

# Towards a new characterization of Translation Errors: From Pre-symptomatic to Postsymptomatic Errors

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# Abstract

The research on Translation Errors has traditionally been carried out from the product point of view, i.e., the translation as a result. This paper aims to prove the interest in going beyond the product-oriented perspective, consisting in the comparison of the source-text and target-text and dealing with the error phenomenon from the process-oriented point of view. In order to do so an experiment was conducted: ten participants (first year undergraduate translation students from the University of Alicante, Spain) were asked to translate a deeply ironic journalistic text from French into Spanish. We recorded all their actions while translating with a piece of software which captured all what they saw on their screens, what they said and what they wrote simultaneously, and saved them as compressed video files in real-time. This experiment provided us with a double nature corpus: a) a textual corpus (10 translated texts) and b) a multimedia corpus (10 compressed video files). We studied the errors they made from a product-process combined perspective. After this analysis we could establish the existence of two process-based error families: the pre-symptomatic and the post-symptomatic errors.

Keywords: Translation error, Product, Process, Pre-symptomatic error, Post-symptomatic error

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# Introduction

The Translation Error is one of the most common phenomena if we talk about the translation activity. It would be a truism to state that every day and everywhere translation errors occur. Professional translators, trainers, trainees, translation "consumers"... have to cope with them quite often. Even though it would be absurd to call into question the existence of this phenomenon, one must admit that its characterization is not so straightforward. For the purposes of this study, that characterization will be based upon two main elements: the definitions and the classifications of translation errors from the late 1950s –date considered by some scholars (Vega, 1994: 53) as the date of birth of contemporary Translation Studies– until today.

# The Translation Error: Definitions and Classifications

In order to address the definition of the concept of *Translation Error* we reviewed a set of significant studies<sup>1</sup>that, from different perspectives, directly or indirectly investigated this interesting phenomenon. It should be noted, however, that we did not find any error definition based on the process-oriented point of view. In other words, scholars had, almost exclusively, defined the translation error from the product-oriented perspective. This could be explained by translation scholars' late interest in empirical process-oriented translation research, which became especially noticeable after the generalization of some tools borrowed from cognitive psychology and computer engineering. Therefore, we borrowed the main idea from each study and we paid special attention to fourteen definitions (Tolosa, 2013: 78) which seemed to be original and shed new light on the issue. After having merged these definitions, it is possible to define the Translation Error as "an inappropriate equivalence according to a translation assignment. From a linguistic point of view, it could be defined as every flaw or defect in the target language made in trying to reproduce the linguistic source text material. From a discursive

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Bensoussan, M. & Rosenhouse, J. (1990), Collombat, I. (2009), Cruces Colado, S. (2001), Dancette, J. (1989), Delisle J., Lee-Jahnke, H. & Cormier, M. (1999), Gile, D. (1992), Gouadec, D. (1989), Hansen, G. (2008), Hatim, B. & Mason, I. (1997), Hönig, H. (1987), House, J. (1977), Hurtado, A. & Martínez Melis, N. (2001), Hurtado, A. (2001), Kupsch-Losereit, S. (1985), Kussmaul, P. (1995), Larose, R. (1989), Mejía, C. (2008), Newmark, P. (1988), Nord, C. (1996), Palazuelos, J. C. et al. (1992), Pym, A. (1992), Sager, J. (1989), Santoyo, J. C. (1994), Séguinot, C. (1989), Spilka, I. (1984), Williams, M. (1989), Wilss, W.



and textual perspective, it is a defect related to the factors that should have been taken into account to generate the target text -a bad choice made when choosing a target text as a substitute of a source text in accordance with a specific purpose and reader. Moreover, it represents an unjustified inobservance of the textual coherence, cohesion and adequacy rules. From a communicative and functional point of view, it unleashes the groundless distortion of a message or its features with regard to the generic communication rules, the lack of equivalence between the source and the target situational dimensions, the inobservance of the rules governing a linguistic contact situation, the unfounded distortion in the target text of the source text communicative function, the inappropriate manifestation of equivalence in the target text – understanding equivalence as a linguistic product which should work in the new cultural polysystem as it worked in the source cultural polysystem. From a professional point of view, it represents the failure to comply with the translation task specifications - the distance that separates the expected results from those really reached in a specific translation project. All in all, the translation error constitutes the lack of respect towards the function that the translated text should play in the target linguistic and cultural system, the inobservance of the textual coherence, cohesion and adequacy target language rules, the lack of respect towards the linguistic, cultural and text-type conventions and communication specific situations related to the translation task at hand – all of this with a common factor: the specifications of the translation task do not justify such inobservances".

