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Norm research in conference interpreting: How can the study of documentary sources contribute to a better understanding of norms?

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1 The reference framework: the concept of norms in Translation Studies

Since the mid-seventies the notion of norms has often been discussed in connection with translation. In interpreting studies it did not become an issue until about ten years later. This section will consist of a brief reminder of this background.

Toury is usually considered as the first to have introduced the notion of norms in Translation Studies. There is no doubt about his pioneering role in the conceptualization of the concept: since Toury, research on translation phenomena is first of all research about norms. But he is well aware of the roots of his norms concept within Translation Studies (Levý 1963, 1969, Holmes 1988), sociology and sociolinguistics (Toury 1999).

Toury argues that translating is bound to be affected by norms, as is every other socially relevant activity, norms being ‘the translation of general values or ideas shared by a group—as to what is conventionally right and wrong, adequate and inadequate—into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations’ (Toury 1999: 14). In his view “‘translatorship’ amounts first and foremost to being able to *play a social role*, i.e. to fulfil a function allotted by a community - to the activity, its practitioners and/or products - in a way which is deemed appropriate in its own terms of reference. The acquisition of a set of norms for determining the suitability of that kind of behavior, and for manoeuvring between all the factors which may constrain it, is therefore a prerequisite for becoming a translator within a cultural environment.’ (Toury 1995: 53). These norms are acquired by internalization in four phases: firstly by environmental feedback from any party to the communication event, concerning the translator’s output, secondly by sanctions and/or rewards applied by the group in which the translator operates, thirdly by the translator developing an internal monitoring mechanism and finally by the full internalization of norms in his/her competence, which results in decisions often being made more or less automatically (Toury 1978/ revised 1995:

248-254; Toury 1999: 26-27). Toury distinguishes between initial norms, preliminary norms and operational norms. (Toury 1978/ revised 1995).

Chesterman (Chesterman 1993, Chesterman 1997) refines this last category by introducing a further division into

- professional norms (production norms) concerning the translation process and at least in part validated by norm authorities, but also by actual practice

and

- expectancy norms (product norms) concerning the form of the translation product, based on the expectations of the prospective readership. These are of a higher order than professional norms, as they shape production norms and are validated only by virtue of their existence in a certain community and in a specific communicative situation.

Although the various levels of norms are obviously interlinked (see a.o. Coulmas 1991; Fishman 1993; Lambert 1994), I chose to focus on *professional norms* in the study presented in this paper, to avoid widening the scope of the project too much. This is why, in the sections dealing with the research project ‘norms’ should be read as ‘professional norms’, i.e. norms governing the actual decisions made during the act of translation/interpreting.

2 Studying norms in CI: where to start?

Although Toury claimed that the norm concept was applicable to written as well as oral translation, the usefulness of norms for the study of interpreting was not immediately recognized. In 1989, though, Shlesinger opened the discussion about the introduction of the concept into interpreting research (Shlesinger 1989). Since her programmatic article quite a lot has been written about the methodological aspects of such research. Most authors underline the methodological obstacles involved, such as:

- the virtual non-existence of interpreting corpora. Research based on a limited corpus will make it difficult to draw a distinction between idiosyncrasies and general norms and allow at best for the tentative formulation of norms for the specific language pair of this corpus (Shlesinger 1989)
- differences in importance and prestige of an interpreting setting, which may influence the norms, so the formulation of a tentative "canonized-noncanonized" scale for interpretation settings would be a prerequisite to correlate observable differences in performance with a range of settings (Shlesinger 1989; Marzocchi 2005a).
- technical, logistical and legal obstacles of recording interpreters: not all features of the interpretation can be shown in a transcript, interpreters are generally averse to have their output recorded etc. (Shlesinger 1989)
- the possible impact of recording/observing on interpreters' behavior and consequently on the representativity of the corpus to be studied (Shlesinger 1989; Schjoldager 1995/2002)
- the variety of factors influencing the SI process and product (Diriker 1999) which Interpreting Studies is not yet able to take into account by lack of the necessary tools
- the real time character of interpreters' performance, especially in the simultaneous mode, which makes it difficult to assess whether an interpreter's output is the result of the application of a norm or of processing capacity limitations (Schjoldager 1995/2002; Shlesinger 2000). To counter this problem, Schjoldager proposes the introduction of

specific interpreting norms governing “what the interpreter ought to do – or is allowed to do –when the task becomes difficult or impossible” (Schjoldager 1995/2002: 303).

