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## The translator as mediator in researcher/referee correspondence

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**Abstract:** Professional translators often mediate in the complex relation between the authors of scientific articles (their clients) and the referees of scientific journals (their clients' clients). Experience tells us that standing in the middle of this type of relation—crucial to ensuring scientific articles are published—can be difficult. We need to handle issues arising from author-referee communication that are often far from straightforward and require skilled diplomacy, both oral and written, in the authors' mother tongue and the target language of the translation. Future translators need to be aware of this role as it affects their professional careers, but do clear guidelines exist? The present communication describes mediated transactions in author-referee correspondence, summarizes related research literature, formulates a set of research questions, and presents a study that we are conducting with a view to obtaining qualitative data from a sample of experienced professionals.

**Keywords:** mediation; scholarly communication; translation; professional practice; translator training.

## El traductor como mediador en la correspondencia entre investigador y revisor

**Resumen:** Los traductores profesionales a menudo median en la compleja relación entre los autores de artículos científicos (sus clientes) y los revisores de revistas científicas (los clientes de sus clientes). Por experiencia propia, sabemos que no es siempre una mediación fácil, pero que sí es fundamental para conseguir la publicación deseada. Atendemos a las consecuencias de la complicada comunicación autor-revisor y aplican toques diplomáticos, tanto de expresión oral como escrita, en la lengua materna de los autores y la lengua meta de la traducción. Los traductores en formación tienen que ser conscientes de este papel que forma parte de la carrera profesional, pero ¿existen parámetros claros? En esta comunicación describimos transacciones mediadas en correspondencia autor-revisor, resumimos la bibliografía relacionada con el tema, formulamos una serie de hipótesis, y presentamos el estudio que estamos realizando para obtener datos cualitativos de una muestra de profesionales experimentados.

**Palabras clave:** mediación; comunicación científica; traducción; práctica profesional; formación de traductores.

**Sumario:** Introduction. 1. Review of the literature. 2. The translator's role. 3. Data analysis. 4. Discussion and preliminary conclusions. 5. Further research.

## Introduction

"Translation Studies, like translation itself, should be seen as a social problem-solving activity." (Pym 2002)

Professional translators often mediate in the complex relation between the authors of scientific articles, who are in fact their clients, and the editors and referees of scientific journals, their clients' clients. This role is part of the professional relation between translators and clients but has little or no formal status. It is simply a natural follow-on from the preparation of a translation that is to be submitted to a journal. For the translator, the fact that an author renews their relation after a translation has been delivered is highly positive. Not only does it mean the client is satisfied with the translator's work to the extent that they wish to re-enlist their help, it also gives the translator the professional satisfaction of knowing their work has been successful. However, the interaction between authors and editors and/or referees is not always easy and the social problem-solving process that leads to the creation of a definitive, publishable scientific article requires not a little diplomacy. This process can involve cultural and linguistic barriers as a function of the language of interaction and the native speaker (NS) or non-native speaker (NNS) status of the interlocutors on both sides. Often authors call on translators to perform a linguistic function—translating the contents of a letter and a reply—when in fact the mediation involved requires an interpretation of that letter and the appropriate diplomatic intervention in the reply.

The present study begins with this hypothetical situation and presents a brief review of related publications, in the absence of any prior research of our topic. Having contextualized our study, we then offer an initial analysis of a single set of data which would seem to support our hypothesis. On the basis of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987), we analyze a series of translator interventions in authentic author-to-editor/referee correspondence—from Spanish into English—which demonstrate the purpose and nature of the mediation that takes place. In our discussion, we consider the underlying motives for these interventions and the translator's implicit intercultural understanding. Finally, we propose a wider-ranging study of correspondence of this type based on a survey of professional translators working in the Spanish-into-English language combination.

