

On the direction of Translation Studies

Susan Bassnett and Anthony Pym in dialogue

[Enter Anthony]

I imagine I'm at one of those interminably repetitive translation conferences where the talk is all about the threat of global English and how much the world needs translations – since we all love languages, we all want more of them, more work on them, thus more translations. I am drifting to the back, a little forlorn, silently hiding disheveled and perplexed dissent, when I spy Susan, who has just come in. Time for a quiet word or two, with someone who really cares about translation (more than I do) and who especially cares about literature (again, more than I), someone whose opinion is always worth having, along with a little gossip. So I look around for the biggest available glasses of acceptable wine, offer her one, and whisper in mock horror, “Susan, they're all crazy! Translation can't save the world... How can they all be so sure? These guys are living in denial, aren't they?”

By which I mean, I guess, that conceptual monsters are produced when you just look at *lingua franca* and translations, black and white, as if they were somehow bad vs. good, unrelated and exclusive of all other communication solutions. By which I refer to denial of the many ways that solutions *other* than translation can solve interlingual communication problems. I speak from my occasional attempts to look at things other than translation, especially recently. (True, I only get invited to translation conferences, thus finding myself boxed in by age, yet I have been working with language-policy people in recent years, who similarly seem to be living in denial of English as a *lingua franca*, so I am boxed in even further.) “Susan, can you help me get out of here, please? Beam me up...”

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Susan finished her first glass of wine and held it out for a refill. “I too am sick of translation conferences where everybody says the same thing and they all talk to one another in their own arcane language,” she said, adding that with hindsight, she wishes she had not preached the gospel of translation quite as assiduously, in the years when she was trying to build Translation Studies. The field has become a sort of monstrous thing, like the man-eating plant in *Little Shop of Horrors*, but has had little impact anywhere outside its own domain.

Part of the problem, she continued, is that Translation Studies has grown exponentially around world, and in the UK this has been as a way of repackaging language teaching under a trendy new catch-all title. What we have today are hundreds of programmes called Translation Studies but no two are the same and the term covers a multitude of different interpretations of what Translation Studies means. In some cases, the programmes are more oriented to practice, hence effectively translator training, while in other cases they are abstract and mainly focus on literary translation and literary history. Then there are the technology programmes, where everybody is doing something with eye-tracking and petitioning for expensive equipment from impoverished universities who are spending all their cash on self-promotion.

What is clear though is that the socio-political and economic changes of the last three decades have led to an increased awareness of translation, or rather of the gaps that occur in communication without translation. We can send messages across the world in seconds but, as Michael Cronin (2017) points out, if those messages are not translated into a language that the recipients can understand, then the sending is pointless. But quite how we teach translation and to whom is not clear to me at all, despite the proliferation of programmes.

What I would like to see is translation being taught in programmes across the board, integrated into studies of all kinds, including Medicine, Law, Business, the sciences, and not just within the Humanities or as an add-on to foreign language learning. And I would like to see people who consider themselves Translation Studies experts explaining to the rest of the world exactly what they think their subject is.

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Anthony looked out the window and pondered silently: Will we wear our trousers rolled? Each generation complains about the next, of begetting monsters. No, we are not out of action yet, surely? Still work to be done!

The monster of the corporate university, indeed: they take the money of international students, promising to make them translators and interpreters, and simply not delivering. Ester Torres and Anthony had crunched some numbers from the programs in the European Masters in Translation (EMT), showing that in the UK the percentage of obligatory language-pair translation courses is regularly below 20 percent – the rest is for theory, research, and translation “in general”, with all languages in the same classroom to make more money. The EMT seemed suitably outraged by analysis, which they saw as some kind of treason to the cause, but how many of them would like to be translated by graduates of those programs?

That's what Anthony was thinking, but he didn't say it out loud. You see, he too was now caught up in the same game, developing a course called "Language Translation" (to distinguish it from the medical kind) to be offered to any undergraduate interested, no matter what the language. Yes, the idea is to give people ideas about what translation is, how fascinating it can be, and particularly how to work with online translation technologies (since they're all doing it anyway), and to take those things well beyond any discipline called Translation Studies. Anthony used to make fun of such courses, which he saw as a sad indication of how bad Americans were at languages. Didn't Venuti (1998: 105) propose that Comparative Literature students study translation theory instead of trying to learn a second foreign language? Anyway, now even Anthony is trying to explain translation beyond the coteries of Translation Studies. Anything is better than ignorance.

