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THE METHODOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF A LANGUAGE *A* TO LANGUAGE *B* TRANSLATION TEXTBOOK

Dmitry Yermolovich

Moscow State Linguistic University, Moscow, Russia

Abstract

The paper is based on the author's experience of writing a Russian-English translation textbook and looks into the methodology of teaching students to translate into their non-mother tongue (language B). It is argued that a textbook delivering a course on general, rather than specialized, translation should move away from the popular format of text samples followed by glossaries and comments. Instead, the primary focus should be made on the utterance as the principal unit of translation. Utterances need to be analysed in terms of the situations which they reflect and their semantic class components (objects, events, abstracts, and relations). This approach, termed semantic-situational, can help make the learning and teaching of Language A to Language B translation more consistent and streamlined.

Keywords: teaching translation, non-mother tongue translation, A2B translation, language B translation, translation textbook, textbook methodology, instructional principles

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Dmitry Yermolovich, PhD, DSc (Moscow State linguistic University), is a Professor with the Department of Translation Studies and English, Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, Moscow State Linguistic University (Russia). His research interests include translation theory, comparative onomastics and bilingual lexicography. He is the author of several translation textbooks and a long list of dictionaries, such as the New Comprehensive Russian-English Dictionary (Russky Yazyk, Moscow), and the Russian Practical Dictionary (Hippocrene, New York). His poetry translations include a book of Lewis Carroll's verse in Russian.
Email: slovesa@gmail.com

Why a different approach is needed for teaching translation into Language B

It is a widespread belief that professional translation should only be undertaken into one's mother tongue or near-native language (referred to as language A), so many universities and translator schools do not teach translation into languages other than A (to which I will refer here broadly as 'B languages').

There are quite a few countries, however, whose universities cannot afford the luxury of not teaching their students to translate into B languages (a subject which will be termed 'A2B translation' here[1]), if only for the lack of a sufficient number of native speakers of those languages available as professional translators. In Russia, for example, the ability to translate well into B languages studied is directly stated in the national standard for linguist/translator training. So for Russian universities the question is not whether or not to teach A2B translation, but how to teach it.

The methods of teaching A2B and B2A translation are vastly different. In either case, of course, the global task is to teach students to create a target text (TT) which is equivalent to the source text (ST). However, in B2A translation the emphasis has to be on correctly extracting the sense from the ST, since this is where most mistakes are made. A further task—expressing that sense in language A correctly and competently—is made easier by the students' inherent (though, of course, not always expert) command of, and previous education in, the target language.

Although the issue of understanding and interpretation in A2B translation is not totally irrelevant, it is less challenging for the same reason; the ST is written in the students' mother tongue. The task that comes to the fore and presents the most serious challenge here is that of expressing well-understood meaning with resources of a language with which the students are much less comfortable.

To present the difference more graphically, albeit rather simplified, one might say that in B2A translation the focus is on understanding the original and not distorting it in translation, while in A2B translation it is on putting the given meaning into words without making mistakes.

[1] Abbreviations used in this paper: *A2B translation* – translation from language A (native or near-native) into language B (non-mother tongue); *B2A translation* – translation from language B to language A; *ST* – source text; *TT* – target text. Russian text is cited using 'scientific transliteration of Cyrillic' (Scientific transliteration of Cyrillic, n.d.), with the exception of the authors' names given in accordance with their traditional Romanization.

When translating into language A, the students may not always be good at providing smooth and well-balanced sentences, but it is still a language they know fluently and systematically. There can be no matching fluency or systemic knowledge of a B language. Desirable systemic knowledge can and should be gained, however, within a well-organized, if limited, arsenal of resources.

Finally, the teaching of A2B translation imposes some additional requirements on the instructor: not every language teacher is equally efficient in translating both ways him or herself, and, consequently, in teaching it.

The above seems a good argument in favour of teaching A2B translation as a separate course. The structure of such a course and the methodology behind it deserve attention and are the subject of this paper.