### **1. Review of the literature.**

Our initial search for earlier studies of this topic gave no results and only a wider-ranging online search with a manual follow-up revealed related studies. Researchers concerned with the author-editor/referee relation have taken the academic peer review process as their starting point and applied one of two approaches: an introspective approach which has led to their proposing recommendations or guidelines for authors to follow in their response to editor/referee letters (Cummings & Rivara 2002, DeBehnke, Kline, & Shih 2001, Samet 1999, Williams 2004), or an empirical approach based on the analysis of corpora of correspondence and/or other related documents (Belcher 2007, Lillis & Curry 2006).

Introspective publications have generally begun with an analysis of the contexts arising as a result of the peer review process in which the authors of a scientific publication can face one of four different scenarios: (1) the unqualified acceptance of their article; (2) the acceptance of their article subject to minor revisions; (3) the suggestion that the article should undergo substantial revision with no guarantee that it will be accepted for publication even if the revision is carried out to the letter; and (4) outright rejection. The authors of these studies are often former or current editors and/or referees of academic journals and they consider that the peer review process in itself constitutes “mediation” through which editors/referees and authors negotiate the production of a final document “worthy” of publication. To achieve this, Williams (2004) suggests authors need to follow a set of “Golden rules” when making their responses. He recommends they respond promptly, putting their emotions aside despite the all-too-natural sense of injury at having their work criticized. Furthermore, he suggests authors read the reviews carefully and respond to them point by point, enumerating the reviewers’ comments if necessary. The authors’ replies should always be complete, polite, and supported by the appropriate evidence.

One further perspective on the peer review process that gains importance in both the introspective and the empirical studies is the issue of the NS/NNS divide in scientific publications. Academic journal editors and referees are widely considered the Anglophone gatekeepers to publication and the issues associated with “first world” and “third world” science have been widely debated by information scientists since Garfield (1990a, 1992a, 1992b, Garfield & Welljams-Dorof 1990) defined the concept of “impact” and formulated the “impact factor” (IF). The key concepts in this description are those of inclusion–English NS authors writing for English-language publications–exclusion–English NNS authors finding themselves unable to publish in the foremost English-language journals–and the peripheral authors, who are described as being “off-network” and, as such, producers

of “lost science” (Gibbs, 1995). In this context, Burrough-Boenisch (2003) writes from her experience working with Dutch authors who are soundly networked, in that they achieve high numbers of publications in English-language journals with good IF scores. In what she terms the “shaping” process that produces a scientific article, Burrough-Boenisch identifies indirect and direct interventions from two groups of professionals: discourse community members, that is, professionals who are involved in the same or similar research fields and have, therefore, a good grounding in the topic area; and language professionals, among whom she includes a category defined as authors’ editors. Furthermore, in the shaping process, she describes two distinct levels of editing: higher order editing, typically involving members of the discourse community, and lower order editing, usually of a linguistic nature and, we interpret, possibly involving the translator or—what is more likely in the case of Dutch authors—the author’s editor.

The empirical studies we have encountered are based on corpora either at a micro-level, such as the submission histories of nine journal articles studied by Belcher (2007), or at a macro-level, such as the study of 46 scholars from four European states reported by Lillis & Curry (2006). Both studies begin with the NS versus NNS debate. Belcher analyzes content and tone in an attempt to determine whether or not NNS authors are disadvantaged and concludes that they are not. However, she does find that “off-network” scholars need help interpreting referees’ comments and that politeness and politeness strategies are fundamental both to NNS authors and, importantly, to NNS referees.

In their study of the politics of access, Lillis & Curry look at the publishing histories of 46 scholars in the fields of Psychology and Education. The authors are natives of Hungary, Slovakia, Spain and Portugal and the researchers have had access to text histories including draft documents and correspondence that constitute parts of the “literacy brokering” process—in their view a part of the larger process of mediation, and synonymous with what Burrough-Boenisch termed “shaping”: “...ways in which people are involved in helping others interact with written texts, whether formally or informally, paid or unpaid” (Lillis & Curry 2006:12).

Like Belcher, they divide those who intervene into two major categories: academic professionals (73%), such as general academics, discipline experts, sub-discipline experts; and language professionals (24%), like translators, copy editors, proofreaders, and English-language specialists such as (*sic*) teachers of English. [We cannot but remark on this apparently unfounded distinction which appears to assume neither translators, nor copy editors, nor proofreaders are English-language specialists.] To these groups,

Lillis & Curry add a third, albeit minority group of non-professionals (3%)—spouses, family, friends—who they have also found to intervene in mediation.

