

IV Congreso Latinoamericano de Traducción e Interpretación

**HOW TO SURVIVE IN THE
TRANSLATION-MEME POOL**

María Cristina D'Gregorio
Traductora Pública

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The concept of the *meme* comes from genetics: it is the cultural equivalent of a gene. The term was introduced by **Dawkins** in his best-seller *The selfish gene* (1976). In one of his chapters he discusses how cultural phenomena can be studied in the same way as genetic ones, in that both are subject to the same Darwinian laws of natural selection. He proposes "meme" as a term to describe the evolution of cultural phenomena. **A meme is a unit of cultural transmission, a unit of imitation...** Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so **memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.** If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. (**Dawkins 1976**).

Dawkins' term itself is a good example of a meme. Since 1976 memes have appeared all over the place in research on cultural evolution. Some scientists have even looked for direct neurological correlates of memes in the brain itself, where they are seen as "constellations of activated and non-activated synapses within neural memory networks "and as competing for synaptic space" (**Hull 1982; Plotkin 1993; Delius 1989**).

Dawkins argues that organic bodies are in effect no more than survival machines for genes. **Correspondingly, it can be suggested that translations are one kind of survival machine for memes- at least for memes that can be expressed and transferred verbally.**

Mememes that promote the survival of their carriers (i.e., mostly people) tend themselves to survive; being "good ideas", they benefit their hosts, and are known as mutualist memes. "Bad" ideas, in the long run at least, do not last, as they tend eventually to kill their hosts; they are parasitic memes.

(**Andrew Chesterman**)

Let us recall Popper's theory of the three Worlds: World 1 is the physical world of objects; World 2 is the subjective mental world of personal thoughts and feelings; World 3 is that of objective knowledge, of ideas, theories, arguments etc. that are in the public domain. Each of these worlds interacts and affects the others: for instance, ideas affect behaviour, behaviour affects the physical world, which in turn inspires new ideas; and so on. As forms of objective knowledge, memes exist primarily in World 3: they affect World 2 directly (what I read affects the way I think), and World 1 indirectly (what I think affects the way I impinge on my environment).

Some memes consist of ideas about translation itself, its theory and practice. These "received ideas" are passed on from generation to generation, from teacher to trainee, from one professional to another. **At any given moment in history, in a given culture, there thus exists a meme pool of translational concepts of all kinds, all fighting for acceptance and survival. And it is precisely in this pool that the trainee translator learns to swim or otherwise drowns.**

Then, the essential questions to be addressed are:

***What are the main risks of drowning in the translation-meme pool?
What can be done about minimizing these risks?***

I) DISSECTING PARASITIC AND MUTUALIST MEMES

(i) Atheoretical attitudes

That is, the belief among some translators and many students that one does not need a translation theory in order to be able to translate. This is pure self-deception: it would not be possible to translate without a theory. A theory basically is a view of something, a conception. Holders of this belief probably mean only that their theory is common sense, or instinct, or gut feeling. Such blindness suggests a fear of knowledge (including self-knowledge) and also intellectual arrogance. (Chesterman).

He suggests that neither of these characteristics will be conducive to the survival of a professional translator.

The student body making up my course at the University would in general see themselves as "natural translators or "native translators" (terms defined by Harris- 1977- and Toury- 1980.) These terms indicate some of the ***attitudes with which these students along with many practising translators are likely to approach translation theory.*** Since they have often had experience with translation work, they believe that they already know what translation is about and therefore consider the time spent on theoretical considerations as time taken away from the actual task of translation, an activity which they see as contributing directly to their future or current employment.

Unfortunately, the students must often make a considerable leap in order to relate many and conflicting points of view about translation to their everyday problems in carrying out the process. ***Teachers of translation must be cognisant of the fact that the connection between general considerations about translation must be brought to life within the context of two language systems.***

(ii) The myth of untranslatability

The idea of untranslatability has been discussed at enormous length in the literature from a great many angles. Way back at the turn of the 18th Century, **Wilhelm von Humboldt** would impassively claim:

All translation seems to me to be simply an attempt to solve an impossible task. Every translator is doomed to be done in by one of two stumbling blocks: he will either stay too close to the original, at the cost of taste and the language of his nation, or he will adhere too closely to characteristics peculiar to his nation, at the cost of the original. The medium between the two is not only difficult, but downright impossible.