Legacy: Katzer & Kunin, Gak

Let us take a look at our legacy. For the Russian/English language pair, Russia's one and only A2B translation textbook was published by Yuli Katzer and Vladimir Kunin (1964) half a century ago. The book consists of two unequal parts. The introductory part contains 13 chapters with "theory" dedicated to various translation difficulties and techniques, followed by exercises consisting of isolated sentences or paragraph-long contexts.

The textbook's main part is made up of sample texts to translate, each followed by comments on potential translation issues and then by exercises for students to practice the resolution of those issues either in class or at home. Interestingly, lessons 1–13 also contain model English translations of the Russian STs. Lessons 14–26 do not provide such model TTs, but the final four lessons containing excerpts from classical literature and their translations bring the students back to comparative ST and TT analysis.

Russian scholars and educationists have traditionally paid meticulous attention to defining two aspects of their teaching efforts: *metodologija* (methodology, or global scientific principles) and *metodika* (more specific instructional principles or methods). Katzer & Kunin describe their approach as follows: "In their instructional principles the authors have assumed that specific translation theory can be built by both inductive and deductive logic" (Katzer&Kunin, 1964, p. 8).

The term 'methodology' is not used here, but it is obviously equated with specific (i.e. language-specific) translation theory, a version of which the authors had to develop, at least partially, while writing the textbook. What is described as ‘inductive’ and ‘deductive’ logic are the two components of the book’s *metodika,* or instructional method: inductive learning implies mastering bits of theory first and then applying them to practical translation; deductive learning means drawing such bits of theory, in the form of translation rules and techniques, from TTs done earlier or from one’s own practice under an instructor’s guidance.

The Katzer & Kunin (1964) textbook widely employs comparative analysis of the ST and TT, a tool whose advantage is that it can be used both deductively and inductively.

The above solution determined the book’s structure: although most of it was built around texts, the latter had been selected so as to illustrate various ‘bits of theory’ and techniques of translation, rather than to exemplify some technical subject areas or to train some glossary. It also explains why comparative analysis was given so much space in the textbook: students were not just asked to translate a text after reading the authors’ comments; they had to compare professionally translated TTs against their own STs. In this way, not only did they learn to assess other people’s translations, but eventually also their own.

Another notable Soviet-era book in A2B translation was written by Vladimir Gak (1975), a unique blend of textbook and research paper. In addition to analytical chapters, the book contains no STs at all, only exercises each containing a handful of isolated sentences (or slightly longer strings of text) to translate. Unlike the Katzer & Kunin work, its instructional method is purely deductive, with a comparative typology of Russian and French chosen as it general methodology.

In contrast to the two works described above, most, if not all, other A2B translation textbooks of the Soviet period were based on inductive logic, essentially being compilations of Russian STs selected and grouped by subject matter: international relations, labor unions, industry, science, art, etc. None of those works received the acclaim accorded to the textbooks by Katzer & Kunin (1964) or Gak (1975), or remained as memorable.

This statement is not intended to imply opposition to the inductive principle in university teaching. On the contrary, it may be quite appropriate in two-way or B2A translation textbooks and courses. There are strong arguments, however, that it should not play a significant role in general (i.e. non-specialized) A2B translation courses, especially at the basic and intermediate (bachelor's degree) level.

Post-Soviet experience

In the 1990s and 2000s no textbooks or manuals on A2B translation were published in Russia. The unfinished edifice of specific Russian/English translation theory, whose foundation was laid by Yuli Katzer and Aleksandr Kunin, resembled an abandoned and neglected construction project.

Elements of Russian-English translation were included in some of the numerous 'learner's books' (*uchebnye posobija*) on English translation composed as subject-area selections of texts and exercises to develop an "active" vocabulary. The emphasis on vocabulary was understandable: in the early 1990s, Russia was going through a period of dramatic change, and its society, as it opened up to the world, was flooded with new information and terminology.

