

Failure analysis in a professional translation setting

DIANE HOWARD

Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Spain

Dietrich Dörner has carried out research on failure during complex tasks. This paper applies his research to twelve Japanese-to-English translations from the 2005 the American Translators Association Certification Examination. Analysis of verb tense as a target-text cohesion marker suggests that failure to produce a cohesive translation can result from translators working in a progressive top-to-bottom manner without performing feedback loops or error-elimination procedures. The possibility that failure may be partly a byproduct of the testing environment is also considered.

Keywords: *Dietrich Dörner, cohesion, concept of translation, failure, hypothesis, Japanese-to-English translation, short-passage translation tests*

Introduction

In line with Quine's view that the linguist needs to treat first attempts at establishing empirical meaning between languages as tentative translations only (Quine 1960), Andrew Chesterman has argued that translations are theories, tentative solutions to the question of how to translate a source text (2000: 117). Bits of the proposed solution may be perceived as erroneous, perhaps because the commissioner or user of the translation holds a different view of what the translation should be, or perhaps because the translator failed to perform appropriate "error elimination" procedures. Unfortunately, however, revisers often encounter translations that go beyond the "erroneous" zone into an area that can best be described as "failure." Failure can be taken in two senses: the translation failed to meet the requirements of a client or evaluating organization, or it failed to form a cohesive target language text.¹ The translations examined here fail under both definitions and we will argue—based on the cognitive approach of Dietrich Dörner—that failure results when translations are done, not as theories, which implies some degree of hypothesis testing, but rather as rendering of the source text in which the translator works progressively from the beginning of the text to the end without confirming whether discrete elements are actually fitting together to form a coherent whole. Verb tense is used as the cohesion marker under the assumptions that English has a recognizable sequence of tenses that create cohesion and that scrambling the sequence indicates that the translator is working at the sentence level or lower and not using any sort of feedback loop for error elimination. The data used are translations of the general (mandatory) passage from the 2005 American Translators Association (ATA) Japanese-to-English certification examination.

¹ Texts can be coherent without being cohesive, but this is rarely an issue in commercial translation other than advertising.

That the translations being considered were produced in an examination setting has two advantages and one very large disadvantage. The advantages are that all the translations were done under similar circumstances and that—although we know nothing about the candidates except that they met the criteria for taking the test—we can assume that they have diverse backgrounds. Many studies have been done of translation students, but the possibility that some of the findings may reflect trends resulting from training at the same institution limits our ability to generalize results to a larger population. The disadvantage is the very fact that the translations were created under test conditions which were very different from the environment in which translators normally work. As a result, the findings here may be an artifact of the examination situation. That possibility will be discussed at the end of the article.

Looking at failure

Dörner, Professor of Psychology at the University of Bamberg and an authority on cognitive behavior, has studied why people fail when faced with complicated problems. Based on a series of experiments in which participants responded to complex situations (e.g., community and humanitarian planning scenarios) via computer simulations, Dörner noted several characteristics that distinguished successful from unsuccessful participants. For example, successful subjects proposed hypotheses about the effects of their actions that they went on to test while unsuccessful subjects considered the first proposal they generated as “truth” (1996: 24). Successful participants considered causal relations while the unsuccessful ones saw events as unrelated (1996: 24).

Restating the above in terms of translation—which certainly qualifies as a complex task—we can say that those who produce translation failures generate not hypotheses to be tested but, from the start, a final version in which sentences, and even parts of sentences, are seen as unrelated units. To return to Dörner’s ideas, we can consider a text as a system, which Dörner defines as “a network of many variables in causal relationships to one another” (1996: 73). He also notes that, “[t]o deal with a system as if it were a bundle of unrelated individual systems is, on the one hand, the method that saves the most cognitive energy. On the other hand, it is the method that guarantees failure” (1996: 88). What I think we see in some translation failures is a text treated as unrelated elements by a translator who proposes immediate solutions to translation problems rather than hypotheses to be verified and perhaps discarded. At the same time, one should also note that saving cognitive energy is not a trivial goal and that what we are seeing may be the result of applying a strategy that worked perfectly well with one category of text (for example, texts consisting of loosely related facts) to a text type for which it is not appropriate.

