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TRANSLATION AS A LABORATORY OF LINGUISTIC AWARENESS: SPANISH AND THE ROMANCE LANGUAGES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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This article examines translation as a laboratory of linguistic awareness within the Romance language family, focusing on Spanish in relation to French, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian. It argues that translation between closely related languages is not simply a matter of transfer, but a privileged form of linguistic inquiry in which resemblance must be tested rather than assumed. By slowing down comprehension and bringing lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic friction into view, translation reveals how related languages both enable and resist one another. Drawing on the author's experience as translator and teacher of Spanish as a foreign language, the article further shows how contrastive work can be used pedagogically to sharpen metalinguistic awareness, challenge false transparency, and foster more precise interpretation. Translation thus emerges not only as a professional practice, but also as a method of analysis and a pedagogical tool for deeper learning within the Romance continuum.

Keywords: *translation pedagogy; linguistic awareness; Spanish; Romance languages; contrastive analysis; metalinguistic reflection*

Introduction

At first sight, translation between related languages may seem easier than translation across distant linguistic systems. Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French, and Romanian share a common historical background, a substantial body of recognisable vocabulary, and a number of structural parallels that create an impression of immediate accessibility. Yet it is often precisely this proximity that makes comparison so revealing. Similar languages invite premature equivalence: they encourage translators, learners, and teachers alike to assume that formal resemblance guarantees semantic, grammatical, or pragmatic correspondence. In practice, however, some of the most significant differences emerge precisely in those areas that appear closest at first glance.

This article argues that translation can be understood as a laboratory of linguistic awareness, especially within the Romance language family. By "laboratory" I do not mean a mechanical site of verification, but a space of close observation, testing, and reformulation. Translation slows down comprehension and makes visible what fluent reading often leaves unexamined: why one structure is natural in Spanish but awkward in French, why a cognate that appears transparent shifts in meaning between Portuguese and Spanish, or why a discourse choice that sounds neutral in Italian requires a different degree of explicitness in Spanish. In this sense, translation is not only a means of transferring meaning, but also a way of bringing linguistic form into focus.

Such an approach is particularly productive in the Romance continuum because related languages do not simply mirror one another. They also resist one another in subtle

but highly instructive ways. Their similarities facilitate access, but they also conceal zones of instability in which words, grammatical forms, and discourse habits overlap only partially. It is precisely in these areas of partial overlap that translation becomes most illuminating. What initially appears self-evident must be tested; what seems equivalent must be reformulated; what looks familiar must be examined more closely. Translation, then, does not merely move between languages: it exposes the fine-grained decisions through which languages organise meaning differently.

My perspective is shaped by experience at the intersection of translation and the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language. In both fields, comparison is not an abstract exercise but a practical tool. As a translator, one learns that proximity between languages rarely removes difficulty; it simply relocates it, often to more subtle levels, where lexical familiarity, grammatical resemblance, or pragmatic expectation can become sources of error. As a teacher, one sees that students understand Spanish more deeply when they are encouraged to compare it critically with the structures of their first language rather than learn forms in isolation. The article therefore has a double aim: to show that translation between Spanish and other Romance languages offers a privileged space for linguistic inquiry through contrast, and to argue that the same contrastive work has clear pedagogical value in the Spanish classroom, where guided comparison can foster precision, reflection, and metalinguistic awareness.

Translation as Linguistic Inquiry: Noticing, Comparison, and Reformulation

Translation is often described as transfer, reformulation, or negotiation between languages. These definitions are useful, but they do not fully capture what happens in the act of translating itself. Before translation becomes a finished text, it is first an exercise in attention. It requires the translator to pause where ordinary comprehension would usually move on, and to examine choices that might otherwise remain unnoticed. In that sense, translation can be understood not only as a communicative operation, but also as a form of linguistic inquiry grounded in noticing, comparison, and reformulation.

