

## "IS TRANSLATION A GOOD TESTING TECHNIQUE?"

by J Charles Alderson

### **The lift is being fixed. You will be unbearable today**

**(Or why [we hope that] there will not be translation on the new English Érettségi)**

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#### **A) Introduction**

My title (found in a hotel lobby in Bucharest) is typical of many public notices in a foreign language - in this case English - which contain humorous mistakes. Examples are legion:

*On a menu in a Swiss restaurant:*

Our wines leave you nothing to hope for

*In a Bangkok cleaner's:*

Drop your trousers here for best results

*From the Soviet Weekly:*

There will be a Moscow Exhibition of the Arts by 15,000 Soviet Republic painters and sculptors. These were executed over the past two years.

*In a Rome laundry:*

Ladies, leave your clothes here and spend this afternoon having a good time

*Office of a Roman doctor:*

Specialist in women and other diseases

And if you think it does not happen in Hungary, here are is an authentic restaurant brochure from Debrecen:

"This historic building functioned once as a stage-couchstation. The building of the

Debrecen's oldest house should date back to 1690-s years. Here stayed overnight the Swedish king, XII. Charles in 1714.

At the moment it's functioning as a restaurant furnished with original furniture from the beginning of the century. Living music takes care of the agreeable atmosphere. In summer, in open-air offers the garden a refreshing by grillparties.

In cellar gives the junglebar an origin "jungle-experience" for the young people"

And here are some examples taken recently almost at random from a menu in a restaurant in the Matra hills:

*"Fűt füstölt csülök*  
Boiled smoked hoof

*Vörösboros vaddisznó pörkölt burgonyalángoson*  
Red vinous wild boar stew on fired potato doughnut

*Mustáros cigánypecsenye*  
Grilled pork neck with mustard to taste by gypsies"

On a University entrance exam paper in 1991, the English text to be translated included a reference to a commercial traveller selling, amongst other things, "semi-conductors", which was translated as "zsidó kalauz".

And on a University entrance exam paper in 1992, the English text contained the sentence: "My cat likes me like no person can", which was translated by at least one student as: "a macskám úgy szeret, mint egy személytelen konzervdobozt".

## **B) What is the point of showing such mistranslations?**

Such mistakes are funny, even ridiculous, and we can laugh at them and their authors. They show somebody else's carelessness, or stupidity, they reveal our own superiority because, of course, we would not make such mistakes, would we? They amuse us because the translator has chosen the wrong word, an inappropriate word, has been driven by the actual text in the source language, has not recognised polysemy, or ambiguity, either in the source text or in the created target text.

They COULD be used in language classes, to discuss both why they are funny and why the authors made the mistakes or mistranslations they did. That could provide both amusement and interesting input. And I know audiences at this conference want practical, interesting ideas they can use in their classes. Which is one reason why I presented them and suggested that they could be used sometimes in class.

However, my main aim in showing these mistranslations is to discuss the whole notion of

translation and mistakes.

What is interesting about such mistranslations is that they suggest that despite passing the *érettségi*, or maybe even passing *Rigo utca* exams, people in Hungary may still have difficulties in translating. These exams are often called "bilingual" exams, yet still people make simple mistakes in the foreign language. Which is odd when one considers that translation is such a common feature of Hungarian examinations, and yet everyday experience shows that mistranslations abound. Why do people who have presumably passed the *érettségi* and even *Rigo utca*, where translation ability is explicitly tested, still make mistranslations? Do they do it just to make us smile? Or is there a problem with those exams? Or with translation as a test method?

### C) Bilingual exams

It is indeed odd that Hungary prizes and values what it calls bilingual exams, and insists that other exams, usually but not only international exams, are monolingual, as if that were in some way a deficiency. It is also curious that Hungary insists on the superiority - in law as well as in practice - of bilingual exams, and yet the country is self-evidently not bilingual and mistranslations are amusingly common.

Note that the very term "bilingual" is dangerously misleading, possibly deliberately so. It is a use of the term that only exists in Hungary. These exams are NOT bilingual exams, whatever the Hungarian term "*kétnyelvű*" says. This term itself is a good example of mistranslation. In this context, "*kétnyelvű*" is not "bilingual". "*Kétnyelvű*" tests **require** two languages. They do not **test** somebody's bilingual proficiency. They test the ability to take those, often bizarre, tests and to get a passing score, often by chance, or by taking the test again in another town or maybe by paying enough for a certificate. But they are not bilingual exams. They are, rather, at least potentially unreliable exams that include, for reasons I shall explore, translation as a testing method. Thus, "*kétnyelvű*" means "unreliable tests that include translation" and not "bilingual".

