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A SHORT HISTORY OF WESTERN TRANSLATION THEORY

Introduction

Antoine Berman has argued that because 'reflection on translation has become an internal necessity of translation itself…(t)he construction of a history of translation is the first task of a modern theory of translation' (Berman 1992: 1). This paper gives a very brief overview of the history of western theories of translation, from the perspective of the end of the twentieth century.

The framework for my discussion will be a discourse analysis approach to the history of ideas developed by the French historian Michel Foucault. Adapting Steiner (1998: 248-9), I will divide the history of discourse on translation into four periods: (1) a 'traditional' period, from the beginning of the Christian era to the end of the eighteenth century, which is a period of 'immediate empirical focus', (2) a period of 'theory and hermeneutic inquiry', growing out of German Romanticism around the beginning of the nineteenth century, (3) a 'modern' period, reaching well into the twentieth century, in which the influence of General Linguistics is increasingly dominant, and (4) the contemporary period, subsequent to the publication of Steiner's book, which has taken to itself the name of 'Translation Studies'.

An Approach to the History of Ideas

My sources to the end of the nineteenth century will be drawn from Douglas Robinson's Western Translation Theory (Robinson 1997a). In studying the history of ideas about translation theory, we are seeking to make sense of a series of existing written texts - what they have to say about the act of translation and translated texts, and how they say what they have to say. Clearly there is a vast amount of discourse about the practice and significance of the act of translation. The 334 pages of Robinson's book include 124 texts by 90 authors. The historical 'sequel', which is the basis of my later remarks, Venuti's Translation Studies Reader (2000), includes 30 essays by 30 authors and covers 524 pages. This mass of documents is far from being a random collection of statements. As Foucault has noted: 'we know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything' (Foucault 1972: 216).

Specific fields of discourse are organised in regular ways and grow out of definable social contexts. In all fields of discourse, including those related to translation, 'discursive practices are characterised by the delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories' (Foucault 1977: 199).

In Steiner's opinion, over two millennia only a few authors have succeeded in introducing 'anything fundamental or new' into the discourse about translation. These creators and transformers include 'Seneca, Saint Jerome, Luther, Dryden, Holderlin, Novalis, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Ezra Pound, Valery, Mackenna, Franz Rosenweig, Walter Benjamin, Quine' (1998: 283). I will focus on some of these figures and their more recent successors, not for their own sakes, but because they are the major 'agents of knowledge' whose writings have allowed for the emergence of new objects, concepts and theories within the field of discourse on translation theory.

1. Traditional Translation Theories

There is a continuity of intellectual expression from Ancient Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, through to the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the rise of the early European nation states. The central language of scholars and other readers was Latin, while the core of this tradition was classical literature and Judeo-Christianity. There was a profusion of economic and political contacts throughout Europe and the Middle East, and this must have involved an abundance of linguistic transactions. Nevertheless, Lefevere's words provide an accurate background to understanding the social position of the subjects of traditional translation theory: 'In such a culture, translations were not primarily read for information or the mediation of the foreign text. They were produced and read as exercises, first pedagogical exercises, and later on, as exercises in cultural appropriation - in the conscious and controlled usurpation of authority.' (Lefevere 1990: 16).

The first texts encouraged future orators to create dynamic and non-literal versions (rather than literal equivalents) of the original works. Marcus Tullius Cicero, in his remarks in On the Orator (De oratore, 55 BC) on the pedagogical use of translation from Greek to Latin, set the terms which were to be expanded by Horace, Pliny the Younger, Quintillian, Saint Jerome, and Catholics, Reformers and Humanists from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Reflecting on his own experience, Cicero stated: 'I saw that to employ the same expressions profited me nothing, while to employ others was a positive hindrance… Afterwards I

resolved…to translate freely Greek speeches of the most eminent orators'. As a consequence, 'I not only found myself using the best words, and yet quite familiar ones, but also coining by analogy certain words such as would be new to our people, provided only they were appropriate' (Robinson 1997a: 7).

