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TRANSLATION AT WORK

Editors

David Katan
University of Salento and Trieste

Elena Manca
University of Salento

Cinzia Spinzi
University of Napoli Federico II and Taranto

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Towards an “Activist” Translation Pedagogy¹

Federica Scarpa

1. Introduction

Translation is an ancient art but a young discipline. From the 1960s on, when some linguists started to give a theoretical basis to the activity of translating, translation became an academic discipline under the aegis of linguistics, itself a “pilot” science which, as Neubert (1998) points out, represented the only channel for translation scholars to enter the academic community. Thus until the 1980s translation was considered as a branch of applied linguistics and its unquestioned paradigm was that of contrastive linguistics, based on the systems of correspondences between language pairs. The focus of linguistic theories of translation was consequently more on the formal traits of language than on the relations among language structures, the translators who used such structures and the sociocultural context in which they were used (Baker 2000: 31-32). However, in the first half of the 1970s translation also started to take its first steps as an independent discipline. The beginning of such a process is traditionally identified with the presentation of the paper “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies” by James Holmes at the Third International Conference of Applied Linguistics in 1972, in which the name “Translation Studies” was coined to stress the interdisciplinary (as well as the humanistic) nature of translation (Holmes 1988 [1972]).

Within a more general “pragmatic turn” of linguistics (Snell-Hornby 2006: 35-40) came the concept of “similar communicative situations” of the cultures that had produced “parallel texts” independently, i.e. texts which were similar in topic and genre (which today are more generally called “comparable corpora”). In the 1980s, a new “interdisciplinary” paradigm of translation derived from this approach, which focussed more on the process of translating

¹This article is based on section 3.1 “Approcci diversi allo studio della traduzione” in *La traduzione specializzata. Un approccio didattico professionale* by the same author (Scarpa 2008: 77-82).

than on the product of translation (the target text) and therefore looked beyond a purely linguistic approach. Translation continued to be viewed as a fundamentally linguistic activity, but also as an interdiscipline with components drawn from other bordering disciplines (philosophy, stylistics, aesthetics, psychology, sociology, cognitive sciences etc.) as well as from all the areas of human knowledge where translations are carried out. More recently, the discipline of translation has even begun to have an impact on the conceptual and methodological apparatus of other research areas (business management, IT, history, philosophy of science etc.). The interdisciplinary paradigm of translation has inevitably drawn Translation Studies closer to the professional side of translation and to the practical aspects of the methodology used for producing translations and revisions, with the result of limiting the predominance of linguistics, which has now lost its previous pivotal role for many translation scholars.

However, linguistics has still an important role to play in a discipline such as translation that remains anchored in language. Linguists, such as Hatim (2001: 3-11) and Malmkjær (2005), solve the tension between the two disciplines in favour of linguistics through modern linguistic approaches to translation which are still greatly influential. Both scholars think that linguistics - contrastive, for Malmkjær, and applied, through the model of “action research”, for Hatim - can still be applied to translation production, description and assessment to provide an answer to the problems encountered by practitioners, i.e. professional translators and translation trainers.

From a more research-oriented perspective, scholars who have applied approaches developed in other disciplines (linguistics, language teaching, literary studies, cognitive psychology, cultural studies, business etc.) have often had communication problems, due to a basic lack of homogeneity between their research methodologies and terminologies. Any attempt - such as that made by Andrew Chesterman and Rosemary Arrojo (2000) in issue 12:1 of *Target* - to try and find common ground between these different approaches is therefore laudable. The debate initiated by the two scholars (“Shared Ground in Translation Studies”) in response to a proposal by Gideon Toury spanned over the issues 12:2, 13:1, 13:2 and 14:1 of the journal, sadly without any common ground being found. It was based on the premise that within translation studies two main paradigms could be identified and should somehow be reconciled: the empirical/descriptive (represented by Chesterman) and the postmodernist oriented towards cultural studies and textual theories (represented by Arrojo). The first is “essentialist” in nature, considering translation as the transfer of objective and stable meanings by a translator who must remain

“invisible”, whilst the second is “non-essentialist” (relativist) in nature, considering translation as the interpretation of meanings intrinsically unstable (within contexts which are unique and unrepeatably) by a translator who is inevitably “visible”.