This paper presents a depressing tale, because most English teachers profess their belief that translation is indeed complex and is not a suitable testing method. There is no evidence of the validity of translation tests in Hungary and no evidence of their reliability. Surely, with the new Hungarian Language Exam Accreditation Law, unreliable and invalid exams should not be allowed? Or do the members of the Accreditation Board know something about the reliability and validity of these exams that the rest of us, including language test researchers, do not?

I am sure my readers have heard the arguments against translation many times, yet translation persists as a test method. Why? I plan to explore possible reasons for this, but first, I need to briefly discuss what translation is, and what we mean by accuracy of translation. I will then go on to discuss possible reasons for having translation as a testing method in Hungarian exams, especially the *érettségi*, and speculate on what translation as a testing method appears to involve, before finishing with a brief description of

alternatives to the current érettségi.

#### **D) Levels of translation accuracy/ faithfulness**

Traditionally, people have distinguished between different levels of translation, as illustrated below

Word for word translation (usually no sense):

It is raining cats and dogs  
Ez van esik macskák és kutyák

Literal translation (normalised according to the rules of the target language):

Esik macskák és kutyák

Free translation:

szakad (or ömlik) az es\_

or idiomatically:

Égszakadás földindulás

or

Ugy esik, mintha dézsából öntenék

But of course even the free translation does not convey all the possible connotations of the English idiom, and probably never could. Translations exist at a number of different, more or less adequate, levels of meaning, and the literature is full of discussions about the adequacy of translations, and how to decide which level is appropriate for a given purpose.

#### **E) Complexity of translation**

Clearly translation is a complex matter, if so many different possibilities are allowable, and can be considered accurate, or if indeed none of them can be considered to have rendered the meaning of the original text in the target language.

“Translators not only need to know their source language well; they must also have a thorough understanding of the field of knowledge covered by the source text, and of any social, cultural or emotional connotations that need to be specified in the target language. The same special awareness needs to be present for the target language, so that points of special phrasing, contemporary fashions or taboos in expression, local (eg regional) expectations and so on” (Crystal, 1987 p 344)

“My problem is that I think I know what a good translation is, but I doubt whether many people would agree with me.” (Newmark REF)

#### **F) Translation as a skill versus translation as a testing method**

In what follows, however, I am not discussing the skill of translation *per se*, which is indeed a complex matter, and which is addressed by the above two quotations. The skill and art of translation is a specialist matter, the subject of specialised courses and even degree schemes, and about which much has been written. Rather, I will discuss translation as a testing method: translation from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1, presumably intended to measure different aspects of proficiency in the L2.

### **G) What do mistranslations prove?**

I want to argue that mistranslations can give us insights into the translation process, to help us to understand what the testing method actually involves: what goes on. What do mistakes tell us about the process? What do they therefore tell us about language competence? Can a student be a competent reader/ writer in the L2, but a poor translator? Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is indeed possible. Bensoussan claims that “only those elements in the text that have been comprehended can be correctly translated, no matter how roughly”. The problem is that the reverse does not necessarily apply: students can understand but may not translate accurately at any level.

Certainly, as Bensoussan says, you cannot be an incompetent reader and a good translator, since one needs a high language competence to be a good translator. However, we need to ask ourselves whether the level aimed at by Rigo utca Intermediate and the new érettségi - namely somewhere between levels A2/ B2 in the Council of Europe Framework - is indeed high enough to enable a candidate to produce adequate translations?

What level of competence in the language do you need to translate particular texts? We don't know, but it is certainly higher than the text itself. And remember that the Intermediate érettségi and the Rigo utca exams are supposed to be at levels A2 to B2 in the Council of Europe Framework. Almost certainly well below the language competence required to **translate** rather than to **understand** "intermediate" texts.

Interestingly, Stansfield et al, having tried out their draft translation test on professional FBI translators, say that “for a number of examinees, a considerable discrepancy existed between their proficiency in their native language and in their second language. Thus, for example, some examinees translating into their native language (ie English) produced translations that were fluent and grammatical but inaccurate in terms of content. Similarly others, when translating into their second language, produced accurate translations but evidenced problems with grammar or vocabulary.” (They therefore developed two components to the test: expressions and accuracy.)

Bensoussan et al conclude that mistranslations at word level did not lead to misinterpretations at the macro (global) level. They also found that students often wrote grammatically unacceptable prose in their own native language, and often at the wrong register.

