The translator’s vocabulary: do our words tell who we are?

The translator's vocabulary: *do our words tell who we are?*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the vocabulary used by novice vs. more experienced translators from a longitudinal perspective, so as to describe its nature, distribution and evolution. Data have been gathered in the framework of an empirical longitudinal product-oriented study which investigates the development of translation competence in a sample of novice and (more) experienced translators, whose performances are monitored over three years. Thanks to the specific research design adopted, the variables under investigation can be analysed both synchronically and diachronically, so that any discrepancies in the nature and distribution of the vocabulary used by novices vs. professionals can be observed. Such twofold perspective allows for a thorough investigation of the nature of translators' vocabulary and its evolution as they gain experience and expertise. Finally, a possible relation between the textual trends observed in more experienced translators as opposed to novices and the participants' assumed level of competence will be suggested.

Keywords

Translation competence, basic vocabulary, empirical study, longitudinal study.

1. Introduction

Research on the relationship between vocabulary and personality is all but new in psycholinguistics, with considerable scientific evidence showing that words are windows into one's world.[1] Without any intention to describe the translator's mind or personality, which is neither its scope nor its ambition, this paper examines the attitudes of novice vs. more experienced translators towards the use of vocabulary, with the aim to find a possible relation between their lexical choices and translation competence (TC).

The investigation adopts an eminently descriptive approach so as to paint a picture of the vocabulary used by the participants and map it on their supposed levels of TC, without any claim to assess their lexical choices from a qualitative perspective. However, this does not preclude the possibility that, if a particular type of vocabulary proves peculiar to professional translators as opposed to novices, some qualitative assumptions may be made about the adequacy of the lexical choices made by (more) experienced translators, which could only be confirmed by a subsequent qualitative assessment of the same translations. Also, since vocabulary is strictly related to the register and function of a text, a lexical choice cannot be adequate or inadequate per se, but only in relation to the specific translation task. Hence, the trends described in this paper will be related to the participants' level of competence, but not (necessarily) to the quality of their translations.[2]

2. Investigating translation competence: an introduction

In the last decades, the definition of TC has fed a lively academic debate, which has not yet resulted in definite and shared conclusions. Early research on TC – however unempirical and sometimes anecdotal (cf. Colina, 2003: 29; Rothe-Neves, 2007: 128) – was fundamental to the future developments in this field since it allowed for the conceptualisation of TC as a distinct non-innate competence (vs. a sub-category of bilingualism) that is acquired and developed through specific training (cf., among others, Chesterman, 1997; Lörscher, 2012; Presas, 2000; Toury, 1986). This resulted in a growing number of studies exploring the definition, acquisition and development of TC, which was then considered as translation- rather than language-specific. With the so-called "empirical turn" (Snell-

1 Further references on this topic can be found at: http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/HomePage/Faculty/Pennebaker/Reprints/writingrefs.htm and http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/HomePage/Faculty/Pennebaker/Reprints/index.htm.

2 The PhD research project on which this analysis is based takes into account other variables, including translation acceptability and error analysis. The possible relation between such variables and the use of vocabulary will be explored in the PhD thesis and other future publications.

Hornby, 2006: 115) in the mid-1980s, research on TC has moved towards a more scientific and empirically-based approach which relies on the direct observation of the translation process and/or the analysis of translations produced within an empirical setting. Empirical studies have tried to shed light on the nature and development of TC by searching for recurring patterns in the performance of and/or the translations produced by single or groups of trainees and professionals, so as to gain some insights into the specific competence required of a professional translator (cf. Göpferich, 2009; PACTE, 2008, 2009, 2011a, 2011b).

In fact, today TC is mostly regarded as a specific professional competence with a multicomponential nature (cf. EMT Expert Group, 2009; Göpferich, 2009; Kiraly, 2013; PACTE, 2003; Pym, 2003), though no agreement has been reached about the number and type of its components (as well as on the relevant terminology, including the term 'Translation Competence' itself). The terminological and conceptual discrepancies which still persist despite the extensive research carried out so far (for an overview, see Quinci, in press) thus require further investigation on TC, from a combination of both process- and product-oriented perspectives.