In spite of the difficulties envisaged, all authors agree that the norm concept is indispensable for the study of interpreting, as it can help to shed light on phenomena that cannot be explained by a purely cognitive approach.

Taking as a point of departure the two methodological approaches set out by Toury (Toury 1995: 65) and bearing in mind the specific requirements of interpreting studies the following research methods have been proposed:

1. using textual sources (‘text’ in the case of interpreting research meaning interpreters’ output)
 - confronting corpora of actual interpretation products with hypotheses about relevant norms (Shlesinger 1989)
 - source-target comparison (Schjoldager 1995/2002; Schjoldager 1995)
 - comparison between interpretations and translations of one source text (Schjoldager 1995/2002)
 - ‘analysis of the target text (i.e. interpreter's rendition) as an oral text serving the needs of a certain audience under certain circumstances, a comparison with non-translational target language texts and a descriptive comparison between target and source texts to detect regularities of behaviour by interpreters’ (Diriker 1999: 77)
2. using extratextual sources, which may involve
 - a study of ‘either the written or oral discourse on SI to observe the expectations of employers, customers, institutions and scholars’ (Diriker 1999, 77). By analyzing the discourse, certain expectations and priorities can be revealed, although these are not necessarily the norms governing interpreting in real circumstances. The analysis can, however, ‘point to the larger social framework where interpreters have to survive and where some of the options available to them are considered more ‘correct’ and ‘appropriate’ than others’ (ib., 78). This method is advocated also by Gile, when he recommends reading didactic, descriptive and narrative texts about interpreting (Gile 1999) and analysing user responses - asking interpreters about norms (Gile 1999), questionnaires and in-depth interviews with interpreters and other stakeholders (Diriker 1999)
 - asking interpreters and non-interpreters to assess target texts and to comment on their fidelity and other characteristics using small corpora (Gile 1999)

3 A PhD project on norms in conference interpreting

The starting point of my research project on norms in conference interpreting was the fact that my own working environment - the interpreting service of the European Parliament and the Joint Interpreting Service of the European Commission (JICS), for which I work as a freelance interpreter - seemed to offer good opportunities to study the way norms are acquired and applied in practice. In both services a group of conference interpreters works together regularly in a limited number of settings, which might make it easier to observe some of the mechanisms Toury describes (environmental feedback, control of access to the professional group, sanctions) and to gather more or less comparable real life data. The two services have a number of characteristics in common and especially the considerable group of freelance interpreters employed by both institutions provide a close connection between them. That is why I chose to perform a case study taking into account both services.

The research project does not pretend to treat norms in conference interpreting in general, but focuses on the professional norms relevant in a particular interpreting environment. This also implies, however, the consideration of a number of basic methodological questions about the norms issue as such.

The project as it stands now is aimed at finding an answer to the following questions:

- How can we find empirical proof of the existence of norms and mechanisms that are conducive to norms coming into being and/or to their dissemination and enforcement (in particular, mechanisms for access control, environmental feedback and sanctions) in the context of the EP interpreting service and JICS? In which way do these norms and mechanisms operate in the community studied?
- What indications can we find of the content of the *professional* norms (more specifically communication and relation norms in Chesterman's sense (Chesterman 1997: 67-70) valid among the interpreters belonging to these communities?
- What norm hypotheses can we put forward on the basis of the indications found?
- What are the complementary data needed to confirm or falsify these hypotheses?
- Can we observe differences and similarities between the norms prevailing in each of the interpreting services studied?

4 Research methodology

For a general discussion of the methodology I propose to use (a.o. the delineation of an interpreting community), I would like to refer to an earlier paper (Duflou (forthcoming)).

The research plan is to a great extent based on Shlesinger's, Gile's and Diriker's suggestions for research methods as summarized above and on the general methodological approach set out by Chesterman for the study of norms in translation (Chesterman 2006). In its current form the plan consists of the following steps:

1. the selection of one or more conference interpreting communities to be studied, based on objective data on social cohesion, familiarity of community members with each others' performance etc.

As target communities the Dutch booths of the Interpreting Service of the EP and the Joint Interpreting and Conference Service (JICS) of the European Commission were selected. It is envisaged to consider also, to the extent feasible, the wider context in which this group of conference interpreters is operating, i.e. the services employing them, as well as the speakers and audience they work for.

