Reflections on Translation

TOPICS IN TRANSLATION
Series Editors: Susan Bassnett, *University of Warwick, UK* and Edwin Gentzler, *University of Massachusetts/Amherst, USA*

Work in the field of Translation Studies has been expanding steadily over the last two decades, not only in linguistics and literacy studies, but also in business studies, economics, international studies, law and commerce. Translation Studies as a discipline in its own right has developed alongside the practice of teaching and training translators. The editors of the Topics in Translation series encourage research that spans the range of current work involving translators and translation, from the theoretical to the practical, from computer assisted translation to the translation of poetry, from applied translation to the history of translation.

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To my brother Steve, another kind of translator

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Introduction

The opening words of L.P. Hartley's novel, *The Go-Between* have become one of the most famously quoted sentences in English: 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.' When I reflect on where the study of translation was in the 1970s, when I was starting to write my first book, that quotation comes to mind, for things were indeed very different back then. Not only was translation not perceived as worthy of study in a university, but attitudes to translation ranked original work as much more significant that what was considered a mere copy. Translators, poorly paid and regarded all too often as hacks with a foreign language, were not taken seriously. Never mind that millions of readers were able to read works in ancient Greek, Russian, Spanish, Arabic and countless other languages, thanks to the skill of translators; translation was a lowly activity and not something to boast about. Indeed, in the world of universities, young academics were advised not to list their translations as serious publications. Promotion prospects would not be enhanced by a list of translations, no matter how successful they may have been.

I find myself guilty of that very same prejudice when I reflect that in the opening paragraph of this introduction, I have mentioned writing my *first* book, for it was in fact the second, the first having been a translation of a book on the Renaissance city by the distinguished art historian, Giulio Carlo Argan. It was, however, the first book I ever wrote that reached a large number of readers, my first monograph in effect. Its title was very simple: *Translation Studies*.

The book came out in a series edited by the distinguished Shakespearean scholar, Terence Hawkes. His series, the New Accents, was a bold endeavour to make accessible to students around the world some of the new thinking about literary studies that had been increasing in importance in the 1970s. Titles included books on structuralism and semiotics, reception theory, media studies, feminist theory, deconstruction, postcolonialism, new historicism, just some of the many trends sweeping through the academic establishment. The series was challenging and

exciting, and though it was condemned by some scholars as populist, it was nevertheless hugely successful with the readers for whom it was always intended – students.

I approached Terry Hawkes with a proposal for a book on translation, and though he was at first unconvinced, he gave me the benefit of the doubt and took me on. *Translation Studies* came out in 1980, a second edition followed a decade later in 1991, with a third edition in 2002. By 2010 the number of copies sold was higher than ever. Clearly something had happened over 30 years that has changed the level of interest in translation.

What happened were major changes that can be broadly seen as both intellectual and physical. In terms of the latter, it is undeniable that millions more people are moving around the world than was the case in the 1970s. The end of the Cold War, the changes in Chinese foreign policy meant that millions who had previously been unable to travel could now start to move more freely. Economic changes, increased globalisation, developments in mass communication have all contributed to the opening of borders, as also have other kinds of pressures – famine, years of war, political oppression and world poverty, all of which have driven people to seek new lives away from their homeland. And as people move, so they take with them their language and their cultural expectations, engaging inevitably with other languages and other cultures, in short translating for themselves and being translated in turn.

The changes intellectually reflect this increased mobility, and reflect also a rethinking of disciplinary boundaries in the academic world. Translation Studies is today regarded as a serious subject, with university programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level, journals, academic conferences and series of books proliferating, but when I wrote my book, the term itself was barely known. I chose to title it *Translation Studies* fully aware that most readers would not understand what the title might mean because the subject barely existed. True, there were programmes for training translators in many countries, but the term 'translation studies' had only just been coined, by a small group of scholar-translators who were seeking to raise the profile of translation generally. By a happy chance, I had joined that small group following a meeting in 1975, and at what has come to be remembered as a seminal conference in Leuven in 1976, the group that comprised James Holmes, Itamar Even-Zohar, Josè Lambert, Gideon Toury, Raymond van den Broek and André Lefevere set out a kind of manifesto for what they hoped would be a new field of study. Such a field would bring together research from various disciplines and would bridge the gap between translation practice and the history and theories

of translation, and in so doing the status of translation would be raised. Even-Zohar proposed that any study of the history of literature must also be a study of the history of translation, for through translation new ideas, new forms, new concepts can be introduced. He also argued that the number of translations produced at given moments varies according to the stage of development at which a culture finds itself; hence, cultures in transition tend to translate more texts as they seek to consolidate, while those that see themselves as self-sufficient tend to translate less. The present boom in translations in China is a good example of the former situation, while the paucity of translations into English reflects the global dominance of that language and the sense of superiority that unfortunately accompanies that dominance.