Whatever their merits, all earlier translation textbooks had lost their relevance. The demand for translation was associated with new and different types of discourse, and language teachers felt it to be their first priority to fill huge lexical gaps in their students' (and their own) education.

These new textbooks and learner's books were text-centered. Each text or group of texts was dedicated to a 'topic' and its associated lexicon. However, the texts—and, therefore, textbook chapters or 'lessons'—depended little on one another. One could study them in any order, some could be skipped and others added without any tangible impact on the logic of how the skill of translation was supposed to be developed, if the author had that in view at all.

To put it in a straightforward way, there was simply no method or principle of teaching A2B translation to students of English in any textbooks published in the last quarter of the 20th century. The only "method" apparent in them was the requirement that students use the prescribed equivalents for the clichés, expressions and terms listed after the texts.

I have had to read a large number of these sorts of manuals as an expert of the Russian Education and Science Ministry's Instructional Association in the Sphere of Linguistics (*Učebno-metodičeskoe ob"edinenie*). When reading them, I often felt that the authors had a very remote understanding of the essence of the translator's craft. In their explanatory notes and cover letters they often admitted that their goal was to expand the students' bilingual vocabulary. It seemed that, according to the authors, all that aspiring translators needed to know to do their job well in the future was to accumulate as many word and phrase equivalents as possible. A huge number of translation textbooks are still based on the same understanding today, both in my country and abroad.

Two books which broke that trend around the turn of the century were written by Yevgeny Breus (1998) and Igor Poluyan (2005). Both authors gave up the inductive text-centered principle, and both brought back specific translation theory as the methodology for teaching translation. That could have been expected, since both had had a long affiliation with Moscow State Linguistic University, home to the translation studies school to which Katzer and Kunin had belonged.

These two books, however, could form no basis of a systematic course for training professional A2B translators—if only because they were too short. The pieces of specific translation theory which they contained were fragmentary and limited in range and number. For example, the main part of Breus's (1998) book, which is dedicated to the rendering of the text's referential meaning (or denotative function, to use the author's term), only deals with five translating issues barely if at all connected with one another: the change of predicates in translation; translating sentences with inverted word order; translating verbal noun constructions; splitting or merging sentences in translation; translating free word combinations.

The comparative observations given in Poluyan (2005) are valuable, but again very fragmented. In addition, some of the author's theoretical assumptions cannot be easily shared. As an example, differences in how the underlying situation is described in the ST and TT surface structure are seen by the author as "processes", a term which runs through the entire book and is included in its title but is highly debatable.

Despite their vulnerabilities, Breus (1998) and Poluyan (2005) were a real breath of fresh air in the world of translation teaching. However, they rose like solitary rocks above the boundless turbid sea of other teaching materials which reduced all translation theory to just a single technique, that of substituting prescribed equivalents for words and clichés from rote-learnt lists.

Role of curriculum

For a university textbook to be efficient, it needs to be based on a well thought-out curriculum. Back in the Soviet period, the translation curricula of foreign languages institutes were typically broken down into sections corresponding to the traditional divisions of the language system: lexical issues of translation; grammatical issues of translation; and stylistic issues of translation.

As translation theory developed, this three-aspect approach became a Procrustean bed for translation studies and teaching. To give an example, complex transformations such as modulation (also termed metonymic translation—in Russian, *smyslovoe razvitie*) were classified as 'lexical'. It is clear, however, that they do not only affect words and phrases, but also some non-lexical aspects of text and thus do not fit in the traditional class of lexical phenomena.

The development by Vilen Komissarov (2011) of the *equivalence levels theory* was a landmark in translation studies. Not only did he underscore the need to take account of the referential situation reflected in a ST utterance (something which other authors, including Vladimir Gak, had done before him), but he also identified two levels on which a situation can be referenced in translation: component-dependent (*sposob opisanija situacii*) and component-flexible (*identifikacija situacii*) (Komissarov, 2011, pp. 124–129). The latter level can account better than other theories for legitimate 'deviations' from ST structure, but the requirement that the translator should seek to attain equivalence at as many levels as possible (out of the five identified by Komissarov) leaves no room for an unjustifiably liberal translation.

