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**Translation: An Art or a Science?**

Translation is defined as “a written communication in a second language having the same meaning as the written communication in a first language” (1) Translation can also be a verbal communication but the important point is that the meaning is the same in the two languages. The difficult part in translation is making sure that the sense of the meaning is put correctly in the second language.

There has been a lot of debating about whether translation is an art or a science. It is important to find out how “art” and “science” are defined. Science is defined as “A skill, especially reflecting a precise application of facts or principles; proficiency, and knowledge, especially gained through experience. On the other hand art is defined as “A system of principles and methods employed in the performance of a set of activities, and a skill that is attained by study, practice or observation.” (2)

It seems that the term science applies when being precise is involved in translation. Precision is an important part of translating, because translations are made of important documents where meanings must be clear and accurate. A good example where precision is important is in technical literature where the terms can accurately be translated from the first language to the second language.

But written literature or speeches that are made are different than a technical document. The language that is used in a fiction or non-fiction book can be quite different than something like a technical manual. The meaning in literature is often implied or hinted at, and a scientific approach does not make sense for that the meaning would be lost. This is where translation becomes an art. Implied meanings cannot be easily programmed into a computer. These meanings must be learned from practice and experience with both languages. In this way translation is much more art than it is science.

A poll was taken in May 2009 asking whether translation was an art, a craft, or a science. The results were that 26.58% said it was a science, 29.73% said that it was an art, and 43.69% said that it was a craft. A craft is defined as “where the skills needed to be able to translate a learned over the years and honed with experience.” (3) This poll is interesting because it introduces the concept of a craft that involves skills that are increased with practice. More people thought that this was the best way to describe it.

It is my feeling that translation can’t really be put in only one category. It has scientific aspects to it and it has art aspects to it also. Both of these are important. I think that to be a good translator you must be ready to use a scientific approach as well as an artistic approach. It is definitely true that like other skills, translation ability improves with more years experience. And in the end, whether it is scientific or artistic or the result of a craft, the important thing is that the meaning is the same in both languages.

References:

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