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## A Short Survey of Translation Theory: Will Translation Studies Find its Way Amidst the Echo of its Plural Voices?

### 1. Introduction

Whether or not translation studies has truly become an autonomous discipline, general interest in this field has grown enormously in the last few years. New publications are appearing all over the world. Scholars are developing an increasing number of approaches to translation, making the traditionally sharp distinction between linguistic- and literary-oriented translation studies increasingly dated and simplistic.

A large variety of definitions, methodologies and specialized fields are available to the student of translation today. For example, the 1998 edition of the *Bibliography of Translation Studies*, the first issue of a periodical which aims at offering a “non-partisan guide to teachers involved in designing courses in translation and/or interpreting” (Bowker et al. 1998: v), arranged its references under 15 headings, namely: Translation Theory, Interpreting, History of Translation, Corpus-based Translation Studies, Translation & Gender, Translation & Cultural Identity, Translator/Interpreter Training, Bible Translation, Specialized Translation, Contrastive Linguistics, Machine (-aided) Translation, Localization, Audio-visual Translation, Terminology & Lexicography and Multicategory Works (on Translation).

Not surprisingly, the translation theory section lists the largest number of references. The reason for this is that the theoretical branch of translation has received particular attention in the last two decades, when the discipline’s autonomous status has been at stake. With translation increasingly recognized as an independent field of research today, it is becoming possible to explore new territories; hence, the keyword at the turn of the century is - of theoretical approaches, methodologies, translation resources and tools?

The question I would like to ask in this short survey of translation theories is whether plurality is to be perceived as a sign of development or of impending crisis in an area like translation studies, which has just recently began to define its own frameworks and models. Is it still possible to speak of translation theory or, rather, translation theories, or is the apparent fragmentation of approaches leaving no space for anything but contingent speculation, strictly dependent on the material conditions in which translation takes place?

Discussion will be limited to a relatively small number of recent publications in English, and as such can clearly not be considered fully representative. The bulk of literature on translation is published in English, but this state of affairs is challenged on different fronts, from postcolonial scholars to all those who are interested in the vexed question of translation and power. Lawrence Venuti’s assumption, “that many cultures have strong translation traditions in the twentieth century, but that to be influential internationally, writing about translation needs to be written in or translated into an internationalized language such as English (Venuti 2000: 3)”, is however counterbalanced

by another statement on the part of the same author, who points out that “native speakers of English wrote relatively little of the Western translation theory that has proved influential during this century (ibid.: 3)”.

## **2. Translation Theories Explained**

A series entirely dedicated to translation theory was launched a few years ago by St. Jerome Publishing. ‘Translation Theories Explained’ aims at responding to “the profound plurality of contemporary translation studies”, as the editor, Anthony Pym, puts it in the short foreword which is prefaced to each of the volumes. Although he points out that plurality is both a strength and a potential shortcoming, the extreme diversity of perspectives in translation is the series’ *raison d’être*. The series is not designed for the publication of new theoretical thought; it presents a number of comparatively recent approaches to translation, arranged according to clear-cut subject divisions, the overall picture being that of a diversified discipline. Each text illustrates a perspective on translation usually ‘borrowed’ from another academic field, according to the principle of interdisciplinarity.

For example, Peter Fawcett’s *Translation and Language* embarks on the extremely difficult task of offering a view of a large variety of linguistic approaches to translation. The author proceeds to a systematic explanation of linguistic insights and developments that have become particularly relevant to translation, such as the notions of context, register, text structure, text functions, etc. For example, his discussion of text functions opens with a general introduction to language functions in which Roman Jakobson’s and James Holmes’ taxonomies are illustrated and set in detailed contexts. This is followed by a concise description of the functionalist approach to translation, with an introduction to the basic concepts of *Skopos* and examples of text type classification (Fawcett 1997: Chapter 9).

Although Fawcett’s analysis of the linguistic elements at work in the translation process is extremely thorough, he establishes a relationship between translation and linguistics which is clearly dominated by the latter. The troubled, if productive, relationship between the two disciplines is briefly mentioned in the introduction, when the author goes so far as to claim that linguistics is of limited use if we want to employ it “as a recipe giving ready-made solutions to specific translation problems rather than as a resource for extrapolating general problem-solving techniques from specific concrete problems (ibid.: 2)”. In spite of this, however, translation topics selected for discussion by the author are systematically contained in more extensive analyses of specific linguistic debates. This procedure offers the reader a partial image of the linguistic perspective on translation: the approaches introduced appear to have been simply imported into translation studies, with some adaptation and little, if any, subsequent development.