### **H) How people translate in Érettségi**

As anybody who has observed students doing the érettségi translation tasks will confirm, student are far from being competent translators. Typically, they do not even read through the text to be translated before reaching for their dictionaries. Rather, they appear to look up the first word they come across and write interlinear glosses of the "meaning". This they repeat for the next word, and the next and so on, painfully, word by word, right through the text. There is very little if any evidence of students reading the text first or even later, as most of them take the majority of the allotted time just to produce these interlinear glosses and then have to rush when writing out a target language version of the text, in a clean copy, before time is over.

### **I) Error analysis of érettségi papers**

The examples I gave in my introduction from university entrance exams attest to some of the problems that students have in rendering inappropriate versions of the L1 in their translations. However, more than just anecdotal evidence is available. Nagy Edit conducted a survey of translation performances as part of the joint CITO-OKI project to investigate suitable school-leaving test types and levels. She studied a sample of papers from the normal érettségi, from 1993.

From a sample of 46 of the weakest papers, she classified the "translation errors", and found the following results:

Mistakes in comprehension: 261  
Mistakes in Hungarian vocabulary: 234  
Mistakes in Hungarian grammar: 269  
Style/ register errors in Hungarian: 66  
Spelling errors (Hungarian): 41  
Punctuation errors: 13.

Thus a total 623 of the errors (70%) found on these 46 papers were errors in Hungarian. But this is supposed to be an English test!

Why do students make these errors? Is it because students don't know Hungarian? Of course not. It is much more likely to be because students are being misled by trying to be literal, doing word-for-word glossing, not stepping back from the text in order to consider its overall, or even sentence-by-sentence, meaning. In any case, are we interested in an English exam in knowing how good a candidate's Hungarian is? Surely not: this is a simple matter of the validity of a test of the foreign language, not of Hungarian.

### **J) Practice elsewhere in translation as a testing method: Alderson survey**

I am currently conducting a survey over the Internet of the use of translation as a testing technique in other countries. To date I have received responses from 19 countries. Much of the information is partial as I did not use a detailed questionnaire, expecting to find

very few cases where translation was used as a testing technique. However, I received some very varied responses, and so I plan to confirm these data with respondents and to include a brief questionnaire to complete the survey. The preliminary results are interesting, as follows:

Country	In secondary schools?	In School leaving exams?	In University exams?	Other
Germany	No ?	No ?	?	?
Greece	No	No	?	diplomats
Italy	No ?	No ?	Some	?
Norway	No	No	?	?
UK	No	No except Chinese	Some	Institute of Linguists
Canada	No?	No?	Some	?
USA	No?	No?	Some	Military, FBI, CIA, NSA
Brazil	No ?	No?	Yes	?
Colombia	Yes	No	Yes	?
Mexico	No ?	No ?	Yes	?
Peru	Yes but	?	Yes	?
Egypt	Yes	Yes	Yes ?	?
Ethiopia	No ?	No?	No?	newspaper journalists
Iran	No ?	No?	Yes	?
China	No?	No?	Yes	?
Japan	Yes	Yes	Yes?	?
Romania	Yes	Yes	?	?
Slovenia	Yes	No	?	?
Ukraine	Yes	Yes	Yes	?

Clearly there are two main types of location: those where translation is virtually non-existent, and others where it is still widely used. In others, it is still used, but my respondents consider it to be old-fashioned and hope that it will disappear in due course.

Typical responses from the two main categories are as follows:

**Norway:**

"In the case of English at least, translation has been dropped altogether at both ordinary and advanced level school leaving exams. - it fell out of favour a few years back and doesn't seem to be used in coursebooks either."

**Japan**

"Yes, both are still very widely in use here in Japan. Particularly in entrance exams to tertiary education. For example, at the very institution I am working for, we administer 7 forms of English test (written only) for screening at 7 faculties. Each of them is designed so that the full score is 200 points, in which L2-L1 translation accounts for 30 points, and L1-L2 translation is also 30 points. Of course, a person like me is trying very hard to persuade the authority to change the format, in fear of possible negative backwash and less-than satisfactory interrater reliability, but as is always the case, old tradition dies hard."

Obviously this data is subject to many caveats, but it does appear as if Westernised or developed countries do not on the whole use translation as a testing technique, whereas a number of developing countries and especially in Central Europe, still use the technique. Hungary did not respond but clearly falls into the latter category of countries following traditional ways of assessment. Why is this? Why does Hungary still use translation as a testing technique when elsewhere it has fallen out of favour and there is virtually NO evidence (from a survey of the literature I conducted some two years ago) that it has been shown to be reliable or in any way valid?