As a meme, it is extremely parasitic to its hosts, since if all translators believed it there would soon be no translators. Less absolutely, it breeds a pessimistic and defeatist attitude, a willingness to give up trying. It also affects the professional self-image of translators: " Well, if translations inevitably lose something, ***so what is the point of....*** Poetry can't be translated, ***so why bother*** ".

The partner mutualist to this meme, is the idea that translators are experts in their own right, not servile slaves of a source-text master (among others, *Holz-Mänttari* 1984). Such a meme has an obvious effect on the picture translators have of their professional role, on their own self-image and hence on the quality of their work.

iii) " Free versus Literal ? "

The "literal versus free" controversy, that is, the degree of latitude the translator is permitted in representing the source text in translation, has been more or less a constant in translation studies. (it is erroneous to assume that one-for-one equivalents exist for all lexical terms in both languages in contact: word order, sentence length, ways of presenting information, and so on are language specific). More fundamentally, still, it is erroneous to assume that the meaning of a sentence or text is composed of the sum of the meanings of the individual lexical items, so that any attempt to translate at this level is bound to miss important elements of **meaning**. The arguments are, no doubt, familiar ones. Yet the debate continues even today and literal translation has its defenders.

The belief, then, that the only decision translators have to make (or even can make!) is that of "free or literal?" is a further example of a parasitic meme.

Since the issue has held sway for centuries in writings about translation, this has been a rather long-lived meme. **Andrew Chesterman categorizes it as a parasitic meme because in the past it has tended to inhibit discussion of other parameters , and because pronouncements about translating literally or freely have often been divorced from contexts of history, culture and text type.** The "literal " end of this parameter is clearly linked to the equivalence meme: they form a meme complex (technically, a memome).

It is a fact that the source-language text (ST) and the reader of the target-language text (TT), do happen to exist within their own, different social frameworks. The social conditions in which translations are produced vary considerably as between the work of literary, religious, scientific and technical translators, between staff and freelance translators, and so on. **But dwelling on these demarcations would mask the important similarities that exist between all types of translating. It is the task of the theorist to discern regularities and patterns of behaviour where these exist, to incorporate diversity of function within an overall model of the translation process.** Kelly (1979) suggests a functional approach:

It is only by recognizing a typology of function that a theory of translation will do justice to both Bible and bilingual cereal packet.

iv) Equivalence as Sameness?

"Formal and dynamic equivalence" is **Nida's** reformulation of the problem in terms of types of equivalence appropriate to particular circumstances. By distinguishing formal equivalence (closest possible match of form and content between ST and TT) and dynamic equivalence (principle of equivalence or effect on reader of TT), Nida poses basic orientations rather than a binary choice, shifting attention away from the sterile debate of free versus literal towards the effects of different translation strategies.

Let us recall, however, the way **Nida's demand of dynamic equivalence ("same effect") in biblical translation, where the effect of the message is presumably somewhat easier to specify, has been taken as being valid for translation types** (literary translation, for example) in which "effect" is much harder to define and other

criteria may well be more relevant. (This, also, accounts for the converse accident fallacy to be treated later on).

Naturally, actual effects on receivers of texts are difficult to gauge. Consequently, it seems preferable to handle the issue in terms of equivalence of **intended effects**, thus linking judgements about what the translator seeks to achieve to judgements about the intended meaning of the ST speaker/writer. We are here in the domain of pragmatics, a discipline which over the last twenty years has brought considerable insights into the nature of intended meaning, as the relation of meaning to communicative environment and the principles of cooperation and communication between producers and receivers of texts.

The use of the term "equivalence" implies that complete equivalence is an achievable goal, as if there were such a thing as a formally or dynamically equivalent target-language version of a source-language text.

Equivalence (in some absolute sense of "sameness") is often termed "the partner parasite" to that of untranslatability." "Texts are untranslatable because equivalence is impossible. - No wonder trainees get frustrated with theory!

Chesterman terms it a meme in decline, a meme that will not survive precisely because it is increasingly perceived to be parasitic.

v) Semantic versus Communicative?

Newmark (1981) prefers the terms semantic and communicative translation, the former attempting to "render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original", -is less extreme than formal equivalence and conforms more closely to a common translation strategy. Useful as these concepts are, however, they are beset with problems. ***To begin with, (and to end with, would I claim) all translation is, in a sense, communicative. (Hatim and Mason).***

vi) Form versus Content?

