Translation: Reviewing the Role and Reach of Theories

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Many new comers to translation wrongly believe it as an exact science, and mistakenly assume a firmly defined one-to-one correlation exists between the words and phrases in different languages which make translations fixed....http://www.axistranslation.com/translation-"article/what-is-translation.htm. 12/10/2015. (1).

Abstract: In this paper, an attempt is made to reconsider the fate and place of theories vis à vis the task of translating one language into another, in spite of their popularity in scholarly studies. The idea is to re-submit the central concept of theory to a refreshing review such that the implicit spirituality involved in the task of translating could be given its right place and the central role of cultural specificity and inter-territorial constraints could be properly highlighted. It will also permit us to accord the necessary prestige and honour to unpredictable intellectual upsurge usually described as 'brain wave' noticeable with authors of translation and often difficult to plot within a theoretical graph. Using French, English and Yoruba as key references, the paper ends with the assertion that, very often, the product of translation does not allow a direct insight into a given theory of the author's final access to the product. Key words: translation, theory, translator-critic, Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT), Source language (SL), Target Language (TL),

1. Introduction

This short paper begins with an obsession with the obvious: what is translation? The reasons for this obsession are several. The first, perhaps the most obvious, is the popularity of the misconception among the non-initiates that translation is synonymous with interpretation. The second reason is technical; it is that translation is defined in different ways according to perspectives. This approach often tends to leave out the need for a holistic, base-line approach to the effort so much so that translation is seen by some as a process, by others as an activity or an exercise and yet, by some others, as a style or an operation, each being simultaneously acceptable and debatable, thanks to the fact that there is no attempt at cross-border examination of the approaches. The third reason why a position on a definition of translation should be taken in a paper of this nature

is that the paper is itself a query on, or, to put it less frontally, an inquiry into, the theoretical foundations swarming translation studies today. A final reason is tied to the controversy surrounding the fortune of translation vis à vis unwritten languages. It is also pertinent to wonder whether the process of moving an oral text to a written mode is not in a way akin to some kind of 'translation'. Or are we translating or simply 'transcoding'? There are, of course, a few more reasons. But time and space may not allow us to consider them.

2. Definitions of Translation

Now, what is translation? Like we said earlier, many definitions exist. Consider the following, among others: Translation is the rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL) so as to ensure that the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and the structure of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible but not so closely that the TL structures will be seriously distorted. (Bassnett-Mcguire 2)

According to Henri Van Hoof (1989), quoting Cassagrande (1954), traduire est un art ...une pesée sans cesse renouvelée.... traduire, c'est peser, c'est comparer, c'est confronter deux systèmes, non seulement deux lexiques, deux syntaxes, deux structures, mais deux génies.

'Translation is the communication of the meaning of a source-language text by means of an equivalent target-language text.' The Oxford Companion to the English Language, Namit Bhatia, ed., (1051-1054). Citing Wikipedia, 'Translation is an activity comprising the interpretation of the meaning of a text in one language in one language - the source text- and the production, in another language, of a new, equivalent text -the target text'. http://www.axistranslation.com/translati on consulted 12/10/2015. According to Jean-René Lamiral, translation is 'une activité humaine universelle, rendue nécessaire à toutes les époques et dans toutes les parties du globe' (qui sert à remplacer) 'la lecture du texte original'

These are highly sophisticated definitions of the concept of translation and the level of sophistication of each is probably best measured by the reach of the philosophical perspectives nourishing it. While Mcguire's (1991) definition is anxious to capture the dignity or integrity of the source language, that of Van Hoof (1989) calls attention to the dynamic essence of translation. In Wikipedia, we are dealing with emphasis on the intellectual gymnastics that precedes and shapes translation. This gymnastics is called 'interpretation'. Lamiral's definition, unlike others', reminds us of the fact that translation is primarily a human activity for human consumption. So, we can see that all the definitions are (a) a product of a given vision and (b) largely complementary. However, from a reductionist view-point, translation will, for our purpose, be defined as simply and basically the faithful transfer of information in a written text from one language to another. In this connection, three items 'faithful', 'information' and 'written text' are crucial. While we all know the importance of this triangular journey of the translator, we need to be reminded that the translator's attitude to each member of the tripod is as important as the tripod taken as a whole.

