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# TRANSLATION THEORY AND TRANSLATION QUALITY ASSESSMENT

In this introductory chapter I will briefly explain what I take translation to be, and also introduce topics that will be treated in more detail in the following chapters.

Translation is both a cognitive procedure which occurs in a human being's, the translator's, head, and a social, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural practice. Any valid theory of translation must embrace these two aspects. To do this, a multidisciplinary approach to translation theory integrating these aspects in a plausible manner is needed. Further, a theory of translation is not possible without a reflection on the role of one of its core concepts: equivalence in translation. And looking at equivalence leads directly into a discussion of how one would go about assessing the quality of a translation. Translation quality assessment can thus be said to be at the heart of any theory of translation.

This book is a new treatment of translation quality assessment designed to update my two previous versions of a model for translation quality assessment (House 1977, 1997). Since to my knowledge this model is today still the only fully worked out, research-based, theoretically informed and interdisciplinary conceived approach to translation quality assessment of its kind, I believe it is now time to present an updated version of the model – particularly in view of the enormous growth and spread of translation studies in recent decades, as well as a soaring interest in translation quality assessment in the translation profession and the translation industry.

While this volume includes a detailed description of my own work in the fields of cross-cultural and intercultural research, and translation evaluation over the past 40 years, I will also provide a review of a number of interesting and relevant approaches, detailing their relative merits and limitations. I will look both into past attempts at evaluating translations and into a number of present day research strands that might prove useful for validating judgements about the

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worth of a translation, among them work on contrastive pragmatics and intercultural communication, corpus studies and psycho-neuro- and cognitive linguistic research. I will argue for the necessity in translation studies of a multidisciplinary view of translation that combines traditional linguistically informed and text-based views of translation with views that emphasize the context of translation in its widest sense taking account of power relations, conflict situations, ethical issues and the human beings involved in acts of translation, i.e. authors, translators, readers, and so on (see my recent edited volume, House 2014).

In recent decades, we have witnessed a rather one-sided shift in the field of translation studies towards viewing translation as a predominantly social, cultural, political, ethical and ideology-dominated affair. While such concerns are of course necessary and valuable, one should not forget that translation is, at its core, a linguistic act. So while on the whole maintaining a stance which is as fair, balanced and non-biased as possible, I will try in this book to emphasize the importance of detailed textual analysis and comparison, since this is the strength of my model of translation quality assessment. And in my view translation quality assessment means both retrospectively assessing the worth of a translation and prospectively ensuring the quality in the production of a translation.

### What is translation?

Translation can be defined as the result of a linguistic-textual operation in which a text in one language is re-contextualized in another language. As a linguistic-textual operation, translation is, however, subject to, and substantially influenced by, a variety of extra-linguistic factors and conditions. It is this interaction between 'inner' linguistic-textual and 'outer' extra-linguistic, contextual factors that makes translation such a complex phenomenon. Some of the interacting factors we need to consider when looking at translation are:

- the structural characteristics, the expressive potential and the constraints of the two languages involved in translation;
- the extra-linguistic world which is 'cut up' in different ways by source and target languages;
- the source text with its linguistic-stylistic-aesthetic features that belong to the norms of usage holding in the source lingua-cultural community;
- the linguistic-stylistic-aesthetic norms of the target lingua-cultural community;
- the target language norms internalized by the translator;
- intertextuality governing the totality of the text in the target culture;
- traditions, principles, histories and ideologies of translation holding in the target lingua-cultural community;
- the translational 'brief' given to the translator by the person(s) or institution commissioning the translation;

- the translator's workplace conditions;
- the translator's knowledge, expertise, ethical stance and attitudinal profiles as well as her subjective theory of translation;
- the translation receptors' knowledge, expertise, ethical stance and attitudinal profiles of the translator as well as their subjective theories of translation.

So while translation is, as stated above, at its core a linguistic–textual operation, a multitude of other conditioning and constraining factors also routinely impinge on its processes, performance and of course on translation quality. However, it is well nigh impossible for any practicable model of translation quality assessment to take into account all of these factors, much less so in an essentially text-based model such as my own. So, I would maintain that despite the multiple conditioning of translation and the resulting complexity, one may still, as a common core, retain the minimal definition of translation as a replacement of an original text in one language with a text in another language. When using the term 'replacement', one may assume, rather negatively, that any translated text is in principle 'second-best', i.e. a substitute for the 'real thing'. Viewed this way, translation is by definition a secondary act of communication. Normally, a communicative event happens only once. In translation, this communicative event is reduplicated for persons or groups otherwise prevented from appreciating the original communicative event. More positively, however, translation can be seen as enabling – often for the first time – original access to a different world of knowledge, to different traditions and ideas that would otherwise have been locked away behind a language barrier. From this perspective, translation has often been described as a builder of bridges, an extender of horizons, providing recipients with an important service and enabling them to move beyond the borders of the world staked out by their own language. It is through translation that lingua-cultural barriers can be overcome. So translation is one of the most important mediators between societies and cultures. But despite all these assets, it remains a fact that translation only gives readers access to a message which already exists. This inherently 'derived nature' of translation also means that, in translation, there is always both an orientation backwards to the existing previous message of the original text and an orientation forwards towards how texts in a corresponding genre are composed in the target language. This type of 'double-bind' relationship is a basic characteristic of translation which should not be forgotten.