2. a description of the hierarchical structure and procedures governing access, feedback and sanction mechanisms within the two interpreting services.

This description is based on documentary sources and interviews. The documents used contain information about a.o.:

- procedures for granting access to the interpreting community: accreditation tests and exams
- procedures for quality assessment and (positive or negative) sanctioning
- attribution of responsibilities and tasks within the interpreting community

Interviews with some key officials of both communities are used to gather complimentary information, mainly on the practical implementation of the procedures mentioned.

The provisory results of this step show that there are considerable differences between the two services in the nature and the degree of formalization of quality assessment and

sanction mechanisms. Access mechanisms (test and exam procedures), on the other hand, are more or less harmonized, since all tests (for accreditation of freelance interpreters) and exams (for recruitment of staff interpreters) are organized inter-institutionally and administered by juries made up of members of both interpreting services studied (plus representatives of the interpreting service of the European Court of Justice).

Beyond the procedural information, it is difficult to get access to specific data on the functioning of sanction mechanisms in practice (e.g. the nature and number of complaints received yearly and measures taken in response to them), but there is every indication that speakers and users of interpreting services have only an indirect and limited impact on either of these mechanisms, as all procedures are administered by (ex-)interpreters in middle or high management staff functions.

Another problem is the determination of the real power distribution in the communities. The function of a member in the organizational organigram is a strong indicator of procedural powers, but it is hard to identify the interpreters who are considered to be the “moral” authorities in their community. As a result of their acknowledged expertise, their statements on norms may be more influential than those of other community members, which could be an important factor to bear in mind when assessing the value and scope of a given statement.

3. the collection and analysis of a set of data extracted from documentary sources to reveal indications of norms valid in the communities studied (this phase is currently in progress)
4. the formulation of one or more provisional hypotheses on the existence of specific professional norms, based on the data gathered
5. The collection and analysis of data from non-documentary sources (interviews, survey) to find more evidence to support, refine or refute these hypotheses
6. the analysis of a corpus of interpreters’ performances focused on the collection of evidence for these hypotheses in the form of regularities; the corpus can be pre-existing or specifically compiled for the purpose of the study. Given that it will probably be limited in size for reasons of feasibility, it is envisaged to use or establish a corpus that is as homogeneous as possible as far as the type of meeting, its importance and prestige etc. (Shlesinger 1989) is concerned.

5 Finding evidence on potential norms in documentary sources

In this paper I would like to discuss more in detail the third step of the research project, i.e. the use of documentary sources to find clues for the existence of concrete professional norms. As set out above, this phase should provide the material needed to formulate norm hypotheses and to determine which questions should be asked in the survey and interviews envisaged in the later steps.

To put together a corpus of documents relevant to the two interpreting services studied, the following categories of existing written data (i.e. not produced for the purpose of the study) were taken into consideration:

- official documents of the interpreting services concerned, dealing with the interpreting profession, discussing what can be expected of interpreters etc.
- official documents of the interpreting services concerned dealing with procedures for selection, tests, assessment, conditions for recruitment etc.

- documents written by representatives of the interpreting services about their work as an interpreter, about what an interpreter can, should, must not do etc.
- interviews with representatives of the interpreting services about the subjects mentioned above
- (to a limited extent:) other documents produced, published and/or distributed within the context of the interpreting communities studied and dealing with the subjects mentioned above, particularly documents emanating from or expressing the point of view of users of the interpreting services concerned

These documents are scanned for evidence of norm content ('norm-kernel' in Von Wright's terminology (Von Wright 1963: 70):

- character of the norm: obligation, prohibition or permission
- the obliged, prohibited or permitted action
- condition(s) of application: condition(s) which must be satisfied for the obligation, prohibition or permission to be applicable

We find evidence of norm content in the form of:

- *norm formulations* (Von Wright 1963: 93 ff.): a norm formulation is the sign or symbol (the words) used in enunciating a norm. As a sentence, a norm formulation has a performatory function and serves to promulgate the norm. The concept is slightly broader than that of Chesterman's 'norm statements' (Chesterman 2006).
- Linguistically norm formulations occur as imperative sentences, deontic sentences (sentences with modal verbs such as ought to, may or must not) or sentences in the present or future tense (in which case it is the use and not the look of the sentence that determines whether it is a norm formulation or not (Von Wright 1963: 102-103).
- *normative statements* (Von Wright 1963: 105 ff.): a normative statement is a subjective statement to the effect that one thinks something ought to, may or must not be done. It has a descriptive function. It refers to the belief in the existence of a norm and as such can be true (if the norm really exists) or false (if it doesn't). The belief statements mentioned by Chesterman (Chesterman 2006) belong to this category.