With the equivalence levels theory accepted, translation had to be taught in a new way, which called for development of an appropriate translation course curriculum driven by what can be called a semantic-situational approach. I happened to draft the first such curriculum for the Moscow State Linguistic University back in 1987, and was entrusted as executive editor with coordinating work on its updated 2000 version (Yermolovich, 2000). The curriculum gained wide recognition in academic circles. Its later versions were amended only in minor details.

However, back in the early post-Soviet period of the 1990s, when the Russian educational system was muddling through a largely anarchic phase of development, academic curricula were of little actual interest to anybody. As the demand for translators increased, many universities and colleges even outside the humanities field seized at the opportunity to fill the gap, most often with no competent instructors or good training materials. The university departments and courses set up then to train so-called 'translators in the sphere of professional communication' (a coinage designed to replace the too-down-to-earth-sounding *technical translator*) had no proper curricula because they did not have the expertise to develop them. The situation and its side effects are described in greater detail in Yermolovich (2007). As a consequence, there was nothing for new textbooks and learning materials to rely on in training A2B translators through the end of the century.

However, in the early 21st century the Russian education authorities tightened their grip on the universities, also by checking whether they had all the curricula and other educational requisites in place. Many of the new translator training colleges and departments reacted by putting forth clones of the MSLU translation department curriculum, often slightly abridged or modified, without apparently giving too much thought, as the 'clones' were often eclectic, watered-down or lacking an inherent logic.

That was an expected result. A curriculum is not self-explanatory by definition: it just names modules and subject areas but never expounds on them. After reading, for example, a wording like "Ways to render citational relations" (*Peredača otnošenij iz"jasnitel'nosti*) or "Verbalizing the implicit meaning of concession in translation" (*Vyjavlenie nejavnogo značenija ustupitel'nosti pri perevode*) not every new convert to translation teaching can tell what it is about and what there is to teach their students.

From a curriculum to a textbook

For a curriculum to be implemented successfully it takes a congruent set of teaching materials, primarily a relevant textbook. I began working on such a textbook shortly after the curriculum had been finalized and, due to a number of circumstances, brought it to completion more than a decade later (Yermolovich, 2014a).

Going from a curriculum to a textbook is not any trivial matter. A curriculum is not much more than a declaration, one to be filled with content in a textbook. From the onset, the textbook's structural framework has to be defined. Items of the curriculum do not have to be covered in the same order or in the same way in the textbook. Certain units can be grouped together; others may be broken down into smaller bits and scattered across several units. Some issues are only touched upon once, others may be recurrent.

So the main question that arose when writing the textbook was how to structure it in such a way that it is knit together by a common logic, so that translation techniques are mastered in a systemic way, and so that the material is generally presented in a simple-to-complex sequence.

It was clear from the very beginning that a Russian-to-English translation textbook, like the curriculum, must rely on specific translation theory for the two languages as its methodological basis. The only problem was that the edifice of that theory was still 'under construction'. Despite a multitude of academic papers in this area and the fact that specific translation theory lectures are given at most universities, there was not a single monograph with consistent coverage of the subject. Therefore, a specific theory for the two languages had to be developed in the course of textbook writing.

As I thought over how to make the theory of equivalence levels the organizing principle for the textbook, I couldn't help noticing that Komissarov applied it to individual *utterances* (or *messages*), rather than complete texts. An utterance is not the same as a sentence, although the latter is the surface part of the former. An utterance is a complex speech sign which corresponds to the sentence in the expression plane and to a certain *situation* (i.e. a fragment of physical or mental reality) in the content plane. Another feature of a complete utterance is that it is characterized by one or more predications.

The emphasis on the utterance in translation theory should be seen as absolutely natural, as the utterance is the main unit of communication and, therefore, translation. If the teaching is to be based on the simple-to-complex principle, translation should be taught starting from the basic unit of translation, i.e. the utterance.