The poet Horace too argued for the revitalisation of well-known texts through a style that would: 'neither linger in the one hackneyed and easy round; neither trouble to render word by word with the faithfulness of a translator [sic]', not treat the original writer's beliefs with too easy a trust, and would avoid stylistic over-sensationalism 'so that the middle never strikes a different note from the beginning, nor the end from the middle' (Ars Poetica, c. 20BC, Robinson 1997a: 15). Quintilian agreed: 'In translating [Greek Authors], we may use the very best words, for all that we use may be our own. As to {verbal} figures…we may be under the necessity of inventing a great number and variety of them, because the Roman tongue differs greatly from that of the Greeks' (Institutio oratoria, c. 96AD, Robinson 1997a: 20).

St Jerome called on the authority of Cicero and Horace in his Letter to Pammachius, No. 57 (395AD), when he 'freely announced' that 'in translating from the Greek - except of course in the case of Holy Scripture, where even the syntax contains a mystery - I render not word for word, but sense for sense' (Robinson 1997a: 25). The exception is crucial, for Jerome's fame as a translator rests precisely on his scriptural translations. In insisting in this regard on 'the accurate transmission of the meaning of the text rather than the budding orator's freely ranging imagination', he introduced 'the first major shift in western translation theory' (Robinson 1997a: 23). Jerome maintained the major terms of source text and target text, original meaning and translated meaning, the concepts of literal and dynamic translation ('word for word' and 'sense for sense'), and joined these together through his 'new ascetic regimen' (Robinson 1997a: 23). An explicit consequence was an emphasis on interpreting the original meaning 'correctly in order to reproduce it properly' (Gentzler 1993: 95). 'Correctness' and 'accuracy', the repressed terms of Ciceronian discourse which were previously only the concern of 'faithful translators' but not budding rhetoricians, entered the discourse formation with a sacred necessity.

There were two further extensions to be made to the discursive formation. The first came in the 'wild, shaggy, "rebellious"' (Robinson 1997a: 84) circular letter on translation, written by Martin Luther in 1530. Luther's aim remained communication with readers and listeners, but the audience for his new translation of the scriptures was composed not of scholars but plain speakers of vernacular German, 'the mother in her house, the children in the street, and the common man in the market' (Robinson 1997a: 25, modified). The other was English poet John Dryden's expansion to three, instead of two, ways of translating, in the Preface to

his translation of Ovid's Epistles (1680): 'metaphrase…turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another'; 'paraphrase, or translation with latitude…where [the author's] words are not so strictly followed but his sense'; and 'imitation, where the translator…assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and the sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion' (Robinson 1997a: 172).

With this precision by the man some consider the first real translation theorist, the formation has assumed its basic form. Its practical, commonsensical nature has ensured that it remains the basis for much theorising done to this day. As a contemporary example, we may cite the work of Peter Newmark, who argues that the 'central problem of translating...has always been whether to translate literally or freely'. His answer to this problem is the distinction between semantic and communicative translation. Semantic translation: 'is personal and individual, follows the thought processes of the author, tends to over-translate, pursues nuances of meaning, yet aims at concision in order to reproduce pragmatic impact'. Communicative translation, on the other hand, 'attempts to render the exact contextual meaning of the original in such a way that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible to the readership' (Newmark 1988: 46-7). Informative and vocative (non-literary) texts require communicative translation; expressive (literary) texts tend more towards the semantic method of translation (Newmark 1981: 44). Binary schemes - of 'formal' and 'dynamic' equivalence - also play an important part in the work of the still very influential Eugene Nida (Nida 1964).

2. German Romanticism

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a second, more philosophical and less empirical, formation began to open within discourses on translation theory (Munday 2001: 27). This formation was connected, in one direction, with the rise of philology as a university discipline, and in another with the literary movement of Romanticism. Philology provided a range of new and exotic texts and allowed the experts to produce translations aimed primarily at other experts, not the general culture of which these scholars were a part (Lefevere 1990: 22). Romanticism exalted the translator 'as a creative genius in his own right, in touch with the genius of his original and enriching the literature and language into which he is translating' (Bassnett-McGuire 1980: 65). The stress on both the original author and the translator as being artists was not part of traditional discourse formations.