2.1. An empirical longitudinal study on translation competence: the research design

In the attempt to contribute to the analysis and definition of TC, an empirical longitudinal product-oriented study has been carried out at the University of Trieste, comparing the performances of translators at different stages in the development of their TC. The sample consists of about 60 participants, divided into four cohorts, namely: professional translators (Group P), and three groups of translation trainees at the University of Trieste, i.e. BA students (Group N, 'novices') and first-year and second-year MA students (Groups I1 and I2, i.e. first- and second-year 'intermediates' respectively). Table 1 below provides an overview of the overall structure of the sample.

Year	*BA (Novices)*	*MA (Intermediates)*		*Professionals*
		1st year	*2nd year*	
2012	GROUP N 1st-year trainees	GROUP Ia 1st-year trainees	GROUP Ib 2nd-year trainees	GROUP P
2013	GROUP N 2nd-year trainees	GROUP Ic 1st-year trainees	GROUP Ia 2nd-year trainees	
2014	GROUP N 3rd-year trainees	GROUP Id 1st-year trainees	GROUP Ic 2nd-year trainees	

Table 1. Overall structure of the sample per year (cf. Quinci, in press)

All participants performed six translation tests, each involving the translation of a non-specialist article from English into their mother tongue (Italian), as well as the compilation of a brief questionnaire about the translation task. The translation tests were performed at regular intervals over three years (2011-2014), so as to allow for both the synchronic analysis of the target texts (TTs) produced by translators with different levels of TC and the diachronic analysis of the TTs produced by each group throughout the duration of the study. The variables under investigation include a wide range of process- and product-related aspects whose analysis aims to describe TC as a set of procedural and textual patterns shared by translators at approximately the same stage in the development of their TC. Of the different variables considered (e.g. translation delivery time, perceived source text difficulty, reference materials used, lexicometric measures, lexical density and variation, readability, syntactic variation, translation errors and acceptability), this paper only discusses the nature of the vocabulary used by the participants, in the attempt to identify possible patterns in their lexical choices and observe whether such patterns may be ascribed to their level of TC. The following sections provide some insights into the theoretical framework adopted for the analysis and a description of the trends observed so far, both synchronically and diachronically.

3. The Basic Vocabulary of Italian: theoretical and methodological issues

Following De Mauro (2003: 115-117), the lexicon of a language can be described as a sphere made of multiple layers (cf. Figure 1). Moving inwards, the first layer includes the specialised terminology that is only used by the experts of that specific field and is not generally known or used outside the specialised communicative context, as well as the hapax of influential, well-known texts, i.e. words that only occur once in the most important texts of a given culture. The second layer, i.e. the 'common vocabulary' (CV) of a language, consists of some specialised terms as well as some words of restricted geographical areas that can be however understood, known, and used by most speakers outside that specialised or geographical communicative context. The third layer includes the so-called 'basic vocabulary' (BV), i.e. the set of words of the CV that are definitely known to most speakers who have completed at least eight years of basic education. Finally, the most internal layer, i.e. the 'fundamental vocabulary' (FV), includes the words that are understood, known and used by all native speakers of that given language who have passed childhood.

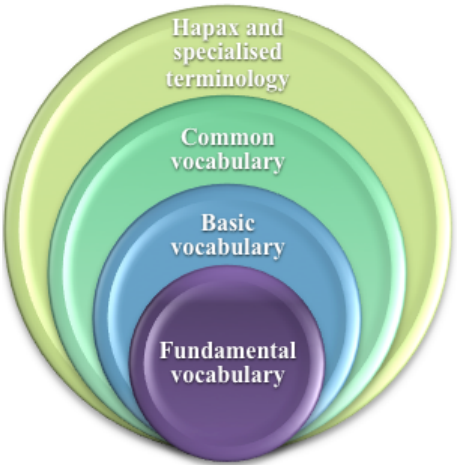

Figure 1. The structure of lexicon as defined by De Mauro (2003)