Which brings up images of the North American Comparative Literature machine, with subsidiary branches elsewhere. Anthony silently recalled some creepy Chinese Professor of English and Comparative Literature, apparent best mate of any big name in the game, saying: "Translation theory is very weak, and this is why the rightful home of translation is Comparative Literature, where theory is strong." Hello? Or Emily Apter, bravely writing off European translation studies as merely being concerned with "accuracy". Whatever. And now Edwin Gentzler has "post-Translation Studies", which looks a whole lot like (good) Comparative Literature.

Susan, he whispered with yet another look of perplexity, years ago you proposed that Comparative Literature was a subsidiary of Translation Studies, didn't you? Was it merely to provoke? In any case, it seems not to have worked. Some of these people are just saying whatever they like, about whatever they like, since translation is everywhere and they know about everything, apparently, so they use the word "translation" to mean all things. Here is Apter: "Cast as an act of love, and as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history" (2006: 6). Sounds really cool. But language learning also does that, doesn't it? As do a whole lot of other things. Or Sakai, who is an intelligent thinker dealing with important problems: "This occasion of making sense out of nonsense, of doing something socially – acting toward foreigners, soliciting their response, seeking their confirmation, and so forth – is generally called translation" (2010: 32). Really? It might also be called language learning, intercomprehension, use of pidgin or creole, translanguaging, and a lot more. Surely, Susan, to get back to my first point, surely we are losing the common object we were talking about?

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Indeed, Susan did say that Translation Studies ought to be the broad umbrella under which Comp. Lit could sit (1993: 161), but that was back in the 1990s and was a deliberate attempt to a) provoke the then moribund field of Comp. Lit. and b) to encourage the still marginal field of Translation Studies. What has happened since then is that Comp. Lit. has revived, largely through appropriating ideas from Translation Studies about the ways in which texts circulate and the various agencies involved in that process. With hindsight, Andre Lefevere's (oddly titled) book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* which came out in 1992 contained all kinds of suggestions that Comp. Lit. has taken up, including rethinking the importance of economic factors in the movement of texts, recognising the role played by anthologies, editing, criticism and reviews, all seen as forms of 'rewriting' along with translation. The re-publication of that book in 2017, with a preparatory essay by Scott Williams, shows just how prescient Lefevere's ideas were. However, the debt Comp. Lit. owes to Lefevere and other scholars who worked across the board in literary, linguistic and historical studies is rarely if ever acknowledged.

What I see today is a widening gap between what is termed 'Comp. Lit' and what is termed 'Translation Studies'. Somewhere in the gap is the whole vexed issue of language which has never been resolved. Once upon a time, you had to be competent in three or more languages to be admitted onto postgraduate programmes in Comp. Lit, but that has long since ceased to be the case. I increasingly encounter postgraduate students not only of Comp. Lit but also of Translation Studies who have minimal acquaintance with any language other than their own, and the result is poor quality essays and feeble translations. Yet who is going to push for linguistic competence if that means turning away fatted calves who will swell the universities' coffers with the high fees they pay?

I don't see how we can separate the problems of Translation Studies as a so-called discipline from the pressures of the new corporate university systems, because they are connected. The proliferation of programmes defined as Translation Studies is surely connected to the need to bring in more and more students, regardless of linguistic qualifications.

So what might be done?

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What needs to be done? – Anthony's favorite Leninist title! This time he replied far too presumptively:

I'm not trying to pit one discipline against another, Susan. At the end of the day, it's all knowledge. And I know these things look like monsters only because

we can't control them, when we perhaps once vainly thought we could or should control them. But the few things I have tried to do all have their downsides.

For example, I have argued against the anti-empiricism of Baker and Venuti. I was just trying to say that we can't pretend to know everything from the outset; we need discovery procedures; translation exceeds its theories. But of course, as soon as I say that, I get put on the wrong side of history; I am associated with the descriptivist project that was innovative in its day but has now become a rather puerile positivism.

In the same way, as mentioned, Ester Torres and I have tried to show what is happening in all those one-year Masters degrees, with the best numbers we could find, but we are then accused of not understanding contemporary pedagogy, of being traitors to the cause, along with darker mumblings.

Or again, I wrote a book on translation solution types that is actually a history of twentieth-century linguistic Translation Studies. I tried to show that the discipline has a dynamic past, that the linguistic categories have been highly political, that there is more at stake than binary categories, and that there were flows of ideas connecting the Soviet Union, China and Central Europe prior to the kind of studies we found from the 1970s in English, French and German. But in pointing to that history of reasonably intelligent thought, all of which is nowadays dismissed as merely "linguistic" or perhaps "pre-activist", I am very aware that I cannot compete with exciting critical theory that now sees everything as culture and has all the answers always already.

