The Importance of Linguistic Knowledge to Translators-to-be: The Lebanese Higher Education Context

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Abstract

This study reveals whether translators-to-be need to take courses of linguistic nature while pursuing their bachelor degree according to Lebanese higher education context. Following the descriptive qualitative and quantitative approach, I reviewed the courses that translators-to-be take at the public university, The Lebanese University, and at two private universities, namely The Lebanese International University, LIU, and The American University of Science and Technology, AUST to reveal the current academic linguistic requirements. Besides, the perspective of translators-to-be as well as sworn translators towards linguistic courses is explored through a questionnaire filled anonymously. It was found that despite the difficulty translators-to-be have faced with this new realm, around 73% find linguistic courses insightful and very helpful in translation. However, their responses fluctuated between the importance of one field in linguistics rather than another.

Keywords: *translators-to-be, linguistics, Lebanese higher education, descriptive research*

1.0 Introduction

Researching the relation between linguistics and translation arose when I was asked to give the course "Introduction to Linguistics" to translators-to-be. As a linguist, I was intrigued to discover the type of linguistic knowledge these translators need to be equipped with to attain meticulosity in their future profession, especially if they are to translate specific types of texts. On the other hand, a twofold trigger enthused me to discover the validity and necessity of explicit linguistic courses to translators. This trigger includes two instances involving knowledge of certain linguistic knowledge.

1.1 A Twofold Trigger

The linguistic terminologies of some syntactical features differ from one language to another, and in some cases, there is no equivalent to them, which pose a problem to translators. To illustrate, translating the terms "clause" and "phrase" from English to Spanish is delicate in this sentence: "One area of grammar that challenges learners of English as a second language ESL is *clauses*". Translating the term "clause" as "cláusula" does not convey the function a clause entails in English, unlike the term "oración" which is more accurate. The same thing can be said about "phrase", especially when specifying the type of the phrase as "noun phrase" or "verb phrase". The term "frase" in Spanish is general. Thus, to communicate the meaning and function of a "noun phrase", the term "sintagma nominal" is used. The same problem evolves

when translating these terms into French. "Phrase" in French refers to "sentence" in English, so the term "syntagme" is used instead to refer to "phrase" and the term "phrase complète" refers to "sentence". Any deficiency or lack of such lexical and linguistic knowledge jeopardizes the translation. Residing to Spanish and French languages to translate these two words can be extended to other languages to demonstrate the necessity of understanding the linguistic uses of lexical items.

Another problematic area is relevant to syntactic and morphological discrepancies resulting from the distinctive features of each language. Taking the possessive structure as example, translators need knowledge of the relation between the annexer (possessor) and the annexed (possessed). That is, translating the possessive case "the school's director and teachers" into Arabic as in [1] is faulty.

> [1] *mudīr-u wa-muʿallim-ū l-madras-at-i
> [literal] director and teachers the school
> [2] mudīr-u l-madras-at-i wa-muʿallim-ūha
> [literal] director the school and its teachers

The translation in [1] retains the syntactical order postulated in the source language, English, yet violates the syntactical relations in the target language, Arabic. In Arabic Annexation constructions, nothing separates between the annexer "school" and the annexed "director". Thus, the translation in [2] relays the meaning and maintains the structure where "school" follows "director" and a post-clitic pronoun referring to "school" follows "teachers".

Though the aforementioned examples are limited in scope to translating linguistic formulas, they highlight the importance of relaying accurate messages in the target language. These two instances – the translation of "phrase" and "clause" and that of annexation structures – raise some questions as to whether explicit linguistic courses are helpful to translation students and which linguistic fields translators find as more helpful than others.

Briefly speaking, linguists and translation experts commend acquiring linguistic knowledge as is evident from the different curricula at universities worldwide. The question becomes: do universities in Lebanon consider the importance of explicit linguistic knowledge? What do translators-to-be as well as sworn translators think of these linguistic courses?

