# Translation Studies as Social Problem-Solving

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*Abstract*: It is proposed that the main tasks of Translation Studies should be to help solve certain social problems. This may provide a model of interdisciplinarity where the definition of problems precedes and orients the many disciplines that may be used to solve them. It is suggested that suitable problems may be recognized in terms of three ethical criteria: 1) the possible solutions should concern linguistic mediation, 2) the aim should be to promote cooperation between cultures, and 3) the problems should proceed from social disagreements. It is hoped that application of these criteria will protect the interdiscipline from excessive instrumentalization.

> *"Le métalangage, c'est le grand alibi pour masquer et oublier les tâches historiques et les missions qui n'ont pas été accomplies, pour effacer les responsabilités, pour diffuser une culpabilité latente, un sentiment imprécis de frustration et de malaise."* (Lefebvre 1968: 254).

In a key contribution to the Thessaloniki conference, Yves Gambier (2002) described the coherence of Translation Studies as a possible "co‑errance", the state of various disciplines getting lost together. The pun works better in French than in English, but it might still deserve a prize for worst of the year. Gambier nevertheless names a very real problem of interdisciplinarity, although he seems to offer no immediate solution. Here, as in the heat of the conference, I would like to propose a solution: Translation Studies, like translation itself, should be seen as a social problem-solving activity. And the stability of our interdiscipline would then require work on definitions of the problems to be solved, a task which has not yet been undertaken effectively.

I claim absolutely no originality for this approach. Problem-solving has been a valid view of translation *practice* ever since Levy's seminal essay on decision-processes in 1967, and more recently through empirical psycholinguistics (cf. Lörscher 1991). It has been a legitimate view of *research* for much longer, although it most immediately benefits from the work of Karl Popper on scientific methodology. Problem-solving lies at the heart of theoretical disciplines like mathematics, just as it enters empirical work in most of the sciences. So there is nothing revolutionary here. But there may be other benefits involved.

## Advantages

The simple idea of setting out to solve a problem has several immediate advantages for an interdiscipline. The most obvious is that the problem may be relatively

independent of disciplinary locations, and possible solutions may be sought in any number of old or new sciences. If, for example, we want to measure the extent to which people trust a particular mode of translation, what particular discipline should we place ourselves in? The definition of "trust" would require philosophical inquiry; its operationality would need some kind of psycholinguistics; the selection of a population assumes sociology; empirical methodology is nowadays a discipline of its own; the definition of "translation" might even require some translatology, and so on. The problem exists independently of the disciplines that can be used to solve it. And why should we solve it? The European Commission's Translation Service currently produces translations at a total cost of 175.5 euros per page (Stecconi 2002), whereas even the most up-market localization companies charge no more than about 40 euros. One of the legitimate justifications of this is that the Service produces trust, not words. So our task, if we want to address the potential problem of not wasting taxpayers' money, should be to quantify trust in a way that might correspond to some reasonable openings of the public purse. Needless to say, Translation Studies currently struggles to recognize such problems; it thus has remarkably few conceptual tools for working on them. But the first step is to insist on the general form of problem-solving as a way to approach such things.

A second simple advantage of problem-solving is that the model can be applied to both the practice of translating and the study of translation. This helps keep things neat: all things above as below. It also constantly forces researchers and theorists to keep tabs on their own subjectivity. Just as we tend to attribute motives and ideologies to the ways translators solve their problems (in Bourdieu's terms, we "objectify the subjective"), we should recognize similar determinants on our own selection of problems and viable solutions (thus "subjectivizing the objective"). The modes of self-awareness are various (one could reach similar dialectics through Luhmann), but problem-solving helps to get us there.

