Thinking German Translation

A Course in Translation Method: German to English

Sándor Hervey, Ian Higgins and Michael Loughridge

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A Course in Translation Method: German to English

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Introduction

This book is a developed version of a tried and tested course in translation methodology for third-year undergraduates in modern languages at the University of St Andrews. The course was first designed for students of French; the French-English version was published by Routledge in 1992 under the title of *Thinking Translation*. However, long before this publication, the French course had proved to be so successful at St Andrews that parallel versions of it were developed for German-English and Spanish-English. These courses are also currently taught at St Andrews.

The present volume is a fully-developed German-English version of the course. While this volume will be found, in many respects, to correspond to the 1992 version of *Thinking Translation,* it is a self-contained, 'parallel' course-book for English-speaking students of German, which contains both major and minor departures from the 1992 version. Some of these departures spring from specific differences between German and French (for instance the 'contrastive topics' in Chapters 16 to 19). Others result from the inevitable process by which ideas are refined through continued application and practice (for instance the section on 'oral genres' in Chapter 11). The most evident departure affecting the structure of the course consists in the inversion of the order in which 'textual levels' are presented. In the 1992 version we opted for what Mona Baker (1992, p. 6) calls a 'top-to-bottom' arrangement: that is to say, textual levels were discussed starting with the broadest and most general level (the 'top') and ending with the level of the smallest, most particular units of language. However, the St Andrews German-English course has always been taught using a 'bottom-to-top' approach (an approach which is, incidentally, Mona Baker's preferred one). Our own experience has confirmed that students explicitly prefer to work from the particular to the general. In the present volume, therefore, we have chosen a 'bottom-to-top' arrangement.

Let us now briefly outline a few basic assumptions that lie at the back of the course structure we are advocating. First, this course is not a disguised version of a 'grammar-and-translation' method of language teaching. Our focus is on how to *translate,* not on how to speak or write German. It is assumed that students already have the considerable linguistic resources in German that they need in order to benefit from the course. We also assume that they have already learned how to use dictionaries and, where appropriate, data-banks. Naturally, in using their linguistic resources to produce good translations, students inevitably extend and improve those resources, and this is an important fringe-benefit.

As we have said, our main interest lies in developing useful translation skills and, generally, in improving *quality* in translation work. In this connection, the point should be made that this quality depends on the translator's having an adequate command of English as much as of German; indeed, Birgit Rommel, head of the Übersetzer- und Dolmetscherschule Zürich, has lamented the lack of mother-tongue training in universities, concluding that: 'Great stress is laid on improving foreign language proficiency, but excellence in the mother-tongue—the translator's target language—is, quite wrongly, taken for granted' (Rommel, 1987, p. 12). As Rommel's comment also suggests, it is normally assumed when training translators that higher quality is achieved when translating into the mother-tongue than into a foreign language; hence the predominance of unidirectional translation, from German into English, in this course.

Second, the course is not intended as a disguised version of translation theory, or of linguistics. 'Theoretical' issues do, of course, arise in it, because translation practice and its deployment of linguistic resources are so complex. However, such issues are not treated out of theoretical interest, but out of direct concern with specific types of problem encountered in translating. That is, our slant is *methodological* and practical—theoretical notions have been freely borrowed from translation theory and linguistics merely with the aim of rationalizing methodological problems. Throughout the course, we have provided instant and simple exemplification of each theoretical notion invoked, and linked these notions instantly and directly to practical issues in translation.

Third, the course has a progressive overall structure and thematic organization. After setting out the fundamental issues, options and alternatives of which a translator must be aware, it examines a series of layers that are of textual importance in translation ('upwards' from the nuts and bolts of phonic and graphic details to the generalities of intertextuality and culture). It then moves on, via a series of semantic and stylistic topics (literal meaning, connotation and language variety), to a consideration of textual genres and the demands of translating texts in a range of different genres. If literary genres have, on balance, a higher profile than 'commercial' ones, this is partly offset by the use of non-literary texts of various kinds throughout the course (such as speed translation exercises). In any case, 'commercial' texts tend to present translation difficulties that are far too narrowly specific in subject matter to be suitable for a general course-book on translation method. Our aim has been to produce an integrated, non-specialized approach to the various aspects that need to be discussed in the context of a general methodology of translation. While we cannot claim that this approach is exhaustive, it does have a wide scope and a coherent organization, and it is applicable to translating virtually any type of text likely to be encountered by graduates who go on to translate professionally.