Starting from word frequency, in 1980 De Mauro identified the basic vocabulary of the Italian language (BVI), which integrates high-frequency words and high-availability words. It includes about 7,050 words which fall into three distinct sub-categories, i.e. the FV, the 'high-usage vocabulary' (HUV), and the 'high-availability vocabulary' (HAV), as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

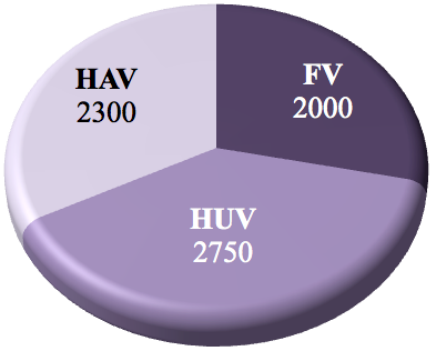

Figure 2. The structure of the BVI

The FV (about 2,000 words) and the HUV (about 2,750 words) have been identified based on word frequency and include the most frequent Italian words, covering respectively 90% and 6% of all spoken and written text occurrences. On the other hand, the HAV includes approximately 2,300 words which might not be commonly used in spoken or written texts, but are nevertheless 'available' to (i.e. understood and known by) most adult native speakers as they relate to everyday life objects, facts and experiences (cf. De Mauro, 2003). Hence, as pointed out by Chiari and De

Mauro (2010: 25), the BVI paints "a full picture of not only written and spoken usages, but also purely mental usages of words." The BVI thus provides a useful tool not only during the drafting of a text, but also for analysis purposes, i.e. as a measurement tool to assess the (lexical) complexity and clarity of that text.[3]

On the basis of these considerations, the lexical analysis of the target texts produced by the sample relied on the BVI as a tool to gain some insights into the lexical choices made by translators. The analysis explores the nature and distribution of the participants' vocabulary and monitors its (possible) evolution throughout the duration of the study. It has been carried out automatically via the software *Guida all'uso delle parole* by Èulogos (1997),[4] which maps the words of a given text on the BVI.

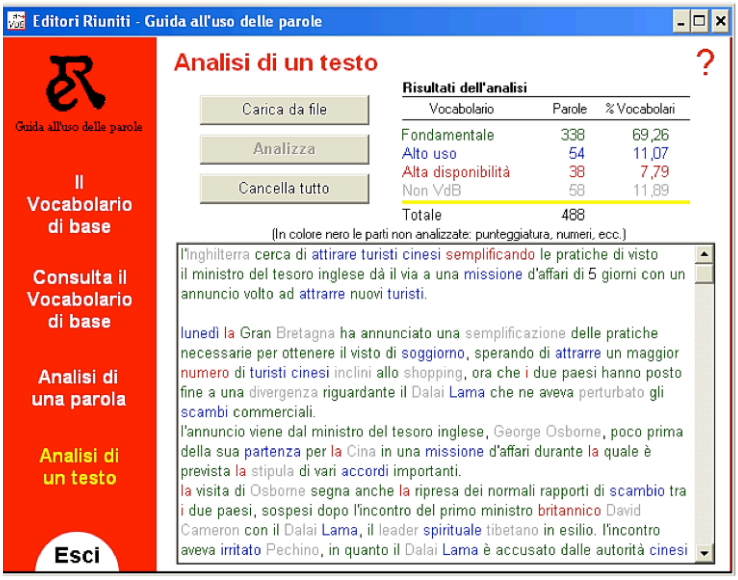

FIGURE 3. Screenshot of the software used for the analysis of the translators' vocabulary

3 The use of the BVI is one of the measures suggested for language simplification in Italian administrative and governmental institutions. It has been added as an Appendix to the "Codice di stile delle comunicazioni scritte ad uso delle amministrazioni pubbliche", published in 1994, (http://www.funzionepubblica.gov.it/media/875448/codice%20di%20stile%20cassese-1994.pdf) and is quoted as a tool for language simplification in the relevant directives of the Italian government, i.e. the 2002 "Direttiva sulla semplificazione del linguaggio dei testi amministrativi" (http://www.funzionepubblica.gov.it/media/342424/direttiva.pdf), as well as the 2005 "Direttiva sulla semplificazione del linguaggio delle pubbliche amministrazioni" (http://www.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/assets/files/10/20051025112716.pdf).