As we did with definitions, we merged (Tolosa, 2013: 81) the essence of the classifications that we have previously analysed. We then realised that the first big dichotomy that could be established was based on the error origin or cause. Errors could appear as a consequence of a deficient, insufficient or absent comprehension of (a part of) the source text or as a result of a deficient, insufficient o absent rendering of the source text in the target language. These potential causes could, in turn, affect the microlinguistic, macrolinguistic and functional acceptability of the target text. The microlinguistic acceptability may be impaired by local errors that could have a bearing on grammatical, lexical, semantic, morphological, syntactical and

typographical aspects. In light of what the scholars considered in their investigations, these errors (called by some of them "language errors") were the easiest ones to deal with inasmuch as the fact that determining whether the segment in which they appear is correct or not does not present major difficulties. Apart from the errors that affect the microlinguistic acceptability, we find those that may directly impact on the macrolinguistic acceptability (considered by some scholars as "translation errors", Delisle et al. 1999). These errors have an influence on larger textual portions and, very often, they cannot be analysed under binary (i.e. correct or incorrect) parameters. It is therefore more difficult to state categorically that a segment is correct or wrong if we do not take into account other latent or patent factors. These factors can concern textual, pragmatic or stylistic aspects. Indeed, from the discursive and textual point of view, these errors may impair the target text coherence, cohesion and cultural and situational pertinence (use and user/register and dialects). They can also compromise the pragmatic value of the source material, i.e. implicit meanings, presuppositions, extra-linguistic elements, etc. Finally, they can also affect the source text stylistic value and, thus, some stylistic nuances may be non-existent in the target text. These errors can diminish or even ruin the clarity of the target text, which becomes a stiff and unnatural product. This kind of errors can adopt many forms: faulty, imprecise, poor, clumsy, unnatural, forced, ambiguous, cacophonous, vague and/or pleonastic renderings. Beside the errors that affect the microlinguistic and macrolinguistic acceptability of the target text, it is possible to define a third group consisting of errors that impair its functional acceptability. As postulated by functionalist scholars, every source text has a main function that has to be respected (or not) in the target text and culture, according to customer specifications, and which determines every professional translation task. The lack of respect towards the translation task function could also be considered as an error, even though the target text is free from microlinguistic and/or macrolinguistic inadequacies. These three groups of errors can appear on the target text under many forms: barbarism, ambiguity, repetition, solecism, inappropriate expression, zeugma, etc. (these errors often affecting microtextual elements); incorrect meaning, misinterpretation, unjustified addition, unjustified omission, interference, nonsense, hypertranslation, inappropriate paraphrase, loss, over-translation, under-translation, etc. (these errors frequently affecting macrotextual and/or functional elements).

All these definitions and classifications seem to have something in common: the Translation Error is always analysed from the object or product perspective. We state that it is both possible and pedagogically interesting to analyse the Translation Error also from a process-oriented perspective in order to complete the previous information.

# The Translation Error from a Product and Process-oriented Perspective

Process-oriented research suggests that translating is feasible thanks to a set of mental operations –still quite superficially known– which make it possible to turn a source text into a target text. The relevance and interest of looking into these processes from an empirical point of view have been proved through excellent investigations, publications and conferences from the 1980s. Understanding the translation activity as a cognitive (and textual) phenomenon and taking into account what has been stated above, we considered the possibility of analysing the Translation Error phenomenon from the process point of view, without disregarding the Translation Error as result or product. To do so, we designed and conducted an empirical investigation based on an exploratory study (Tolosa, 2013).<sup>2</sup> We analysed the videos produced by the fifteen subjects who participated in our study and we realized that there is an underlying executive process that determines in a critical way the translation activity. This executive process consists of a set of actions that derive from the cerebral-mental process executed by the translator while s/he carries out her/his translation task. We were able to identify 8 actions that, in general, seemed to form our subjects' executive process: preparation of the tools that the translator will need to feel comfortable while translating (dictionaries, glossaries, specific software, specific text

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In the framework of that research, 15 subjects (3 high school students who wished to pursue the B.A. in Translation and Interpreting offered by the University of Alicante after their secondary education; 9 translation students from the University of Alicante, divided into 3 levels according to the academic year they were enrolled in: beginner, intermediate and advanced levels; and 3 professional translators) were asked to translate 3 texts (of approximately 250 words) from French into Spanish: two journalistic articles taken from the French newspaper *Le Monde*. We also used a scientific fragment, "Micro-circuits", taken from the book *L'homme neuronal*, by Jean-Pierre Changeux. We recorded the subjects' movement/action while translating (which is what we called executive process), what they said and what they wrote simultaneously, without they being aware of it, in order to respect the ecological validity of the experiment. For that purpose, we used a piece of software which captured what they saw on their screens (ZD Soft Screen Recorder) and saved the recordings as compressed video files in real-time. This experiment provided us with a double nature corpus: a) a textual corpus (45 translated texts) and b) a multimedia corpus (45 compressed video files containing all our participants "moves" while translating).

processors, etc.), full source text reading, translation, correction, partial and full target revision, virtual, electronic and paper dictionaries use, internet searches and pauses.