Of course, it may be that Hungarians are right, like Ukrainians and Romanians, and translation is indeed a valid testing technique. But there is no evidence to show this, and my Hungarian contacts assure me that no empirical research has been done into this matter, so translation cannot survive because it has been shown to be valid and reliable. There must be other reasons.

And indeed, Hungary has some odd bed-fellows in retaining translation: the Ukraine and Romania.

### **K) The company translation keeps**

Consider the sort of tests that are administered in the Romanian school-leaving exam, and judge translation as a test method by the company it keeps:

Translation is used in the BAC (Bacalaureat: school-leaving examination) for the written test, in different forms for the various categories of classes:

Bilingual schools (5-7 hours of English /week) get a text to translate into English. It is a literary text (8-10 lines long) from well-known Romanian prose writers.

Intensive classes (3-4 hours/week): from L1 into L2 a short text, usually about 6 lines of dialogue, no source indicated, either literary (plays) or made up.

Classes with 1-2 hours/week: 6 invented sentences to translate from Romanian to English, meant to test the use of grammar structures.

To give an idea of the sophistication of other parts of the Romanian Bacalaureat,

**The Reading test** is typically a pseudo-literary or stylistic “analysis”

eg

(text from Carmen Calili “Lebanese Washing Stories”)

"Comment in about 300 words upon the text above, having in view (sic) the following:

1) the point of view used by the author and its effect

the character and the way she is presented

your personal opinions about the character "

(5-7 hours per week of English)

**The Writing test:**

“Describe your best friend” (about 300 words – 1-2 hours per week, March 2000)

“In about 250 words, argue for and against this: 'We are born equal’” (5-7 hours per week, March 2000)

“There is a gap between generations.' Expand upon that statement and sustain your opinions with arguments. You may refer either to a text you have studied or to your personal life experience.” (about 250 words) 3-4 hours of English a week, March 2000

These examples reveal very traditional test methods, of highly doubtful validity. Indeed, some would claim that the "Reading" tests test one's writing ability, and the "Writing" tests test one's ability to understand what to do, as well as the text that accompanies the task.

In short, I do not believe that translation is used as a testing technique anywhere in the world because it has been shown to be valid and reliable. Rather, I believe, and the survey supports this, that translation is used because it has always been used, and often despite criticism and calls for its replacement. Its use is associated with very traditional and largely discredited testing techniques like pseudo-literary analysis and essay writing.

**L) Why does Hungary use translation?**

Various reasons are plausible: resistance to change; preference for things traditionally Hungarian and suspicions of anything modern and Western, especially in education; a generally deep conservatism in society; the conservatism of the teaching profession, or of the testing profession. But all these are arguably a matter of the observer's prejudice or subjective opinion, and hardly attestable.

Below, I discuss briefly some of the arguments I have heard, or can imagine.

**1) Influence of Rigo utca?**

Clearly the powerful influence of the Rigo utca exams is an important factor. Rigo utca exams test translation, and therefore exams that wish to be considered equally valid (or, of course, invalid!) may feel it appropriate to use translation as a testing method. When or if Rigo utca ceases to test using translation, then it is quite possible that practice elsewhere will also change.

Of course, the key question is: why does Rigo utca insist on using translation as a testing method? Is it because it has evidence that it is valid and reliable ? I know of NO

published evidence to this effect from Rigo utca or elsewhere in Hungary. Or is it to keep foreign international examinations out of Hungary, by insisting that "two-language" exams are the most appropriate for Hungary - despite the obvious lack of evidence to support that argument either?

Whether the fact that the proposed new érettségi does not include translation as a testing technique for English will have an equivalent effect remains to be seen. It is also unclear to what extent that proposal will be accepted and if accepted by the politicians whether it will be a popular decision among teachers. (And if politicians sense that it will not be a popular decision you can be sure that they will not accept the proposal, whatever the educational and psychometric arguments against translation as a testing technique.)

## **2) Special position of the Hungarian language?**

One argument I have heard not infrequently is that "bilingual exams" are essential in a country like Hungary, whose national language is infrequently used outside national and regional boundaries. It is argued that Hungarian risks dying as a language if bilingual exams do not continue. I consider this to be a bogus argument, simply used to rationalise traditional practices. Consider the following facts, taken from D Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*, 1987.

Hungarian has reportedly somewhere between 13.5 to 14 million speakers, and uses translation as a test method.

Icelandic has 250,000 speakers and does not use translation as a testing technique

Slovene has 1.5 to 2 million speakers and translation is only used informally in schools, not in national exams.

Finnish, a related language to Hungarian, has fewer speakers, a mere 4.5 to 5 million, yet translation is not used as a testing technique.

