Examining User-Centered Translation
How to (not) perform surgery with a Swiss Army Knife

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My dissertation, *User-centered Translation and Practical Application of Usability Methods* is a qualitative study, where the conceptual innovation of user-centered translation is put to a pragmatic test and assessment. In this lectio, I shall briefly describe the core points of my research. First the focus is on key matters of translation and its context-dependency, followed by the concepts of *usability*, *user-centeredness*, and the specific *usability methods* I have examined. Finally, I shall present the four individual research articles my dissertation comprises.

The work of translators may often be quite invisible. Many people might think that translations are simple to produce, and that machine translation has replaced much of the human work involved in professional translation. This idea of machines replacing human translators has been around since the 1950s, yet translation and other forms of communication still demand human effort, empathy, and the ability to understand context (although some more mundane work may already be externalized for machine translation). A translation is never a one-to-one replica of its source text; rather, translations are always an interpretation of the source text that is made for a specific purpose from one language and culture to another.

Translation can be seen as a *product*, a *service*, and a *process*. For the layperson, translation is likely to refer to a finished *product* – that is, a message produced from a text into another language. Most consumers, readers, or – as I refer to them in my dissertation – *users*, tend to experience only the product-level of translation: a tangible text created by a translator, be they human or machine, professional or nonprofessional.

For those who purchase translations and other language services, the concept of translation is commonly seen as a *service*. The client is employing the translator to procure a service. Each service is unique since each text and their translations' requirements are unique. If the product quality is roughly the same level between different providers, these service aspects may be the key factor of choosing one translator or translation service provider over another.

For those of us involved in translation, we tend to see translation as a *process*. A multifaceted process of linguistic and cultural problem-solving that results in a translated text, a product. A process that is offered to clients as a service, where each process is

tailor-made, unique, and irreplicable. A process which we are trained in and in which we train others. A broad process where ideas are conveyed not only between languages but also between cultures. I wish that you keep all these three aspects of translation in mind while we are discussing translation today.

Translations are always made for a specific purpose and a good translation is one that fits its purpose – in some cases a raw machine translation (even one by a free online app) may be what suits the purpose, in other cases the text might require a lot of cultural adaptation and modifications to suit its needs in a new language and culture. Most often the purpose falls somewhere in between. However, practical means to address this purpose and the readers of translation may often be scarce. My research has focused on how to make the readers, the *users*, for whom the translations are made, a part of the translation *process*. In practice, this has been done by applying methods from usability research, as suggested by the user-centered translation model, which I shall present shortly. Focus on the user and use situation helps to concretize what the translations are required for and thus translate with the reader and context of use in mind.

As translations are created for specific purposes, translation is always a context-dependent practice. Indeed, as the old joke goes:

> So, ask a translator what anything is in another language, you'll always get the same reply: "What's the context?"

For a professional translator, the translation process often requires more knowledge than a single expression, or a single piece of text. And this is not just applicable to translation, taking anything out of context risks misrepresentation, and misrepresenting the source is a very undesirable outcome in all communication. Knowledge about the target audience, use situation, and purpose of the text are key factors for producing translations that are fit for purpose. Now, translators will say they always consider the reader in their work, but specific ways of how this is done are rarely mentioned. This is where the concept of user-centered translation comes to play.

The idea of applying usability research methods stems from user-centered translation (UCT), a model introduced in 2012 by Tytti Suojanen, Kaisa Koskinen, and Tiina Tuominen. The key idea of UCT is to place the user and context of use at the heart of translation processes. This is done by adapting the principles of user-centered design into translation.

User-centered design is a method used in all kinds of design processes. For instance, design of websites, clothing, city planning, and cellphone apps may all involve user-centered design methods. User-centered design places the needs of the user at the core of the design process. The idea is not to let the designers think about what the user wants, but to rather involve the users and discover their actual needs. You might have encountered products designed in such a way that ignores actual human behavior in favor of the designers' ideas of how people should act and that have thus resulted in poor usability. As French philosopher Simone Weil is often quoted to have said, the great human error is to reason in place of finding out. In translation, this user-centered approach is applied by utilizing methods of usability research used in user-centered design and applying them into translation.

A key concept in the user-centered approaches is *usability*. To demonstrate this, I shall ask you, the members of the audience, to consider the following pairs of items.

First, two examples of microwave ovens: The first one has only two dials to control heat and time. The second one has a complex digital interface and LCD screen. Imagine you are buying a microwave for an elderly relative. Which one would you choose? Most likely, understanding the second one would need a manual (preferably a well-translated one); conversely, the operating principles of the first one can be understood just by looking at it.

Another example, consider a scalpel and a Swiss Army Knife. Your doctor is about to perform surgery on you. Which tool would you like to see them wield? Granted, the Swiss Army Knife can perform many tasks, perhaps even surgery, but there are undoubtedly better tools for such a task.

One more: You are moving to a new apartment, and you do not have a car. You have the choice between two friends to ask for help. One of them drives a "cool" sports car, the other has a van from the 1990s, covered in rust and band stickers. Which friend do you call?

