

**Translation Quality Assessment:
three systems encountered in practice**

Below, a brief characterization will be given of three systems with which the author has been confronted in the course of 27 semesters spent teaching at German universities:

System 1: Saxony

The present section will briefly describe the system of the Wissenschaftsbereich Englische Übersetzungswissenschaft, Sektion Theoretische und Angewandte Sprachwissenschaft, Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig, in the period just prior to German reunification. The system was defined in an internal document entitled *Einheitliche Kriterien zur Korrektur von Übersetzungen* (hereinafter: KMU 1979), a copy of which was given to each newcomer to the department upon arrival. Caught up in the enthusiasm of the initial stages of the Revolution of '89, the present author duplicated this document and distributed it to his students in the spirit of *glasnost*, only to be taken aside and informed by an embarrassed colleague that the system was based on theoretical positions that were 'over ten years out of date'; presumably, the fear was that some students could possibly be in position to recognize this. The system was based on a commendable principle: "Die Bewertung eines Fehlers in einer Übersetzung ergibt sich aus seiner Auswirkung auf den ZS-Text. ... So ist z.B. das „nur“ falsche Übertragen von Zahlen oder Namen als Fehler zu ahnden, obwohl ein solcher Fehler nicht von schlechten Sprachkenntnissen, sondern von Unkonzentriertheiten beim Arbeiten zeugt." (KMU 1979: 1) The individual errors were classified and weighted according to the following schema (Korrektursymbol : Gewichtung (Fehlerpunktzahl): Beschreibung):