It is in fact this attitudinal posture that determines how to assess the quality and drive of the exercise. A summary question that most translations seem to impose is: Is translation seeking to separate the world or seeking to unify it? Having satisfied ourselves about the concept of translation in comprehensive terms, let us now consider the concept of theory in scientific inquiry.

3. Re-examining the Role of Theories

By popular, thinking, a theory is a general statement of fact derived from a speculative hypothesis or a set of such hypotheses. A theory is thus an abstraction waiting to be subjected to a real test of practical verification. In a way, a theory is the product of a cyclic phenomenon which draws its strength from raw intuitive data and, passing through generalized processing, ends up as a surface -structure statement waiting for a given set of raw data to verify it. As far as translation is concerned, from Cicéron (1921) to the present times represented by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), Catford (1967), Lederer (1976) and Seleskovitch (1980), we can see a current of abstraction characterized by tentativeness, openness and varying levels of delicacy but all fed by a primary philosophical decision. Such is the nature of theories that they are simultaneously new and old, manifesting experience borne out of experience. But like Paul J. Dimaggio has said: ....good theory is so difficult to reduce routinely, in part, because "goodness" is multidimensional. The best theory often combines approaches to theorizing, and the act of combination requires compromise between competing and mutually incompatible values (1995:396).

However intricate assessing the premises of theory may be, we still need theories for our work for many reasons. First, and this is not limited to translation, theories tend to keep our raw imagination and intellectual buoyancy in check. Thus, it is theories that provide the framework within which to act and to react. Thanks to theories, therefore, exuberance or exorbitance is easily noticed and, where appropriate, reviewed. Secondly, with regard to translation, theories provide the leitmotiv for the type of sense we should expect from the translated work. Thirdly, translating within a given theory implies a choice among options. This, of course, also means that a work can be open to multiple translations depending on the theoretical choice made by translators, leading to what we refer to as 'traduction plurielle' the type of which we find of works of legends like Shakespeare and Molière,. Related to the last point is the fact that having a theory behind a translation supports the assessment of that translation. Is it close or not to the original? Is it, in fact, meant to be close? If yes, in what sense? Is it with a view to capturing the linguistic message or the cultural message, with a view to satisfying the original author or the 'secondary' author? So, when we put all the aforesaid together, we should have no doubt at all in our minds that, indeed, there is a good place for theory in translation, whatever may be the character or spirit of the text translated.

4. The Worries

However, we would like to argue that there is a lurking abuse of theories in an attempt to apply them, and this is why we are worried. The first point of worry

is that we do not seem to know who should apply the theories or at what point they should be applied. Regarding who should apply them, we should be able to distinguish between the translator (T), the translator-critic (TC) and the translation-student (TS), the three main handlers of translation. The story is often told of how authors of translated texts are asked how they arrived at their final products. In other words, interviewers are interested in the authors' theories. In our view, the question does not really arise or, if it does at all, the answer may be convoluted, insincere or unreliable. This is simply because, most often, translators behave like artists whose productivity depends on unpredictable creative impulse, leaving little or no room for prescriptive genius. In that circumstance of being governed by a creative spell, the question of 'how' may be difficult to answer in all sincerity. It might sound like asking a driver to account for every mechanical detail of HOW he drove from one major location to another, or an oral poet how he strings his thoughts together to match the rhythm of his chant. How many times have we not marveled at the skill of religious interpreters who display near-flawless inter-lingual transfer even without the supportive background of a given theory?

