

INTRODUCTION TO THE Theory of Translation

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The twentieth century could be once more considered as the 'age of translation'. The huge quantity of books and works in all fields of knowledge translated in different languages along with the increasing importance of the daily role played by translation in the modern world communication suggest this claim.

Since the foundation in 1953 of F.I.T. (Federation Internationale des Traducteurs) interest in translation, as a discipline to be studied and investigated, has developed rapidly. Series of studies on various aspects of translation, ranging from the linguistic to the aesthetic and humanistic were published.

Prior to the twentieth century, translation difficulties were described by translation theorists (Cicero, St Jerome, Dryden, Dolet) as being mainly stylistic and aesthetic.

Generally, the main issue was whether Translation should be "literal" or "free".

The interest in translation, in the twentieth century, ranges from the practical concerns of professional translators to the theoretical speculations of linguists seeking to understand the intricacies of translation. It is interesting to know that although professional translators have set some rules and techniques for the process of translation, and presented some personal views on

different aspects of their activity, they have produced no theory of translation. Linguists, on the other hand, used translation to shed some light on certain linguistic issues such as bilingualism, foreign language teaching, or as a criterion in the comparison of the patterns of two languages.

Nevertheless, it may be said with some confidence that translation theory as a discipline was initiated in the middle of the sixties by Nida, Catford, Mounin, etc. They attempted to apply certain linguistic theories to translation and shed some light on its process. In the seventies, translation theory advanced considerably thanks to numerous contributions and new achievements in language-related theories, particularly semantics, text-linguistics, communication theory, psycho- and socio-linguistics which provided a new stimulus to the systematic study of the process of translation.

Since 1950's, linguists began to consider translation as a scientific task using the rigorous tools available to linguistics. Many 'theories' of translation have been constructed on the basis of theories of language (see lefevre 1970a). Linguists believed that translation difficulties are mainly linguistic in a narrow sense rather than semantic or aesthetic. Hence, translation occupies a central position in linguistics, for it entails some fundamental issues the science of language has to tackle.

However, as early as 1935, J. R. Firth put translation in the domain of semantics. In his seminal paper "the Technique of Semantics" he suggests that 'the whole problem of translation is in the field of semantics'. For him, there was phonetic meaning, phonological meaning, lexical meaning and situational meaning and all were involved in the process of translation (see Gregory 1980, 455).

Generally, translation has been considered by linguists as a topic to be studied with the means of contrastive linguistics, that is, linguists have tended to give preference to an approach to translation based on the comparison of linguistic structures to assess their potential use as translation equivalents (see Pregnier 1978).

By considering language as a system and social institution, De Saussure (1949, chapter III, 2) stresses the importance of linguistic communication as a social phenomenon and consequently puts translation within the sociolinguistic perspective. Thus, the translator should take into account the fact that linguistic communication occurs usually as an exchange and an interaction between individuals belonging to a certain group. When this exchange goes beyond the group, the linguistic differences and most importantly the socio-cultural differences should be taken into consideration. Accordingly, word-for-word translation for De Saussure cannot function satisfactorily as words in one language do not have the same 'conceptual surface' in another language. Sharing the same views as de Saussure, Bloomfield studied language in its context and stated that any communication process occurs in a complex social and cultural context (see Dussart 1977).

However, while some linguists insist on the role of language in the apperception of the world and highlight the differences existing between languages, others - such as Greenberg and Chomsky- (see: Comrie, 1981) look for 'language universals', that is, features or properties shared by all languages. Language universals may throw some light on the possibility of translating from one language to another if we assume that similarities do exist between languages. In contrast, it is suggested that each language makes its own distinctions differently, since according to Humboldt, languages do not reflect the same experience of the world in a similar way (see: Mounin, 1963, chap. IV).

Language, for Humboldt, is a reflection of extra-linguistic realities which are characteristic of the speech community involved. In other words, languages are not 'universal copies' of universal realities.

Fedorov (1953), on the other hand, incorporated the study of translation in the general framework of linguistics and insisted that translation is a purely linguistic operation. He considered translation theory as "deriving from observation and providing

the basis for practice" (see: Newmark 1982, 9). Contrary to Humboldt, he believes that all experiences are translatable.

Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), although sharing some of the views with Fedorov, acknowledge that translation is an independent discipline which has its own peculiar techniques and problems. Nonetheless, it can be studied with the methods of contemporary linguistics. In addition to applying de Bally's linguistic theories to translation through '*stylistique comparée*', their biggest contribution to translation theory is the notion of situational equivalence. This notion suggests that, for each SL situation a similar TL situation should be sought.

Mounin (1963) discussing translation theories and their relation to semantics, suggests that for each language corresponds a particular organization of experience. According to this notion, language is a reflection of culture, and since each culture has its own organization and characteristics, similarly each language has its own organization. Consequently, the experience formulated by one Language cannot occur with the same form in another Language (see: Mounin 1963, 44-45). Thus for Mounin, the experience formulated by a source language text can be rendered in the TL by analysing the characteristics of the situation expressed by the message.

Different Languages do express, with different Linguistic structures, the same physical event; but as Humboldt sees it, they do not reflect the same experience of the event similarly. Mounin considered translation as point of contact between Languages and believed that Linguistics may throw some light on the process of translation itself which constitutes a theoretical problem for Linguists. However, he stresses that, to a certain extent, it is not possible to include all aspects of translation in an exhaustive definition which depends exclusively on Linguistics.

Mounin supports Cary's claim (1958) that translation is a *sui-generis* operation, and therefore should be studied as such in all its aspects. As a literary translator himself, Cary believes that literary translation is primarily a literary operation and not a

linguistic one. His argument is that the linguistic content constitutes only the basic tool for the process of translation. It is the context and the relations between two cultures which characterize translation. Hence, for Cary, translation should be studied separately from other disciplines.