Rather than being read as an introduction to the linguistic theories of translation, this text could perhaps be better described as a detailed study of the influence of linguistics upon translation. Fawcett himself tackles the problem when he sets up a rather problematic distinction between a linguistic theory of translation and an application of linguistic findings to translation. The former, which is especially relevant to my discussion, is defined as follows: “rather than applying linguistic theory to elements within the texts to be translated, one can apply it to the entire concept of translation itself (ibid.: 2)”. For example, Eugene Nida’s theory of translation, with its distinctive stress on reader’s response, and on the necessity to adapt the translated text to the specificity of the receiving culture, is defined as

a “sociolinguistics of translation, describing the way translators can adapt texts to the needs of a different audience in the same way we all adjust our language to suit the people we are talking to (ibid.: 2)”. The point here is to see whether descriptions of these processes of adaptation employ linguistic notions (as Nida himself in fact does in his texts): if so, the distinction between a linguistic theory of translation and the application of linguistic models to translation does not seem to be very helpful.

We might ask whether the relationship between translation and linguistics is indeed so dominated by the latter, either for reasons pertaining to a structural incapacity of translation studies to develop its own paradigms, or because of the fact that linguistics established itself as a discipline and a field of research well before translation studies, developing an experience which has been exploited by generations of translation scholars. However, arguments of the same kind as the ones raised above in the discussion of Fawcett can be applied to other texts in the ‘Translation Theories Explained’ series, such as Douglas Robinson’s *Translation and Empire*, which deals with postcolonial theories of translation, and Luise von Flotow’s *Translation and Gender*, analysing gender approaches. Both postcolonial and gender studies have emerged relatively recently (at a time when pluralism and interdisciplinarity were becoming the hallmark of most critical thinking), and therefore they do not share that veiled antagonism often perceived in the relationship between linguistics and translation. Yet neither Flotow nor Robinson present a dialogic relationship between translation and postcolonial or gender studies. The reader is left with the impression that translation has been the recipient of an extremely productive influence from these fields, but has hardly, if ever, been able to return the favour.

The question of whether such a negative view of translation studies is actually a product of the scope and structure of the ‘Translation Theories Explained’ series comes immediately to the fore. Despite the undoubted importance of the series as one of the first attempts to provide an accurate, wide-ranging view of contemporary developments in translation, its very organising principles might carry with them a subtle danger. These texts are meant as concise introductions to specialist areas, which should enable readers to compare and evaluate the potential of each individual approach. Does this aim, together with the adjustments necessary to meet the demands of a heterogeneous readership, imply the risk that a simplified picture will emerge of the relationships between translation studies and those disciplines which are collaborating with it? It would be extremely difficult to provide a straight answer to this question. Undoubtedly the series runs the risk of presenting translation studies as an intrinsically fragmented subject. Yet this is a risk that it shares with all those contemporary works that lay a special emphasis on the pluralistic vocation of translation studies, and end up by creating the image of a lively but uneven subject, which has to be supplemented by theoretical work produced elsewhere.

### **3. Unity vs. Diversity?**

The collection of essays entitled *Unity in Diversity: Current Trends in Translation Studies* (Bowker et al. 1998) addresses the question of plurality in a different way from the texts so far examined. The essays explore a wide range of aspects belonging to both traditional and emerging areas of translation. Not only does such a large variety provide a representative image of the state of the art, but it is the very idea of presenting miscellaneous works in a single volume that reflects the editors’ desire “to suggest areas of common interest beyond the necessary boundaries of specialization (ibid.: vii)”. The essays span the subfields of translation training, terminology, lexicography, machine translation,

interpreting, polysystem approaches, linguistics, literature and feminist approaches. Multiplicity is also reflected by the extremely heterogeneous language employed by the contributors, embracing the specialized terminology of their respective fields.

While plurality is considered an optimistic indication of the discipline's future, unity appears to be a different question altogether. On the one hand, the editors attempt to foreground it by introducing and displaying the essays as parts of a complex whole, in a synecdochical manner that actually proves effective, if only because this kind of inclusiveness is rare in translation studies. On the other hand, however, the editors leave almost all the questions regarding the field's unifying principles unanswered in their introduction. They confine themselves to suggesting that translation is "simply going the way of other disciplines, in a world in which disciplinary fragmentation is becoming a kind of postmodern rule (ibid.: iii)". The only form of consensus apparently shared by translation scholars seems to be of a 'defensive' sort, that is a strategic alliance to counteract the scarce interest in translation of our contemporary world. The editors point out that translation is still too often considered a marginal area, in which specialists are expected to talk only among themselves:

It is striking that though we talk to each other more and more, even if frequently within rather than across translation specialisms, we seem to talk on the whole to ourselves. Countless conferences, articles and books on history, sociology, anthropology, politics, new technologies and philosophy in the late twentieth century simply ignore the question of language and translation (ibid.: vi).