As soon as this approach was taken, it became clear that the structure of the textbook could be laid out into a sequence of the following stages:

- the rendering of the utterance's *referential content*, starting from individual utterance components according to Eugene Nida (1964): the object, the abstract, and the event (with a section of the book dedicated to each of them; relations are taken up later as they function both within an utterance, connecting its components, and between utterances);

- the rendering of the utterance's structure, primarily associated with the nature of predication—whether full or reduced, or 'wrapped-up' (*svërnutye*)—and the presence of an agent in the predication, a feature particularly important for the Russian language where impersonal predications are plentiful and multiform;
- the rendering of the utterance's *communicative content*, such as communicative structure and modality;
- the rendering of the utterance's internal and external *relational elements*: conjunctive, contrastive, concessional, cause-and-effect, etc.

"Where do grammatical and stylistic issues of translation go?" the reader may ask. As a matter of fact, the grammatical and stylistic aspects of translation are dispersed throughout the textbook and discussed together with associated aspects of reference and meaning. There is no need whatsoever to isolate them into separate sections.

In accordance with this approach, for example, differences in the use of plural nouns are discussed partly in the section entitled "Taking account of language differences in object designation" and partly under the title "Variations in the syntactical structure of agent predications", as well as a few others.

Similarly, the situation-oriented approach helps remove the unnecessary accent on translation techniques. There is no doubt that a translator should master those techniques, but they must not be looked upon as an end in itself—rather, as a means of equivalent rendering of various semantic nuances. That is the reason why, for instance, *antonymic translation* is treated in the section on rendering utterance modality in connection with ways to translate affirmative/negative utterances.

Achieving consistency

The structural framework chosen allows for various translation issues to be discussed in a logical and consistent way against the broader horizon of utterance reference, meaning and logic. Let us return to the rubrics constituting the main part of Breus (1998), where they look somewhat isolated and disconnected.

It appears that these rubrics may look more logical, if placed in a broader and more systematic specific translation theory context. As an example, the issue of verbal noun constructions (Breus, 1998, §1.4) is treated in the new textbook under the heading

"Paying attention to language differences in the designation of events" and, more specifically, "The rendering of utterances with a noun designating an abstract event" (Yermolovich, 2014a, §62). The issue of splitting and merging utterances in translation (Breus, 1998, §1.5) is discussed as part of "The rendering of relations between predications and their components" (Yermolovich, 2014a, §86).

To give a further example, let us look at another of five main topics in Breus (1998), "Change of predicates in translation". The book says quite rightly that "in translating Russian utterances with a verbal predicate denoting the manifestation of some property, like *nervničat', revnovat', opazdyvat'*... predicates denoting a state should be used (compare *On opazdyval*—He was late)" (Breus, 1998, §1.2). However, the title, "Change of predicates", is too focused on form, it obscures the semantic aspect of the utterance and all other language resources that denote abstracts. If the semantic-situational approach is assumed, the issue is naturally discussed in the chapter "Paying attention to language differences in the designation of abstracts" or, more precisely, in the section entitled "Ways to render permanent and nonpermanent attributes" (Yermolovich, 2014a, §32).

The semantic-situational approach, which examines the objective reference of the utterance, gives a broader and more coherent overview of various translation issues. It just helps see more of them, and the textbook (Yermolovich, 2014a) consists of about 100 paragraphs, each dedicated to a category of translation difficulties.

Each section in the textbook is structured as follows. It opens with a theoretical discussion of the title issue, explaining, among other things, the relevant concepts and terms. It goes on to give a contrastive overview of the Russian and English language resources used to express analogous meanings or referential components of an utterance. Then the relevant principles and techniques of equivalent translation are discussed.

It is here that the translation equivalence levels concept is brought into play as an analytical tool. Comparative (both pre-translational and post-translational) analysis is part of the textbook's fabric. This explains why a lot of space in the book is taken up by comments analyzing and editing earlier translations found in print or online. As an example, the reader is asked to compare the following message and its published translation:

Včera v dome pravitel'stva Respubliki Tatarstan sostojalos' soveščanie, posvjaščënnoe podgotovke k meždunarodnomu ekonomičeskomu sammitu Rossii i stran OIS.