Danish has 5 million speakers, and Denmark does not use translation as a testing method. Greek has 10 to 10.5 million speakers and does not use translation as a testing method in school-leaving examinations.

On the other hand, translation IS used in the Ukraine: where the number of speakers of Ukrainian is between 40 and 45 million. And it is used in Japan, where the number of speakers of Japanese is 120 million. Clearly, the number of speakers of a language does not determine whether or not translation is used as a testing technique. In Japan translation is considered to be a strong intellectual challenge, a discipline *sui generis* and thus achievement in translation is highly valued (and in Japan, spoken abilities in a foreign language are notoriously weak).

## **3) A good testing method?**

Is translation used in Hungary because it is a good testing method? Good to test which language skills? Reading? There is simply no evidence that this might be the case: indeed, internationally, there are very few studies indeed of translation as a testing method. And there are plenty of other ways of testing reading, with demonstrated validity and reliability.

Is it suitable for testing writing ability? Again, there is absolutely no evidence. I have seen no data from Rigo utca, for example, no evidence of even the reliability of marking, let alone of its validity, and there are, of course, other valid and reliable ways of testing writing.

Indeed, unlike in writing, where assessment scales are well understood and frequently developed, there are very few examples of scales for the assessment of translation. There are no scales for markers of the érettségi, for example. The teachers themselves have to decide on the adequacy of a translation, and the minimal guidance they are given - "5 is to be awarded to a stylistically acceptable translation and 1 to a very poor translation" - is vacuous, to put it politely.

Interestingly, we have very little evidence, other than the occasional anecdote, of how teachers mark the érettségi translations, and I know of no study of how Rigo utca examiners mark their translations either, nor how reliable or valid it is.

Why are there no studies? Because we all know that translation is valid and reliable and so it is a waste of time studying it or publishing results, or because the data is so awful and so problematic that nobody dare publish the results?

So why is translation still used? Because we have always done it that way? Surely that is hardly an adequate reason, especially when the use of translation as a testing technique might affect people's lives and future, as in the case of the Rigo utca, if not the érettségi.

#### **4) The power of the (non-) native speaker?**

Maybe translation survives in order to retain the power of the non-native speaker: many native speakers just don't speak Hungarian well enough to judge translations, and so Hungarian teachers can retain power in their classes and exams if they are the sole arbiter of a student's performance, at least on translation exams.

Or maybe it is because of the Hungarian textbook publishing industry? Clearly there are few international publishers interested in publishing textbooks which teach students how to translate from and into Hungarian for a Hungarian English examination. If the examination did not have translation, however, one could imagine that international publishers might be interested in developing textbooks that prepared students here in Hungary for examinations that could also be relevant to, and sold in, other countries with similar exams elsewhere in the world. But as long as there is translation to and from Hungarian on exams, only locally produced books would sell - or even be published. This sounds like a form of provincial protectionism - at the expense of students and of test

validity and meaningfulness. And of course, I have argued above that this may also be one reason why Rigo utca insists on keeping translation as a testing method, and why politicians eager to preserve Rigo utca's monopoly in the face of international competition insist on "two-language" exams as the only ones for which one can earn salary bonuses, or get credit for university entrance or towards university degrees.

### 5) Easy to design?

One possible reason is that it is easy to set a translation test: all you have to do is to take a text and get students to translate it. This is of course quite unprofessional, and makes an assumption of automatic validity. And it ignores the crucial problem of how to mark. It is therefore an unacceptable reason for the retention of translation as a testing method.

### 6) Needed in real life?

One argument frequently advanced is that translation is needed in real-life, especially in a country like Hungary, whose language is not one of the "world" languages. The numbers argument is similar to, but slightly more sophisticated than, the argument presented above about the number of speakers of a language, but it is equally specious, and can be dismissed with the same evidence.

The argument that translation is a real-world activity is totally superficial and unthought-through as a justification for the sort of translation that is typically done in the *erettsegi*. First, of course, most real-world translation is done by trained, qualified or experienced translators. It is not done by young adolescents with no specific training and very little if any experience of true translation. Thus, translation as a real-world activity is a specialised skill exercised in businesses, NGOs and governmental agencies by people who specialise in translating.

It is also of course, done part-time by language teachers, to enhance their income, but again, they are experienced in doing this, they are clear who their audience is, what their task is, and they struggle to complete a native-like text. Anybody who has ever done translations under these conditions, and I am sure there are many among my readers, would acknowledge that it is not something that just anybody with language proficiency can do, and it is not an easy task.