We should also bear in mind that Dörner considers complexity to be ultimately a subjective factor (1996: 39). In his view, experience of a situation can result in perceiving the situation not as a barrage of variables but as a set of *supersignals* that consolidate variables into a manageable experience, similar to the notion of intuition that Chesterman describes at the stage of translation expertise (2000: 147-149). We might then say that a translation which fails to form a cohesive text is indicative of a translator who has been unable to knit the multitudinous variables involved in the translation task into a coherent whole. It would be interesting to know at what point the variables get out of hand, whether this happens at the time of source document comprehension or later in the process. However, that sort of process question cannot be answered by looking at the translation product.

Translation failure

As noted above, there are at least two ways of defining a translation failure: a translation that fails to meet the criteria set by a second party, and a translation that fails to create a viable target language text. Kirsten Malmkjaer (2004: 142) has observed that, from the perspective of

Descriptive Translation Studies, the first category is problematic, as it is difficult to distinguish errors from “motivated choices,” a point that has also been made by Daniel Gile (2004). This becomes additionally problematic in test situations in which the translator cannot include notes and has no opportunity to write a cover letter. Despite such problems, certifying bodies like the ATA use error-marking systems, as do many translation agencies. When used in combination with an error-weighting scheme, such systems can provide a reasonably good idea of the commercial acceptability of a translation. One can also argue that translations in which a plethora of errors have been identified, by whatever method used, have gone past the point of not meeting a set of somewhat arbitrary criteria and moved into the realm of genuine failure. Such translations would have to be completely redone before they would be acceptable to a client. The four translations considered to be failures here all received more than 45 error points when marked by two graders working independently. The cut off point for passing the examination was 17 error points.

In this study, the second category of failure, failure to create a cohesive text, is judged by the single marker of tense. Obviously, one could use other cohesion factors—linking vocabulary, transition markers, anaphora, etc.—but tense is an adequate and appropriate marker of translation failure in this setting for three reasons: first, readers generally agree on what constitutes misuse of tense; second, tense is a necessary sentence element and so sidesteps problems such as whether adding transition markers between sentences or supplying nouns count as additions when translating; and three, because of the way in which tense usage differs between Japanese and English, translators are forced to make English tense choices within the context of the passage being translated. Making these choices at the sentence level or lower, or not revising the final translation to establish an appropriate sequence of tenses, will almost inevitably result in a noncohesive English tense pattern.

Passage and translators

The translation of tenses was examined in the general (mandatory) passage rendered by the 12 candidates who took Japanese-to-English certification tests given by the ATA in 2005. The passage selection criteria used in 2004, when the passage was chosen, were fairly vague: “One passage is mandatory for all candidates. This general text is written for the educated lay reader in expository or journalistic style.” However, in their selection of passages, language workgroups were encouraged to choose passages with the following characteristics:

[The general passage] should present a clear and coherent progression of thought and reasoning in which the candidate may be required to follow an argument or supported opinion and possibly author inference. The passage should contain translation challenges in form of varied sentences patterns, grammatical difficulties, and idioms. (ATA Graders 2008)

The above guidelines were drafted during 2005 and approved in 2006. Workshops on passage selection based on the ideas in the 2005 draft had been held in 2004, during the passage selection period. The 2005 Japanese passage and a possible translation are given in the Appendix.² General information about the ATA certification examination can be found on the ATA Web site and will not be repeated here (ATA 2010).

From 2002 on, candidates taking the ATA examination have been required to meet eligibility criteria. These include certification from another member of Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT), a degree or certificate in translation and/or interpreting, high school or college graduation with a specified amount of translation or interpreting experience, or an advanced degree in any field with no translating experience required. The last requirement makes it possible for someone without any training or experience in translation to sit for the examination.

² Although I was a member of the workgroup that selected the passage and later graded the examinations, I do not know the source of the passage.

Comparison of verb tense

Verb tense in the Japanese source text and the English translations were compared. The verb used for comparison was the final verb in the Japanese sentence, which governs tense in Japanese. Using only the final verb is rather a blunt instrument, since it ignores other tense decisions in the sentence, but it provides adequate information about cohesion.