+	2	inhaltlicher Fehler (Verstoß gegen Semantik)
⊕	4	grober inhaltlicher Fehler (z.B. völlig falsche Zahl)
∨	1	ungerechtfertigte Auslassung (z.B.: fehlendes Adv, Adjektiv, Präposition usw.) oder Hinzufügung
⊖	2	grobe ungerechtfertigte Auslassung oder Hinzufügung
∨	1	leichte inhaltliche Akzentverschiebung
∨	1	fehlende pragmatische Adaption, d.h. Nichterkennen des Verhältnisses Explizitheit-Implizitheit (bei veröffentlichungsreifer Übersetzung)
∨	1	vermeidbare (z.T. politisch brisante) Zweideutigkeit
G	0,5	Verstoß gegen ZS-Grammatik
⊙	1	grober Verstoß gegen ZS-Grammatik
A	0,5	unangemessener ZS-Ausdruck im weiten Sinne (u.a. falscher bzw. fehlender Terminus bei Wahrung des Denotatsbezug; unangemessene Syntax, falsche Kollokation, Verletzung der Stilebene bzw. des Funktionalstils)
Ⓐ	1	grober Verstoß gegen die Ausdrucksnormen der ZS
I	0,5	Fehler in der ZS-Orthografie
Ⓛ	1	grober Verstoß gegen ZS-Orthografie (z.B. Schreibung von immer wiederkehrenden Eigennamen, Fehler an der Grenze der Verständlichkeit)
–	0,5	Verstoß gegen Interpunktion der ZS
⊖	1	grober Verstoß gegen ZS-Interpunktion (in Praxis nur denkbar, wenn dadurch der Denotatsbezug geändert wird)
~~~~	0	Hinweis, daß Textstelle (Wort, Ausdruck u.a.) vom Korrektor subjektiv als nicht sehr gelungen, aber noch nicht als Fehlleistung empfunden wird
s.o.	0	Fehlleistung tritt erneut auf und wurde bereits vorher bewertet

(KMU 1979: 3).

[ZS = Zielsprache]

The extent to which particularly positive aspects of a translation should be honoured via 'plus points' was left open; the number of error points to be assigned for missing sentences was determined on the basis of their length, difficulty, and importance for the communicative value of the text as a whole; and in cases where an error could be assigned to two categories, the more serious categorization was mandatory. The individual error points were totalled, and the total was divided by the number of standard-sized pages (30 lines of 60 keystrokes each) to arrive at the final assessment (number of error points per page : grade): up to 2 points : grade 1; up to 4 : grade 2; up to 6 : grade 3; up to 8 : grade 4; more than 8 : grade 5 (fail). For translations done under examination conditions, 50 to 100 % more error points were allowed, depending on the difficulty of the source text.

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**System 2: Saarbrücken**

The system described here is the system used within the Englische Abteilung (and also by the English-speaking teachers of the Frankophone Abteilung), Fachrichtung 4.6 (Angewandte Sprachwissenschaft sowie Übersetzen und Dolmetschen), Universität des Saarlandes, between summer semester 1993 and winter semester 2001/2002. The origins of this system are lost in the mists of translational prehistory, and all attempts at reconstructing its phylogeny have proved futile. (While some observers claim to have discovered analogies with a system used for assessing written assignments at Saar high schools, skeptics point out that this may be nothing more than a case of convergent evolution, whereby near-identical environments have favoured the development of similar phenotypes.) The system is nowhere documented, and the newcomer has to learn it by trial and error. True to the principles of Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence and interior design, the system is a cosy clutter of uncodified categories, of varying provenance and degrees of antiquity, cohabiting comfortably in a muddle-through-somewhat world of old-fashioned common sense and Enid Blyton optimism. With typically British good-naturedness, the newcomer is even allowed to make his or her own personal contribution to the clutter by establishing new legal precedents (or by complementing the existing collection of knick-knacks). There is no hierarchy in the system of categories (there are no explicit relations of hyponymy among the terms, and the taxonomy is thus potentially a very broad but in practice always a maximally shallow one); nor is there any hint of formal opposition or strict logical disjunction, such as would permit mutual ‘definition’ of the categories in any other than a naïve, ‘real’ sense of the word. For some fourteen semesters (as at the time of writing), the present author has been compiling a list of the categories which appear to constitute the system. The provisional results are:

(unwarranted) **addit**(ion); **ambig**(uity); **art**(icle) [either zero article for definite/indefinite article, or vice versa]; **awkward** (translation); **clumsy** (style?); (wrong) **coll**(ocation); (wrong) **constr**(uction) [e.g., infinitive instead of ‘-ing’ form]; **context** [meaning of this term unknown; = *Funktionalstil?*, *Stilebene?*, co-text?]; **def**(inite) **art**(icle) [where indefinite required]; **expr**(ession) [apparently used for incorrect choices of an essentially lexical nature, above word rank]; (incorrect) **gr**(ammar) [also abbreviated as **G**; in particularly aggravating cases: **grrr** (or even **GRRR!**), presumably a ‘grammarian’s growl’ ...; the extension of this term appears to include primarily problems of flexional morphology, concord, and valence]; (something which is just not an English) **idiom**; **indef**(inite) **art**(icle) [where definite required]; (unclear) **logic**; (illogical) **logical sequence** [of ‘ideas’?; what are ‘ideas’?]; (wrong) **meaning** [= (apparently) *Sinn*]; (wrong) **modal** (verb); **om**(ission); **orth**(ography); **overtr**(anslation); (wrong) **prep**(osition); (incorrect) **punct**(uation); (unclear or incorrect) **ref**(erence) [e.g., of a pronoun]; **shift of emphasis** [does this have something to do with ‘information distribution’ (i.e., with the most natural interpretation of what is being presented as ‘given’ and what is being presented as ‘new’ information)?; or does it refer to a lexical or grammatical choice which is only ‘slightly’ inappropriate?]; (incorrect) **sp**(elling); (ungrammatical) **s**(entence)-**str**(ucture) [in more serious cases: **SSTR**; both terms apparently used indifferently for wrong sequencing of clauses in a clause complex or for wrong sequencing of groups or phrases within a clause]; (wrong or misleading) **stress** [“can be either syntactic