THE RELEVANCE OF THEORY FOR TRANSLATORS: TRANSLATION THEORY REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

Translation Theory has been traditionally marginalized in the practice of translation and has been considered within the field as a minor, not relevant discipline. In this essay I will show that this understanding is far from being precise: translation theory is not only important but necessary for Translation Studies and translators. In order to show this relevance, I will first review different approaches in translation theory using a genealogical method—from the Platonic approach, to the linguistics-inspired approach and the scientific model, and finally to post-Nietzschean approaches— to demonstrate that theory and practice of translation are intertwined and that theory is beneficial and necessary for translators, even inherent to the practice of translation.

KEYWORDS: translation theory, translation studies, essentialist tradition, cultural turn

RESUMEN

La relevancia de la teoría para los traductores: la teoría de la traducción revisada

La Teoría de la Traducción ha sido una disciplina que tradicionalmente se ha marginalizado en pos de la práctica de la traducción y se ha considerado como un ámbito menor e inferior respecto a esta. Con este artículo se pretende demostrar que esta idea no es precisa: la teoría de la traducción no solo es importante, sino necesaria para los Estudios de Traducción y para todos los traductores. Para ello se presentarán diferentes enfoques de la teoría de la traducción siguiendo un método genealógico –del enfoque platónico, al enfoque lingüístico y científico para terminar con los post-Nietzscheanos- demostrando que la teoría y la práctica de la traducción están inherentemente unidas y son necesarias la una para la otra.

PALABRAS CLAVE: teoría de traducción, estudios de traducción, tradición esencialista, giro cultural

1. ESSENTIALIST OR PLATONIC TRADITION

Translation theory has been traditionally framed in essentialist terms. The Platonic essentialist tradition understands translation as a derivative secondary activity regarding an original text. Plato made a distinction between the world of Forms or Ideas and the sensorial world in what we live. The world that we perceive through our senses is a derivative inferior copy of the transcendent world. On the other hand, the world of Ideas is where Truths are located. Truths are timeless universals that can be accessed through reason and philosophers, in the Platonic understanding, are those in search of them. The process is explained by Plato in *The Republic* in the following way: God creates the ideal Forms; the carpenter copies the Form creating a material object; the artist, instead of taking the original Form as a model, takes the copy, making images and illusions instead of true knowledge (Plato 1997). The artist, taking a copy of the original Form as a model instead of the Form itself, introduces a deceiving multiplicity where good from bad can no longer be distinguished. As Socrates puts it in "Book X" of *The Republic*:

> Imitation is far removed from the truth, for it touches only a small part of each thing and a part that is itself only an image. And that, it seems, is why it can produce everything. For example, we say that a painter can paint a cobbler, a carpenter, or any other craftsman, even though he knows nothing about these crafts. Nevertheless, if he is a good painter and displays his painting of a carpenter at a distance, he can deceive children and foolish people into thinking that it is truly a carpenter. (Plato 1997: 1202)

The poet, or artist, is an imitator who does not have real knowledge of the world of Forms or Ideas and only knows the material world which is an inferior copy. This distinction in the Platonic tradition between Forms and copies goes along with other different oppositions between terms such as speech/writing, original/copy, good/bad, God/human or truth/false where the second term is regarded as derivative or inferior.

Drawing a parallel to Translation Studies, essentialist approaches believe that there is some kind of kernel, a stable meaning present in the original text that can be transferred to another text in a different language. The implications of these ideas for classical philosophy are crucial since the traditional notion of translatability is the condition for philosophy to exist. The idea that there is a stable meaning that can be accessed and rendered is the belief in the possibility of traditional philosophy. The notion of essences presented by Plato implies the existence of multiple derivate and inferior copies of the original stable Form. In the process of rendering of meaning, the translator is just an intermediary with no agency and very little responsibility. In Platonic terms, the translator has no knowledge of the meaning of the original text; the author is the person who creates and bears the sense of his text. Authors are god-like entities that create texts and bear the original stable meaning, whereas translators are deceiving artists that introduce multiplicity far removed from the truth.