The test passage contained seven sentences and so seven final verbs. Tense in Japanese is either past or nonpast. Verbal inflections indicate aspect (completeness or noncompleteness) in addition to time (Martin 1988: 272; Lehmann and Faust 1951: 52). The seven verbs under consideration can be categorized as follows:

1. 変わっていった (*kawatteitta*): base meaning, *to change*; inflected form, continuing action in the past
2. ことになった (*koto ni natta*): base meaning, *to come about*; inflected form, completed action in the past
3. 始まった (*hajimatta*): base meaning, *to begin*; inflected form, completed action in the past
4. あらわれた (*arawareta*): base meaning, *to appear*; inflected form, completed action in the past, passive form
5. ことになる (*koto ni naru*): see below
6. 進んだ (*susunda*): base meaning, *to progress*; inflected form, completed action in the past
7. 頼らざるを得なくなった (*tayorazaru o enakunatta*): base meaning, *came to be forced to depend on*; inflected form, completed action in the past

The list contains three verb-following expressions. Number 7 is straightforward: the present negative of *to depend on* is followed by an auxiliary meaning *cannot help but* followed by *to come about* in the past tense. Numbers 2 and 5 are more problematic because they appear to be the same in the past and nonpast tenses. However, *koto ni natta* indicates that the action of the preceding verb (in this case a causative form of *to become fixed*) came about, while *koto ni naru*, following the dictionary form of a verb (simple nonpast), is used to signal a change of perspective in the narrative, often connected with what the writer believes to be true (Sunagawa 1998: 121, 122). Although the construction is formally in the nonpast, it can be translated with an English past tense. In the test passage, temporal cohesion is maintained better by translating this sentence in the past, a decision that none of the seriously failing candidates made.

Table 1. Comparison of Tense of Japanese Final Verbs and English Translations^a

Japanese Final Verb	English Tense					
	Simple Past	Past Passive	Past Progressive	Past Perfect	Present Perfect	Simple Present
変わっていった	a,d,e,f,h,i,k (7)	g (1)	c (1)		b,j,l (3)	
ことになった	a,d,e,f,h,i,j,k (8)	g,l (2)		c (passive) (1)	b (1)	
始まった	a,d,e,h,i,j,k,l (8)				b,c,f (3)	g (1)
あらわれた	a,d,e,g,j,k,l (8)	h (1)			b,c,f (3)	
ことになる	a,d,j,l (4)				b (1)	c,e,f,g,h,i,k (7)
進んだ	a,c,d,e,h,j,g,l (8)	f (1)			b, g (passive),i (3)	
頼らざるを得なくなった	a,c,d,h,l (5)	j (1)			b,f,i,k (4)	e,g (2)

^a *a* through *l* represent the 12 Japanese-to-English examinations administered by the ATA in 2005. The two passing exams were *h* and *i*.

Table 2. Tense Decisions in Examinations Failing by more than 45 Points (4 of 12 Tests)

Japanese Final Verb	English Tense					
	Simple Past	Past Passive	Past Progressive	Past Perfect	Present Perfect	Simple Present
変わっていった	e	G	c		b	
ことになった	e,	G		c (passive)	b	
始まった	e				b,c	g
あらわれた	e,g				b,c	
ことになる					b	c,e,g
進んだ	c,e,g				b	
頼らざるを得なくなった	c				b,f	e,g

The verb choices for all examinations are shown in Table 1 and those for the failed tests only in Table 2. The passage can be translated using the English simple past in all seven sentences, although one could account for *koto ni naru* in the fifth sentence with a transitional *that is* followed by the rest of the sentence in the past tense (none of the candidates who used the simple present in sentence five chose that solution).

Two translations (*a* and *d*), despite failing, did use the simple past to translate all seven verbs and showed temporal cohesion. Judging from the pattern of article use, both translators were working into English as their A language. Test *h*, one of the two passing papers, mirrored the Japanese most closely, adding the word “steadily” to capture the feeling of the *teitta* form in the first sentence. Neither of the passing examinations used a past tense to translate the main verb in sentence 5.

