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So how would you translate that?
PORTAL - Professional ORal Translation in Adult Learners

1.0. Introduction

The headline "*So how would you translate that?*" is an authentic informant comment from our data and we think it very accurately sums up what this part of our research is actually about. Also, it highlights the type of problem-solving strategy that stands out in our data. Most readers will probably also recognise the phrase from the classroom, where we as teachers desperately try to fight the feeling among students that there can be only ONE correct solution to any given translation problem.

This article presents a status report of our ongoing research. The POR-TAL project is a spin-off from our main project - FOCAL (free oral communication in adult learners). However, we have found it relevant and rewarding also to look at likenesses and differences between the communicative elements that students draw on in free oral communication and in oral translation.

Our reasons for focusing on oral translation are a.o. that it gives us the opportunity to

- Identify information processing strategies through the use of introspective methods, and to
- Identify pedagogical implications for teaching, interpretation, free oral communication as well as oral and written translation.

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For practical purposes we have chosen to do parallel work on the different competence areas (see 2.1 below) in both the PORTAL and the FOCAL project.

1.1. Design

The design of the project is aimed at combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. As regards the qualitative aspect, introspection and retrospection data have been collected from the participating learners, and as to the quantitative aspects, our project includes the following elements:

- A number of groups of informants (MA students of English at CBS[1]) set up at random
- A longitudinal study that comprises the following elements:

1. a pre-test – a video recording of a spontaneous discussion in English about a topic that had been disclosed and discussed before the recording;

2. a post-test - a video recording of a spontaneous discussion in English about a topic chosen by the group of informants in question;

3. a video recording of the informants discussing the same topic as in the post-test, but *in Danish* with a view to ia identifying their use of linguistic and discourse/text competence elements in the production in their first language;

4. a video recording of informants carrying out extempore translations from Danish into English;

5. an analysis of selected parts of the informants' production, ie those parts of their competence that were the focus of instruction in the period between the pre-test and the post-test;

6. a video recording of extempore translations made one year after the end of the course aimed at investigating – by means of introspection – the problem solving strategies applied by the informants ie aimed at identifying the degree to which automatisation of linguistic and discourse competence features has taken place;

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7. a video recording of a free discussion in English made approximately 15 months after the end of the course aimed at investigating which of the identified verbal and non-verbal elements are still part of the informants' competence, and which elements seem to have disappeared after the end of the course; that way we may identify whether more competence elements have been automatised.

1.2. The qualitative aspect

In connection with our investigation of our informants' competence, we have asked students to fill in a questionnaire immediately after the pre-test and post-test video recordings with the purpose of determining how the learners themselves view the level at which they operate within the five competence areas. The learners were given two questionnaires: One immediately after the video recording, and one immediately after they had been viewing themselves on video and had been given the teachers' evaluation and comments to their performance, divided into comments related to the five competence areas (see below).

Before the pre-test video recording, the students had been introduced to the five competence areas in a lecture, and they were thus able to relate their perception of their own performance to these areas. In the classes that took place between the two video recordings, specific attention was paid to working with the linguistic, the discourse, text and strategic competence areas.

In connection with items 4 and 6, the oral extempore translation from Danish into English, the video recording took the form of introspection, ie the informants were asked to think aloud in connection with their translation of the texts.

1.3. The quantitative aspect

As pointed out above, the project comprises a number of video recordings followed by data-driven data analysis. The reason why we have chosen this particular format is that we have the basic hypothesis that target-oriented teaching may affect learners' competence and contribute to enabling learners to progress from having a need to exercise control over their output in a given communication situation to being able to reach a certain stage of automatisation. With a group of 30 students in

all, qualitative evaluation is feasible and gives an indication of the possible degree of development involved in the course.

2.0. Main research assumption and research hypotheses

Our work is based on one main assumption and a number of research hypotheses, which will be described in the following.

2.1. Main research assumption

Our basic assumption is that we can identify five separate competence areas in oral communication that together describe the general competence of a speaker; these five competencies – which have been defined in co-operation with colleagues from the CBS Faculty of Modern Languages on the basis of previous pilot studies and analysis of students' oral communication – constitute our overall research parameter and they are

- *Linguistic competence* – the ability to use language correctly in regard to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation;
- *Discourse and textual competence* – the ability to use words and phrases in a local or global context in relation to the function of the text. Examples are coherence, the use of fillers, discourse markers, gambits and turn-taking;
- *Pragmatic competence* – the ability to use the rules and norms that exist in a given communication situation. This competence also includes non-verbal communication in the form of body language;
- *Socio-cultural competence* – the ability to communicate within the cultural premises of the foreign language, inter-cultural competence, general social skills expressed eg in the form of politeness, knowledge of the world, LSP factual knowledge and
- *Strategic competence* – the learner's ability to solve his or her own communication problems in the foreign language by means of linguistic strategies such as false starts, self-repair or other-repair.