4 Since 1980, when it was first released as an annex to the volume *Guida all'uso delle parole*, the BVI has not undergone any major changes, which explains the use of apparently outdated software. Though a new version of the BVI (the "New Basic Vocabulary of Italian") has been recently presented by Chiari and De Mauro (2010), at the time of writing it is still not available for analysis purposes.

As shown in Figure 3 above, the software highlights each word of the text by using different colours according to the specific category it falls into (i.e. green for the FV, blue for the HUV, red for the HAV and grey for the words which are not included in the BVI, here referred to by the abbreviation NBV). The number of occurrences and percentages for all categories is given in a table in the upper-right corner of the window. Multi-word units, phrases and compound nouns are not considered as single instances but each word (token) they are made of is considered as a separate instance..

By way of example, Figure 3 above shows the compound noun 'Dalai Lama' with 'Dalai' and 'Lama' being considered as two distinct units, the former not being included in the BVI and the latter falling into the HUV. Obviously, this approach might considerably affect both the quantitative and the qualitative results of the analysis if taken as such. However, the present paper (and the empirical study at large) does not use these particular data for linguistic purposes, i.e. to provide a purely linguistic description of the target texts per se, but rather for comparative purposes, i.e. to contrast and compare the percentages[5] scored by each group as indicators of possible differences in their use of vocabulary. Also, the potential inaccuracies caused by such approach are deemed to have a limited impact on this particular contrastive analysis from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective as: (a) the analysis is carried out by using the same software, which ensures consistency in the classification of multi-word units, phrases and compound nouns, and (b) the analysis considers multiple translations of the same source texts (STs) containing approximately the same (number of) multi-word units, phrases and compound nouns, which considerably reduces the impact of inaccurate classifications when comparing the results. Consider for instance the abovementioned compound noun 'Dalai Lama': both units will always fall into the same categories, i.e. NBV and HUV respectively; also, this same compound noun will most definitely occur in all the target texts analysed with approximately the same number of occurrences, which ensures consistency and comparability of data.

Yet, for these same reasons, the figures provided by the software do not maintain the same consistency from a diachronic perspective (i.e. for the contrastive analysis of data relating to the translations of different STs produced by the same group) as the number and type of multi-word units, phrases and compound nouns in the ST may considerably vary, thus affecting significantly the comparison between the percentages scored by the same group in different translation tests. In view of this consideration, the diachronic analysis will monitor the (possible) evolution in the use of vocabulary not by comparing the scores of the four groups but rather by considering their ranking with reference to the four cat-

5 To ensure data comparability, both the synchronic and diachronic analyses rely on the percentage of FV, HAV, HUV and NBV scored by the groups, rather than on their absolute scores.

egories of the BVI, i.e. by observing whether a group tends to score consistently higher or lower percentages as compared to the others.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Preliminary remarks

Taking into account the considerations outlined in the previous section, the trends observed about the translators' lexical choices need to be related to the relevant ST, which might affect the TTs' register and vocabulary. A list of the STs translated in the first five translation tests is provided in Table 2 below.

Test	Title	Publication	Date	Length (words)
1	*Why I sent Oxford a rejection letter*	theguardian.com	19/01/2012	352
2	*How low can you go?*	Britain in 2011 *Environment News*	19/11/2010	358
3	*Looking for a Google*	The Economist	06/10/2012	383
4	*The UN Commission on the Status of Women unmasks equality's enemies*	theguardian.com	18/03/2013	403
5	*Britain looks to lure Chinese visitors with simplified visa rules*	The Wall Street Journal	14/10/2013	374