This becomes especially clear when the languages involved are closely related. Between distant languages, difference is expected; between related languages, it is often underestimated. Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French, and Romanian share enough lexical and structural material to create an impression of immediate intelligibility, but that very proximity can be deceptive. A cognate appears transparent, a tense seems transferable, a syntactic pattern looks parallel. Translation interrupts that illusion. It forces the translator to determine where resemblance ends and where each language begins to impose its own semantic, grammatical, or pragmatic logic [2].

From this perspective, translation is closely linked to linguistic awareness. As Svalberg (2007) argues, language awareness involves active engagement with language through noticing, reflecting, comparing, and reassessing one's understanding in the light of evidence. Translation activates precisely this kind of engagement. It requires the translator to ask not only what a text means, but also how that meaning is constructed, what linguistic choices support it, and what might count as an adequate reformulation in another language. In this way, language becomes an object of reflection rather than a transparent vehicle of communication.

This is one reason why translation deserves renewed attention in language education. As Cook (2010) has shown, translation need not be treated as a relic of outdated pedagogy; it can also function as a demanding and legitimate means of relating the target language to the learner's existing linguistic repertoire. Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez (2011) likewise argue that insights from translator training can enrich language teaching when translation

tasks are framed as opportunities for problem-solving and interpretive precision rather than as exercises in mechanical substitution. This is especially relevant in multilingual settings, where learners do not approach Spanish as blank slates but bring previous languages, habits of categorisation, and assumptions about what counts as natural expression. Prior linguistic knowledge is not simply interference to be eliminated, but also a resource that can support further learning if approached critically [4].

Within the Romance domain, this becomes especially productive. When learners or translators move between Spanish and another Romance language, they operate in a zone of partial overlap: there is enough shared ground to facilitate access, but also enough divergence to make superficial equivalence unreliable. A lexical item may coincide in form but not in meaning; a verbal structure may look parallel while functioning differently in discourse; a phrase may be grammatically possible and yet pragmatically odd. Translation becomes valuable precisely because it makes these small displacements visible. Seen in this light, it is not merely an application of knowledge already acquired, but one of the practices through which such knowledge becomes sharper, more explicit, and more usable.

The Romance Advantage — and the Romance Trap

Translation within the Romance domain is particularly productive because it moves constantly between familiarity and resistance. Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian share a recognisable historical foundation, and that shared background undeniably helps: it facilitates initial comprehension, creates lexical bridges, and gives learners and translators a sense of orientation that is often absent in more distant language pairings. Yet this advantage comes with a trap. The very closeness that makes access easier also encourages overconfidence. Formal resemblance is easily mistaken for real equivalence, and similarity begins to replace analysis.

This is precisely where translation becomes revealing. As Ringbom (2007) has shown, cross-linguistic similarity can support learning, but it can also encourage excessive reliance on transfer. In related languages, the danger is rarely total misunderstanding; more often, it is partial understanding mistaken for full control. Translation is valuable because it interrupts that illusion. It forces the learner or translator to test whether a form that looks familiar actually behaves in the same way, carries the same range of meanings, or produces the same effect. In the Romance continuum, proximity is therefore never just a resource. It is also a source of interpretive risk.

False Transparency and Lexical Overconfidence

At the lexical level, the attraction of similarity is immediate. Romance languages offer a large number of cognates whose shared form genuinely supports comprehension. The problem is not that cognates are always misleading, but that they are only misleading some of the time. That partial reliability is precisely what makes them dangerous. A word may look familiar and still prove unstable in use. Spanish *librería*, French *librairie*, and Portuguese *livraria* seem to confirm the closeness of the Romance lexicon, yet they do not coincide in all contexts; the same applies to pairs such as Spanish *constipado* and French *constipé*, or to French *éventuellement* and Spanish *eventualmente*. What matters in such cases is not only denotative meaning, but also range, register, and habitual use.

