

# THE WHEEL OF EXPERIENCE IN TRANSLATION ACTIVITY

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**Motto:**

*Translating Means Channeling Meaning – and Influence,  
and Connectedness – Through Vast Global Communicative Networks.*

**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on the wheel of experience in translation activity in a metaphorical way. The wheel of experience can be imagined as the wheel of the car that moves forward enabling the translation process to proceed smoothly. The translator (driver) is only occasionally aware of the turning of the wheel(s). Once the experiential processes of intuition, experience of world and experience of translation have been sublimated, they operate sub- or semiconsciously. The smooth spinning movement can be interpreted as follows: the translator approaches new texts with an intuitive readiness that with experience steeped in the automatisms of habit. This movement is one of the most important keys to successful, effective, and enjoyable translation.*

**Keywords:** *translation, instinct, experience, habit, practice.*

## 1. Introduction

This article has taken shape as a result of translation activity and in interaction with my students during the seminars at faculty. Translation studies is part of the curriculum at Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of „Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University in Bucharest.

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More and more students are attending this course with a great desire to become professional translators or interpreters after graduation. They are taught that translation is a science and a profession that has its own ethical aspects, namely the ethics of the translator and the ethics of the activity of translation. The common definition of this activity is the rendering from one language into another. At first sight one can say that it is not so difficult to do it, if you can speak fluently two or more foreign languages. Professional translators have long agreed, however, that it isn't easy at all to render one language system into another. Translation requires attention to cultural values and differences, to economic and political problems, to historical events, to otherness in its linguistic and cultural forms. The translator's task is never the less an ethical one in attempts to translate. It is unethical for the translator to distort the meaning of the source text. The ideal translation is faithful, accurate and reliable. The translators should translate in conformity with imposed standards and not becoming the „traitors” they are sometimes suspected of becoming (*traduttore traditore*)<sup>1</sup>.

## **2.The process of translation: instinct, experience, and habit<sup>2</sup>**

The activity of translation can be perceived from the translator's perspective as an activity that aims at the production of a text from the source language into the target language. For the professional translator this activity is a lifelong learning cycle that moves from instinct to experience and, habit. The translator shuttles between two different mental processes: the subliminal state, and the conscious analytical state.

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, Douglas. *Becoming a Translator*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 155-200.

<sup>2</sup> Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Edited by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks. 8 vols. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. (1931-66), pp. 20-50.

This means that the translator is at once a professional for whom mental processes have become second nature and a learner who must solve new problems in conscious analytical ways. In the first stage it seems as if the translator's fingers are doing the work, so that the translator can dream while the body translates. In the second stage the translator reviews mentally synonyms, looks words up in dictionaries and different reference works, analyzes sentence structures and so on. If there are no problems in the source text, or when the translator can solve them without conscious analysis, then he is able to finish his work successfully and very fast. This is the subliminal state of the translator. Sometimes translators encounter serious difficulties while translating and have to slow down, and make textual, social, and cultural analyses. This is the analytical state. The experiential/analytical material is stored and retrieved for use: in the subliminal state, it is transformed into habit, second nature, procedural memory; in the analytical state, it is brought back out of habit into representational memory and conscious analysis. People always need fresh experiences that startle them out of their habitual routines and make them feel alive. The back-and-forth movement between habit and fresh experience is one of the most important keys to successful, and reliable translation.

Peirce was an American philosopher and founder of semiotics who considered the process of translation like a „triad” made of three-step process: instinct > experience > habit.

Instinct = general readiness to act

Experience = real-world activities that work on the individual from the outside.

Habit = incorporates the opposition between instinctual readiness and external experience into a person's desire to act in a certain way under certain circumstances as shaped by experience.

Peirce's theory about translation can be explained as follows:

- The translator begins with an instinctive sense of what a word or phrase means (instinct); he translates intuitively

- While translating the translator moves back and forth between the two languages, feeling the similarities and dissimilarities between words and phrases (experience); he thinks about what he/she has done, and feels the tension between intuitive certainty and cognitive doubt.

- Over time the translator sublimates specific solutions to specific experiential problems into unconscious behaviour patterns (habit), which help her or him to translate faster, decreasing the need to stop and solve troubling problems. He internalizes what he has learnt for later use; makes it second nature, sublimates it flexibly. The translator should always be ready if needed to doubt, question, contradict, and disbelieve.

### **3. The wheel of experience in translating**

Translators should train and learn through personal discovery and insight to get experience in the field of translation and improve his professional work. Their experience must become habit, sublimated and transformed into techniques that seem to come naturally. This process can be imagined as the wheel of a car that moves forward or backward from intuition to habit. If the wheel moves in a clockwise direction, the car moves forward, the translation process proceeds smoothly, and the translator is occasionally aware of the turning of the wheel. Once the experiential process of intuition, of experience of world and experience of translation have been sublimated, they operate subconsciously. This movement can be described as follows:

- First the translator approaches new texts with an intuitive readiness that with experience steps in the automatisms of habit, so habit is directed by experience.

- Experience of professions begins with general knowledge of the world which is consolidated at the beginning of the translator's career; over time the translator's subliminal input of world experience will expand and operate without her or his conscious knowledge.

Peirce explains the translator's experience in three logical processes namely: abduction, induction and deduction.

Abduction is the act of making an intuitive leap from unexplained data to a hypothesis.

Induction is the logical reasoning that begins with specifics and moves toward generalities.

Deduction is the logical reasoning that begins with general principles and deduces individual details from them.

The translator tests the abductive solution inductively in many contexts; first he leaps from incomprehensible words to meaning, from an expression that makes sense but seems to resist translation, seems untranslatable to a target language equivalent. This abductive experience makes the translator feel confused; he does not know how to proceed, but finally he makes a blind stab at understanding a word in context. The translator begins inductively to discover patterns or regularities in the text which help him to make deductions. In this way he feels confident about making generalizations: syntactic structure X in the source language always becomes syntactic structure Y in the target language; addresses and people's names must not be translated; ring the alarm bells whenever the word "Z" comes along, and so on. We can say that deduction is the source of translation methods. Abductive guesses, inductive pattern-building, and deductive laws, bring the translator closer to habit, the creation of an effective procedural memory that will enable the translator to process complex texts rapidly, and reliably.

Sometimes the subliminal translation and movement through the various forms of experience to an enriched subliminal level fails. The translator is unable to proceed further and so, forced out of subliminal translating, he begins to move consciously, analytically back around the circle, the wheel of experience, through deduction, and the various aspects of induction to abduction – the intuitive leap to some new solution that may be appropriate but it is not the right one. Then the translator lists the synonyms, looks up the word in the dictionary, encyclopedias or other reference materials. If he doesn't find it and nobody can help him, the translator will generate a translation abductively, intuitively, and will

incorporate the solution into his habitual repertoire, where it may be used again in future translations.

There is always a tension between experience and habit, the startling and the subliminal. It is interesting how one slides from one to the other, sublimating fresh experiential discoveries into an effective translating habit, bouncing back out of subliminal translation into various deductive, inductive, and abductive problem-solving procedures.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In Peirce's process of translation we have seen that the translator begins by approaching a text with an instinctive sense that he knows how to do it, but in fact he doesn't know how to proceed. Then he guesses abductively anyway and learns inductively as he goes, by trial and error, makes mistakes and learns from those mistakes; he gradually deduces patterns and regularities that help him to translate quickly and reliably. Eventually these patterns become habit or second nature, and are incorporated into a subliminal activity of which he is only occasionally aware. The translator is constantly forced to revise what he has learnt through contact with new texts.

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