2.2. Research hypotheses

Our first hypothesis is that *all second-language adult-learner production is based on general problem-solving strategies that are not unique to language*, ie it takes place via the process of hypothesis-formation and

hypothesis-testing based on information that has been collected, stored and which is subsequently being processed and applied (McLaughlin 1987). Our second hypothesis is that if we can *explain adequately to adult learners what it requires for them to reach a level of professional communicative competence in a second language*, we can assist students in their efforts to become professional language users. Our third hypothesis is that *several layers of linguistic awareness need to be addressed* as illustrated in the models shown in the following. Our fourth hypothesis is that *analysis and control will influence learner performance* and that adult, advanced level learners are able to analyse and exercise some degree of control over their oral output. Our fifth and last hypothesis is that *learners will be drawing on fairly similar competence elements in free, oral communication and in oral translation*.

In connection with this, we assume, however, that *in oral translation, learners will focus more on the linguistic and socio-cultural competencies than they would in free, oral communication*.

3.0. Models used in the PORTAL project

It goes without saying that a research project such as the PORTAL project – and thus also the FOCAL project – needs to draw on a number of theoretically based models that we use to provide the foundation for our assumption, our hypotheses and our data analysis.

3.1. The Triangle Model of Translation.

This model that we have developed for the PORTAL project illustrates links between the three main areas that students need to put into play in order to produce a professional translation that functions well on both the communicative (left-hand box) and the content-related (right-hand box) levels.
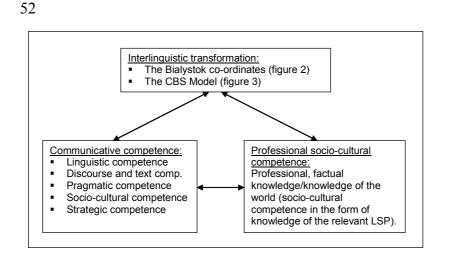
Figure 1 – The Triangle model of translation.

The model illustrates the ideal interplay between 1) theoretical knowledge of models that describe learners' language processing (the element of adult learners' quest for understanding how and why problem-solving strategies are a key to professionalism, see hypothesis 1); 2) the factual communicative competence areas that have both a knowledge and a practice aspect and 3) the professional, factual knowledge of the world that any professional translator/communicator needs in order to be able to communicate adequately (Lundquist 1994).

This and the next two models are being used in both the PORTAL and the FOCAL projects; and they all deal with the contents of the three boxes, beginning with the top box:

3.2. The Bialystok model of control and analysis

The second model that we draw on is Ellen Bialystok's model of control and analysis in combination with different levels of linguistic and metalinguistic awareness, which was discussed in a SLA seminar at the University of Odense, Denmark, in May 2000.
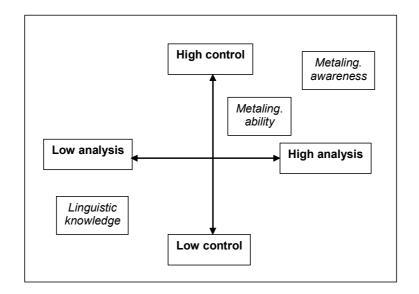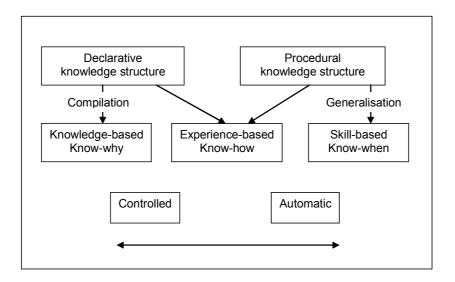
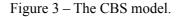Figure 2 – The Bialystok co-ordinate system of control and analysis.

According to Ellen Bialystok (Odense 2000), one way to illustrate learner knowledge and awareness is to focus on the control and analysis dimensions of general problem-solving strategies in combination with "linguistic knowledge", "metalinguistic ability" and "metalinguistic awareness", respectively. The model shows the relationship between analysis and control for each of the three dimensions of learner linguistic capacity, ie linguistic problem-solving: First the **linguistic knowledge** aspect that requires little analytical skill and a low level of control, next the **metalinguistic ability** aspect that requires a higher degree of both control and analysis, and thirdly the **metalinguistic awareness** aspect that requires high levels of both control and analytical skills on the part of the learner. The ideal adult learner development would consequently be progressing from the 3rd quadrant well up into the 1st quadrant.

