

Translating English Technical Texts: The Role of the Translator and the Challenges of Technological Facilities

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Abstract

The paper approaches the specific case of the technical discourse in the context of a modern world which facilitates and promotes a more and more refined diversification of specialized texts. Created, imposed, promoted and sustained by economic reasons, the translation of technical texts finds new challenges as it is confronted with the opportunities offered by the cyberspace. While being quick, available and free, online instant translation services prove to be essentially inappropriate for the translation of technical texts, where accuracy is a prerogative.

For an extremely long time, the idea of “translation” was strictly and elitistically reserved to the translation of literary texts as one of the privileged means of exporting / importing culture. And despite Mihail Kogalniceanu’s famous remark that translations do not make a literature, the practice of translation has been a constant and valuable means of enriching one nation’s cultural horizon.

However, modern times have brought about a serious alteration to the traditional value allotted to the exercise of translation. If originally the act of translation was an essentially cultural act, we now witness the commodification of this practice. Nowadays, the age of industrialization, globalization and business practices has triggered the reconsideration of translation as part of the literary phenomenon as a more practically oriented exercise, as a service in the global business environment. This, in turns, leads to a reevaluation of the specifics of the translation mechanism and, at the same time, of the position of the translator as a mediator between the two texts.

Among the very specialized types of discourses that the modern world has imposed, the technical discourse stands out as a discursive pattern whose main informative purpose is characterized by an extremely

specialized type of communication. The technical discourse, and the English technical discourse to an overwhelming degree, is the Lingua Franca of engineering to such an extent that speakers with a variety of native languages acknowledge it as a common ground.

The degree of specialization that characterizes the English technical discourse is so high that the role of the translator and of his / her activity is seriously challenged. The differentiating feature of the specialized discourse of any nature implies an objectivization / depersonalization of the translator, with the purpose of transmitting accurate, factual information devoid of any possible stylistic ornament. What matters in the adequate translation of a technical text is conveyance of correct equivalent data from one language to the other. To make a comparison with literary translation, if the same poem / metaphorical text can be rendered into a foreign language in a multitude of variants, according to each translator’s personal input and capacity of interpretation, a technical text can only have one correct translation.

This has two possible effects: one the one hand, as it has already been mentioned, the subjective input is null (or it should be null, if the standards of accuracy and correctitude are to be met). On the other hand, despite the enormous degree of impersonality of the translator, he / she finds himself / herself confronted with a challenge that the traditional literary translator did not need to face: that of handling a text whose degree of specialization makes it difficult to grasp.

So the translator of a technical text is confronted with two simultaneous and contradictory trends in terms of technical translating: his status is both reduced and elevated.

There is solid evidence which supports this double claim. Perhaps the most relevant example is given by the so popular language translation engines on the internet. Due to their alleged practicality, they are widely used as instruments of translation which renders

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the role of the translator redundant. Their popularity is proved by the staggering number of 13 900 000 search results for the Google query “language translation engines”. To what extent these technological means are relevant in the case of the technical discourse is a debatable question. At any rate, the result can by no means be compared to the same work done by the translator. The principle which allows these robot translations to be done is a mechanic one, on a word-to-word basis, in total disregard of some of the fundamental linguistic laws which govern discourse construction in any language. The translation engine is incapable of complying with the rules of syntax, it is unable to discern between diverse grammatical categories and it is also oblivious of polysemantic words, degrees of formality, figures of speech etc. All of the above-mentioned shortcomings apply in the particular case of a technical text, where the information may be essentially altered and the technical message can be misinterpreted to the limit of misunderstanding and nonsense. I cannot overemphasize the importance of accuracy where technical texts are concerned; if in a literary text a particular choice of metaphors, synonyms, word order or even grammatical categories can be seen as stylistic devices meant to give a touch of the translator’s subjectivity, one of the prerogatives of a technical translation is its perfect equivalence with the original text.