2. Different perspectives on translation

My first argument here is that this dichotomy is in fact not “delicate” enough for at least two reasons. First of all it does not take into account perspectives on translation such as that of applied linguists, whose approach is founded in both empirical/descriptive and textual theories (Bell 2001). Secondly, with special reference to a professionally-grounded pedagogy of specialist translation, this dichotomy lumps together in the empirical-descriptive paradigm very different ways of studying and teaching translation, where the emphasis is variously put on the linguistic component of translation (the linguist’s approach), or on the professional aspects of translation (the professional translator’s approach), or on translation as an academic discipline (the translation scholar’s approach).

For the linguist, the most interesting aspect of translation is translation theory as a branch of linguistics: translation is a privileged means to understand how language works (cf. Malmkjær 2002: 112), and a university-level translation course should be centred on how to obtain correspondences between the structures of different languages. Translation is therefore considered to be a linguistic *transcodification* and *transfer* based on an approach which can be contrastive, functional, textual etc. For example, a contrastive approach (cf. Pierini 2001: 21-23) enables the translator to identify - and possibly compensate - the “unbalances” resulting from the formal differences existing between different languages/cultures, whilst a functional approach (cf. Taylor Torsello 1996: 91) enables the translator to grasp the meaning potential of the source text and transfer it to another language with the necessary adaptations for a new recipient or group of recipients.

Whilst for the linguist the main teaching objective in a translation course is the study of texts in a functional, textual, contrastive etc. perspective, for the professional translator the main objective is the actual translation of a text. For the translator, the most interesting aspect of translation is, in fact, the practice of translation and all the activities connected to the translation process. A translation course should therefore be centred on activities which are immediately useful to translating texts and the emphasis should be placed on the prescriptive aspect of the translation norms and conventions which govern the tran-

slation market. Translation is considered as the *reformulation* of a text written in a language A into another text written in a language B after establishing a hierarchy of possible different translation solutions and choosing the most suitable to a specific translation brief (cf. the definition of “translational competence” given by Pym 1991). Consequently, for the translator language is not the ultimate *aim* but only a *tool* for reformulation. Contrastive linguistics is a tool to enhance the translator’s ability to identify and solve translation problems and linguistics is a tool to evaluate the final product of the translation activity.

The third approach to translation is the translation scholar’s who, within the empirical/descriptive paradigm mentioned above, can adopt one of two² of the main branches of Holmes’s (1988[1972]: 71-77) basic “map” of translation studies, which - after all these years - can still provide a basis for the development of the discipline. The first branch is provided by the paradigm of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) which, since the 1980s, has been pivotal in contributing to the development of translation as an academic discipline. Adopting a perspective that goes beyond the immediate needs of practitioners, the most interesting aspect of translation for the descriptive translation scholar is the *description* of how translation phenomena manifest themselves as both process and product, with particular reference to the nature of the translation process and the theoretical concepts of the discipline. A translation course should therefore be centred on a (possibly acritical) description of the social, cultural, ideological and cognitive constraints that have shaped actual translations via the specific choices made by the translator. The other branch of translation studies is provided by the paradigm of Applied Translation Studies (ATS), which focuses on the more practical issues of translation: translation pedagogy, translation quality, translation aids or tools, and the ethical and professional aspects of translation. A translation course should therefore be centred on a critical analysis of how translations are done and why they are done in certain ways. From this analysis, prescriptive principles and methods can be drawn which are immediately useful to translators and whose ultimate