Finally, our claim that the course systematically and progressively builds up a methodical approach to translation should not be taken to mean that we are offering a way of 'mechanizing' the process of translation by providing rules and recipes to be followed. On the contrary, we believe translation to be a highly creative activity in which the translator's personal responsibility is constantly to the forefront. We have, therefore, tried to emphasize throughout the need to recognize options and alternatives, the need for rational discussion, and the need for decision-making. All the material in the course—expository and practical alike—is intended not for silent consumption, but for animated discussion between students and between students and tutor. (In fact, we have found that many of the practicals are best done by students working in small groups and reporting their findings to the class.) Each chapter is, therefore, intended for tutor-student discussion at an early stage in the corresponding practical; this is because we are not trying to inculcate this or that particular theory or method, but simply the general principle that, whatever approach the translator adopts, it should be self-aware and methodical.

While the course we are presenting is a progressively designed whole, it is divided into a series of successive units intended to fit into an academic timetable. Each unit consists of a chapter outlining a set of related notions and problems, and an accompanying practical in which students are given a concrete translation task, working on textual material to which the notions and problems outlined in the chapter are particularly relevant. The first fifteen units are designed to be dealt with progressively, in numerical order. There are, however, four further units, which can be studied at whatever points in the course seem most appropriate to local conditions. These are Chapters 16–19, devoted to four different 'contrastive linguistic' topics. In these four units, the proportion of expository material to practical exercises varies from chapter to chapter.

With the exception of some of the 'contrastive' chapters, each unit needs between 90 minutes' and two hours' class time, and students are also required to prepare in advance for class discussion of the chapter. It is important that each student should have the necessary reference books in class: a monolingual German dictionary, a German-English/English-German dictionary, an English dictionary and an English thesaurus. Some of the practicals will be done at home—sometimes individually, sometimes in groups—and handed in for comment by the tutor. How often this is done will depend on local conditions; in our situation we have found that once a fortnight works well. When an exercise is done at home, this implies that some time should be devoted in the following class to discussion of the issues raised. (Fuller suggestions for teaching and assessment can be found in the *Teachers' Handbook*.)

From consideration of the progressive overall structure of the course and its modular arrangement, it is easy to see how versions of the same course outline can be designed for languages other than French and German. With the exception of the contrastive topics in Chapters 16–19 (which, for each other language, need to be replaced by different contrastive topics dealing with problems that loom large for that language), adapting the course involves the provision of illustrative material for each chapter and of suitable texts for the practicals. A Spanish-English course book along these lines has already been published, and an Italian-English version of the course will be published in 2000.

NB (1) A number of the practicals in the course involve work on texts that are not contained in the present volume, but intended for distribution in class. These texts are found in S.Hervey, I.Higgins and M.Loughridge, *Thinking German Translation: Teachers' Handbook* (Routledge, 1995), which can be obtained from the addresses given on the opening page of this book. (2) The oral texts for use in practicals are available on a cassette: S.Hervey, I.Higgins and M.Loughridge, *Thinking German Translation,* which can also be obtained from the addresses given on the opening page.

1
Preliminaries to translation as a process

There are people who believe that skill in translation cannot be learned and, especially, cannot be taught. Behind this attitude is the assumption that some people are born with a gift of being good translators or interpreters, whereas others simply do not have this knack; in other words, skill in translation is an inborn talent: either you've got it or you haven't.

Up to a point, we would accept this view. No doubt it is true, for instance, that some people take to mathematics or physics, whereas others have little aptitude for such subjects, being more inclined towards the 'humanities'. There is no reason why things should be otherwise for translation; some are 'naturally' good at it, others find it difficult; some enjoy translating and others do not.

