Thoughts on the Translation and Open Source Intelligence workshop

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I took part in the AHRC Network Project workshop “Translation and Open Source Intelligence” on 9 June 2015, at BBC Monitoring, Caversham. The workshop proved immensely interesting for me as a translation studies scholar, as I have explored below.

The historical context the workshop provided through testimonials, recollections by (former) linguists and translators whose work was anchored in the high stake world conflict of Second World War, a period which is often described as catalytic in the professionalization and foregrounding of interpreting and translation. The history of translation is increasingly ‘mainstreamed’ into translation studies and relies on archival work that this type of project allows.

The contemporary context and environment in which today’s BBC Monitoring operates and the clear impact of shifting geopolitical priorities on the focus of monitoring, and thus on the significance for monitoring of given languages/language combinations at any one time.

The significance of the case-studies (via access to a number of documents) and group discussions during the workshop with regard to translator agency and positioning, training issues, translation norms and user expectations. The discussion allowed the groups to unpack a number of factors, such as language proficiency, translation procedures, working practices and degrees of involvement and ownership. With regard to translation procedures, the generally ‘literal’ approach which seemed to be applied by the monitors could be explained by a combination of linguistic interference and focus on ‘accuracy’ which could sometimes lead to literalness.

Beyond the insights on news structure and lexical choices that a textual analysis of the texts could yield, issues of agency can be identified. Translators’ agency, a concept on which contemporary debates in the field hinge, was complex. The monitors enjoyed a degree of autonomy in terms of deciding whether a news bulletin was particularly significant or whether a news item could be disregarded. In contrast, their ‘translation’ approach remained generally literal. The combination of linguist and journalistic skills that was expected, together with the lack of structured training may help explain these contradictions. The framing of some of the texts monitored and translated was also very interesting, for instance some of the French government news bulletins/reports from the Second World War were presented as ‘propaganda’, which supports the argument that translation is always performed according to a certain agenda and that language mediation plays a crucial role in conflict. In more recent times, examples abound of lexical choices made by press agencies or claims of neutrality in language choices and positions being challenged (for instance the BBC’s Director of Television flouting the organisation’s requirement of impartiality by openly condemning the academic and cultural boycott of Israel, or the BBC Diplomatic Editor, Mark Urban erroneously referring to Jerusalem as Israel’s capital).

To conclude with reference to the existing structure of BBC monitoring and the role of translation within it, translation appeared to be grounded in team and collaborative work and to amount to more than interlingual transfer, which is very much in line with the way the process and act of translation is viewed in translation studies.