Assessing Specialized Translation In Academic Contexts: A Case Study
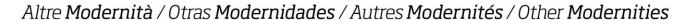
by Kim Grego

AIM OF THE PAPER

This paper intends to contribute a reflection to the widely-debated issue of how to go about assessing translation, with a focus on specialized texts and on the didactics of translation at the academic level. Firstly, the main approaches to translation assessment in general will be shortly illustrated. Secondly, some of the advantages and limitations of each approach will be highlighted. Lastly, the area of investigation will be restricted to assessing the translation of specialized texts in academic translation didactics, in order to identify what characterizes such a context, and to verify how the above approaches can apply and adapt to specific languages in a didactic context.

TRANSLATION ASSESSMENT: A SHORT OVERVIEW

The issue of evaluation[1] in translation is often said to be as old as the practice of translation itself. This is possibly true if referred to the translation of literary texts; it definitely applies to the classic practice (and the one that most reflections on the topic dealt with in the first place[2]) of biblical translation. It seems hardly the case, however, that anyone in ancient times would bother to judge how well an inventory or a

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[1] A very first lexical distinction is required here: whereas 'evaluation' may be used as a synonym of 'assessment' when dealing with the subject generically, the term 'assessment' will be preferred in strictly didactic discussions, as it tends to carry a less subjectively connotated semantic load.

[2] Not to mention classical biblical exegesis, even contemporary milestone studies on translation – for instance from the "second generation" or "theory of translation" period (Nergaard 1995: 5-17) – deal with biblical exegesis (cfr., e.g., Nida 1964, 1969).

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contract or a deed had been translated, unless it was to question their validity, i.e. it were to ponder the practical consequences (e.g. lost goods, profits or inheritances) of a 'wrong' translation. The ancient and recent history of studies on translation is thus rich in criticism of translated literary or religious texts, but not of non-literary ones. It is only in contemporary times that translation criticism, established with Translation Studies in the 1970s as a sub-branch of this discipline, has proven especially productive. Despite its being typically and mainly focused on literary texts, it has come up with a variety of extensively researched, interesting and viable models. These are based on considerations on translation at large, but are also partly applicable to specialized texts and, therefore, worth mentioning here.

The main issues in any discussion of translation assessment revolve around the key notions in translation itself: equivalence, fidelity, adequacy, error, scope (or *skopos*, to be true to *Skopostheorie* developers Reiss and Vermeer, 1984). These concepts, though – as major researchers in the field have highlighted (e.g. Lefevere 1975, Toury 1980 and 1995, House [1977] 1997, Nord 1997) – are as fundamental as they are vague, ambiguous and subjective. It is precisely the elusive nature of translation itself the aspect that makes it extremely challenging (impossible?[3]) to attain the ideal goal in translation assessment: to establish general principles that may be universally and consistently applicable to all translations. The limits posed by absolutes – or rather by their unattainability – are the first problem encountered in this quest, and one that flaws it at its basis. Nonetheless, just like translation occurs in spite of its theoretical uncertainties, so must research in translation assessment come up with an applicable set of criteria. Partial as these may necessarily be, they must nonetheless be functioning and operative enough to allow providing translation assessment in all the situations it is required. The aim, therefore, becomes to try and reduce the criteria's inescapable degree of subjectivity to an acceptable minimum (where the notion of acceptability too is subjective and is to be negotiated) with regard to all the classic and the new "translation incommensurables" (Grego 2010: 29). Some of these are:
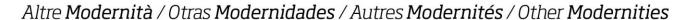
- Equivalence / fidelity: if equivalence means equality, how can something (the TT) that is necessarily different from something else (the ST) also be equal to it? Or, if it is their effects that are in question, how can two necessarily different things obtain precisely the same effects? And are such effects measurable, how and by whom?
- Adequacy: to what, and in whose opinion?
- Error: with respect to what, and in whose opinion?
- Scope: how is it determined, and by whom?

Scholars who addressed these questions have developed a number of translation assessment models that can be categorized according to the approach followed.

One general overview dividing approaches into major areas is Campbell (1998). He identifies three: 1) psychological modelling of the translation process; 2) translation

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[3] See, for instance, Pym's interesting article "On indeterminacy in translation" (2008), outlining the main contact points between indeterminism in philosophy and its in echoes in Translation Studies.