We can now think of the implications of this approach in the dichotomy between theory and practice of translation. Translation theory is regarded as a secondary inferior discipline by most of translators both in translation practice and translation training. Theory is perceived as an activity far away from the practical implications of the translation process. That is, most of translators believe that theory of translation has nothing to do with what they do when they translate a text.

2. LINGUISTICS-ORIENTED AND SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES

The distinction between translation theory and practice remains within the same essentialist approach that has prevailed as the general understanding of translation. As Edwin Gentzler points out in the introduction of the second edition of his book *Contemporary Translation Theories*: "Despite the fact that proponents of "new" approaches such as translation studies have been developing their ideas and publishing their data for over two decades, their ideas remain foreign to more traditionally based

approaches" (Gentzler 2001: 2). It seems that the only theory that translators would like is a prescriptive one that tells them what to do and helps them in the process of decision-making. This is exactly what the linguistics-oriented approaches and the scientific models tried to achieve. Both of these approaches thought that language could be studied scientifically; therefore, there would be equivalence between languages and linguistic universals could be established. Authors such as Vinay and Darbelnet created procedures and methodologies to help and guide translators in a mathematic way: "These seven methods are applied to different degrees at the three planes of expression, i.e. lexis, syntactic structure, and message... This range of possibilities is illustrated in Table 11.1, where each procedure is exemplified for each plane of expression" (Venuti 2004: 136). According to this system, translators follow the steps of theory to achieve a perfect result in their translation. But this theory does not include other factors apart from those present in the equation. The same rules apply to all translations, no matter what the circumstances and the context are. The only agency of the translator is to follow the rules and transfer the meaning of the text.

Eugene A. Nida conceptualizes translation as a scientific method based on the traditional notion of translation —universals, kernel or essence, transfer of meaning, etc. In the article "Science of Translation" Nida (1969) explains his idea of the process of translation: "the translator first analyses the message of the SOURCE language into its simplest and structurally clearest forms, transfers it at this level, and then restructures it to the level in the RECEPTOR language which is most appropriate for the audience which he intends to reach" (Nida 1969: 484). The process of translation for Nida is a process of analysis, transfer and restructuring. This model is very similar to the linguistics inspired one: there are some steps that need to be followed by the translator in order to achieve a perfect transfer of meaning and the task of the translator is to follow these instructions and come up with an equivalent rendering of meaning.

These conceptions of translation theory also contributed to its marginalized status. Not only that, but to its stigmatization. Lawrence Venuti talks about this issue in the introduction of *The Scandals of Translation*. Although Venuti is talking about the status of translation in general, I would like to apply it to translation theory in particular:

> Translation [or Translation Theory] is stigmatized as a form of writing, discouraged by copyright law, depreciated by the academy, exploited by publishers and corporations, governments and religious organizations. Translation [theory] is treated so disadvantageously, I want to suggest, partly because it occasions revelations that question the authority of dominant cultural values and institutions. (Venuti 1998: 1)

As it has been stated before, translation theory is regarded by most of translators as something abstract and useless being, as a result, consigned to oblivion. One of the general practices and understandings within the translation field is that someone who knows two languages can automatically translate or interpret. Also, those translators who are trained argue that translation theory is something dispensable. These understandings, as well as the essentialist approaches and the traditional notions of translation, seem to be naive and imprecise. Not only theory is something important but something inherent to the process of translation. Every time that a translator makes decisions, has a specific approach, chooses a text, chooses one word over the other, translates one author over the other and so on is making theory. In other words, translators are constantly making decisions, both consciously and unconsciously, and therefore are responsible for their choices. The sum of all these decisions in the process of translation creates as a result different theories and approaches.

3. MANIPULATION IN TRANSLATION

We can highlight the work developed by the Manipulation School, with Theo Hermans as its main representative, and the Polysystem Theory developed mainly by Itamar Even Zohar and Gideon Toury. Both of these approaches try to leave behind the idea of the text as an isolated entity, and start to

focus on the relation with the society in which a translation is being created: its norms, expectations, literary systems, etc. Theo Hermans explains Even Zohar's idea of a polysystem and summarizes its characteristics in his book *The Manipulation of Literature. Studies in Literary Translation*:

> [Even Zohar] developed the notion of literature as a "polysystem", i.e. as a differentiated and dynamic "conglomerate of systems" characterized by internal oppositions and continual shifts. Among the oppositions are those between "primary" (or innovatory) and "secondary" (or conservative) models and types, between the centre of the system and its periphery, between canonized and non-canonized strata, between more or less strongly codified forms, between the various genres, etc. The dynamic aspect results from the tensions and conflicts generated by these multiple oppositions, so that the polysystem as a whole, and its constituent systems and subsystems, are in a state or perpetual flux, forever unstable. Since the literary polysystem is correlated with other cultural systems and embedded in the ideological and socio-economic structures of society, its dynamism is far from mechanistic. (Hermans 1985: 11)

As we can see, this type of approach integrates many other perspectives into the study of translation, and it acknowledges the role that it plays within society and vice versa. Special attention is directed towards the source and the meta cultures and their circumstances as a whole: their literary system, their norms, their conventions, their status, etc. The text is no longer isolated, but situated in a bigger system and interrelated with a number of other elements. Furthermore, within this approach, the status and the relevance of translation as a differentiated part regarding the rest of the polysystem is acknowledged and considered as an element capable of establishing change and challenging the canon. André Lefevere refers to translation as "rewriting" in his book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of the Literary Fame* and shows the constant tension between a canonized or central system and the periphery:

> Significantly, though, works of literature canonized more than five centuries ago tend to remain secure in their position… This is a clear indication of the conservative bias of the system itself and also of the power of rewriting, since while the work of literature itself remains canonized, the "received" interpretation, or even the "right" interpretation in systems with undifferentiated patronage, quite simply changes. In other words, the work is rewritten to bring it in line with the "new" dominant poetics. (Lefevere 1992: 19)

The Manipulation School bases its rationale upon the idea that all translation entails some degree of manipulation, and that there are some factors that mediate the process of translation in different ways: "From the standpoint of view of the target literature, all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose" (Hermans 1985: 11). Ideology and poetics are, according to Lefevere, the main forces that shape translations within any literary system. These two elements, however, change over time and, therefore, the expectations for what a "good" translation is within society changes accordingly. Another determinant factor is patronage, "the powers (persons, institutions) which help or hinder the writing, reading and rewriting of literature" (Lefevere in Hermans 1985: 227). Patronage consists, at the same time, of three elements: ideology, economic component, and status. The form of patronage varies over time: from the House of Medici in Italy during the 14th century to our present days when media, publishing houses or editors control and determine the writing and rewriting of literature. As we can see, this contemporary approach completely accepts the relevance of sociological factors as key in the way translation works. Because society changes, translation perception, poetics and ideology change too. A translation is no longer considered a fixed text, but something that is in constant change and that is determined by outside factors pertaining to social, historical and political spheres. Furthermore, a translation can be everything that the target culture considers it to be, not necessarily a "faithful" rendering like in previous approaches.

The agency of translators has impact and relevance both in the source and target cultures. It is not that anything goes, that everything is allowed. Rather the opposite. Since translators are the only ones responsible for their job, they have to be aware of what they are doing and be tremendously careful.

Instead of a transfer of meaning there is a transformation of it. Derrida presents this idea of translation as a regulated transformation in his interview with Julia Kristeva:

> A notion of transformation: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We will never have, and in fact have never had, to do with some "transport" of pure signifieds from one language to another, or within one and the same language, that the signifying instrument would leave virgin and untouched. (Derrida 1981: 20)

In post-Nietzschean terms, language is arbitrary: there is not an essential component in words that define them. Moreover, reality is constructed through language and not the other way round: "with words it is never a question of truth, never a question of adequate expression; otherwise, there would not be so many languages" (Nietzsche 1999: 82). This statement undermines the whole essentialist assumption that there is some kind of universality. If the Platonic world of Ideas existed and essences as well, we wouldn't need languages to communicate or explain anything since meaning would be universal and stable. Nietzsche, on the other hand, argues that we have nothing but metaphors of things that do not correspond to the original entities:

> Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things. Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept "leaf" is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects. This awakens the idea that, in addition to the leaves, there exists in nature the "leaf": the original model according to which all the leaves were perhaps woven, sketched, measured, colored, curled, and painted —but by incompetent hands, so that no specimen has turned out to be a correct, trustworthy, and faithful likeness of the original model. (Nietzsche 1999: 83)

This passage takes us back to Plato's differentiation between original and copy, truth and false. Nietzsche introduces the idea that "truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins" (Nietzsche 1999: 84). In order to be able to communicate with each other we have to arbitrarily create a language and equate unequal things. If not, it would be impossible to have a language that would specify every single difference and detail, we would be talking about an infinite language. This is why we refer to "leaves" even though there are millions of differences between all the types of leaves.

