

# ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

24/2

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## **The Case for Creativity and Literalism in Practical Translation Classes**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the results of a minor experiment which illustrates how practical translation students deal with a text which is not very well written and so producing an acceptable target text may require some amount of creativity. The text in question is a film review providing a summary of the film. Even though the text looks relatively easy, it features numerous linguistic traps, and also there is an absence of linking phrases, which in written English are vital for good flow and style. We are interested in finding out to what extent students are capable of sacrificing literalism in translation in order to produce a text that has a “natural flow” and we look to draw conclusions regarding the implications for translator training.

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### **1. Introduction**

In real life translation tasks, translators often have to face source texts which have not been well written. The evidence for this fact may be found in theoretical accounts of translation. Chesterman (1999, 17–18) in referring to the problems which could possibly be resolved by Translation Studies asks: “Why are source texts often so badly written?” and “How do competent translators improve on badly written source texts?” Samuelsson-Brown (2004), in turn, presents the following misconception about translation: “Translators are mind-readers and can produce a perfect translation without having to consult the author of the original text, irrespective of whether it is ambiguous, vague or badly written” (2), later suggesting that in such cases the text may be sent back to the author to revise (93).

The issue of improving original texts through translation is also raised in literature. Nord defines a “functional” i.e. a professional translator as having “the ability to produce a target text serving the desired function, even though the source text may be badly written” (Nord 2005, 211). Robinson (1997) makes a clear statement that “there is no room in the world of professional translation for the theoretical stance that only straight sense-for-sense translation is translation, therefore as a translator I should never be expected to edit, summarize,

annotate” (Robinson 9). In his translation handbook, Armstrong (2005, 187) has a separate section devoted to improving the source text preceded and followed by examples providing useful tips, which clearly shows the activity of improving as a legitimate action to perform; whereas references to improvement as an element in revising translation are also made by Mossop (2007). Those few examples of attitudes towards improvements in translation seem to suffice to conclude that making a better text out of an imperfectly written source text, or producing a well-written target text sacrificing some of the faithfulness to the original are legitimate translational activities.

On the other hand, the problem also appears in Pym (2010, 170–172), where the translator’s ethical right to improve original writings is discussed. “Since translators cannot help but take position [...], their ethics should break with passive non-identity, forcing them actively to evaluate the texts they work on, making them take on a major degree of responsibility for the texts they produce” (170), Pym writes, later to add that translation always means an attempt to improve (171). He also states, however, that “from the perspective of authors, clients, receivers and cultures, what we are calling translation is the production of equivalence” (172).

The issue of recipients’ expectations regarding equivalence in translation brings to mind the opinion given by Newmark (1988, 76), who declares the importance and superiority of literal translation, saying that “a bad translator will always do his best to avoid translating word for word”. At the same time, he acknowledges that the literal approach may be “abandoned” in the case of texts that are “badly written”. Here, Newmark’s opinion on the unit of translation may be quoted: he states that it “normally ranges from the word through the collocation to the clause”, but admits that some are inclined to believe that it is the whole text (285). The above gives rise to questions relating to the extent to which a text which is not well written may be improved by the translator, and those referring to the particular measures taken to introduce those improvements, including the changes in text segmentation, where the latter is in some way influenced by an understanding of the nature of translation units.

Such questions also lead one to wonder about the implications for teaching practical translation in the world in which badly written texts are not exceptions and where the dispute between the advocates of the functional approach (cf. Nord 1997, 2005) and those who favour literalness whenever possible is still taking place. It is sensible to agree that the translator is responsible for the final shape of the target text, and that the adopted strategy is the result of the translation brief, and that this is what we should teach our students. It is not clear, however, what we are to expect of our students when the instruction given by the teacher is simply: “translate”. It may be stated that such an instruction is erroneous, but it is a perfectly natural request, given the fact how

translation and equivalence are perceived by commissioners (cf. Pym 172 above). Also, one might argue that in the event of doubts on the part of students, they should ask the teacher for further specifications, and if they do not, it is a signal that the training should take a more “functional” direction. Thus, it is interesting to observe how students go about translating a text that is not perfectly written and which could achieve a better shape when re-written into the target language with phrasing and segmentation which are far from literal, while still with the same general sense. What the students do with the text, therefore, may be then treated as evidence of how they see translation and their responsibilities as translators.

What follows is a description of an experiment in which two groups of translation trainees, B.A. students of the Institute of English Studies at the University of Warsaw, were asked to translate the same, not very well written text. In one of the groups the faults of the original were discussed prior to the translation, in the other group no comments on the quality of the source text were made. The aim was to find out whether the pre-translation discussion influenced the quality of the target texts.

