Translation Technology and Translation Theory
——Dialogue with Anthony Pym on Localization

Pan (Pingliang): I would like to discuss the problems of translation technology, which is a necessary part of localization. Firstly, could you give us an idea of what defines your research specialization?

Pym (Anthony): I think Translation Studies, as an interdisciplinary connected with many other disciplines, is not well suited to specialization. If I only did technology, I would work in IT for industry and make a lot more money than I do as a scholar. So I am necessarily interested in technology from an academic and teaching perspective. But even then, technology is not really of interest in itself. I mean, I just published the book On Translator Ethics, and there I see technology as a concern of ethics, or ethics as a consequence of technology. For example, traditional ethics focuses on the source text; you are faithful to the source. These days, however, translators work from a source text and a translation memory, and increasingly from a machine-translation feed and perhaps a glossary from the client. So we should be faithful to what? A range of texts, databases, or the client?

So I don’t think translation technology need be a specialization in itself, and I don’t think it is the whole of localization. My book on translation theories has a chapter on localization, and now for the second edition I am indeed adding a lot more on translation memories (TM) and machine translation (MT). But that is only to the extent that the technologies have changed traditional translation work patterns, and in fact are introducing new occasions for theorization.

Pan: Why did you turn to translation technology?

Pym: I think technologies are changing the cognitive process of translation, and this is for several simple reasons. In many circumstances, post-editing TM/MT output is faster and more productive than translating from scratch, and the terminology is more consistent. Those are real advantages. So translating is shifting from text reproduction to post-editing. At the same time, translation memories and machine translation are coming together and becoming the one thing. Each company will have its own translation database; its machine translation program you have to work with that; so translators will mainly be post-editing, in several different ways. And that necessarily changes the professional status of translators.

More importantly, we now have web-based systems for collaborative translating, often incorporating machine translation. These tools are very simple to use and allow everyone to produce a translation to some degree of quality. So there are increasing numbers of volunteers translating, which leads to crowd-sourcing and collaborative translation, even in professional environments. That is why I think the technology is going to change the professional and social status of translators. We will have many volunteers translating, and then a group of professionals post-editing, editing, revising the texts to reach whatever level of quality that may be needed. So technology is not really a specialization, it is everything.

Pan: (It’s everything!) So that is why translation technology is widely used in the European Union. And you have worked for the European Union. As we know, compared with other parts of the world, Europe has the most advanced translation technology industry.

Pym: I don’t think that’s true.

Pan: It’s not true? But Ireland is said to be at the top.

Pym: Okay. There are a couple of things here. The technologies themselves have not been developed by translators or by translation scholars, and not even by the translation industry, except for applications like some translation memory suites. The basic technology is produced by IT engineers, mostly in the United States, which is still the place where most of the innovations seem to come from. Some innovations are perhaps European, but mostly we are applying existing technologies to the specific purposes of translation. In Europe, we do use a lot of translation memories. SDL bought Trados; Spain developed DéjàVu; Budapest was the place for MemoQ; Germany had Star Transit. These things are developing in Europe and used...
in Europe a lot. But it depends on the sector concerned. Lagoudaki’s 2006 survey found that over 80% of translators use translation memories, but the survey was largely focused on the localization industry - for literary translation you get very few users of translation memories. In the end, what technology you use when translating does not really depend on the country or continent; it depends more on the client you work with and what section of the industry you are in. In most cases, the client asks the translator to use a specific translation memory, so the key factor is probably what clients know or think they know.

Pan: Some software in translation technology is costly right now. Could you give us a picture of the market in which these softwares are used?

Pym: The only one that’s very expensive is Trados, which is the market leader. That’s why they can ask for that price. There is no logical reason why anybody should pay for that. You can use the good alternatives. You can get MemoQ, which is cheap; Déjà Vu is also cheap. MemoQ, Déjà Vu, and Wordfast give free versions for teaching purposes, as Trados used to, by the way. There are lots of translation memory tools out there, many more than Trados. And most of them are very good for training. Once you can use one or two tools, you can work with them all. The important thing is not that you can use the market leader, but that you know how to pick up a new translation memory suite and use it quickly. You have to “learn to learn”. So personally I don’t teach Trados, unless I have to.

Pan: You just teach the theory.

Pym: No, I don’t. Here in Monterey I teach a Practicum class. We do two translation tools, and the second one is learned by the students themselves. I just say: here is the website, download the demo, find out how to use it (the students work in pairs) and do this translation in two hours.

Pan: So fast?

Pym: Yes. These are clever students, because they are young. But you see what they are learning? How to learn, how to pick up the technology quickly. That’s the skill I try to teach. Not Trados, but how to learn technology quickly.