² For the sake of the present discussion, the third branch of translation studies envisaged by Holmes, *Theoretical Translation Studies* - i.e. the study of the general principles that can explain and predict translation phenomena - will be considered not as a separate branch, but as the theoretical component of both the DTS and ATS paradigms (though providing to the two different kinds of data). As Holmes himself claimed, the different branches are interdependent, each “supplying materials for the other two, and making use of the findings which they in turn provide it” (1988: 78).

goal is to raise the quality of translations and the professional status of translators (cfr. Chesterman and Williams 2002: 2-3). A good example of the difference between DTS and ATS is provided by the degree of tolerance that the translator trainer should have of the interference caused by the influence of the source language on the target text. In my opinion a compromise should be found between the extreme of a purely prescriptive (ATS) approach, where all interference phenomena are considered as a contamination which must be avoided at all costs, and the other extreme of a purely descriptive approach, where these phenomena are merely considered as one of a number of viable options with no negative evaluation being attached to any of them. A good example of the close relationship between ATS and both linguistics and translation practice is the different attitude of linguists, translators and translation scholars concerning the usefulness of translations vis a vis “native” texts (i.e. non-translated texts). Linguists tend to consider translations as non-representative of a specific language because they “deviate” from the “superior” norm represented by native (i.e. “authentic”) texts (cf. Baker 2000: 32-33). Likewise, professional translators and ATS scholars consider translations as less reliable sources than native texts on which to base their translation decisions or for the compilation of a terminographical database. On the other hand, for DTS scholars the distinctive features of translated texts are merely genuine instances of communication whose difference is due to the fact that these documents - which should be considered as “authentic” in their own right - are functioning in a different context of production and reception (cf. written language vis a vis oral language) (cf. Baker 2000: 32-33).

3. Translation teaching as the discriminating factor

My second argument here is that a university-level course for specialist translators should necessarily mediate between these different perspectives, whose aims and objectives should all be incorporated - though with a varying degree of importance - in the teaching methodology of such a course. Always with an eye on the professional aspects of translation - which in fact should be a major influence on the curricular content especially at the MA level - students should acquire a translation theory grounded on the description of behavioural regularities of professional translators from which good “predictive hypotheses” can be derived to make predictions from different initial conditions (Chesterman 2000: 157). Consequently the production of translations may well be the primary concern of both the practicing translator and the translation teacher (Hal-

erson 2004: 562), but the latter should also be a translation scholar whose research paradigm integrates an applied (ATS) component with a theoretical (DTS) one, and in particular what Ulrych (1999: 61) has called the “pedagogical component” of DTS, “which consists in relaying to young researchers the techniques of descriptive translation research and instructing them on the underlying theoretical and methodological presuppositions”.

From a pedagogical point of view, instead of the three different sets of priorities mentioned above, it seems however more useful to make a distinction cutting across the three categories of linguists, professional translators and translation scholars. My third and last argument here is that this distinction should be based instead on those who study translation “from the outside” vis a vis those who study translation “from the inside”. Whilst it can now be assumed that the description of translation phenomena is a key component in the approach for anybody wishing to study translation, the basis of this distinction is whether the data gleaned from observation is put to any use or not. In the first category are those who merely describe translations, without any evaluative aims and without trying in any way to influence the production of future translations (cf. Ulrych 1999: 61): linguists and translation scholars who do not teach translation and/or are not practicing translators, and researchers from other disciplines whose interests are characterized either by the centrality of translation or by a mere relevance to translation (cf. Gile 2001). The results of their systematic observation of existing translations are therefore not applied to solving the most important translation problems, which Pym (2002) calls “social” problems because these require solutions to promote cooperation among different cultures. In the second category are the practitioners - linguists and translation scholars who teach translation or are also practicing translators - who describe translations with instrumental or applied aims, typically to provide predictive hypotheses functioning as either a theoretical support to future translators or as guidelines to practicing translators for the decisions they have to make in their professional activity: “if you, the translator, do not do this, I predict that the result will be that someone (myself, the client, reader...) will not like your translation” (Chesterman 2000: 157). For researchers belonging to the second category trainee translators may well need broad functionalist principles (“Who is this translation aimed at?”, “What is the main function of the source text?”, “What is the skopos of the target text?” etc.) but they also need to be given (or told where to find) specific guidelines for their decisions at the macro- and microlinguistic levels of the text.

