

# Evaluation of Translation Errors: Procedures and Criteria

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**Abstract.** The domain of errors in translation is a complex issue that requires a solid theoretical background before any attempt is made to induce or generalise conclusions about students. Although researchers in this field differ in their participation in the teaching process, they generally uphold similar methodological criteria [1]. They suggest that a sound account of students' error evaluation should be organised in terms of certain procedural steps, namely assessing the gravity of the error and accordingly recommending the appropriate therapy. This paper attempts to discuss the main criteria which borrowed mainly from literature on foreign language teaching and translation quality assessment to see how far they serve this purpose. Thus, an effective evaluation is the main goal of this research paper. First, errors in the students' translations must be detected. For this, it seems necessary that the instructor should make an accurate critical analysis of the students' translations so as to be able to identify errors. In describing the identified errors, instructors should try to see in what way the student has failed to communicate or transfer the source text message by comparing the source and the student's target product. Then, they will have to explain how the trainee translator has deviated from an adequate translation and what rules s/he has broken. Finally, the instructor should adopt evaluative measures and seek appropriate pedagogical assistance.

**Keywords:** Translation, Evaluation, Errors, Procedures, Criteria Trainee Translators.

## 1. Introduction

Translation is an activity that is growing phenomenally in today's globalized world. It is an incredibly broad notion which can be understood in many different ways. To this end, the evaluation of translation errors is considered one of the perennial problems due to the interdisciplinary nature of translation. Evaluation is widely known in the field of translation studies as *translation quality assessment* (TQA) which is a type of evaluation. Evaluation is taken to mean the determination of merit, worth, or significance [2]. The relevance of, and justification for, translation evaluation is stronger than ever: professional translators, their clients, translational researchers and trainee translators all rely on evaluation for different reasons. Yet whereas there is general agreement about the need for a translation to be good, satisfactory or acceptable, the definition of acceptability and the means of determining it are matters of open-ended debate. National and international translation standards now exist, but there are no generally accepted objective criteria for evaluating the quality of translations [3]. This article presents an updated argumentation about the criteria of evaluation for trainee translators.

## 2. Preliminaries to Error Evaluation

Recognition of translation errors is not as easy a task as it may appear. Instructors usually find it hard to define what is erroneous and what is not. In this respect, a distinction should be made between errors and mistakes. The idea is adopted originally from foreign language teaching, a mistake (which is usually the case in a foreign language class) reflects a deficiency in the linguistic competence of the student. It is binary as it can be judged as wrong or right. An error, on the other hand, (usually typical of the translation class) reflects a deficiency in translation skills. It is non-binary and can only be assessed in terms of acceptability or appropriateness. This means, it requires that the actually selected target text (TT) is contrasted to at least one further target version which could have been selected, and then to other possible acceptable answers. The non-binary nature (no clear-cut answer) of translation errors makes the process of recognition a point of controversy among instructors.

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Describing a translation error is describing the difference between what the trainee has done and what should have been done. That is, the teacher checks where the student has failed to communicate the meaning or part of the meaning of the ST. The process is a comparison between the trainee's erroneous construction and the teacher's reconstructed one. We may, however, still wonder how teachers design their reconstruction to which the student's erroneous translation is contrasted. This evaluative procedure contrasting the student's construction to an ideal reconstruction compared by the teacher is often performed from one of two standpoints: from the view of the closeness of the translation to the SL text or from treatment of the TL text as a work in its own language [4].

Explanation of error has been one of the main concerns of foreign language teaching (FLT) in general and one of the theoretical objectives error analysis in particular. It has generally been assumed that most foreign language learners' errors are traced back to what is referred to as interlanguage transfer [1]. It is held that errors are attributable to transfer from the SL which occurs when the student cannot help mixing up two systems, at the same time, ending up with a new one of her/his own belonging to neither of them.