3.3. The CBS Model

This brings us to the third model, the CBS model, that we believe explains both the *structure* of knowledge, the *constant restructuring* of knowledge

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and the *application* of knowledge by adult learners of a second language (based on Mondahl & Jensen 1996) as suggested by the arrows in the figure and by the two types of re-structuring of knowledge, viz compilation and generalisation.

Figure 3 – The CBS model.

The model is based on the hypothesis that a small part of adult learners' communicative competence is brought about through the application of Universal Grammar type knowledge, eg basic grammatical knowledge which is not that different in Danish and English. However, the major part of learners' development comes about through learners' cognitive development, through hypothesis formation and testing, and through the compilation or generalisation of already acquired knowledge, as outlined in the first project hypothesis.

The model takes its starting point in Anderson's *declarative - procedural knowledge* dichotomy; but based on a number of studies of learner information processing in translation, we have found that learners who produce a second language make decisions about production on the basis of *three* types of accessible knowledge rather than two. This means that

the declarative or procedural knowledge that may have been taken in initially has gone through a process of either generalisation or compilation and has therefore been restructured.

4.0. What's inside the left-hand box (Figure 1)?

The left-hand box in Figure 1 contains the five sub categories of communicative competence outlined in 2.1. In both the FOCAL and the PORTAL project we have so far completed the part that focuses on linguistic competence, where we have investigated our informants' use of modal expressions – in our study expressed in three forms:

1) by means of modal verbs
2) other expressions of modality eg adverbs
3) expressions that combine 1) and 2).

We are presently focusing on discourse competence where our empirical data suggest that we investigate our informants' use of uptakers, turntakers, fillers and elements of hesitation rather than other discourse elements. Pragmatic competence (body language) and strategic competence (self-repair and other-repair) will be dealt with later.

4.1. Practical implications – the PORTAL project

In connection with our work on the PORTAL spin-off project, our data suggest that in translation, students' problem-solving centres around two main competence areas:

• *Linguistic competence* where we can compare informant examples of the use of modality from free, oral communication and oral translation, and

• *Socio-cultural competence,* where our data indicate that the awareness of differences in UK and DK society serves as the link between the left-hand and the right-hand boxes in the Triangle model of translation (Figure 1). This awareness is more prominent in our oral translation data than in the free, oral communication data.

Our free communication data show that informants' level of socio-cultural awareness is quite low, but when it comes to translation, it suddenly

gains weight and importance. This is supported by the introspective (translation) and retrospective (free communication) data collected in connection with the respective video recordings.

We suggest that in translation it is difficult to distinguish between this particular competence on the language side in the left-hand box and the processed and applied factual knowledge from the right-hand box. Thus, socio-cultural competence could be said to function as a decisive difference between learner information processing in oral translation and free, oral communication.

4.1.1. Modal expressions in free oral communication and in oral translation

Figure 4 below shows the actual numbers of modal expressions used successfully by informants 2, 3, 4 and 5 in our recordings of free oral communication and oral translation, respectively.

Successful – free oral communication					
Modal verbs		Other modal exp.		Combination	
Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
38	85	4	8	0	5
Successful – oral translation					
Modal verbs		Other modal exp.		Combination	
11		0		0	

Figure 4 – The successful use of modal expressions in free oral communication and oral translation by informants 2-5.

In the free communication data, it is worth noting that the total number of successful occurrences of modal expressions in the pre-test is 42 whereas the corresponding number in the post-test is 98, ie an increase by more than 100%. The number of *unsuccessful* modal expressions in both tests is stable at 15. In the oral translation, however, the total number of modals used successfully is 11! This is not particularly interesting in itself: the interesting point is that the students' information processing

seems to be on the level of metalinguistic ability (see Figure 2, the Bia-lystok diagram), ie the informants produce a fair amount of verbalisation involving analysis and control in the think-aloud data characterised by rule-of-thumb-like verbalisation. The students also draw on their strategic competence (see 2.1) in the form of self-repair and other-repair; they do not specifically formulate declarative rules, but they use rules that appear to be compiled (see Figure 3, the CBS model).