From a translational point of view, false transparency is useful because it exposes a basic fact: similarity is not a binary category. Between full equivalence and complete divergence lies a broad area of partial overlap, where words resemble one another enough to invite transfer but not enough to guarantee it. Translation forces the translator to move beyond visual familiarity and to ask a more demanding question: not whether a word looks

recognisable, but what it actually does in context. Pedagogically, this is equally important, because it helps learners replace lexical confidence with lexical attention.

Shared Forms, Divergent Grammars

The same tension appears at the grammatical level, though often in subtler ways. Romance languages share a large amount of inherited grammatical material: verbal paradigms, articles, clitics, mood distinctions, and familiar syntactic patterns. At first sight, these shared categories suggest a high degree of structural overlap. Yet comparative Romance linguistics has repeatedly shown that formally related systems do not necessarily organise meaning in the same way [5]. What appears to be the same category may occupy a different functional space or be subject to different constraints in actual use.

Spanish offers a clear example of this. Speakers of Italian, Portuguese, French, or Romanian often find parts of Spanish grammar accessible because many forms look recognisable. But recognisability is not the same as equivalence. Tense usage may seem broadly parallel while differing in discourse value or distribution; mood distinctions may appear familiar while operating under different conditions; even small grammatical choices such as articles, prepositions, or clitic placement often resist direct transfer. These are not spectacular contrasts, but they are precisely the ones that matter most in translation. They show that grammar is not simply a set of labels to be aligned across languages, but a system of choices embedded in usage. In related languages, grammatical difficulty often lies not in radical divergence, but in near-equivalence.

Similar Words, Different Pragmatics

If lexical and grammatical resemblance can mislead, pragmatic resemblance can be even more deceptive. Closely related languages often seem to share communicative habits simply because they share structures and vocabulary. Yet similar resources do not always produce similar effects. Discourse markers, connectors, hedges, routines of politeness, and patterns of mitigation may appear comparable while carrying different weights in actual interaction. As Zufferey and Degand (2024) note, languages may encode similar discourse relations through forms whose distribution and force remain language-specific.

This is where translation moves beyond correctness in the narrow sense. A sentence may be morphologically sound and lexically accurate, and yet still feel slightly off because of its tone, rhythm, degree of explicitness, or discourse framing. A request that sounds appropriately neutral in one Romance language may sound too direct or too elaborate in Spanish; a connective that feels natural in French may overstructure the discourse if transferred too literally. These are often the hardest differences to perceive, precisely because they are not always visible on the surface. Translation is useful here because it compels attention to language as use, not just as structure. It asks not only *Can this be said?*, but also *Would this be said like this here?*

The Romance continuum, then, is not a space of effortless equivalence, but a field of calibrated difference. Translation is valuable because it makes that calibration visible. It reveals that related languages do not simply mirror one another, but illuminate one another precisely through the limits of what can be transferred. In that sense, the Romance advantage is real, but so is the Romance trap.

From Comparison to Learning: The Classroom as a Space of Linguistic Awareness

If translation can function as a laboratory of linguistic awareness, the classroom is where that awareness can be turned into learning. For a teacher of Spanish, especially in multilingual settings, comparison is not a distraction from language teaching but one of its most effective tools. Learners do not arrive in class without categories, intuitions, or habits

of interpretation. They bring previous languages with them, and those languages shape not only what they find easy or difficult, but also what they notice, what they overlook, and what they assume can be transferred. In this sense, the classroom is never truly monolingual at a cognitive level, even when only one language is officially being taught.

From this perspective, the teacher's task is not to suppress prior linguistic knowledge, but to activate it critically. This does not mean encouraging constant bilingual explanation or turning the class into a translation exercise. It means recognising that students often understand Spanish more precisely when they are invited to examine it in relation to what they already know. Prior linguistic knowledge is not simply interference to be corrected; it can also be a resource for reflection if resemblance is tested rather than assumed [4]. This is especially relevant for learners whose first language is itself Romance, since linguistic proximity tends to accelerate comprehension while also increasing the risk of false confidence.