Novalis provided a significant twist to Dryden's tripartite division when he spoke in his philosophical fragments, Blutenstaub (1798), of 'grammatical translations…translations in the ordinary sense of the word', 'transformative

translations [which] when they are authentic body forth the sublimest poetic spirit', and 'mythic translations' which are 'translations in the noblest style: they reveal the pure and perfect character of the individual work of art. The work of art they give us is not the actual one but its ideal' (Robinson 1997a: 213). Similarly, Schlegel wrote that, in translating Homer, it was necessary 'to get away from the notion of literal precision so commonly associated with fidelity', because 'truth must be the translator's highest, indeed virtually his only, mandate' (Homers Werke von J.H. Voss, 1796, Robinson 1997a: 217). And Goethe commented on Wieland's translation of Shakespeare: 'I honour meter and rhyme, for that is what makes poetry poetry, but the part that is really, deeply, and basically effective, the part that is truly formative and beneficial, is the part of the poet that remains when he is translated into prose. This residue is the pure, complete substance, which a dazzling external form can simulate, when it is lacking, or conceal, when it is present' (Dichtung und Wahrheit, 1811-14, Robinson 1997a: 222).

These statements may seem to be reworking of the classical Latin theories of rhetorical freedom. In fact, they represented a major challenge to them because the re-working they sought privileged the reproduction of the foreignness of the source text and not its domestication. The fullest expression of this strategy was Friedrich Schleiermacher's 'On Different Methods of Translating' (Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden de Uebersezens, 1813), which Robinson describes as 'the major document of romantic translation theory, and one of the major documents of Western translation theory in general' (1997a: 225).

Schleiermacher distinguished between the 'interpreter (Dolmetscher) who works in the world of commerce', and the 'translator proper (Ubersetzer) who works in the fields of scholarship and art'. The more a work is dominated by the author's 'unique ways of seeing and making connections', he argued, the more it is 'ordered by free choice or personal experience', and the more artistic it will be. For the true translator, there are only two choices: to 'either (1) disturb the writer as little as possible and move the reader in his direction, or (2) disturb the reader as little as possible and move the writer in his direction' (Robinson 1997a: 228-9). Schleiermacher's preference was for the former, with all its consequences: 'If the target-language readers are to understand, they must grasp the spirit of the language native to the author, they must be able to gaze upon the author's inimitable patterns of thinking and meaning; but the only tools that the translator can offer them in pursuit of these goals are their own language, which nowhere quite corresponds to the author's, and his own person, his own inconsistently clear understanding of, and vacillating admiration for, the author.' To this end, he argued for the use of an intermediary language, which in following 'the contours of the original' will seem 'foreign' to the reader, by giving off 'an aura of impediment, of having been bent forcibly into the foreign semblance'. It will sound like 'some specific other thing, something definitely other' (Robinson 1997a: 232-3).

Jeremy Munday notes the statement of Kittel and Polterman that 'practically every modern translation theory - at least in the German-language area - responds, in one way or another, to Schleiermacher's hypotheses. There have been no fundamentally new approaches' (2001: 28). In support of this claim he cites the work of Walter Benjamin (1923), George Steiner (1998), Katharina Reiss (1989), and Lawrence Venuti (1995), all major theorists of translation during the twentieth century.

3. The Early and Middle Twentieth Century

Discussion in English of translation theory during the first half of the twentieth century continued to be dominated by the themes of Victorian discourse on translation, 'literalness, archaizing, pedantry and the production of a text of second-rate literary merit for an elite minority' (Bassnett-McGuire 1980: 73). In his list of major contributors to the area of translation theory, Steiner recognises only the names of Dryden, Quine and Pound among English-speakers. Quine and Pound both belong to the twentieth century and challenged the dominant discourse. Willard V. Quine (b. 1908), a major American philosopher, wrote on 'the indeterminacy of translation' within the field of linguistic philosophy (Quine 1960). Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was a poet and critic. Ronnie Apter has argued that Pound made three major innovations to thinking about 'the nature and intent of literary translation…he discarded the Victorian pseudo-archaic translation diction; he regarded each translation as a necessarily limited criticism of the original poem; and he regarded good translations as new poems in their own right' (Apter 1987: 3).

