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The Importance of the History of Translation into the Theory of Translation

The translation process is a volcano incarnated. A translator's mind erupts to lay the richest of magma buried inside. The cooled lava on ground though different in shape but still retains the same essence. A layer after another composes the history of translation that when planted, becomes a rich soil for any cultivating axes that dig for search of treasures inside. The volcanic eruptions of the history of translation will always add new layers for persistent excavating quests for knowledge.

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The process of translating is almost as old as recorded history. It has been in the course of development along the years and has survived various wavering periods of revival and decline. The most thriving period in the life span of translation could be considered to be the twentieth century which has witnessed drastic growth and development in the sphere of translation, on both the theoretical and empirical sides. The most significant incident is probably the emergence of translation (or translation studies) as a discipline on its own right. By virtue of this development, there has been a growing and urgent need to record the history of translation. This paper will seek to shed some light on the role that history of translation can play in translation studies and show how it is incorporated for the

manifestation and application of theories of translation. It will attempt to clarify the reasons that led to the birth of the history of translation as a sub-discipline.

Until decades ago, translation studies were submerged under other disciplines such as literary criticism, applied linguistics, philosophy, etc. For centuries, the practice and theorization of translation have not entirely been carried out by translators per se, but rather by writers or scholars in other fields of knowledge interactive with translation such as linguists, philologians, literary scholars. There has not been **a** Theory of Translation. With the recent developments in the domain of translation, the situation called for extensive studies to reconstruct the science of translation as an independent discipline that has its own methods, approaches and theoretical framework to delineate the borders of this science. A considerable number of questions have arisen and scholars have worked laboriously to seek answers to them. The principal solution they could resort to was by launching profound studies into the history of Translation.

The need to write the history of translation

The history of translation treasures centuries of tradition. The literature on translation is very large and it is almost as old as the history of mankind. From a translation perspective, history has been divided into different stages according to idiosyncratic characteristics common in each period. Roughly, the history of translation begins with the ancient Greeks and Romans, with the two most significant Roman translators Cicero and Horace, who introduced the principle of word-for-word vs. sense-for-sense translation. In the 15th century, till the twenties century, many attempts were made to postulate and formulate theories in translation by a number of translators such as St. Jerome, the French

humanist Etienne Dolet (1509-46), Martin Luther (1483-1546) (Delisle 2001), but most of them were narrow-minded and dispersed. (Bassnett-McGuire1991:39).

Lefevere gives a date for the substantial change in translation theories around 1800 similar to Steiner who proposes 1791 as a date in which "all statements and theories stem directly from the practical work" (in Muschard 1996:13). Steiner sees it as a change from mere practice towards the development of a methodology, a pragmatic approach towards translation "in an epoch of rationality that had its impact on nearly all spheres of public life, including the assessment of history, education, society, music and literature"(*ibid*.:14). This shows that important changes within society went along with changes in matters of humanities. For Lefevere, the difference has been between "the constraint on translation and translating exercised by authorities".

In the 1970s, the focus was primarily "on literary concerns, rejecting theoretical presuppositions, normative rules and linguistic jargon" (Gentzler 1993:74). At the same time the term "Translation Studies" was in the process of evolvement. But the studies in the domain of translation were dispersed in a wide variety of scholarly fields.

The need to have a systematically recorded history of translation has mainly been recognized during the mid-twentieth century, particularly since the 1980s. This awareness can be sensed by the extensive bulk of studies on the subject and great attempts carried out by different scholars and institutions to construct a historiography of translation that has its own methods and models. Berman (1984:12) stressed that "La constitution d'une histoire de la traduction est la première tâche d'une théorie moderne de la traduction". D'hulst (1991:61) argues that "Il est temps de donner à l'histoire de notre discipline la place qui lui convient, et de la traiter comme une discipline-relais". José Lambert (in

Woodsworth 1999:101) argues that such work "stems from the need to legitimize a new discipline". One of the largest projects to write the history of translation was called for by the International Federation of Translators (FIT) during the 1990s. A committee was formed, chaired by Jean Delisle and vice-chaired by Judith Woodsworth, the end-product of which was a thematic review of the history of translation in a book titled *Translators through History* in 1996 in English and French. Another project is the Sachwörterbuch der Translationswissenschaft, an encyclopedic dictionary of translation studies (Woodsworth 1999:105). The most ambitious attempt in process is the *International Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* by Walter de Gruyter (*ibid*).