## 2. The problematic source text

The text the students were given to translate is a short unsigned review of the film *American Beauty* written in Polish (source unknown). The text consists of eleven quite short sentences, which do not seem to form a cohesive whole due to the absence of linking words or phrases. The text may potentially be a translation from English: an English text that bears substantial similarity to the Polish one can be found at [theemailcampaigns.com/american-beauty/](http://theemailcampaigns.com/american-beauty/). In any case, below we present the Polish review (the sentences are numbered for clearer reference):

(1) Lester Burn ma 42 lata, pracuje w korporacji jako tryb w maszynie, zagubił całkowicie poczucie wartości życia i radość z niego. (2) Nie ma kontaktu ze swoją żoną Corline ani z nastoletnią córką Jenny. (3) Pierwsza – energiczna bizneswoman, a naprawdę kobieta na skraju załamania nerwowego – zaczyna zdradzać go ze swoim szefem. (4) Córka gardzi ojcem. (5) Obie uważają Lestera za fajtlapę. (6) Dopiero spotkanie Angeli, najlepszej przyjaciółki Jenny, zmieni życie sfrustrowanego 40-lata. (7) Mężczyzna zakochuje się w seksownej nastolatce i to uczucie jest dla niego jak orzeźwiający prysznic. (8) Nagle zdaje sobie sprawę z zakłamania i chorych układów, w które jest uwikłany. (9) I postanawia się z tego wypłatać: odchodzi z pracy i zaczyna zajmować się sobą. (10) Sprowadza się to głównie do ćwiczenia z hantlami, wspomniania młodości w schyłkowym okresie dzieci kwiatów i palenia trawki, kupowanej od Ricky’ego, nastolatka z sąsiedztwa. (11) I oczywiście marzy o Angeli.

In addition to the text's problematic structure, what also works against perceiving the text as a well written piece is the presence of factual errors: the main character's surname is not Burn (sentence 1) but Burnham, his wife is called Carolyn, not Corline, and the daughter's name is Jane, not Jenny (sentence 2). The teenager mentioned in the penultimate sentence (sentence 10) does not only live in the neighborhood (*chłopak z sąsiedztwa*) but, more precisely, is the next door neighbour. Additionally, a slight inconsistency may be spotted: we can learn from the first sentence that Lester is 42, whereas later on he is referred to as a 40-year-old (sentence 6). At this point it may be stated with confidence that the translator needs to be familiar with the plot of the film in order to prepare a successful translation. On the other hand, one might ask whether those who have seen the film would really remember all the details and also to what extent the translator should be suspicious towards the factual quality of the source text in general. Whereas doing elementary research on the subject of any translation appears logical and sensible, translation practice may show that one does not tend to be that information mining-oriented when dealing with terminology-free texts that do not seem to cause any problems apart from, possibly, structural ones, as is the case with the text in question here.

### **3. The objectives of the experiment**

The focus of the experiment was on the structural problems connected with the source text. It was assumed that applying some cohesion-strengthening devices, potentially combined with the knowledge of the film's plot, could substantially improve the quality of the target text, which could also be produced in a more literal fashion, but at the risk of looking like a draft ready for editing rather than a finished product. The emphasis was on how, if at all, the students were going to cope with making up for the formal flaws of the original. The objective was to correlate their choices with the fact whether the translation was preceded with a discussion on the source text or not. It must be stated that it had been expected that those who overtly debated the problem would evidently try to make the text "flow" better in English than it does in Polish, and that those who commenced the task without first commenting on it would attempt to make the translation more literal or, if they did attempt beautification, they would not try that hard.

### **4. The pre-translation discussion**

The hints from the teacher regarding the doubtful quality of the source text given to one of the groups led to a short discussion on how to tackle the problematic ele-

ments. On the whole, the students were of the opinion that no significant changes were needed to make the text acceptable in its English version. They agreed that the source text is not well written as far as the style is concerned: here, they were particularly sensitive to the repetition of the Polish conjunction *i* 'and', which may confirm the fact that repetitions are perceived as a rather serious stylistic flaw in the Polish language. They also criticized the short sentences present in the text as depriving it of smooth flow and fluency by interfering with its rhythm. However, the issue of the missing linking elements, to which the students' attention was drawn in a straightforward way, was not given substantial attention. On the one hand, it was decided that the text could, in fact, be translated into English keeping its slightly cohesion-wanting form. Predictably, it was stated that though the text could never be described as a masterpiece of writing, it could be kept communicative and understandable. On the other hand, the students admitted that some changes in the segmentation of the text at a clausal level should be considered in order to make it flow better – however, not necessarily via the direct introduction of additional linking vocabulary.

## 5. Some features of the target texts

For the purpose of the present paper the excerpts from the translations were analysed only in relation to any attempts at making the text better than the original from the point of view of cohesion. Unfortunately, the texts contain some target language errors, but these are not taken into account here. The examples are quoted in their original form.