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quality assessment; and 3) translation pedagogy (1998: 6). The first deals with "attempts to infer mental constructs from empirical data" (*ibid.*), and focuses on the psychological process(es) and development going on in the individual translator's mind, to be checked by means of different ability testing. The second concentrates on the "relationship between a text and its reader" (1998: 7), following a text-oriented perspective. The third "tends to foreground theories of teaching and learning, which it presents with varying degrees of persuasiveness, comprehensiveness and eclecticism" (*ibid.*), and "tend[s] to be text- or theory-centred, rather than student-centred [...] [and of a] prescriptive nature" (1998: 10-11). This possible categorization of translation competence assessment is very broad and not the only possible one, of course, but it is interesting to report because it discriminates based on the focus of the approach: on the translator, on the text or on the function (pedagogy). With the necessary caution, as in any generalization, the classification of approaches that will follow may be defined 'text-centred', i.e. closer, in Cambpell (1998)'s words, to what he calls "translation quality assessment". In particular, his view that translation quality assessment "illustrates the gulf between professional translators and academic linguistics" (1998: 9) is especially subscribed to. Indeed, it anticipates the distinction that will be made in the last paragraph between assessing professional translation in general and in specific academic contexts, dealing with specific domains.

Following an established trend in Translation Studies, translation assessment models will be divided here into 'bottom-up', 'top-down' and 'mixed'. Bottom-up models are more or primarily concerned with the 'fine' levels of lexicon and syntax. Then they move on through the phrastic level to the textual plane. As a final step, the lexical and syntactic analyses are used to make hypotheses about the context(s) and communicative event which the text represents. The paradigmatic example of a bottom-up model is Van Leuwen-Zwart's (1989). Developed for literary translation criticism, it classifies errors in terms of shifts between ST and TT, at both a micro- and a macro-structure level. Baker's (1999) successful functional model also belongs to this category.

Top-down models, typically, would follow the opposite pattern. They are firstly concerned with placing the text within its communicative context, e.g. by identifying its author, addressee, role and purpose in society. Only subsequently, do they verify the considerations made against the text's textual, syntactic and lexical aspects. Hatim and Mason's (1997) model is one that follows a top-down orientation. It starts from the contextual and textual levels. It then creates hypotheses. Finally, it verifies these hypotheses against the micro analysis level of lexico-grammatical features. Any discrepancies between context and text would then result not in errors ("the term is [...] not entirely appropriate", 1997: 164) but in "mismatches of text and context" (*ibid.*). Torop's [1995](2010) chronotopic model, too, adopts a top-down approach. It is based on a text's cultural coordinates in space and time but also in psychology and metaphysics (Torop [1995]2010: 19). Torop's proposed analysis, thus, unfolds by checking whether a series of translatability parameters have or have not been met in

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the metatext, i.e. whether there have been any "shifts" in the translation. The linguistic level is one (the first) of these parameters.

Mixed approaches would include the analysis of elements from both the bottom-up and top-down approaches. Moving within this framework of interpretation is the well-known 1977 assessment model (revisited in 1997) proposed by House, the scholar who has probably researched translation assessment most extensively since the birth of Translation Studies. In House's view, it is actually possible to define the ever-ambiguous "equivalence relation". She does so by identifying it with "the relation between the source text and its translation" (House 1997: 24). She, however, tones down her optimistic yet vague definition, by adding that "equivalence is [...] always and necessarily relative" (House 1997: 25), "absolute equivalence" being "a contradiction in adiecto" (*ibid*.). She then proceeds to illustrate how this relativity is determined by the contextual aspects of translation. She calls for functional translation and proposes that both source and target texts should be analyzed and compared according to sets of parameters called "situational dimensions" (House 1997: 37). The strictly linguistic aspect is represented by the lexical and syntactic meaning levels that need to be considered in the analysis of situational dimensions. Errors resulting from the comparison are, as in Hatim and Mason (1997), named "mismatches" (House 1997: 45). The most relevant features of House's model, together with its clearly functional underlying focus, are considered to be a) its overt acknowledgement of the necessary relativity of equivalence, and b) the ensuing need "to operationalize the equivalence relation" (House 1997: 24). Another mixed approach model is Osimo's (2004) which, since it was developed starting from the English-Italian language combination and with special attention to the didactics of translation, seems particularly relevant for the scope of this paper. It owes much to the Russian (Žukovskij, Jakobson), Estonian (Lotman, Torop), Slovak (Popovič) and Czech (Lévy) schools[4] (Osimo: 97), but also draws widely on the western tradition of Translation Studies. This model has the ambitious and commendable aim of proving itself applicable to at least four large areas requiring translation assessment: academic research, translation critique, university didactics and the professional market (Osimo: 99). To do so, it combines elements of Van Leuwen-Zwart's (1989) and Torop's [1995](2010) models, and adopts Martínez and Hurtado's (2001: 82) functional notion of mistake, measurable against the consequences it might produce. The resulting model includes, among its various mixed discursive and textual levels of analysis, strictly linguistic categories such as lexicon, syntactic competence, grammar, syntax, orthography (Osimo 2004: 104-105). Osimo's evaluation form, summing up his view, is successful in proving particularly operational and thus valid in the different areas of application considered. The