*There was a meeting devoted to preparations for the International Economic Summit of Russia and OIC Countries in the government house of the Republic of Tatarstan yesterday.

The textbook book explains why this translation is in need of improvement: the phrase "there was" is stylistically out of place in the context of a news item. Modified versions are then suggested, including one that makes the logical circumstance the subject of the sentence:

The Republic of Tatarstan's Government House hosted (or: was the venue of) a meeting to discuss preparations for the Russia–OIC International Economic Summit yesterday.

The comments do not confine themselves to pointing to a different sentence structure in the translation (whose grammatical subject denotes the place of the action, while the meaning 'to be the scene of action' is expressed by the grammatical predicate). It is underscored that equivalence has been reached at the component-flexible level and that the situation is thus described from a different angle. Students are taught in this way to analyze translation in terms of equivalence theory, so that they might apply it to their own and other people's translations in the future.

It was indeed gratifying to find a consonant message in the Katzer & Kunin book: "The objective of this course is to help the students develop conscious, rather than mechanical, translation skills" (Katzer & Kunin, 1964, p. 8).

The use of texts in a textbook

Does the emphasis on the utterance professed and implemented by the author mean that he recommends total renunciation of the popular topic- and text-centered principle built into many translation textbooks? No, not at all. Text-centered organization can be well justified in advanced courses with the focus on the genre and style of texts to be translated, and also in specialized or technical translation courses. However, the semantic-situational approach, which gives priority to the utterance rather than the text, appears optimal for the general A2B translation course leading to a bachelor's or so-called specialist's degree (the latter being an intermediate degree between B.A. and M.A. in Russia).

It is, of course, impossible to teach translation without practical training. Translation exercises follow almost every paragraph in the textbook, but short assignments consisting of utterances (or groups of utterances) relatively independent of a broader context come first. Such exercises help the student concentrate on the theoretical subject just learned and on finding solutions to associated translating difficulties.

That is not the only type of exercise, of course. Students do need to grasp and render the supra-situational semantic and stylistic structure of a complete text. So exercises consisting of individual utterances and short text fragments are followed, in many sections, by assignments to translate either full texts or extended text fragments. The texts and fragments are selected so that they contain the types of difficulties discussed earlier, to the extent possible.

Though not text-centred, the textbook nevertheless permits discussing certain peculiarities of text genre and subject-area categories, such as biographies, annotations, opera synopses, guidebook descriptions, historical texts, conference agendas, official releases, meeting minutes, executive orders and quite a number of others. It is true that this fundamental course does not place an emphasis on genre: it is believed, as noted above, that a more detailed study of text genre and subject-area specificities is best dealt with at an advanced academic level or in industry-specific translator courses.

It remains to be added that a separate book with guidelines for teachers and keys to exercises has been published (Yermolovich, 2014b) as a supplement to the textbook. It is intended more for instructors than for students, assuming that instructors too are sometimes in need of a translation version suggested. Where this author has felt necessary, versions of translation are commented on and recommendations are given as to what translation issues might require a more detailed discussion by the instructor.

Just one textbook cannot be sufficient for a translation course: students also need to be taught to use authoritative dictionaries, linguistic corpora, precedent texts, and related literature, to become good translators. Nevertheless, a logically structured textbook that amounts to more than a selection of sample texts with accompanying glossaries seems to be an absolute must for a university to be able to produce good A2B translators. In addition, such a textbook also performs the role of a reference book to be consulted at times of difficulty.

The new Russian-English translation textbook discussed in this paper is an attempt to put A2B translation teaching on the methodological foundation of a specific translation theory for the two languages, the semantic-situational translation model, and Komissarov's equivalence levels theory. Its instructional principles involve deductive application of specific translation theory in combination with comparative ST and TT analysis.

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