### **Translation as intercultural communication and social action**

As mentioned above, translation is not only a linguistic act, it is also an act of communication across cultures. This was recognized in the sixties by one of the grand figures of translation theory: Eugene Nida. Nida (1964) saw translation as one of the major means of constructing representations of other cultures. He clearly recognized that translation always involves both different languages and

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different cultures simply because the two cannot be neatly separated. Language is culturally embedded: it serves to express and shape cultural reality, and the meanings of linguistic units can only be understood when considered together with the cultural contexts in which they arise, and in which they are used. In translation, therefore, not only two languages but also two cultures invariably come into contact. In this sense, then, translation is a form of intercultural communication. Over and above recognizing the importance of the two larger macro-cultural frameworks, however, the translator must of course also consider the more immediate 'context of situation'. This more local situational context has to do with questions about who wrote the text, when, why, for whom, and who is now reading it, and for what purpose, etc. These questions, in turn, are reflected in how a text is written, interpreted, read and used. The context of situation is itself embedded in the larger socio-cultural world as it is depicted in the text and in the real world.

The inherently reflective nature of translational action reveals itself in a translator's focus on the situatedness of a text, and his or her recognition of the intimate interconnectedness of text and context. As texts travel across time, space and different orders of indexicality in translation, they must be re-contextualized. Exploring text in context is thus the only way of exploring text for the purposes of translation as re-contextualization (see House 2006a). Recently, such re-contextualization in translation has involved contexts characterized by radically unequal power relations between individuals, groups, languages and literatures. In these cases, translators are asked to play an important role in analysing, questioning or resisting existing power structures (see Baker and Pérez-González 2011: 44). In these contexts, translations do not only function as conflict mediating and resolving actions but rather as spaces where tensions are signalled and power struggles are played out. An extreme case of such tensions is the positioning of translators in zones of war. In such a context, translation scholars have recently looked at the impact the performance of translators has had on the different parties in war zones, whether and how translators align themselves with their employers or openly refuse to do so, and how personally involved they become in situations of conflict and violence (see the work by Baker 2006; Maier 2007; Inghilleri 2009).

In the wake of rapid technological advances and the need to spread information quickly and efficiently through instant mediation, translation has substantially grown in importance in the globalized, de-territorialized space. While this trend is certainly financially advantageous for the translating profession, there has also been criticism of the instantaneous flow of information, and its reliance on English in its role of a global lingua franca in many influential domains of contemporary life. The impact of English as a lingua franca has recently been explored in corpus-based investigation of translation as a site of language contact in a globalized world (cf. Kranich *et al.* 2012; House 2013b).

Another recent development of looking at translation as a socio-cultural phenomenon is the concern with questions of ethics in translation (see e.g. Goodwin 2010; Baker and Maier 2011). This concern goes hand in hand with the

increased visibility of translators through their involvement in violent conflicts and various activist translator groups, activist centres and sites and the concomitant broader awareness of the role of translators in making transparent human rights issues and the suppression of minorities.

## Translation as a cognitive process

Apart from the social contextual approach to translation, there is another important new trend which looks at translation as a cognitive process. Cognitive aspects of translation and in particular the process of translation in the translator's mind have been investigated for over 30 years, with a recent upsurge of interest in issues relating to translation as a cognitive process (cf. Shreve and Angelone 2011; O'Brien 2011; Ehrensberger-Dow *et al.* 2013). This increase in interest in 'what goes on in translators' heads' owes much to the availability of modern technology, to continuously improving instruments and methods for the empirical investigation of particular aspects of a translator's performance such as keystroke logging, eye-tracking or screen recording as well as various neuro-psychological techniques. As O'Brien (2013: 6) has rightly pointed out, translation process research has heavily 'borrowed' from a number of disciplines: linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, reading and writing research and language technology. The influence of these disciplines and their particular research directions and methodologies on translation studies is at the present time something of a one-way affair, but given time, a reciprocal interdisciplinarity may well come into being, with the result that translation studies will be not only a borrower but also a lender.

Over and above a concern with new technological and experimental means of tapping the cognitive process of translation, a new combination of a theory of translation and of a neuro-functional theory of bilingualism has also recently been suggested (House 2013a). This new linguistic-cognitive orientation in translation studies emerges from a critical assessment of the validity and reliability of introspective and retrospective thinking aloud studies (cf. also Jääskeläinen 2011), and of various behavioural experiments and the usefulness and relevance of recent bilingual neuro-imaging studies.

Taken together, translation needs to be looked at from two perspectives: a social perspective, which takes account of the macro- and micro-contextual constraints that impinge on translation and the translator, and a cognitive perspective, which focuses on the 'internal' way a translator goes about his or her task of translating. Both are complementary, and both can be split up into different domains and fields of inquiry.