Closely related to the literal versus free issue is the debate on the primacy of content over form or vice versa. Should content be faithfully rendered at all costs, and form only if the translation of content allows? The ideal would be to translate both form and content. Many, though, would claim that this is frequently not possible. The form of a source text may be characteristic of SL conventions but so much at variance with TL norms that rendering the form would inevitably obscure the message or sense of the text. The standards of stylistic acceptability for various types of discourse differ radically from language to language.

The other side of the coin would read, though: what is the peculiar Englishness of the dialogue in many of Harold Pinter's plays doomed to when modified for the sake of TL stylistic conventions? The characters are no doubt transformed into different people!. For in such cases, the "style" is the "meaning"!

So when and to what extent is the translator justified in departing from the style or manner?

Henri Meschonnic (1973) is critical of Nida's willingness to detach style from meaning: "meaning and form: there are not two dissociable, heterogeneous entities. A text

is a whole entity, to be translated as a whole." The style, in other words, is an indissociable part of the message to be conveyed.

There is a more fundamental problem, namely the term style itself. Rather than try to resolve the style and content debate, the terms in which the conflict has been traditionally stated should be re-examined. **(Hatim and Mason).**

vii) The Ghost Role versus the Invader's Role?

Inevitably, both translating and discussing translations involve making judgements. Moreover, even every reading of a text is a unique, unrepeatable act and a text is bound to evoke differing responses in differing receivers. **Reiss** (1971) would claim that "any analysis, however concerned it may be to achieve total objectivity, amounts to interpretation".

Simpson (1975), **House** (1976), and **Wills** (1982) in turn propose methodological and systematic criteria based on ST analysis and consideration of available translation procedures in an attempt to establish objectivity on a proper footing.

viii) The converse accident fallacy

This is a well-known informal fallacy, which consists in generalizing over-hastily from a non-typical particular to a general, from a specific case to all cases. In other words, it is manifested in the way some memes are taken to represent the whole picture, rather than only a part of it.

Typical instances of this fallacy occur when an ***idea pertaining to a particular text type (and even within a particular culture at a particular time) is taken to apply universally to all kinds of texts.*** The fallacy is especially prevalent in the way concepts in literary translation are taken more generally than is warranted.

Or again, consider the long-standing idea that translations are directional, going from source to target. In one sense, they are, but this is not the whole picture, and a blind focus on this metaphor prevents us from seeing its limitations. ***Rather, we might think of alternative metaphors, such as that of propagation or diffusion: ideas contained in a source text are spread, they "multiply"; they may even evolve during the translation process.*** Here again, we can think genetically: what happens in translation is that memes are propagated, in such a way that they come to exist in new environments and adapt themselves to these, hence enhancing their chances of survival. ***Translation is thus a way of affecting the developmental history, the evolution, of memes.***

ix) Ahistoricism

Memes of translation, too, have their own developmental histories. The profession itself, the memes that it has given rise to and that help to shape it, and the roles played by its professionals, all have historical roots and have evolved over time, like other forms of human activity. ***So as to be aware of their own roles as professionals in the future, trainees would do well to take a historical perspective. Such a view would also contribute to enhancing the social status of the profession.***

The risks of an ahistorical attitude is that trainees do not realize that translator roles and strategies are determined by historical, cultural and situational context.

II) TOWARDS THE IMPLICIT TEACHING OF THEORY

My Fourth-Year courses in translation theory and translation practice at the University labor their way so as to get rid of atheoretical attitudes right at the very start, by way of encouraging self-awareness of the fundamental translation norms and professional translation strategies students bring to class from their previous experience along with deep-rooting a sense of accountability. Along with such self-awareness, it is further fostered a sense of the way said norms and strategies are interpreted by contemporary professionals in the culture. Such sets of strategies are presented and practiced overtly.

Some practising translators have begun to bring their experiences to bear on the writings about translation in the last few years, but it is not about descriptive and prescriptive approaches to individual translation texts, for they only produce a series of separate experiences for students. Better students can connect these experiences into a coherent structure. However, **Gentile** believes courses must provide an overview of the phenomenon of translation and thus develop critical skills which will then be used for addressing translation problems.

- I will pick up this issue again when treating the converse accident fallacy.

The choice of elements in my course for would-be translators **is an attempt to reconcile theory with practice and set them in motion at the very start**. Many a time, however, frustration manages to creep in and doubts manage to pop up, for ...

