# MATERIAL TEXT TRANSFER
## AS A KEY TO THE PURPOSES OF TRANSLATION[*]

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I believe that careful attention to material text transfer can lead to a model of translation able significantly to strengthen and enrich current purpose-based approaches. I shall attempt to demonstrate this by asking five hopefully difficult questions of purpose-based methodologies, then showing how a model of text transfer can give reasonably coherent answers to those questions. The result might even be an alternative approach to translation.

But first, let me explain why I am looking for an alternative.

## The problems of purpose

As a sociologist interested in describing and improving intercultural relations, I tend to see translation as a privileged index of wider intercultural phenomena and translation theory as a source of interesting models for such relations. This means that I am not particularly interested in questions of comparative linguistics, nor with debates over what kind of theory is or might be of actual use to translators, nor indeed with institutional squabbles between literary and non-literary wings of translation institutes. My interests lie elsewhere. I want to know what translation can tell me about intercultural relations... and perhaps I can suggest to translation theorists that their subject has something serious to do with intercultural relations.

From this personal perspective, I have little doubt that the most stimulating general approaches to translation are currently those that privilege target-text purpose (and thereby target-culture purpose) over all other factors. This orientation is most evident in Skopostheorie (Vermeer, Holz-Mänttäri) and in system-based approaches (Toury, Even-Zohar), but should not be dissociated from the general twentieth-century tendency towards contextual semantics as found in anthropology, sociolinguistics, discourse pragmatics and communicative language teaching, nor from approaches where strong

notions of target purpose have long been accorded priority, particularly in the evangelistic and Modernist tradition of Bible translating. Recent trends in translation theory are by no means without antecedents or out of step with the other social sciences.

The generalized notion of target purpose—in might be called the purpose paradigm—not only has various pedagogical virtues for the description and teaching of translation strategies but should also lead to a more vital understanding of translation history. After all, to understand the translation of a text, one must ask why and for whom the text was translated. There are, however, several areas in which I suspect this paradigm is somewhat less than intellectually satisfying. Let me list just five of these areas, framed more as questions for experts than as criticisms from an opponent:

- First, although I accept as axiomatic the proposition that translation is a teleological activity, I suspect that the proposition is so axiomatic as to risk banality: as a Chomskyan might say, it is certainly true, but is it interesting? Are there any activities which are not teleological (the creation of Kantean "free beauty" might be one of them, but Vermeer 1989, 99 has placed the priority of purpose above aesthetic deviations)? How might such activities differ significantly from translation? Is there only one possible purpose for each action?

- Second, although great insistence is placed on the role and rights of theory, purpose-based approaches generally lack any explicit epistemology able to explain their own origins. They thus run into quite elementary confusions between normative and descriptive ambitions. Even when liberated from the vestiges of source-text analysis, one tends to find theory understood as a system of names for things which, without any explicit discovery procedure or predictive value—and correctly haunted by its own unfalsifiability (Holz-Mänttäri 1984, 162)—, tends to produce labyrinthine tautologies: if translation achieves a purpose, and the purpose is what the translation should achieve, can this position be meaningful beyond the context of an alternative theory able to doubt the tautology?

- Third, although the insistence on purpose makes it possible to describe the translator's responsibility as being to attain given goals, this cannot provide the basis for a professional ethics in any strong sense of the word. Can such a theory generate a way of discerning between good and bad purposes, between good and bad translation strategies? Or is its aim merely to produce mercenary experts, able to fight under the flag of any purpose able to pay them?

- Fourth, these approaches are generally marked by a strong cultural relativism, complete with corresponding concern about their own cultural centrism. This means that emphasis is placed on radically different and mutually distant cultures rather than on translation as a phenomenon that occurs between real or virtual neighbors in order to change their intercultural relations. But if translation involves active contact, if it involves the exchange and change of cultural entities, can the tenets of relativism be of value in the analysis of translation? Why be concerned about the virgin separateness of two entities if they are already involved in active exchange? More particularly, would it be right to insist theoretically on the priority of TT-culture purposes in a situation of ST-cultural imperialism where translations are initiated and performed so as radically to alter the TT culture? Are relativism and one-sided purposes leading to quite dangerous blindness? Does cultural imperialism no longer exist?

- Fifth, and as a consequence of overly relativist thought, the insistence on TT purpose makes it difficult to conceptualize the role of transfer either as a basis for translation or as a general frame for its theorization. Although the term transfer is used with significant frequency within these approaches, can anyone really say what is transferred? More radically, if the translational product's purpose and constitutive elements are seen as residing in the TT culture before the translation is actually carried out, surely there is nothing of significance to be transferred, since everything of importance is always already there? If this twentieth-century reasoning is to be followed through—perversely as a negation of the nineteenth-century argument that nothing worth translating can be translated, and reaching the same conclusions—is not transfer then entirely illusory?