André Lefevere was given the task of outlining what a field known as Translation Studies might consist of, and in the subsequent publication of collected papers from the Leuven colloquium, he proposed that the name might be adopted for the discipline that concerns itself with 'the problems raise by the production and description of translations' (Lefevere, 1978). This means that within the field, both the process of how a translation comes into being and what the translator does to a text are as valid an object of study as is the fortune of a text once it passes into another language and literature. Lefevere was at pains to note that theory and practice should be indissolubly linked, and should be mutually beneficial to one another. It was with these ideas in mind that I wrote *Translation Studies* as an introduction to what we all hoped would be a new interdisciplinary field.

The growth of the subject is not only due to a small group who met in Belgium in the 1970s. There are other important centres of research into translation, some more closely connected to linguistics, others to interpreting. Today, the subject is well-established, and there is a growing body of work coming out in China, Africa and India, as well as in Europe and the Americas. As I reflect on what has happened in the field over the past 30 years since the first appearance of *Translation Studies*, and consider where the subject is today, the lack of recognition of translation back in the 1970s does indeed seem to belong to another country.

Revaluing the Translator

Academic programmes about translation lead students to examine the ways in which ideas about translation have changed over time, to study theories of equivalence and problems of interlingual transfer, to investigate ideas of untranslateability and theories of meaning, to work on huge

linguistic corpora, to do research on specific case studies, investigating genre, stylistic features, patterns of lexicon and syntax. The emphasis of programmes in different places varies, and there are a wide number of approaches, some more theoretical and historical, others more practically oriented and geared to the training of translators. There has also been a greater rapprochement between the training of translators and the training of interpreters, which is timely and important.

What has been less explored, however, is the impulse that leads to translation in the first place, for apart from obvious commercial factors, it is clear that a great many distinguished writers have also chosen to translate works written by other writers, and it is clear also that translating is a profession that for some people is akin to a vocation. Yet it remains a curiously marginalised profession in some countries, most notably in the English-speaking world, where only a tiny percentage of books published annually are translations, a profession that is not well-remunerated or well-recognised, despite its obvious importance in a world that sets such a high value on instant communication.

Umberto Eco, the Italian writer is fascinated by translation, not only because he himself translates, but also because he can see what happens to his own writing when someone else translates it. He even goes so far as to say that he believes that anyone studying translation should have the experience of translating and being translated so as to fully grasp the complexity of the processes involved. He is fortunate in being able to talk to his translators and so understand what they are seeking to do with his writing, and he is also aware that translation involves much more than the linguistic. In his essay, 'Translating and being translated', Eco argues that translators must take into account rules that are broadly cultural, and gives as an example of the simple phrase 'donnez-moi un café', 'give me a coffee' and 'mi dia un caffe'. These three sentences are linguistically equivalent and all convey the same proposition, but are not culturally equivalent:

> Uttered in different countries, they produce different effects and they are used to refer to different habits. They produce different stories. (Eco, 2001: 18)

He does not go into detail about what those different stories might be, but is referring to the very different practices of coffee drinking in the three cultures. He might also have had in mind the different levels of politeness in the three sentences, for while it is acceptable in Romance languages to use an imperative, in British English a request for coffee would have to be accompanied by 'please' or it could cause offence. The point Eco is trying to make is significant: translators need to be aware of

the culturally determined nuances that underpin texts. What translation does is to focus attention on difference, because the task of the translator is to negotiate difference, to find ways of avoiding homogenisation while at the same time ensuring that difference does not cause misunderstanding. It is an extremely difficult task, hence the appropriateness of a bellicose metaphor often used to describe translation, as a kind of no-man's-land. Usually we think of no-man's land as a stretch of terrain between warring armies, often heavily mined, so that anyone trying to make their way through such a space will be in greatest danger. The translator, delicately stepping through the minefield, is wary of snipers watching from both camps, wary also of becoming entangled in coils of barbed wire.

It can be argued that translators have to translate not only the words on a page but the absent context in which those words appear, the text behind the text, as it were, if they are to avoid the perils of literalism and create something worthwhile. Herein lies the great dilemma for a translator: if he or she is endeavouring to be respectful to the original, then how much scope is there for textual variations? Is it licit for a translator to change a text, to add to it or delete, or does the translator have a responsibility to the original author to try and ensure that as much as possible of that author's work is brought across into the target language?

This has been discussed countless times and throughout the ages, and is both highly relevant and completely redundant at the same time. For it is simply not possible to bring any text written in one language into another without changing it; what continues to be debated is the extent of the change. Some translators have declared their intention to be absolutely faithful to an original, while others have announced that they feel free to take the liberties necessary to produce a good result. Some translators prioritise the original author, others put their readers first. We may smile today when we read the statement by Antoine Houdar de la Motte in the preface to his translation of the *Iliad* into French in 1714, when he announces that he has followed 'those parts of the *Iliad* that seemed to me worth keeping', while changing anything he thought disagreeable, but the smile changes to astonishment when we learn that he cut out half the poem, speeded up the action, invented new material and changed the behaviour of characters in accordance with societal norms of his own age:

> I have not deprived the heroes of their unjust pride, which often appears as 'grandeur' to us, but I have deprived them of the avarice, the eagerness, and the greed with which they stoop to looting, since these faults would bring them down in our eyes. (de la Motte in Lefevere, 1992: 30)

De la Motte, however, was being true to the taste and norms of his age; in London, Shakespeare was reconstructed for audiences unwilling to cope with his barbarity (the tragic end of *King Lear*, for example was softened by the recovery of Cordelia) and Voltaire pointed out that Homer needed to be softened and embellished by his translators, because a writer always writes for his or her own time, and not for the past.