However, the trainee translator's task becomes more complex than that of the foreign language learner. While the latter is well advised to use the thought patterns of the TL independently of the SL, the former is often faced with the problem of how to represent the thought patterns of the SL into the TL without affecting the structure of either of them. Thus, translation errors, though they may sometimes be transfer errors, are most often typical in a sense that they relate to translation skills and nothing else. Yet, explanation of errors is often speculative as we can only infer what has gone on in a student's mind. Such inferences, or rather guesses, may either coincide with the reality about the translation process or simply contradict it, as in the case of interpretation of a student's construction in a way that is different from what s/he means.

From what precedes, any sound account and assessment of error should follow a correct identification, a formal description and an exhaustive explanation. Thus, evaluation is not a single independent operation but a network of procedures that can work only together. However, despite recent attempts to account for translation assessment by looking at the product (TT) and the process (ST), it remains mainly performed on an intuitive basis establishing an experimental taxonomy of potential translational difficulties and of the general linguistic, extralinguistic and sociocultural impact a particular text makes on the student [5].

### 3. Possible Criteria for Evaluation

Although different criteria have been proposed in applied translation literature in order to eliminate the subjectivity of the evaluator, these attempts remain tentative and, consequently, evaluation is still an area of controversy. Evaluation is not an easy task especially because the requirement or ideal aim is to produce the objective out of the subjective. A sound evaluation should go beyond intuition to achieve objectivity and accuracy [6]. In translation practice, however, the operation inevitably involves the making of personal judgements and cannot be a pure mechanical process. For instance, there is a distinction between situational and speech act adequacy (in addition to other criteria) [7]. Such criteria, however, may sometimes exclude one or the other, as for example in the translation of the following extract from a political speech by an Arab leader to members of the National Council. Consider Sentence 1:

(1) Iyy ākum wa-iyy ākum an ta<sup>c</sup>taqidū anna ayyata muškila la tastaḥiqq ijtimā<sup>c</sup>a l-majlis

(1a) Don't, don't ever think that any problem does not deserve the meeting of the Council.

In Sentence 1a, the speech act of command is realised but there is a communicative failure as such directness is not customary in a similar target situation (English) and may even cause offence. Communicative translation would comprise other levels of meaning.

(1b) The Council will give full attention to all problems.

(1c) All problems should be given the attention of the Council.

In Sentences 1b and 1c the situational aspect of tenor (the level of formality of the text) becomes different from that of the original text (Sentence 1) as the subjectivity of the source language (SL) text-producer becomes completely hidden. This confers on sentences, 1b and 1c unlike the source text (ST), a character of formality.

It can be claimed, however, that such criteria will contribute to the construction of systematic assessment processes. Instructors are required to seek a basis for informed judgement built upon both theoretical consideration and experimental criteria. The criteria under discussion embrace: (i) the frequency criterion; (ii) the generality criterion; (iii) the intelligibility criterion; (iv) the interpretation criterion, and (v) the naturalness criterion.

### 3.1. The Frequency Criterion

This criterion is quantitatively orientated and assesses errors in terms of the number of their occurrence. Most translation instructors would, however, opt for a quality assessment as translation involves a transfer of meaning which can be affected by the quality of the error rather than its quantity. Yet, a high distribution of an error can always alarm instructors and arouse their suspicion, especially when it is widespread among various students. Thus, we can distinguish, in terms of the frequency criterion two different ways for assessment of the relative gravity of the error.

The first relates the gravity of the error to its frequency in the work of the same individual student. Obviously, the procedure is not often easy to achieve by the instructor who normally cannot single out every individual error on account of economy of time and effort. That is, the instructor cannot, in addition to determining the distribution of each student's errors, design reteaching methods for each student. This is not indeed a practical goal if we take into account the fact that, because of shortage of time, the instructor has to satisfy the needs of different classes rather than individual students.

The second is more likely to be of interest to the instructors as it concerns the frequency of errors within a group of students, the most recurrent being the most serious. It is not surprising that most errors falling within the parameters of this criterion have been heavily penalised. Indeed, frequent recurrence of an error-type among students should urge instructors to view their teaching methods and material, and consider reteaching or remedial measures if necessary. This is because high frequency of an error-type means that the teaching method either ignores aspects which represent the students' areas of difficulty or simply fails to address them correctly. Corrective measures should then be initiated depending on the type and source of error. Unfortunately, checking what remedial or corrective measures our subject instructors would adopt in such cases falls outside the scope of this research owing to time limitations. In respect of the frequency criterion, some foreign language educationalists suggest statistical methods to account for the gravity of the error. For example, we can calculate the relative frequency by multiplying the number of errors by one hundred and dividing the total by the number of words in the same text, so that a small quotient represents a low level of seriousness, and vice versa [8].

