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TRANSLATING AUDIOVISUAL SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES FOR EDUCATION: FROM LOST IN TRANSLATION TO GAINED IN TRANSLATION

Introduction

The call for participation in the 2017 workshop “Localisation of videotaped testimonies of victims of National Socialism in educational programmes” states: “The key objective is the joint development of quality concepts (what is ‘good practice?’)”. I was excited to contribute something to that objective from a translation perspective. I had numerous constructive and interesting conversations with my colleagues at the workshop, although I was the only translator and translation scholar there. The other occupational groups represented could be loosely categorized together under the broad label Holocaust Studies. While that collegial exchange was very positive, it confirmed an impression that I had always read about, namely that although Translation Studies scholars working on the topic of “translation and the Holocaust” engage themselves in Holocaust Studies debates, that engagement is usually one-sided. In Holocaust Studies or Holocaust Education, the issue of translation is widely ignored. If it is discussed, then it is in an exclusively theoretical manner, removed from translation practice. In this regard, the translation scholar Peter Davies claims that Holocaust Studies scholars have failed to develop a descriptive methodology for the analysis of Holocaust testimony translation practices – they have instead based their critique on ideas stemming from a purely theoretical discussion of those testimonies, “for example, theories of secondary witnessing, textual trauma or generic innovation – that assume the uniqueness of these texts and make proscriptive, critical judgements about translations.” (2014a: 204) Davies calls instead for a descriptive exploration of translation practices:

“A key task of translation scholarship is to make this activity [of translators] visible, to understand the conditions under which translators have worked, and to uncover the traces of translation in the texts that we rely on and in the systems of knowledge through which we interpret the Holocaust. [...] the Holocaust is literally inconceivable without translation and translators; but this understanding is not useful unless the processes of (re-)creation and mediation involved are also reflected on in ways that acknowledge the specificity of translation as an activity.” (2014b: 168)

This approach also seems to be useful in our common search for “good practices”: This article focusses on the practical processes at work in the translation of survivors’ audiovisual testimonies for educational purposes. The organisation of translation processes and the translators’ working conditions are critical to the result – and thus to how the “legacy of the survivors” is transmitted and experienced. Each particular translation process is generally determined by the contracting institutions – some of which were represented at the workshop. This is a point of intersection that is more than just an abstract meeting between the fields of Translation Studies and Holocaust Studies; here it is possible for us to meet in person as the representatives of those fields in order to develop good practices. Before introducing some possible solutions, however, it is first necessary to briefly outline some of the problems in the field of translation: This section will discuss the results of an investigation into the practical context of audiovisual testimony translation (Degen 2017). The research framework consists of three well-known Berlin institutions in the field of Holocaust Education: 1. *Witnesses of the Shoah. The Visual History Archive in School Education* multimedia archive; 2. *Forced Labor 1939–1945. Memory and History* online archive; 3. *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* video archive. |¹ All of them are or were involved with translating audiovisual Holocaust testimony for education. In summer 2014, I conducted 24 qualitative interviews. Instead of only focussing on translators, I also talked to translation coordinators, project directors, e-learning experts, and administrative coordinators responsible for budget management and third-party funds. Furthermore, I analysed translation

briefs, service contracts, and other translation guidelines, comparing them to legal regulations (e. g. copyright laws or usage rights), industry standards, and DIN/EU norms. Although there is much to discuss from these findings, I will only focus on one point for the purpose at hand, namely the development of good practices. ¹² It is a point that became a central theme in the study and, in my opinion, it is one of the main reasons for planning errors when it comes to translation for the archives: namely, the fundamental misconception of translation.

Lost in Translation: Is Translation just an Outsourced Side Job?

During the study, it became clear that the participants' behaviour was strongly determined by their ideas about translation. That was the case on the structural level – from the criteria for awarding the contract, to the payment, to the work environment – as well as on the operational level – from the translators' applied translation strategy to the fact that archive employees rarely made use of the translators' expertise, most likely due to the fact that they were unaware of said expertise. I was surprised when I discovered how many non-professionals were translating for the archives. Not even half of the interviewed translators were state-approved or had a degree in translation. Only 15% were working exclusively as translators. What the people had in common who were translating for the archives was not that they were professional translators, it was that they were academics (albeit in very different phases of their career). Why is that? The obvious response is that the contract providers did not specifically look to hire professional translators. The institutions' representatives provided a variety of answers as to why that was the case, which were primarily financial or in some way practical (such as a rare language combination or time pressure). According to my research, another explanation is that they have a narrow idea of the scope of work conducted by professional translators. That would also explain the observation that although the archive representatives expressed high quality expectations, that did not lead to awarding contracts to professional translators, as one would expect in any other professional field. On the contrary, contracts

were not often awarded based on a person's translation competence. It was reported that the archives asked translators about their fee, but not about their expertise: In other words, they asked nothing about the very thing that professional translators have to offer the archives.