4.1.2. Modal verbs with a sound resemblance Danish-English

The five modal verbs *shall/should, will/would, may/might, must* and *can/could* are particularly interesting from a Danish point of view in that they have a resemblance in sound, though not always in meaning, with Danish modal verbs; this sound resemblance pattern is the focus of a large modality study that we have carried out under the FOCAL project and dealt with in the parallel PORTAL project.
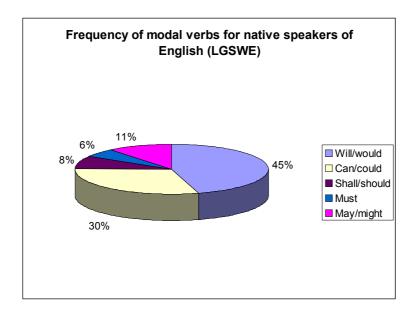

Figure 5 – The frequency of modal verbs with a sound resemblance Danish-English for native speakers of English.

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In order to clarify the difference between our Danish informants' competence as to modal verbs in free oral communication and oral translation, respectively, and the use of modals by native speakers of English, we have used the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSWE) as our reference point. The figure above illustrates the use of the five main modal verbs in English by native speakers; in the figure below we have the pre-test results for the same verbs in free oral communication of informant No. 2 from the FOCAL project.
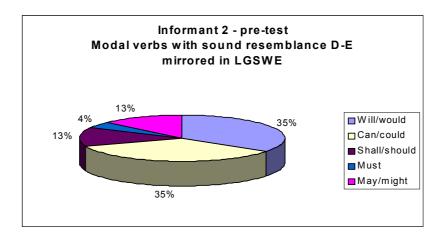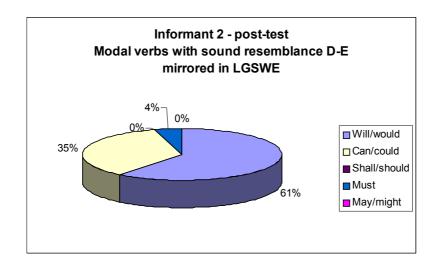

Figure 6 – The five modal verbs with sound resemblance D-E, informant 2 – pre-test results.

**Informant 2 - post-test
Modal verbs with sound resemblance D-E
mirrored in LGSWE**

Figure 7 – The five modal verbs with sound resemblance D-E, Informant 2 – post-test results.

In the pre-test, informant 2 matches the LGSWE figure for the five modal verbs in question quite nicely. In the post-test, however, something peculiar has happened: *Shall/should* and *may/might* are completely absent here. A possible explanation is that informant 2 chairs the post-test discussion, and so her role is more defined as the initiator of discussions rather than a participant who expresses opinions and doubts where modal expressions in general would otherwise be used. This signals an awareness of the pragmatics of the situation that calls for different formats in the two situations.

Below is the corresponding picture for informant 3. Like most of the other informants - but in contrast to informant 2 - informant 3 shows a relatively simple picture in the pre-test. She "plays it safe" with a low degree of variation in her use of modal verbs compared to the LGSWE.
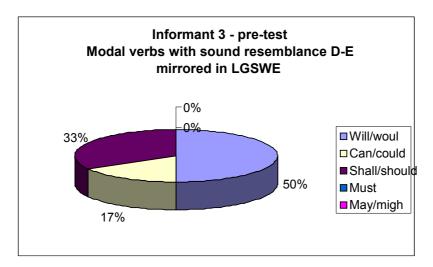
Figure 8 – The five modal verbs with sound resemblance D-E, informant 3 – pre-test results.
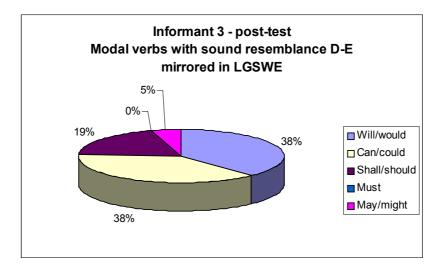

Figure 9 – The five modal verbs with sound resemblance D-E, informant 3 – post-test results.

In the post-test, however, informant 3 shows a higher degree of variation, just as she is significantly reducing the gap between the average rate of appearance for *skal/skulle (21.5%)* in Danish and the usual level of *shall/should (8%)* for native speakers of English.

The reason that we are paying particular attention to the ratio of *shall/should* vs the Danish *skal/skulle* is that many Danes will almost automatically tend to substitute them for one another – and often with disastrous results as to the meaning of the utterance.

If we turn to the oral translation data and compare it with the previous figures, we find a much smaller number of modals in use as already shown, even if the translation text calls for modal expressions.