As far as translation is concerned, such distributional methods, statistical or otherwise, cannot reflect the quality of the translation. They may give some pedagogical insights for the instructor about what translation skills are mostly unmastered by students, but cannot provide a reliable measure for the accuracy assessment of the actual text being translated. In other words, the error should be assessed in terms of its situation of occurrence because the same error can occur in different translated texts but may affect the quality of the translations differently. Translation errors should therefore be judged accordingly, depending on their situation of occurrence. Consider, for instance, the translation of Sentence 2:

(2) He is studying linguistics

(2a) Yadrus al-lugha

Translation 2a may be acceptable for a layman in the field of language and linguistics although we recognise the wrong selection of the word *al-lugha* (language) instead of *al-lisiniyyāt* (linguistics). On the contrary, in a situation where distinction between *language* and *linguistics* is essential to the meaning of text, the error can be regarded as serious.

In this respect, a similar view is suggested, though more restrictive, claiming that errors should not be evaluated on the basis of their recurrence, but on the frequency of texts or constructions in which they occur [9]. For example, a student is bound to make more mistakes with article use than with, say, use of the present perfect tense because the need to use articles arises more frequently than that of modality. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that instructors would say that such errors or such erroneous constructions are serious solely on the

basis of their frequency; they would decidedly ignore the fact that translation is a quality instead of simply a quantity process. The quality of the text can be breached by grammatical errors affecting its syntax, semantic errors affecting its intelligibility, or pragmatic errors affecting the general communicative goal of the ST. For this reason, other criteria are needed in order to examine the different basis upon which our instructors base their judgement of errors.

### 3.2. The Generality Criterion

According to this criterion, evaluation should be performed in terms of the major/minor rules infringed, the more general being the more serious. Major errors refer to those failures to observe general grammatical rules such as case inflections in Arabic, or the insertion of the appropriate tense like the infinitive after a conjugated verb in English as in Sentence 3:

(3) The birds are singing

(3a) Yugharrid	Al-Tuyūr
Singing-feminine	Birds-plural-masculine

In Arabic, the verb preceding the subject is always inflected for gender agreement. In Sentence 3a, the verb should take a feminine prefix number because it governs a non-human plural as in Sentence 3b:

(3b) Tugharrid al-Tuyūr.

On the other hand, minor errors refer to failures to observe exceptions to major rules which most often result in overgeneralization. Foreign language students are more prone to such errors than translation students. However, these errors are still apparent in Arab students' translation when rendering into English. Consider the following erroneous translation, Sentence 4a, made by an Arab trainee when translating into English:

(4) Jamma<sup>Ct</sup> kull al-ma<sup>C</sup>lūmāt

(4a) I gathered all informations.

The student has overgeneralized the rule of the plural morpheme (s) forgetting that *information* is an uncountable noun.

According to the generality criterion, grammatical errors are more serious than lexical ones as error gravity is determined in terms of the syntactic structures they violate. In this respect, a distinction between two types of error is suggested: the first involves local errors which are evaluated as less serious since they involve single lexical items which are unlikely to affect the entire understanding of the message. The second involves global errors which occur in main clauses and are likely to affect the meaning of the whole message [8]. Such a claim of this nature is unlikely to account for the complexity of translation quality assessment because an error relating to a single lexical item can be more detrimental to the meaning of a message than a breach in a general grammatical rule at main clause level or otherwise.

However, grammatical errors in translation should not be overlooked as happens with most translation theorists [10]. There is an increasing frequency in grammatical errors among Arab trainee translators which can be detrimental to the credibility of the profession, once they begin practising and can provoke the irritation of instructors. The criterion of grammaticality has indeed been very useful in identifying the irritation of instructors with some type of grammatical errors.

