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BASIC PRINCIPLES AND ORGANIZED RESEARCH OF THE HISTORY, THEORY AND HISTORY OF THEORY OF TRANSLATION

The motto of the present Jubilee Congress of the International Federation of Translators suggests a very practical approach to the questions which interest the translator: “Translators and Their Position in Society”. Whether at an international meeting with such a practical device, history and theory are not out of place?

At the end of my present paper I shall refer to one old sentence, “*Historia est magistra vitae*”, but now, for the beginning, let me expose the following consideration. Without literary translation Shakespeare never would have crossed the frontier of the English language area.

Without scientific technical translation the achievements of civilization would remain scattered and no organized research would exist.

Without interpretation no exchange and conciliation of views would ever have taken place, no peace negotiation could have been conducted, hopeless hostility would reign over the world.

That is why the history of translation is an inseparable part of world history, an indispensable factor of human culture. And therefore the historical and theoretical view of translation has also to belong to the picture of the position of translators in society. Without this historical and theoretical view this picture would be incomplete.

Having stated this fact, our minimal task is to outline the gradual degrees how research in the field of the history of translation has to go on.

Since a mass of preparatory studies has already been published, the systematical work has to begin with the collection of facts already available and to lead to the final synthesis, as follows:

- i. compilation of bibliographies
- ii. edition of historical chrestomaties
- iii. compilation of the history of translation on a national level
- iv. studies in comparative history of translation
- v. the World History of Translation.

Now, let us throw a critical glimpse on the situation at present.

Surveys of the history of translation into one or other language are issued in several countries. Sometimes the outlook on history was broader, for instance, Givi Gachechiladze gave in his books, besides the national history of translation into his native Georgian, also a short history of translation into Russian.

Attempts to compile a general history of translation were also made, but they did not surpass closed geographical areas; Henri van Hoof published in the review of our Belgian society a history of translation in Western Europe, etc.; but as far as I know, no attempt was made, up to now, to compile a comprehensive work which would include the history of translation in Europe as well as in the Near, the Middle and the Far East and into all the languages of the Soviet Union.

However, the historical links of translation in different languages areas do exist. Let me quote two examples from my own research. The first Spanish translations from the poetry of the Hungarian classic, Sandór Petőfi were made from French, thanks to the fame of François Coppée who was one of Petőfi's French interpreters. To the Far East, Petőfi reached through Esperanto thanks to the fact that the prominent Chinese poet, Lu Hsün was an enthusiast Esperantist.

Let us not waste more time with examples, the fact is that a general history of translation which would be an important part of the general history of cultural contacts between the nations of the world, still remains to be seen.

On the other hand, theory of translation is a flourishing field of research. Every year more and more works, articles and voluminous books appear in this field almost all over the world: very different approaches to the subject. Although these works include sometimes long bibliographies of the literature relevant to the subject, they begin, almost all, to build up their own, separate theoretical system. In this tide of works, on the whole average, two trends can be distinguished.

The first one is that of the linguists. Basically, this trend can be characterized with the words of professor Danica Seleskovitch in her preface to the book of Marianne Lederer "La traduction simultanée, fondements théoriques": 'L'essor des linguistiques structurale et générative des dernières décennies a centré l'attention sur le fonctionnement des signes, écartant l'étude des phénomènes cognitifs qui, s'ils ne sont pas quantifiables, font néanmoins

parties du langage et peuvent être observés expérimentalement et expliqués théoriquement.” To this criticism we have to add, that in the last time a part of the linguistic schools, especially those of, as called in German “Textlinguistik”, try to include in research those “non-quantifiable” phenomena too.

The other general trend in theory of translation is that of translators themselves who expose the results of their own practical experiences. To this category belong the volumes of the Russian series “Masterstvo perevoda”; lately in my country has appeared an anthology of opinions of contemporaneous Hungarian literary translators concerning their craft and art.

Both trends—that of the linguists and that of the translators – enrich their common discipline, the theory of translation, with precious contributions, but both of them have, generally, their own weakness too.

Generally, with very few exception, linguists while building up their own system, work out their own, personal terminology, used, then, by their disciples too. Our lamented friend and colleague who was to be in the chair of this workshop, Professor Anton Popović, has supplied his book on the theory of literary translation published in Slovak language and its English version issued in Edmonton, Canada, with a vocabulary explaining his scientific terms. This terminology was then used by the so-called Slovak school of translation theory. Another special terminology is used by the Heidelberg school of translation theory, and so on. These separate terminologies do not promote mutual comprehension.

The other trend, that of the translators, has also its weakness. This concerns mostly literary translators, a part of which do not believe in the reality of their craft and art. They say that literary, especially poetic, translation is a beautiful but hopeless struggle with the different ways of expression of the different languages.

I think, it would be profitable for representatives of both trends if they knew better each other, each others achievements.

And now, let us see the history of the theory of translation.

Some retrospective collections were issued in this field, containing texts of basic importance. “Das Problem des Übersetzens” compiled by Hans Joachim Störig contains studies from Hieronymus and Luther to Ortega y Gasset and Gadamer. The collection compiled by Levin and Fyodorov, “Russkie pisateli o perevode” gives a variety of comprehensive studies and short aphorisms, mostly critical remarks from the last three

hundred years.

These and similar collections make us familiar – with some works on the theory of translation, important items of the past and present – without any synthetization, and while Störig tried to collect texts from several countries, Levin-Fyodorov remained within national bounds.

Attempts were also made to compile commented syntheses of the history of theory of translation. Georges Mounin whose work was published first in Italian, “Teoria e storia della traduzione” extended his basically Western horizon on Soviet theoretical research too. George Steiner’s capital work “After Babel” devotes a richly documented chapter to the history of translation theory: “The Claims of Theory” but he also does not surpass the boundaries of European culture.

Like a general history of translation itself, also the worldwide, general, comparative and systematic history of translation theory is still missing. Both can be compiled only with a broad, organized international co-operation. Especially European and American research should be brought into harmony with research in the field of non-European cultural areas. This is a *conditio sine qua non* if we want that the quantitative–but only quantitative!–development of these historical researches turn into a qualitative development. And I think, that the International Federation of Translators is the proper forum to organize this international co-operation.

In conclusion, let me put the question: Whether the promotion of history, theory and history of theory of translation is not a merely esoteric, impractical occupation? That is: Can it promote the cause of translation? Can it influence the translator’s position in society?

My answer is, instead of reiterated assertion, an old, classic wisdom, proved by many centuries: ‘Historia est magistra vitae’, History is the teacher of life.

Of life, of practice, of progress.

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