Table 2. Overview of the STs translated in the first five translation tests

Given the time constraints imposed for the test (2 hours), the length of the STs ranges from 352 to 403 words, including the title. As can be inferred from their titles, the articles deal with different topics, ranging from personal experiences (Text 1, on a rejection letter sent by a candidate to Oxford University as a complaint against the British higher education system) to environmental, economic, and social issues (respectively Text 2, on EU carbon dioxide emission reduction targets; Text 3, about microlending and business management in poor countries; Text 4, on women's rights; and Text 5, reporting on political and touristic issues between UK and China). Hence, the vocabulary of the first text is indeed less specialised as compared to the others, whose limited technical terms have however entered everyday language and are frequently used in newscasts and newspapers, e.g. "greenhouse gas emissions" (Text 2), "microlender" (Text 3), "social capital" (Text 4), and "biometric data" (Text 5). In fact, the subtle discrepancies in the register and vocabulary of Text 1 might still have influenced the results of the analysis, as will be outlined in the following section.

This section outlines the trends observed in the data relating to the use of vocabulary by the different groups of participants and suggests a possible relation between such trends and the participants' assumed level of TC. Data are presented via both graphs (cf. Figure 4 below) and tables (Table 3, 4, 5, and 6 below), the latter ranking the percentages of the four groups in a decreasing order from left to right. The symbols '=' and '>' are used to show whether the difference between the percentages is respectively smaller or greater than 0.5%.

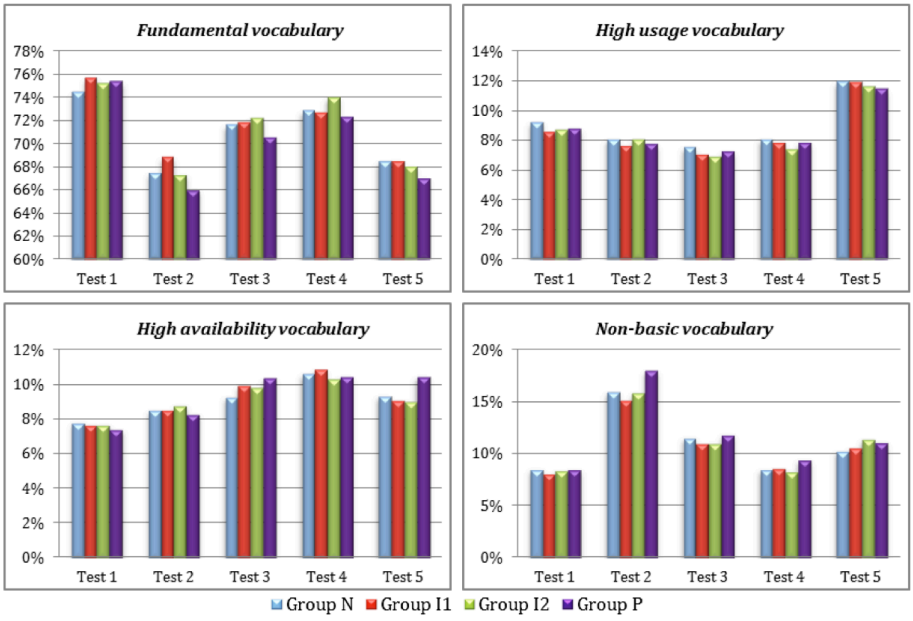

Figure 4. Average percentage of words in the FV, HUV, HAV, and NBV per group (diachronic perspective)

As Figure 4 above suggests, the percentages scored by the four groups of participants vary significantly from one test to another, with the same category accounting on average for about 75% or 65% of a TT, as in the case of the FV in Test 1 and 2 respectively. As anticipated in the previous sections, this implies that the register and vocabulary of the relevant ST do play a role in the participants' lexical choices. This might be due to either a word-for-word approach to the translation task or a conscious stylistic choice, which in both cases results in the reproduction (whether intentional or not) of the ST register.