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[4] The scholars mentioned are necessarily only a small choice, exemplifying those who, at one time or another and to various degrees, contributed to the different 'traditions' (cfr. the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* ed. By M. Baker [1998]2001) mentioned. It may also be vague to refer to all of these traditions as 'schools', since cross-discipline, hard-to-pigeonhole movements like formalism and structuralism are called into question here. The ambiguity, however, is transposed 'as is' from Osimo 2004 (97): "scuola russa, scuola di Tartu, scuola slovacca di Popovič, scuola ceca di Lévy").

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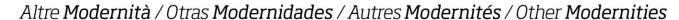
deriving drawback is that it inevitably has to stay general, if not generic. Its broadness is however also its strength, as its analytical categories may be substituted, integrated and/or reduced to adjust it to more specific purposes.

THE TOP-DOWN, BOTTOM-UP AND MIXED METHODS: A COMPARISON

What all three methods seem to share are the lexical and syntactic levels. Indeed, just as there is no translation without languages, there is possibly no way of going about assessing a translation without assessing the relationship created by and during the translating process between these levels.

The bottom-up method, thus, is particularly relevant as it insists on these levels, putting them in the first place. It is the closest approach to classic logical reasoning, if somewhat suffering from the distance between theory and practice typical of traditional disciplines, more suited to be analysed through mere logics. It seems not, however, to duly emphasize the relevance of translation as a practice, and the role of purpose that informs it. Therefore, the risk implicit in a method conducting the assessment at a level absolute from the extra-linguistic is to start opening up to and considering the discursive aspects too late in the analysis. At worst, this may result in myopic distortions affecting the assessment. At best, it requires waiting for confirmation of the hypotheses made studying the lexicon and syntax, until these may be verified at the extra-linguistic levels. Proving the hypotheses, in turn, requires carrying out what is practically a top-down assessment every time, thus reduplicating, in a sense, the process. In all cases, although the fine-level analysis may provide very accurate considerations, this choice proves non-economical in terms of time, and does not sit well in cases in which tight deadlines apply, e.g. in professional settings. On the other hand, it could be considered in didactics, when the translating event can spread over some time, and translating techniques are being looked at from the theoretical viewpoint, or at a stage where the focus is on lexicon or syntax alone.

The top-down method presents with different risks. The main is for the discursive to take precedence over the linguistic to the point of shadowing the latter. Another is to result in ideological filters distorting the philological reading of the source and target texts. This would weaken or even ignore the key aspect of translation, language, which has the peculiarity of being both the medium and one of the aims of the translating process. The mixed method would thus perhaps be the most advisable choice to provide an integrated assessing procedure (i.e. not requiring a double process), and to relate language to discourse at every stage, thus maintaining quick and effective control over the relationship between hypotheses and results. Within this approach, House's situational dimensions seem one appealing proposal, as they relativize the text-context relationship, making it possible to conduct the assessing analysis starting from any level and also to focus on a few or just even one of the levels, without either completely isolating the communicative event from the strictly philological or ignoring the discourse into which it is immersed. In this way, the operationalization of the equivalence relation purported by House (1997: 24) appears

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– with the necessary adjustments to each individual case – to be possible. Indeed, from an indeterministic perspective, such as the one supported here, any viable translation assessment model will have to strive to render the ultimately indeterminable, unquantifiable and thus unassessable nature of meaning equivalence as determinable, quantifiable and assessable *as possible*, or enough to *operate*. In other words, an applicable model will have to be able to function operatively in clearly set-out contexts and for clearly established purposes, and to at least try and reduce the gap between the elusive nature of translation and its very perceptible manifestations.