A third advantage is that problem-solving encourages us to avoid stating the obvious over and over again. If we look at a translator at work, we find that most of the procedures do not involve problem-solving at any explicit level. Countless phenomena, involving things like standard terminology, gendered substantives, syntactic transformations and so on, are dealt with automatically or semi-automatically. The translator can do all that without any help. But then they stop. There is a problem without immediate solution. How should they render non-standard dialogue? Should the foreign term be used as a loan? Should a sick pun be omitted? There are many problems that, in many situations, have no standardized solutions. Translators have to solve those problems, often using quite complicated reasoning involving many factors. Those are the points where they might appreciate a few pointers from Translation Studies, even if the help involves no more than the simple message that they are not alone with their quandary. Note, though, that the help is needed only at the points where problems are encountered and solutions are not obvious, or rather, at the points where there is no general agreement on standard solutions. Those are the points where researchers of translation practice should ideally find their problems; that is the social dimension we are most interested in. There is really little need to bore us with the rest.

If we can see that translators only invest effort in problem-solving when there are important problems to solve, we might usefully apply the same logic to researchers and theorists, in the hope that one day they too will ideally dispense with the trivia as quickly as possible. And this mode of thought should be possible no

matter who we are dealing with (Translation Studies can help many people and institutions, not only translators).

One final advantage: As we have said, to propose solutions to a social problem means trying to *help* someone. It might also mean helping to form some kind of agreement. This is a long way from approaches that stress the insolubility of most translational dilemmas then leave the translator to their own devices. Admirably existential, deconstructively *de rigueur*, such washing of hands merely deludes us with respect to our own social responsibility. To solve problems is to propose solutions, to someone, in the hope that some kind of improvement might result.

## Descriptivism is not enough

Despite its apparent ubiquity, problem-solving does have a certain import with respect to its potential opposites, especially if we insist on the adjective "social". To try to solve a social problem is not quite the same thing as describing a set of data, no matter what the level of description (hypotheses, models, theories, laws). For instance, we can take the data "2, 4, 6, 9", look for a description accounting for the series, and come up with the principle "ascending even integers except for the last one", or something similar. We might even regard this representational methodology as a way of evaluating our descriptions: if an alternative theory can account for the last number, it will be superior to the one we have just proposed. We might even ask a theory to predict the next numbers in the series, then regard this as an empirical test of the theory's problem-solving ability. This does indeed mean solving a kind of problem: here is the data, now "account" for it, or "study" it (as literary scholars tend to say), or "predict the future" (if we are working for a stock market). Such epistemology assumes there are patterns in behaviour and that our prime task is to represent those patterns in language of some kind. The result is sometimes called "understanding". It is a noble everyday activity. However, there is nothing in such simple representationality that says why we should look at this set of data and no other (why not just discount the number 9 as an outlier?). There is thus nothing there that says why one theory should be better than another (since there is no necessarily superior value in accounting for a larger set of irrelevant data). And there is consequently no substantial way of choosing between two theories that account for the same set of data (as proposed by Quine's indeterminacy theory). All that we can really say about different representative understandings is that there is a principle of elegance at stake: the best theory will use the fewest terms to account for the most data. But there is nothing at all social here until we can say why some data are worth more attention than others, what we want to do with a description once it has been formulated, and, if our intervention is more than passive prediction, what our functional criteria for success might look like.

Another example: A doctoral thesis, published as a 260-page book, deploys vast conceptual and informational machinery to discover, tentatively, that translators from German into English use more variation when rendering noun-phrase clusters than with other parts of speech. This might impress the technically minded. Someone could even finance more of the same (another conclusion is that "more research is needed", of course). But did any translator, or indeed any other theorist, ever have a problem with these particular variables? Were they losing sleep at night? Are they going to solve problems better now that the research has been done? Pending answers to those questions, we hesitate to confuse this piece of research with the solving of social problems.

It is very necessary to account for data with hypotheses, models, theories and, if possible, laws. Any kind of problem-solving requires descriptions that are adequate in some way. But that is not enough; description should not be the problem as such. The more important problems are social; they come from the societies around us; they require solutions that might help improve the lives of those around us. If not, we are merely playing, at someone else's expense.

## What kind of problems?

In his talk in Thessaloniki, Yves Gambier raised the question of our social status, and he did so in terms of exchange. Since we use social resources for our various activities, we should repay or justify that consumption in some way. Some exchanges are easy. We teach languages and train translators, and our societies consequently reap greater benefits from trade, tourism and qualitative international cooperation. If we teach and train better, our collective societies will ideally perform better. Other exchanges are more clearly ideological but no less justified. If, for example, we theorize and defend the rights of a language like Catalan, adapting our models and possible solutions to the one aim of strengthening just one target language, we might similarly be paying back the social resources invested in our efforts, and not just when we are working for Catalan institutions (diversity may be a resource for all).

