

IV Congreso Latinoamericano de Traducción e Interpretación

**PRINCIPLED IN PRACTICE,
PRACTICAL IN PRINCIPLE
THE LINK BETWEEN THEORY AND
PRACTICE IN TRANSLATION**

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Introduction

There has always been an unsettled debate between proponents of a theory-free practice of translation and those who believe that theory is an integral part of translators' training. The arguments the initial group provides relate to the fact that translators simply are able to conduct translations without having to rely on theoretical views which they say in most cases make their task even more complex, these views themselves, they say, are single-minded, hindered, untested; not to mention those highly controversial ones. Theory proponents on the other hand, are adamant that a translator should know about experts' views on matters related to translation. If this does not make them carry out their job with greater success, they insist, it will at least provide them with invaluable insights about a number of nuances related to the practice. So, how relevant is 'theory' in translation?

1- Theory is irrelevant

Why look at theory for an essentially practical and performance-gearred job? (Karl Mc Laughlin, April 2002, Bradford University, personal communication)

Can't you just translate?
(Janet Fraser 1999, Westminster University)

Why do we indulge ourselves in this sterile debate?
(An MA student, Salford University).

Translation Theory? Spare us!!!!!!
(Emma Wagner 2002, Senior Translation Manager, The European Commission, Luxembourg)

With the current approach, translation studies of the kind pursued at West German universities produce few results of interest to people outside the community formed by the translation scholars themselves... we need more orientation toward the needs and interests of practicing translators and their clients. (Lars Berglund 1990, cited in Chesterman & Wagner 2002)

Assessing Baker's *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies* (1998), Graham Cross (1998, cited in Chesterman & Wagner 2002) believes that it was

a remarkable storehouse of interesting information. But my doubts... remain. Will it help one to become a better translator? I doubt it. ...Does it help to give the translation profession a feeling of self-esteem and worth? Hardly. ... From the point of view of my working life, it is interesting but irrelevant.

Let us first attempt to understand the incentives which led to this skepticism.

It is undeniable that what theorists themselves are selling is itself not something that is criticism-free. That is the stand taken by their own fellow theorists. One has simply to

consider the following: a multitude of terms is used to refer to 'theory'. Or, at least, sister disciplines: Translation Theory, Models of Translation, Translation Studies. Although many established researchers strive to diffuse the disagreement [Chesterman, personal communication; Snell-Hornby (1991)] which has been a subject of focus for a number of scholars practicing translators and trainee-translators. Or, at least some of them, are unsure about the elements littering what Lambert (1991) refers to as "genealogy of concepts".

Chesterman (2002:7) concedes that "...people have different opinions about what kind of a discipline translation theory actually is". Within the same framework, Wagner (ibid) argues that [within theory] "there is often no single solution, but there *might be* a range of standard solutions. Secondly, I don't expect to find it in one person's head".

1.1- Multiplicity of standard solutions

From the above statements one can understand that when faced with a problem, the translator often find himself/herself stranded between a multitude of often contradicting solutions which by default makes his/her uncertainty even more acute. To better understand these two arguments, imagine a trainee-translator who lacks the ability to determine what is the basic unit of translation. Let us fetch within literature to try and help this person. Consider the following views related to defining what different scholars consider a *unit of translation*.

Newmark (1987:30) "argue that normally [one] translates sentence by sentence". He, therefore, concludes that "the sentence is the 'natural' unit of translation" (Idem:65). A 'text' for Newmark could be one sentence and even one word. But, let us not dwell in the pragmatics of 'word', 'sentence' and 'text' because it is not within the scope of the matter being discussed.

At the first glance, Basnett (1980;1991) seems to agree with Newmark until she clarifies that her notion of a 'text' refers to a prose text.

Other rather confusing description of notions and practices related to translation and which involve entirely clashing statements where a translator struggles to put his/her hand on common ground between them, and consequently complicate the problem further. Consider the following for instance:

Reiss & Vermeer interpret equivalence on the basis of each individual text. Toury, on the other hand, focuses on their functions and communicative effects.

Also, Baker's (1992), much influential "In Other Words" which emphasises different kinds of equivalencies, at the word, phrase, grammar, text, pragmatic levels can be juxtaposed to Basnett's (1991:25) view on this very notion:

Translation involves far more than replacement of lexical [i.e. words] and grammatical items between languages.... Once the translator moves away from close linguistic equivalence, the problems of determining the exact nature of the level of equivalence aimed for begin to emerge.

Let us now look at another type of problem: translating culture. Here, I would like to invite you to imagine a situation where a translator is faced with exigencies related to a

translation of a literary text. What this translator finds readily available in the literature related to the matter available and which had variable impacts on the subject as a whole are views not too distant from Venutti's (1996:196) following statement:

The aim of translation is to bring back the cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text... where translation serves an imperialist appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political.

Remember the starting point was a translator who has before him/her a volume of sensitive and culturally mined structures. His/her aim is to find a 'strategy' which enables him/her to handle his/her work free of any 'imperialist appropriation' and a 'domestication' of the text in hand. It is imperative to stress here, that dissimilar to Venuti's calls, a large volume of translation literature invites translators to put the TT reader at the fore, in actual fact. However, Venuti has failed to provide our translator with the necessary mechanisms to enable him/her to carry out a translation that is in harmony with Venuti's own claims.

1.2- Theory uses an 'alien' code

Practitioners and trainee-translators have long voiced their concern over the ambiguous, unnaturally coined lexicon used by theorists to often describe canonical notions and concepts. A number of examples spring to mind amongst which Hatim's use of '*semio-pragmatic communicative interface*', '*reflexivity*', van Leuven-Zwart's *architranseme*; House's *erroneous overt* and *erroneous covert errors* and many, many others

Thus, one cannot hide that practicing translators have some valid arguments which created an ever-growing feeling of discontent and a contributive-less feeling towards the dichotomy 'theory' vs 'practice'.