The First Language as a Cognitive Resource

For a long time, the learner's first language was often treated in language teaching as something to minimise or exclude. Yet learners compare even when they are not explicitly asked to do so. They interpret new forms through categories they already possess, and they build hypotheses about Spanish on the basis of previous linguistic experience. The real question, then, is not whether comparison will happen, but whether it will remain implicit and unexamined or become a conscious part of the learning process.

This is where a contrastive approach becomes especially useful. Comparison helps learners move from rough intelligibility to real understanding. A student who can already infer the meaning of a Spanish text because of its proximity to Portuguese, Italian, or French still needs to understand where that intelligibility stops. Guided comparison makes that boundary visible. It encourages the learner not merely to recognise familiar forms, but to ask why Spanish chooses one structure rather than another, what nuance is being marked, and what changes when a similar form from another language is transferred too directly. In this sense, comparison does not distract from learning Spanish; it deepens it.

This view also fits broader plurilingual approaches to language education. The *CEFR Companion Volume* places increasing emphasis on mediation, plurilingual competence, and the ability to draw on different parts of one's linguistic repertoire in order to interpret and compare across languages [3]. In the teaching of Spanish, this is particularly fruitful in Romance-language contexts, where the learner's first language becomes more than a background fact: it becomes a cognitive resource. Used critically, it helps learners identify false friends, notice divergent grammatical patterns, and become more sensitive to pragmatic mismatch.

Micro-translation Tasks and Contrastive Reflection

This is where micro-translation tasks become especially useful. Their value lies in their scale. A short sentence, a lexical pair, a discourse marker, or a small reformulation can often reveal more than a long bilingual exercise if the task is framed in the right way. What matters is not the amount of material, but the quality of attention it produces. Instead of asking students simply to translate "correctly", the teacher can ask why one option sounds more natural in Spanish than another, why an apparently equivalent cognate fails in context, or what pragmatic effect is altered when a structure is transferred too literally. The focus shifts from product to process.

Used in this way, micro-translation tasks are not remnants of an outdated method. They are a means of making learners justify choices, test intuitions, and articulate distinctions that might otherwise remain vague. Cook (2010) argues that translation can

serve as a legitimate tool in language teaching when it is treated not as mechanical substitution but as a reflective activity. Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez (2011) make a similar point in showing that translator training offers language pedagogy valuable insights into problem-solving, reformulation, and interpretive precision.

In the Spanish classroom, such tasks are especially revealing when they target areas of partial overlap between Romance languages. Learners may compare near-cognates and explain why only one works in context; reformulate a request so that it sounds natural in Spanish rather than merely transferable from Italian or French; or examine how a change in tense, article, or connective modifies the interpretive frame of a short passage. Particularly effective are tasks followed by a brief metalinguistic comment. That reflective step matters because it turns an intuitive answer into explicit awareness and allows the teacher to see not only whether the learner has chosen an acceptable form, but how that form has been understood.

This diagnostic value is one of the main strengths of micro-translation. It reveals patterns of transfer, areas of uncertainty, and zones where apparent familiarity still masks unstable understanding. It also supports the kind of active engagement with language that Svalberg (2007) identifies as central to language awareness. In this sense, the classroom becomes more than a space of practice. It becomes a space where language is made visible through contrast. Comparison does not weaken the target language; it helps bring it into focus.

The Translator-Teacher as Mediator of Linguistic Awareness

If translation is a space of close observation, the translator-teacher is particularly well placed to turn that observation into understanding. This is not because translation and teaching are identical activities, nor because every language teacher must think like a professional translator. Rather, both depend on a sharpened sensitivity to form, nuance, context, and to the often unstable boundary between what languages seem to share and what they actually allow. The translator-teacher works precisely in that unstable zone, where resemblance cannot simply be trusted, but has to be examined, tested, and interpreted.

