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## **Translating medical texts into a foreign language: some methodological considerations**

### **Abstract**

Many authors, scholars, and theorists have theoretically denied the possibility of translating into a foreign language (Newmark, 1998, 1995; Van Deth, 1989; Vásquez-Ayora, 1977 among others), because of the interference caused by the translator's mother tongue as well as the lack of competence, especially in writing, and level of intuition when going into the foreign language. Authors confront and argue the different points of view. Arguments in favor of translating into a foreign language should also be considered (Wilss, 1982; Wotjak, 1981; Harris, 1990; Nord, 1992; Cao, 1996; Beeby, 1996; Quiroz and Muñoz, 1996; Zapata et al. 1998). Likewise, it is shown that methods, methodologies, and techniques may be used both ways. It is concluded that the correct establishment of text analysis features as well as linguistic characteristics in both languages make it possible to translate medical texts into English as a foreign language.

### **1. Introduction**

In some countries in the last 10 years translation into a foreign language (TFL) has begun to gain widespread acceptance in theory by different authors. Even though discussions about the topic are just beginning, translation into a foreign language will have to explore different facets

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in general, specialized and literary translation at a cognitive, meta-cognitive, socio-professional, ethical and political level.

The following theoretical and methodological considerations are valid for medical texts as well as for any other kind of scientific and technical texts to be translated into foreign languages.

*Scientific development in translation has gone through many changes during history. Translation has changed from literal to dynamic equivalence. Today, it is not a totally empirical discipline any longer but reaches a wide and interdisciplinary theoretical basis. This aspect (interdisciplinarity) has permitted its own advance and that of each of the contributing disciplines such as discourse analysis, semiotics, linguistics, psycholinguistics, ethnolinguistics, informatics, literature, etc. (Wills 1996: 133).*

In spite of its advance up to now, there exist some theoretical myths, which go against the practice, theory, and the scientificity of translation as supported by Zaixi:

*The author attributes the underdevelopment of translation theory to such factors as empiricism, mysticism, dogmatism, and lack of overview on the part of the translator and translation scholar. (Zaixi 1977: 352).*

*The manifestation of such dogmatism is that people tend to follow blindly ideas put forward by authorities without regard to the contexts in which these ideas were first put forward. (Zaixi 1977: 336).*

One of those myths is translation into a foreign language called *tema*, active translation, etc. However, it is important to explain that many translation theoreticians give us elements which contradict their own principles.

Some authors only mention translation into a foreign language to refute it dogmatically like Vasquez-Ayora (1977), Van Deth (1989), Newmark (1988, 1995), etc.

Newmark states, from the beginning, that his *Textbook of Translation* will be for translators and would-be translators translating into their mother tongue:

*I shall assume that you, the reader, are learning to translate into your language of habitual use, since that is the only way you can translate naturally, accurately, and with maximum effectiveness. (Newmark 1988: 3).*

However, he accepts that there exists translation into the foreign language called “service translation” as a great contribution to bring na-

tions together. Besides, Newmark states that a good level of reading and comprehension must be held in a foreign language and a particular interest in one of the main translation subjects (scientific and technical, literary, and general translation) as a part of the translational competence. It can be seen that he accepts this type of translation, although he does not explain its methodology. Later, Newmark assures that there exist translators in the United Kingdom who translate into a foreign language, but he still continues denying the fact with no convincing arguments with respect to the reality. He also states that even in the United Kingdom, the bidirectional practice is recognized in the social, corporate and professional worlds but is not well regarded by theoreticians. (Newmark 1988: 54).

It can be observed in this brief review how translation has been attached to a restricted context: the linguistic one. It has to be highlighted that translation cannot be reduced to a linguistic fact because it is a semiotized product which involves different circles of a geopolitical, social, ethic, pragmatic and conceptual character of all the special subject field communication in which it is handled, specific concepts of specific subjects with special languages as stated, among others, by Felber and Picht (1984), Arntz and Picht (1995), Fedor de Diego (1995). In other words, the text is made up of both linguistic elements and concepts that support it in a particular situation.

In this way, concepts such as effectivity, naturality, and precision can be discussed because they only depend on the translator's ability but not on the text type or language. Thus, the characteristics of a professional translator such as the perfect knowledge of both languages at all levels is not necessary because of the fact that as Newmark points out, competence will mainly be on the level of reading comprehension of the foreign language. It is even known that in their native language most speakers do not have an adequate competence in the four skills and that others have it intuitively. Besides, the translator, as a specialist in languages who daily thinks of a language in a rational way, may translate into a FL using an adequate procedure which can be in both directions as Nord puts it:

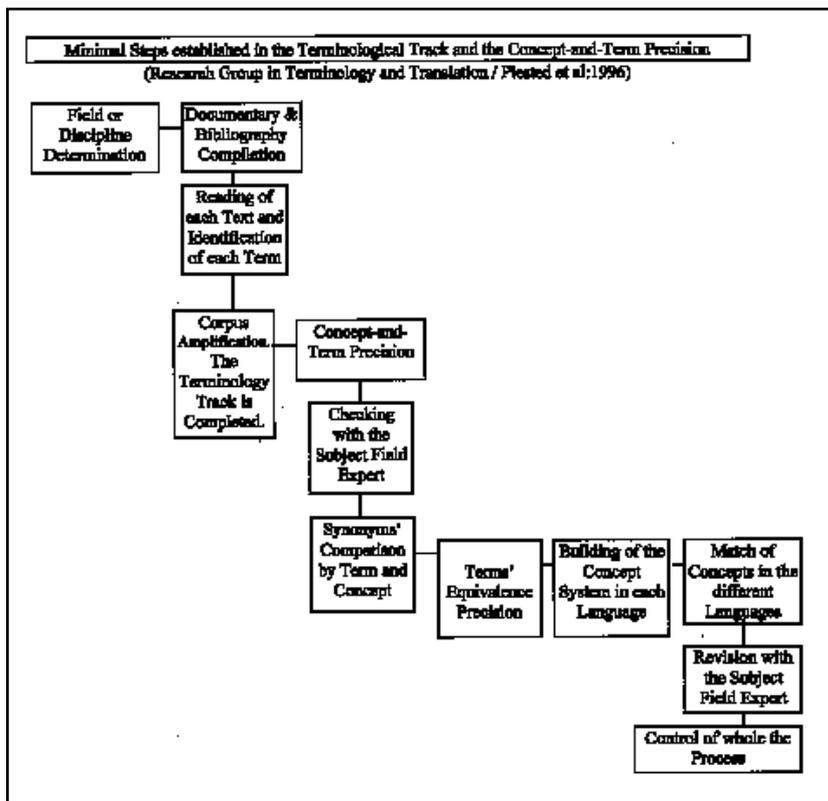
*...and (translation) should be valid for both directions, i.e. translating into as well as out of the translator's native language. The model thus produced can then serve as a general theoretical basis for translation studies, translator training, and translation practice. (Nord 1992: 1-2).*

Here, Nord confirms how the model(s) of translation must be more general and less specific for a studied phenomenon or object as such as any theory must be.

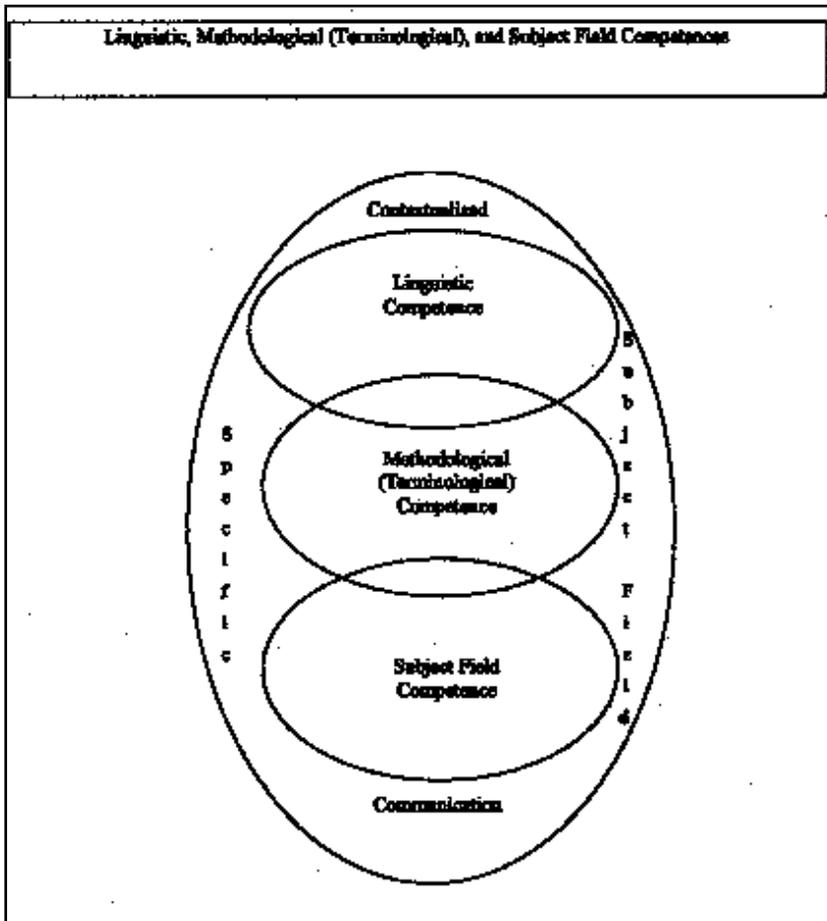
Therefore, these arguments let a translation procedure be thought of as with no unification even if there is no methodological pattern among authors. On the contrary, some authors such as Neubert (1968), Wotjak (1981), Wilss (1982), Harris (1990), Nord (1992), Beeby (1996) state that methods, procedures, and techniques must be in both directions. In this way, it is intended to show that translation theory and practice can be done in both directions. For that reason, the methodology used in translating into the mother tongue can also be applied to translating into a foreign language without detriment to the quality of the translated text; that is to say, any model proposed so far may include both directions.