The twin assumptions behind this book are that it will help its users acquire proficiency in translation, and that we are addressing ourselves to people who do enjoy translating, even if they are not brilliant at it. Indeed, this assumed element of enjoyment is a vital ingredient in acquiring proficiency as a translator. This, again, is quite normal—elements of enjoyment and job satisfaction play a vital role in any skilled activity that might be pursued as a career, from music to computer technology. Note, however, that when we talk of proficiency in translation we are no longer thinking merely of the basis of natural talent an individual may have, but of the skill and facility that require learning, technique, practice and experience. Ideally, translators should combine their natural talent with acquired skill. The answer to anyone who is sceptical about the formal teaching of translation is twofold: students with a gift for translation invariably find it useful in building their native talent into a fully-developed proficiency; students without a gift for translation invariably acquire some degree of proficiency.

Since this is a course on translation method, it cannot avoid introducing a number of technical terms and methodological notions bordering on the 'theoretical'. (These are set in bold type when they are first explained in the text, and are listed in the Glossary on pp. 228–34.) Our aims are primarily methodological and practical rather than theoretical, but we believe that methods and practices are at their best when underpinned by thoughtful consideration of a rationale behind them. This book is, therefore, only 'theoretical' to the extent that it encourages a thoughtful consideration of the rationale behind solutions to practical problems encountered in the process of translation or in evaluating translations as texts serving particular purposes.

Throughout the course, our aim is to accustom students to making two interrelated sets of decisions. The first set are what we shall call **strategic decisions**. These are general decisions which, ideally, the translator should make before actually starting the translation, in response to such questions as 'what are the salient linguistic characteristics of this text?'; 'what are its principal effects?'; 'what genre does it belong to and what audience is it aimed at?'; 'what are the functions and intended audience of my translation?'; 'what are the implications of these factors?'; and 'which, among all such factors, are the ones that most need to be respected in translating this particular text?'. The other set of decisions may be called **decisions of detail**.

These are arrived at in the light of the strategic decisions, but they concern the specific problems of grammar, lexis, and so on, encountered in translating particular expressions in their particular context. We have found that students tend to start by thinking about decisions of detail which they try to make piecemeal without realizing the crucial prior role of strategic decisions. The result tends to be a translation that is 'bitty' and uneven. This is why, in the practicals, students will usually be asked first to consider the strategic problems confronting the translator of a given text, and subsequently to discuss and explain the decisions of detail they have made in translating it. Naturally, they will sometimes find during translating that problems of detail arise which lead them to refine the original strategy, the refined strategy in turn entailing changes to some of the decisions of detail already taken. This is a fact of life in translation, and should be recognized as such, but it is no reason for not elaborating an initial strategy: on the contrary, without the strategy many potential problems go unseen until the reader of the translation trips up over the inconsistencies and the obscurities of detail.

TRANSLATION AS A PROCESS

The aim of this preliminary chapter is to look at translation as a process—that is, to examine carefully what it is that a translator actually does. Before we do this, however, we should note a few basic terms that will be used throughout the course. Defining these now will clarify and simplify further discussion:

Text Any given stretch of speech or writing produced in a given language and assumed to make a coherent, self-contained whole. A minimal text may consist of no more than a single word—for example, 'Prima!'—preceded and followed by a period of silence. A maximal text may run into volumes—for example, Thomas Mann's *Joseph und seine Brüder*.

Source language (SL) The language in which the text requiring translation is couched.

Target language (TL) The language into which the original text is to be translated.

Source text (ST) The text requiring translation.

Target text (TT) The text which is a translation of the ST.

With these terms in mind, the translation process can, in crude terms, be broken down into two types of activity: understanding a ST and formulating a TT. While they are different in kind, these two types of process do not occur successively, but simultaneously; in fact, one may not even realize that one has imperfectly understood the ST until one comes up against a problem in formulating or evaluating a TT. In such a case, one may need to go back to square one, so as to reinterpret and reconstrue the ST in the light of one's new understanding of it (just as a translation strategy may need to be modified in the light of specific, unforeseen problems of detail). In this way, ST interpretation and TT formulation go hand in hand. Nevertheless, for the purposes of discussion, it is useful to think of them as different, mutually separable, processes.

