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## AN ACTION-ORIENTED APPROACH TO TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATION STUDIES

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**Abstract:** *The topicalisation of the social nature of language stems from the idea that to use language is to perform an action. The overriding criterion for evaluating language use in translation is meaning-oriented since translators, as privileged language users, display norm-governed behaviour in particular socio-cultural contexts, agency refers to the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act, and praxis is the action itself.*

**Keywords:** *agency, meaning-oriented, mediation, translatorial action*

### 1. What's in a name? Translation as science in action

It is difficult to determine the birthdate of a science, yet, establishing landmarks in its emergence and development is worth embarking upon. The academic interest in translation may be traced back to the 1950s, mostly from a linguistic perspective; the name *Translation Studies*, attributed to Holmes (1972/1988/2004) in his far-reaching paper "The name and nature of Translation Studies", delivered at the Third International Conference of Applied Linguistics, held in Copenhagen in 1972, is a denomination which I prefer and which currently seems to prevail among translation theorists both internationally and in Romania (Baker, 1998; Bassnett, 1980/2002; Boase-Beier, 2011; Dimitriu, 2005; Munday, 2001; Snell-Hornby, 2006; Venuti, 2004, to name just a few), and among large professional associations (for instance, European Society for Translation Studies - EST, American Translation and Interpreting Studies Association - ATISA, Canadian Association for Translation Studies - CATS, International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies - IATIS, etc.). *Translation Studies* has been running parallel to *translatology* (Holz-Mänttari, 1984), *traductology* (Lungu-Badea, 2005, owing to the French input), *translation theory (and practice)* (Chesterman, 1998; Dimitriu, 2002; Ionescu, 2003; Newmark, 1988; Nida and Taber, 1969/1982; Pym, 2010, etc.), *translemics* (Alcaraz, 1996) or simply *translation* (Alvarez, Roman and África Vidal, 1996; Baker 1992, Croitoru, 2004; Frăţilă, 2009; House, 1977/1997; Schäffner, 2004; Venuti, 1995, etc.). Furthermore, it happens that the same scholars use parallel terminology at different times, which may be explained by changing their ideological affiliation with a particular school of thought, or even by an aesthetics of variability.

Newmark (1988) seems to sceptically promote the label *theory of translation*, although he overtly prefers it to *traductology* and *translatology*:

“‘Translation theory’ is a misnomer, a blanket term, therefore a translation label, for ‘Übersetzungswissenschaft’. In fact translation theory is neither a theory nor a science, but the body of knowledge that we have and have still to have about the process of translating: it is therefore an ‘-ology’, but I prefer not to call it ‘translatology’ or ‘traductology’ because the terms sound too pretentious” (Newmark 1988: 19).

I think that the name *Translation Studies* is more adequate since it implies a closer examination of theoretical and practical problem-solving situations, and the ability to provide feasible descriptive and explanatory models of investigation. From the outset, it can be said to go from the *savoir dire* to a reflective approach of the translation practice - a *savoir faire*, an action-oriented perspective.

Conceptually and methodologically, Translation Studies provides the framework of principles, rules, hints for translating texts and evaluating translations (as a background for problem solving). The key concept of *translation* is twofold, incorporating both the process/activity and the product/the translated text. The list of topical issues is made up of: the intention of the text; the intention of the translator (as decision-making process resulting in the translator's choices); the readership and setting of the text; the quality of the writing and the authority of the text. Of course, an impactful translation theoretical framework deals with recurrent problems and formulates a set of strategies for approaching these, i.e. its cohesive character is explained by the collection and interpretation of data.

The discipline of Translation Studies is neither self-reflexive nor an innocent phenomenological perception of the process of translation; it represents the harmonisation of translation principles in order to enhance a dynamic and flexible system of equivalences. The translator should be able to accommodate content and form and to place alien utterances into an easily recognisable mould. From this perspective, translation theory goes hand in hand with translation methodology with a view to identifying general and particular problems; it is both an applied and interrelated discipline, an eclectic one, drawing its material from various sources.

In spite of the fact that Translation Studies includes translation methodology and terminology, the status of translation is still blurred: science, art or craft? If translation is an exact science, then creativity finds no place within. If translation is reduced to a skill, we oversimplify matters since translation also presupposes intellectual pursuits and emotional affinities. Yet, the three aspects are to be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Translation is a science because the translator possesses a multilayered competence (activating linguistic, cultural, interpersonal, thematic, etc. components), s/he masters at least one specialism and the methodology of translation, the translator's work meaning knowledge acquisition and research work. Translation is an art since it engages creativity, subjectivity, that hazard and *primum movens* that poetics mention, and the readership's aesthetic pleasure. Translation is a craft as the translator develops a set of techniques and strategies in order to successfully manipulate the original text. Nevertheless, the translator is not a mere skilled worker and translation is not a facsimile of the original, underpinning "rewriting and manipulation" while asserting "the central function of translation as a shaping force" (Lefevere and Bassnett 1992: xi-xii) and the translator's visibility (Venuti 1995) in the socio-cultural (macro) context.