Pan: Localization is rather broad in scope: it includes project management, translation technology, etc.; translation itself seems to be shrinking in the localization industry. What role do you think translation plays in it?

Pym: It depends on the nature of client. In the localization industry, the companies or language service providers can be big or small. In 1990s, the period of conglomeration, they became bigger and bigger. So now the biggest translation companies are Lionbridge and SDL, but there are still many smaller language service providers, which care for fewer languages or for a particular language. How translations are done depends on the level of language quality required. The sad reality is there are many projects that just require a lot of words to be translated quickly. And in those cases the translators are not paid very much. You can have five or so translators working on one project simultaneously, and once one translator has completed a segment and confirmed it, it is locked into the shared database – the other translators then have to accept it. You can work very fast with that kind of system, but the quality suffers. In that kind of workflow, a lot of work is being outsourced, for example, to India, where people work very well for lower rates than Europe. Chinese companies also are outsourcing to India, or to Mongolia, I’m told. The work can be done for lower rates and quite acceptably, following the rules and applying the glossaries. That would be industrial translation.

On the other hand, high-quality work is still needed, especially when it comes to selling products, giving sensitive information. You need good technical writers and good copy editors at that level. I don’t think we should complain. We should look for the quality of work within the existing technologies.

Pan: Translation with technology or localized translation is quite different from literary translation. What theoretical frame do you think can be used to guide localized translation? How about postmodernist theories, or cultural theory? Do they still work for translation technology?

Pym: Two things here. If you are doing industrial localization, respecting a glossary and just filling in the blanks, it looks like you are moving information from one language and culture to another language and culture, from one locale to another, as in the traditional models of translation. That’s what the technology, with its two-paneled computer screens, wants you to see. Socially, though, we are really moving information within the culture of technology, IT software, computer software, the basis of the localization industry. When a natural language gets its electronic form and has computer software translated into it, what happens? Are the relations really between a source culture and a target culture? Not really. There is no longer any source, since the software you work on has been developed from the previous versions, so you are really working from an internationalized version. And then, the language and culture you are working into is the specific technical field that has been well formed and cultivated beforehand – you are never working into an entire language or an entire culture.

Pan: It’s true that you have discussed this in your book The Moving Text. The text is always moving.

Pym: That’s right. But culture is always there. The culture is the culture of Microsoft, or of IT technology. The source is an internationalized text; it’s no longer the American version, for example. And translation brings a new language into that culture, the culture is a culture that is growing, so translation is not happening between the source
and target, it’s happening within the internationalized IT culture, bringing another language into the one technical culture. And if you now look beyond the technology, I think you can find the same thing happening in the international culture of the modern novel, or the naturalist novel, or simply poetry. Do you think translation in those genres is really between source and target? I suspect it has been the one modernist literary culture bringing new languages into its forms, growing and enriching with it, and becoming postmodernist across the globe. Something similar can even be found in Translation Studies, as a discipline, which started as a name for a discipline in the Netherlands, Belgium, Israel, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, then spread out to be a European discipline, an American discipline, and now to China. Was that a question of source vs. target? No, it is the one academic culture is growing, and becoming richer, bringing new languages and insights into it and becoming international culture of its own. Translation is a part of that growth, whether it be in the localization industry or of great literary texts.

Pan: You know, most translation theories deal with literary translation. Do you think they are still applicable to translation technology?

Pym: If contemporary theory talks about the transcendence of the great author or text, it is hard to apply because localization doesn’t have authors, and no text is great. Every text is transmutable; every text is being translated out of time, being rewritten in the process. Then again, literary communication did not really have strong authorship prior to Romantic individualism, and probably not pronounced authorship before the age of print. Prior to that, it could be seen as a process of constant rewriting. So in many respects, electronic communication is moving back to things that were there prior to the age of print. I have come to see the notions of equivalence, source and target, transcendent author, the fixed great text, all those things as belonging to the age of print culture. When it comes to electronic communication, those things don’t apply. This might not work in China, though, since printing was invented much earlier there.

Pan: As we discussed before, localization seems, to most of us, to be indispensably linked with technology. Maybe no one can overvalue the importance of technology in localization. So could you introduce us some of latest technology for localization?

Pym: Okay. At this stage, translators work and produce with translation memories. The databases may be owned by the company, the translator may sometimes make a copy. Translators work on the web, so the database is generally not on their computers. This means there are now no real problems of compatibility with versions of software, or with using a Mac or a PC. Translators have machine translation feed coming in from several sources; the blanks in the translation memories are fed by machine translations. If the database is good and big, the translator is not translating many new segments, they are post-editing, they are repairing what is being translated by the machine. If they work on big projects, if they work with a group of people, they see each other’s translation automatically and discuss the translation at the same time. The customers are communicating with translators about the problems and the possible translation strategies they have to develop. I think that is where we are today. And that would be the situation for professionals and non-professionals alike.