Even though there are a lot of different approaches within translation theory we need the concept of translation theory to reflect, conceptualize, think and discuss a number of different issues in translation studies. Theory is a necessary tool to teach and share knowledge and ideas between different people. The fact that thinkers such as Plato, Nietzsche, Nida, Derrida or Venuti amongst others, wrote and discussed their thoughts on specific topics, makes possible that today we are still thinking and questioning ourselves and others. Theory is a tool to shake thinking, to enrich minds and understandings, sharing different points of view on a subject matter. In ancient Greece the dialogue was the way to promote discussion and conversational exchange. Nowadays, theory gives us the ability to do the same in a formal way.

Even though most of translators want to think about translation theory as an isolated matter, it is not the case. Going back to Gentzler, he points out in the introduction of his book that:

> Anyone working "monolinguistically" may purport no need for translation theory; yet translation inheres in every language by its relationships to other signifying systems both past and present. Although considered a marginal discipline in academia, translation theory is central to anyone interpreting literature; in a historical period characterized by the proliferation of literary theories, translation theory is becoming increasingly relevant to them all. (Gentzler 2001: 1)

4. CONCLUSIONS

Translation and translation theory are necessarily related to other disciplines in the humanities such as literature, philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, cultural studies, language studies, education, and so on. The idea of all these disciplines as separated clear-cut distinctions is an illusion, especially since translation is the possibility for most of them. All of these disciplines deal with translation and translated texts every day, even though this relation has been traditionally erased or remained hidden. Translation disappears from these fields because of the way they are taught or studied and because of the illusion that the texts used by them are not translations and translators have no agency whatsoever in those texts. The same way, the distinction between theory and practice of translation is an illusion itself. These two fields have been traditionally opposed as if there was an irreconcilable gap between them; when, in truth, no such thing as a clear-cut distinction exists. Theory implies practice and vice versa. Therefore, theory is inherent to practice and practice inherent to theory.

As Derrida would put it: "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*". If there is no outside to the text there is only interpretation and there is no way out of it. There is no reading without difference. Theory is, after all, interpretation.

After all of what has been stated so far, it can be concluded that theory is highly beneficial for translators. Moreover, there is no way out of theory: in every decision the translator makes theory is at stake, although it might be in an unconscious manner. What theory does is to show the mechanisms and the philosophical basis of the ideas developed by translators. Theory is a way to be conscious and responsible of the ethics of translation and translators. It is beneficial because translators who know theory are aware of the big responsibility and impact that their work has. As Foucault would put it: "knowledge is power", meaning that knowledge is an instrument of power. Another of the benefits theory brings to the work of translators is that it offers a philosophical basis to their work. Translation is no longer based on apparently random decisions but it has a political dimension behind it that can be used to explain and answer to critiques. As it has been stated above, theory brings to translators the possibility of sharing ideas, discussing topics, opening dialogues, offering a variety of perspectives... in sum, enriching the field of Translation Studies. It seems that future translators should be aware of the issues posed by translation theoreticians because, apart from making them aware of the philosophical issues at stake, future translators may offer answers to those issues or improve the discussion on them. These future translators have the opportunity to start thinking critically about these issues from a new different perspective and come up with other approaches, questions and perspectives. It is both beneficial for the individual translators and for the discipline of translation.

We have the desire of having clear-cut distinctions, like in the case of translation theory and practice, because that way we can stand for one of them and critique the other. When the truth is that those distinctions are desires that we forget are desires. Theory is inherent to practice just the same way that practice is inherent to theory. Translation includes the two aspects within it, even though we are determined and we desire to separate them. But we should keep in mind that it is just that, an illusion, a desire.

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