## **2. Babel after Babel. The divide between theory and practice?**

According to *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, *theory* entered the English language in the late 16th century, etymologically denoting a mental scheme of something to be done: via late Latin from Greek *theōria* *contemplation, speculatio*, from *theōros* - *spectator* (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/theory>). Therefore, *theory* is closely linked to the notion of viewing or beholding as the outcome of the relationship between the contemplating subject and the object of contemplation. Since its birth date, Translation Studies has proved to be an extremely productive field as an academic discipline; nevertheless, the question of how far theory informs the actual practice(s) of translation and shapes the translation market is still a topical one.

There are rather strong opinions voicing the possibility of a clear-cut distinction between Translation Studies and the translator's day-to-day work, premised by the idea that translator's training and qualification is not a pre-requisite for their accreditation both nationally and internationally. For instance, in Romania, translators are certified following a written

examination at the National Institute for Cultural Research and Training (please visit <http://www.culturadata.ro/examentraducator/>), i.e. translation of a 2000-character text from the mother tongue into the foreign language or from the foreign language into the mother tongue, in different fields of activity such as literary translation, business translation, technical translation, medical translation, etc., with the notable exception of legal translation for which translation is required from and into the mother tongue. Besides, the label of "sworn translator" is subsequently awarded by the Ministry of Justice to successful legal translation test takers. The eligibility criteria for test takers provide that they should hold, at least, the Romanian Baccalaureate Diploma. Even at the European level, the European Personnel Selection Office organises open competitions for translators as permanent staff (EU careers), the required key qualifications being a "perfect command of one EU language and a thorough command of at least two others, and a degree in any discipline" ([https://epso.europa.eu/career-profiles/languages\\_en](https://epso.europa.eu/career-profiles/languages_en)).

It cannot be denied that at the level of the Directorate General for Translation, European Commission ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/index\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/index_en)), the flagship project European Master's in Translation (EMT) launched in 2009 and revisited in 2017 ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/resources-partners/european-masters-translation-emt/european-masters-translation-emt-explained\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/resources-partners/european-masters-translation-emt/european-masters-translation-emt-explained_en)) has achieved a leading reference standard for both the academia and the industry, underlying academic networking, research outcomes on translation and the translator's competence, consultation with the industry stakeholders, etc. It is also true that the framework addresses solely the Master's students as future language industry professionals, although it admits that some of the competences, skills and knowledge may have been acquired by Bachelor's students at different stages and levels ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/emt\\_competence\\_fw\\_k\\_2017\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/emt_competence_fw_k_2017_en_web.pdf)).

In the global village that Austermühl (1999:440) labels "the Babel-and-Bytes phenomenon" where "cyber-neighbours" are affected by "factoids" (i.e., the explosion of information) and worldwide networking, allegedly, translation theorists tend to react slowly to changes, and it is the translator's task to timely bridge the communication gap in multilingual settings, in a flexible and comprehensive manner. The author (1999) endorses the pivotal role of translation training programmes and higher education institutions, while also highlighting the role of translation research:

"to build up natural knowledge bases, to provide the input for the artificial knowledge bases, and to develop and teach strategies to retrieve relevant information from online and offline databases" (Austermühl 1999: 445).

On the other hand, translators have their own agenda when they do their work, and their decisions are not always well-informed with respect to scientific grounding in the decision-making process - starting from basic decisions such as linguistic choices. It is not rare occurrence that translators act as pathfinders, having to analyse the text to be translated and find working solutions (from a functional perspective) in the process of identifying linguistic and cultural (optimal) equivalents. It is common knowledge that translation is equated to a process of cultural mediation, while encyclopaedic and cultural knowledge represents an essential dimension of the translator's competence packaging. What translators seem to lack are not only highly reliable natural and artificial knowledge databases, but also a common language shared by translators, users of translation and translation theorists. Accordingly, I plead for triangulating translation: theory - practice - use.

Prevailing ideologies and axiologies shape both translation theorists and practitioners, and the relevance of Translation Studies for the practice of translation should not be reduced to the provision of guidelines and re-usables to be adopted indiscriminately by translation trainees and professional translators. It is vital to further raise the translators' awareness with respect to

their active role as linguistic and cultural mediators and to their authorship and intellectual property rights. Translation theorists should pay more attention to the actual translators' sensitivities and concerns while translators should be more open to use the research outcomes to their best interests, i.e. to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their work.

In other words, "the changing landscape of Translation Studies" and of the profession (Baker 2014) triggers new ways of contemplating and experiencing the new (global) realities, with the translator using the available tools (I use the word *tool* as a blanket term covering the body of knowledge, technology and other available resources) in order to accommodate, meet the quality standards and raise the social relevance of the profession.