This strategic cohesion seems too weak to be able to support the weight of coherent disciplinary growth. Yet, many recent works in translation studies appear to share the view that the pluralistic vocation is to be upheld at the expense of any kind of unifying criteria. In his recent anthology of theoretical essays in translation studies, Lawrence Venuti does not only share the conviction of Bowker and others that the plurality of voices within the new discipline reflects the "differentiation of modern culture", but he also appears to broaden the interdisciplinary spectrum (at the risk of exploding it), when he sets out to link "recurrent themes and celebrated topoi" to a large variety of cultural developments (Venuti 2000: 4). If, on the one hand, putting historical and cultural developments in perspective and drawing attention to broad intersections with other disciplines is what is generally expected from an anthology (and the work of a cultural historian besides), on the other hand, however, this strategy has also the effect of undermining any idea of self-reliance in translation studies. This is particularly evident when Venuti goes beyond the necessity of contextualizing translation developments, and his threads threaten to become too loose. For example, the concept of universal elements in language, which were thought to cut across linguistic and cultural barriers, according to well-known developments in linguistics in the '60s, is connected to George Steiner's hermeneutic perspective on translation published in 1975. In a rather daring comparison, Venuti defines Steiner's critical reading of several translation works a 'universalizing' act, as, in his opinion, Steiner's comprehensive analysis pays little attention to the specific historical circumstances that place such substantial weight on translation (ibid.: 124). Another example is Hans Vermeer's *Skopostheorie* (a rather original approach that gives special emphasis to the aim the translated text is called upon to fulfil within the receiving culture), which is connected to contemporary developments in literary

theory, and particularly to reader-response criticism and theories that highlight the role of reception in the interpretation of literary works (ibid.:217).

If we may agree that originality *per se* has become a rather problematic issue since the advent of deconstruction, some better-defined form of internal coherence would however be desirable in a discipline with multiple vocations such as translation studies. It is therefore surprising to see that Venuti does not present any argument in favour of unity.

As has been pointed out before, however, the genre Venuti is adopting, namely anthology, might be responsible for the emphasis on diversity at the expense of unity. A similar situation occurs in Basil Hatim's latest publication, *Teaching and Researching Translation* (2001). In spite of the title, this text is not a pedagogical manual to be adopted exclusively in translator training programmes, but is a thorough description of the multiple theories and approaches in translation studies. The work of a translation scholar whose research is informed by a linguistically oriented perspective, this text does not provide the large contextualization work of Venuti's anthology; rather, it is more pragmatically focused on translation itself (translation both as a field of research and an activity). This does not mean that the links between translation developments and similar trends in neighbouring disciplines are not discussed, however. Hatim does in fact insist on the connections between translation and linguistics, both in the early stages of translation studies in the '60s, and today, after linguistics itself has undergone a profound transformation, which has seen a proliferation of approaches.

The productive interplay between translation and literary theory, deconstruction and cultural studies is another subject which is dealt with at length. The author adopts a thematic perspective, which becomes instrumental in cutting across subdivisions within translation studies, breaking barriers, and effectively contributing to some idea of unity (albeit in a symbolic, rather than in an explicit way). For example, the problem of the impact of ideology on translation, which has recently become an extremely productive area of research, is examined from the perspectives of both cultural studies and linguistics, with hints that the two aspects are not mutually exclusive (ibid.: chapters 9 and 10).

However, Hatim does not provide a satisfying solution to the unity dilemma, apart from offering a matter-of-fact view of the problem, which takes the growing popularity of the discipline as proof of its increasing disciplinary influence : "Translating is a multi-faceted activity, and there is room for a variety of perspectives. This might conceivably be seen as the fragmentation of the discipline, but evidence points the other way (ibid.:10)". Should we be content with this answer? The question effectively becomes whether it is at all possible to speak about unifying criteria in translation theory today. Margherita Ulrych and Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli are aware of the problem when they define translation firstly as a 'multidiscipline' (a field of study with an autonomous scientific domain, which distinguishes itself for its peculiarly flexible and dynamic nature) and then as a 'metadiscipline', "that is able to accommodate diverse disciplines with their specific theoretical and methodological frameworks (Ulrych and Bollettieri Bosinelli: 220, 237)". At the same time, they stress the necessity for future developments to be gathered around a core of unifying principles, which are bound to emerge from the productive interchange among scholars working in different areas of translation. The answer to the problem of unity thus appears to be deferred to the (near) future. However, there is another definition in this text which is particularly interesting for the purpose of this discussion, and that is the definition of translation as an osmotic discipline. Ulrych and Bollettieri Bosinelli point out that translation displays an:

osmotic capacity to absorb experience, theories and methodologies from various surrounding sources and adapt them to its specific needs. Translation has shaped its specificity and built up its own scientific domain to become an autonomous discipline by drawing on elements from neighbouring disciplines (ibid.: 236).