After having studied the executive process of each subject taking part in our experiment, we asked three professional reviewers' to detect the errors in the target texts (product) and finally we proceeded to triangulate the data collected in order to perform a product-(executive) process combined analysis. Thanks to this combined analysis (source text-target text + video), we realised that there were errors that appeared *ex nihilo*, errors that arose spontaneously; they were not preceded by any "symptom", "without previous notice", so to speak. We suggest calling them "pre-symptomatic errors". We also found another significant family of errors that appeared after a set of symptoms, such as chaotic dictionary searches, random consultations, long pauses, false starts, repeated deletions, etc., that we call the "post-symptomatic errors".

# Pre-symptomatic and Post-symptomatic Translation Errors: A New Experiment and Some Conclusions

In order to investigate in a more detailed way the pre-symptomatic and post-symptomatic errors, we conducted a new experiment. In this case, ten participants (first year undergraduate translation students, University of Alicante, Spain) were asked to translate a part (352 words) of a deeply ironic journalistic text from French into Spanish. The text, whose original title was "T'es vraiment cro-mignon",<sup>3</sup> was written by François Reynaert and published in July 2010 in the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. The computers they used to translate the text had an Internet connexion and they had *carte blanche* to use it as they wished while translating. As we did in our previous experiment, we recorded all their actions:<sup>4</sup> what they saw on their screens, what they said and what they wrote simultaneously, and saved all this information as compressed video files in real-time. As a consequence, this experiment provided us with a double nature

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Cf. September 2014. http://www.youscribe.com/catalogue/tous/savoirs/science-de-la-nature/t-es-vraiment-cro-mignon-2120508

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Initially and in order to avoid the Hawthorne effect, we didn't tell them that they were going to be recorded; only after having finished their translation did we let them know that their actions while translating have been recorded and asked them for their permission to use these data anonymously and specially for the purposes of this research.

corpus: a) a textual corpus (10 translated texts) and b) a multimedia corpus (10 compressed video files).

The analysis of the errors made by our ten students led us to some provisional conclusions. In general, post-symptomatic errors may come out as a consequence of the presence of potentially triggering elements (PTE) in the source text.<sup>5</sup> In the case of pre-symptomatic errors, there is no any PTE in the source text and therefore the error appears unexpectedly. According to the recorded actions, the awareness level of the subjects having made the error seems to be higher when it comes to post-symptomatic errors than when we are dealing with pre-symptomatic ones. Simply because post-symptomatic errors appear after conscious efforts made to translate a triggering element. Moreover, post-symptomatic errors are quite often the result of recurrent resolution behaviours. They are much more predictable than pre-symptomatic errors and, from a pedagogical point of view, their treatment is likely to be more feasible just because the trainer is also more aware of their existence. In general, pre-symptomatic errors are more idiosyncratic or typical of one particular person whereas post-symptomatic errors, if we are talking about subjects having similar translation and language skills, may be common for a particular group of subjects.

# **Two Resolution Profiles: The Static and the Chaotic Resolution Profiles**

Our multimedia and textual corpora analysis helped us to establish two resolution profiles that could perfectly be found in the same subject: the static and chaotic resolution profiles. The static resolution profile entails the absence, insufficiency or deficiency of the tasks of identification, representation and planning before starting to translate. As a consequence of this static resolution, the subject translates in a quasi-automatic way until s/he comes across an element that disturbs her/his translation inertia. The problem lies in the fact that without a proper planning task, the resolution process becomes an intuitive and static exercise since the thinking

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> As their name suggests, the *potentially triggering elements* (PTE) of particular behaviours are elements that provoke specific translator reactions aiming at finding the most suitable translation solution in that context. PTE can be divided into several levels: typographical (spelling, typographical conventions), grammatical (morphology, syntax), lexical (general and specific terminology), textual (coherence, cohesion, adequacy), stylistic (connotation, denotation, stylistic value), pragmatic-semantic (intention, implicit meanings, presuppositions) and functional (ST and TT purpose). For more details, cf. Tolosa, 2013:131, 132.