Literary translation is indeed a literary endeavour, but linguistic knowledge or analysis is necessary for the understanding of a source language text. Some translations, on the other hand, cannot be solely the result of a linguistic process. A translation of a theatrical play cannot be the result of a purely linguistic analysis but mainly a product of a dramatic activity.

To the literary critic who concerns himself with the aesthetic and creative aspect of language, translation may be regarded as an art which has nothing to do with linguistics. Hence, some literary translators, were - and still are - against the idea of considering translation as a linguistic discipline. Translation considered as an 'artistic' operation, eliminates any scientific aspect of the process which will enable it to be included in the general framework of linguistics.

On the other hand, some linguists such as Pinchuck (1977, 17) believe that 'linguistics, undoubtedly, has most to give and translation as a discipline should be regarded as a branch of applied linguistics'. Linguists, as well as some translators, defend the idea that translation is fundamentally a linguistic process. Linguistic knowledge, they argue, is essential to understand the source language text, and therefore to reconstruct it in the target language. Since linguistics is a 'science' the subject of which is to study how human communication system functions and since translation is an exercise on a text which is part of the communication system, linguistics, therefore, may provide the translator with the necessary tools and techniques to analyse and understand how two languages function and also may enable him to perform an adequate transfer of a source language message into the target language.

The notion that translation is based on linguistics, in a narrow sense, stems from the idea that a text is a sum of signs and structures that have to be analysed, decoded and understood by the translator. However, translation does not operate mainly on linguistic structures but on messages. Hence, any model of translation should take account of discovering the concepts and situations the words or linguistic structures represent rather than transposing word-for-word or structure-by-structure. Each structure and each utterance may have several possible meanings. Consequently, a knowledge of the situation and of the writer/reader relationship is necessary to be sure of the intended meaning.

Translation does involve an operation on the linguistic elements of the text, i.e. a linguistic analysis, before involving the meaning. But most importantly it deals with meaning and the process is carried out within the domain of meaning. This necessitates a semantic analysis of SL text. Moreover, one aspect in translation is related to the difficulty of translating connotations (see for this instance Nida 1969, Mounin 1963). Connotations do, indeed, constitute obstacles to the transfer of one civilization to another, from one language to another, and even to the transfer of a message from one person to another within the same culture and language (see Mounin 1963, 8). As usually stated, what a sign indicates corresponds to what it denotes, but what it expresses does not correspond automatically to what it connotes. Accordingly, a pragmatic analysis is necessary if we want to understand the SL text fully.

The three types of analyses linguistic, semantic and pragmatic, mentioned, interact with each other to solve certain translation difficulties related to meaning. These difficulties originate partly from the non-existence of direct equivalence between languages, because even if the lexical units seemed to be similar, their semantic fields or pragmatic interpretations are different. Textual equivalence is almost never produced by the formal correspondence either word-for-word or structure-for-structure.

However, the SL and the TL items, as Catford (1969, 49) puts it, "rarely have the same meaning in the linguistic sense, but they can function in the same situation".

Nevertheless, it is sometimes argued that translation difficulties are mainly the result of the differences between SL and TL cultures. Languages, as we suggested before, are not universal copies of a universal reality, but each corresponds to a particular organization of the human experience (cf Mounin 1976,61). Translation difficulties are the reflection of cultural differences materialized by the differences of two linguistic systems.

However, in many cases, the translator may be faced with problems raised mainly by differences in the systematic structures of the two languages. These problems and difficulties are, as Popovic (1970, 75) sees them, unavoidable but "cannot be considered significant as they are the result of disparity and asymmetry in the development of the two linguistic traditions". Nonetheless, we should not neglect any aspect of the differences existing between languages since any attempt to consider them 'not significant' may affect the accuracy of translation.

Accuracy, here, is not used in a strictly formal sense, but is related to meaning. Accuracy may be judged according to the extent to which the response of the TL reader is equivalent to the response of the SL reader (see Nida 1964, 88) provided that the message or the meaning in SLT and TLT is similar despite the linguistic and cultural differences.

Indeed, linguistic problems are often compounded by sharp cultural differences between the people associated with languages dealt with in translation. Often, the difficulties emerge because 'things' to be translated from one language do not exist in corresponding culture of the other language. Hence, cultural differences pose greater difficulties for translation than linguistic differences do.

Some expressions are difficult, if not impossible, to translate because they come out from the life and environment of people within specific cultures. For instance, an Arab hearing good news may use the expression/ *athlaja qalbi*/ (lit. he snowed my heart) to express his satisfaction with the good news. The use of (snow) in the arabic expression may be explained by the fact that for an Arab who lives in a hot environment anything that is cool is desired. However, for a French to express the same emotion, he may use the expression "ça m'a réchauffé le cœur" (lit. it warmed my heart). Thus different environment may impose the use of different linguistic means to express the same experience.

Meaning, we assume, is the basic link between culture and language. The latter is not only a set of verbal and syntactic forms, but also a system of ideas and thoughts peculiar to it. Culture and language are closely interrelated. It is through language that culture is mainly expressed, whereas we may metaphorically say, culture enriches and nourishes the language that carries it. Consequently, the absence of cultural background knowledge of a text may restrict the possibility of an adequate translation. As is held by Cary (1958), the linguistic context constitutes the primary material of the translation process. It is the complex context of the relation between two cultures, two thoughts which characterizes translation.

Earlier and more modern views and theories in general, if taken as a whole, consider translation as an interdisciplinary topic which draws upon such fields as linguistics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, etc. This stems from the notion stressed many times by translation theorists that translation embodies linguistic as well as extralinguistic factors which influence the process of translation. Translation, therefore, should be viewed as an all embracing and multi-dimensional process.

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