From French to English: A look at the translation process in students, bilinguals, and professional translators

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Harvard University, 1988

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Abstract

A study was conducted using think-aloud protocols to investigate the translation processes of students, bilingual speakers, and professional translators. The study consisted of twelve subjects: four intermediate level college students learning French as a second language; four bilingual speakers of French and English, none of whom had significant prior experience with translation; and four professional translators, none of whom had grown up bilingually. Subjects were given a French magazine article and asked to "think out loud" as they translated it into English. Participants had access to dictionaries and a thesaurus. The think-aloud protocols were audio- and video-tapes recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were then coded for problem solving strategies and behaviors and the size of language units worked with (e.g. word, phrase, clause, sentence). The data were analyzed to determine differences in processing among the groups, the range of individual variation within groups, and different "types" of processors that emerged.

Central findings were that translation gets neither "easier" nor faster as one becomes more experienced with the language and more practiced with translation. Problems simply become more complex, and experienced
language users hold themselves to higher standards than
do novices, leading them to find more problems with the
text and to spend more time and effort on those they
find. Bilinguals and translators engaged in more total
problem solving activity and made more solution attempts
per problem than the students did. They also generated
more possible translation choices, did more editing and
continuous monitoring, and worked through the text a
greater number of times.

All participants worked mostly in small syntactic
units, but bilinguals and translators also worked in
larger discourse chunks, demonstrating greater range and
flexibility in their processing styles.

Experience with translation was found to be a more
reliable predictor of processing style than degree of
language proficiency.

The study discusses the structure of the translation
process, the importance of context building in
translation, and differences in processing styles within
and among the groups, identifying various "types" of
processors that emerged. Some hypotheses are offered
concerning processes that are most likely to produce good
translations. Implications for both education and
research are presented.