As Jon Amos Comenius wisely put it in his “Great Didactic”, “things are essential, words only accidental; things are the body, words but the garment; things are the kernel, words the shells and husks.” [3, p.115] Below is a poem composed by a first-year group of students:

*The Moon orbits the Earth
That is revolving round the Sun,
People live on Earth,
They eat and drink,
People need food to live.
Man always looks at the sky
Observing how
The Moon spirals the Sun
And thinking that
People play and learn,
People love, people cry,
People live and people die
Under a starry-starry sky.*

Each student had to provide a verb with which we constructed simple sentences and then compiled them into this elegant poem – a real construction site that our class had become. Grammatically, the Earth poem (such is the name we had come up with for our poem) came to be the result of students’ arduous mental work, as they had to use grammar rules explained to them previously. Thematically, it was born first in Russian, within the students’ minds, which is especially valuable, as they managed to formulate their thoughts using the grammar of the foreign language – to give proper “garment” to the “body”, in Comenius’ words. As a result, students see their horizons, previously limited to their mother tongue, widen up to embrace a new worldview. More importantly, newly acquired competences enabled them to use the knowledge of basic grammar in reading and discussing authentic articles in soil science: the Present Simple to describe well-known scientific facts – *Soils are the basis of life; they play a key role in absorbing carbon and filtering water* [4]; and the Present Continuous to speak about the ever

changing reality: *We are losing 30 soccer fields of soil every minute, mostly due to intensive farming* [Ibid.]. So one should not have underestimated the inspiring power of poetry! Clearly, translation is entrenched in learning a new language.

Translation can also broaden horizons for upper-intermediate and advanced students. There are a number of grammar structures that may present difficulty but that can be clarified through translation. Consider the explanation of the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses by David Crystal:

a) Snakes which are poisonous should be avoided.

b) Snakes, which are poisonous, should be avoided.

The b) statement appears to be false as it implies that all snakes are poisonous. [2, p.151] Both statements look the same if translated into Russian word by word: *Змей, которые ядовиты, следует избегать*. However, this might sound a bit far-fetched, so it would be more natural to say: *От ядовитых змей следует держаться подальше* (back-translated: *Poisonous snakes should be avoided*). I sometimes use other examples to support Crystal's explanation to make it even more transparent:

a) This is a quote from the Bible which I didn't read.

b) This is a quote from the Bible, which I didn't read. [Это цитата из Библии, которую я, кстати, не читал(а)]

Here the false one appears to be a), which suggests there are many Bibles, whereas b) makes sense if translated into Russian using the adverb "кстати" ("by the way" in English). The idiom acts as an explanatory word adding "side note" information: This is a quote from the Bible, which I, *by the way*, didn't read. Back translated into English, the statement reveals its meaning – the grammar of non-restrictive relative clause brought to light by means of translation.

Of interest is the fact that the same thought may be framed in completely different ways due to different mentalities and values, which results in different statements. Let us now look at how advanced and proficient students of English coped with translating a piece of authentic Russian text. «Был там и его орден – тяжёлая тёмно-красная звезда. Он не любил его носить, да и не перед кем было это делать. Награду тогда заслужили все. Своим трудом, потом, кровью, своими жизнями, а дали одному только ему. Как командиру и комсомольцу. *Стыдно было носить её*». [1, p.114]

This brief excerpt is from the memoirs by one of the defenders of the Soviet city of Sebastopol, which was one of the first cities to receive the first blow during the Great Patriotic War. The officer confesses to "feeling shame", being the only one among his comrades, both fallen and survived, to have been awarded a military award. He feels everyone had deserved one and the only reason he was awarded is that he was a commander and member of Komsomol. Here is a literal translation of the text in cursive: *He didn't like wearing the medal, nor was there anyone before whom to show it off. He felt ashamed to wear it*. When translating, one of my students suggested a different phrase for the literally translated "felt ashamed" – *there was no valor in wearing it* – which, to our mind, was able to cover the meaning of the text in cursive as a whole. In the words of my student, this statement would sound more understandable for an English-speaking person. Saying there may be "shame" in wearing a bravery award one had earned for their "toil, blood, sweat and risking his life" might sound somewhat paradoxical. Such explanation may of course be subject to debate, but discussing the subtle nuances has shifted our classes to the level of professional translators. Should we convey a statement more literally or should we adapt the message depends on the translator's task. No doubt, pragmatics is an important part of linguistic education at the advanced and proficient level.

As is seen from the above examples, translation as a classroom activity fosters student creativity and has tremendous power to shed light on some questions of meaning where purely grammatical aspects remain obscure due to structural differences between languages. Those questions may be resided in grammar and syntax, but understanding often happens at the level of semantics. The latter, in turn, appeals to and is uncovered in translation – the true beacon of light.

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