Justifying the Deverbalization Approach in the Interpreting and Translation Classroom

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Abstract/ Résumé
Pour convaincre les étudiants de l’intérêt de la déverbalisation, il importe de les sensibiliser au préalable au fait qu’en traduisant, ils accomplissent une tâche communicationnelle au service d’un client et d’un auteur. Sur cette base de loyauté professionnelle, ils comprennent l’intérêt de la correction de certaines erreurs et maladresses techniques. En interprétation, l’existence de celles-ci apparaît rapidement aux yeux des élèves-interprètes du fait de leurs propres difficultés. En traduction, l’expérimentation pédagogique aide à montrer que la variabilité est une partie intrinsèque de la production du discours, que l’auteur d’un texte n’en est pas nécessairement le maître absolu, et qu’il peut souhaiter le modifier s’il en a la possibilité. Cette expérimentation, ainsi que les explications théoriques, qui n’excluent pas les aspects spécifiques par langues et par paires de langues, ont un effet sensibilisateur, mais un suivi concret dans la pratique est indispensable.

Keywords/ Mots-Clés
deverbalization, classroom experimenting, speech-production variability, fidelity, language-specificity

I. Introduction

In a recent book on translation research and didactics, Hatim (2001) rightly puts the “literal vs. free” issue at the center of debates on translation throughout history. In the translator training schools environment, the literature of the past 30 years seems to reflect a consensus, at least on translation of informational texts (as opposed to literary texts), in favor of a meaning and intention-oriented translation strategy, as opposed to a strategy based on formal equivalence: it is felt that translation suffers when it is constructed on linguistic correspondences, and serves its purpose better when the form of the source text is used to understand it and is then honorably discharged while the reformulation process proceeds on the basis of an autonomous mental representation of its meaning (informational, emotional, social, intentional, etc.). As pointed out by Pöchhacker (1994:22), more than 40 years ago, Wirz (1958:23) talked about the translator operating mostly on the basis of the content (“sense”) of the source text
stripped of its linguistic form (“vom Wortlaut schon gelöst, also entsprachlicht”). Two
decades later, Seleskovitch and Lederer of ESIT, Paris, made this “deverbalization”
principle the foundation of their “theory of sense” (“théorie du sens”). In the literature,
there is some uncertainty as to the status of this concept: is it supposed to be total or
partial (Laplace 2002:197, Setton 2003), descriptive or prescriptive? My feeling,
somewhat different from Karla Déjean Le Féal’s (2002:146), is that the “theory of
sense” is only challenged by its critics as a descriptive theory in the usual scientific
sense of the word, but that it is widely supported as a prescriptive paradigm, that is, a
desirable approach to translation. This paper discusses strategies for justifying such an
approach to students in the classroom.

II. Translator-Role Postulates

Like many other authors and Translation instructors (“Translation” with a capital T
will be used to refer to both translation and interpreting; similarly, “Translators” will
refer to translators and interpreters, and “Texts” will refer to texts and speeches), I
believe that prescriptive statements about Translation strategies are most convincing if
they are based on a clear idea about the communicative role of Translation, that is, if it
is made clear to students that in the world of professional Translation, most often, and
nearly always when translating non-literary texts, Translators are expected to serve not
texts, but people, with particular intentions and interests.

Explanations can be “theoretical”, for instance using the “skopos theory” (see for
example Reiss and Vermeer 1984, Schäffner 1998). In an academic environment, much
can be said in favor of some abstract thinking and theorizing. However, in the context of
short, more professionally oriented programs, a straightforward, down-to-earth
approach is probably more efficient: when students are told about the real-life
circumstances that lead to a Translation assignment, it becomes clearer to them that they
are asked to Translate primarily in order to help users operate a machine, to help a
researcher present and explain his/her theory or findings to fellow-researchers, to help a
CEO present and defend his business strategy to directors and shareholders, to help a
company sell its products, etc. It also becomes clearer to them that the Translation