These are all examples of usability over other factors. You might prefer a more hi-tech approach to your microwave cooking, a high-utility multitool over several specific tools, or a flashy sports car over a beat-up punk rock van, but whether they suit the purpose at hand is a matter of context.

You may also think of all the previous examples as allegories for translated texts too. Why is the text required in another language? Who is the translation for? What is its purpose?

To compare to the previous examples to translation, the microwave oven invites us to ask, "Does understanding the text require specific knowledge?" The multitool would reflect the question "Is this text for a specific purpose or for more general use?" And the car is a question of which is more important, style or functionality?

Again, it all depends on the context.

In my dissertation, I have adapted the following definition of usability from Suojanen, Koskinen, and Tuominen (2015: 36): "Usability is the ease of use of a product in a specified context of use; users are able to use a product effectively, efficiently and to their satisfaction." I have focused on three usability research methods, as suggested by the UCT model. These are usability testing, heuristic evaluation, and user personas.

Usability testing is perhaps the most prominent method of usability research. It is an empirical test, where a test user, who represents the intended target audience, is performing a predetermined task with the evaluated product. Their actions are observed and recorded, and after the task, the users are interviewed about the process. Any problems or inconveniences identified by the test users should then be taken into consideration further on in the design process. This is quite a resource-heavy method, since it requires planning, recording, and recruitment of test users.

Heuristic evaluation, on the other hand, is an evaluation method performed by usability experts or experts of the product being evaluated. The evaluators examine the product alongside a list of predefined principles called heuristics. These heuristics include definitions of what is being evaluated and may include statements, for example "the

terminology is familiar to the reader", or questions, such as "Is the product presented in an appropriate medium?" If the evaluator finds inconsistencies between the product and the heuristic, they make a note of the problem and often offer a possible solution.

User personas are fictional representations of the target audience. They are characters created based on facts known about the intended target audience, used to concretize decision making. Often multiple personas are created to represent different archetypes of the intended target audiences. The personas are given a name, some background information, facts about how, why, and where they use the product, as well as how they feel about the product. For instance, if one were to create personas for a lectio praecursoria for a PhD defence, they could include 1) academics who are too familiar with the topic and have heard this all before multiple times; 2) friends who snuck in because they heard there will be cake afterwards; as well as 3) relatives who are trying to nod politely as if they understood something about the presentation.

My dissertation research was published in four articles. In the first article (Suokas et al. 2015), the principles of user-centered translation were applied in a university translation project. The project involved translating course material from Finnish into English for foreign students. The process adapted a user-centered approach, and international students were included in the translation process via two modified usability tests. Having users comment and use the translation during the translation process helped create a more usable end-product.

In the second article (Suokas 2016), I examined a translation that had been criticized for being difficult to use due to its poor language quality. The book in question was the Finnish translation of *The Guitar Handbook* by Ralph Denyer (1984a). The translation *Suuri kitarakirja* (1984b) was deemed as "unusable" and "suitable as teaching material of how not to translate" by a well-known Finnish translator. To assess whether these criticisms were valid, I created a usability test setting, where test users practiced specific guitar playing techniques by using the book while being moderated. The test sessions were followed by an interview. Expert evaluation was also conducted by language professionals who also had experience with guitar playing. The same section that was used in the usability test was evaluated by four expert evaluators, who used a set of heuristics I had created for the purpose. Neither test confirmed the critique that the book was unusable because of its language, but they did point out other usability problems. Mainly the problems had to do with the layout of the text and how a book was seen as a dated interface to learn guitar.

In the third article (Suokas 2020), I gathered material from students in my translation courses. I have been applying some usability methods in my teaching for a while and decided to gather data from students on how they experienced using personas and heuristics as part of translation courses. Analysis of the student data suggests that both methods have their merits: personas may give a better understanding of the target audience and thus help create solutions for specific translation problems. Heuristic evaluation may offer a more structured and easy-to-apply way of conducting review. However, the methods, most notable the heuristic evaluation, were also seen to have drawbacks, especially in terms of extra time required in the translation process.

The final article (Suokas 2019) deals with bringing UCT to the field. The article presents preliminary results of a research project in co-operation with Finnish language service provider Traduct. The article examines how to best apply UCT into practice and what topics could be connected to the application of the model. The article provides ideas on how to address questions such as translation quality, customer feedback, and communication with clients from a practical viewpoint, and suggests an action-research approach to apply the methods in practice.

In conclusion, UCT and usability research methods seem to suit translation on multiple levels: practical translation work, translator training, as well as the broader processes of language service providers. A suitable method may be chosen from different alternatives; for instance, creating a user persona requires relatively little work, so they may benefit even smaller projects, whereas a more resource-heavy usability testing might better suit larger projects, especially ones that involve multimodal material. Those who require and purchase translations may also benefit from the application of usability methods: using the methods to identify the target audience and their needs before starting the translation helps improve communication among everyone involved. Having a clear picture of the end users also reduces the risk of having to undergo costly alterations during later stages of the translation process.

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About the author

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