1.2. Brief Theoretical background

Chomsky (1980: 11) maintains that the "central task of descriptive linguistics is to construct grammars of specific languages" and Newmark (1988: 39) sustains that "any translation is an exercise in applied linguistics". Taking the two perspectives, linguistic courses and in specific, grammar courses, seem a must to translators-to-be.

Newmark (1995: 4), through a schematic organizer Figure [1], reveals the intervening relations upon translating a text. Among the forces affecting translation are two relevant to this study which are: SL norms and TL norms. Developing knowledge of the norms can be interpreted as linguistic knowledge since it is related to all codes, rules and terminologies used in one language.
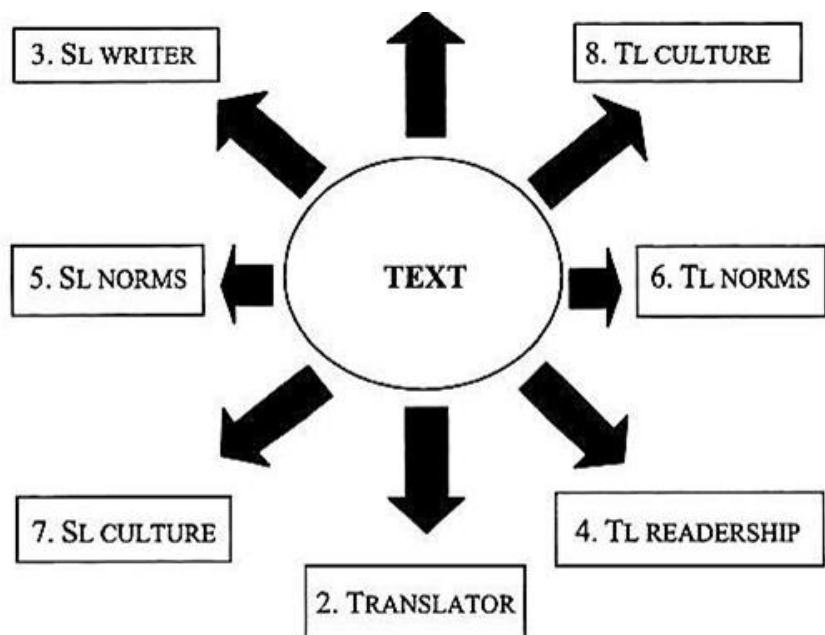
Figure 1. Forces that intervene in the translation activity based on
Newmark's (1995:4) figure 'The Dynamics of Translation'

Rojo (2009: 193) identifies this knowledge as "the grammar of a language", without which language becomes inaccessible. She even extends the authority of grammar to its potential to selecting aspects of experience as well as organizing how to express oneself by combining words in different ways.

It is interesting, at this point, to review the literature on curricula of translation at universities to reveal the perspective on linguistic and grammar courses in translation. One study by Lim (2006) reveals the status of translation by comparing the entire process from entrance exams to graduation exams at four universities in Korea to find where they converge and diverge, and ultimately to offer a "model" program suitable for translators-to-be. Upon examining the contract sheets of these universities, it was clear that "language" and "advanced language" courses in Korean and English are compulsory to translation and interpretation students, yet their percentage varies a lot from one university to another – from 7.7% up to 25%. This variation is high.

Another study by Dabaghi et al (2015) on the courses given at BA level to translation students at six Iranian universities reveals the students' viewpoints on how much they "felt they had learned" from the university courses. One item in the questionnaire is relevant to this study: "The difference between linguistic understanding and understanding of ideas has been described" (p. 5). On a four point Likert scale, the majority, 46.6% of participants, said that it has not been taught in comparison to 23.3% who said it has been taught. 18.4% stated that it was mentioned briefly in comparison to 11.7% who mentioned it was thoroughly explained. When researching the contract sheet of courses at BA level at Iranian universities, 12% of the courses are linguistic (Razmjou, 2001).