So the sort of so-called real-world activity that translation is said to represent cannot be that sort of translation. Rather, it is what the Council of Europe has called **mediation**. However, a word of warning. This word, "mediation", has become a buzz word amongst teachers, especially in Hungary where the conservatives see a chance to get translation back into respectability and the classroom through the back door, and the more enlightened see mediation as an opportunity to wean the conservative and die-hard translators away from mindless, difficult and ultimately senseless activities in class to something more akin to the real world.

So anybody who uses or who hears the term "mediation" should beware and be on their

guard. You should check carefully and critically exactly what the person using the term means by it.

Exactly what does "mediation" mean? Well, the Council of Europe does not know, as the new Framework, finally published this year, has virtually no reference to it. True, there are brief mentions, but unlike virtually every other communicative activity in the Framework, there are absolutely no scales or descriptions of mediation as an activity.

The first draft of the Common European Framework of Reference (1996) contains only the following brief section, 4.4.4 on "Mediating activities"

"Examples of mediating activities include spoken interpretation and written translation as well as summarising and paraphrasing texts in the same language, when the language of the original text is not understandable to the intended recipient e.g.:

**oral mediation:**

- simultaneous interpretation (conferences, meetings, formal speeches, etc.);
- consecutive interpretation (speeches of welcome, guided tours, etc.);
- informal interpretation
- of foreign visitors in own country
- of native speakers when abroad
- in social and transactional situations for friends, family, clients, foreign guests, etc.;
- of signs, menus, notices, etc.

**written mediation:**

- exact translation (e.g. of contracts, legal and scientific texts, etc.);
- literary translation (novels, drama, poetry, libretti, etc.);
- summarising gist (newspaper and magazine articles, etc) within L2 or between L1 and L2;
- paraphrasing (specialised texts for lay persons, etc.)."

Note that of these, most are the province of the experienced or trained translator or interpreter, and should properly be termed translation and interpretation, not mediation, to avoid the obvious confusion.

Moreover, the Council of Europe and its experts have proved unable to identify suitable descriptions which would enable them to say that at Level A2 or C1, a person ought to be able to do X mediating activity, or to be at Y level in mediation. Those scales just do not exist. Why not? Because of the complexity of translation as a skill, and the difficulty - some would say impossibility - of objectively or even semi-objectively comparing translations and deciding that one is better than another.

So what are we left with? What sort of things do people mediate from one language to another? Precisely NOT the sort of texts that students are given to translate in exams. Rather it is the informational text, notices, warnings, instructions: texts that convey information that is needed by one interlocutor or another. And typically these are done in speech, not in writing.

It is important to make a distinction between translating and interpreting, where interpreting is either simultaneous or consecutive, and a very different skill from, and a more difficult skill than, translation, and people have to be even more experienced and trained to do the job. It is equally important to be clear, when analysing mediation, to know which modality is normally used for the cross lingual information transfer. Indeed, I suggest that *cross lingual information transfer* (CLIT) is a much more accurate term than mediation, precisely because it places the emphasis on information. "What did Great Uncle Janos, now in America and using English all the time, say in his letter?" "What does that notice mean?" "Where do I get changed in these swimming baths?" "Does this packet of cornflakes contain sugar?" These are the sort of information questions that crosslingual information transfer - mediation - seeks to answer. What people doing this sort of crosslingual transfer precisely do not do, is take literary or subliterary fictional texts of the sort that are typically used in translation tests, and ask people to render them accurately in another language.

Typically what people are expected to do is to summarise the gist of the source text, they are asked to identify specific pieces of information, and they are asked to do this information transfer for a known audience, with a clear purpose in mind. What purpose do student translators on the *érettségi* have (which I shall call *érettségi* translators, or ET for short, from now on - ET to contrast with the real world, of course!)? What are the expectations of their audience: nobody seems to know, because nobody knows how to mark the translations.

If we are to take this real-world argument at all seriously, rather than as the thinly disguised plea for traditional translation that I am sure it is, then we have to insist that the sort of crosslingual information transfer task we put in the exam is similar to such real life tasks, and that the processes engaged in by ETs are the same as those used in real life, or as similar as possible. Thus we should not expect literal or even pragmatic translation of literary texts, but we should require summarising in L1, or an exact or approximate rendition of information contained in notices, short messages, adverts and the like, in L1 or L2, in settings that approximate those of the real world and NOT real-world professional translation tasks.

But I simply do not believe that the real-world argument is the reason translation is still used as a testing method. Otherwise we would see more real-world translation tasks of the sort I suggest might be appropriate. Rather, translation is used - why? Who knows? But the question is important, and should be answered by those who insist on its use in the face of lack of evidence for validity, reliability or utility.