These differences notwithstanding, the highest percentages are consistently scored by FV, which accounts on average for 71.01% of the whole TT in the five translation tests, followed by NBV (11.09%), HAV (9.21%) and HUV (8.67%), as shown in

Figure 5 below. Hence, BVI (i.e. the aggregate sum of FV, HUV and HAV) accounts on average for about 89% of the TTs, while NBV only covers the remaining 11%.

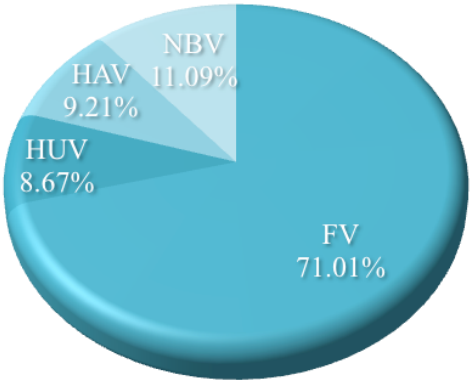

Figure 5. Average distribution of the vocabulary of the TTs (aggregate data from the four groups in the sample)

On the basis of these preliminary considerations, it is interesting to note that the most significant differences between professionals and novices in the distribution of vocabulary among the four categories considered (i.e. FV, HUV, HAV and NBV) relate to the two most represented categories in the TTs, i.e. FV and NBV.

FV *(from highest to lowest)*							
Test 1	I1	=	P	=	I2	>	N
Test 2	I1	>	N	=	I2	>	P
Test 3	I2	=	I1	=	N	>	P
Test 4	I2	>	N	=	I1	=	P
Test 5	I1	=	N	=	I2	>	P

Table 3. Ranking of the percentages scored by the groups in relation to the FV

NBV *(from highest to lowest)*							
Test 1	N	=	P	=	I2	=	I1
Test 2	P	>	N	=	I2	=	I1
Test 3	P	=	N	=	I2	=	I1
Test 4	P	=	I1	=	N	=	I2
Test 5	I2	=	P	=	I1	=	N

Table 4. Ranking of the percentages scored by the groups in relation to the NBV

Tables 3 and 4 above rank the four groups in decreasing order as concerns the average percentages scored in the use of FV and NBV. As highlighted (in light and dark grey for group N and P respectively), novices and professionals show opposite tendencies in relation to the use of both FV and NBV, with professionals mostly scoring the lowest percentages of FV and the highest of NVB, and novices showing the opposite trend. The two groups hold the same order, with professionals consistently following and preceding novices in Table 3 and 4 respectively. The only exception to this general rule is observed in Test 1, where novices tend to use a more sophisticated vocabulary as compared to professionals, who scored

higher in FV and lower in NBV. However, as already mentioned, the ST translated in this first test had a quite different register and vocabulary as compared to the other STs, as it is a first-person narrative reporting on the personal experience and beliefs of the author in relation to the British educational system, rather than an impersonal report on a social or environmental issue. Hence, professionals might have considered this particular aspect when opting for a particular lexical choice, so as to reproduce the style of a young writer, as opposed to novices, who used in this case a more sophisticated vocabulary.

Despite NBV scores being very close to one another (the difference between the positions in the ranking is in most cases ≤ 0.5%, with the sole exception of Groups P and N in Test 2, as shown in Tables 3 and 4 and Figure 4 above), the fact that professionals and novices consistently hold the same ranking order for both FV and NBV in almost all tests clearly shows a trend, which is supported by repeated measurements. This trend, with novices using on average a higher proportion of FV, seems to be further confirmed by the data relating to HUV, shown in Table 5 below.

HUV *(from highest to lowest)*							
Test 1	N	>	P	>	I2	>	I1
Test 2	N	=	I2	>	P	>	I1
Test 3	N	>	P	>	I1	>	I2
Test 4	N	>	I1	=	P	>	I2
Test 5	N	>	I1	>	I2	>	P

Table 5. Ranking of the percentages scored by the groups in relation to the HUV

Provided that the HUV includes high frequency words (i.e. the most common and frequent words after those included in the FV), the novices' stable first position in the ranking seems to confirm the hypothesis that they tend to rely more on basic vocabulary, as suggested by the contrastive analysis of the groups' ranking in relation to FV and NBV.