activity, which should govern the whole process, seems non-existent. This static resolution behaviour has another effect: while translating all triggering elements were perceived by our subjects as having the same nature and hence they used the same tools in the same way to deal with them. Static resolution patterns are also visible when focusing on the translator inertia. Indeed, when the (bilingual) dictionary searches did not help them to resolve their doubts, they translated showing a clear lack of reflection, pauses seemed to be random and the revision did not help them notice that they had made mistakes. Finally, it seems that the concomitance of external factors, such as lack of time, did not have a significant effect on the way of translating at the early stages. The static resolution profile can also be understood as the lack of strategies providing the translator with the ability to face the unexpected. On the other hand, when chaotic resolution behaviour governs the translation task, the presence of triggering elements having analogous or similar nature unleashes a set of different and unexpected resolution patterns. In other words, when having to translate elements of similar nature, our translators, in a sort of functional fluctuation, put into practice resolution patters at random, without considering the unoriginal idiosyncrasy of the element they were trying to translate.

Notwithstanding the clear formal differences which exist between the chaotic and static resolution behaviours, we found an implicit feature which led us to postulate that, in reality, these two phenomena are the noticeable result of a common underlying behavioural tendency: our translators showed "an inertial translation process", so to speak. This inertia ended up "anaesthetizing", if we may say so, their potential thinking capacity and, therefore, their translation problem-solving skills. All in all, translating a text in a chaotic way means that the translator uses her/his resolution patterns in a random, unstable and even accidental way. Translating a text in a static way means that the translator uses her/his resolution patterns in an asymptotic and monotonous way. It seems that the translator translates in an automatic<sup>6</sup> way until s/he comes across an element that triggers the controlled mode activation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> *Automatic processing* refers, generally, to thinking and, more specifically, to translating in a non-conscious, unintentional, involuntary and effortless way. *Controlled processing* refers, generally, to thinking and, more specifically, to translating in a conscious, intentional, voluntary, and effortful way. Cf. for example, De Vega, 1984: 150-162.

The flow chart below, which is an abstraction of the behaviours we observed in the subjects participating in our experiment, aims to summarize the ideas presented above. This flow chart should be read from top to bottom and from right to left:

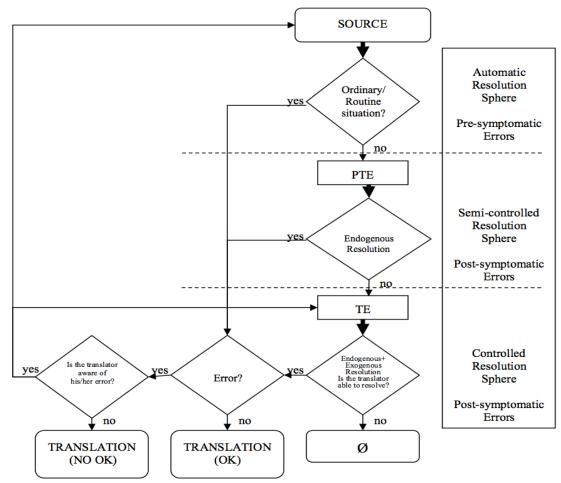


Figure 1. Pre-symptomatic and post-symptomatic errors in their action context (Tolosa, 2013: 258)

According to this flow chart inferred from the observation and analysis of our multimedia and textual corpora, the translator reads the source material and, in principle, s/he globally understands it and starts her/his translation. The translator translates under a more or less regular rhythm unless a "strange" element disrupts it. At that translation stage, without any apparent incident, we can assume that the subject is translating in an ordinary or routine way under a normal or routine situation. It is very likely that s/he carries out her/his task through the