The component processes of translation are not qualitatively different from certain ordinary and familiar processes that all speakers perform in the normal course of their daily lives. In this sense, translation is not an 'extraordinary' process. For a start, comprehension and interpretation of texts are commonplace processes that we all perform whenever we listen to or read a piece of linguistically imparted information. The act of understanding even the simplest message potentially involves all the beliefs, suppositions, inferences and expectations that are the stuff of personal, social and cultural life. Understanding everyday messages is therefore not all that different from what a translator must do when first confronting a ST— and it is certainly no less complicated. It is, however, true that messages may be understood with varying degrees of precision. For instance, suppose that a mother asked her son to get the blue biro from the top left-hand drawer of the bureau, and he responded by giving her a black biro that happened to be handy. She would be justified in thinking that he had not understood her message fully, as he had evidently not paid attention to a number of details in it. Yet he could not be accused of a total lack of comprehension, because he did register and respond to the one salient fact that he had been asked for a biro.

In everyday communication, evidence that a message has been understood may come from appropriate practical response. Another measure of how precisely a message has been understood is appropriate *linguistic* response. Appropriate linguistic response includes such simple things as returning a greeting correctly, giving a satisfactory answer to a question, or filling in a form. While none of these are translation-like processes, they do show that the element of comprehension and interpretation within the translation process involves what can be a perfectly ordinary, everyday activity requiring no special skill or power of intellect, only an average native command of the language used.

There is, however, another kind of ordinary, everyday linguistic response that is rather similar to translation proper. Here is a commonplace example:

BOY: Ask your Dad if I can take you to the disco tonight.
GIRL: O.K. *(Exit to find her father)*
(to father) Dad, there's a disco on at the Y.M.C.A. tonight. Can I go?
DAD: Just a minute. Who's taking you?
GIRL: Guess who.
DAD: Oh, I see. And what time does it start?
GIRL: Eight o'clock—and it finishes at midnight.
DAD: Right. If you make sure you get your homework done by seven and get what's-his-name to bring you home the moment the thing finishes, you can go. But I want you back here by 12.15 at the latest, and no messing around going round to friends on the way, or whatever it is you lot get up to in the middle of the night. And you come right in and go to bed when you get home, is that clear? No hanging around at the door saying goodnight for hours on end.
GIRL: O.K., Dad. Thanks. *(Goes back to find Boy)*
BOY: Well? What did your Dad say?
GIRL: He says we can go as long as we come straight back at quarter past midnight—and as long as we behave ourselves.

In this commonplace verbal exchange, the girl gives ample evidence of having understood very precisely what her father has said. She does so, not by appropriate practical response, or by making the appropriate reply, but by a process of *interpreting* her father's words (including managing to read skilfully between the lines), and then *reporting the gist* of her father's intended message *in her own words*.

This twofold process is strongly reminiscent of translation proper. Extracting information (by way of comprehension and interpretation) from a given text, and then re-expressing the details of that information in another text using a different form of words is what translators do. We can even distinguish in the example between a ST (the words used by Dad) and a TT (the girl's reply to 'what did your Dad say?'). The only real difference between this example and translation proper is that both ST and TT are in English. We shall follow Jakobson in referring to the reporting or rephrasing of a text in the same language as **intralingual translation** (Jakobson, 1971, pp. 260–6).

In the same article Jakobson also talks of **inter-semiotic translation** (ibid.). This is another commonplace, everyday process, as can be shown in a banal example:

A What does your watch say?

B It says 'five past three'.

Of course, the watch does not actually *say* anything: the words 'five past three' are just a verbal rendering of a message conveyed by the position of the hands. Verbalizing this non-linguistic message is simply a way of *translating,* not from one language to another, but from a non-linguistic communication system to a linguistic one. The common denominator between the two is that they are both 'semiotic systems' (that is, systems for communication), and Jakobson is right to call the process inter-semiotic translation: something we do all the time without even thinking about it. This is another reason, then, for arguing that everybody is a translator of a sort.