There were 11 students in the group whose choices were not influenced by any pre-translation discussion. When their translations are analysed from the point of view of text segmentation at sentence level, it turns out that none of the students decided to fully follow the structure of the original text. Most of the shifts occur at the beginning of the text and in its three last sentences. The first source sentence: (1) *Lester Burn ma 42 lata, pracuje w korporacji jako tryb w maszynie, zagubił całkowicie poczucie wartości życia i radość z niego* is divided into shorter chunks in nine translations. In six of them only the last clause of the original gets the status of a separate sentence: e.g. *Lester Burn is 42, he works in a corporation simply as a cog in the machine. He has completely lost the meaning of his life and the joy that should come out of it* or *Lester Burn is 42 years old and works in the corporation as a cog in the machine. He has lost completely the sense of life and has stopped enjoying it*. In one translation the same happens with the first clause: *Lester Burn is 42 years old. He is a cog in the machine at a company and he absolutely lost the sense of enjoyment as well as the feeling that his life is valuable*, whereas in two translations each clause becomes a separate sentence. It seems quite natural that the changes occur in

this particular part of text where the absence of linking devices is quite striking. The other shifts concern joining sentence (9) with sentence (10) (in three translations), e.g. *He decides to get out of it: he quits his job and starts taking care of himself, which means working out with weights, remembering youth during the late Hippie times and smoking weed, which he used to buy from Rick...* or joining sentence (8) and sentence (9) (in two translations), e.g. *Suddenly he realises being involved into hypocrisy and sick relations, so he decides to free himself and leaves his job and begins to take care of himself.* The two short sentences (4) *Córka gardzi ojcem* and (5) *Obie uważają Lestera za fajtlapę* were condensed into one sentence only by one student, resulting in *His daughter despises him, and, together with her mother considers him a loser.* Only two translations show definite attempts at making the text flow better than the original by producing such versions as, for instance: *As if that wasn't enough, the daughter despises him* (a translation of sentence 5); *Of course, in the meantime he dreams about Angela* (a translation of sentence 11); *It goes without saying that he constantly dreams of Angela* (a translation of sentence 11); *However, it all comes down to working out with dumb-bells* (a translation of the beginning of sentence 10); *However, it all comes down to working out in his garage* (a translation of the beginning of sentence 10).

The group who did the translation after the discussion consisted of 8 students. In five of the translations the first sentence (*Lester Burn ma 42 lata, pracuje w korporacji jako tryb w maszynie, zagubił całkowicie poczucie wartości życia i radość z niego*) is divided into two after the second clause, e.g. *Lester Burn is 42 years old and he works in a corporation like a cog in the machine. He completely lost the joy of life and the sense of its value.* Only two of the students introduced changes in the segmentation of the text in the last four sentences: one of the shifts involves replacing the colon with the full stop after *I postanawia się z tego wypłatać* (sentence 9), the other consists in joining the sentence ending with *w które jest uwikłany* (sentence 8) with the one starting with *I postanawia się z tego wypłatać* (sentence 9), resulting in: *Lester starts to see all the false and deceit surrounding him and decides to escape from all this, so he quits his job and begins to take care of himself.* Here, it appears that the discussion did not influence the students positively towards introducing major changes in the syntactic aspects of the text. The endeavours to boost the text's cohesion are visible in the use of such words and expressions as: *on top of that, while, who, and, so* and *also*. However, the translations produced by this group show a slightly, but not considerably, higher number of attempts at making the text more fluent than those done by the students who had not discussed the text: counting the most noticeable traces of linking and text condensation reveals 22 instances in all the 8 translations done by the former group and 19 among the 11 translations produced by the latter. None of the students in either of the groups questioned the facts presented in the review, and they were not commented on during the discussion.

Generally, when the translations done by the two groups are compared, it turns out that they do not differ to a substantial extent, while the conclusion that better students simply do better seems inescapable: there are translations that appear to “flow” more easily regardless of the lack of additional linking devices, which is achieved thanks to the use of more idiomatic words and phrases. Thus, it might seem that the pre-translation discussion was not a decisive factor in this particular task. The reasons for this may be twofold. On the one hand, once it had been stated that the text’s syntactic organization could be translated literally without really grave consequences, why expect any changes at this level? On the other hand, it might be the case that the students were not willing to “manipulate” the segmentation of the source text in order to be as literal as possible instead, the very feature which they potentially understand as being the purpose of translation.

## 6. Literalism wins

The results may thus serve as a confirmation of the intuitive suggestion that translator trainees are generally afraid of straying from literalness where it is not absolutely necessary to achieve intelligibility. The question that follows is whether they should be encouraged to break from their inhibitions, which, in turn, entails asking about the advantages and drawbacks of a less encumbered strategy. While it is evident that the target text would gain when rewritten into a dissimilar form into English, it remains a point of contention whether the aim of translation is to embellish a text, make it more acceptable, or to document the content and form of the original as much as possible. In this particular case the instruction given to the students was simply “translate” without any further details; thus, potentially it may be assumed that attempts at preserving the true nature of the source text do not definitely qualify as bad translation.

