Massimiliano Morini. *The Pragmatic Translator. An Integral Theory of Translation.* London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013. vii + 200 pages.

Morini elegantly combines surprising immodesty with selective vision: in announcing a theory that aspires to "reconcile all existing theories" (1) he immediately states that the great reconciler must really be linguistic, since "no general theory of translation can help being that" (ibid.). And the imodest part of the project really dies there, since this theoretical discourse finds itself with little to say about much of what has happened in translation theory since about the mid 1980s: *Skopos*, polysystems, cultural translation, sociology, things cognitive and similar are not allowed a look in, and there is strangely no reference to Robinson's performative linguistics (2003). The one ambition left standing is pragmatics, called upon to study the relations between language and context. And it is true, language and context might indeed cover everything out there, if nomenclature were somehow the only criterion in town.

Here, then, is a self-summary: "The theory presents translation as something which is *done to texts* (the performative function) in *space and time* (the locative function) and *involving people* (the interpersonal function)" (155; italics in the text). No one could have any qualms about that – it is all perfectly acceptable, even obvious, and it comes with a convenient package of names for some of those relations. The package begs a few questions, though: What do we need the names for, exactly? What problems do they help solve? And isn't theory something more than a set of names-for-things anyway?

Some of the names are actually very appealing. The aim to study "how to do things with translations" (29-30) is a pleasing allusion to Austin and promises much. And the notion of studying a "text act" rather than just a text (16) is certainly the right way to make good on that promise. But then something strange happens: we are led into assumptions about "what the book 'wants to do' in the world" (17), as if texts were people, with intentions. And then we discover that "the text act is everything that a text aims to do and/or does in the world" (34), which again attributes agency to an inanimate object (although it does at least allow for a possible range of actions). Of course, Morini is by no means alone in making such assumptions. There is a longish literary tradition of discussing implied readers and intended effects; Eco did talk liberally of the "intention of the text"; all of that fed acceptably well into a British tradition that wants to stick close to a linguistics of the text, with timidly adventurous foci on voices, narrative and otherwise, since Applied Linguistics has made major money from selling English to the world. Yet from outside that overlapping location, one has to ask the obvious: Surely people, not things, want and do things in the world? Surely people are not yet entirely texts? And surely the decision to attribute agency to text simply blocks out some of the more interesting things that the study of people entails: history, power, and change, for starters. When Morini sets out to "do things with translations", that should not usually entail that translations are doing things with him, should it? And then, when we learn that "the actual effects of texts on people and ideas are observed" (35), one would like to know where, how, and to what purpose, since if texts have agency they might as well also be the things *in* which their effects are observed. To push the point, why implicate people in this pragmatics at all? One would like clarity on this score.

Morini claims early on that his categories are "psychologically plausible" (4), but then no evidence is offered from any kind of psychology, experimental or otherwise, and we are offered nothing approaching a psychology of the text. He then takes the liberty of railing against "the old traps of exhaustiveness and scientificity" (28), which could be fair enough, except that those aging ambitions at least had the virtue of being discovery procedures, of which Morini seems to have none. How did he get all this definitive insight? It seems the old traps are only evaded by definitive revelations. For example, we learn that "[t]he highest-order decisions the translator takes are of a pragmatic nature" (11), and that "translators are more vulnerable than authors to the (interpersonal) pressure of norms" (22), all of which might well be true, but some of us would

like to know how such things were discovered, and whether they are true for everyone, and if they will hold for eternity. Surely a theory should be able to explain how it came into the world?

Instead of epistemology or genealogy, the names-for-things tend to be illustrated in discussions of literary translations, mostly from various Scottish Englishes into Italian, some of them by Morini himself. These extended anecdotes are entertaining, committed, and not without intrigue. Rather like Venuti (who of course tends to work the other way, from Italian into English), Morini uses personal engagement to provide real insight into the intents and ambitions at least one literary translator, including the occasional rejection notice and unenlightened reviews. In one case the translator receives a rejection slip because of his "conscious attempt at creating a personal translating style" (78); he went "off the beaten path" and was punished for it. As in Venuti's similar tales of publishing, noble intent here meets ignominious miscomprehension. The intriguing thing is that this is reported as happening in *Italian* publishing, whereas Venuti might have us believe the beaten paths are more ferociously defended in Anglo-American tradition. In both cases, one wishes the translators were able to consider that they might have miscalculated a risk. And one might hope they would not use facile theory as a field for revenge – nothing in the pragmatic terms, as far as I can see, indicates that the unbeaten path is better than the beaten one. I agree that it should be, but I can't see why pragmatics should get in the way.

Indeed, in strict theoretical terms – or at least in terms of a theory that aspires to "reconcile all existing theories" – these literary excursions make some pretty obvious points. For example, a long explanation of a poem translation concludes that "everything has a purpose" (62), which is nice to know, but we knew if before. Or again, an entertaining commentary on Italian translations of Monty Python and Astérix suggests that "Italians tend to 'localize' comic discourse more than other translating cultures" (153), which is certainly thought-provoking but, again, does not seem to be explained by pragmatics (one would surely need a fair swathe of culture and history as well). And then, in the one instance where pragmatics could really have something to say, Morini claims that in the Italian Astérix "most of the humor is usually locative, and it is based on cultural/linguistic cliché and anachronism" (154), whereas translated Monty Python films merely "sound translated". That would be a fascinating explanatory application of pragmatic categories, if only there were some real evidence that Monty Python films actually used fewer anachronisms than we find in Astérix (I suspect that anachronism is the basis of the humor in both cases, but we would need something like "the old trap of scientificity" to find out).

Theoretical pretensions aside, I noted down a few genuinely intriguing asides. Here is one: "Very few contemporary translators working in a non-totalitarian state would think of changing the facts of the source text, or of altering the order in which they are introduced" (71). So our common Western notion of text representation is somehow linked to non-totalitarian democracy? (Remind me to think about that.) Then this one: "the more commonplace an expression, the more the translator will look for a suitable equivalent within a very limited range of possibilities – whereas a very personal message will prompt an individual response" (72). That does indeed sound psychologically plausible, rather like Xu Yuanzhong's theory that "low-register language" (with common terms) has few variants in translation, whereas "high-register language" includes items for which more than one equivalent can be found (Xu 1995). I personally suspect that none of these claims actually holds (common terms could equally provide the widest range of variants in translation), but I would love to see them tested before being offered as theoretical epiphany.

On the downside, this one: "if the process of translation is depersonalized, the products of the process will tend to conform to the strong norms operating within a society for a given transaction" (86). I'm sorry to say I did ponder over this for a while, before seeing it is basically a tautology. And then, having done pretty well in opening new conceptual space, Morini claims, after the fact, that his "definition of text act is narrative" (44). No, his definition was not narrative in any but the most banal sense (things happen); he might also have claimed, with equal eagerness to please, that his concept is "dialogic", since there is some kind of reception involved.

At moments like these, one feels he is following immediate trends rather than thinking from his own practice. With time, ubiquitous claims to narrative will become as much cause for embarrassment as "translation universals" have now become.

*Somme toute*, despite the integrationist bravura, this is an engaging book where an astute risk-taking literary translator, encumbered by theoretical terms, shows how he has struggled with (and against) prevailing translation norms.

**References**

Robinson, Douglas. 2003. *Performative Linguistics: Speaking and Translating as Doing Things with Words*. London: Routledge.

Venuti, Lawrence. 2013. *Translation changes everything*. London and New York: Routledge.

Xu, Yuanzhong. 1995. "Why retranslate *John Christopher*?". *Foreign Languages* 4: 37-40.