More radical, and more decisive, developments in translation theory took place in Europe. These begin with the Russian Formalist movement, which focused on the 'what makes literary texts different from other texts, what makes them new, creative, innovative' (Gentzler 1993: 79). One of their answers was that literary texts rely on a process of 'defamiliarisation', using language in new and strikingly different ways from ordinary speech. This led the Formalist to focus on 'surface structural features' and 'to analyse them to learn what determines literary status' (Gentzler 1993: 79). In so doing, they began the search for descriptive rules, which would help scholars understand the process of translation, and not normative rules, in order to study and assess the work of other translators (Bell 1991: 12). Their work was extended and refined by the Prague school of linguistics, founded by Roman Jakobson, who had earlier worked in Moscow. In his essay 'On the Linguistic Aspects of Translation' (1959), Jakobson expanded traditional discourse of 'equivalence' into the theme of 'equivalence in difference'. In so doing, he argued that words should be seen within their (arbitrary) semiotic context, and that

'the grammatical pattern of a language (as opposed to its lexical stock) determines those aspects of each experience that must be expressed in the given language' (Venuti 2000: 114).

After the Second World War, translation theory was profoundly influenced by Noam Chomsky's concepts of 'deep structure' and 'surface structure', and the first steps in machine translation. As Mary Snell-Hornby succinctly explains: 'In this view translation is a "recoding" or change of surface structure in representation of the - non-linguistic and ultimately universal - deep structure underlying it.' (Snell-Hornby 1988: 41). Chomsky's theories strongly influenced 'the science of translating' as understood during the 1960s by Eugene Nida and later, during the late 1970s by the German school of Ubersetzungswissenchaft, leading to the definition of translation studies as a branch of applied linguistics. As Snell-Hornby elsewhere explains, the German school 'at least in its early days, aimed at making the study of translation rigorously scientific and watertight, and, like linguistics, it adopted views and methods of the exact sciences, in particular mathematics and formal logic. Basically, translation was viewed as linguistic transcoding … or substitution, whereby Elements a1, a2, a3 of the inventory of linguistic signs L1 are replaced by Elements b1, b2, b3 of the inventory of linguistic signs L2.' Further: 'in this view, language is seen as a code relating to the system of universals, and the differing elements of two languages are linked by a common interlingual tertium comparationis by virtue of which they can be described as 'equivalent" (Snell-Hornby:1990: 80).

What Fawcett describes as 'the heroic age' of linguistically oriented translation studies extends from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s (Fawcett 1997: Foreword). Particular mention should be made of the work of Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet (1995); J.C. Catford (1965) and Katharina Reiss (1989). These extremely valuable studies focused on the word, phrase or sentence level.

4. Translation Studies

Three factors worked to limit this sharp focus on descriptive linguistics as the major form of discourse on translation. The first was the questioning of Chomsky's linguistic theories by linguists themselves. The second was the development of a number of new and dynamic fields within linguistics, such as 'discourse analysis, text linguistics, sociolinguistics, computational linguistics, prototype semantics, and other assorted wonders' (Pym 1992: 184). These 'wonders' took in prior fields such as British social anthropology and American cultural anthropology, as well as contemporary and parallel developments in philosophy, information and communication theories, computational linguistics, machine translation, artificial intelligence, and the ideas of socio-semiotics as developed within French

structuralist and post-structuralist thought (Nida 2001: 110). The sense increased that: 'Language is not the problem. Ideology and politics are…' (Lefevere 1990: 26). This has led to a separation between linguistic and cultural approaches to translation in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For some translation scholars, indeed, it has seemed that 'strictly linguistic theories have been superseded, [as] translation has come to be considered in its cultural, historical and sociological context' (Woodsworth 1998: 100).

And the third factor was the emergence of Translation Studies, 'the systematic study of translation...not as an intrinsic part of the foreign language teaching process, [but] for its own sake' (Bassnett-McGuire 1980: 1, slightly modified). The field of 'Translation Studies' was decisively defined by the American scholar, James Holmes, in his 1972 paper on 'The Name and Nature of Translation Studies'. There Holmes rejoiced that, 'After centuries of incidental and desultory attention from a scattering of authors, philologians [sic], and literary scholars, plus here and there a theologian or an idiosyncratic linguist', there has been a new and increasing interest in translation after the Second World War, 'particularly from the adjacent fields of linguistics, linguistic philosophy, and literary studies, but also from such seemingly more remote disciplines as information theory, logic and mathematics' (Venuti 2000: 173). Holmes divides Translation Studies into two major branches, 'Pure' and 'Applied', and then sub-divides the 'Pure' into two further sub-branches: 'Theoretical' and 'Descriptive' Translation Studies.