The way trainees are exposed to this translation-meme pool will affect the way they think about translation and the way they conceive of the role of the translator, and this in turn will influence the way they themselves translate, the kinds of physical texts they produce.

Fortunately enough, however, since I am in charge of the translation practice course along with the studying in depth of the translation theory, my students are not exposed to the different attitudes found in some practioners who are blinded by the former and some teachers who would exclusively adhere to the latter.

More often than not, I happen to wade across the course in an ambitious attempt to cater for a consistent and considered approach to issues in translation, and to ***cater to a delicate balance between practical translation work and its theoretical bases.***

Again according to Gentile, ***ideally, notions treated in class should have a direct impact on and applicability to the production of a translation.*** Students must recognize schemas and apply them to the micro-problems of specific expression. This ability can be defined as the "transfer of training".

As far as the problem of transfer of training is concerned, ***the issue of what to teach and what to omit becomes important. Given the limits of time, a delicate balance is again to be sought along with a close link between exemplifications and real translation problems.***

It is for these reasons that **Gentile** does not talk about "translation theory" or a "theory of translation, but about "theoretical bases of translation".

In introducing the students to the thinking on translation, he assumes there is no such thing as a "theory of translation", for the same reasons as **Chesterman**:

"An adequate theory would not be content merely to describe or explain why; it would also attempt to predict what a translator would do..., in given circumstances. But because translation is a probabilistic activity, predictions can only be probabilistic... The challenge is to establish principles, strategies or rules that will enable predictions to be made with the highest probability possible.

One of the consequences of this approach is that, in treating the theoretical bases, greater emphasis tends to be placed on **translation as a process**, whereas the translation practice tends to concentrate on **translation as a product**.

Which takes priority over what, then? ...

Given that the target text displays only the translator's final decisions, readers perceive an end-product, a result of a decision-making process. If, as a teacher and thus a critical reader myself, was I tempted to both solely and cozily follow a product-oriented approach upon assessing my students' translations, what becomes available for my scrutiny is the end-product, the result of the translation practice rather than the practice itself. I would not have access to pathways leading to decisions, to the dilemmas to be solved by the trainee translator...

Hopefully, I set to work the process-oriented approach along with the product-oriented approach, which turns out to be a both painstaking and an often though not always- rewarding task.

Many a time, I must admit, I feel as if thrown in at the very deep end...

To put it in **Hatim and Mason's** words: ***the resulting translated text is to be seen as evidence of a transaction, involving the negotiation of meaning between producers and receivers of texts***. In the same way, the ST itself is an end-product and again should be treated as evidence of a writer's intended meaning rather than as the embodiment of the meaning itself.

It follows that the objectives of the curriculum should be constructed with the time frame of courses and the student intake and exit levels in mind. This affects the curriculum design in terms of selection of material, its presentation and the degree of emphasis given to some aspects over others ***in order to cater for the learning stage at which the students are***.

Given my course objectives and the time available, I have selected the elements I believe to be most appropriate and most likely to connect with the students' actual practice. Obviously such a connection is not made by all students, nor it is made necessarily at the point when it is needed.

III) TOWARDS COUNTERING RISKS

The teaching of translation theory can adopt a number of strategies, such as

(i) Exploiting the growth of expertise. The growth of expertise is described by the **Dreyfus brothers** (1986) in terms of five steps from novice to expert.

These steps illustrate how rules and strategies for action are first consciously recognized by the novice and the beginner; then internalized and applied consciously,

analytically; and finally used automatically, unconsciously. At the highest level of expertise, action is shaped by intuition but is always accessible to monitoring by deliberative rationality; strategies and principles can be recalled to consciousness if required.

This view of the development of expertise illustrates the significance of memes rather well. Memes are, after all, our conceptual tools of trade.

Roughly speaking, the student body making up my regular courses may initially be placed at Stage Two, that of beginning to recognize new relevant facts and new situational features and further anchoring them with others previously defined and presented. On we move to Stage Three: along we plod in an attempt to achieve competence and develop and put to work a decision-making capability, a conscious problem-solving skill, i.e., a development of expertise. This involves the ability to bring out a sense of priorities among all the relevant situational features

- My students would trudge through difficulties: success is many a time elusive.

But, whenever intuition begins to pop up and the learner reacts more holistically, without conscious analysing, the overriding feeling is that of realization.

(ii) Of particular relevance here are memes concerning translation norms, and concerning the typical strategies that professionals tend to use.