One has trouble imagining what motivated the choice of the present perfect throughout test paper *b*, particularly since, of the four Japanese verb forms used, only the *koto ni naru* ending of the fifth sentence suggests action that could continue in the present. The time expressions in the first two sentences (*wo tsujite, throughout*; and *kono aida, this period*) limit the action to the past. The translator handled those correctly, but then went on to use the present perfect:

Throughout the period of Japan’s high growth, the forms and functions of the family, the basic unit of society, have changed. The number of working families has increased during this period and a division of labor by sex has become fixed whereby the husband works outside the home and the wife engages in housework and raising the children.

The above translation suggests that the translator was, in effect, not connecting the dots, perhaps because he or she did not stop to consider that the period of accelerated economic growth in Japan had ended. While we are arguing here that this was the result of translating at too low a level (phrase by phrase), the tendency to translate almost word by word may have been partly the result of being presented with a passage that was completely out of context and shorn of all information about date of publication, overall subject, or time period under discussion.

The translator of test *c* appears not to have understood the time words in the first two sentences and so lacked context for making verb decisions:

The shapes and relationships of families, which are the foundation of society, were changing as they passed through an era of high Japanese growth. Not long ago, for a large number of working families, gender-based responsibilities had been fixed, with the husband working outside the house and the wife in charge of housekeeping and child rearing.

The candidate continued to have problems with time phrases, omitting *sono ippou de* (*meanwhile/at the same time/on the other hand*) in the next sentence: “However, with the increase of couples in which both work, gender-based divisions of labor within the home are being reconsidered, and new efforts have started to attempt to make the relationships of couples more equal.” The temporal sequence between sentences two and three is cohesive, but incorrect in terms of the source text. The second paragraph lacks temporal cohesion; tense choice seems

to have been made on a sentence-by-sentence basis. The core sentences as taken from the translation follow:

Immense changes have appeared.

Consumption is separated from production.

Electrification made progress.

There could not help but be increased dependence on nursing and other social institutions.

Test *e* has textual temporal cohesion among the first six sentences, but the last sentence in the present tense does not connect with what has gone before. The main problem with this translation is that the sentences themselves are incoherent. Two examples follow:

Trough [sic] the high-paced economic growth period of Japan changed the mode and relationship among members of a family, which is the basic unit of the society.

And to the places of consumption which has become highly dependent on society, that is, to the places of household matters, frozen food, disposable consumables and the like penetrated one after another, thus, promoting popularization of washing machines and vacuum cleaners.

In the first paragraph of test *g*, the first two sentences in the past passive are followed by a sentence in the present: “On the other hand, with an increase in the number of households in which both husband and wife worked outside the house, correct this gender based division of labor and create an equal relationship between husband and wife”. The tenses in the second paragraph form a zigzag pattern of simple past, simple present, simple past, simple present. This pattern suggests that the attention of the translator did not extend beyond individual sentences and that little or no self-monitoring was practiced.

Failure in a translation system

Dörner lists three elements necessary for effectively handling a system:

Knowledge of how casual relationships among variables in a system work

Knowledge of how “individual components of a system fit into a hierarchy of broad and narrow concepts” (i.e., the ability to fill in the gaps through analogy)

Knowledge of the parts into which system elements can be broken and of the “larger complexes in which those elements are embedded.” (1996: 79)

If we consider these elements in terms of translation, the list might be rephrased as:

Knowledge of how cohesion functions in both the source and target texts

Knowledge of how the information in the text is related both within the text and to real-world knowledge

Knowledge of the level of translation unit to address and how these units fit together.

In his experiments, Dörner found that most failing participants did not achieve an overall view of the system they were presented with, nor did they see the interactions within a given system (1996: 87). The above analysis of tense suggests that the seriously failing candidates similarly lacked a larger vision of the text they were translating. For example, they do not appear to have analyzed the source text for cohesive features or thought about how the initial

statement of the time period (“Japan’s period of rapid economic growth”) should govern later tense decisions. Knowledge of previous solutions (e.g., Japanese *teitta* forms equal English present perfect) was often misused as ready-made translation elements not adapted to the new textual environment and with no reference to information outside the text. The translation unit in most cases appears to have been the phrase. These phrases frequently did not form coherent sentences, and we have seen that, as indicated by tense, there was little cohesion among sentences.