Another common process of interpretation that bears a similarity to translation proper is an intra-linguistic process whereby one expands on a particular text and its contents. A good example would be an explanatory commentary on the Lord's Prayer, which might expand and expound the message contained in the single phrase 'Our Father' to read as follows:

> When we pray, we should not pray by ourselves and only ourselves; prayer should always be a corporate activity (compare 'Wherever two or three of you are gathered together…'). This, we may say, is the significance of the word 'our': a first person plural inclusive pronoun. In using the word 'Father', Jesus is suggesting forcefully that one should not think of God as an abstraction, but as a person, and not as a distant, unapproachable one at that, but as a person having some of the attributes associated with a father-figure: head of the household, strict, caring, loving, provident, and so on.

This type of expository interpretation can, as here, easily develop into a full-scale textual exegesis that tries to analyse and explain the implications of a text (perhaps with the addition of cross-references, allusions, footnotes, and so on). This process may not tally with everyone's view of translation, but it does share some common features with translation proper, especially with certain kinds of academic translation: there is a ST which is subjected to comprehension and interpretation, and a TT which is the result of a creative (extended and expository) reformulation of the ST.

The first and third examples above represent two extremes on a continuum of translation-like processes. At one end, the TT expresses only a condensed version of the ST message; we shall call this **gist translation**. At the other end, the TT is far more wordy than the ST, explaining it and elaborating on it; we shall call this **exegetic translation**. Both gist translation and exegetic translation are, of course, matters of degree.

Half-way between these two extremes there is, in principle at least, a process that adds nothing to, and omits nothing from, the message content of the ST, while couching it in terms that are radically different from those of the ST. In *form of expression* ST and IT are quite different, but in *message content* they are as close to one another as possible. We shall call this ideal process **rephrasing**. Thus, we can say that 'Stop!' is a rephrasing of 'red traffic light', and 'yours truly consumed a small quantity of alcohol approximately 60 minutes ago' is a rephrasing of 'I had a little drink about an hour ago'.

The attainability of ideally precise rephrasing is a controversial question that will continue to occupy us in what follows. From the examples just cited, it is clear that precision is a relative matter. 'Stop!' is perhaps a successful inter-semiotic rephrasing of 'red traffic light' (but it omits the associations of danger and the law), while 'yours truly consumed a small quantity of alcohol' is a distinctly less exact (intralingual) rephrasing of 'I had a little drink'. These examples illustrate what is surely a fundamental maxim of translation, namely that rephrasing never allows a *precise reproduction* of the total message content of the

ST, because of the very fact that the two forms of expression are different, and difference of form always entails a difference in communicative impact. We shall return to this in Chapter 2, in discussing the concept of translation loss.

So far, then, we have suggested that there are three basic types of translation-like process, defined according to the degree in which the IT abstracts from, adds to, or tries to reproduce faithfully, the details contained in the ST message.

It should be added that there are two important respects in which these three types of process are on an equal footing with one another, as well as with translation proper. First, they all require intelligence, mental effort and linguistic skill; there can be no substitute for a close knowledge of the subject matter and context of the ST, and a careful examination and analysis of its contents. Second, in all three cases, mastery of the TL is a prerequisite. It is salutary to remember that the majority of English mother-tongue applicants for translation posts in the European Commission fail *because of the poor quality of their English* (McCluskey, 1987, p. 17). In a translation course, TL competence needs as close attention as SL competence. There is, after all, not much point in people who do not have the skill to rephrase texts in their native language trying their hand at translation proper into their mother-tongue. Consequently, synopsis-writing, reported speech, intralingual rephrasing and exegesis are excellent exercises for a translator, because they develop one's technique in finding, and choosing between, alternative means of expressing a given message content. That is why the first practical exercise in this course is a piece of intralingual translation in English.

PRACTICAL 1

1.1
Intralingual translation

Assignment

(i) Assess the purpose of the text given below.
(ii) Recast the story in different words, adapting it for a specific purpose and a specific type of audience (define carefully what these are).
(iii) Discuss the textual changes you found it necessary to make, and the reasons for these alterations. (Do this by inserting into your TT a superscript note- number after each point you intend to discuss, and then discussing the points in order on a fresh sheet of paper. Whenever you annotate your own TTs, this is the system you should use.)