Terms like "translation competence" or "professional translation expertise" are widely discussed within the translatorial field. While laypeople usually imagine translation solely as a kind of language competence, possibly combined with knowledge of the subject matter, translation competence actually goes far beyond those components. The Translation Studies scholar Anthony Pym defines it as a "multicomponent competence, involving sets of skills that are linguistic, cultural, technological and professional". (2003: 481) Such skills include:

"world and field knowledge, translation theories and methods, [...] skills in the analysis of the client's brief and the source text, translation strategies, TT [target text] presentation (including layout), documentation, terminology, and knowledge of the translators' professional practice." (Ibid.: 486)

That last skill includes knowledge of professional norms and standards, the legal framework (e. g. usage rights, copyrights, or tax policies) as well as the ability to provide advice and support to customers or colleagues unfamiliar with translation processes (e. g. in an interdisciplinary team, working on the same project). According to this definition, translation is much more than just reproducing a text in a different language. Considering the educational context at hand, it should be noted that the question "how do we get the message across?" is also central when it comes to translation. And from a professional point of view, a satisfactory answer to that question does not depend exclusively on the (translated) text, but rather on extratextual factors such as the target group, communication goal, or transmission medium, which determine the appropriate translation strategy. If translators are not incorporated into the project planning process from the beginning, then they at least need to be well informed of the above factors in order to deliver optimum

results. That also applies to the archives discussed here. However, the idea that incorporating professional translators into an interdisciplinary team within the archive could have a positive effect on both the translation process and the quality of the translation was simply not understood. Instead, the archives only focussed on language competence and knowledge of the subject matter when recruiting translators. A particularly remarkable point here is that my study supports the observation that, in doing so, they repeatedly separated form (language) and content – and the translator’s skill set was reduced to the former. Therefore, based on that misperception, the translator’s main task is thought to be simply finding target language equivalencies for linguistic signs – something reminiscent of translation exercises during language class. This understanding of translation explains why so many scholars in the researched field (who were not professional translators) were translating: as academics, they have an understanding of a foreign language and – based on this language-fixated understanding of translation – the almost automatic next step is to presume they can also translate that language. In line with the limited idea of the scope of work conducted by professional translators, these “content experts” even seem almost overqualified in comparison: they are not only skilled in foreign languages, they also contribute contextual knowledge – something perceived as an added bonus. And as far as those who “only” translate are concerned, less is expected from them apparently. It is not surprising that many of the interviewed non-professional translators had almost no concept of translation competence either – they come out of the same academic environment as their contract providers, namely the field of Holocaust Studies, mentioned at the beginning of this article. They are unaware of professional practices and do not follow discussions in the field of Translation Studies. A similar, language-fixated understanding of translation was predominant in those cases as well. It became clear that the contract providers – as well as many non-professional translators – had no awareness of professional translation expertise and thus no awareness of the lack thereof and the contribution it could make towards the successful transmission of crucial historical documentation.

The particular notion of translation observed in this study is very problematic: In the archives, it led to project planning errors and additional work. Furthermore, misunderstanding translators as mere language service providers is a precondition for the decision to outsource: While most of the other professions involved in the preparation of the audiovisual testimonies were part of a team based within the respective institutions, translation was usually an outsourced task. And for that reason, the translators' expertise was not being used effectively. The following quote from a translator, who also worked on the indexing and bibliographical registering of the translated testimonies, shows how presumed "cost savings" in early project stages – made by working with non-professionals – led to additional work later on:

"Everything comes together during the indexing process. All of the mistakes, from the interview methodology to the transcription to the translation, they all accumulate and come up at the end. In addition to the work that you have to do. They just didn't think about that part. [...] That was a catastrophe. It was so badly paid, that you were really exploiting yourself in the end, if you did it right. If you actually worked out what you were getting paid per hour, it would have been 50 cents. [...] And that's just drudgery, the effort put into it has no relation to anything anymore. And then you tend to be sloppy about it all. And that is very critical, because it is really special material we are dealing with here. You should really confront it thoughtfully and with a clear head and not that way. [...] That isn't right." (Interview U_ZA_5, 37:50)

In that project, the poor quality of the interview transcripts led to a significant amount of additional work in the following stages – and probably to a loss in quality as well.