We should be aware, however, that not all the problems that come our way are universal in scope. The lowering of transaction costs in cross-cultural exchanges firstly benefits the social groups financing trade, and their increased profits do not inevitably flow on to all. In the same way, the defence of Catalan most immediately works in the interests of a caste of functionaries whose tendencies are protectionist, and their well-being is not automatically compatible with all sections of their multicultural society. In other words, the kind of Translation Studies we do, the kind of problems we choose to deal with, is conditioned by our own positioning among *local* social groups and interests (for the case of Spanish Translation Studies, see Pym 2000: 225-239). At the same time we form, as far as I can tell, a series of small professional groups spread across many different countries, sharing a precarious professional *interculture* (which would include the kinds of behaviour patterns and norms we use at our conferences and in our publications). Each of us plays with proximity to some power group within our local context, yet we share at the same time an intercultural context where that proximity is more or less annulled. We can thus assist the masters of globalization, we can help the small nationalisms, or we can criticize both of those options, and everything else in between, by using our intercultural distance. There is no obvious fatality here. And there is a lot of leeway for variance.

Since our varied positionality thus entails local as well as intercultural responsibility, I refrain from engraving in stone any closed list of social problems to be solved (although I have mentioned a few along the way). The local must always have its say. Let me instead propose three guidelines for the intercultural (i.e. non-local) recognition of the kind of social problems that Translation Studies might usefully deal with:

1. The problems dealt with by Translation Studies should be those of translation as a mode of linguistic mediation. This means we should not mindlessly exclude from our vision other modes of mediation (language-

learning, for instance), as if we were professionally convinced of the superiority of translation in all cases.

2. If the aim of all linguistic mediation, including translation, is to promote long-term cooperation between cultures, its problems can involve anything that impedes that aim. It follows that the same ethical aim should guide the problems and solutions of Translation Studies. We attach the proviso that the potential solutions should in some way lie within various modes of linguistic mediation (wars impede cooperation, but Translation Studies cannot pretend to impede all wars on its own).

3. Most effort should be spent on the problems that are most important, in the sense that they concern disagreement and debate between different social groups, rather than the more internal problems solved through the apparently disinterested agreement of professionals (for a more technical discussion of "importance", see Pym 1998: 20-37).

These three criteria concern the scope of our discipline, its ethical aim (which could be the same as that of translation) and the kind of relationship we should have with the people around us. In short, they concern the whole of Translation Studies. Here we can do no more than open them to future debate.

**Objections to problem-solving**

In Thessaloniki I proposed, from the floor, that the problem with Translation Studies is that we have not yet defined our problems. I have now spelt out that same proposition, hopefully in terms more convincing than the blunt spoken appeal.

At the conference, from the podium, the reactions to the proposition were uniformly negative. Let me briefly try to summarize the objections, and to offer arguments why they should be regarded as substantial but non-fatal.

*Objection 1: Problems are solved indirectly*

One very legitimate criticism is based on the idea that research is not a simple stimulus-response operation, as if a problem were fed in at one end and a solution came out the other. Often we solve problems while working on something quite different from the problem itself. Something we pick up from experimental psychology might give us an idea for a problem in pragmatic linguistics (cf. Robinson 2002). There is a whole creative process involved in interdisciplinarity, and the simple notion of problem-solving, which might falsely promise a rigorous selection of data and methods, can only restrict that creativity.

Response: One can only agree that our interdiscipline is and should be navigated translaterally, zig-zagged, with as much liberty as we can spare. But this need not stop us from referring to problem-solving in order to recognize and evaluate a finding, using at least criteria 2 and 3 above. Or are our results to be cherished only for the number of disparate readings it took to produce them?