## **2. Methodological considerations**

It is a fact that a quality translation requires an adequate methodology which includes text reception, text analysis of sender, receiver, intention-effect, channel, time, place, function, motive, and terminological units as well as medical specific language structures such as multinoun compounds, passive voice (quasi-passive in Spanish), -ly adverbs, terminology acronyms, Latin words, etc. It also requires knowledge of procedures, techniques and tools for the transfer phase, revision and edition strategies as well as translational competencies at a cognitive, metacognitive and socio-professional levels such as the analysis, control, revision, production and management of the client and the necessary information tools and resources, and mode of delivery. The following methodology was used.



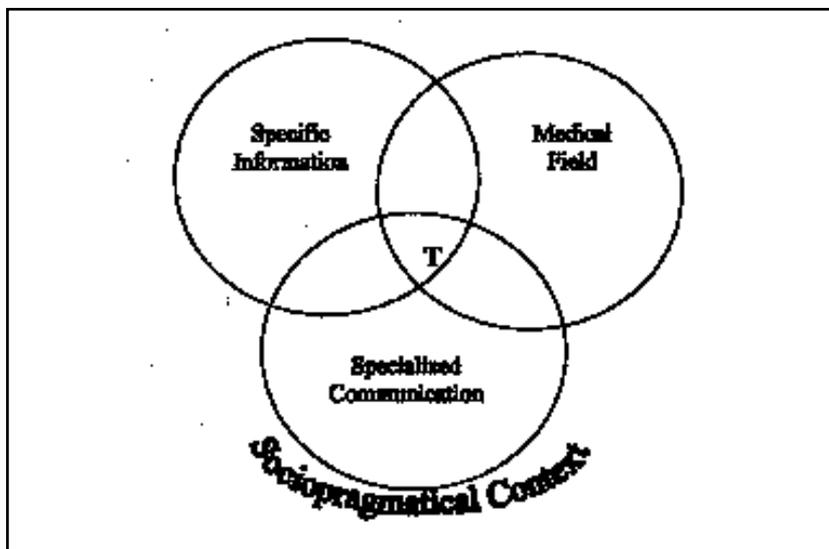
The methodological process for this work is always done with precise steps that shape the terminology as well as concept and term precision.



According to Plested (1987) and Sandrini (1998)

Therefore, using methodological competence means doing a conceptually-oriented analysis by means of concept and definition precision. Cognitive competence involves the knowing of both terminology science theory and the subject field or subfields as happens in medicine, e.g. a medical text on Malaria may involve the following fields: parasitology, statistics, research methods, lab techniques, immunology, taxonomy, etc. According to this process, terminology work permits the solving of conceptual problems, e.g. interpretation of knowledge units in the way messages are transmitted through conceptual units. Termini-

nology is indeed the coverage that involves information strategies with specialized communication and knowledge transfer in each specialized field (LSP). In this way, the translator avoids loss of time searching for “medical” terminology just in medical dictionaries. He/she will use different sources and subject field dictionaries for a medical text.



According to (Budin 1996: 126)

Terminology analysis and terminography work need the mental configuration of a subject field expert, in this case for the translator.

### **3. Geopolitical and ethical considerations**

However, translation into a foreign language has a very marked geopolitical aspect. The traditional arguments originate in multilingual countries and regions where finding translators into different languages is easier and where geographical distances are short. London, Paris, Madrid and Berlin are neighboring capitals with different languages and in case of not finding a translator, one of these cities can be resorted to by means of electronic communication.

Harris reaffirms the hypothesis about the geopolitical framework from the viewpoint of interpretation. Geographical, political and linguistic contexts create the need for translation in both directions, into the native language and into the foreign language:

*The norm taught in Western European interpreter schools is that professional conference interpreters should only work into their language A (i.e. their first language). I am tempted to call it a dogma, since I myself have been criticized by members of AIIC (the International Association of Conference Interpreters) for insisting that our students at the University of Ottawa must learn to interpret as a matter of routine into their second (B) language as well, and be examined on their performance in both directions, B to A and A to B.[....]. However, it is a norm that is just not practical in places and in some circumstances- so it then ceases to be the norm. First, it will not work in most escort and court interpreting, where there is usually one interpreter to serve everybody [...] Secondly, it will not work in places where there is a shortage of native-speaker interpreters into foreign languages, for example in the Soviet Union, where consequently the Western norm is not applied [...] Then again, it does not work well in Canada... (Harris 1990: 116).*

What happens in a linguistic context such as that of Latin America concerning translation needs? It is well known that although there are many minority native languages (such as Quechua) it is not a multilingual region like Europe. Except in very few countries of Central and South America, Spanish is the official and most used language with a very small community of professional translators.