There have been old endeavors, such as Cassiodorus's (AD 480-524) and Boethius's (490-583) attempts to preserve classical history by translating the whole of Greek literature, philosophy and theology into Latin (Kelly 1988:18) and Samuel Johnson's attempt in 1754 to trace the history of translation from ancient Greece to seventeenth-century England, to illustrate the triumph of non-literal translation (Woodsworth 1999:100). However, these attempts are not basically translation-oriented and they motivated by the goal of serving other purposes in literature or theology. In modern history, Eugene Nida, according to Gentzler (1993:52) was still writing for missionaries, not translators when he wrote *Towards a Science of Translation* in 1964. Thus even "when he was moving in the direction of scientific analysis, the discussion of theological motivations remained overt". Contemporary efforts, on the other hand, attempt to pattern their configuration of the past in a more introspective structured and systematic way.

Types of history

It is necessary to draw the attention to the fact that there are two types of histories in relation to translation; history of both the practice and theory of translation. The first concerns the history of translated works (i.e. literature of the practice of translation) while the second refers to the history of theories of translation (i.e. literature -or discourse- on the development of theory of translation). Scholars have been interested in writing the literature of their disciplines mainly during the twentieth century. The history of the practice of translation addresses questions such as what has been translated, by whom, under what circumstances and in what social or political context (Woodsworth 1999:100). On the other hand, the history of the theory of translation deals with questions of the type: "what translators have to say about their art/craft/science; how translations have been evaluated at different periods, what kinds of recommendations translators have made, or how translation has been taught; and how this discourse is related to other discourses of the same period" (*ibid*.:101). Both trends can be investigated at once. In this case, it will deal with the two questions of how relevance of texts on the translation can be determined, and what relation exists between practice and reflection on translation (*ibid*.).

Historiography

Reference to historiography is made for two reasons. First, for any sphere of study to be considered as a science, it has to define its own systematic methodology. In the case of translation, historiography undertakes this task. Second, it could give insights into the nature of translation and exhibit the types of problems that are inherent in and

representative of translation as an activity. Historiography in general refers to the "art of writing history"(Delisle 2001). In relation to translation, it deals with "discourse upon historical data, organized and analysed along certain principles" (Woodsworth1999:101). D'hulst (1990: 57-58) explains that it is essential to lay the foundations for a historiography of translation. This should not be done in isolation, but with reference to current trends in historical theory and method. This entails developing historiology, i.e., methodology of writing. However, one of the major historiological concerns is how to structure the events of the past; is it according to the categories of geographical area or time, or following chronological conventions such as countries, reigns and dynasties. It is evident that the diversity of issues related to historiography is reflexive of the complexities involved in the translation process as there is indeterminacy as to the definition of translation and because "le système de production en historiographie de la traduction est complexe, morcelé, voire désordonné, car les sujets dignes de retenir l'attention des chercheurs sont d'une prodigieuse variété" (Delisle:1997:24). Hence, are both written and oral forms included? Would sub-disciplines as terminology and lexicology be included?

Why write the history of translation?