Their conclusions centre on authors' concerns about the process of brokering and, most especially, the changes introduced in their texts. Authors, they find, feel complexity is reduced and the academic contribution of their texts is in some way "shifted".

This brief review confirms that author-editor/referee negotiation in the context of scientific article submission is a complex area often requiring the intervention of several people. However, up till now the process has not been studied from the point of view of the translator. This is somewhat surprising given the volume of scientific research which is published into English and the fact that, having translated an article, it is natural that the translator should also be asked to help out with the subsequent author-editor/referee correspondence. In the following section, we offer an account of the role of the translator in this situation, based on the concept of face as presented in Brown & Levinson's (1987) classic account of politeness.

## **2. The translator's role.**

Brown & Levinson (1987:76) specified two social dimensions as having a crucial impact on the way politeness is carried out between interlocutors, these being Social Distance and Power. In author-editor/referee correspondence, it seems reasonable to suppose that Social Distance is rather small, since both parties belong to the academic world and are experts or near experts in the same field. On the other hand, the imbalance of Power between the parties is great. For the author(s), acceptance in a high-impact journal may be a decisive factor in the future viability of their research, as demonstrated by the expression 'publish or perish'. However, the decision to accept or reject the article is entirely in the hands of the editors and referees, and authors have no choice but to follow their indications. In his or her role as mediator on behalf of the author(s), the translator is therefore on the side of the powerless.

In their strategic account of politeness, Brown & Levinson (1987: 80) predict that the powerless will attend to the face of the powerful, particularly when they want them to do something. Broadly speaking, this may be achieved through promoting the addressee's self-image (positive politeness) and communicating the wish not to impose (negative politeness). In author/editor-referee correspondence, common examples of such strategies are giving thanks, agreeing and showing deference. However, there are times when authors threaten the negative face of the editor/referee by making requests which limit their freedom of action, and they may also

challenge the positive face of editor/referees through disagreement and even criticism.

Our hypothesis, formed on the basis of a single set of data taken from correspondence between Spanish authors and US scientific journals, is that when mediating on behalf of the author(s), the translator will typically **intensify** both positive and negative politeness strategies towards the editor/referee, and **mitigate** threats to the latter's face. In the following section we aim to show how this is done.

### 3. Data analysis.

The examples which follow are taken from replies to US authors-editors/referees mediated by a single translator working for research teams from the University of Granada, Spain. Specifically, the teams belonged to the *Instituto de Agua* and the *Departamento de Personalidad, Evaluación y Tratamiento Psicológico*. Targeted journals were as follows: *Journal of Hazardous Waste, Desalination, Applied Microbiology and Biotechnology, Psychology in the Schools, Learning and Individual Differences, Archives of Clinical Neuropsychology* and *Aging Clinical and Experimental Research*.

It should be pointed out that in the present sample, the translator was only required to render the authors' replies into English, since as generally occurs in scientific translation their level of English was sufficient to make it unnecessary to translate the editor/referees' indications into Spanish.

This section is divided into two parts. The first attempts to show how the translator intensifies the extent to which the Spanish researchers enhance the face of referees and editors, while the second illustrates the translator's efforts to mitigate threats to face.

—*Intensifying enhancement of face.*

#### a) Giving thanks.

The data revealed a tendency on the part of the translator to reinforce expressions of gratitude through the addition of the adverbial phrase 'very much'. On occasion, the translator supplied an expression of gratitude where none was present in the source text:

(1) *Gracias por sus comentarios...*

Thank you **very much** for your comments...

(2) *A la espera de sus noticias, reciba un saludo cordial...*

**Thank you very much** for your attention, with best wishes...

b) Agreeing.