Text

And the LORD said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward:

But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it; and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea.

[…]

And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten me honour upon Pharaoh, and upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen.

[…]

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.

And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.

And the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them to the midst of the sea, even all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.

And it came to pass, that in the morning watch the LORD looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of the cloud, and troubled the host of the Egyptians,

And took off their chariot wheels, that they drave them heavily: so that the Egyptians said, Let us flee from the face of Israel; for the LORD fighteth for them against the Egyptians.

And the LORD said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand over the sea, that the waters may come again upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen.

And Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to his strength when the morning appeared; and the Egyptians fled against it; and the LORD overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.

Exodus 14, vv. 15–27, Authorized Version.

1.2
Gist translation

Assignment

You will be asked to produce a gist translation of a passage given to you in class by your tutor. The tutor will give you any necessary contextual information, and tell you how long you should take over the translation.

2
Preliminaries to translation as a product

As we saw in Chapter 1, translation can be viewed as a process. In this chapter, we shall view it as a product. Here, too, it is useful to start by examining two diametric opposites, in this case two opposed types of translation, one showing extreme SL bias, the other extreme TL bias.

At the extreme of SL bias is **interlineal translation,** where the TT attempts to respect the details of SL grammar by having grammatical units corresponding point for point to every grammatical unit of the ST. Interlineal translation is rare and exists only to fulfil specialized purposes in, say, language teaching, descriptive linguistics, or in certain kinds of ethnographic transcript. Since it is of little practical use to us, we shall not, in fact, give it much consideration, other than to note its position as the furthest degree of SL bias. Interlineal translation is actually an extreme form of the much more common **literal translation,** where the literal meaning of words is taken as if from the dictionary (that is, out of context), but TL grammar is respected. (Literal meaning will be discussed as a topic in Chapter 7.) For our purposes, we shall take literal translation as the practical extreme of SL bias.

At the extreme of TL bias is completely **free translation,** where there is only a global correspondence between the textual units of the ST and those of the TT. The following example contrasts a literal and a free translation of a stock conversation in Chinese between two people who have just been introduced:

	Literal TT		Free TT
A	Sir, are you well?	A	How do you do?
B	Are you well?	B	Pleased to meet you.
A	Sir comes from where?	A	Do you come here often?
B	I come from England.	B	No, this is my first visit.
A	How many persons in your family?	A	Nice weather for the time of year.
B	Wife and five children. And you?	B	Yes, it's been quite warm lately.

The type of extreme freedom seen in the second version is known as **communicative translation,** which is characterized as follows: where, in a given situation (like introducing oneself to a stranger), the ST uses a SL expression standard for that situation, the TT uses a TL expression standard for an analogous target culture situation. This degree of freedom is no more to be recommended as general practice than interlineal translation. (Translators have to use their own judgement about when communicative translation is appropriate.) Communicative translation is, however, mandatory for many culturally conventional formulae that do not allow literal translation. Public notices, proverbs and conversational clichés illustrate this particularly clearly, as in:

SL bias ⟵⟶ **TL bias**

(......................) ■ —— ■ —— ■ —— ■ —— ■

(Interlineal) Literal | **Faithful** | **Balanced (semantic/communicative)** | **Idiomatic** | **Free**

Anlieger frei.	Access only.
Man soll den Tag nicht vor dem Abend loben.	Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.
Servus.	Hello.

For further examples, see pp. 24–5 below.

Between the two extremes of literal and free translation, one may imagine an infinite number of degrees, including some sort of a compromise or ideal half-way point between the two. Whether this ideal is actually attainable is the question that lies behind our discussion of 'equivalence' and 'translation loss' below. For the moment, we simply suggest that translations can be usefully judged on a parameter between the two polarities of extreme SL bias and extreme TL bias. Five points on this parameter are schematized in the following diagram adapted from Newmark (1982, p. 39):

Between the literal and free extremes, the Chinese conversation given above might be rendered at the three intermediate points as follows:

Faithful TT		Balanced TT (semantic/communicative)		Idiomatic TT	
A	Are you well?	A	How do you do?	A	How d'you do?
B	Are you well?	B	How do you do?	B	How d'you do?
A	Where do you come from?	A	Where are you from?	A	Where are you from, then?
B	I come from England.	B	England.	B	I'm English.