As can be seen, the importance of the history of translation stems from the autonomy of translation as a discipline. Being the case, it needs a well-defined corpus, upon which studies can be performed as the construction of any theory requires being based on a corpus. History of translation provides the necessary literature for the theorization of translation processes. Such literature will set the premises for any study. No study of

translation can be comprehensive without considering the historical side of it, particularly that translation is mainly a practical exercise. By compiling the discourse on the practice of translation, the relevant set of phenomena that represent problematic areas in translation can be detected. Similarly, compiling the discourse on the theory of translation, will furnish the means and principles of testing, refuting, modifying parameters in translation, and hence lay the grounds for the theory of translation. Reciprocally, the intertwining relations between the theoretical and practical branches of translation will pave the way for more refined studies to take place that in turn facilitates the understanding the various elements that interfere in the translational behaviour.

Theoretical issues in translation require the investigation of its history, because translators of previous ages must have faced similar problems and sought answers to their unresolved paradoxes as their contemporary and modern peers. It would be enlightening to learn about how previous translators managed to deal with such issues in light of the political, socio-cultural and economic conditions – such elements that interfere in the decisions made in relation to their choices of strategies, diction, stylistic features, etc. All these different elements pour into the major channel of "how to translate?"- the most fundamental question that is addressed by the theory of translation. Answers to this question must have been sought through history and reference to similar exemplifying cases will definitely enrich the translator's repertoire and competence to deal with difficult translational situations of the same nature.

One of the theoretical issues that are repeatedly brought up through time is the word-for-word translation as opposed to sense-for-sense translation. This issue has reoccurred through history in one way or another, and under different names as literal vs.

free translation. The two strategies of foreignizing vs domesticating translations (Venuti: 1995) roughly refer to the same concepts as faithful vs. unfaithful translations or Nida's two types of equivalence of formal vs. dynamic equivalence. However, they can not be described as being diachronic and rigid, as each term comes in relation to different variables within a distinctive context. So, the former expressions of foreignizing and domesticating translations are more translator-oriented in their contemporary usage while the others are more text-oriented as Nida's terms were mainly devised to describe the translation of the Bible. Other examples would be issues of authorship, fidelity, subjectivity, equivalence, (un)translatability, etc. By examining each concept within the bounds of genre, socio-cultural, political, authoritative and economic backgrounds, scholars will be able to define a set of elements that justify (or annul) the way a text is rendered. Comparing translations in the past and nowadays in terms of the purposes that give rise to them explains why a number of texts were retranslated. The same process is being subjected on strategies of translation. For instance, In the Greco-Roman period, Roman readers usually knew already the source text so that translating and the reading of translations could be rather as an exercise in comparative stylistics" (Muschard 1996:17). So, translations were not primarily read for information or mediation of the foreign text. In such provisions, emphasis is placed on form rather than content, as concern for the elevated and classical language was of a paramount priority.

The reference made to theoretical issues existing in history does not necessarily mean taking them for granted. Each era has its unique circumstances with different impacts on the way translation is perceived and handled. A good example would be the central issue of word-for-word (literal) or sense-for-sense translation. Van Vermeer

(1990:5-8) argues that Saint Jerome said that he followed Cicero in not translating "vebum e verbo", but "sensum de sensu"- with the exception of the Holy Scriptures. Vermeer discovers that St. Jerome does not abide by that strategy. However, that does not make him an imposter. Vermeer explains that "vebum e verbo" and "sensum de sensu" has been understood for centuries to mean literal vs. free translating on the sentence level, while it is taken by St. Jerome to refer to "translating morphem(at)ically" (*ibid*.:7). He justifies this by the argument that "we attribute a function for them". He adds that "documents are not just dead and dusty pieces of parchment and paper with dead meanings and intentions: they are just as much our communication partners today as anything else. And we try to make sense of them for our own time and situation"(*ibid*.). As Venuti (1995:18) explains "a foreign text is the site of many different semantic possibilities that are fixed only provisionally in any one translation, on the basis of varying cultural assumptions and interpretive choices, in specific social situations, in different historical periods". So what can be considered as a correct presumption at one period in history can be argued to be inappropriate in another. During the middle ages a number of the Bible translators such as John Wycliffe (1330-1384) and William Tyndale (1494-1536) were prosecuted for translating the Bible into the vernacular (Muschard:1996:18) By the end of the middle ages, Europe witnessed the "development of capitalism and the decline of feudalism" (Bassnett-MaGuire1991:39) and the vernacular had already begun to play a role not only in translation but in literature in general and translators would not be prosecuted for similar rendering (Muschard 1996:19).