As concerns HAV, data do not seem to show any recurring pattern in relation to the participants' supposed level of TC (see Table 6 below).

HAV *(from highest to lowest)*							
Test 1	N	=	I1	=	I2	=	P
Test 2	I2	=	N	=	I1	=	P
Test 3	P	=	I1	=	I2	>	N
Test 4	I2	=	P	=	N	=	I1
Test 5	P	>	N	=	I1	=	I2

Table 6. Ranking of the percentages scored by the groups in relation to the HAV

The average percentages scored by all groups fall within a very short interval, each being ≤ 0.5% as compared to the next one (with only two exceptions); also, both professionals and novices rank highest, middle and lowest, without following any recognisable pattern. Yet, it should be stressed that HAV is not frequency-based but has been identified on the basis of "a psycholinguistic insight experimentally verified" (Chiari & De Mauro, 2010: 27). This means that the data relating to HAV do not directly influence the claims made about the different approaches of novices and professionals towards high-frequency words.

5. Conclusions

This paper has reported on the results of a longitudinal empirical study aimed to map the use of vocabulary (among other variables) on the participants' assumed level of TC. The longitudinal design adopted allowed for both the monitoring of the evolution in the vocabulary used by the four groups of participants, on the one hand and, on the other, a sort of double-check procedure whereby the trends observed in each test can be further supported (or rejected) by subsequent tests. By way of example, in the first test the data relating to FV (Table 3) and NBV (Table 4) suggested that novices used a more sophisticated vocabulary as compared to professionals and both groups of intermediates, as they relied most on NBV and scored the lowest percentage of FV. This first result was however contradicted by subsequent tests showing the opposite trend. Also, despite the small intervals between the percentages scored by the different groups, the longitudinal perspective showed some consistent patterns in the data analysed, with novices and professionals mostly holding the same ranking order. In this case, even though data do not show any definite and clear trends from a quantitative point of view, the sequence of repeated measurements suggesting the same trends can be taken as indicative of the general reliability of the analysis as a whole.

The results presented in the article provide some interesting insights into both the overall structure of the TTs produced by the sample and the vocabulary generally used by the different groups of participants. FV accounts on average for 71.01% of the whole TT in the five translation tests, followed by NBV (11.09%), HAV (9.21%) and HUV (8.67%). Hence, the BVI (i.e. the aggregate sum of FV, HUV and HAV) accounts on average for about 89% of the TTs, while NBV only covers the remaining 11%. The discrepancies in vocabulary use between the groups of novices and professionals are mostly related to FV and NBV, i.e. the two categories which account for most of each TT. Except for the first test, data show a regular pattern, with professionals ranking higher than novices as concerns NBV and novices ranking higher than professionals in the use of FV. This would suggest that either less experienced translators have a more limited and basic vocabulary or, regardless the size of their vocabulary, they simply tend to rely more on high-frequency words. Their inclination towards a less

sophisticated vocabulary might therefore be either a Hobson's choice or a deliberate stylistic choice.

The results of the first translation test might be of some use in this regard since they show the opposite trend in professionals, who scored on average higher percentages of FV as compared to novices. This irregularity has been ascribed in the analysis to the specific nature of the ST, which is a first-person narrative on a personal experience and has a slightly different register as compared to the other STs used in the study. Consequently, professionals may have used a different proportion of BVI and more significantly relied on FV to meet the peculiarities of that particular ST, whereas less experienced translators did not adapt their vocabulary to the specific needs of the single translation task. This assumption, though, would need further supporting evidence, which might be collected for instance by comparing the performances of novices and professionals in relation to different types of STs. If proven correct, these observations on the use of vocabulary might be of use in translator training to show translation trainees the importance of a customised approach to the specific translation task. In the framework of the wider empirical study on TC, the results illustrated above will also be related to the quality assessment carried out on the same target texts, so as to possibly correlate certain trends in the use of vocabulary to high-quality or low-quality performances.

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