

Is Translation Natural?

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"Nothing in the universe has more grandeur than the infinity of the human mind." — Norman Cousins, *The Conquest of Pain*.

There are those who believe that translation is a natural human function like breathing, talking and walking. I beg to differ.

"All things in the universe are compelled to achieve zero energy."

It is the law of nature that all things in the universe are compelled ultimately to achieve zero energy. A stone falling from a cliff reaches zero energy when it comes to rest at the bottom of the cliff. All life forms are destined to die and decay in order to reach this state of motionless. A bird that drops dead, decays and decomposes until all energy is released. A hurricane keeps raging until it runs its course and loses all energy. A supernova is a star's spectacular explosive finale to release all energy.

All things if not used, that is if their level of energy is not maintained, are subject to decay and dereliction. As for languages, try not to speak for a year, then try to speak again. You will probably have no difficulty speaking. Why? Because the brain is alive and cognition has not stopped. Unless you stop thinking, you will not lose your ability to use the language. Thus, language is as natural as the brain itself. But stop writing for a month or two, then try to write again and you will find it somehow difficult to do so. Why? Simply because writing is not natural. After decades of research in textology and text typology, there is still no agreement as to what constitutes a text, yet there is almost consensus that writing is not a natural activity. Stop translating for a month and then translate again. You will most likely find it difficult to do so.

"Translation is like flexibility in ballet dancing...."

Translation is innate in that it is a skill that can be acquired, but it is not natural. Breathing underwater is not innate or natural. Try to breathe under water, and you will surely die. Translation is like flexibility in ballet dancing or the martial arts. You can work hard at stretching to increase the degree of flexibility and suppleness in your joints, muscles and ligaments, but if you stop for a while, you are bound to lose the range of flexibility you had before. Stretching the body is innate, suppleness is innate, that is you can physically do them, but they are definitely not natural. It is natural to walk, but it is not so to do a Japanese split!

If innate is the state of something possessed at birth, something that is inborn, if it is the quality of something of or produced by the mind rather than learned through experience, then translation is innate. If natural is the state of something characterized by spontaneity and freedom from artificiality, affectation, or inhibitions, then translation is not natural.

"In the bilingual mind, one language always tries to dominate and displace the other."

In the bilingual mind, one language always tries to dominate and displace the other. If one language is disused, it most certainly decays. If you are a bilingual person or a translator, try this exercise. In your mind, scan the objects around you naming them as you go. Which language did you use? Now try again starting with the last item. Which language did you use this time? At any one time, bilinguals (and translators) do not think of things in two languages simultaneously — if they use language at all. For example,

looking at a book, a bilingual person (or a translator) does not see the book as a “book” and “livre” at the same time, but either. For the switch between languages to happen, the bilingual (translator) has to become aware of the switch. And for translation to occur, the translator’s mind has to be primed. Translation cannot begin unless the translator becomes aware of his or her intention to translate, which triggers off the translation process. The translator has to switch into what I term the translation mode because prior to the switch the translator is locked into a monolingual mental frame of reference. The translator is neither aware nor capable of translating naturally between two languages unless he or she makes a conscious decision to switch into the translation mode and start the translation process. This switch is basically a recognition-priming operation that triggers the two language systems in juxtaposition to one another in readiness for translation and brings the translator online.

In this respect, it can be argued that the notion of naturalness of translation is a false one. Monolingual and bilingual children exhibit certain natural abilities to translate and their learning process is basically a translation process — a monolingual child would ask his parents what objects are called. In a bilingual child, the tendency to learn and switch between languages is natural in the sense that it does not require a conscious decision on the part of the child. However, children’s ability is rudimentary and primitive in that it is confined to basic lexical units and a lower level of abstraction. Furthermore, it is always triggered by cues in the language to which they switch. A mother would say to her bilingual child: “Honey, Où est l’avion?” and the child would say: “Dans le ciel, mummy.”

In contrast, translation in adults is not natural. It does not occur automatically unless the individual makes a conscious decision to translate. It also requires a developmental path, where the translators build upon their past experience and develop their skills to a certain level that allows them to translate efficiently. This view is supported by Beardmore (1986) who confirms that “...many bilinguals who can function extremely well in two languages in clearly demarcated situational contexts often find it difficult to translate spontaneously between their languages without heavy interference. This is one reason why professional interpreters require special training for a task that does not necessarily come naturally, even if they were childhood bilinguals” (106).

" Translation is not natural because it requires a mental switch into a Translation Mode..."

That is why it is important to make a distinction between innateness and naturalness, as they seem to be used interchangeably in the literature on natural translation. Harris (1976) and Harris and Sherwood (1978) argue that translation is a natural and innate skill. According to Harris (1976), natural translation is “the translation done in everyday circumstances by bilinguals who have had no special training for it”. However, Toury (1995) contends that the innateness hypothesis does not account for the emergence of translation as a skill and that the acquisition of translating as a skill does not amount to the mere unfolding of an innate predisposition.

While it is true that the ability to translate is innate, that is we are born with the ability to translate ideas within the same language or between languages, translation is not natural because it requires a mental switch into the *Translation Mode*. A simple test to detect this switch is to ask a bilingual (in its widest sense) person to tell the meaning of an expression in either language. Such a request will always bring on a pause before the person answers the question. Based on retrospective reporting by bilingual respondents selected

and asked randomly by the author, it becomes apparent that the pause is not so much caused by the person's attempt to search, locate and retrieve the required data from their short-term memory as much as by switching his or her mental frame to the *Translation Mode*.

This assertion is supported by Johnson-Laird (1995) who observes that we do not have immediate access to the semantic content of words. We have no difficulty in choosing words appropriate to our communicative purposes or in grasping the meaning of words in other people's utterances. But if we were asked the meaning of a word, we would have to stop and think about the matter. Johnson-Laird cautions that "such oddities should not be lightly put aside" because "they provide important clues to the underlying nature of human mentality" (205).

In addition, preliminary studies on the effects of aging on bilinguals conducted by The Center for Research in Language at University of California San Diego (UCSD) have shown that some of the processes bilinguals employ to calibrate different linguistic situations have been observed to break down under both perceptual and speeded-response stress in aged bilinguals suggesting that "performance on cross-language targets is slowed because of a reduction in processing resources, a tendency that is exacerbated when elderly bilinguals have to inhibit semantically appropriate word competitors in either language, and/or word competitors from the dominant language" (ditto). These findings further support the hypothesis that translation is not a natural activity.

Moreover, utilizing functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to examine language switching in bilinguals, Hernandez, Martinez and Kohnert (in press) have shown that language switching is a part of a general executive attentional system. Their findings support the notion of recognition-primed switching into the translation mode discussed in this article.

"Translation does not get easier with experience."

Finally, Gerloff (1988) shows that "translation does not get easier" with experience. She observes that while certain aspects of the translation process become easier as the translator gains experience — they become more automatic and more routinized — other aspects become more complex and time-consuming. She suggests that future research should further explore the relationship of speed to level of language proficiency and degree of translation experience. Gerloff's research findings lend support to the notion I have discussed in the preceding paragraphs that translation, unlike language, is not a natural function as some translation researchers have proposed, but rather an innate ability that is subject to deterioration and degeneration and requires continued maintenance.

It remains to be said that translation research has not yet made full use of medical scanning and imaging technology to capture the brain activity of translators during the translation process and ascertain what happens in a translator's brain at the moment of language switching. Most likely, scanning and functional imaging of the brain during translation memory processing will give results consistent with the view in this article.

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