What else can I do? Better, what could I do alongside like-minded souls?

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Anthony, isn't it interesting that I asked 'what MIGHT be done' and you ask what NEEDS to be done? I am more hesitant than you seem to be, but that is probably because we are coming at the problem from different angles. I have been more involved with literary translation, and then more recently with news translation, so for me both stylistic and cultural questions are always going to be significant, whereas you have been more involved with working in the wider world, and with training translators to engage with that world. But regardless of starting points, we both seem to share a concern about the state of Translation Studies as a field, about its inability to move forward and its failure to have much impact on other disciplines. And we both share concern about the way in which learning another language is declining in importance, at least in the English-speaking world.

We also share concern about the way in which translation as a concept has been hijacked by literary and cultural theorists. Remember when Salman Rushdie announced that ‘we are all translated men’, when he was referring not to language but to migration? Harish Trivedi then fulminated about that kind of thinking, pointing out that back in multilingual India people were getting on with the business of translation conducted across languages and were not engaging in the abstractions that appeal to intellectuals in the comfort of their English-speaking salons. But the idea of translation as a loosely conceived metaphorical concept has spread, to the detriment of attention being paid to what actually happens when you take a text in one language and try to put it into another.

In answer to a question you posed, yes, I think we have missed an opportunity to form an intellectual group that would be concerned with promoting translation as a creative act, one which always involves language and is also political, but which above all is a process of discovery. We learn through translating- we learn about our own language as well as about the language from which we are translating. We learn what cannot be said, what is unsayable, and we also learn about compromise, manipulation, negotiation. I go so far as to believe that it ought to be possible - indeed essential - to teach translation to people who have no foreign language, because in a way everyone engages in intralingual and intersemiotic translation, to go back to good old Jakobson, even if they don’t have a foreign language. I think this is what Genzler is trying to say through his post-translation studies stuff.

We seem to have found ourselves in a twenty-first-century version of the old language-versus-literature debates, which always ended with the literature people proclaiming their superiority and the language people scurrying round becoming ever more text-focussed. Only this time, what we have is Comp. Lit and World Lit grandly laying claim to translation as a metaphor for the movement of texts across cultures, and so ignoring anything sensible coming from Translation Studies people and continuing to think of translation as involving a notion of accuracy. Meanwhile, TS people import ideas from all over the place but don’t seem concerned with exporting anything, but more concerned with talking to themselves and building up their reputations as ‘translation scholars’.

Which brings me right round to where we started this discussion, with the dismal prospect of having to listen to yet more third rate papers at translation conferences.

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A week or so then passed until, as if tumbling out of a time machine, Anthony read the place and date (Ottawa, November 11 2017) and found himself

facing yet another translation conference. The title this time is “Translation and Minority”, which seems to mean several hundred things. Anthony is invited to say a few words to close the show. Oh dear. He reads the beginning of the dialogue you are reading now, down to the “beam me up” plea. Then he asks the audience, not entirely rhetorically, why he is there, yet again.

A hundred or so smiling faces are quickly saying why. They are mostly graduate students, young, enthusiastic, from all over: Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, Spain, the United States, France, and so on, with just a few from Canada (Canada is not very Canadian), and a similar mix among the older faces. They have been talking for two days about a vast array of closely felt problems: poetry from the ruins of Syria, moribund languages in Taiwan, translation in the history of Romani, culture planning in Turkish journals, languages on the Mexican border, hegemonies with Translation Studies, bilingual Arabic authors, activism, resistance, democracy in several flavors, some literature, a bit of linguistics, but more generally the problems of people with languages and politics. The graduate students have been well selected, producing an intellectual mix that is far from Western, is universally engaged, and is immediately engaging. Somehow all these beautiful young people are using snippets of Translation Studies to think about their problems, to discuss them together, to seek solutions, to produce knowledge. And the language of the discipline, whatever its many faults, at least helps us talk about the most harrowing of horrors without weeping in public.

Is that good Translation Studies? Is it headed in any clear direction? Those are perhaps the wrong questions, calqued on a supposition of control, as if we could direct the show. There is a younger generation there; they are working on problems close to their experience; if we can help them at all, then long may it continue.

[Exit Anthony]

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