Of all these general problems, it is the latter that I want to address here. I want to suggest a way in which the basic tenets of the purpose paradigm can be strengthened so as to incorporate a strong notion of transfer and thereby connect with several wider social sciences. But I also want to show that the difficulty of describing transfer is part and parcel of all five difficulties listed above.

**How the problem of transfer is evaded**

Vermeer has recognized that, once target purpose is seen as having the highest priority in the determination of translation strategies, translation can be seen as text transfer only in a narrow sense, since it is then better seen as the reverbalization of a message (1986, 36). The peculiar point about this observation is that it occurs in the middle of an

article called "Übersetzen als kultureller Transfer," which seems hardly the appropriate place to admit that the notion of transfer is of limited usefulness. Something similar happens in Even-Zohar, where the "new directions" of translation theory are seen as according epistemological priority the target culture's "state of system" and to the "products of translation" (1990, 74) just one page after translation is supposedly placed within the general framework of a theory of text transfer (73). The problem is the same in both cases: as soon as one privileges the target pole of the translation process, focusing on what actually reaches or should reach the TT receiver, it is not obvious why time should be wasted on describing any anterior status of whatever was supposed to have moved. We know that something was meant to arrive; we know that something arrived; and we know that what was meant to arrive and what actually arrived both tell us about what preceded it; so why then should attention be paid to the transfer process by which that something was able to move? The question surely becomes irrelevant. Unless, of course, one suspects that the movement was entirely illusory.

Justa Holz-Mänttäri is rather more courageous. She at least asks the missing question and offers a partial elaboration:

"Was ist Transferieren? Die [...] Frage ist unvollständig. Es fehlt die Angabe, was denn transferiert werden soll? Die Frage bleibe vorläufig unvollständig, denn es gibt keinen theoretisch fundierten Grund, Ausdrücke wie 'Wörter' oder 'Texte' oder 'Einheiten' einzusetzen. [...] Eine offene Frage ist also der methodische Ansatzpunkt zur vorliegenden Untersuchung." (1984, 20)

Does Holz-Mänttäri then answer this question? I suspect that most of her response comes on the following page, with the introduction of the term "Botschaftsträger" (bearers of messages, of which texts are one kind). This implies that "messages" are what is transferred and that the translator's role is to provide one particular means of affecting such transfer. And none of this seems to contradict or eclipse the emphasis on TT purpose:

"Da 'Translation' [...] 'translatorisches Handeln' ist, um Botschaftsträger für transkulturellen Botschafts-transfer zu produzieren, erhält solches Handeln seinen Fokus, seine Steuergrösse 'Funktion', von der Zielkultur her." (1984, 83)

But is this an answer, or simply a production of names to fill a blank conceptual space? Do these "message bearers" really move? One would hope so, since Holz-Mänttäri's numerous schemata include axes of space and time and incorporate different degrees of communicational and cultural "distance". But then, further on, transfer is described as "Sich-Hineinversetzen in das andere Kulturgefüge" (164), which is then explicitly glossed as a "mental process" (165). Is transfer then a question of purely imaginary voyages in the mind of the translator, a teleological but insubstantial "as if..."? This would seem to be the case, especially since various comments on the notion of cultural

distance, presumed to be greater in a complex society than in a simple one (164), reveal it as a decidedly non-material concept. I therefore suspect that, if Holz-Mänttäri does answer the questions "What is transfer?" and "What is transferred?", it is ultimately by leaving space for a neurological or mentalistic answer.

The human brain and mind, or their psychoanalytical or even cybernetic surrogates, are not convenient places to leave the problem of transfer. If the question "What is transferred?" can be answered by a simple "Botschaft" for Holz-Mänttäri, it could equally be answered by the "sens" of Seleskovitch et al., the "pure thought" occasionally cited by Newmark (1981, 51, 57), or even "God's Word to man", presumably underlying Nida's early belief in messages and psychological "transfer mechanisms" (1964, 146). In this interior and ultimately unknowable space, one name is really as good or bad as any other, since as soon as the "what" is named it is in a sense consagrated as some kind of "true meaning", as that which should be rendered in the situation concerned. Translation theory, which has long had to ward off semantic idealism, is not well served by such names. It has understandably not wanted to address too closely the problem of transfer.