The review of the main approaches to translation assessment and the models described so far will be of great use and a basis for the considerations that will be made in the next paragraph, aimed at defining a restricted area of application compared to either 'translation' in absolute terms or even to Osimo's four wide areas.

TRANSLATION ASSESSMENT AND THE DIDACTICS OF SPECIALIZED TRANSLATION

As seen, multi-faceted issues surround translation assessment and make it highly debated and little definable in a universal, comprehensive way. However, restricting the debate to only some fields or contexts in translation can make the task of identifying assessment criteria somewhat more attainable. This paper restricts its scope to specialized translation in didactic contexts.

'Specialized translation' refers to the translation of specialized or domain-specific texts as in ESP (English for Specific Purposes). An ESP is a natural language used in a given technical or disciplinary domain, and for the operational purpose of communicating within a professional or an academic setting (e.g. legal, medical or academic English). 'Purpose' is the underlying defining feature of domain-specific texts, which are written with clear communicative intents by and for specialists in a specific field. It also lies at the basis of translation itself, which is always carried out for a particular audience and reason. Purpose, thus, doubly impacts on specialized translation, reinforcing the need for adopting a functional(ist) approach to its study, practice and evaluation. Not only, the purposed nature of specialized texts itself contributes to the task of restricting the field of action and investigation, since the discourse communities[5] that use them are by definition inclusive of members and exclusive of non-members. This gate-keeping function is linguistically achieved on at least two planes. At the textual level, they sanction communication by well-established, crystallized genres. At the syntactic and lexical levels, they favour the use of fixed and unchanging formulaic structures and terminologies. By means of exemplification, textual and syntactic features of specialized texts include nominalization, depersonalization, synthetization, hedging, modality-based and

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[5] In the now classic sociolinguistic acceptation of Nystrand (1982) and Swales (1990), but also intersecting and developing the anthropologic notion of "communities of practice" of Leve and Wenger (1991).

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cohesion-aimed strategies (see, e.g., Grego 2010: 60 ff.) – considerably, consistently and consciously applied throughout. The highest degree of exclusiveness, though, is achieved in the lexicon of specialized texts and its non-ambiguity, monoferentiality and technicality (cfr., e.g., Gotti 1991; Garzone 2006). Terminology, indeed, has historically been recognized as their only defining characteristic and, to this day, it is still awarded the most attention in many applied contexts. In the perspective of translation, however, if the technicality of specialized terminology makes it restrictive in terms of threshold of membership, its monoferentiality and non-ambiguity also make it restrictive in terms of equivalence. Differently put, in specialized translation the translator's intervention (especially but not only at the lexical level) tends to be restricted. Thus, in Lévy's (1967) "decision process", the translator's responsibility is at the minimum end of the continuum or, in Venuti's [1995](2005) words, the focus shifts to the "invisibility" end.[6] For this reason, although it is difficult to go past discourse community thresholds and acquire the key(s) to interpreting specialized texts, once access is obtained, the degree of ambiguity in communication proves significantly reduced. This, in turn, contributes to reducing ambiguity in translation and to increasing the accuracy of its assessment.

The other restriction operated is limiting this discussion to didactic contexts. In Osimo's (2004) terms, this means eliminating at least three macro areas to which translation assessment applies: academic research, translation critique and the professional market. This is already a relevant quantitative cutback. The choice of the remaining area – didactics – represents also a qualitative reduction in equivalence-related issues, since it is the area subject to the least and simplest variables, compared to the others. For instance, academic research may aim at providing universal models and draws on various disciplines. Translation critique constantly flirts with the dangerous (in scientific terms) notion of (artistic) 'quality'. The professional market, in turn, is subject to as many variables as there are employers (publishers, agencies, other companies, institutions, etc.), contracts (freelance, in-house, voluntary, etc.), domains (business, law, medicine, etc.), text types (descriptive, narrative, expository, argumentative, instructive[7]), textual genres and, ultimately, individual work projects. Academic research, translation critique and the professional market are therefore 'open' systems, receiving numerous inputs from the outside that influence the assessment criteria they adopt. Didactics, on the other hand, is by definition a closer system, whose nature is strictly prescriptive. It creates and deals with contexts that are both controllable, controlled and focused primarily on input (providing students with education) rather than on output (it is only the students' academic – not professional –