### 3.3. The Intelligibility Criterion

The generality criterion discussed above implies that the acquisition of lexis is a less fundamental skill for the translator than the mastery of grammatical structures. The intelligibility criterion, however, holds that we are more likely to be comprehensible with the help of meaning of words without syntax than with syntactic structures without words. That is, the communicative goals of a text are more seriously affected if the breaches involve wrong selection of words rather than syntactic structures.

According to the intelligibility criterion, lexical errors can affect the intelligibility of the translation in two different ways; first by making the intended message totally unintelligible and thus causing a breakdown in the communicative function of the text; and second, by distorting the meaning without impairing communication, so that the target language (TL) reader understands something other than the original

author's intentions. The importance of this criterion lies in the fact that it determines how instructors differently assess distortion of meaning and disruption of communication. For instance, the translation of Sentence 5a below is likely to be unintelligible or nonsensical to a TL reader while the Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) translation in Sentence 6a distorts the meaning:

(5) yaHtāj ilā <sup>C</sup>amaliyyat naql damm

(5a) He needs an operation of blood transport

(5b) He needs a blood transfusion

(6) Al-yad al-<sup>C</sup>ulyā khayr min al-yad al-suflā

(6a) The upper hand is better than the lower hand

(6b) The giving hand is better than the receiving hand.

Although the TL readers may be confused as to what *an operation of blood transport* means, they will probably be able to understand what the actual SL message is about. In 6a, however s/he is likely to associate *the upper hand* with power and authority which is completely different from the ST intended meaning successfully conveyed in Sentence 6b.

It is undeniable fact that the impact of lexical and cultural words which tend to be etymologically obscure or unrelated to any corresponding words in the TL on the quality of translation. Therefore componential analysis of meaning is recommended as a technique to handle the lack of cross-linguistic correspondence between words. As far as translation and componential analysis are concerned, the basic process is to compare a SL word with a TL word which has a similar meaning, but is not an obvious one-to-one equivalent, by demonstrating first their common and then their differing sense components [11]. Consider, for instance, Sentence 7:

(7) Tanāqalat al-Suḥuf al-xabar

(7a) The newspapers reported the news.

The response of the Arab reader to Sentence 7 is different from that of the English reader to Sentence 7a because the Arabs and English have different attitudes towards news reported by mass media such as newspapers. They are likely to have conflicting attitudes because the lack of informativeness and objectivity in Arab dailies, in contrast with their English counterparts, is mainly due to media censorship in the Arab world and the fact that most of them are state-run. That is both media share the feature of readability is motivated by the desire to reinforce or impose a certain ideological path. For this reason, the reliability of media in both cultures is often questioned by the audience.

However, the lexical division of labour within the text does not often determine the quality of translation nor the gravity of the error. As words are lexical units with a referential and/or pragmatic meaning, componential analysis may be useful to identify these components and even establish semantic limits so as to make translation possible. For example, the Arabic adjective *wathīr* can stretch to (comfortable) but not to *fakhm* (luxurious). Yet componential analysis segmentation of meaning is not usually successful as it fails to account for the fact that the meaning of a word is decided via its content and context. For instance, the components of the word *interesting* in English cannot be determined unless its context is taken into consideration. Consider Sentence 8:

(8) The story is *interesting*.

The word *interesting* in Sentence 8 can convey different meanings depending on con-text. It can be rendered as *mufīd* (useful), *muhim* (important), *mumtī<sup>C</sup>* (amusing), *musalī* (entertaining) etc. Componential analysis on its own cannot solve this problem of multiple choices with which translators are often faced. Only the con-text can help discover the intended meaning of the original author. That is, the meaning of a word is dependent on other words which precede and follow, in and outside the text, and cannot be just atomised into semantic units irrespective of the linguistic and socio-semiotic situation of occurrence. We would therefore expect instructors to conceive different levels of seriousness in their assessment of intelligibility errors rather than be confined to the binary dichotomy of wrong/correct. For instance, the seriousness of confusion caused when substituting partial synonyms as in the *big/large* class is not the same

as that caused by synonyms which are not mutually interchangeable in a certain context as in *big girl/large girl*.

