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Compte rendu

Kelly, Louis G. 1979. *The True Interpreter: A History of Translation Theory and Practice in the West.* New York: St. Martin's Press. 282 p.

In this volume, Kelly, in the guise of a history of translation theory and practice in the West, proposes a creative, compelling alternative to current linguistic theories of translation. Kelly proposes that it is the translator's purpose in translating a given text, not the text's subject matter or differences between the source and target languages, which is the key factor influencing his translation decisions. Kelly argues that incorporating this element into translation theory brings together the insights of both major groups of translation theorists–linguists and humanists–and better accounts for the breadth in subject matter and methodology found in translations throughout Western history.

Chapter 1 is an overview of the history of theories of language with attention to their contribution to the theory of translation. Kelly divides theories of language into two broad groups. The first group consists of those who view language as an arbitrary instrument whose "essence can be described by relating observed behavior to scientific models" (p. 7). Linguistic theories from Saussure to the present are all brought together under this broad heading. Kelly suggests that the basic contribution of linguistic theories of language to translation theory is to provide a means of analyzing the semantic, functional, and effective equivalence of expressions from different languages. The second group, somewhat opposed to the first, consists of the theorists who view language as *logos*, that is, as a creative, dynamic force in human history and interaction. This group includes the contributions of the German Romantics, such as Humboldt and Heidegger, and their intellectual descendents. While rejecting some of the ideas of this group of theories as too mystical to be of practical use to a translator, Kelly finds in the social hermeneutics of Martin Buber and Gerhard Ebeling a significant contribution to the theory of translation. These two theorists affirm that language is essentially the "tool and environment of human interaction" (p. 31). It is this appreciation for the interactional, I-Thou essence of language that Kelly sees as important to the theory of

translation.

Each view of language engenders its own model of translation theory. The instrumental, linguistic view has spawned translation theories that are essentially descriptions of translation methodology. On the other hand, the hermeneutic, humanist view of language has given rise to models of translation as literary creation, as a complex human interaction between translator and original author as the former struggles to fully translate the beauty and intention of the latter's text. In chapter 2 Kelly recounts the history and development of both types of translation theory and concludes that neither type is adequate in itself–"It is only by balancing the means of translation against its end that one can arrive at a comprehensive theory of translation" (p. 66).

Chapter 3 presents the book's major theoretical contribution to translation theory. Kelly suggests that the practice of translation is best understood with reference to the purpose for which a text is translated. It is the intended function of the translation which is the critical element influencing a translator's decisions on how to render his source text in the target language. Kelly divides the possible functions of translations into three broad categories, based on Karl Buhler's three functions of language. The first function possible for a translation is the communication of information in the target language, termed the *symbol* function. Kelly documents that, throughout the history of translation theory and practice in Europe, translations whose sole function is the transfer of information from one language to another have generally been painstakingly literal in their renderings. This preoccupation with reproducing the literal form of the source language text stems, according to Kelly, from the translator's purpose for translating. His commitment to the translation is purely intellectual–he allows himself no room for creative expression, for his goal is only to reproduce in his translation exactly the same information contained in the original.

The second possible function of translation, *symptom,* involves not only communication of information but also the self-expression and self-fulfillment of the translator. The translator whose purpose is symptom seeks to develop a friendship with the author of the source text, and to share the joys and realities of that friendship with

others, that is, his potential readers, through his translation of the source text. Thus, in a symptom translation, the translator's commitment in translating is not merely intellectual but also personal. His commitment of friendship extends both to the author of the source text, to aptly express the original message in all its nuance and beauty, and to the readers of the translation, to produce a target language text that is understandable and pleasing. Kelly exemplifies this purpose from translations in every period of European history. Symptom translation is shown to contain great dangers of mistranslation, if the translator expresses himself at the expense of the author, but also to yield the rich rewards of great translated literature.

Signal, the third function of translation, refers to persuasion and manipulation as the purpose of translating. In a signal translation, the translator consciously attempts to persuade or influence his reader through his translation. A translator whose purpose is signal may be sincere and well-meaning, as Kelly shows in excerpts from translated religious literature of the Middle Ages and the Reformation, but his translation is likely to do injustice to the original text. In documenting the occurrence of signal translation in Western history, Kelly concludes, "Signal demands departure from literality, and sometimes changes in matter and emphasis. At its crudest, this function depends on twisting the message" (p. 99).

The remainder of the book expands on the basic theoretical claims of chapter 3 and traces their various applications in Western history. Chapter 4 demonstrates, through historical example, that a translator's preparations to translate–establishing the text to be translated, seeking to understand the text, deciding the units to be translated, and the use of background information–all depend to some degree on the translator's reason for translating. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, Kelly shows that the translator's choices between various dynamic and literal renderings of lexical items, sentence and thematic structures, rhetorical style, and poetic form all depend not so much on the subject matter or differences between the target and source languages as on the translator's purpose in translating. Chapter 8 is a history of the perceptions of fidelity in translation in the West.

Finally, Chapter 9, entitled "Theory of Translation," summarizes the basic themes

which Kelly has developed throughout the entire book: first, neither the linguists nor the humanists have as yet developed an adequate theory of translation, and each group has suffered from its isolation from the other; second, in terms of translation methodology, there is nothing new under the sun–the basic strategies used in translating have been established and documented since the first century; and third, it is only by recognizing a typology of function or purpose in language and translation that a theory of translation can do justice to the breadth of translation practice in the West. The book closes with a 12 page appendix, containing short texts in various Indo-European languages with references to published translations of those texts, a 21 page bibliography, and a 7 page index of subject matter and names.

The weaknesses of this book are few but nagging. The bibliography is divided into two sections, "Discussions of theory and practice" and "Secondary sources," but since discussions of translation theory appear in both sections, the distinction seems of questionable value. Further, certain works repeatedly referred to in the book do not appear in the bibliography at all. These omissions are especially glaring in the case of Gerhard Ebeling's *Introduction to a Theological Iheory of Language* and Karl Buhler's work on the functions of language. The extensive quotation of French, German, Classical Greek, and Latin texts makes the book formidable reading--a reader not fluent in these languages will find it difficult to benefit from the otherwise admirable abundance of examples.

Leaving aside the relatively minor considerations above, the most troubling weakness of Kelly's book is its preoccupation with translation between various Indo-European languages, particularly the Classical, Germanic, and Romance languages, to the neglect of problems encountered when translating between Indo-European and non-Indo-European language. Such problems have been faced by Western translators since the age of European colonialism and thus certainly deserved some attention in Kelly's book. The inclusion of examples from translations between Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages might have led Kelly to moderate his claim that it is the translator's purpose in translating, rather than differences between source and target

languages, which is the primary factor influencing his rendering of a source language expression. The languages are legion which contain no structural equivalent of the English passive, or which have no means of nominalizing semantic events, as in the English words *crime* and *punishment.* In such cases it is precisely the differences between the source language (English, for example) and the target language (say, a Papuan language of New Guinea) which require considerable structural and lexical adjustment in translation, regardless of the translator's purpose in translating.

In spite of its deficiencies, Kelly's work constitutes a significant contribution to the literature on translation theory. Kelly's suggestion that one's purpose in translating is the major factor influencing translation decisions is insightful and (notwithstanding the comment above) well-documented. It is also a refreshingly new proposal in a field of linguistic endeavor which, theoretically, has scarcely moved beyond Nida's twenty year old discussions of dynamic equivalence in translation.

Source : *Notes on Translation,* Vol. 1, No. 109, 1985, p. 33-36.