Strictly speaking, therefore, it is our belief that it is rather the responsibility of the 'traductologue', the translator-critic (TC) to discover the probable theoretical drive behind the work in translation, and not that of the translator. Even then, it must be admitted that his can only be an attempt and not an absolute discovery, given the multi-

faceted approach to dealing with a translated work. So, one is worried when one hears people insist on knowing from the author what theories were at work during the work itself or on relying absolutely on the author's information when we do (or should) know that the process of translation depends, more than anything else, on grappling with how to practically solve an urgent practical problem. The truth about translation activity is that it is like a meal whose ingredients are best assessed only after it has been tasted. Again, we must reiterate that the position of the paper is NOT to discredit theories but to relocate their angle of relevance.

On another plane, one given theory, in spite of its beauty of caption and delicacy of application, often hides the fact of its being ' limitedly' useful in explaining the product of a translation process. In other words, it is not always the case that one theory will be strong or delicate enough to capture all the nuances of a given text, especially when it is a literary text. In the opinion of André Levefère (1978: 234-35), for example, a critical translation problem arises when translation theories are viewed against strong literary traditions such as are found in Arabic. According to him, translating from Arabic, a language with no epic tradition but rich in lyrics, into a European language rich in the reverse poses a serious generic problem; does it imply that all translations of Arabic lyric poetry, for example, will need to be viewed through the prism of Western literary tradition? Given that open question, attempting to award a theory to a particular product looks partial, decidedly biased and

reflective of a desire to disregard the intrinsic 'meander' quality of a natural language. One must therefore be slow to conclude, for instance, that in such and such a text, Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence is apparent as opposed to B which carries evidence of a strong reliance of Seleskovitch's interpretative theory, in text B, Catford's linguistic theory applies while in text C Rifaterre's semiotic approach explains things best.

Sometimes, one wonders if translation theories are not, after all, an expression of given perspectives which perspectives now determine what to make of a text billed for translation. If this is so, then to what extent can we afford to be dogmatic in the evaluation of the translated text without reference to, or being oblivious, of the set perspective? A theory that stems from a view of translation activity as primarily an art, for example, cannot but tend to accord a pride of place to creativity, ingenuity, surprise, in brief, a form of active spirituality. This is the kind of treatment given by most critics to works by Cicéron and Edgar Allan Poe in the French translation of the 'Raven; by Stephanie Mallarmé, Charles Baudelaire and Henri Parisot. (Mcguire,1991) In the same manner, a translator-critic that has been trained to perceive a translated text as a product of dynamic equivalence à la Nida will be tempted to see the target language as unfinished as long as there is a missing link between the source message and the target message despite structural or syntactic similarities between the two texts. Again, on perspectives, imagine a text taken through the mould of interpretative psychology. It will not be a surprise if such a text misses details

such as laid bare by proverbial convergence. This often happens when texts with rich cultural ethos are being translated into a language where such ethos is either non-existent or mild. A case in point is a deeply Yoruba text which is for translation into, say English. The question of 'how do you put it?' now arises especially when proverbs such as ile l'a a wo k'a to so omo l'oruko are up for translation in translation. (Family condition dictates what to name a child)?

Native speakers of the language would know the difficulty that lies in wait for them in their attempt to provide an English equivalent in its direct intellectual form. It is that type of difficulty that makes the interpretative model rather appealing. Our point here is that without a readiness to assimilate theories several facts of the text may be missing. Yet, the overwhelming profile of a particular theoretical tradition could lead to a neglect of information which, perhaps, only another theoretical tradition could unravel. See again, for example, how the tonolgy of Yoruba has contributed to transmitting a message that, in non-tone language can only be narrowly captured in translation. A good example of this can be found in a retort like: 'Òmìnira kọ, òmìnìrà ni' which may only be timidly captured by 'Independence, my foot!' or as found in Okediji's Réré rún (1973) where a special type of reduplication has produced a special problem for theory. Or, what theory will lead the way to the successful translation of Idowu's 'Àpà alápà gbogbo'? (1973: 1), A rendering of this as '(You) miserable bunch of profligates' or .'Profligates of the highest order' can be said to be very

close to the spirit of the text. but to what extent either of them responds to a given theory is open to question.