### **M) How translation differs from normal communicative activities**

Construct validity requires that we understand what is involved in taking a test, and in

being able to complete successfully any test task, by whatever test method. Thus it is crucial to understand what is involved in completing translation tasks, when they are used as methods to measure reading or writing abilities or to measure general language ability.

First, when writing, either in the first or target language, we normally do not have a script to which to write. We may know who we are writing to - unlike the *érettségi* translator (ET). We may know what we want to say - unlike ET, who does not want to say anything. But we certainly are not told exactly which words to use, and how to phrase things. We are at liberty to select our own words, to avoid words we are not sure of the meaning of, to avoid difficult or unusual syntax. We are at liberty to be as clear or as obscure as we wish, formal or informal. In short, unlike ET, we can decide for ourselves what our message is, within the limits of the task, how to phrase it, and exactly how to express ourselves.

ET, on the other hand, is driven by words other people have chosen, and ET may not even know why those words were chosen or what they mean. ET has been given syntax to follow which may be opaque, ambiguous, or indeed deliberately effective - humorous, sarcastic, sentimental, ironic, and so on - and whose tone he or she may either not recognise or feel is his or her own.

Above all, what ET has to do is to render somebody else's message, which doubtless meant something to that other person, but which may not have the same meaning to ET, and to render it into another language, supposedly retaining the meaning - whatever it was, and without knowing how the person reading the translation will judge what is an appropriate meaning. Is it literal or pragmatic, communicative force or style, reader effect or exact information?

And there is another important psycholinguistic constraint. ET is not only constrained by somebody else's words, somebody else's syntax, somebody else's organisation. ET is influenced by these. When confronted with a phrase in another language to render into one's own, it is a common experience that the natural way of saying things in one's own language simply escapes you. The normal phrase would come naturally, unbidden as it were, but when asked to find an L1 equivalent of a given phrase, word or sentence, that very phrase or word or sentence truly interferes: it becomes a straitjacket from which you cannot easily escape.

Thus for example, I was asked recently what the English was for "száz tagú cigányzenekar". Immediately I thought of "100 person orchestra". But it did not seem right: I was unsure whether it was good English or not. Do we really say that in English? I had to mentally distance myself from the Hungarian and ask myself what DO we say in English? I thought of the phrase "100 piece orchestra", but was still not entirely satisfied. We say "a 100 voice choir", but not "100 instrument orchestra", I said to myself. "100 person orchestra" does not sound right. I could not find the right phrase, but doubtless had I not been thinking of the Hungarian, I would have had no problem in using the appropriate phrase. Note this is not because I don't know English. The interpreter at the concert talked constantly of "100-member orchestra". But it sounded odd, like a literal

translation, and I am still not sure what the normal correct phrase would be. Yet I know all the words in Hungarian and I know English pretty well. I was constrained by the source text. I was being forced to translate literally when I would not normally go through such a process. I would simply, out of the blue, as it were, talk or write about "a 100 something orchestra".

And this is precisely what happens to all translators, and it takes considerable skill, and experience with the task - not just with the language - to free oneself from somebody else's expression, from the way that a given language chooses to say something, and to think of how you would say that in the other language. "Raining cats and dogs" is only one of millions of examples. It is not just a question of being idiomatic. It is a question of being able to think and express oneself in parallel, conveying the same meaning but in appropriate ways. Translation as a test method does not allow one to do this. ET is virtually obliged by his or her perception of the task to stick to the words on the page, rather than to free him or herself from the tyranny of the words and to think of the meaning, and then to consider how best to convey that meaning, not those words, in the other language.

Which is precisely why so many ETs in the érettségi make mistakes in their Hungarian. It's surely not that they do not know Hungarian. Rather it is that they are sticking, maybe not literally, but almost inevitably, to the words in the text, to the foreign way of expression and find it psycholinguistically difficult to free themselves from that tyranny. And of course under exam conditions, reading texts that are typically not easy to understand anyway - which may have been chosen because they had certain hidden tricks or problems, rather than because they are the sort of texts that people would need to translate in real life - under time pressure, without any clear idea of what is expected of them and how it will be judged, not surprisingly they make mistakes: the task forces them to make mistakes.