Despite the scarcity of studies on curricula of the translation major, the drive to reveal the status of what translators-to-be study at the Lebanese universities while preparing for the profession domain becomes a legitimate quest.

2.0 Methodology, Population of the Study and Measurement Tool

The study is descriptive in nature following the qualitative approach. It investigates the courses presented at three Lebanese universities at the bachelor level and the percentage of explicit linguistic courses they take. Translators-to-be, at LU, AUST and LIU, as well as sworn translators, constitute the population of this study, 144 participants in total. They communicated their views towards the efficiency and helpfulness of the courses with explicit linguistic nature. 95 participants were full-time students and 38 participants were pursuing their studies while working. 11 participants were sworn translators.

A questionnaire composed of 3 sections was passed to the participants and filled anonymously. The first section is dedicated to identify the educational level; the second addresses the relevant experience; and the third investigates the courses taken at the university with major focus on those with linguistic nature like grammar and the fields of linguistics.

The first two sections of the questionnaire resulted in categorizing the participants according to their knowledge and experience as is demonstrated in Figure [2].
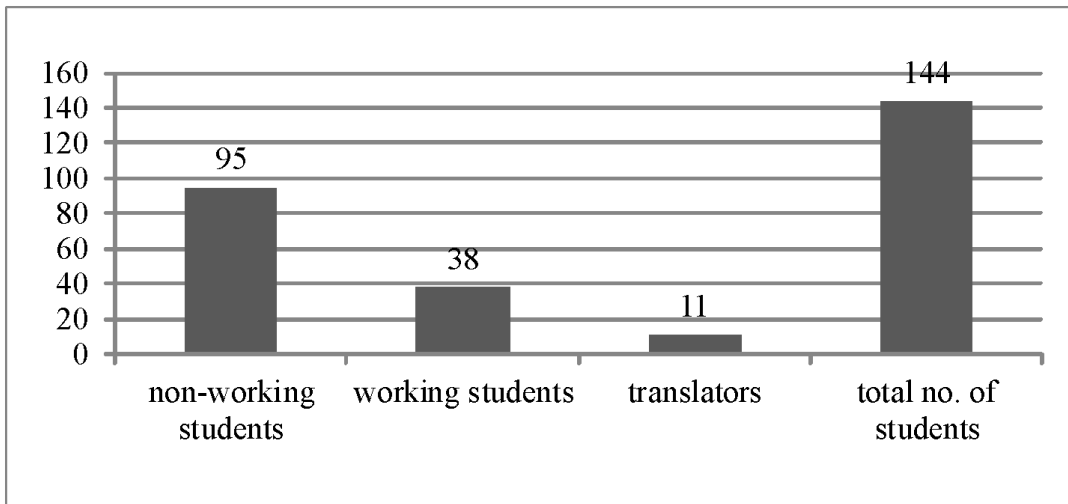

Figure 2. Categorizing the participants

3.0 The State of Translation Departments at Lebanese Universities

Describing the situation of translation major at the Lebanese universities entails looking at the contract sheet of the courses. Three universities were part of this study: the Lebanese public university, Lebanese University, and two private Lebanese universities, LIU (Lebanese International University) and AUST (American University of Science and Technology).

3.1. The Situation at the Lebanese universities

The percentage of explicit linguistic courses at the Lebanese University is 13.7% of the total courses (7 courses of linguistic nature out of 51). These courses are: "Grammar and Techniques of Expression" in Arabic, English, and French, "Applied Linguistics" in English or French, and Morphology and Syntax in English and Arabic. At the private university, Lebanese International University, LIU, translation students take 3 courses out of 36 courses, equivalent to 9% of the total number of courses, pertaining to linguistics including "Grammar[1]" in English and Arabic, and "Introduction to Linguistics" in English. Similarly, at another private university, American University of Science and Technology, AUST, there are 7 courses concerning linguistics out of 33 courses, which is equal to 21.2% of the total courses. 4 courses are given in English: "Introduction to Linguistics", "English Morphology and Syntax", "Comparative Stylistics" and "Grammar", and 3 courses given in the target language of the course: Arabic Professional. for Translators, French Professional for Translators, and English Professional for Translators, .

