5 Principles of translation

Although this is not a theoretical work, I realize that teachers may appreciate some guidelines on how to help the students evaluate their own work. Specific remarks are given in the *Comments* after each activity. Below are some general principles which are relevant to all translation:

a. *Meaning*. The translation should reflect accurately the meaning of the original text. Nothing should be arbitrarily added or removed, though occasionally part of the meaning can be 'transposed', for example, He was *limp* with fatigue might become: Il était tellement fatigué qu'il *ne tenait plus debout*. Ask yourself:
   - is the meaning of the original text clear? if not, where does the uncertainty lie?
   - are any words 'loaded', that is, are there any underlying implications? ('Correct me if I'm wrong . . .' suggests 'I know I'm right'!)
   - is the dictionary meaning of a particular word the most suitable one? (should *subverzija* be *subversion* in English?)
   - does anything in the translation sound unnatural or forced?

b. *Form*. The ordering of words and ideas in the translation should match the original as closely as possible. (This is particularly important in translating legal documents, guarantees, contracts, etc.) But differences in language structure often require changes

in the form and order of words. When in doubt, underline in the original text the words on which the main stress falls. (See activities 1.3, 2.1, and 2.2.)

c. *Register*. Languages often differ greatly in their levels of formality in a given context (say, the business letter). To resolve these differences, the translator must distinguish between formal or fixed expressions (*Je vous prie, madame, d'agréer l'expression de mes sentiments distingués*, or *Please find enclosed* . . .) and personal expressions, in which the writer or speaker sets the tone.

Consider also:
– would any expression in the original sound too formal/ informal, cold/warm, personal/impersonal . . . if translated literally?
– what is the intention of the speaker or writer? (to persuade/ dissuade, apologize/criticize?) Does this come through in the translation?

d. *Source language influence*. One of the most frequent criticisms of translation is that 'it doesn't sound natural'. This is because the translator's thoughts and choice of words are too strongly moulded by the original text. A good way of shaking off the source language (SL) influence is to set the text aside and translate a few sentences aloud, from memory. This will suggest natural patterns of thought in the first language (L1), which may not come to mind when the eye is fixed on the SL text.

e. *Style and clarity*. The translator should not change the style of the original. But if the text is sloppily written, or full of tedious repetitions, the translator may, for the reader's sake, correct the defects.

f. *Idiom*. Idiomatic expressions are notoriously untranslatable. These include similes, metaphors, proverbs and sayings (*as good as gold*), jargon, slang, and colloquialisms (*user-friendly, the Big Apple, yuppie*, etc.), and (in English) phrasal verbs. If the expressions cannot be directly translated, try any of the following:
– retain the original word, in inverted commas: *'yuppie'*
– retain the original expression, with a literal explanation in brackets: *Indian summer* (dry, hazy weather in late autumn)
– use a close equivalent: *talk of the devil = vuk na vratima* (literally, 'the wolf at the door')
– use a non-idiomatic or plain prose translation: *a bit over the top = un peu excessif*.

The golden rule is: if the idiom does not work in the L1, do not force it into the translation.

(The principles outlined above are adapted from Frederick Fuller: *The Translator's Handbook*. For more detailed comments, see Peter Newmark: *Approaches to Translation*.)