*Objection 2: We do not know the problems before we find the solutions.*

This is a more subtle version of the indirect causation model. The basic idea is that any apparent solution creates further problems, so there can be no neat separation of the two categories. For example, a translator working with pen-and-paper has no

problem with speed until someone comes along with a computer. The new technology creates the problem (slowness) to which it is the solution (speed), along with many other new problems requiring further solutions (pains in backs, wrists and eyes, to mention just a few). To take an example more obviously from Translation Studies, the nature of translational language was not an enormous problem for anyone until corpus linguistics came along to help explain it. Or again, no one was particularly upset about the notion of "meaning transfer" until deconstruction came along to denounce it (correctly) as a retrograde fiction.

   Response: Same as above, although we should perhaps insist more that the model of problem-solving, especially if we accept criterion 3 above, should actually help reduce the internal causation of problems. Translation Studies, like any field subject to technological evolution, will tend to invest effort working on problems for which it has the tools, such that the tools seem to cause both the problems and the solutions. However, the more properly social problems should be precisely those that occur somewhere outside Translation Studies, or in our relations with local social groups. If and when this is so, the problem should indeed precede the possible solutions, just as other problems may follow the solutions. Translation Studies should be in a productive dialogue with other social groups, seeking to formulate the important problems initiating from beyond the academic discipline. If this is not so, then the criticism is entirely justified and attempts should be made to restore the dialogue between outside and inside, between before and after.

*Objection 3: The aim of science is to understand, not to solve.*

This is the more classical objection against instrumentalization. It claims that our aim is to produce theoretical or descriptive knowledge, not the instrumental knowledge that actually causes changes in the world. The practitioners do things; our job is to know *why* they do those things. This can be found in Aristotle, in Jesus ("they know not what they do"), in Hegel, and in Marx, to name a few. As scientists or scholars, we can only really be of service to our societies if we refrain from intervention in the world, since the objectivity of our observations depends on our maintenance of academic distance. We should thus be free to deal with any problem we choose, since to do otherwise would mean only to serve selected parts of our societies.

   Response: These classical arguments are not only representational, they mostly assume the principle of a value-free description (following the Kantian distinction between judgements of fact and judgements of value). The reasons why this is a false epistemology have to do with twentieth-century awareness of language, and no one in Translation Studies, of all places, can seriously believe in the neutrality or transparency of linguistic descriptions. The rest tumbles down from there. We are in the world; we are acting in the world; and our actions have consequences for those beyond our narrow academic milieux. So we had better be as conscious of it as possible. And if we think we know why people do things, and *they* do not know it, we should do everything possible to tell them about it: our knowledge might actually help them, as well as our careers.

These three objections are non-trivial; they concern debates that fill many books. At many points, they reveal the limits of a naï ve problem-solving model. That is why we have proposed the above three criteria, our guidelines for the selection of problems, in order to restrict not only what we deal with, but also the kinds of solutions that lie within our general field. Without those riders, anything can happen.

For instance, I am told that an East German theorist, lecturing in Cuba, once claimed that translations should be carried out in ways that faithfully reflected the Communist Party line (I have not seen the evidence, but the position is not implausible). The theorist might have thus solved many problems concerning how to translate; he might have been of service to several local power groups. However, one doubts that the solution, making all sides sound like the Party, was promoting long-term cooperation between cultures. It would not count as effective problem-solving in terms of our second criterion.

Similarly, the editor of a Translation Studies journal has recently decided to cut all ties with scholars and institutions in the employ of the Israeli state, as a way of helping to stop the Israeli persecution of Palestine. Is that a legitimate piece of problem solving? Perhaps, in the wider world of economic and political boycotts. That problem, though, does not concern translation as a mode of linguistic mediation, and the solution certainly does not promote long-term cooperation between cultures. That little piece of problem-solving can only serve to alienate Israeli scholars, to split the interculturality of Translation Studies, and to engage us in debates that are not those of our field.

Instrumentalization is indeed a problem in contemporary Translation Studies. Yet the general model of problem-solving, if accepted with something like our ethical riders, will hopefully save us from its excesses. More important, the solving of social problems might deliver us from as interdisciplinarity of lost souls.

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