Students should be aware of fundamental translation norms right from the start. Following **Chesterman**, the four basic norms are: a) expectancy norms, governing the expectations of readers about what texts of various kinds should look like; (b) the relation norm, governing the expected relation between source and target texts of different kinds (it is part of the translator's task to decide what this relation should be); (c) the communication norm, governing the achievement of optimal communication between all parties concerned; and (d) the accountability norm, governing the ethical behaviour of translators

Trainees should also be aware of professional translation strategies, i.e., ways in which translation problems tend to get solved. For instance: (a) syntactic strategies; (b) semantic strategies and (c) pragmatic strategies.

At later stages of training, when such memes have become familiar, they become useful as part of deliberative rationality at various levels.

At a more general level, another mutualist meme that deserves to be introduced at an early stage is the idea that all writing is translating. This meme has emerged in many different contexts ranging from semiotics (most recently in **Gorlée** 1994) to hermeneutics (e.g. **Steiner** 1975) and the deconstructionist view of intertextuality (**Gentzler** 1993).

This meme is made good use of in the suggestion by **Jakobsen** (1994) that the teaching of translation should start "from the other end" i.e., from practice in target language writing per se, rather than from a source text.

I would round off this concept by claiming that not only practice in Spanish writing is badly needed, but so (and foremost) is reading.

(iii) A Holistic View. *To counteract the risk of a partial and blinkered view of translation*, one should clearly aim at a holistic view which is as wide as possible, seeking to cover the whole field from a bird's eye perspective. *This means balancing ideas from literary translators with those of technical ones, or of people working on machine translation, for instance.*

(iv) The evolution of translation memes. One aspect of such a holistic approach to the teaching of translation theory is the historical one, drawing attention to the way memes have evolved over history, moving in and out of fashion, submerging in one culture only to re-emerge in another.

Or, consider the meme embodying the idea that the source culture is superior and the target inferior or peripheral, so that translation is a way of building up this target culture. (There is also, of course, the reverse meme, where the target is superior and the source is inferior).

A different reason for teaching translation memes from a historical angle comes from Darwin's idea that the development of an individual recapitulates that of the species as a whole.

Were there indeed parallels between the development of the individual and that of the profession (or the theory as a whole), a historical approach might well reinforce and encourage the gradual development of trainees' own professional self-image along with own professional role awareness. (Chesterman)

IV) DISSECTING MY STUDENTS' CHANCES OF SURVIVAL IN THE TRANSLATION –MEME POOL

(i) Do they actually need a theory? It may help. Students do not know what such help may amount to, and they'd rather adhere to what they are already acquainted with and aware of. In their opinion, practice, anyway, is far more important than theory.

(ii) How dangerous may the meme of untranslatability be for students? Paralyzingly dangerous. Though they erroneously tend to relate this meme to literary translation almost exclusively.

(iii) What does their involvement with the "literal versus free" controversy amount to? As they gain self-confidence, they tend to shift from the less committed literal to the increasingly risky free approach.

(iv) Equivalence or Sameness? I don't think they are aware of the difference. However, they struggle to achieve the "same effect" goal, and sympathise a great deal with the dynamic equivalence approach.

(v) Semantic versus Communicative? / Author versus Reader-Centred? Again, as they gain confidence and start building up their competence, they understand it is not a matter of "versus" but rather of "and" and sometimes "or". But above all students know that it amounts to a lot more than just sticking labels.

(vi) Form versus Content? Content, absolutely. As I mentioned in (ii) above,

they mostly relate untranslatability to literary translation, and further perceive that literary translation is far beyond their scope. I fully share this perception.

vii) The Ghost Role versus the Invader's Role? Students bring along an idealized picture of the translator's invisibility metaphor and consequently struggle to achieve the ghost role. Over time, they realize what their previous experiences and knowledge of the world amount to.

viii) The risk of generalizing? Yes, absolutely. Generalizing provides them with both confidence and easiness. So why bother to dissect cases? Over time, again, they manage to visualize whole and partial pictures.

ix) Do students take a historical perspective of the translation memes? They don't. At the cost of not realizing that translator roles and strategies are by far determined by historical, cultural and situational context. A lot of work needs to be done to achieve this perspective.

How to survive in the translation-meme pool, it was about.

By way of dissecting parasitic and mutualist memes, it was also about.

By way of the implicit teaching of theory, it was further about.

By way of countering the risks, it was furthermore about.

By way of my attempt to reconcile theory with practice, it is all about...