Looking at the prestige enjoyed by current theories used in, or propounded for translation, one would discover a tilt towards Western scholars. It is these scholars who have consistently shaped the thoughts of translation critics and even teachers of translation practically all over the world. From J. Etienne Dolet (1540) to Jeremy Munday (2007) passing through Vinay et al (1958) and George Steiner (1975), there has been a consistent exploitation of European languages and culture in arriving at translation hypotheses and postulations, the result being that translation processes tend to be seen through the European prism. There seems thus to be no place for a second thought about these processes. Yet, a second thought is desirable when we remember the interesting peculiarities provided by languages and cultures outside Europe and America. While it may be valid to be able to explain how translation works generally across languages all over the world, we suspect that using raw materials exclusively from Indo-European languages may tend to obscure facts that are precious to translation processes involving other languages in the world. It is true, for example, that processes like transposition, suppression, calque, restructuring, equivalence, interpreting, are common to texts, given what Popovic, cited by Susan Bassnett-Mcguire (1991:27) refers to as the 'invariant core', it is doubtful if the surface structure of some less known languages will not favour a review of some processes or an admission of fresh

processes. Let us take for example, the popular seven processes of translation advanced by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958). A study of these processes: emprunts, calque mot à mot, transposition, modulation, équivalence, adaptation, will reveal a consistent reference to either English or French. This is understandable because the thrust of the work actually hinges on the structure of both languages.

However, experience has shown that it is a great challenge for students in the Nigerian environment, for example, to find immediate or ready data in their languages to support the processes proposed. Matters are made worse when, for instance, students of translation are required to provide illustrative evidence to support the validity of these processes, using their own self-acclaimed languages. In other words, even when this evidence is or should be available in these languages, the over-dependence of students on ready-made examples from the established authors hardly allows them to think out of the box, thereby contributing to stifling the strength of theories as the latter's universality of application remains often un-tested. Still on thinking out of the box and the popularity of theories, one is tempted to wonder too whether some theories would not have benefited from a critical review if subjected, for example, to African data. Shouldn't a few facts of language in Yoruba, Hausa, Urhobo, and Hausa, for example, encourage a review of the meaning of suppression, borrowing, stuffing calque, transposition, etc. when translations of numbering, greetings, insults, incantations, hypocoristics, panegyrics

in such culturally sensitive communicative events as 'dirging'?

It is probably in reaction to worries like this that Indian scholars can be said to be right in clamouring for a re-think of translation theories. In their view, it is the tendency to keep uncritically within Western translation canons that led to the temptation to literally force the ' facts of life' of non-European languages into theoretical prisms expounded in these canons. No wonder why, today, in re-thinking translation, the Indian scholar, K. Satchidanandan (2001), has proposed that an inward-looking approach be adopted to reflect those values that are specific to translation effects in non-Western contexts (5-8). It is in doing that, in his opinion, (and we share this opinion), we can review the theory that sees translated texts as being 'secondary' products rather than being at par with the original. Without a study of how Indian poets move seamlessly from one language to another such that 'the best poets are translators just as the best translators are poets', such a conclusion would have been laughable in classical translation theories.

Another point that calls for worry has to do with the so-called dichotomy between faithful translation and transparent translation. For years, the dichotomy seems to have drawn translation scholars apart, though not for the same reasons. This has meant a lingering controversy over which translation is more powerful: the one which insists on capturing the meaning essentials of a text i.e. the faithful translation or the one that puts premium on idiomatic translation i.e. the one in apparent conformity with the structural demand of the target language as

assessed by a native speaker. While both can go pari pasu, only a few translators, in practice, can achieve the feat. While some scholars like Lawrence Venuti believe in a translation that draws the reader towards the author others like John Reed tend to want authors to move towards the reader. While in one breath, we have what has been called 'foreignization', in another we have what may be called 'indigenization'. Both perspectives have produced an interesting but disquieting terrain for building lasting theoretical foundation, especially such that both perspectives have competing appeal. Apart from the fear of perpetuating Euro-centric paradigms, there is also the debate over translatability that has tended to create holes for translation theories. In the face of that debate, it is yet to be seen how the stability of theories can be sustained.