In Colombia, for example, there are few well trained translators and a lot of empiric translators, due mainly to the lack of translator training programs. Thus, it is understandable that very few translators of languages other than Spanish are available, that there are only some professional translators, and that translator training programs are just starting. Also, most of the few foreign citizens residing in the area that do translation work, do not have training in the field or are mainly engaged in other economic activities. And many times when they are hired for translation revisions, they are not qualified enough to meet the standards of a professional job, as in the case of medical translation (Muñoz & Quiroz, 1997).

As a result of the above situation, it is often the case that translation from Spanish into any foreign language is and has to be done by Spanish native speakers. Frequently, these translators do not have academic

training in translation. They are usually personnel with a certain degree of command of one or several languages such as English, French, German, Spanish, etc. Since the 50's a proficiency test has been established as a requisite to become a certified official translator and interpreter.

All of the above specific contexts of situations of translation work in Latin America, and hence in Colombia, point to the search for an applied methodology which covers the real professional requirements in our countries. Therefore, we consider that a bidirectional methodology in the translation processes is the proper way. Also, this bidirectional translation practice is further legitimized by the everyday practice in view of such circumstances.

When dealing with the ethical and practical dimensions of translation, one has to bear in mind that theme and version are left for third-parties to do: engineers, medical doctors, businessmen, and even secretaries (Gouadec 1989: 5). In Latin America it is a fact that translation into foreign languages is being done by nonnative speakers and with poor or no quality control.

Why not accept that it is a valid modality and strengthen quality control and adopt a methodology to insure that translations into foreign languages have acceptable quality standards? In this dimension, the social, ethical and practical aspects of translation are superposed within. If nonnative third-parties engage in translation into foreign languages, very often without due academic training and/or knowledge of the foreign language, why not accept that it can be done by a professionally trained translator with a carefully controlled process and an appropriate methodology? What about the professional knowledge of the translator? Cannot interdisciplinary cooperation achieve high standards in translation into foreign languages?

Then, why not accept that theoretically it can be done and only new strategies and methodologies are needed to successfully carry out translation into foreign languages? Why not do it and with professionals? If we look at translation as a process and as product, it can be done both ways:

*All translation processes are designed to be transferred from a source language to a target language, the process having the possibility of being effected from the mother language to the foreign language as well as the other way around - in each direction with its particular difficulties for translation. (Wilss 1982:71)*

In the same perspective, Nord argues for the adirectionality of the translation process when she deals with her text analysis model (looping): In her view, it should be possible to produce a model of translation-oriented text analysis without reference to the specific characteristics of the source or target languages. It should not depend on the translator's level of competence (i.e. on whether he/she is a professional or a trainee) and should be valid for both directions, i.e. translating into as well as out of the translator's native language. The model thus produced can then serve as a general theoretical basis for translation studies, translator training, and translation practice.

We want to remark that the translation of specific subject field texts such as the medical texts need to be seen as a disciplinary subfield in the specialized communication processes within language for medical purposes. Therefore, a translator's methodological training must take into account the relation among knowledge, information processes, and specialized communication which overlap on the axis of the subject field units of knowledge (Budin 1996), that is to say terminology.

Nowadays, we as terminologists-translators have tested the above mentioned methodological procedures in the medical field. It means that we ourselves have been translating articles about research results in tropical diseases (Malaria and Leishmaniosis), which have been published in indexed journals of that field.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Having looked at both positions concerning the legitimacy of translation into foreign languages by nonnative speakers, we can now maintain that some theoreticians have a narrow concept about language and translation, since they reduce translation to the linguistic dimension and seem to look at it as a non systematic process. These viewpoints are not universal and therefore do not take into account other more complex contexts of translation. Some authors have restricted the translation problem to a regional setting, overlooking translation and interpretation history as well as the social practice already explicitly stated.

The above shows that if translation is carried out with a controlled process, a good product should be obtained. Then, the processes can become adirectional, making it possible to build more powerful, adequate and general theory leading to a more scientific translation and thus, to

delineate a methodology that allows for more rationality, control and precision of translation into foreign languages and/or mother tongue. Hence, resorting to linguistically and professionally competent translators leads to a higher degree of scientific qualification.

Besides, we should always take into account the importance of the specific subject field matter and configuration as well as its specific units of knowledge. This is one of the most important capabilities any translator has to have.

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