Although this may seem a weak argument in favour of unity, in the sense that no unifying principle comes explicitly to the fore, it would not appear difficult to gather a general consensus on a concept such as the transformative power of the act of translation. To endow also the theory of translation with such transformative power might not be just a strategic move, but a pragmatic recognition, that has been pointed out in different ways by all the scholars mentioned so far, and many more. On the one hand, this does not preclude translation studies from acknowledging its debts to other disciplines, which have lent it theoretical or methodological tools, while, on the other, autonomy and unity in translation studies would be guaranteed by the fact that the discipline as a whole would be greater than the sum of its theoretical branches.<sup>1</sup> A concept of translation theory as integrated, rather than fragmented, could be the answer to our quest for unity, provided that such integration results in new, creative thinking. A way to test this hypothesis would be to see whether it is confirmed in the practice of research conducted within a methodology of this kind.

#### **4. An Integrated Theoretical Apparatus**

Several recent publications offer case studies in which methodological tools taken from diverse areas of translation studies are fruitfully integrated. For example, Maria Tymoczko's analysis of translation practices and their impact on the formation of the Irish state is informed by elements taken from postcolonial theories, literary criticism, cultural studies, linguistics and philosophy (Tymoczko 1999). Not only is the fundamental role of translators such as Lady Gregory, Standish O'Grady and many others made explicit in their shaping of a national culture that was instrumental in the creation of a new political entity, but it is also the role of translation itself that is magnified, and seen as one of the principal shaping forces of the realities (historical, cultural, linguistic, political etc.) we all experience. For example, Tymoczko's linguistic analysis of the translation of Celtic proper names demonstrates that names are not simple linguistic markers: rather, they identify different people. By tackling the semantic and phonological aspects of translating proper names, translators are at the same time dealing with the complex processes of differentiation vs. identification that are at the basis of identity, and have a fundamental weight in postcolonial contexts. In another example, Tymoczko uses the methodological tools of reception theory to argue that when a translation from a colonized context is assimilated into the receiving culture (as in the case of the translation of ancient Irish texts into English), it brings its difference with it, a difference which resists any domesticating technique the translator may have adopted. And this eventually contributes to changing the receiving culture. But Tymoczko's most powerful argument is probably her definition of the metonymic aspect of translation: translating is seen as an activity that creates connections and contiguities, rather than being a process of substitution *tout court*. Translated texts stand in metonymic relationship to their larger cultural contexts, and thus represent them in a way

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<sup>1</sup> Bowker and others ask the same question, when they write: "Is the interdisciplinary whole greater than the sum of the disciplinary parts or do we have juxtaposition without shape, colours without form? (vi)". However, they do not provide any answer.

that is necessarily partial, in the sense that some aspects or images will be preferred to others. However, translations bring with them that seed of ‘belongingness’ that makes the difference between representation and substitution: the latter severs all kinds of bonds with its background, while the former is essentially an act of recognition and restitution.

Although the methodological tools are indeed borrowed from disciplines other than translation studies, the working material of Tymoczko is exclusively translation, which takes on an active role, whether it interacts with language, literature, social or political issues, etc. This picture of translation, taken as a whole, represents a more complex image than the one potentially composed by the sum of its (methodologically different) parts, if only because it shows that it is possible to analyse historical, linguistic and cultural developments in the concrete terms of actualised intercultural strategies, rather than in terms of abstract influence. This strategy places translation at the centre of the stage, as has been pointed out before, and, at the same time, adds a realistic dimension to Tymoczko’s representation.

Maria Tymoczko is not the only one to use translation theories in an integrated way.<sup>2</sup> Other works could be mentioned, in a tradition that some may be tempted to refer back to George Steiner. This tradition, and the fact that more and more texts of this kind are being published, seems to confirm that the unifying principle of translation studies is indeed an integrated theoretical apparatus.