Similarly, the translator made small additions with a view to highlighting the authors' agreement with the editor/referees' suggestions and criticisms. There was also a tendency to make the authors' willingness to comply with the journal's recommendations more explicit:

(3) *Respecto a estas cuestiones tenemos que decirle que evidentemente la muestra utilizada es representativa del sur de España...*

In this regard, **we agree** that the sample is **indeed** representative of the south of Spain...

(4) *También se ha corregido the 'Research Highlights'.*

We have also corrected the 'Research Highlights' **in line with your comments**.

(5) *Se han realizado los cambios propuestos por los revisores.*

**All** the suggested changes have been carried out.

—*Enhancing deference.*

As Brown & Levinson point out (1987: 178) deference may be carried out either by evoking the superior status of the addressee or by lowering the face of the addresser. Status may be explicitly encoded through the use of honorifics as in example (6), in which the translator supplies a high-status term of address where none was present in the source text:

(6) *Estimado P. Philips*

Dear **Professor** Philips

In (7) and (8), the translator indirectly communicates respect by supplying 'please' in speech acts with directive force:

(7) *Adjuntamos el artículo revisado...*

**Please** find enclosed the revised version...

(8) *Ver respuesta 3 revisor 1.*

**Please** see Answer 3 to referee 1.

With regard to lowering addresser's face, in example (9) the translator places the blame for any comprehension errors squarely on the authors, whereas in the source text it is ambiguous. In examples (10) and (11) the authors' dependence on the goodwill of the editor/referees is evoked and intensified respectively:

(9) *Respecto a los problemas de comprensión en p.11...*

Finally, regarding the **confusing** sentence in the middle of page 11...

(10) *...el revisor estará de acuerdo con nosotros en que es una comprobación básica.*

...**we hope** the referee will agree that this is a basic assumption.

(11) *Esperamos que ahora puedan aceptar nuestro trabajo.*

We **very much** hope that the article will now be accepted.

—*Mitigating threat to face.*

As mentioned above, authors may sometimes threaten the editor's negative face by making requests, thus conditioning their freedom of action. More seriously, they can threaten positive face by disagreeing with the editors and referees and even criticizing. With regard to requests, it was observed that the translator sometimes impersonalizes their expression, and thus avoids specifying that it is the addressee who is being called upon to carry out the action predicated (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 190):

(12) *Me permito pedirle que no se demoren demasiado en la revisión para que este trabajo no pierda actualidad.*

I am also taking the liberty of requesting that **there should not be too long a delay** in the revision of this third version, so that the article does not become out of date.

(13) *Esperamos que con estos cambios y aclaraciones puedan definitivamente aceptar nuestro trabajo para su publicación.*

We hope that with these changes and clarifications, **our article may now be definitively accepted** for publication in your journal.



*—Hedging disagreement*

It is quite common for authors to feel that the referees have misunderstood a certain section of the manuscript or have made inappropriate suggestions for its improvement. Authors may therefore state their disagreement with the referees, which inevitably challenges their self-image as experts in the field. In (14) and (15), the translator hedges such disagreement by stating it as an opinion rather than an assertion, thus allowing the possibility for other points of view:

(14) *No tiene mucho sentido hacer los subgrupos que nos indica...*

**We feel** there is little point in specifying the proposed subgroups...

(15) *El número de sujetos participantes (215) es suficientemente representativo de la población objeto de estudio*

**We consider that** the number of participating subjects (215) is sufficiently representative of the population under study

In (16) the disagreement takes the form of non-compliance with a referee's indication. Here the translator uses minimizing techniques to suggest the non-compliance is an isolated occurrence and of little significance:

(16) *...mantenemos la referencia a los trabajos previos realizados sobre minorías étnicas*

...**here** we **do** maintain a **brief** reference to previous studies involving ethnic minorities

*—Softening criticism.*

At times authors' disagreement with the referees may turn into outright criticism, particularly when they feel that their indications are contradictory or based on a misinterpretation of the manuscript. Again, the translator was observed to use hedging and impersonalization techniques to weaken the force of such criticism:

(17) *Hasta el momento hemos intentado responder a todos los puntos que nos plantean los revisores pero estos parecen no entender el objetivo que perseguimos con nuestro trabajo...*

Up to now we have tried to answer all the points raised by the referees; however, **we feel they may** have misunderstood the objective of our study...