In translation, noticing is indispensable. The translator must attend to distinctions that fluent reading often leaves implicit: the force of a connective, the range of a lexical item, the weight of a tense, the rhythm of a sentence, or the pragmatic colouring of what may look like a minor reformulation. In teaching, that same attentiveness serves a different purpose. What was once a translational problem becomes a pedagogical opportunity. A point of friction between Spanish and another Romance language is no longer merely something to solve, but something to explain, frame, and turn into awareness. In that sense, the translator-teacher does more than transmit correct forms. He or she mediates between systems of meaning, helping learners understand why a structure that feels possible may still be inadequate, misleading, or slightly out of place in Spanish [2; 7].

This role becomes especially valuable in Romance-language contexts, where learners often benefit from proximity but are also vulnerable to overconfidence. They recognise enough to move quickly, though not always accurately. The translator-teacher is well placed to intervene at exactly that point. Experience with near-equivalence, partial overlap, and false transparency makes it easier to identify where learners are likely to trust resemblance too soon. More importantly, it allows those moments to become occasions for reflection rather than mere correction. The point is not simply to say that a form is wrong, but to show why it seemed plausible in the first place, and what that plausibility reveals about the relationship between the two languages. Error, read in this way, ceases to be a dead end and becomes an interpretive clue.

That shift also changes the way learner language itself is read. In a strictly monolingual model, error is often treated mainly as deviation from the target norm. In a contrastive and mediation-oriented model, by contrast, it can also be read as evidence of an underlying linguistic hypothesis. A learner who transfers a discourse marker too directly from French or maps a Portuguese tense too neatly onto Spanish is not simply reproducing Spanish inaccurately; the learner is testing an assumption about cross-linguistic correspondence. The translator-teacher can unpack that assumption and redirect it, making feedback more precise, more explanatory, and often more meaningful. This view also resonates with the broader understanding of mediation in the *CEFR Companion Volume*, where the task is not only to provide correct language, but to build bridges between repertoires, interpretations, and communicative contexts [3].

The value of the translator-teacher, then, is not merely corrective, but also interpretive. This figure helps learners see language more clearly by making visible the decisions that fluent speakers often make automatically. That includes grammar, but also register, textual rhythm, lexical texture, degree of explicitness, and the pragmatic balance between what is stated and what is left implicit. As Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez (2011) suggest, translation-based work can foster the kind of reflective problem-solving that leads to deeper engagement with language, provided it is framed critically and not reduced to mechanical substitution. In the Romance continuum, where similarity so often obscures difference, the translator-teacher helps learners move from resemblance to distinction, from intuition to articulation, and from partial recognition to more reliable understanding.

Conclusions

Translation between related languages is often assumed to be easier because so much seems to be shared. Yet, as this article has shown, it is precisely within that apparent closeness that some of the most revealing differences emerge. In the case of Spanish and the Romance languages, translation does more than facilitate comparison: it tests resemblance, exposes the limits of equivalence, and makes visible those lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic distinctions that fluent comprehension can easily overlook. What looks familiar at first sight often turns out to require the most careful attention.

This is why translation within the Romance continuum is so valuable both analytically and pedagogically. It sharpens linguistic awareness by forcing learners and translators alike to move beyond superficial recognition and to engage more critically with form, meaning, and use. Rather than treating proximity between languages as a guarantee of easy transfer, it invites a more disciplined kind of comparison—one that turns partial overlap into an opportunity for reflection. In this sense, translation is not simply a technique for carrying meanings across languages, but a way of making language itself more visible.

Within that process, the translator-teacher occupies a particularly important position. By working at the intersection of comparison, reformulation, and explanation, this figure helps transform linguistic friction into understanding. The translator-teacher does not simply correct error, but reveals why error was plausible, where resemblance became misleading, and how awareness can emerge from that tension. Seen in this light, translation is more than a professional practice or a classroom tool: it becomes a way of reading language with greater precision, and of teaching it with greater depth.

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