## **5. To Conclude**

But there is another final point I would like to raise, lest such a conclusion seem too optimistic. If translation studies is indeed an autonomous discipline, in spite of, or, rather, thanks to the plurality of its voices, can situations be envisaged in which models could be exported, rather than imported? The answer to this question has already been provided by a few scholars.

In 1998, in her essay entitled ‘The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies’, Susan Bassnett reached a provocative conclusion, when she said that translation studies was already moving outwards, not only to share methods and concerns with other disciplines, but also to export some of its findings (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998). Bassnett is particularly interested in the relationship between translation and cultural studies. In 1990 she and Lefevere advocated what has come to be known as the ‘cultural turn’ in translation, a change of focus from textual to extra-textual constraints in the translation process (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990). The shift from culture to ‘cultures’, from the anthropological notion of culture as a unified whole to the concept of cultural pluralism, also advocated by postcolonial and cultural studies, is recent history. Bassnett maintains that from that moment onwards translation studies has become increasingly aware of the manipulatory

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. for example Annie Brisset’s work on drama translations in Québec, which are deemed to play a fundamental role in the creation of a Québécois national identity. Brisset combines a detailed literary and cultural analysis with a sociolinguistic perspective. Another example in which translation theories are fruitfully integrated could be Keith Harvey’s work on ‘camp’ talk, an analysis of an homosexual literary discourse, which emerges in recent French and English literature. Harvey’s analysis spans literary criticism, cultural studies and linguistics. Michael Cronin’s work on the role of language and translation in the creation of the Irish nationalist movement, and also his recent work on translation and travel writing (in which he combines a historical, linguistic and cultural approach to translation) should be mentioned too. My own work on representations of Italy by eighteenth century women translators and travel writers can be added to this short list, as translation, both in a metaphorical and in an actual sense, is the object of an analysis that combines historical, literary, linguistic and cultural approaches.

processes at work when texts are transferred across different cultures. As a consequence, the discipline has begun to ask new kinds of questions:

how a text is selected for translation, for example, what role the translator plays in that selection, what role an editor, publisher or patron plays, what criteria determine the strategies that will be employed by the translator, how a text might be received in the target system (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998: 123).

Translation studies has increasingly broadened its perspective and developed a distinctive methodology and expertise, which is enriched both by new specialist research and by the productive dialogue with neighbouring fields.

A few years ago Bassnett argued that the theoretical models developed by translation studies and its capacity to deal with a wide range of cross-cultural phenomena could save comparative literature from its impending crisis (Bassnett 1993). She envisaged a new panorama, in which translation studies was the discipline, and comparative literature one of its fundamental branches. With a similarly provocative stance, today she is asking cultural studies to acknowledge a 'translation turn', which, in her own words, "is now well underway (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998: 136)". We should take this to mean that translation studies is capable of exerting its influence on other disciplines today.

Kirsten Malmkjær points to similar developments in a recent contribution that analyses the relationship between translation studies and linguistics, a relationship that has traditionally been considered unidirectional, with translation studies firmly on the borrowing side (1999: 264-5). Yet according to Malmkjær this is not a correct representation of the current state of affairs, as many linguists are already fruitfully drawing on data provided by translation studies. Malmkjær quotes Roman Jakobson, who, as far back as 1959, displayed a singular awareness of the importance of translation for linguistic purposes, when he wrote:

Any comparison of two languages implies an examination of their mutual translatability; the widespread practice of interlingual communication, particularly translation activities, must be kept under constant scrutiny by linguistic science (Jakobson 1959: 233-4).

Recent translation developments, which will be particularly interesting for linguists, according to Malmkjær, are research into the specificity of translators' and interpreters' skills, an area in which psycholinguistics and pedagogical approaches in translation are joining forces. Corpus-based studies is another promising field. The search for recurrent translation patterns between source and target texts in parallel corpora, or in monolingual comparable corpora, sheds light on the specificity of the language used in translation. Lawrence Venuti suggests that this kind of research can transcend the boundaries of translation studies and linguistics, and contribute to explaining social and cultural phenomena (2000: 336). He quotes Dorothy Kenny, who maintains that "a careful study of collocational patterns in translated texts can shed light on the cultural forces at play in the literary marketplace, and vice versa (Kenny 1998: 519)".

Translation studies is therefore able to enter into a dialogic relationship with other neighbouring disciplines, and might as well return their favours by exporting her newly developed research models. The currently fragmented state of translation needs to be conceptualized in a different way: the potential for integration of the various approaches



should be emphasized, and the plurality of voices should be arranged in a more coherent melody. However, fragmentation in the theoretical field appears already to be offset by an increasing awareness of the central and active role of translation.

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