3.2. The status of linguistic courses

Upon comparing the percentages of linguistic courses to the total number of courses given at the three universities in the Bachelor of Arts in translation, there is discrepancy between the number of linguistic courses, as is demonstrated in Figure [3]. AUST gives double the number of linguistic courses given at LIU, while LU offers half the number of the two universities.

It is worth mentioning that these universities do not use the same textbooks to teach these
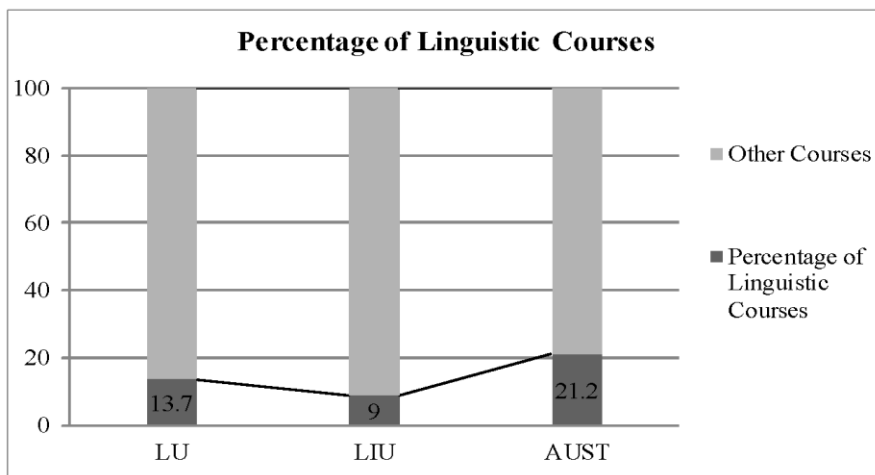
Figure 3. A representation of the percentage of linguistic courses at LU, LIU & AUST

courses, and instructors at each university decide on the content taught and methodology followed, which reveals the instructors' preference of one area of linguistics rather than another and, consequently, limits the participants' knowledge. The effect of such an action needs further

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[1] "Grammar" is a branch of "linguistics", which is referred to as syntax. In the Lebanese context, grammar courses neither use linguistic terminology, nor the analysis. It is basically stating, in clear terms, the rules and applying the correct structures. Linguistic courses usually include but are not limited to: phonology, phonetics, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and other interdisciplinary branches like neurolinguistics, language acquisition, and sociolinguistics.

research since translation does not rely on one particular area to relay the source language.

These variables are encountered upon surveying the opinion of sworn translators, as indicated in the population section, to identify any discrepancy in the results.

Yet, there is a consensus among the three universities; they find giving the courses, "Grammar" and "Introduction to Linguistics", in TL[2], which is the English language, as essential. This creates another variable. That is, teaching some courses, like "Introduction to Linguistics", in English results in presenting examples and illustrations on linguistic features from English neglecting a precious opportunity from other languages. However beneficial, this creates a gap in the knowledge relevant to the other languages a translator is majoring in, which could be French, Spanish, Italian, Chinese or German, in addition to Arabic and English.

4.0 The Outcome of the Questionnaire

4.1. Participants' attitudes towards grammar

Participants' responses to the third section of the questionnaire revealed their almost unanimous affirmation to the benefits of grammar courses, whether these courses are given in the source language or the target language. One participant remarked that grammar courses enable one "to have correct production in the target language"; another stated that grammar courses "help one understand the source text in order to translate it;" a third participant related the impact of grammar courses to personal level and commented that "grammar courses have improved my language skills and my knowledge in the language." Kevin Hendzel (2012) clearly states that "Subject-matter knowledge is not just "important" to translation. It's the very essence of translation."