In our introspection data, the informants discuss the modals *in context*, but they do not single them out in a separate discussion about whether to use a modal or not, or whether the individual modals mean something different in the target language. In other words, their problem-solving work takes place on the discourse and strategic levels rather than on the linguistic level.

The most interesting aspect about the significantly smaller number of modal expressions used in oral translation as opposed to free oral communication is that the success rate is much higher in translation than in free communication – this indicates that the informants realize that modal expressions are problematic and that they apply analysis and control in the form of rules-of-thumb to their choice of a proper translation, which again suggests that they are operating on the level of metalinguistic ability.

5.0. What's inside the right-hand box (Figure 1)?

We will now turn to the right-hand box in Figure 1, which contains the factual professional knowledge component, which is one aspect of the informants' overall socio-cultural competence. The following examples from our data show how the informants attempt to tackle the problems they encounter in connection with an oral translation exercise in relation to this competence.

Example 1:
[About the Danish political party called "Centrumdemokraterne, *ed.*]
"We can't have them think it's a music one" → "The Centrum

> Democrats" → "The Central Democrats – that way they know it's a
> centre party"

In the example, the informants agree that there is a problem in connection with translating the name of the Danish political party Centrum Demokraterne (CD). They realise that they need to explain to foreign readers what the CD is, and they discuss how to solve that problem. They seem not to draw on formalised rules of translation theory, either because they do not know them or because they have compiled their declarative knowledge in this area. Their final solution is *the Central Democrats,* which they choose because "that way they know it's a centre party". The official translation of the name of the party is the *Centre Democrats*, so the solution reached by the informants lies within an acceptable range and could be described as "a close miss".

> Example 2:
> "I don't think it is *yields* here – *interest rate*, no, not just *rate*, but
> interest rate*s*."

Here the informants clearly draw on their professional LSP knowledge from the right-hand box in order to negotiate their way to a good solution to the translation problem.

> Example 3:
> "… the Fed's Board – is that what it is called?" (followed by a discussion
> of what to call the Board of Directors of a bank and of the Danish
> Central Bank) "They probably have a real name, but we seem to have
> forgotten all about that".

Example 3 shows that again the students draw on their professional LSP knowledge from the right-hand box, but this time unsuccessfully. Still they manage to come up with a functional solution to the problem in the sense that the term "board" will indicate the administrative level they are attempting to describe.

6.0. Summary and conclusion

In the preceding pages we have looked at the informants' use of communicative and professional, socio-cultural competence. Initially we hypothesised that *learners will be drawing on fairly similar competence elements in free, oral communication and in oral translation* (hypothesis 5) and that *in oral translation, learners will focus more on the linguistic*

and socio-cultural competencies than they would in free, oral communication.

Based on the above and other findings from the study, we conclude that when it comes to learners' communicative competence, ie in this case their *linguistic* competence, in oral translation compared with their free, oral communication, the information processing appears to contain the same amount of automised responses (see the CBS model, Figure 3). According to the Bialystok coordinates, Figure 2, the informants may thus be said to be operating at the level of metalinguistic awareness in both situations, in CBS-model terms at the level of know-when.

When it comes to the area of *professional, socio-cultural competence*, this knowledge is being negotiated to a larger extent than the linguistic elements in the oral translation.

This leads us to the overall conclusion that as regards the communicative competence, oral translation does in fact resemble free, oral communication. When it comes to the professional, socio-cultural competence, conscious reflections – ie controlled problem solving – play a more prominent role in oral translation than in free, oral communication. This suggests that here the informants process information at the level of metalinguistic ability or in CBS model terms: on the level of know-how.

Therefore our initial hypothesis that free, oral communication and oral translation would resemble each other in regard to problem-solving strategies has been *proved partly right*.

7.0. Implications for the future

The question that arises from this conclusion is then:

- How do we enable our students to draw on know-when knowledge both as regards communicative knowledge and professional, socio-cultural knowledge rather than on know-how knowledge in oral translation where the time factor plays an important part?

This means that one of the issues we need to address is

- How do we teach students to use language elements such as for instance modal expressions in oral translation, the way that they already master it in free oral communication in the sense that they use a much wider range of variation in free communication and that they avail

themselves of modal expressions at the risk of getting them right! - A risk that they seem to be unwilling to take in oral translation!

This is a pedagogical challenge. In the classes between pre-test and post-test, we meet this challenge by first explaining SLA theory to our students and next by practicing consciousness-raising activities that aim at strengthening their discourse and strategic competences, rather than focusing on singled-out linguistic items. That way our students get a more holistic perception of language, and our data show that they are indeed progressing along the path to professional oral competence.

8.0. References and literature

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