

I translate, therefore I doubt

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Doubting is an activity very much associated to translation understood as an intellectual process. A translator's inseparable companion in his daily tasks, doubts obstruct his work, add to his sleeplessness, contaminate his decisions and still manage to survive his stubborn efforts to annihilate them on more than one occasion.

No translator doubts the existence of doubts. Or of their persistence. There are reasonable, admissible, debatable and intolerable doubts. There are methodic and fleeting ones, irresolvable and trivial, insolent and tiring, elusive and uncontrollable, obvious and sibylline, intimate and universal. Every translation provokes, or should provoke, endless doubts. Typographical, terminological, amphibological, syntactic, stylistic...

Doubts can result in hesitation, suspicion, distrust, indecision, indetermination, insecurity or lack of credibility. An expert in their countless disguises, the translator dedicates a large part of his time on unmasking doubts and getting rid of them with skill in order to eliminate them, finally, from the texts that he produces. If he fails in his quest, he can almost always manage to camouflage it before the clinical eye of the editor.

Indecision is amongst the fiercest enemies of the translator. I am in no doubt about that. Leaving aside lack of interest or curiosity, or

the well-known lack of time or ignorance, which borders on incompetence, doubting is the translator's fate. His duty, to detect the problems that are hidden in his projects; and if he is an interpreter, to react immediately without losing face in front of clients.

Nothing disturbs a translator as much as the tireless humming of his conscience, which lasts until the text is finished. No doubts are as lasting as those which remain unsettled before handing in a translation.

Often, I doubt and then I translate. On other occasions, which occur much less frequently, I translate without doubting. In the end, I almost always end up doubting.

It is strange to analyse a translator's behaviour when faced with doubts. Not only how he resolves them, as every translator has his *little book*, but how he remembers to settle them once they have been left aside.

Let me explain. As you translate and come up across doubts, various things can happen: you can settle them immediately; you can come up with a sketchy solution to reconsider later; you can momentarily give in when faced with a complicated

doubt and tackle it with renewed energy after a break, or a few pages.

There are doubts that solve themselves when the flow of the text itself kindly reveals the answer. However, the opposite can also occur while translating: that is, a few paragraphs into the text, the translator can start doubting something that before he took for granted.

Consulting with the client about your doubts is another possibility, as a last resort, some suggest. *In extremis*, the translator can hand in a faulty product accompanied by the due notification of his loose ends.

We all have our own personal way of remembering pending tasks: repeating them mentally, noting them down in a diary or on little coloured pieces of paper or asking somebody to remind us not to forget to... Something similar happens with doubts when translating, and I am afraid that in this case there are also many personal ways of remembering them, by noting them down on paper or on screen, according to each case.

There are those that turn to the question mark: the doubt as a sign. The more you doubt, the more the sign appears; three or more times preferably. Exclamation marks, asterisks or square brackets also do the job... If the doubt is more doubtful than other doubts, it is put in bold, underlined and, in some cases, it's worth having the word processor's palette or the fluorescent marker at hand.

Of the many diacrisis, of any type, the biggest is the doubt as well as the danger that it will go unnoticed in successive revisions, just slipping in and ending up in hands of the client. It has happened to the best of us.

As I was saying, the art of doubting is something very personal. Little by little every translator finds his own method of using intuition and common sense, starting from scratch or using a system inherited from a colleague or client, and turning to the tool box of a word processor or the program being used at the time. In this way, the electronic method of labelling pending doubts, leaving a trail of bread crumbs on the way to be able to find the way back, with time adapts to the particular requirements of each translator and of each project, and it usually ends up reflecting their character. There are those that indicate the problems that arise in their translations as systematically or as anarchic, as practical or as undecided as in real life, or as when they translate.

By dint of coming across the subject, at work and in class, today I limit myself to reflecting upon it, thinking, above all, of those who are just starting out in this profession. I don't think these nuances are taught in a translation class.