The translation unit has been a subject of some debate (see Toury 2006). Dörner’s approach allows us to sidestep the issue. He writes, “There is no a priori appropriate level of detail. It may happen that in working with a system we will have to move from one level of detail to another” (1996: 78). This is in line with Toury’s observation that, “the translator will normally be decomposing (on textual or non-textual principles) longer, higher-level segments [...] into shorter, lower-level ones, and not always the same segments, either” (2006: 61). Toury then continues—in line with what we have been proposing here—that in the process of moving between segments the translator engages in “self-monitoring” behavior. The main cause of failure to create a coherent text appears to have been a breakdown in this self-monitoring that resulted in phrase-by-phrase translation.

Failure of a testing system?

Charles Perrow, another major theorist of failure, notes that when failures occur there is a pronounced tendency to blame “operator error” (1999: 174); in other words, the person at the lowest level of the system. Here we could simply say that the translators were bad and that the test worked because the candidates failed. There is an element of truth there—Perrow also states that operator error happens far more often than it should. However, he insists that failure should be seen in the larger context of system complexity. Taking that approach, we need to consider whether some aspects of the translation failures examined here may have been a result of the testing system itself.

In a 1998 critique of the Institute of Linguists examination for the Diploma in Translation—a short-passage test very similar to that of the ATA—Christina Schäffner discusses several problems with the test format, including insufficient information about the source text, not supplying the complete text when an extract is to be translated, and no purpose being given for the production of the target text (1998: 121). All of those factors apply to the testing situation in which the 12 passages were produced in this test case. The only context provided for the examination general passage was, “Please translate for an educated general reader.” No information was provided about the source of the passage or how the translation was to be used. One would hope that someone taking a Japanese-to-English professional certification examination would know enough about modern Japanese history to recognize 日本の高度成長期 (*nihon do koudo seichou ki*) as a definite period (the economic recovery and boom following the Second World War), particularly when coupled with the popularization of electrical appliances. However, that expectation may have been optimistic, given that two candidates (tests *a* and *c*) used an indefinite article and a third dropped the notion of a specific period altogether (test *j*, “Due to Japan’s rapid economic growth...”). That the passage is an excerpt is also problematic. It presents an argument, but does not come to a conclusion. Certainly information about the source, author, and date of publication would have made the test fairer and might have improved candidate performance. As the test was constructed, the translations were produced very much in the dark, which may well lead to generally conservative behavior on the part of the candidates and caused them to focus on a lower level of translation unit than they otherwise would. Also, the translators did not have access to their usual resources and had to—quite unnaturally—produce a handwritten text. In addition, they were working under time constraints (translation of two passages of approximately 250 words in three hours), which—while usual in the professional environment—may have seemed daunting to some candidates.

In light of the above, it is quite possible that the overall testing system was conducive to failure. As Schäffner notes in her article, there is a tendency for short-passage tests to focus on language skills. This may well have caused both candidates and graders to concentrate on specific linguistic elements rather on text production. The presentation of two paragraphs with essentially no more context than “Here, translate this” may have further exacerbated the tendency to view what was printed on the test sheet as a collection of words. If test design was an element contributing to candidate failure—and we think it was—then more rigorous standards need to be applied to the creation and administration of short-passage tests, particularly in high-stakes situations like certification.

Conclusion

An interesting thing about the seriously failing tests is not just the nature of the failure, but also the setting in which they were produced: an internationally recognized, professional-level certification examination. The candidates were willing to bet money—in the form of the examination fee and possibly travel and lodging costs—that they could produce a translation the examiners would find acceptable. Looking at the target texts, then, is it possible to identify an underlying concept of translation? Is there any notion of translation equivalence (Toury 1995: 37)?