The Translator

This previous account shows the liveliness of history and alludes to the developments taking place in the progress of translation, one of which is authorship. Translators have been given different positions throughout history. Where the translator stands in the process of translation has always been debated. There has been a period when translators could be prosecuted for producing renderings that are not approved by the authority, such as Etienne Dolet who "was executed for heresy after 'mistranslating' one of Plato's dialogues in such a way to imply disbelief in immortality" (Muschard 1996:19). Now, international institutions are playing vital roles in endowing translators with more prestige and honour than they used to receive in past periods, on the postulate that the translator is the key functioning element of the whole translational process. One of the issues related to authorship is whether the translator should be present or absent in the text. Who comes first, the author or the translator? For long centuries, the translator was invisible. Venuti (1995:17) argues that the translator should be "more visible so as to resist and change the conditions under which translation is theorized and practiced today". By effect, this will allow a theoretical basis to be presented " from which translations can be read as translations, as texts in their own right, permitting transparency to be demystified" (*ibid*.) Venuti (1995:19) describes two types of translation; the foreignizing and the domesticating methods which were introduced by Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1813. He argues that " Foreignizing translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations. As a theory and practice of translation, however, a foreignizing method is specific to certain European countries at

particular historical moments; formulated first in German culture during classical and romantic periods, revived recently in France in the form of poststructuralism" (*ibid*.:20-21). In contrast, Anglo-American culture has long been dominated by domesticating theories that recommend fluent translating. He argues further that foreignizing translation is highly desirable today, as a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of the world affairs. Venuti further calls for translation rights to be acknowledged similar to writing rights.

Inter-disciplinarity of translation process

The arbitrary involvement of translation into other disciplines has directly and indirectly led to the submersion of translation into other disciplines, so that it seen from other interdisciplinary perspectives. Translation by nature involves different elements such as genre, culture, subjectivity, etc., as texts encompass all types of genres. Literary, linguistic and philosophical analyses have become inadequate to account for and examine translation products from exclusively one perspective. Wilss (1999:132) describes the situation since the late 1980s as being "in a state of fluctuation, even in a phase of multidisciplinary turbulence" which has witnessed " a wide range of values, standards and concepts that tend to develop into endless controversies".

D'hulst (1990:58) states that "L'analyse historique des theories de la traduction est plus souvent dispersée dans des trauvaux de nature différente, comme des histoires qui traitent parallelement théorie et pratique". Toury (1995:2) further explains that the main reason for the underdevelopment of a descriptive branch within Translation Studies is the overriding orientation towards practical application. Being important as they are, the

immediate needs of particular applications of translation studies have often been taken as major constraints on the formation of the theory itself.

It has become necessary to subject works of translation to examination under a translational microscope as a master with the other disciplines as servants to the demands of translation, as "il n'est plus opportun de concevoir en vase clos le fonctionnement des theories, sujettes à des systèmes de valeurs auxquels elles empruntent des structures argmentatives et une dimension critiques destinée à examiner les recoupements et les divergences d'autres modèles avec les siens propres" (D'hulst 1990:57).

Wilss (1999:133) draws the picture of translation studies as the center of a hexagon with other disciplines around it such as linguistics, sociology, cultural studies, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, anthropology and computer science. He argues that "the hexagon is only a tentative step towards providing a general charter for future work in Translation Studies aiming at solving the enigma of the translator's mind and to establish the grounds for regarding translation as a human activity in its own right".