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[6] It is thus not strange that terminology is one aspect of translation that has been made the subject of international standards by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), with a technical committee for 'Terminology and other language and content resources' has existed at ISO that has existed since its foundation in 1947, and having produced dozens of standards so far, among which "Translation-oriented terminography" (ISO 12616:2002) and "Assessment and benchmarking of terminological resources – General concepts, principles and requirements" (ISO 23185:2009).

[7] Cfr. Werlich (1983).

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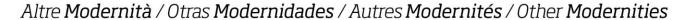
output that matters). Just as in Osimo (2004), the area considered here is precisely university-level (academic didactics. This additional restriction, on the one hand, further helps delimiting the scope. On the other, given the degree of autonomy usually allowed university trainers in designing or adjusting programmes compared to (e.g., training courses or internships) introduces a significant degree of variation. Academic didactics, due to the nature and history of the institutions hosting it, tends to be self-referential and self-sufficient, with well-established practices at all levels, from administration to testing. Within the discourse of university didactics, trainees constitute a large discourse community of its own, whose members are usually below the professional threshold level. Trainers are obviously numerically inferior, but both control over – and responsibility for – the training lie with them. The relationship linking trainers to trainees follows strict and recognized prescriptive practices, in which norms should be and are interpreted in the most restrictive sense.

When considering the specific case of translation university training[8], the nature of translation itself must be taken into account, with its various incommensurable aspects. Firstly, there is the metalingustic level. The didactics of language and of a domain-specific discipline overlaps with the didactics of translation *per se*. This alone opens up the well-known issue of what it is that trainers teach when they teach specialized translation[9]. Also, as a consequence, the question is raised of what threshold levels – knowledge of translation techniques, of the source and target language(s), or even of the domain – need to be evaluated and to what degrees. Secondly, considering only translation itself, what aspects of translation are to be taught and therefore assessed? To provide a scientific answer to this, trainers in academic contexts ought to be adhering *a priori* to a specific theoretical conception of translation, which specifies the nature of translation or at least the view the individual trainer has of it. Supposing a perspective such as proposed in Grego (2010) is assumed, considering translation a product, a process and a social practice at the same time, the educational focus might be on the practice (involving providing notions, for instance, on the history, theory, or profession of translation), or on the process (what is usually yet ambiguously known as translation techniques or strategies). However, when it comes to assessment, if practice training has been administered, the trainers' knowledge (study) of the notions will have to be assessed. If, on the other hand, process training was provided, the trainees' translation products will be under scrutiny. Trainers thus need to be familiar with the nature of translation as a product, a process and a practice (whatever the model or terminology adopted to indicate these very manifestations of translation) to the degree required by the type of training they wish or have to provide. Not only; theoretical considerations also affect the trainer's

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[8] There is a variety of translation didactic contexts in higher education: universities are not the only places where translation training is provided, as will be better illustrated in paragraph 3.

[9] The issues raised by the complex relationship between translation and ESPs or, rather, by *translating* ESPs, are many and manifold, one of these being the long-discussed question of whether linguists or (other) specialists are best suited to carry out specialized translation, and for what reasons. See, for instance, Scarpa 2008 (262 ff.) on this specific topic.

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view on the very possibility of *teaching* translation[10]: is it at all possible to 'make' translators out of (university) students? What about the other incommensurable notion of talent that needs to be addressed when teaching the arts in general[11]? Or, applied to this discussion, how to include or exclude talent and other personal assets (talent for languages, talent for translation, trainees' pre-existing familiarity with the translation practice[12]) in or from assessment?

It emerges from the above considerations that purpose, once again, informs the discourse of translation didactics. Clearly establishing what the purposes of a university course or teaching are determines not only the content of such a course or teaching but also the trainer's expectations of his/her students' performance. Whether this refers to testing their knowledge (study) of notions on the translation practice or the product of their translation process is irrelevant. Of course, 'translation assessment' is commonly understood as the latter, i.e. the assessment of a translated written text. This view is limited because, as seen, it does not include the teaching of translation practice. Nonetheless, the insistence on the assessment of translation products is perfectly comprehensible: it is indeed the really unique and most challenging facet of translation assessment.