To illustrate this type of mechanistic translation obtained from submitting a technical text to a translation engine, I have selected paragraphs belonging to English technical texts and have submitted them to the Google translator in order to obtain a Romanian version of these texts, and the other way around. Here are the results:

Original texts:

1. “Avoid spilling: never fill the jar above the maximum level indication (i.e. 1.25 litres), especially when you are mixing liquids. Always place the lid on the jar before you start using the appliance.”
2. “After you have turned off the appliance, wait until the knife unit has completely stopped rotating before you take off the jar.”
3. “Conform tematicii lucrării, pentru cercetarea zonei amplasamentului în cauză, a fost stabilită execuția a unui foraj geotehnic, executat în sistem semimecanic, uscat, rotativ, pentru efectuarea cercetărilor de teren, pentru urmărirea stării fizice a complexelor interceptate până la adâncimea de investigație, au fost prelevate probe, în vederea determinării principalelor

caracteristici fizicogranulometrice a stratificației locale, pe categorii de strat. “

4. Electrical connectors are devices that join electrical circuits together. Male connectors plug into receptacles, jacks, and outlets. Female connectors contain sockets to receive other devices. Gender changers convert female connectors to male connectors, and vice versa.

Romanian / English translation:

1. “Evitați deversând: niciodată nu umple borcanul de mai sus indicația maximă de nivel (adică 1.25 de litri), mai ales atunci când ești de amestecare lichide. Întotdeauna loc capacul de pe jar înainte de a începe să utilizați aparatul.”
2. “După ce ați oprit aparatului; așteptați până când unitatea de cuțit a complet oprit de rotație înainte de a decola jar.”
3. “Under the theme of the work site area for research that was established implementation of a geotechnical drilling, executed in the system semimecanic, dry, rotating, for the field research for physical monitoring of complex intercepted by deep investigation were sampled in order to determine the main features fizicogranulometrice the local stratificației, type of layer.”
4. Conectori electrice sunt dispozitive care se alătură circuitele electrice împreună. Conectori Tată plug în recipiente, obiecte casnice, și piețe de desfacere. Conectori de femeie conțin prize pentru a primi alte dispozitive. Gender Changers converti conectori de sex feminin la conectori de sex masculin, și vice-versa.

Conclusions: in the case of technical texts, the online translation facility is not a very helpful means of translating, just as it fails to render a reliable translation in any domain. The oblivion of syntactical categories makes possible constructions such as “evitati deversand”, where “deversand” is a raw translation of “spilling”. The error here is a twofold one: the computer does not recognize different syntactic values of the word “spilling” and simply “interprets” it, so to say, as a present participle of the verb “to spill”. Moreover, the

semantic value conferred to the word is not appropriate. Since the text is a technical description of a blender, it would have made much more sense to translate “spill” as “scurgere” instead of “deversare”.

A similar confusion of semantic meaning is the translation “inainte de a decola jar”, which is supposed to be the equivalent of “before you take off the jar”. In this case, the verb “to take off” has been considered in its “aeronautic” meaning when it actually refers to the action of “removing”, “putting aside”. As for “jar”, the automatic translator probably did not recognize the word at all, as the English text does not refer to the Romanian word “jar” (English “embers”) but to the recipient of the blender.

Similarly, in the last text, the word “outlet” should be interpreted in its technical meaning, namely “a point in a wiring system from which current can be taken to supply electrical devices”, but instead, it is translated as a “market for a product or service”. As for the syntagms “conectori de femeie” and “conectori de sex feminin” or “masculin”, the translation is already becoming sexually allusive instead of technically appropriate.

The same ignorance of the original text appears in the case of translating from Romanian into English. The words which the computer dictionary does not include – and this is especially the case with highly specialized terms – were simply transposed in the “translated” text in the original language (Romanian): “semimecanic”, “fizicgranulometric”, “stratificatie”.

Apart from the already mentioned errors, the results of the automatic translation are imbued with non-sense, a multitude of instances of lack of agreement, improper use of the singular instead of plural, the lack of definite articulation, inaccurate

word order and so on. All of these are a strong argument against the use of the automatic translation programs in the case of technical engineering texts.

It seems fair to assert that while translations are becoming more and more specialized, as a reflection of demands imposed by the ever developing technological society that we live in, this only apparently reduces the role of the translator when it comes to technical texts. Specialists seem to have agreed on a common technical lingo which serves their communication needs. However, this technical language would become a source of linguistic barbarism in the absence of a mediator. The main concern of this mediator – the translator of technical texts - is to see that the information is conveyed appropriately, unbiased by linguistic ignorance. This responsibility implies narrowing down the translator’s field of expertise, so that he / she should become familiar with the concepts themselves before attempting to translate them into another language.

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