A common source of criticism is the recommendation that the manuscript be extended in specific ways while at the same time the article is said to be too long. In (18) the translator uses impersonalization to disguise the fact that such contradiction arises from the referees, while in (19) the difficulty experienced in complying with the contradictory indications is minimized, and the indications themselves are reported with weaker force:

(18) *...no hemos podido profundizar más en este tema dado que se nos pedía no alargar más el manuscrito*

...we have not been able to go into detail **in view of the need to avoid** extending the manuscript further.

(19) *También hemos intentado no aumentar la longitud del trabajo, cosa muy difícil, dado que nos han pedido descripciones de instrumentos que han tenido que ser incluidas.*

We have also done our best to avoid increasing the length of the manuscript, although **this has proved difficult** in view of the **referees' request that we should provide** descriptions of the instruments used.

Finally, criticism sometimes arises from apparently inconsistent guidelines on formal conventions such as the presentation of footnotes (20) and references (21). In both cases, the translator intervenes to make the accusation of inconsistency on the part of the editors or referees less explicit. This is achieved particularly through temporal distance, whereby the inconsistency is represented as an isolated event in the past:

(20) *Se han quitado las notas a pie de página, aunque en algunos de los artículos de esta revista consultados, sí se incluyen*

The footnotes have been eliminated, although **when consulting** other papers of this journal, **we did notice** that some of these include footnotes

(21) *Se han eliminado las referencias internas...a pesar de que en la guía del autor se encontraron ejemplos de citas con referencias internas*

The internal references have been eliminated...However, in the Guide for Authors **we did find some** examples of citations with internal references.

#### **4. Discussion and preliminary conclusions.**

One question arising from this brief review of translator-mediated correspondence between Spanish researchers and editors or referees from US scientific journals is why the translator should feel the need to intervene in this way. Our view is that instinctively, the translator recognizes the expression of certain speech acts as inappropriate or even unacceptable to the target reader, and also notes the absence of certain expressions that might be expected, such as gratitude and deference. This may be related to different ideas on the part of the two cultures involved with regard to appropriate manifestations of politeness in this context. Several authors (Lorés Sanz, 1997; Hickey, 2000; Ballesteros Martín, 2001; Lorenzo-Dus, N. 2001; Arnaiz, 2006) have noted different orientations between Peninsular Spanish and Anglo-Saxon politeness, whereby Spanish places less importance on the need to protect the addressee's face than Anglo-Saxon cultures and may therefore express requests, disagreement and criticism in more direct fashion.

At the same time, it is likely that researchers are too busy and too focused on the matter in hand to worry about these interpersonal niceties, so that perceived inadequacies in the expression of politeness may also be the result of lack of attention. Either way, it is incumbent upon the translator to smooth the way through deployment of a variety of mediation strategies which go well beyond mere linguistic transfer.

A further question is how far the behaviour of the translator in this case is representative of translators in general. Clearly, empirical research is required before we can make any claims in this regard. However, the findings from our sample are at least sufficient to advance the hypothesis that professional translators act as mediators in this type of correspondence, and that in doing so they provide a service which may help to speed up acceptance of the article in question and even determine whether or not the manuscript is published at all. Up to now, this service has been largely unnoticed and, as our review of the literature indicates, has certainly not been perceived as having anything to do with translation. In our view, there is a clear need to make this service on the part of the translator visible, so that it may be acknowledged and rewarded as an essential part of the brokering process.

#### **5. Further research.**

As stated above, it is proposed to corroborate the findings described here through questionnaires and/or interviews which will allow us to obtain empirical data on the practice of a large number of professional translators with experience of mediation in author-editor/referee correspondence. These

data may then be used to identify and describe effective mediation strategies which should be incorporated into the training of future translators. In particular, the results may be used to design a series of classroom activities both to demonstrate the need for mediation and to provide practice in different mediation techniques.

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