Linguistically normative statements take the form of deontic sentences, sentences in the present or future tense (see remark above).

As far as the use of this last category of evidence is concerned, I would like to refer to Toury, who admits 'the *possibility* of having norms verbalised, in order simply to comment on them (or on norm-governed behaviour and its results) or even as part of the process of imparting them to others to ensure social continuity', but warns against taking these statements at face value, as 'there is no identity between the norms as the guidelines, as which they act, and any formulation given to them in language' (Toury 1999: 15).

I shall take this reservation to be applicable to normative statements only, not to norm formulations, which due to their performatory function *are* the direct linguistic expression of norms. If in a document addressed to interpreters we find a formulation 'Do x', this formulation creates a norm 'to do x' and we can only question its validity for a certain group of professionals and/or its force in a given context and moment in time. As long as there is no evidence indicating that the norm in question is not valid or extremely weak, we shall assume that a norm with this content exists and is being promulgated.

For norm statements, on the other hand, we shall have to take into account that they 'always embody other interests, too' and 'may, therefore, serve as a source of data on norm-governed behaviour, and hence on the underlying norms as such, but [...] only indirectly: if one wishes to expose the bare norms, any formulation will have to be stripped of the alien interests it has accumulated.' (ibid).

6 Analysis of documents

For the analysis of the individual documents the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (see a.o. Fairclough 1995; Locke 2004; Van Dijk 1993) are applied, as well as the categories and principles of deontic logic (Von Wright 1963).

The choice for CDA as a method was inspired by Diriker's use of it for the analysis of meta-discourse on conference interpreting (Diriker 2004).

CDA implies that textual analysis of the documents is combined with an analysis of their institutional context and allows an assessment of the status of the document within the community studied and of its potential impact on the promulgation of norms in this community. Norm formulations e.g. do not as such contain information on the strength and validity of the norm. The position of the author and the status of the document in the community may give indications of normative force and validity, but extra-documentary data will be necessary to assert these, i.e. to show that the norm is being followed and to what extent.

Andrew Chesterman drew my attention to Von Wright's work in the field of deontic logic and it proved indeed to be very relevant and inspiring. A logical analysis of deontic features of the documents, based on Von Wright's concepts, allows us to distinguish between different categories of obligations, prohibitions and permissions and to select the data that can be used as a basis for hypotheses and further research. It is a.o. important to make a distinction between obligations, prohibitions and permissions relating to *interpreters' actions* and those who bear on characteristics of the *interpreting product*, as well as between specific *prescriptions* linked to precise conditions and deontic *expectations* pertaining to ideal situations.

7 Some provisory conclusions

Various categories of texts yield different kinds of data:

1. official texts about conference interpreting as provided by (one of) the interpreting services and intended for the general public abound with very general and categorical normative statements, usually referring to what Von Wright defines as 'ideal rules'

Example 1:

"As the range of subjects covered in parliamentary debates is almost unlimited, the interpreter is required to have a solid general knowledge and expertise in all areas of EU activity."

Example 2:

"To be an interpreter, you have to like languages."

Example 3:

"Part of the message interpreters have to transmit is non-verbal so they need to pick up non-verbal clues like tone of voice and body language, making it essential for the interpreter to be able to see the speaker and the audience, to see different reactions."

(European Parliament website 2006)

The first two requirements quoted above are concerned with *being, possessing certain qualities*, rather than with *doing, performing certain actions*. They determine a concept and are closely connected with the concept of *goodness* ('In order to be a (good/EP) interpreter one has to have qualities *x* and *y*'). In these examples quality (e.g. liking languages, having a solid general knowledge etc.) and ideal (e.g. being an interpreter) are not causally related, the

relation is purely conceptual, which is characteristic of ideal rules. In the third example, on the other hand, the use of a certain means (picking up non-verbal clues) is causally related to the achievement of the end (transmitting the message), which corresponds to Von Wright's definition of a technical norm.

