COMMENTS TO GÖPFERICH'S ANALYSIS

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1. Introduction

I suppose I have been invited to speak on this occasion because I've opened my mouth once to often.
a) On the one hand I have raised the question whether «fagspråk» shouldn't be reserved for the technical language of the practical trades.
b) On the other, I have claimed that a practical background is as good a foundation as any for being a good translator. I am against the trend towards substituting practical experience with theoretical education - the trend that keeps people in school for much too long and alienates bureaucrats and leaders from the practical reality which they are set to administer.
Likewise, I think that a purely theoretical education alienates the translator from the reality to which many texts refer. For that reason I am very glad that there is still an opportunity to take the translator's exam without having to study languages per se. I also think that every translator of technical texts has to be willing to acquire some understanding of this practical reality.

When I said yes to this invitation I imagined that I would be able to discuss translation problems with reference to practical examples of translation between Norwegian and English. Since Susanne Göpferich moves on another level altogether and since there is no way I am going to refer to practical examples of translation between Norwegian and German, I have had to rethink since then.

2. Susanne Göpferich's approach, my objections

Göpferich wants to move «from descriptive to a prescriptive LSP ... linguistics» and establish a «hierarchy of requirements» for different text types. (In other words, linguists are going to tell us how to express ourselves for specific purposes). She seems to think that this can be done across languages and thereby be of some use to the translator or at least in "machine translation".

Now machine translation frightens me in much the same way that bureaucrats and some politicians frighten me - their formulae become self-perpetuating, and the life of the language, the boundless and inventive side of language disappears. In the long term this could have serious consequences for our culture and ability to communicate. (This is not to say that we shouldn't use modern computer tools, but we should be very critical in how and when we apply such tools. Must not sacrifice expression for the sake of convenience - EU language).

<u>Philosophy</u>
Susanne Göpferich's system has a certain internal logic. Begin with specific text types, move on to more general systems and find common denominators which in the end will enable you to set up larger text type systems.

Part of the trouble is that SG treats language as a particular branch of knowledge, which in my view it isn't. She is in fact almost philosophical in her approach:

Webster's definition no. 4 of philosophy: "the critical study of the basic principles and concepts of a particular branch of knowledge, especially with a view to improving or reconstituting them". Change a particular branch of knowledge with LSP language and it reads: "the critical study of the basic principles and concepts of LSP language, especially with a view to improving or reconstituting them", which seems to be what SG wants to do.

Because she is moving on the philosophical macro-level SG seems to have little to offer in the way of practical advice as to how LSP language can be improved in order to fulfil specific communicative tasks. Her only tentative prescription is that the use of the imperative form seems to be most appropriate in German user instructions.

She tries to generalise, without being specific. There are innumerable ways of subdividing languages into text types and setting up text type systems.
Take the field of construction – specifications will vary according to *inter alia* the climate, topography, construction materials, building traditions and laws and regulations of the country in which you are building. Setting up general text type systems for this area would itself be a formidable task. It would of course be possible to compare the results with text type systems from knitting instructions or weather reports, and the results might be very interesting, but I fail to see the point.

Hierarchical, not lateral. She does not try to extend the field of knowledge but wants to structure the knowledge we already have. This may be interesting for linguists, but hardly for translators, skilled workers or the technical disciplines.

Conservative. She offers no system for keeping updated. On the contrary: She says that text systems should set up "independent of usage", after which the alternative systems should be tested out for their usefulness. This creates a serious **time lag between analysis and design**.

3. What is «fagspråk» and LSP language, and are they necessarily the same?

The Norwegian have taken the term fag from the German "fach" and use the word in a number of contexts. "Fagspråk" is just one of them. Fag originally meant something adjoined to something else and later came to mean a limited area. In this literal sense it is still used in architecture to describe areas of a wall or the lights of a window, and can then be translated by the term "bay". In other contexts the word might be best translated by trade, branch, subject, skill, department, vocation, discipline or profession. It has to be interpreted in its different contexts in order to adequately convey its meaning for instance in English.

I always used to think that the term "fagspråk" was used about the technical terminology of the various trades. Later I have realised that not only the technical disciplines, but also economists and lawyers, the medical profession and the social sciences are by many considered to have their own "fagspråk". In fact the term is so widely used as to cover almost all types of terminology.

Susanne Göpferich assumes that «fagspråk» and LSP language are the same. She does not define either, but uses the terms freely, not only to describe the terminology, but the syntax of all kinds of different text types. So we have Language for Specific Purposes as opposed to what? Fiction?

Even smalltalk may have its specific purpose in calming people down or getting to know them better. The art of conversation used to be very important to young girls of better families to ensure future marriage to a suitable partner. Even poetic expression may have a specific purpose in the translations of for instance certain tourist texts or in advertising a product.

The study of LSP language would then become all-comprising, and we might as well say that we were studying usage in general, which is fine, but hardly to the point in our context.