But, is this skepticism entirely founded?

2- Theory is relevant

I invite you once again to go back to the mistrust expressed through the statements mentioned at the start of this talk. Remember, they all raise questions about how can theory help practitioners do their job better? How can theory boost translators' self-esteem?

Theorists consider that if a person feels in need of answers to such concerns then there must be something seriously wrong with at least the way the concept 'theory' is perceived. In other words, let us just single out 'theory' as a blanket-term. Would those who are raising such questions believe that if a person reads about musicology, does that mean that they will necessarily become a better musician? Does a person who read about sociology necessarily become a better person in society? Does a person who knows physics, mathematics, control engineering will manufacture... say a plane that will never crash?

The answer is that they might well do. But not necessarily.

Basnett (1988:76) also has something to say regarding the matter. She is unequivocal in stressing the "need for a close relationship between the theory and the

practice of translation". She portrays "[t]he translator who makes no attempt to understand the *how* behind the translation process..." as a "...driver of a Rolls who has no idea what makes the car moves" (italic in original).

By raising those concerns, theory-skeptical practitioners are portraying themselves as incapable beings who are unable to act independently of their instructors. I suppose, no one would like him/herself to be seen in such a fashion.

The core of the matter is that a theory of translation was never intended to provide a recipe for practitioners to imitate. Its *raison d'être* is to observe how people translate and make comments on their performances. The aim? Obviously to understand how these people (translators) are managing to carry out an incredibly complicated task. Chesterman emphasises that what theorists do is to study translators not to give them instructions. However, many theorists believe that in some instances, their work can be relevant to translators. Stecconi, elaborating on Hermans (2002) view that "looking at ideas about translation helps [the translator] become more aware of what he is doing". Stecconi added that "it helps them *understand* what they are doing". (Hermans & Stecconi; 2002)

Chesterman (1996) believes that translators who lack an adequate theoretical background are like "amateur carpenters, trying to make a descent book-case but without using obvious things like a saw, a hammer, screw-driver etc"

Many of those practitioners would certainly say: here we go again: just words but no practical guidance. Well, Chesterman, in my opinion, does provide simple practical tools. He advises practitioners and trainee-translators to consider four concepts: Transposition; Deverbalization; Iconicity and Relevance.

2- a- **Transposition**, first introduced by Vinay & Darbelnet (1958) simply refers to changing the word class: interchange between verbs, adjectives and nouns for instance. This techniques, he believes, makes the translator's task much more bearable and eliminates weighty sentences.

2- b- **Deverbalization** means that the translator/interpreter has to distance him/herself from the surface structure of the source text to reach the intended meaning. The next step is to express that meaning in the TL. "Deverbalization is a technique used to avoid unwanted formal interference: professional translators need to process the intended meaning in their own words, rather than try to mechanically manipulate ST structure", (Chesterman;2002:7)

2-c- **Iconicity** refers to the matching of form and meaning, so that the form reflects the meaning or the experience that is being described. By this it is meant that one should say: *Switch on after plugging* (non-iconic); as opposed to *Plug in before switching on* (iconic). It is a matter of stating things according to the order they are uttered.

2-d- **Relevance** refers to the assumption that what is relevant to TT reader is usually different from what is relevant to a ST reader.

The idea was first introduced by the scholar Ernst-August Gutt (1990; 2000) when he applied the work of Wilson & Sperber (Relevance Theory) to translation. Gutt believes that, for the translator to communicate successfully, he has to arrive at the intended

interpretation of the ST. The next step is to determine in what respect his translation should resemble the original in order to be consistent with the principle of relevance bearing in mind the cognitive reality of his audience.

The principle of relevance is based on the fact that a speaker says only what he believes is relevant to his/her addressee and the addressee in turn makes an effort to understand what his speaker is trying to communicate to him.

Gutt suggest the use of explicitness and implicitness:

Explicitness: make what is implicit in ST explicit in TT

Eg. WMD = اسلحة الدمارلماشل

Implicitness: make explicit implicit.

Eg. *des progrès accomplis* = success or failure.

Gutt's provides a new approach to translation. His statement "there is no need for a distinct general theory of translation" was and is still regarded extreme. In actual fact, his new vision does not call for the abolishing of theory of translation. Instead, it gives the translator more freedom of choice and the way to attain that is simple. The key idea is the principle of relevance.

Many theorists believe that the blame should be partly put on the current status of professional translators in their professional environment, rather than criticise what theorists have and have not provide them with. It is the standard nowadays to see the translator carrying endless titles but that of 'translator'. They are communication consultants, admin, clerks, project managers etc...etc. They are bombarded with an unimaginable volume of work which often falls outside their area of expertise.

Yves Gambier (2000) makes an interesting argument by saying: as if for some "theory must provide a recipe, or establish rules to determine deadlines and costs; establish quotes or a bill ...etc. And, as if for others "practice was an apology for lack of knowledge, an exclusion of thought, an obsession with routine". This attitude, he carries on, ignores "what a theory is for, what its objectives are. It considers practice as unique, homogeneous, similar in all cases, in all times. "Far from trite manichaeism and simplistic dualism", he warns, "the reality is far more complex" (my translation)

Theorists urge those people to look at the real causes of their discontentment. Theorists also wants to collaborate with them more to enable them portray a true picture about what it is they are doing.

Conclusion

To sum up, one can simply suggest that the more appropriate approach to save this dilemma is to be principled in practice and practical in principle. What practicing translators want to see is a different theory; perhaps a theory which focuses on fresh research methods. A theory that is more practice-oriented which takes its material from good performances with the ultimate aim to make them better.

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