Thus, a major dividing line among different research approaches to translation can indeed be identified in the ever increasing pressures to which

translator trainers - be they linguists, translators or translation scholars - in university-level courses specifically aimed at translators and interpreters are subjected, where students understandably require a number of clear practical guidelines to be used in their future profession (cf. Rega 2001: 26, 33-34). This means that learners feel the need not only for broad systematizations of the sometimes complex translation problems they are confronted with but also for the teacher's clear feedback on the quality of the practical solutions they have found to solve such problems. This is particularly true for specialist translation, which includes many text types requiring a standardized translation approach. Consequently, it is necessary first to describe behavioural regularities, i.e. the translation strategies which are more frequent and/or are considered to be the most appropriate on the basis of the choices which have been made by translators in published translations - to be considered as the "gold standard", an expression borrowed from IT and applied to translation and corpora (Kugler et al. 1995; Ahmad 2007) - and then to apply them as the translation "norms" in a particular translation context. In other words, the approach to researching/teaching specialist translation should also have a "prescriptive" component, though not in the sense of "deterministic", i.e. depriving the translator of her liberty of choice, but in the sense of "probabilistic" indicated by Chesterman (2000: 157). A typical type of study where the descriptive perspective has practical applied goals is the analysis of source texts vis a vis their translations (parallel corpora) in combination with the analysis of target texts vis a vis native texts in the same language (comparable corpora), where the combined analysis aim at identifying the most appropriate changes to be made in the target text during the production of future translations and revisions. One example of such a study is provided by Musacchio (2007: 100), where the translation strategies identified by the scholar concern the adaptation of information structure, the reduction of structural weight of sentences and the improvement of cohesion in the translation of popular science texts on particle physics from English to Italian.

4. Towards an activist translation pedagogy

A few final remarks are about the perspective on translation pedagogy and research adopted here which, besides advocating the centrality of corpus-based contrastive linguistics in translation studies³, aims at integrating the descrip-

³ Indeed, within linguistics a contrastive description of languages is the precondition for any

tive component of translation studies (DTS) with the applied paradigm of the discipline (ATS), much along the lines of the synergy between the two branches advocated by Ulrych's "evidence-based approach" to translation practice and translator education, entailing the integration of theoretical descriptive (i.e. evidence-based) and applied (practice-based) components (Ulrych 1999: 63-65, 69ff.; 2002). More specifically, it is argued that the task of the translation scholar who is also a trainer is not only that of describing and explaining translation phenomena, but also to have a more *active* role by doing research which offers solutions to translation problems and aims at improving a current state of affairs (for example, raising the quality of translations on the market or the professional status of translators). It is in this sense that translation pedagogy and research in this area of enquiry should be "activist", where this term is used not in the sense of political engagement to describe the activist aspect of translations and translators (Tymoczko 2000: 24-26; 2007), but to define a committed and engaged teaching approach, where the task of the researcher/trainer is seen as getting actively involved in making choices and value judgements based on the results obtained interrogating corpora of actual texts, both translations and non-translations. The active involvement of the researcher/trainer implicit in this approach can be assimilated to Koskinen's (in press) "academic activism", which includes what the scholar calls "reflexive translator training and training of reflexive translators". "Reflexivity" is a dynamic process in which theory and practice mutually enrich one another (Hatim 2001: 7); but the term is also used extensively by Tymoczko (2007: 17-19), who sees "self-reflexivity" as the ability to challenge one's own perspective as a scholar and a translator. For Tymoczko, a lack of "self-reflection and reflexivity about the speaker's own place of enunciation" and of "even minimal acknowledgement of the relationships binding the speaker's beliefs, actions, and ideological content" is typical of traditional normative stances. However, implicit in the activist approach proposed here is a teaching methodology where translation is seen as a professional problem-solving activity and where a certain degree of normativeness is seen as inevitable.