To define fagspråk as the language that is specific to the different disciplines would narrow down the field a little. But we would still be discussing the language of skilled workers and the academic professions in one breath, and I do not feel comfortable with that.

I see very little purpose in putting academic and practical language into one bag. I feel that there are important differences between the language of the academic professions and that of the workplace. The former could not exist without the latter, and the latter is therefore basic and even a prerequisite for academic studies, whether they be of language or other aspect of human life. Unless we are able to deal with the real world, how can be deal with levels of abstractions from it? If we put hypothesis and abstract terminology in the same category as the fundamentals on which is based, then we are necessarily moving to an even higher level of abstraction. We then become philosophers rather than language workers.

Aschehoug and Gyldendal's Norwegian encyclopaedia defines «fagspråk» as «the language used by occupational groups (Norwegian "yrkesgrupper"), most often characterised by a special and technical vocabulary».

I am not concerned with finding a definition of fagspråk that is «true» or final. But I am concerned with finding one that limits our field of enquiry so that we may say something useful in the context. So for my purpose I would limit the word «fagspråk» to the technical language of skilled workers. I thereby include the language of the building trades, hairdressers, nurses and lab workers, but I exclude legal and financial jargon and the language that is specific to the more academic disciplines and professions.

a) As far as I can see, there is a greater need to review language in the world of technical change than in the academic professions.

b) Technical language (language of the skilled worker) deserves to be considered per se. This is the language that is reflected in manuals, procedures and specifications. It is the language reflected in technical standards like NS, ISO and BS. Moreover, legal documents often have to deal with it in connection with for instance insurance or disputes, financial dispositions are more often than not based on considerations relating to technical innovation, production and processes, etc. etc.

c) It is in this area that most translators encounter the greatest problems. People tend to feel estranged by technology, particularly women, and the majority of translators are women.

4. How do we improve our translation of technical texts?

APPROACH

On the philosophical level a translator needs to be pragmatic and utilitarian. Webster defines (pragmatism as "a philosophical system or movement stressing practical consequences and values as standards by which concepts are to be analysed and their validity determined" and) a pragmatist as "one who is oriented towards the success or failure of a particular line of action, thought etc; a practical person". As translators we have to solve problems as they arise and we discard what we cant use. In addition to some general knowledge, flexibility and imagination this requires **rational thinking** and **professional modesty**. We have to be humble students all our professional lives, always learning from those who know more about the subject matter at hand than we do, meaning people from all walks of life, depending on the subject at hand.

A good translator of technical language has the opposite of an academic approach (Webster 2 (US) "pertaining to areas of study that are not vocational or applied". Webster 3 "theoretical; not practical realistic or directly useful". Webster 4 "learned or scholarly but lacking in worldliness, common sense, or practicality).

Among other things this means that we have to overcome any estrangement we many feel in the face of technology.

First of all we have to look for some internal logic in the text with which we are dealing. In general the internal logic of assembling for instance a water trap underneath a sink is no different from assembling a Lego car. All of us have practical experiences that we can refer to. The good mechanic has a feeling for materials and knows intuitively how much torque to apply when tightening a screw, or how much heat and filler to apply when welding a seam. In principle this is no different from knowing how much heat to apply when frying an egg or how much pressure to apply so as not to break the key in the door. We have to remove some of the mystery from technical translation. Even though we are not engineers in 10 disciplines, we are perfectly able to understand how things work.

Another important element is to accept our own limitations and show respect for other people's skills and specialised knowledge. I used to be embarrassed by asking too many questions.
One of my first technical translations was of a detailed description of different DBS bicycles into Norwegian. Feeling completely helpless, I went to various cycle shops and pretended that I was considering different models to buy for my son. I asked all sorts of pertinent questions about the different gears, hubs etc. before hurrying round the corner to write down the key words. Since then I have realised that most people like to explain about their specialities, and that there is no reason to embarrassed when you are actually showing respect for their know-how.

SYNTAX

Intuitively I would say that the syntax of a language is more peculiar to the language than to any text type. Americans like to put series of nouns together. The Norwegian language is verbal. We prefer the active to the passive form. Both English and Norwegian texts have a preference for the short and simple. Swedish or German texts tend to over-explain things. The French tend to be very exact.

Assuming that the syntax of a text is correct in the original language, we may still have to translate «or» by «and» or visa versa, and even «yes» by «no» in certain contexts. But these are general problems of usage, and not specific to the language of skilled workers. They are however yet another reason to be weary of machine translation.

There are some syntactic problems that have to be solved differently in technical texts:

1. (A translator can sometimes read a sentence five times and still not understand its syntax. This could be because the translator has a bad day. But it could also be because the person who wrote it
a) made a mistake, like leaving out a comma or a verb by accident,
b) was set an impossible task and got out of it as best he could (in other words didn't know what she was talking about),
c) wanted to obscure rather than clarify.)