Only 3% of the participants did not find grammar courses helpful. One participant remarked: "There is no direct relevance between grammar correctness and the process of translating. As a matter of fact, grammar rules are sometimes broken to convey an idea from one language to another." Considering such a stand could find relevance to some scholars who prioritize meaning over syntactical structure and parallelism or vice versa. In fact, Gutknecht (2017 : 648) admits that the call for translation to retain the structure of the original text "preserving the successive units of the source text and arranging them in an order of occurrence irrespective of the 'normal' grammatical sequence of units in the TL […] is justifiable if the aim is to carry out comparative linguistic research".

4.2. Participants' attitudes towards linguistics

Regarding the helpfulness of linguistics in translation, the participants' responses fluctuated from one area to another. Participants' opinions were investigated towards five areas in linguistics only – namely phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics and semantics. Figure [4] summarizes the participants' responses towards these five areas of linguistics.

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[2] In Lebanon, English or French are taught as first language starting from kindergarten. All scientific subjects are taught either in English or French, but not Arabic.
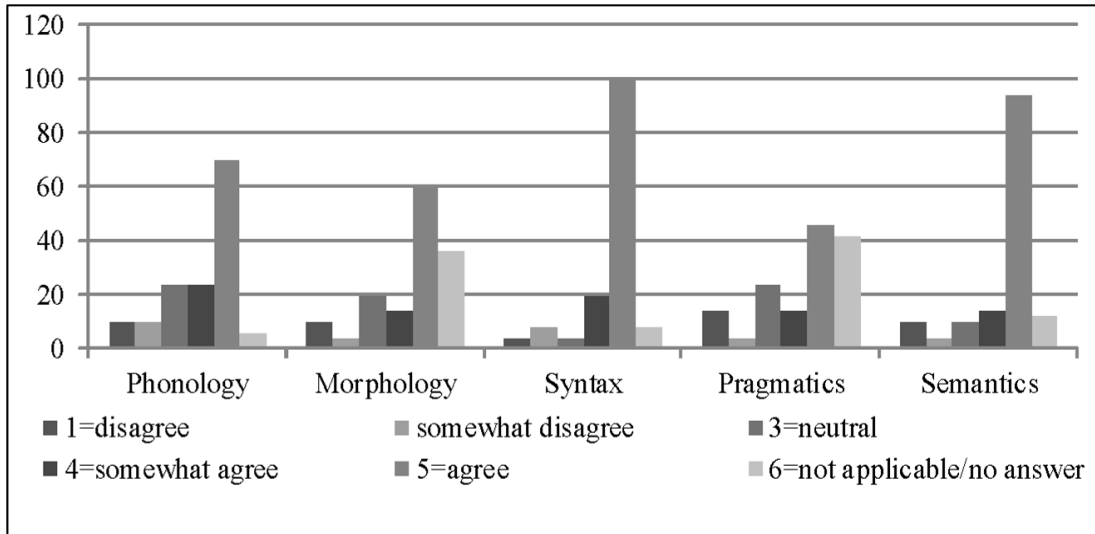
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Figure 4. Participants' opinions towards areas in Linguistics

The majority of participants (69.4%) agree that syntax is very helpful and many of them approved its importance in understanding the structure and meaning of sentences. One particular participant explained that "Syntactic coherence and its recognition can help the translator in translating absurd or odd forms of texts or sentences" probably linking syntax to Chomsky's (1957) differentiation between deep and surface structure. That is, looking at the syntactical structure of an utterance is not enough. Some ambiguous utterances call for scrutiny to grasp the intended meaning. To illustrate, in the utterance "I hate flying planes", two meanings evolve from this "odd form", to quote the participant's words. One wonders whether the person in question hates *flying* where the agent, *I*, acts as the pilot or *planes* that are souring in sky. Delving deeply into the structure and connecting it to the context, helps translators to translate properly.