The non-professional translators primarily pursued a translation strategy directed at producing the most precise, "authentic" reproduction of the original possible. Just as in the case of their contract providers, their understanding of translation was much narrower than that of the professional translators; they felt much less responsible for the transmission of the translated content than the professional translators and repeatedly looked to

the pedagogical staff to fulfil that function. Given that we are talking about Holocaust testimonies, the professional translators also considered it their responsibility to provide the most precise possible transmission of the text. In addition to that, however, they expressed that their goal was to generate a target-group-oriented transmission of the content – in view of the intention to use the translation in education. They thus had a broader understanding of the translator’s scope of duties. Since they had also chosen a source text oriented translation strategy, like their non-professional colleagues, they had to go beyond the text level when considering how to successfully transmit that information. Those considerations included, for example, the form and the medium of presentation (key term: archive’s learning platform design) or questions such as how to address translation for educational activities (key term: media competence). Since there had clearly been no plan to include the translators in any exchange about those considerations, there was no space for the systematic implementation of ideas that could have been developed together. For this reason, short supplemental remarks remained the only option for the translators to help with content that was otherwise difficult to understand. Many professional translators used that option to provide additional information so that the recipients of the target text would fully understand it (numbering among them colleagues without knowledge of the source language, including educational staff). One translator made the following comment in that regard:

“I explained all of the many names that came up. Then they disappeared. I noticed that they were not in the transcripts, the ones that you can read afterwards. I would have considered that [information] important. [...] And for terms too, ones that had an entirely different meaning back then. Some explanatory section would have been important, in particular for education. I had the opportunity to make remarks, I made ample use of that opportunity without knowing what would happen with them. And then I was disappointed when I saw that nothing happened with them. Because something was indeed lost in the process.” (Interview U_ZA_1, 40:00)

These remarks were brought up by the translators frequently. Many of them were equally disappointed when they realized that their remarks had “disappeared” or been changed. The above quote is interesting in a few ways. First, it demonstrates that the translator’s responsibilities had not been clearly defined and communication was inadequate, which is characteristic of outsourcing. Second, it exemplifies how a professional translator understands the job: She considered it her responsibility to conduct intensive research in order to fulfil the translation’s intended function (education). Third, it provides a good example of a targeted translation strategy: by including external remarks, the translator intended to impart important information to the recipients of the translation without interfering too much with the testimony itself – one possible solution to the problem of authenticity, which is central when it comes to survivors’ testimonies. It is important to emphasise here the critical effect of the understanding of translation in this example, and the consequences of the archive’s miscomprehension of translation. For the professional translators, intensive research and supplementary explanations were a self-evident component of their translation work to make the testimony understandable to young recipients. Obviously, the archive administration did not even consider the remarks option: Of course, the remarks did not just “disappear” – they were not seen as an integral part of the translation and hence were not used. When I asked one of the project directors about it, the answer was that they simply had not expected any remarks for the recipients (just technical remarks for the editors) and were not prepared for them – to his great regret. At that point, the development of the online presence was already completed and the archive did not see any way to adequately integrate the remarks. Consequently, a lot of important information was lost in translation.

I would like to conclude this section with a positive example. I have discussed the fact that translation competence did not play much of a role in who the archives chose for the contract. There was one exception to that rule however. One of the translation and editing coordinators spoke out emphatically for the hiring of professional translators. The appropriate qualifications or

membership in professional organisations were proof of skill to her. While others pointed to financial constraints, she successfully advocated for more funding from the funding institutions:

“And of course: too expensive, everything is much too expensive. I had to start working on convincing them, I wrote reports, performed some small studies demonstrating why it can’t be translated with Google. Because that was another suggestion, that maybe it could just all be done automatically. Everything had to be proven again. For us translators, we don’t need proof, it is clear to us why that doesn’t work, [...] but for people on the outside, everything had to be proven. Or why it doesn’t work for students to do it. I had to present that in writing, and figure out how long it would take: 40 years with students and 4.5 years with professional translators, if you want to achieve a certain level of quality. We also had to battle with arguments like, ‘oh, quality isn’t so important, the main thing is that we have 400 completely accessible interviews online.’ And that was unimaginable to us, because what does that mean ‘quality isn’t important’, in that case, you can just forget the whole thing.” (Interview L_ZA_1, 00:21:13)

That example illustrates the recommendations for future best practices highlighted in the final section of this paper:

Gained in Translation:

Professional Translators Should Be Part of the Team

According to my research, working in a team and promoting collective knowledge production, starting in the concept phase, would provide a good framework for the direct and sustainable resolution of organisational issues and translation problems.

– Budget-planning

The finding that representatives from financing institutions or contract providers have very little understanding of professional translation is in and of itself neither surprising nor problematic. However, when that is also the case for those working in the archives who are responsible for procuring transla-

tions and managing translation projects, that does indeed become problematic. Without an expert understanding of translation, project organisation suffers and it is impossible to convincingly argue for appropriate funding. The above example is a clear example of how consequential a professional understanding of translation can be. This particular coordinator had worked as a professional translator herself and on the basis of her own professional experience, she knew exactly what was necessary for the translation task at hand – and she mobilised additional funds in order to reach those goals. In this example, expertise had been used effectively indeed.