or (?lexico)semantic”; cf. ‘shift of emphasis’ above]; (bad) **st**(yle); **superfl**(uous) (verbal) **op**(erator); (incorrect) **T**(ense); (incorrect) **T**(ense)**A**(spect); (incorrect) **T**(ense) **seq**(uence); (incorrect) **tr**(anslation) [of a (single?) term, in respect of the ideational function]; **undertr**(anslation); **Vb** (Verb); **V**(erb)**P**(hrase) [apparently used in the sense of ‘verbal group’, with reference to a tense choice which should have been ruled out by another choice already made within the same clause complex]; **voc**(able) [vocabulary item — at word rank?]; **voice** [active/passive]; (wrong) **w**(ord); (incorrect) **w**(ord) **o**(rder) [“one word in the wrong place” — the absence of a grammatical rank scale makes this term ambiguous, but it appears to be used not for ‘linear sequencing of a word within a group or phrase’, but rather for ‘linear sequencing of a group or phrase within a clause, in cases where the group or phrase consists of a single word, and without regard to whether the functional dimension of meaning disturbed by the incorrect sequencing is experiential, interpersonal, or textual’]. Numerous combinations of these categories are possible, e.g.: **expr/tr**; **expr/style/logic**; **gr/tr**; **tr/ambig** (ambiguous translation); **tr/stress**; **w/context** [“right word, wrong context” — but how can it be the ‘right’ word if the context does not allow it?]; **w/tr**, etc.

The weighting of the individual errors varies somewhat; there is a tendency to reckon  $-1$  point for the categories **G** and **T** (or **TA**), but only  $-\frac{1}{2}$  point for the categories **w** and **expr**. There is also considerable variation in the definition of the difference between ‘two occurrences of the same error’ and ‘two separate errors’. Up to  $-1\frac{1}{2}$  or even  $-2$  points are reckoned for particularly serious errors, regardless of whether these are viewed as evidencing an inadequate command of the target language, an inadequate understanding of the source text, or an inadequate grasp of the principles of translation as cultural transfer. Half or whole ‘plus points’ are given for particularly clever translation solutions, native-like command of idioms, or an overall style of writing which is pleasingly ‘English’. The total number of points is used to assign a grade to the translation. There is some flexibility as far as the number of points covered by grades 1 through 4 is concerned, but staffroom visitors have reported being able to properly contextualize (and thus render slightly less absurd) remarks such as “well of course 18 is definitely 5” or “24 is 6 by any stretch of the imagination”. The scale appears somewhat more sensitive to the length of the source text than to its degree of difficulty. The system is used for assessing translations into (the foreign language) English written under examination or trial examination conditions.

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(cont.)**

**System 3: Sarrebruck**

This is the system used by some of the French-speaking teachers of the Frankophone Abteilung, FR 4.6, Universität des Saarlandes, for assessing translations into (the native language) French. In this system, the student is initially credited with 20 points. Points are then subtracted for errors of content or of form according to the following schema (Rieffel 1994):

<p><i>fond:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>–3 pts pour un non-sens (phrase inintelligible, incomplète ou absurde);</li><li>–2 pts pour un contresens (erreur de structure);</li><li>–1 pt pour un faux sens (erreur de mot);</li><li>–1 pt pour un mot oublié;</li><li>–$\frac{1}{2}$ pt pour une (grave) inexactitude ou impropriété;</li><li>–$\frac{1}{2}$ pt pour un “mal dit”, c’est-à-dire une gaucherie dans l’expression;</li></ul> <p><i>forme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>–1 pt pour une erreur de structure en français;</li><li>–$\frac{1}{2}$ pt pour une faute d’orthographe due à une connaissance insuffisante de la langue “dite” maternelle;</li><li>–$\frac{1}{2}$ pt pour une faute d’orthographe autre.</li></ul>
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Plus points are given for particularly original or elegant translation solutions, for example in the rendering of an English (newspaper text?) title. The mark out of 20 is converted to the German grading system as follows: 20 = 1; 19 = 1,3; 18 = 1,7; ...; 12 = 3,7; 11 = 4; < 11 = 5 (a failure which can be balanced out by a grade of 3,0 or better in the translation in the other direction); 0 = 6 (a failure which cannot be balanced out). (Other colleagues grade a translation as 5 if it contains two contresens, and as 6 if the mark is less than about 5/20.)

**Summary**

All three of these systems are based on a common set of assumptions:

- a) translations contain ‘things’ called ‘individual errors’;
- b) these ‘things’ are of different ‘types’ (translatological, linguistic, etc.; if linguistic, then semantic, lexical, grammatical, orthographic, etc.);
- c) these ‘things’ are of different ‘degrees of seriousness’;
- d) if a thing of a certain type ‘occurs more than once’, then it is sometimes a case of ‘one thing’ and sometimes a case of ‘two things’;
- e) the number and seriousness of the ‘things’ (but not their type per se) determines the ‘quality’ of the translation;
- f) no general theory need be invoked to justify any of the assumptions a) through e);
- g) application of the assessment system requires no prior text-linguistic analysis of source or target text;
- h) at no stage need a general theory be invoked to explain the relations holding among culture, cultural domain, situation type, situation, language, register, text type, text, stratum, rank, metafunction, instantiation, realization, and delicacy-of-analysis at either the source or the target end of the translation process (to say nothing of the relations holding across the space between the two ends!).

**Suggestion**

Why not continue the work of the winter semester 97/98 strike committees by forming working groups and designing your OWN system for assessing the quality of your translations?

It certainly couldn’t be any worse than the systems CURRENTLY in use!!