### 3.4. The Interpretation Criterion

The interpretation criterion takes the ST as a point of departure. It is precisely about how far the trainee's interpretation of the ST personified in the TL is correct or deviant. The instructor checks on the basis of a comparison between ST and target text (TT) to see whether all the information is included, and nothing is added, omitted and/or different [12]. In other words, the criterion relates to the traditional paradigm of faithfulness in translation. Failure to be faithful to the ST can be either conscious or unconscious and the distinction between the two is essential in translation quality assessment.

If the trainee consciously deviates from the ST in order to fulfil demands of the readership, the assessment procedure should be rather appreciative unless the circumstances are inappropriate. Consider, for instance, Sentence 9 below uttered by a Republican actor on the day of the American presidential elections:

(9) America has got a cold but this is not the time to change the doctor.

Without sufficient context information, the reader of Sentence 9, let alone the TL reader of its translated version, is unlikely to understand its meaning. In the absence of such information, the translator is required to decipher and interpret the ST in a way that makes its meaning less ambiguous for the TL reader as in Sentence 9a compared with Sentence 9b:

(9a) SaHiH anna amri<sup>C</sup>ka tu<sup>C</sup>ani<sup>C</sup> min ba<sup>C</sup>D al-mašākil wa-lakin lam yaHin waqt taghyī r raʿi<sup>C</sup>sihā.

(It is true that America suffers from some problems, but the time has not come to change its president)

(9b) Laqad aSaba amri<sup>C</sup>kā mara<sup>D</sup> al-zukām wa-lakin hatha laysa bi-l-waqt al-munāsib li-taghyir Raʿi<sup>C</sup>sihā.

(America was infected by flue disease, but this is not the right time to change its president)

But there are indeed cases where the translator must not shift from the ST using his/her own interpretation. For example at crucial points in diplomatic negotiations, interpreters may need to translate exactly what is said rather than assume responsibility for re-interpreting the sense [13]. On the other hand, if the translator unconsciously shifts from the ST, the effect on the quality of translation is likely to be serious and the error is, therefore, to be assessed as such. Such errors are most often a result of misinterpretation of the ST which in turn produces a *betrayed* version of the ST. This criterion is, therefore, source text-centred in the sense that it maintains that the first loyalty is at all times with the source text [13]. Thus, the quality of translation, according to this criterion, lies in the ability to comprehend and interpret correctly the ST. The comprehension and correct interpretation of the ST enable the trainee-translator to provide an acceptable and accurate translation.

### 3.5. The Naturalness Criterion

No single criterion can deal with all aspects of translation quality assessment. The four criteria discussed so far have not dealt specifically with the extent to which translation should be integrated and read as a natural TL text. The translator may understand correctly the ST and even convey easily a discernible message to the TL reader. However, the TT may not reflect the natural and idiomatic forms of the receptor language [12]. This means that the TT does not read naturally for the TL reader as the ST does for the ST reader.

It seems that problems relating to naturalness often arise when the text is of a covert type. This means that the ST is tied in a specific way to the source language and culture which necessitates the management of the text in a way which meets the expectations of the TL audience. (to manage or steer the ST in a manner favourable to the TT goals in respect of the TL receivers' response). The risk of modifying the original text producer's intentions and discouraging inter-cultural understanding is often higher with naturalistic approaches to translation. A naturalistic approach usually seeks domestication (incorporation) of the ST into the TL and culture, thus compromising the culture-specific meaning of the ST. This process of acculturation often denies the TL reader the opportunity to acquaint her/himself with foreign thought patterns and violates the fundamental principle of historical fidelity in translation [14]. On the other hand, encouraging a non-naturalistic approach to translation has the benefit of enriching the linguistic repertoire of the TL. In other

words, the incorporation of SL features into TL features helps TL readers develop their potential for new terminologies. This whole process is referred to as translational cross-fertilisation [10].