As to phonology, almost half the participants found it insightful to study this area. One participant stated that "phonology helps with aping the produced translation, especially for subliminal context to secure attention and emphasis." The rest had mixed opinions. Most probably, they did not consider its usefulness to interpreters as one participant stated openly that "translation is focused mainly on written production rather than interpretation."

The third area surveyed is morphology. Almost 41.7% of the participants found it helpful in translation. They linked this area to lexicons where one participant observed that "since words form the corner stone of language, they help produce proper translation of the context." It was remarkable to notice that 25% did not answer this question about morphology or found it as inapplicable. Some participants said they have never learnt anything about this area. One participant indicated clearly that "studying morphology is of no clear or direct significance. Translators build lexicons via practice."

Like syntax, semantics was found useful by the participants, at the rate of 65.3%. Some highlighted the importance of reading between the lines and others referred to the relation between words as essential. One response commented that "knowledge of semantics aids largely in the transfer of in-context meaning as well as narrowing cultural gaps between SL and TL",

and another added that "the meaning of words and knowing their origins help us translating almost perfectly."

Pragmatics was the least famous among these five areas as it received very little support; only 31.9 % of participants identified pragmatics as insightful. One explanation concluded that "it is very common to use pragmatics in order to have proper logical sense of production". However, many participants did not supply verification or an explanation to their stands towards pragmatic. Knowing that 29.2% of participants found pragmatics as inapplicable or did not know what it means verifies the absence of an explanation. Almost 10% totally disagreed on its usefulness. One truism is disregarded here: a branch of pragmatics is speech acts and translation can be accurately relayed when considering the three speech acts of locutionary act, illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect (Bariki, 2008: 68).

In interlingual communication, the translator receives and sends messages, acting as the intermediary. How the translator comprehends the message affects the message sent. Translation, in this sense, is viewed as a discipline in applied linguistics. The linguist relays the means and the translator uses this means (Kolawole, 2013).

5.0 Analysis of Findings and Outcomes

The comparison between the number of linguistic courses at the universities involved in this study leads to the conclusion that giving explicit linguistic knowledge to translators-to-be is essential. This is why some universities need to reconsider the number of these courses to achieve optimal benefit as sought by sworn translators and translators-to-be.

The results of the survey also reveal that translation students and translators find linguistic courses helpful to their major to some extent despite the courses' theoretical tendency. They share Malone's (1988) stand that linguistics is at the service of translation since some linguistic tools are used upon translating. Having said so, he calls for the studying the interface of both domains. Yet, they find some fields of linguistics as more helpful than another. Syntax and semantics are viewed as the most relevant to them and pragmatics as the least.

Teaching linguistics without a direct or indirect link to translation results in misunderstanding its efficiency in translation, like the case with phonology to some students. One can conclude that some participants were taught phonology strictly phonetically. Some participants failed to relate phonology to a branch of their major, which is interpretation or direct translation.

Yet, some would argue that one fact cannot be overlooked; translation students take diverse courses that enable them to practice translating specific structures exposing them to particular lexical items. They also receive feedback and proper explanation on proper translation. Thus, exposing translators-to-be to linguistic knowledge is not limited to linguistic courses; it takes place with every act of translation. Though Armstrong (2005) comments that the knowledge of linguistics, however beneficial, is not the only working factor here, the population of this study found linguistics helpful.

6.0 Conclusion

Translation is an interdisciplinary subject by nature. Developing linguistic knowledge paves the way for better interpretation of messages as it gives means to achieve this end. University curriculum developers have taken this stand and included linguistics and grammar as

compulsory courses in the contract sheet. Yet, the percentage of these courses needs to be reconsidered to eliminate discrepancies on one hand and properly prepare translators and interpreters to the profession domain.

The perspective of the majority of translators-to-be and translators fluctuates between the importance of one field of linguistics and another. Thus, while designing the courses, syntax and semantics are supposed to receive much attention. Following their perspectives, such fields in linguistics enhance their language proficiency which would reflect on their translation quality.

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