The only real change I see coming is with machine translation. A few years ago it seemed that statistical machine translation would become better with bigger and bigger databases. The more translation was done with it, the more pairs in the database, the better the translation should be. However, in the past few years it’s been clear that the important thing is not to have a huge database, but to have a very clean, lean, specific database. So IBM, for example, has a translation memory database for each of its products. Now, once you have a small, clean, specific database for a specific product, and that database is used by an in-house machine translation system, there is no real difference between machine translation and translation memory.

Pan: Which software is most-used in American and European market?

Pym: At the moment, Trados is the leading translation memory suite, but there are many other things available. Big companies use their own software. Lionbridge is the biggest translation company, and it’s using its own translation memory system.

Pan: The purpose of localization is to reduce the resistance to new products in the target culture. Yet the technology alone cannot reach that end. The translator must play a very important role, as you discussed in your book Method in Translation History. So what’s your point of view about the role of the translator’s role in localization?

Pym: Technology itself doesn’t produce the product; technology doesn’t produce the idea; technology doesn’t sell the idea; technology doesn’t make people accept or innovate the new idea; technology just gives you the means to do things. The scope for human innovation is enormous; it is limited by the technologies available, but never defined by it.

I think we have to move beyond the idea that technology affects translation only at the moment when we produce translations. Reception is also a very important part of the story. Reception is not a passive process – we should know a lot more about how people actually process translations, and what they do with poor-quality translations. You can say that translators, as text producers, should be important. But are they? Probably not at the moment, because they are not
innovating. Translators could move to the position where they are innovating and introducing new practices, where they have more agency, more power and more salaries. But they are generally not there at the moment.

**Pan:** Do you have any specific examples about some kind of software products that are translated from one culture to another, and the translators give creative ideas to make the products more desirable in the target cultures?

**Pym:** Sure. But the ideas usually come after mistakes are made. A big product, like Windows, is marketed simultaneously in many countries. So the localization process is complex, fast, and hard to coordinate. A lot of things can go wrong. The people who are translating must know the language, actually know the target culture, so they can point out such problems, before it’s too late. Usually translators can see such things and get some kind of feedback happening in the chain of command. Here is a specific example concerning the Microsoft encyclopedia called Encarta. When it was translated into Spanish, the translators saw some mistakes in the dates and names of people. So they noted the mistakes and sent it to the project manager. Then the instruction from the project manager was that the mistakes did not matter. Translators are paid to translate and professional historians had been paid to write the text. If the historian says it’s right, then it is right. So the translators’ creativity didn’t work in this case.

**Pan:** Those are very good examples to demonstrate the translator’s creativity. However, some people still think translation technologies kill human creativity, and translation seems to be a dehumanized activity, making translation just one of a series of procedures. What’s your view of the ethics of the localization industry?

**Pym:** There is a constant risk of dehumanization. When you are getting a series of phrases in Excel files, and a glossary you have to apply, you never see the textual part of it; you never see the product; you never see how the different parts come together. You might be paid well, but you probably don’t enjoy the work. You cannot be engaged with people; it becomes donkey-work, as I think Federica Scarpa put it. However, when the technology allows us quickly to see the whole text we are producing, allows us to work with other people, allows us to discuss translation with other people who are working on the project, I find all that very humanizing. And technology can allow us to do that. For example, people who are subtitling films do it with groups, with friends, and talk with friends about the film; they do it because it’s a socially enriching and culturally engaging activity – that’s humanizing. We can’t say technology dehumanizes; we just say some uses of technology are incredibly dehumanizing. But technology can also be incredibly humanizing – after all, technology is what separates the human from the animal. And the result can be much better than traditional translation, where you are facing the computer screen by yourself, fighting against the author. I’ve never been happy doing that.

**Pan:** In your class, you mentioned equivalence theory and Skopos theory. Are they the guiding theories for translation technology?

**Pym:** No, not at all. We use equivalence in technology because the technologies work on pairs in the text. We use Skopos because we work for clients and follow orders. But there is nothing particularly technological or even theoretical about it.

**Pan:** As we know, they are applicable to translation technology.

**Pym:** It is what happens. But equivalence and Skopos are not the interesting questions any more. In a sense, their questions have been answered by professional practice. I think we should move to more important questions. New theory doesn’t make old theories wrong – the old theories just become less interesting because they are right. I don’t particularly like the term “theory” anyway – I prefer “theorization”, which would be turning problems into questions, then looking for answers.

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注 释


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