Faithful TT		Balanced TT (semantic/ communicative)		Idiomatic TT	
A	How big a family do you have?	A	Have you any family?	A	Any family?
B	A wife and five children. And yourself?	B	Yes, a wife and five children. Have you?	B	Wife and five kids. How about you?

EQUIVALENCE

In characterizing communicative translation, we used the term 'equivalent target culture situation'. Before going any further, we should make it clear what we mean —or rather, what we do not mean—by the terms 'equivalent' and 'equivalence'.

The literature on translation studies has generated a great deal of discussion of what is generally known as *the principle of equivalent effect*.

In so far as 'equivalence' is taken as a synonym of 'sameness' (which is often the case), the concept runs into serious philosophical objections, which we will not go into here. The claim that ST and TT effects and features are ‘equivalent’ in the sense of ‘the same’ is in any case unhelpful and misleading for the purposes of translation methodology, for two main reasons.

First, the requirement that the TT should affect its recipients in the same way as the ST does (or did) its original audience raises the difficult problem of how any one particular recipient responds to a text, and of the extent to which texts have constant interpretations even for the same person on two different occasions. Before one could objectively assess textual effects, one would need to have recourse to a fairly detailed and exact theory of psychological effect, a theory capable, among other things, of giving an account of the aesthetic sensations that are often paramount in response to texts. Second, the principle of equivalent effect presumes that the theory can cope not only with the ST and SL audience but also with the impact of a TT on its intended TL audience. Since on both counts one is faced with unrealistic expectations, the temptation for translators is covertly to substitute their own subjective interpretation for the effects of the ST on recipients in general, and also for the anticipated impact of the TT on its intended audience.

It seems obvious, then, that if good translation is defined in terms of ‘equivalence’, this is not an *objective* equivalence, because the translator remains ultimately the only arbiter of the imagined effects of both the ST and the TT. Under these circumstances, even a relatively objective assessment of ‘equivalent effect’ is hard to envisage.

More fundamentally still, unlike intralingual translation, translation proper has the task of bridging the cultural gap between monolingual speakers of different languages. The backgrounds, shared knowledge, cultural assumptions and learnt responses of monolingual TL speakers are inevitably culture-bound. Given this fact, SL speakers’ responses to the ST are never likely to be replicated exactly by effects on members of a different culture. The notion of cross-cultural ‘sameness’ of psychological effect is a hopeless ideal. Even a small cultural distance between the ST audience and the TT audience is bound to produce *fundamental* dissimilarity between the effects of the ST and those of the TT—such effects can at best be vaguely similar in a global and limited sense; they can never be ‘the same’.

To take a simple example. A translator who decides that the effect of a given ST is to make its audience laugh can replicate that effect by producing a TT that makes its audience laugh. However, claiming ‘sameness’ of effect in this instance would only be at the expense of a gross reduction of the effects of a text to a single effect. In fact, of course, few texts can be attributed such a monolithic singleness of purpose, and as soon as a ST is acknowledged to have multiple effects, it is unlikely that the TT will be able to replicate them all. (In any case, humour itself is a highly culture-bound phenomenon, which means that even the genuine cross-cultural equivalence of laughter is questionable.)