And that is probably why teachers - some teachers, not all, of course - love translation as an exercise and as a test task. Students make mistakes, and teachers can identify them, can judge them, can underline them, can prove to themselves that their students have a lot more to learn, that they are not perfect, that the teacher knows more than they do, that the teacher is justified. And of course they can show the mistakes, underlined appropriately, to the ETs when they complain about getting a four instead of a five. "Look at all these mistakes", they can say confidently. Unaware, or deliberately ignoring the fact that they, too, would likely have made many mistakes, maybe not the same ones but almost certainly mistakes, had they done the task under the same conditions. The task forces you to make mistakes.

But is that really what we want? Do we really want to force students to make mistakes, to rub their noses in their imperfections, to prove to them that they really do not know English, that they really do have a lot to learn or that learning a foreign language is a difficult task or that English is a difficult language to learn - and students often then consider it to be a "stupid" language because it says things in ways that their own language does not, and in which they constantly make mistakes?

## **N) What WILL the new érettségi be like?**

In this paper I have concentrated on questioning the use of translation as a testing method. I have suggested that it is inappropriate, unprofessional and irresponsible to use translation without evidence that it can result in valid, reliable and useful tests of foreign language ability, and I am certain that such evidence does not exist at present. At the very least, then, the onus is on those who advocate or indeed use translation as a testing method to prove that it is indeed valid and reliable.

I wish to conclude on a more positive note, by describing briefly what the new érettségi is likely to contain. I have emphasised that translation will NOT be used as a testing method on this new examination, unless politicians and Ministry officials insist, for whatever dubious reasons. The professional arguments are clear: translation is inappropriate for school-leaving exams in Hungary, as elsewhere in the world.

The new érettségi, instead, will test students' ability to communicate, especially with their peers. It will pay attention to meaning (eg, messages in spoken and written texts). It will seriously de-emphasise the current focus on form until higher levels of achievement. It will seek to professionalise language teaching through washback. The new exam will hopefully encourage good practice in language teaching, through being based on best practice in language testing, using test techniques that are not only thought to be valid but which have been researched, and whose qualities are known and can be proved. And it will use reliable scoring techniques, based on thoroughly professional, trialled and revised training packages to train raters of writing tasks, assessors of speaking performance and interlocutors in the speaking test, rather than relying upon individual teachers' intuitions, which we know are variable, unreliable and unaccountable.

The English Examination Reform Project has trialled "mediation" tasks in speaking and proved that they do not work. Videos exist showing students attempting to mediate, whose English is quite adequate for normal peer-to-peer conversation on the tasks set, but as soon as they are set tasks to mediate - to summarise information from one language in the other - all they do is fall back on pitifully slow, word-for-word literal translation. It has been shown that so-called mediation does not work in the Hungarian context, and so mediation - translation in a thin disguise - will not be used in the English érettségi.

Interestingly, those responsible (in OKI) for developing models of the érettségi for German have been trying to persuade English to keep translation in the érettségi exam, at both Intermediate and Advanced levels. Why is that? What is so holy, so sacred, so important about translation? The aim is to get all foreign languages to accept translation on the érettségi? But whose aim does this serve, and why should the English team agree to something that it finds unacceptable? What ARE the motives of OKI and especially the German team, in seeking to ensure that the dinosaur of translation survives in the German érettségi (as it does in the German university entrance exam - though not in the English university entrance exam)? Do they have EVIDENCE that translation is such a good

method, is so essential to language exams in Hungary? Or do they have other motives?

I don't know, but it makes you think. OKI is apparently planning a survey of language teachers in Hungary to see if they want or will accept the continued use of translation as a testing method. How the teachers and their schools will be selected, I have no idea, but a number of suspicions. One suspicion is that the aim of the survey will be to find evidence that most Hungarian teachers of foreign languages want translation to be retained in the school-leaving exam. Quite why it should matter whether the majority of (unenlightened or uninformed) language teachers in Hungary want translation escapes me. Surely this should be a decision made by the best informed professionals, not by pseudo-democratic market research or by politicians with little knowledge and suspect motives?

If my readers or their school receive such a questionnaire in the next few months, I hope they will remember this paper.

But if my readers still do not believe that translation is a complex, difficult and unacceptable task as a testing technique at the levels I have been discussing, judge for yourselves. Imagine a real-world mediation task. You are with your parents or colleagues, who do not speak English, in my local pub in Lancaster, and you hear the locals standing around the bar laughing. On checking, you see that they are laughing at a sign behind the bar. It's there for all to see and chuckle at, and is in relatively simple English. Your task, a so-called mediation task, is to produce an acceptable translation in Hungarian of this authentic notice.

Even if you can do it, could your students? And if you cannot, why ask your students to do it?

**"Any employee not fired with enthusiasm - soon will be"**

### **References to follow**

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