It appears that the students who took part in the experiment value the original text to such an extent that they do not consider it appropriate to intervene in its structure. They seem afraid of changing the way in which the meanings communicated by the original author are presented in the source text even if the name of the author is not given, suggesting that his or her status in the translation situation is not particularly high. The students who did the translations of the *American Beauty* review are beginner translation trainees with little experience. The fact that they are not native speakers of English naturally results in some more or less serious language flaws, which can be eliminated by increasing their linguistic competence. However, the fact that they follow the structure of the source text by default and do not question the facts presented in the text is a strictly translation strategy-related issue and as such gives rise to questions regarding the instruction that should be given by the translation teacher.



## 7. Implications for translator training

The most important issue is that of the degree to which translation students could be allowed to interfere with the source text in order to produce a target text which reads well, i.e., in the case of a badly written text, attempting to make it better than its original. Piotrowska (2003, 26) recalls what she names “a traditionally dichotomic approach to translation” and states that it is not really mirrored by real-life translation experience. She suggests a “middle-of-the-road” attitude, where a certain compromise between literal and free strategies is aimed at, in which “[t]he translator is responsible for judging what aspects of the original are essential, and for deciding what features can be left out if such sacrifice cannot be avoided.” The above seems logical and is in agreement with the functionalist approach (cf. Nord 1997), which is particularly reasonable when it comes to pragmatic or semi-pragmatic texts, such as the film review which was the object of our experiment. The fact is that a reasonable approach to translation calls for treating each source text individually, depending on various factors which decide about the way in which it is supposed to function in the target context, and this is, obviously, an approach that students should be familiarized with and trained at. However, this unquestionable fact also poses certain problems. As translation teaching experience shows, more often than not translation trainees expect generalizations and tend to make them themselves. This in turn gives rise to the danger that they may fall into the habit of favouring either free or literal translation in situations where the reverse is more welcome, encouraged to do so by previous translation situations and instructions. On the other hand, it may be stated that when translating from the native into the foreign language, the translator trainee is bound to be less “creative” and more literal than when translating the other way around, as they may feel less comfortable with the target language and less skilled at introducing improvements. Such a hypothesis may be supported by Kozłowska (2000, 70), who claims that when translating into the foreign language the translator concentrates rather on the language and the understandability of the message, while when translating into the native language, he or she is more focused on the acceptability of the text and its easy flow of reading. On the other hand, she also says that in L1-L2 translation, the translator is under the influence of the native language, and in L2-L1 translation he or she cares more about “the spirit of the original” (67), which could suggest that a more literal attitude is adopted in the case of translations into the native language. Still, it seems that the tendency to be literal rather than sense-oriented characterizes trainees regardless of the direction of the translation, only in translation into the foreign language it is manifested by lack of idiomaticity where it could be introduced in order to improve the flow of the text and the naturalness of expression.

Hejwowski (2004) complains about syntagmatic translation being the result of the superficial analysis of source texts, taking into account only the surface

and not trying to dig down to the real sense of the message, something which we are used to due to the fact that it is usually enough in the majority of everyday information exchanges (251). Such an attitude to source texts is bound to result in literalism, which then does not stem from an evaluation of either the author or the original but is simply the result of a lack of reflection.

All in all, given the attitude presented by the students who took part in the experiment, it may be concluded that translation trainees should definitely be encouraged to take more liberties when making their final choices concerning the shape of the target text. From the outset they should be sensitized to the significance of the intended purpose of the target text they are producing, so that in the absence of clear instructions they naturally ask the commissioner-teacher to specify the translation brief. Such a statement is in no way revolutionary, but it seems that such an approach is not a strict rule in traditional translation classes. Also, even if we follow the more functionalist attitude, the questions regarding the legitimacy of improving the original still remain hard to answer. Robinson presents a set of such questions for discussion in his *Becoming a Translator*: “When and how is it ethical or professional to improve a badly written source text in translation? Are there any limits to the improvements that the translator can ethically make? (Tightening up sentence structure; combining or splitting up sentences; rearranging sentences; rearranging paragraphs...) [...]” (Robinson 35). All these can be solved by clarifying the intentions behind the translation, and the students should, of course, be made aware of this fact. That said, the following questions remain at the forefront of translation training: Is there a limit to teaching functional translation?, Is there a limit to not teaching faithfulness to the source text?, and: If no specific instructions are given to students, is it not natural that they just document the contents of the source text as they are, assuming that if the task is not accompanied by any special instructions, they are just expected to preserve as much of the original as possible?

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