Another point one must query about the principle of objective equivalent effect concerns the requirement that the TT should replicate the effects of the ST on its *original* audience. This might conceivably be possible for a contemporary ST, but for a work of any appreciable age it may not be feasible, or even desirable. It may not be possible for the translator to determine how audiences responded to the ST when it was first produced. But even if one assumes that such effects can be determined through historical research, one is still faced with a dilemma: should the effects of the TT be matched to those of the ST on its *original* audience, or on a modern audience? The extract from Binding’s *Unsterblichkeit* set for translation in Practical 2 is a good example of these problems. Even if it were translated into the English of the 1920s, could one ever know if the TT produced the same effects on an English-speaking readership in the 1990s as the ST did on its post-World War I German readers? The choice between modernizing a TT or making it archaic is fraught with difficulties whatever one decides: on the one hand, the TT may be rendered trivial without the effects it produced on its original audience; on the other, the original cultural impact of the ST may even be incomprehensible, or unpalatable, to a modern TL audience. For example, in the case of a play by Schiller, most people in his Weimar audience would have appreciated the rhetoric for its own sake, as well as the ideas and feelings expressed; but today, few playgoers in Germany—and still fewer in Britain—have enough knowledge of rhetoric to be able to appreciate it as Schiller's original audiences must have done.

In short, we find the principle of equivalent effect, in so far as it implies 'sameness', too vague to be useful in a methodology of translation. At best, a good TT produces a carefully fabricated approximation to some of the manifest properties of the ST. This means that a sound attitude to translation methodology should avoid an absolutist attempt at *maximizing sameness* in things that are crucially different (ST and TT), in favour of a relativist attempt at *minimizing dissimilarities* between things that are clearly understood to be different. Once the latter approach is accepted, there is no objection to using the term 'equivalent' as a shorthand for 'not dissimilar in certain relevant respects'. It is in this everyday sense of the word that we use it in this book.

TRANSLATION LOSS

Our position is best explained in terms of an analogy with engineering. All engineering is based on the premise that the transfer of energy in any mechanical device is necessarily subject to a certain degree of 'energy loss'. A machine that permits energy loss is not a theoretical anomaly in engineering: engineers are not puzzled as to why they have not achieved perpetual motion, and their attention is directed, instead, at trying to design machines with increased efficiency, by reducing energy loss. By analogy, believing in translation equivalence in the sense of 'sameness' encourages translators to believe in the elusive concept of a perfect translation, representing an ideal mean between SL bias and TL bias. But it is far more realistic to start by admitting that the transfer of meaning from ST to TT is necessarily subject to a certain degree of **translation loss;** that is, a TT will always lack certain culturally relevant features that are present in the ST. The analogy with energy loss is, of course, imperfect. While energy loss is a loss *of* energy, translation loss is not a loss *of* translation, but of exact ST-TT correspondence *in* (the process of) translation. Similarly, the very factors that make it impossible to achieve 'sameness' in translation also make it impossible to measure translation loss absolutely and objectively. Nevertheless, once one accepts the concept of inevitable translation loss, a TT that is not a replica of its ST is no longer seen as a theoretical anomaly, and the translator can concentrate on the realistic aim of reducing translation loss, rather than on the unrealistic one of seeking *the* ultimate translation of the ST.

It is important to note that translation loss embraces *any* failure to replicate a ST exactly, whether this involves *losing* features in the TT or *adding* them. Our concept of translation loss is, therefore, not opposed to a concept of translation *gain;* where the TT gains features not present in the ST, this is a form of translation loss. For example, in rendering 'Schleichweg' as 'secret short cut', an obvious translation loss is that the TT lacks the concision of the ST, and its vivid suggestion of furtiveness (even though there is a 'gain' in explicitness); while rendering 'secret short cut' by 'Schleichweg' entails an equally obvious translation loss, in that the TT does not have the explicitness of the ST (even though there is a 'gain' in concision and vividness). Similarly, translating 'Reichstagsabgeordnete' as 'elected members of the German Imperial Parliament' is an instance of translation loss, even though the TT is not only literally exact, but has 'gained' six words *and* makes explicit reference to election and to Germany. A third example exhibits still more sorts of translation loss—the translation of 'Abgasopfer' by 'victims of exhaust fumes'. The German is more concise, but its grammar is a potential source of ambiguity for the unwary; for instance, are exhaust fumes being (metaphorically) offered up by way of sacrifice, or is someone/something (equally metaphorically) falling victim to their harmful effects? In the German case only the context can fully resolve the ambiguity between these two competing metaphors. The grammar of the English expression