Naturalness is, however, a necessary risk that the translator sometimes has to take in order to produce an equivalent effect to that of the original. Equivalent effect is the closest match of effect where the relationship between receiver and message should aim at being the same as that between the original (ST) receivers and the SL message. This view has been reflected in the instructors' assessment of the students' errors as attempts to acculturate the ST into the TL were rarely pointed out by instructors. It should be noted here that the naturalness of a text can be checked only by native speakers of the TL. Errors relating to naturalness are often a result of cross-linguistic differences at the discourse or stylistic level, such as that in the arrangement of information between Arabic and English. This can be clearly seen in rhetoric and stylistic differences between the two languages. For instance, Arabic utilises repetition and parallelism (repeating synonymous words) as tools to enhance the meaning and give the language its unique ornamental value; this utilisation, however, can be seen as awkward in English because of its straightforward nature [15].

More peculiar to Arabic (than to English) is the tendency to combine repetition and parallelism to create a stronger effect. Consider Sentence 10 taken from a speech made by an Arab fanatic leader.

(10) Inna allathi yata<sup>Cā</sup> la<sup>Cālā</sup> l-jamā hīr wa-yata<sup>Cā</sup> la<sup>Cāla</sup> l-ša<sup>Cb</sup> bi-<sup>C</sup>ilmih aw bi-rutbatih aw bi-darajatih yajib an yasquT taHta aqdamina al-'ān.

(He who looks down upon the masses and who looks down upon the people because of his knowledge or rank or position must now fall under our feet).

Notice here that the positive response which the repetition of form and meaning *yata<sup>Cāla</sup> <sup>Cāla</sup> l-jamāhir/wa-yata<sup>Cā</sup> la<sup>Cāla</sup> al-ša<sup>Cb</sup>* (looks down upon the people and looks down upon the masses) generates at the SL level is unlikely to be preserved if it is kept as such in English. Cutting down the repetition load in the Arabic ST when translating into English will produce, as in Sentence 10a, a more natural translation as far as the TL is concerned:

(10a) Those who look upon people because of their knowledge or position should immediately be eliminated.

From what precedes, it seems that the ways parts of language contribute to the look as well as the meaning of text should be checked cross-linguistically in order to maintain naturalness. It may be necessary, whenever need requires, to choose TL patterns over SL ones.

## 4. Conclusion

The preceding discussion of possible criteria for evaluation was an attempt to investigate different approaches to error gravity in translation. Many controversies in translation error assessment can be resolved by a better understanding of how the different criteria relate to each other. Each criterion, apart from the frequency criterion, represents a particular translation competence but they also have significant interdependencies. For instance, it is often assumed that those who make grammatical errors tend to commit lexical errors as well, and those who lack critical skills in dealing with the ST are likely to face the same at the TL level.

Thus, assessment of translation errors should not be determined in terms of a rigid typological division of skills but on the basis of their impact on the meaning of text as an all-inclusive communicative unit. The entire translation should be checked and, therefore, all the criteria are involved. It is held here that if productive translation research is to continue, we must consider the usefulness and availability of error evaluation to advance translation training and address the concerns of instructors. However, it should be noted that errors are just part of the students' development process in training. Any sound account of this process should involve the other part of the students' performance which does not involve error-making. In other words, the instructor's analysis should not be limited solely to those areas that are problematic to the students but can be extended to those mastered skills in order to draw a complete picture of the training process.

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### Arabic Transliteration System

Throughout the present work, the transliteration system has been consistently employed whenever an Arabic expression is quoted. The following table explains the Arabic transliteration system for Arabic consonants and vowels.

Arabic letters	Transliteration	Arabic Letters	Transliteration
ا	a	ض	D
ء	'	ط	T
ب	b	ظ	Z
ت	t	ع	c
ث	th	غ	gh
ج	j	ف	f
ح	H	ق	q
خ	kh	ك	k
د	d	ل	l
ذ	Dh	م	m
ر	r	ن	n
ز	z	هـ	h
س	s	و	w
ش	Š	ي	y
ص	S		
Arabic short vowels	Transliteration	Arabic long vowels	Transliteration
ـَ	a	ا	ā
ـِ	i	و	ū
ـُ		ي	ī
ـُ	u		