### **3. The ever (in)visible translator?**

Venuti (1995: ix) openly states in the "Preface and Acknowledgements" of *The Translator's Invisibility* that the book originates in his own work as a translator since the late 1970s, and that it envisages a wide audience: translation theorists, literary theorists and critics, translation reviewers, and "most of all" "translators and readers of translations, both professional and nonprofessional, focusing their attention on the ways that translations are written and read and urging them to think of new ones." Paradoxically, the more fluent a translation reads (fluency is associated with transparency and readability), the more invisible the translator becomes. Venuti rightly claims that

"the enormous economic and political power acquired by scientific research during the twentieth century, the postwar innovations in advanced communications technologies to expand the advertising and entertainment industries and support the economic cycle of commodity production and exchange — these developments have affected every medium, both print and electronic, by valorizing a purely instrumental use of language and other means of representation and thus emphasizing immediate intelligibility and the appearance of factuality" (Venuti 1995: 5).

Venuti referred to individual translators - we add that in-house translators of large-sized agencies and international organisations also efface the role played by the translators since the translator's individual effort is diluted in the collective workflow, and the translator's work becomes routinised on account of the tasks assigned and institutional norms of (ethical) conduct, placing particular emphasis on functionality and utilitarianism.

Once again, as far as institutional agendas are concerned, cost-effectiveness seems to prevail over socio-cultural policies and individual expectations. In spite of these, the huge volume of work and the enforced deadlines impact on the translators, asserting their interactional status as agents who are actively engaged in the construction and (re)production of institutional discourses (see Mason [2003] 2004, Arrojo 2012).

In the same climate of opinion, Baker and Pérez-González (2011:38-39) see the emergence of new forms of intersemiotic assistive mediation - for instance, subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, audio description for the blind, etc. as tools of empowerment for translators and interpreters.

### **4. Discharging (common) roles and responsibilities**

According to the *Oxford dictionary*, to *discharge* means "to do all that is required to perform (a duty) or fulfil (a responsibility)". I use it by extending the meaning to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as accompanying professionalism.

It is hard to quantify the overall impact and recognition of one's work, especially in the humanities. Undoubtedly, they can neither be evaluated against a yardstick nor is there any flawless instrument in this respect. However, quantitative and qualitative evaluations are useful in generating the high or low profile, and claims must be supported by reliable direct and indirect evidence in order to demonstrate effectiveness, scale, quality and importance of achievements.

Perhaps, what is still left out of any metrics are the commitment, enthusiasm, unleashed energy, drive and missed opportunities.

Beyond the individual level, I consider that the size and shape of the cooperation between translation theorists, translators, the industry, policy makers and other stakeholders is indicative of the preoccupation for translation quality assurance, and that the wide dissemination and transfer of research outputs will strengthen the communities of practice and professional networks alongside boosting the translator's visibility. Internally and externally focused and informed contributions do reveal engagement with the professional life and one-off duties, on a par with demonstrable benefits to the society. In my opinion, these should be correlated with the following goals:

- to secure networking and relationship building with the range of strategic partners from the business environment;
- to fuel research and teaching based on the input and feedback provided by the strategic partners and stakeholders so as to meet the requirements of the dynamic knowledge-based society and to show commitment to societal goals and economic growth;
- to provide consultancy on matters directly drawing on the capitalisation of expertise;
- to provide high quality language and translation services.

Equally important, joint events and projects are likely to create room for open discussions and round tables, allowing for updating, cross-fertilisation of ideas, setting benchmarks, and, above all, sharing a common language.

## 5. Conclusions

With an accelerating and globalised world and lifestyle, many more people and fields have been affected by and become dependent on translation. There have been various approaches to the study of translation and various shifts of attention, ranging from author-centred translation/ source text orientation to reader-oriented translation/ target text centrality and to user-centred translation, with the user being the ultimate recipient of the translated text in the very process of translation. Nonetheless, we see the future of Translation Studies as translator-oriented (*eco-translatology*), not only as a means of acknowledging the translator's visibility in his/her twofold capacity, i.e. facilitator and beneficiary of global (intercultural) communication, but also of recognizing the translator's "conscious, intentional and planned activity" (Chromá 2014: 147) empowering him/her as a driving force in today's society.

The rigid compartmentalisation of sciences or "disciplinary heredity" (Cohen and Lloyd 2014) as shaped by specific research methodologies and epistemologies belong to by-gone eras. It has become a fact that the fluidity of the 21st century scholarship favours inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary research as a dynamic and creative force and it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Translation Studies is no exception to this trend.

I strongly believe that theorising translation and doing translation mirror each other in a myriad of ways and will continue to influence and enrich each other in unexpected ways.

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