Pedagogical Implications

On the basis that the translator is the most significant element is the translational process, focus is shifted from the translated into the translator. So, there has been growing awareness towards the exigency of preparing professional translators. Too many efforts are exerted on the training of translators and many translation schools or institutions are established for this purpose. However, by reviewing the status quo, it appears that because of the inadequacy in the translation theory, "on s'est beaucoup moins attardé à la méthodologie des cours pratiques de traduction, les plus nombreux et plus spécifiques des

programmes de formation" (Delisle 1988:291). Students of translation need certain "maturité intellectuelle' and certain 'connaissance du monde'. Delisle argues that it is possible "de developer, jusqu'à un certain point, le savoir-faire nécessaire pour produire une traduction qui soit fonctionnellement acceptable" (*ibid*.:293). Therefore, there should be 'tendre vers une organisation plus méthodique de la formation pratique de traducteurs, sans pour autant tomber dans le dogmatisme' (*ibid*. :295). Students should be taught to recognise meta-textual elements that intervene in their choices of strategies. They can take past experiences as guidelines for their work.

By delineating a comprehensive record of the history of translation, scholars will be more capable of detecting the areas that have not been subject to thorough study. Thus, more work can be directed to such sub-domains. For instance, although scientific and technical translation is daily exercised worldwide, not many investigations have been addressed to this branch. Similarly, interpreting plays a crucial role in the history of international relations but has not received the thorough treatment it deserves. This could be justified by the short span life of these domains in comparison to literary translation which has been one of the earliest domains in translation, and which probably was the reason why translation has not been able to stand on its feet for a long time as models and norms of translation were framed according to the literary molds.

Descriptive and prescriptive functions of the history of translation

In general, I believe that the overall role that the history of translation can play is the provision of a corpus to act as a *descriptive* tool for scholars so that reference can be made to the models, norms and strategies made use of in past activities. Following this

stage of compiling history comes the *prescriptive* function of translation in which, after deriving those models from pre-existing ones, scholars can formulate their own paradigms and models. Holmes (1988:67) describes the situation as

> "as a new problem or set of problems comes into view in the world of learning, in some situations, the problem proves amenable to explicitation, analysis, explication, and at least partial solution within the bounds of one of the paradigms or models, and in that case it is annexed as a legitimate branch of an established field of study. In other situations the paradigms or models fail to produce sufficient results, and researchers become aware that new methods are needed to approach the problem".

Holmes explains that in the second case, the result is a tension between researchers investigating the new problem and colleagues in their former fields, and this tension can gradually lead to the establishment of new channels of communication and the development of what has been called a new disciplinary utopia" (*ibid.*).

Another service resulting from the efforts to write the history of translation is the bringing together of multi-national scholars of the world. Writing a multifarious and extensive history requires the international cooperation of a large number of scholars, Teamwork gives the opportunity to explore new ideas and probably reach a universal code of paradigms and parameters that could hopefully be the leading torch for future studies. Radó (1964:170) explains that:

> The materials for the history of translation will have to be sought out and ordered in many countries, from sources in a multitude of languages, and

to do this successfully the cooperation of a large group of researchers is needed. It is essential that the circle of contributors be as wide as possible, in order to include all those with specialized knowledge in one or more of the periods or aspects of the subject.

The science of translation had gone a long way in drawing the map of the history of translation, and had delineated the broad lines for a general theory of translation by assembling the fragmentary parameters and principles diagnosed so far. The history of translation delineates translation as a synchronic phenomenon that has just started to gain its identity. Recent developments have come to show how complex translation is as a process and as a discipline, from a methodological perspective, with the multiplicity of streams leading to and from other disciplines. The need to equip translators with the appropriate means to function as true international liaisons still needs further collaborative efforts, particularly that we live under the shadows of globalization. We hope that such efforts will enable scholars to have deeper insights into the future of translation, so as to meet the future requirements of the profession of translation.

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