Charles Tomlinson writes that great translations are as rare and as commanding as great poems. He declares that a good translator is 'either "transfus'd" by the soul of your original or you are nowhere'. A major translator can bring about a metamorphosis, can transform a work from another time and place into a dynamic, vibrant work for his or her own time, can 'transform the energies of past civilization' (Tomlinson, 1982): This idea of metamorphosis is crucially important, for as Walter Benjamin has pointed out, the translator can do more than transform past energies, the translator can effectively bring a dead work back to life, can effect a metempsychosis, whereby the soul of an original assumes another form in another language. We may ask ourselves what kind of transformation de La Motte was effecting when he cut Homer and reshaped him for French 18th century readers. Looked at from one point of view, he was betraying Homer through reductionism. But looked at from another perspective, he was bringing his own version of Homer to his contemporaries.

What makes translation different from other writing is that there is always a reading process involved prior to the actual writing itself. A translator has to become familiar with a text, has to read and reread it, seeking to understand its intricacies, for only then can the task of translating begin. Some translators became obsessed by their work, like the aged Queen Elizabeth I, compulsively scribbling her translation of Boethius as her health and spirit failed, some return over and over again to the same writer, like Michael Longley, the Irish poet who has spoken of being 'Homer-haunted' for 50 years and who used a translation of a passage from *The Iliad* as a means of writing 'Ceasefire', his magnificent poem about the cease-fire in Northern Ireland.

The detective fiction writer, Dorothy Sayers decided in mid-life to translate Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Her biographer, Janet Hitchman describes her passion for Dante as 'her last great love affair', arguing that as much as she loved any living person, she loved Dante (Hitchman, 1975: 185). In an essay about my own translation work, in the book that Peter Bush and I co-edited, *The Translator as Writer* I also used the language of a love affair to describe the relationship I had with certain writers, especially with Luigi Pirandello in the 1980s and then with the Argentinian poet, Alejandra Pizarnik in the 1990s. The love affair between translator and original

author can last a lifetime, or, as in my own case, can last a few years and then fade away, but out of the intensity of the relationship can sometimes come inspired translations. Ezra Pound, one of the greatest translators who worked in many languages, ancient and modern, was all too aware of the limitations of translation, yet strove to overcome what he saw as unsurmountable obstacles.

Pound identified three kinds of poetic components: *melopoeia* which means the musical property of words, *phanopoeia* or the casting of images on the visual imagination and *logopoeia*, 'the dance of the intellect among words'. Of these, he argues that melopoeia can occasionally be appreciated by a foreigner with a particular sensitivity to sound, but that it is practically impossible to transfer this quality from one language to another. Logopoeia cannot be translated at all, though it might be possible to find a way of paraphrasing, but phanopoeia can 'be translated almost, or wholly, intact' (Pound, 1954: 25). This view of poetry and translation reflects Pound's insistence on the importance of the image, but on balance, his assessment of what is and is not translatable is accurate. The sound patterns of one language cannot be translated, nor can complex word play, whereas imagery does have a chance of surviving the transition from one language to another. Pound was writing strictly about aspects of poetry; he would have readily acknowledged the impossibility of trying to translate culture-bound elements, which takes us back to de la Motte's decision to remove what he saw as digressions about armour and the anatomical details of wounds. De la Motte was bringing Homer into Parisian drawing rooms, whereas Homer's epic was conceived in an age where heroic deeds on the battlefield, the quality of weaponry and the ability to withstand pain determined not only the status of a warrior in this life, but his reputation after death.

The essays collected in this book are reflections on aspects of translation published over a 10-year period, mainly in *The ITI Bulletin*, the journal of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting and, in some cases, in *The Linguist.* They are written for readers with an interest in aspects of translation; those readers include professional translators and interpreters, scholars, students and anyone who cares about the movement of languages across boundaries.

The essays were never intended as a contribution to scholarship, but as a means of offering insights into diverse aspects of translation that kept catching my attention. Topics include the translation of different literary genres, in particular poetry, news and media translation, linguistic problems and aspects of cultural translation. There are essays on the translation of humour, on the language of kinship, on gestures, on jokes, even an

essay on what happens when translation goes horribly wrong. Through the years of writing these essays, I have been encouraged by feedback from readers, and have greatly enjoyed developing different themes.

It has also been a challenge to write in an accessible manner for all readers, not just for those located in the university environment. Translation plays such a huge role in today's world, and the majority of those engaged in translating are not academics. At the end of this book there is a bibliography giving suggestions for further reading, so that anyone who wants to follow up some of the ideas may be helped to do so, but it is my hope that these essays will be read primarily for what they were always meant to be: as one woman's reflections on what it means to be engaged in translation.

Susan Bassnett