When translating legal or academic texts we generally have to render the meaning as obscure in the target language. In a technical text we generally know that the purpose is not to obscure and so we should try to understand the logic and rewrite the sentence if possible, or failing this, go back to the source and make enquiries. As a last resort, (sic) in parenthesis.

2. **How literal should our translations be.** German and Swedish user instructions and specifications can be long-winded and repetitive to the extent that Norwegians would feel almost offended reading them. When should we make a long story short for the sake of readability? My answer would be as a rule, for the sake of clarity and so as not to irritate people unnecessarily.

On the other hand American manuals can have long strings of nouns that are impossible to rearrange because we don't understand the relationship between them. There is no previous tradition for equivalent strings of nouns in the Norwegian language, so how far should we accept the trend that is introducing such strings? Again, clarity is a main objective. But this time the sentence may have to be rewritten using more words for the sake of clarity.

TERMINOLOGY

This is the area in which the problems of translators are most time-consuming.

(terminology: "the system of terms belonging or peculiar to a science, art or specialised subject; nomenclature" (Webster))

1. We cannot rely on two-way dictionaries because

a) if they exist at all, the quality of such dictionaries tends to decline with the level of specialisation, at least in dictionaries between English and Norwegian.

b) dictionaries are not up to date. eg Norsk Språkråd are behind the times. This is particularly true in the field of computer language, but also in a lot of other areas where the dictionaries reflect technological developments after the event. This has become a much greater problem with the accelerated speed of development of offshore and onshore technology. Some of this can be rectified by investing in CD-ROM versions, but even these lag behind the newest technology.

c) many dictionaries do not distinguish between the terminology of different disciplines and skills. e.g. Arnsteinson's technical dictionary lists alternatives without mentioning the contexts in which they are used or defining their meaning. This can create a lot of confusion unless the translator has the time and presence of mind to check other sources.

2. Not only the dictionaries but the development of the language itself lags behind technological developments. How many words should we import from other languages along with new technology, when should we quote terms using hyphens, when should we try to find adequate translations. Here different companies have different traditions. In some companies certain components are only known by their English names. Should we then be inventive and find new words that nobody has used before at the risk of not being understood? In the case of translators the customer always has to have the final word, but I do think we should be inventive and creative and make suggestions. In that way the Norwegians are lucky, because they are able to join almost any two words together to make a new one, should the need arise.

How we solve the problems I have mentioned will depend on such factors as:
a) the time at our disposal
b) our relationship with the customer
c) our attitude to quality, (and even our philosophical or political approach - our attitude to language as a tool of communication and our respect for other other people's skills).

Generally it means that we have to compile our own lists of terms relating to particular skills or disciplines and customers. Unlike dictionaries these can be continually reviewed and extended, and even include working hypotheses.

Encyclopaedias, technical one-language dictionaries, international standards, books on how things work and on the tools of different trades are much more useful than the advice of linguists. Luckily we now also have the Internet as an invaluable and updated source of information.

But the process of finding the right terminology can be very time-consuming. In some cases you need to consult first the customer to understand what certain terms refer to, and then another company to find out what the jargon of the trade is in the target language.

I find technical standards very useful, particularly if they've been translated, but also when they have not. They generally give a system of definitions that enable us to understand what we are dealing with in each particular case. They should be used more frequently in cases where time is not an excluding factor.

Example: I once translated an interactive course for EU certification of welders into English. The one and only welding dictionary between English and Norwegian is pretty useless. So the

translation had to be based almost entirely on British and IOS standards in combination with the practical insight acquired through having handled a welding torch. If I had not handled a welding torch, this translation would still have been possible, but I would probably have had to visit a mechanical workshop to receive some practical instruction.

5. Conclusion

I think the syntax of a language should be allowed to develop freely. I am apprehensive when it comes to machine translation and think it should have a limited and carefully defined scope.

On the other hand I would like to see more use of definitions and technical standards, on the part of both customers and translators. International technical standards generally include definitions of processes, machinery and components. By using them we ensure that we are talking about the same thing. But even this should not be exaggerated. There needs to be room for technical jargon and free expression, also in technical texts. The technical jargon of the workplace is part of our culture and we do not want a dead language.

Every discipline, including linguistics, has its own terminology. Linguists are concerned with the academic study of some aspects of language, but language itself develops independent of linguists, because language is not a discipline, but a means of communication and a common heritage. It belongs to us all.

It develops in response to our everyday needs as well as the needs of individual disciplines.
In addition to a feeling for language, translators of technical texts need a practical mind, and they have to be responsive to the needs of those for whom they translate. We do not need a hierarchy of requirements, but practical advice from current users of the technology or work process we are trying to describe. We need to research and sometimes even invent terms to describe innovations and new ideas.

Like linguists, we have no monopoly in this area. Some customers do their own research and can be very helpful when we ourselves are stuck. And much of the language adopted by translators and even linguists has actually developed in the workplace. Unless we recognise this, our attitude will reflect badly on our work.