application of patterns s/he has in her/his long-term memory. That is why we call this stage "the automatic resolution sphere" as can be seen on the right hand side of this flow chart. As for the errors appearing at this stage, it should be noted that in this routine situation two logical things could, theoretically, happen: a) errors appear, or b) errors do not appear. Errors that occur at this routine moment are those that we called above pre-symptomatic errors. Taking into account their intrinsic nature, we can say that they are seldom predictable and they can easily go unnoticed to the translators because of the dramatically low awareness they have of them. The routine situation that we have just described is interrupted when a potentially triggering element (PTE) appears. We say potentially triggering element because, for the time being, the pause is the only perceptible action when the element appears. And at this stage two more events can occur: a) the translator solves the PTE by her/himself, without needing external tools. That is what we call "endogenous resolution", which may end (or not) in error. Errors which happen at this semicontrolled resolution stage are those we named above post-symptomatic errors, so called because, when the translator comes across the PTE, the pause acts as a symptom to the researcher and also to the translator her/himself. Thanks to this, the translator is more aware of her/his own problems. However, a second event can happen: b) the translator is not able to deal with the PTE endogenously and so it becomes, *de facto*, the triggering element (TE) of a particular resolution behaviour. The translator will face the element and will try to solve it by combining a set of endogenous and exogenous resources (dictionaries, Internet, etc.). Again two situations could arise: a) the translator is able to solve the element satisfactorily or not, or b) the translator is not able to solve the element and then s/he omits it. Errors that occur at this controlled resolution sphere are also post-symptomatic errors. Because of the cognitive and instrumental overload suffered by the translator when translating, s/he is likely to be more aware of having made errors at this stage than at the previous ones. The translator error awareness is represented in our flow chart through the rhombus situated on the very left hand side: "Is the translator aware of the error s/he might have made?" If we get a negative answer, we will logically be dealing with an erroneous translation that will go unnoticed to the translator, as s/he will not realize that s/he made such an error. But if, on the contrary, the translator does notice her/his error when proceeding to the partial or full target text revision, then two things can occur once more: a) the

translator rereads the whole source material with the intention of having a global perception of her/his task starting and ending point and, from that enlarged view, s/he tries to solve the problem, or b) the translator knows quite precisely where the error come from and if it is linked or not to a specific triggering element of the source material. In both cases, the steps followed, as indicated by the ascending arrows, will be the same as if it was a first version. But this time, the translator's aim will not be to translate a source material into another linguistic and cultural system. Now the translator's task would consist in offering a "refined version". The path taken by the translator will probably be quite the same, but the representation and execution tasks will pursue a more specific goal: amending what was judged as not being pertinent, whatever the reason, in the target language and culture.

### **Final Remarks**

The translation error phenomenon has traditionally been investigated from a productoriented perspective since contemporary Translation Studies started in the late 1950s. This entails a lack of process-oriented definitions and classifications of this phenomenon. This also means that its characterization is far from being complete and deserves some attention. With this study, we have tried to make a modest contribution to this characterization from a process-oriented point of view. Accordingly, knowing that: a) every human activity is the result of conscious/controlled and unconscious/automatic actions, b) in the framework of this investigation, translation is considered a human activity, and c) translation could be defined as a combination of controlled and automatic actions aiming at turning a source text, lato sensu, existing in a source space and time and conditioned by a set of factors of diverse nature (linguistic, extra-linguistic, communicative, functional, professional, etc.) into a target text that is also inserted in a specific space and time, which can coincide or not with the source ones, and also determined by some particular factors, we suggest defining the translation error from a process-oriented perspective as the provisional or definitive consequence of an absent, insufficient or deficient handling, management or balance in the strategic combination of automatic and controlled actions which determine different translational behaviours. This imbalance may have an influence in several stages and therefore adopt many forms when

appearing in the target text. In the same vein, our (executive) process investigation encouraged us to put forward a general process-oriented error classification comprising two significant families of errors: pre-symptomatic and post-symptomatic errors. Very often, the first family of errors appears during the development of automatic processes and therefore the subject is much less aware of having made a mistake than when s/he makes a post-symptomatic error. The latter occur frequently during the development of controlled processes. The subject's awareness level of having made this kind of errors is higher and therefore the behaviour shown is also different. We are convinced that the interest of this definition and this admittedly general classification stems from an attempt/a willingness to avoid, to a considerable extent, some approaches to this phenomenon which seem to be too speculative as far as the causes underlying the presence of errors in the target text are concerned.

That being said, it is important to take into account that these definition and classification are intentionally provisional and they should be understood in a clear hypothetic way. They could probably be the starting point of new empirical research. The limitations of this study are obvious: in order to get more far-reaching conclusions we would need a larger number of experimental subjects, a larger number of texts and text types, more than two languages and, especially, we would need to conduct a long-term study which would allow us to observe the subjects' evolution. Perhaps a longitudinal and observational empirical-oriented investigation may shed new light on the translation error phenomenon. Thanks to this kind of research, we would probably get a deeper understanding of pre-symptomatic and post-symptomatic error idiosyncrasies. It would be extremely interesting to investigate the evolution of these errors during translator training.

Henceforth, we already know that one of the cornerstones of research on translation errors could be the symptoms that can be spotted during the translation process. We could now focus our investigation in the correlation which may be established between the presence of multiple errors in the target text and the symptoms which precede them, and analyse the executive process to verify when, where and, as far as possible, why the error occurs, as well as how regularly it appears and how it evolves.

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