There is a certain brashness to Holmes's rejection of translation theory 'from Herodotus to Nietzsche', in favour of a new field of studies founded only in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, in the turning away from an obsession with 'equivalence' and in its development of a range of completely new concepts and theories, Translation Studies does mark a serious rupture with past discourse formations on translation. Here I wish to briefly note five areas which have led to broader approaches to translation beyond the static prescriptive models of the1960s: skopos theory, polysystem theory, descriptive translation theory, postcolonial theory and feminism.

A map of the crucial concepts which we have considered so far will be useful here:

Source (Sender) Translation Target (Receptor)
Author Translator Reader
Text 1 Translation (noun) Text 2
Language 1 Translate (verb) Language 2
Society 1 Types of Society 2
Culture 1 equivalence Culture 2

In the traditional period, the flow of theoretical discourse moves from the source to the target side of the diagram. German Romanticism begins on the target side, but seeks to reverse the flow of attention. In the modern period, attention is in equilibrium; both sides are given equal stress in comparative analysis.

Translation Studies returns the attention to the Receptor side of the diagram. Skopos theory begins by seeing translation as a purposeful 'action', which leads to 'a result, a new situation, and possibly to a 'new' object'. The aim of the translational action, and the way in which it is realised is not random, but must be 'negotiated with the client who commissions the action'. The source text is 'the basis for all the hierarchically ordered relevant factors which ultimately determine the translatum [the resulting translated text]', but, because the target text is oriented towards the target readership, 'it is this which ultimately defines its adequacy'. As Vermeer insists: 'It therefore follows that source and target texts may diverge from each other quite considerably not only in the formulation and distribution of the content but also as regards the goals which are set for each, and in terms of which the arrangement of the content is in fact determined' (Vermeer, 2000: 221-3).

Polysystem theory pays attention to the ways in which source texts are received by the target culture and its 'literary polysystem'. Even-Zohar emphasises: (a) 'the way source texts are selected by the target literature, the principles of selection never being uncorrelatable with the home co-systems of the target literature', and (b) 'the way in which [translated works] adopt specific norms, behaviours, and policies - in short, their use of the literary repertoire - which results from their relations with the other home co-systems' (Venuti 2000: 192-3). Gideon Toury's descriptive translation theory agrees with skopos theory in seeing 'translatorship' as fulfilling 'a function allotted by the community…in a way which is deemed appropriate.' But he extends Even-Zohar's discussion by his emphasis on norms, particularly the literary norms of the receiving literature. Toury describes norms as 'the general values or ideas shared by a community -as to what is right and wrong, adequate and inadequate', which are the basis for sanctioned 'performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations' (Toury 2000: 199).

Postcolonial (Niranjana 1992, Robinson 1997b, Bassnett and Trivedi 1999) and feminist (Levine 1991, Simon 1996) translation theories see the relationship between source and target not as a relationship of equals, but as one containing a basic quality of power. In both of these theories, the receptor (the coloniser, patriarchal society) claims the moral authority of domination over which texts are chosen and how they are to be translated. Translators who attack these ideological norms become, in various ways, 'subversive scribes' seeking to liberate and transform Others.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to identify the continuities, and breaks, present in the field of discourse known as translation theory. The twentieth century draws on, expands and sometimes contradicts, what has gone before it. The work of Translation Studies provides an important extension of this earlier work, but cannot be taken to completely supersede it. For Foucault, knowledge is not 'a progressive deductive structure...an enormous book that is gradually and continuously rewritten', but a field of objects, acceptable statements, themes and theories spread over time. The first duty of the scholar is to search for 'an order in their successive appearance, correlations in their simultaneity, assignable positions in a common space, a reciprocal functioning, linked and hierarchized transformations' (1977: 37). The difficulties of 'talking and keeping silent' are part of 'the misery and splendour' of translation and its theoretical discourse (Ortega y Gassett 2000: 54).

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