systematic study of translation (Toury 1980: 29). There has been an evolution in time of the so-called "translators' rules" which characterized the first stages of translation studies and were based on acontextual sample-phrases derived from contrastive grammars: "no approach to translation can afford to do without contrastive linguistics, but [...] to be of relevance to translators, contrastive studies need to move well beyond the sentence level, to be corpus based, rather than intuition based, and to take full account of context and co-text" (Malmkjær 1998: 70-71)

Not only are students presented with descriptive norms based on solid empirical evidence which are used in a critical and, ultimately, prescriptive way (i.e. offering practical solutions to translation problems) but they are also introduced to the concept of qualitative “standards”, which remains fundamental in the translation market, because they are shown both the advantages and disadvantages of choosing certain solutions rather than others which seem just as viable in a specific translation situation. In no other category of translation are interpretative constraints in operation or in strength as in specialist translation, where the quality of a translation is assessed mainly on the use by the translator of the standard terminology and phraseology specific to the specialist genre of the text to be translated. The prescriptivism of this approach is however distinct from the forms of prescriptivism referred to by Tymoczko and described by Brownlie (2003: 41-43), both traditional and current. Though its aim is “to dictate procedures and standards to translators in terms of source and target orientation, and notions of quality”, the type of prescriptivism referred to here is not “*a priori*”, i.e. based on introspection and speculation, but it is based on empirical/descriptive work. In this same sense the approach can therefore be loosely defined as “committed” because “description is conditioned by and supports the prescriptive aim” (Brownlie 2003: 58), whilst in a “descriptive” approach “there is certainly an interpretative filter, but it is not related to a prescriptive goal”. The prescriptivism referred to here is derived, however, from descriptive norms based on solid empirical evidence and, unlike Brownlie’s “Committed Approaches”, is not inspired by postmodernist postcolonial, cultural-materialist and gender-based approaches within cultural studies. These foreground the social, political and ideological contexts and effects of translation from a committed position, expressing an explicit ideological viewpoint. After all, as Koskinen (2004: 153) rightly points out, “committedness is not the exclusive domain of postmodern approaches, nor does it require a ‘postmodern’ or ‘cultural’ framework”.

The critical outlook and the attempt to improve a current state of affairs which are implicit in this approach also place it within Koskinen’s (2004: 151-153) “Critical Translation Studies” paradigm (Brownlie’s “Critical Descriptive Approach”), where “the task of the researcher is not only to describe and explain but also to attempt to improve the situation or to offer solutions to a perceived problem” and which cannot survive without a solid empirical base. It therefore provides a contribution to the “mutually enriching dialogue” (Koskinen 2004: 153) between the paradigm of DTS (lacking critical reflection) and critical approaches (lacking a strong empirical basis). At an even more general level, it is also an attempt to establish connections between the practical and the

theoretical aspects of translation, in the direction suggested by Hatim's (2001: 6-8) practice-driven "action research" model, where the research cycle of practice-research-practice is set in motion by practitioners engaging in "the identification of interesting problem areas, the choice of suitable investigative procedures, and the pursuit of research aimed at providing answers to a range of practical issues". In this respect, it is also a perspective which is ultimately founded on the inextricability between research and action, and between theory and empirical data, with the first being the basis for the interpretation of the latter (cf. Sinclair 2007: 23-24, 27).

Let us hope then that "activism" in translation studies will start to be used also in reference to the real world of translation pedagogy, where the main focus of trainers and researchers is to address the need to improve the quality of translator training and translations.

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