## Translation and equivalence

As stated above, equivalence is both a core concept in translation theory, and the conceptual basis of translation quality assessment. However, strange as this may

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seem, equivalence has also been one of the most controversial issues in recent decades. Thus we find translation scholars who see equivalence as an important concept, for instance Jakobson (1966), with his early pronouncement of the importance of ‘equivalence in difference’ and Nida (1964), with his suggestions of ‘different kinds of equivalence’; Catford (1965); House (1977, 1997); Neubert (1970, 1985); Pym (1995); and see Koller (1995, 2011). But there are very vocal others who consider equivalence rather unnecessary, for instance Hatim and Mason (1990) and Reiss and Vermeer (1984), or reject it completely (Vermeer 1984; Snell-Hornby 1988; Prunč 2007). More recently, equivalence has been denied any value in translation theory (Munday 2012: 77), or even denied any legitimate status (Baker 2011: 5). Further, and rather oddly, equivalence is sometimes linked to subjectivity in evaluation by the analyst, e.g. by Munday (2012: 68).

How did this happen? I think it is mainly due to many authors simply consciously or unconsciously misunderstanding what the concept implies. If we consider its Latin origin, we can clearly see that equivalence means ‘of equal value’ and that it is not at all about sameness or, worse still, identity, but about approximately equal value despite some unavoidable difference – a difference, we might add, that stems from the (banal) fact that languages are different.

In acknowledging this obvious fact, Jakobson (1966), as mentioned above, rightly spoke of ‘equivalence in difference’. Wrongly and rather dangerously paving the way for later misunderstandings, however, the German translation scholar Wilss (1982: 137–38) suggested a little later that equivalence really derives from mathematics. Another German translation scholar, Snell-Hornby, picked this up and spoke of equivalence implying an ‘illusion of symmetry between languages’ (1988: 22), which for anybody familiar with translation is downright nonsense.

As early as 1965, Catford stated that translation equivalence is essentially situational. More communicatively oriented, Nida (1964) spoke of ‘dynamic equivalence’ as an ‘equivalence of effect’ to be achieved by translations that can be said to be the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message.

A little later the eminent Leipzig school translation scholar Neubert (1970) suggested that translation equivalence is a ‘semiotic category’ that comprises a syntactic, a semantic and a pragmatic component. He believed that these components are hierarchically related, with semantic equivalence taking priority over syntactic equivalence, and pragmatic equivalence governing and modifying both syntactic and semantic equivalence. The importance of the pragmatic component for translation equivalence is later also reflected in the fact that Neubert (1985) attributes prime importance to the text as the level at which equivalence relations can be best diagnosed.

In discussing the fate of the concept of equivalence, mention must also be made of Leipzig school translation scholar Kade. Kade (1968) set up a simple translational equivalence typology between source text and target text. He distinguished between four different equivalence types: total equivalence (e.g. proper names); facultative equivalence, where there are many different correspondences at the level of expression but a 1:1 correspondence at the level of

content (example: German *schreien*; English ‘shout, scream’); approximative equivalence, where we find a 1:1 correspondence on the expressive level and partial correspondence on the content level (example: English ‘turtle, tortoise’; German *Schildkröte*); and zero equivalence, where there is a 1:0 correspondence at both the level of expression and the level of content (example: *Sashimi*).

According to Kade, the selection of potential equivalents depends not only on the (situational and cultural) context but also on a host of different factors, such as text type (genre), purpose or function of the translation and the nature of the envisaged addressees. Many translation scholars today agree that equivalence is to be understood as an approximative concept (cf. e.g. Schreiber 1993) – necessarily so because of the enormous complexity of any translational act. As mentioned above, translation is always subject to grammatical, lexical-semantic, terminological-phraseological and genre- and register-related constraints as well as extra-textual, contextual and situational constraints.

A recent consideration of equivalence stems from Pym (2010). Pym suggested the existence of two basic types of equivalence: natural equivalence, existing independently of the translator’s actions, and directional equivalence, i.e. equivalence from the source language to the target language. Pym believes that directional equivalence emerges from a translator’s personal textual decisions. How the existence of these two types of equivalence and indeed the difference between the two can be empirically tested remains however an open question. As stated above, equivalence has to do with the extent to which the translator manages to negotiate the linguistic and contextual conditions and constraints which underlie and complicate any act of translation.

The most important and comprehensive account of equivalence stems from Koller (2011). He distinguishes five frames of reference to define translation equivalence: denotative equivalence, connotative equivalence, text-normative equivalence, pragmatic equivalence and formal-aesthetic equivalence. Koller suggests that translators need to set up a hierarchy of those equivalences and they must make a choice for each individual translational case, taking due account of the complex enveloping context. This is a daunting task, but it is also an eminently important one, because as Krein-Kühle has recently argued, any ‘theoretical contextualized account of the nature, conditions and constraints defining equivalence remains a central task of our discipline in order to make our research results more robust, comparable, and amenable to generalization and intersubjective verification’ (Krein-Kühle 2014).

One step in this direction can be seen in my own work, which encapsulates an approach linking the enveloping context accessed through a multidimensional grid of parameters with the lexical and structural choices represented in the textual material (see Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7). Before moving on to a description of my own work, however, I will first, in Chapter 2, give an overview of different approaches to translation theory and quality assessment.