To outline some of the variables surrounding the assessment of translation products in university didactics, it may be useful to report Osimo's (2004: 99) view (Table 1 below).

	Università
Oggetto	Competenza dello studente
Focus	Qualità del processo; quantità del processo e del prodotto
Funzione	Formativa; selettiva
Fine	Selettivo; feedback allo studente
Testi prova	Prove di traduzione
Strumenti	Correzione e valutazione

Table 1 – Osimo's (2004: 99) Table 5.3, "La valutazione traduttiva nei diversi contesti", columns 1 and 3 only.

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[10] The term 'teaching' being strongly connotated in prescriptive terms, i.e. best applying to translation seen as a doctrine rather than a discipline (see Grego 2010: 16), and possibly referring to notion teaching; the term 'training', highlighting the operational side, is preferred to refer to the process of translation .

[11] Pym (2011: 89) notices how "a translation done on-time might be more acceptable than one that is more accurate but late". If, in professional settings, time constraints might be worked around to accommodate a late yet brilliant translation, in academic contexts, where the group counts more than the individual, this *cannot* be done, at the risk of undermining the normative framework at the basis of the trainer-trainee agreement itself.

[12] E.g. when students already work or have worked as translators.

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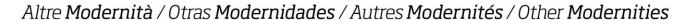*Dipartimento di Scienze del Linguaggio e Letterature Straniere Comparate - Sezione di Studi Culturali*

Table 1 is a valuable description of the situational elements to consider in assessing translation in academic contexts. What could be added is the 'Actors' (trainer, trainees) element, from which at least two aspects would emerge more clearly. One is the self-referentiality of the assessor, since the trainer is (expected to be) aware of the source text, masters the techniques and strategies, is familiar with the practice of translation, sets the norms and conditions of the test, invigilates over the exam *and* marks the products. The other is how the fact that the trainer is simultaneously the assignor, the addressee and the assessor of translation tests ("testi prova") puts him/her in total charge of the assessment process. Due but also thanks to the autonomy usually granted university trainers[13], then, deontological responsibility lies entirely with him/her, and is enormous.

To sum up, despite raising more issues about translation assessment, intersecting specialized translation with university didactics excludes many of the numerous and problematic variables typical of other areas (such as academic research, translation critique or the professional market), but not as – or no less – typical of academic didactics, which is a more impermeable system. It thus results in a quantitative restriction of this very vast topic that is also automatically and intrinsically qualitative.

Operating restrictions of the textual purpose (domain-specific texts only) and of the context of application (university didactics) means that the discussion of translation assessment may be made to move within better-defined and more clear-cut boundaries. Further limiting and refining these boundaries could thus be envisaged in future applied studies potentially dealing with specific cases of specialized translation as taught in universities. Customized criteria to meet real didactic factors may then be proposed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper presented initial considerations on the nature of translation and on the possibility and feasibility of assessing it.

The main approaches and models of translation assessment developed in recent years were briefly reviewed. Then, a comparison of such assessment models was offered, identifying a strictly functional aim as the main drive in researching translation assessment, which is considered to find its only feasible realization in practical, hands-on, operative models. Finally, the very vast field of translation assessment was restricted to one macro-function and one macro-setting: specialized or domain-specific texts and didactic contexts at university level.

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[13] Within the obvious limits set by the nature of the degree curriculum, the agreements existing with didactic managers and the teaching profession's ever-present deontology.

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The advantages deriving from such a massive limitation of object and context were discussed as affecting the quality of translation assessment, due to the intrinsic nature of specialized languages themselves, which employ crystallized genres as well as make use of formulaic syntax and monoreferential, non-ambiguous lexicon. All this tends, under certain aspects, to render less complex the establishment of objective criteria to assess specialized translation. The restriction to didactic contexts, in turn, excludes macro-areas of application such as academic research, translation critique and the professional market, which are rich in ponderable and imponderable variables and hard to subject to well-functioning assessment models.

The study is hoped to contribute to focusing the rich reflection on translation assessment on the very specific but relevant context of specialized translation courses. It may be possible, in the future, to develop a mixed-method model applicable to these specific university courses and useful in designing their syllabi, with possible constructive implications for the subfield of translation assessment in general.

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