Still against the background of theories and worries, one cannot but mention the role of creativity in translation. The general opinion is that translation, particularly, literary translation, often thrives on the creative genius of the translator, which often allows the latter to escape the snares of apparently 'intractable' lexical equivalence. Now, how does the theory of translation prepare us for the exploitation of this creative genius? What template exists that gives a fair idea of when, contextually, to fall back on these precious personal spiritual resources? As long as we are still groping for an answer, we may not be able to grant total confidence to our theories.

As if this is not enough, we have the problem of determining whether translation is an art or a craft, whether it is a product of unreachable but palpably

sublime recreation, borrowing from some sort of spiritual initiative or a product of settled restructuring and editorial skill. While the opposition is becoming less and less sharp these days, it is all the same there. In the face of the fleeting debate, we cannot but be concerned about the implications of the debate for a good theory of translation. This is the more so when a good theory should, in our opinion, depend on whether translation is seen as an art or a science. Tied to this question is the place of understanding how mental processes that are at work before translation can be said to be successful. The role of cognitive linguistics is not to be underestimated in this regard. Now, it is no secret that little or nothing is going on in the field to the extent that little or nothing can be said to have been gained from it by way of application, motivation or inference. In simple terms, a sustained theory of translation, to be robust and universally reliable, will need to feed substantially from cognitive linguistics, which, at present, is relatively at its infancy.

Finally, the arrival on the scene of CAT (Computer Assisted Translation) thanks to which we now talk of Machine or Google Translation is a factor that must be taken into account in a comprehensive discussion of translation theories. This is, in particular, because of the fact that it has provided another window for studying translation processes and, consequently, for assessing translation. In regard of the theme of the present paper, it is of interest to determine to what extent modern technology has contributed to re-shaping the face of theories of translation such that we can ask whether

or not human and mechanical processes are, in any way, close or separate. For example, to what extent can machine translation be adjudged to be 'faithful'? If, as we all know, most critics will assign a 'oui, mais' to the question, does it not suggest that a different base theory is at work? Yet, the intrinsic value of machine translation, especially in terms of 'rapid response', cannot go unacknowledged.

5. Conclusion

In sum, while theories are useful for translation practice, we must be mindful of who needs them – translation-critics and translation students primarily, both of them being the classic mid-wives of translation works. Authors of translation should, in our view, not be burdened with theory (unless they themselves are 'traductologues') since theoretical preoccupations are synonymous with a postmortem rather than with recovery strategies.

Secondly, we should take note that just one theory may not provide the clue to translation processes since the same text can reveal the translator as being simultaneously creative and servile, simultaneously original and mechanical. One is then worried that theories, rather than accelerate the pace of translation if applied by the translator, may tend to impede it and even obstruct creativity. After all, translation as a mimetic activity with a human touch, also carries along with it not just its subtleties and frailties but also its intuitive essence.

In other words, theories are not always consistent with the mental and spiritual outburst associated with the translation process. Thirdly, given the prestige of theories, those who depend on them for

their analysis may be so glued to a particular theory that they find themselves 'limited' by that theory. In a way, then, one is worried that the popularity of a given theory may tend to shroud creativity, evolution of thought structure and natural response to the inner message of the text, especially the literary text.

In fine, we are pleading that data for translation theories be reviewed to accommodate non-Western resources so that these theories may benefit from these resources or create room for fresh theories. Or why must translation theories be so thoroughly dominated by insights from Western cultures?

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