The most important thing is that everyone's *little book* works for them. There are translators that don't even have, or need, one. I have nothing to object, except that they run the slight risk of leaving a doubt unsettled because they do not notice it or because their memory deceives them by trying to remember in vain "where the hell the sentence that needed going over was". Others prefer to cling to a manual method, and they highlight doubts using colours, or they jot them down in a note book or on a piece of paper. This option is perfectly valid as long as the nature of the text, its complexity and length allow. There are even those that use their system not only while translating but also while

redacting other types of text, an article for example, and they record something they will later have to revalidate.

Having your own system to delimit the conflictive parts of a translation has, in the end, a double objective: that we don't lose any of them, and that we can retrace our steps, with agility, as many times as necessary. Before concluding a translation, we should have eliminated the trail of our doubts, or if not, have left it deliberately intact so that a third person can follow it to tie up our loose ends. If we manage to devise a suitable *modus operandi* for any type of text, all the better. If you work in a team or somebody else takes part in the posterior processing or revision of the text, there is even more reason to agree upon a method beforehand.

Some translators prefer to use format *attributes* (underlining, colours, highlighting, the possibility of hiding the text...) as a differentiating feature of his doubts. This is a very effective method visually, but it can turn out to be impractical as it is tiresome to apply (and later delete) and it goes hand in hand with certain technical conversion disadvantages for some systems and programs, which do not always have mechanisms to this effect. It is also worth remembering that the necessary operations to mark down a doubt (sometimes, move the hand from the keyboard to the mouse, select a menu, look for the desired option in the panel again...) have to be repeated as many times as doubts we have to *signpost*. And they can turn out to be many.

As a *beacon*, you can choose a sign (on its own or repeated) or a combination of various. The ideal is that the chosen sign does not appear as such, or that it appears only in an uncommon manner, in texts written

in our working languages, so that there is no confusion with its standard use. Although it is common practice, it is not recommended to rely on, for example, question or exclamation marks (?? or !!), or square brackets ([]). However, the reduplication of these signs can work well (???, [[...]) or of other characters (dd, xx...) or the choice of one that in principle should not appear in the text (ç, #, &, \$..., in the case of Spanish). Improbable or impossible combinations of these signs would also work (!x, x#, ¡x?...).

It is usually enough to put the chosen sign in front of the doubt in question (xxmy doubt), although we may prefer to delimit it by indicating where our doubt begins (word, syntagma, sentence, paragraph...). You may then opt for repeating the sign or signs (**my doubt**), or to use a double one (<my doubt>), which would even make it possible to nest doubts or add remarks (<my doubt<another doubt>>, <my doubt<comment>>...).

This system also proves practical to conserve the original text next to a possible translation (<original<translation>>).

When a doubt is repeated several times throughout the text, you could just signal it the first time (and then note down a reminder to find it later, if necessary), or each time that it reappears. You cannot forget that, before finishing, all traces of your doubts must be deleted, a task that will inevitably strike the translator/editor at a moment when they don't have much time or patience.

Sometimes, it is advisable to catalogue your doubts, with colours for example, to indicate their seriousness or status. Red, orange and green, respectively,

for unconquerable doubts, which are half resolved or already resolved but whose definitive ratification has been postponed for later.

If the doubt has to be accompanied by a comment or explication, or if a report of the pending points has to be sent to the client or editor, it could be useful to record them in a separate document, duly pointing out their position in the text (document, page, paragraph, line, subtitle number, identifier of a chain of computer code, etc.). In such cases, it is recommended to propose a solution next to each doubt to speed up its settlement.

In the end, it is all about choosing a simple method and applying it systematically, which requires certain discipline. As long as a uniform method is always used, and recognised as such by a computer system, this tedious task, which little translations escape, can be greatly facilitated. By doing so, pending doubts can even be counted in some word processors such as Word, although it does not come with a specific function to do this. It is enough to replace, for example < for < (that is to say, by itself), supposing that this was the sign chosen, and to tell the processor to automatically do this in the whole of the document. The program will tell you how many times it has replaced that particular sign and, therefore, how many doubts you have left.

How about you? How do you mark down your doubts?