– Establishment of professional standards and quality criteria

Right from the beginning, professional standards and quality criteria for translation and transcription should be clearly defined – and for that you need professional translators on the team. Next, translators must be sought out who fulfil the developed requirements. The central criterium here is a professional understanding of oneself as a translator, including the corresponding familiarity with occupational norms and standards. The same is true to a lesser extent for transcription: If the quality of the interview transcripts mentioned in the “50 cents example” above had been of a professional standard, the additional work in the later stages could have been avoided.

– Development of clear translation guidelines

The choice of translation strategy should not be arbitrary, it should be thoughtful and consistent. It is therefore necessary to develop a clear translation brief at the beginning. The clearer the guidelines, the better the translation quality. Furthermore, the guidelines are part of the translation contract and thus legally binding, so professional knowledge of copyright laws, usage rights, and professional norms is essential.

– Team Consultation

Many on the team are laypeople in terms of translation. Even though they are involved in the process of preparing the translations, they usually have no

relevant experience with how translation processes work. That is why it is so important to have a professional translation perspective to benefit from the invaluable advice it can provide to the team. What is necessary is team collaboration, a shared understanding of the applied translation strategy as well as an understanding by each team member (editors, e-learning experts, or IT staff) of how to implement that strategy in their own area of responsibility. Without that, the work process suffers, and as demonstrated above, so can the quality of the translation. If the project management and project team members (such as the IT experts) had been aware of everything translators are capable of offering towards a successful educational transmission, they would have been able to factor that into their webpage design in advance. They would have been able to understand the role of the translator as cultural communicator, and that her work does not stop at the word alone. Unfortunately, that lack of understanding led to vital information being lost in translation. This leads us to another important point, the famous synergistic effects: collaboration between translators and IT experts could solve a major translation problem concerning survivors' testimonies: the "authenticity" claim on the one hand and the requirements of modern educational material on the other. By using digital media effectively, the testimony could be translated as accurately as possible, and difficult passages could be contextualised by providing crucial information that would otherwise be lost to the recipient. One possible solution would be to insert pop-ups or different "layers" of the translation rising up in the background: and in that way, something could be gained in translation.

– Translation quality management/standardisation of processes

The three investigated archives were in some ways pioneers in their field and there was a lot of improvisation and "learning by doing". Most of the editors I spoke to worked extremely hard and showed a great deal of personal commitment. However, the translation quality management was poor: Proof reading was often impossible because there was not enough staff for the vast amount of text (one interviewee said that she had one hour to read 100 pages) or the

source language was not spoken. The translators complained that their questions went unanswered and that they were not asked to collaborate during the final stages, meaning that they had no input regarding the finalisation of the translation and its acceptance, no ability to verify any changes. That suggests that the contract providers' quality standards could not possibly have been fulfilled. There are ways that quality management could be improved for these kinds of projects, such as those discussed above.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated numerous problems and missed opportunities arising from the fact that the translation process is woefully misunderstood. That leads to the devaluation of a translator's work and skill set, which leads to the translator not being incorporated into the team or consulted for their professional expertise. As a result, the success of the translation is seriously undermined. The way that the translator's remarks were handled is just one example that makes that clear. And it is especially unfortunate if the final version of a translation reproduces the spoken word as "authentically" as possible, while failing to actually communicate the substance. That kind of approach makes it impossible to succeed in the effort to pass survivors' memories down to future generations. In order to ensure good practices when using testimonies in education, we need to rethink this situation. For translators to effectively facilitate the transmission of the spoken word, it is necessary to open up a discussion about translation and its possibilities. We need consultation, communication, and collaboration on an equal basis. Translation provides an important contribution to Holocaust education. The translation of audiovisual survivor testimonies should be treated with professionalism, and not as a side-job often left to non-professionals: For although the youth are hearing the survivors' voices, it is the translators- words that they are understanding.

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INTERVIEWS

Interview Translator U_ZA_5

Interview Translator U_ZA_1

Interview Translation Coordinator L_ZA_1

- 1 The people in these institutions work incredibly hard to share these testimonies with the world, and I respect that work very much. This paper is a critique of the process, not of the individuals involved in that process. I see this paper as an awareness raising effort aimed at helping those very individuals reach their high quality expectations.
- 2 For a focus on economic aspects, see Degen, S. (2016a). “Arbeitssprachen: Englisch – Russisch – Deutsch. Spezialgebiet: Holocaust”. *Ökonomische Faktoren bei der Übersetzung von Audio-/Videointerviews mit Überlebenden des nationalsozialistischen Terrors*. In *Lebende Sprachen* 61 (2): pp. 441–456 (in German). For a more detailed description of the methodology, see Degen, S. (2016b). The Illusion of “Authenticity”. The Translation of Video Testimonies with Survivors of National Socialist Terror for Use in Education. In Wolf, M. (Ed.) *Interpreting in Nazi Concentration Camps*. Translated by Jessica Ring. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 181–199.