Of course it is “clear that ‘education’ (in the broadest sense) towards ideals will have to make use of prescriptions and other norms of conduct” (Von Wright 1963: 15), but it is impossible to derive the concrete actions needed to achieve the ideal end from the ideal rule as such. This is why the two first quotes are hardly useful as a basis for a norm hypothesis. The third statement seems a more likely candidate for further research; if there is a hypothetical norm prescribing that interpreters are supposed to pick up non-verbal clues, it is empirically possible to verify if interpreters adhere to this norm in practice, e.g. by checking whether they actively scan the meeting room and look at the speakers and audience while working. It is important to bear in mind, though, that this quote has to be put in its historical context: the emphasis on visibility (enhanced by the quote ‘It is important to see the meeting room’ being used as a subheading in the text) can probably be explained as a reaction by the EP interpreters against attempts of the EP administration to introduce remote interpretation in the EP (European Parliament Interpretation Directorate 2006: 4), one of the problems for interpreters not working in the same room as speakers and audience being poor visibility (ibid.: 8). Taking into account that the 3rd remote interpreting test at the EP took place in November-December 2005 and its results were published in January 2006, more or less at the same time the text discussed here was being written, one can safely assume that the statement quoted is not a ‘neutral’ reflection of the existence of a factual norm, but should rather be read as an argumentative proposition aimed at dissuading the EP administration from the introduction of remote interpreting on a permanent basis.

2. statements by conference interpreters working for (one of) the interpreting services featured in (sections of) texts intended for the general public contain more concrete information, they often point out difficulties in adhering to the ideal rules mentioned above in real situations

Example 4:

“ ‘There are times when you can translate, when you find something which is suitable in your language, but it is risky because it can be interpreted differently from the original words and the MEPs listening to your translation can react to your own words rather than to what the speaker said originally,’ said Bernard Gevaert, a Dutch interpreter.”

(European Parliament website 2006)

The interviewee in this example seems to touch upon a conflict between norms here: “you can..., but it is risky, because...”. This is the problem mentioned by Marzocchi (an EP staff interpreter himself) (Marzocchi 2005a; Marzocchi 2005b), who illustrates it with the case of a Polish trainee interpreter rendering the English idiomatic expression “the proof of the pudding is in the eating” into Polish in a semantically correct way, but without any reference to the pudding image, which causes problems for the interpretation of the next intervention, in which a speaker takes up this same image and develops it. Marzocchi analyses the behavior of the trainee as the result of the importance attached in interpreter training to a “cultural adaptation norm”.

On the basis of this statement one could propose two hypothetical norms: “an interpreter should try, to the extent possible, to replace an idiomatic expression used by the speaker by one in the target language” and “when interpreting an idiomatic expression, an interpreter should stick to the words used by the speaker and possibly explain that there is a given image used in the original” and check which norm is followed more often, by whom (experienced interpreters, novices...), in which settings etc.

3. general and categorical normative statements tend to prevail in texts written by conference interpreters working for (one of) the interpreting services and addressed at their colleagues as far as the documents have an official status. In the more informal texts in this category concrete recommendations, norm formulations, rather than normative statements, can be found

Example 5:

“Tell your audience when something happens: ‘The speaker/president interrupts...’, ‘The president:...’, ‘Mr/Mrs So-and-so says.....’”

(European Parliament Interpretation Directorate website s.d.)

Example 6:

“[...] start as soon as possible - even if you say only “Mr. Chairman”- and try to finish soon after the original.”

(Fleming 2003)

The more informal texts in this category contain very clear and explicit norm formulations, providing excellent ‘hypothesis material’. The prescriptions quoted above seem to reveal tensions with some of the categorical normative statements found in other texts. The requirement for relay interpreters to describe what happens in the meeting room, i.e. to add something to the utterances of the speaker, is a normative formulation that seems to contradict other demands like ‘fidélité à l’original , sur le fond comme dans le ton’, (SCIC 2002) and ‘adopting the delivery, tone and convictions of the speaker and speaking in the first person’ (European Commission Directorate General for Interpretation 2005), which emphasize the conduit function of the interpreter. As to the recommendation to reduce the ear-voice span to a minimum, hypotheses could be developed about the scope of this potential norm: is it applicable exclusively to relay situations or also under certain other circumstances?

8 To be continued...

The concrete data extracted from the texts analyzed will be used to establish provisory hypotheses to be refined and/or falsified in the following steps of my study. The next step will consist of in-depth interviews and a survey aimed at gathering supplementary evidence, in particular on the validity and force of the hypothetical norms proposed, and should provide a sound basis for the final step, empirical observation of interpreters’ behavior in the setting(s) chosen for the case study.

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