The second question is probably easier to answer. The notion of translation equivalence in these texts appears to be at the word level. A target-language sentence like

Many of the young nuclear families and single households, concentrated in cities are naturally those of workers who do not have any means of productions as opposed to families of farmers
(g)

does have the necessary words in it, but the words have not been put in a particularly meaningful order and certainly not in one that conveys the thought in the source text. *Naturally* is the first listing in the dictionary for *touzen*, and that appears to have been reason enough to insert *naturally* in the sentence.

Interestingly, the graders—who all produced coherent and cohesive sample translations of the passage—tended to mark errors at the word and phrase level and often missed the tense errors, suggesting that when they switched from their usual work setting into the test environment, the examination framework and error-marking system made them move their attention down to the word/phrase level. That this happened implies that graders—many of whom are not formally trained in translation—have a tendency to view the short passage test as a language test rather than a translation test.

Word-for-word equivalence suggests that the underlying concept of translation was code-switching. One wonders if the seriously failing candidates saw the source text in the same way as the target text, i.e., as a series of loosely connected phrases with barely connected ideas. A US Government finding that only 31% of college graduates are capable of reading abstract prose texts suggests that this is possible (National Center for Education Statistics 2003: 15). In experiments with time sequences, Dörner found that when some participants failed to understand a system they adopted what he calls a *metahypothesis* under which they concluded that “no rationally comprehensible principle” applied to what they were being asked to do (1996: 128-137). This was reflected in ritualized behavior decoupled from any attempt to understand the problem being faced. Possibly, the seriously failing candidates found themselves in the same predicament: they had gone into the test convinced that knowledge of two languages was enough and were then blindsided by the complexity of the translation task.

One can also ask whether the documents examined here can be considered translations at all. Toury writes that the overall process of translation is made up of a self-monitoring activity as the translator moves between source text input and target text output, and that translating involves evaluating the source text and target text, then the target text itself (2006: 61). Gile also emphasizes a model of translating in which meaning hypotheses are checked for plausibility, and

target-language reformulation is checked for fidelity and acceptability (1995: 102-106). If self-monitoring and evaluating do not occur, is the resulting product a translation? Perhaps the most that can be said is that in the failed texts we are looking at initial drafts, texts that are at the same general level as the rough output of machine translation.

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Appendix: Japanese-to-English General Passage from the 2005 ATA Certification Examination with Possible Translation

日本の高度成長期を通じて社会の基礎単位である家族の形態及び関係が変わっていった。この間増加した労働者家族においては、夫は外での勤務、妻は家事・育児という性的分業が固定されることになった。しかし、その一方で、夫婦共働きの増加によって、家庭内の性的分業を見直し、平等な夫婦関係をつくろうとする新たな動きも始まった。

家族と社会の関係にも大きな変化があらわれた。都市に集中した若い核家族と単独世帯の多くは当然労働者家族であるが、農民家族と異なって、生産の手段をもたない労働者家族は、生産と消費が分離され、居住地では消費的機能だけを担うことになる。そして、このように社会的依存度を高めた消費の場すなわち家事労働の場に対して、冷凍食品、使い捨ての消耗品等が続々とはいりこみ、洗濯・掃除器具の電化がはやく進んだ。さらに、共同体の相互扶助機能が低下したため、保育その他を社会的施設に頼らざるを得なくなった。

The form of the family, the basic unit of society, and the relationships within it continued to change throughout Japan's period of high economic growth. During that period, a sexual division of labor in which the husband worked outside the home and the wife was responsible for housework and raising children became fixed in the increasing number of workers' families. However, at the same time an increase in the number of couples in which both husband and wife worked lead to a reevaluation of the sexual division of labor within the household and a new movement for an equal partnership within couples began.

Major changes were also seen in the relationship of the family and society. Most of the young nuclear families and single-person household concentrated in cities were, of course, workers' families. However, workers' families, which, in contrast to farming families, did not have a means of production, were forced to separate production and consumption, with the result that residential areas took on the function of consumption only. This resulted in frozen food, disposable consumer goods, etc., continuously flooding into the site of household labor, i.e., the site of consumption, with its high degree of social dependency, and also gave impetus to the electrification of washing and cleaning appliances. In addition, the decline in the mutual support function of the community made dependence on social facilities for childcare and other services inevitable.

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