## How transfer is related to purpose

As a sociologist, I am of course quite happy that something happens inside translators' heads. But I don't lose much sleep worrying about its exact nature. May that kind of internal transfer continue and fare well: I have no need to know about it, and it has no need to know about me.

However, as a sociologist, I am bound to be genuinely interested in phenomena such as the movement of explicitly alien elements into a falsely homogeneous cultural space (the adjectives come from the phenomenon: a culture which identifies certain elements as alien thereby creates and asserts an image of itself as homogeneous). This kind of external transfer has to do with a great many quite ugly phenomena such as war, intolerance and international iniquity, as well as the birth, development and death of cultures as different ways of celebrating life. External transfer is a phenomenon that I want to know more about. It is also a phenomenon that I might just be able to influence.

The main difference between these two kinds of transfer is that the first is mental and the second is material. One could go further and say that the first represents the second, or that the first belongs to consciousness whereas the second belongs to being, but for the moment all I want to do is explain why my interests are almost exclusively limited to the second, to explicitly material transfer, understood as concrete movement in time and space. This is because only the material conception of transfer can provide pertinent discovery procedures for the analysis of translation.

Let me reduce material transfer to its basic elements: the material support (paper, electrons, human bodies, etc.), the movement of the support (directionality, force, resistance, speed) and the meaningfulness of that support as an artefact.

In principle, the material support is always in movement, since displacement in time cannot be stopped. As Valéry Larbaud appreciated, "l'immobilité du texte imprimé est une illusion optique" (1946, 84). This movement may be called transfer for as long as the support involved remains meaningful.

Of course, meaningfulness is always for someone. On one level, it is for any individual who might chance to come across and recognize the support as an artefact. But since the nature of discursive communication is to organize potential randomness, meaningfulness is more usefully seen as being for a conventionalized second person, the status of whom will of necessity change as the support moves in time and space.

Such changes tend to be uneven, passing through points of rupture ensuing from the nature of the communication concerned: a conference programme, for example, is meaningful as publicity before the conference, as pragmatic information during the conference, and as history after the conference, with the second type of meaningfulness spatially restricted to second persons sharing the time and place of the conference.

There are numerous such changes and types of change. But transfer is not without its logic and basic categories. Consider, for example, the status of second-person receivers. A letter addressed "Dear Jenny" will be meaningful when transferred to a non-Jenny, but it will not be meaningful in the same way. There is a clear and radical difference between these two transfer situations. We might use this difference to distinguish between a participative second person (the Jenny named and found) and an observational second person (a spying non-Jenny). But then, of course, if the letter is in a foreign language and non-Jenny is unable to understand it, then we would have to talk about an excluded second person.

It is not my purpose to develop here the kind of text typology and discourse analysis adequate to these basic categories. Suffice to say that the relative stability of meaningfulness, the text's capacity to withstand distance and remain within thresholds, can be enhanced by relative explicitness and discursive generality: a letter addressed "to whom it may concern" may still be transferred to participative, observational and excluded positions, but it will have greater resistance to change and thus greater elasticity with respect to the forces moving it in one way or another.

The main point to be stressed here is that there are differences in meaningfulness which are brought about by material transfer itself.

These fairly simple examples suggest several basic principles for a theory of material transfer:

• All artefacts are in perpetual material transfer.
• Material transfer changes the meaningfulness of artefacts.

• Such changes are conjugated on second-person thresholds pertinent to the nature of the communication.

• These thresholds form points of rupture or frontiers in the time and space crossed by transfer.

• The basic thresholds distinguish between participative, observational and excluded second persons.

And so on.

It is not difficult to make the principles of transfer talk about translation. One merely has to posit that some thresholds are so radical—they result in such radical second-person exclusion—that they require that meaningfulness be expressed with a new support. This marking of a new support is in fact one way of describing the work of the translator. The translator's specific black box becomes necessary at certain points where second-person exclusion becomes radical.

What is the purpose of translation? From the perspective of material transfer, it is to overcome radical second-person exclusion. Moreover, according to the basic categories outlined above, translation may convert an excluded second person into a participative or observational second person.

Although this reasoning says nothing about the techniques a translator may use to overcome exclusion—changing one language for another is only one of many possibilities—, it can suggest why translation should occur, and why it should occur in the specific times and places where transfer itself proves unable to extend meaningfulness. That is, transfer analysis can in itself lead to the formulation of a purpose for translation in general and, potentially, for each particular translation situation. Some other kind of analysis would then have to say how and to what extent that purpose is achieved.

It should now be clear why I am so interested to find the notion of purpose presented as the crowning concept of approaches purporting to explain translation but with very little to say about transfer. Translation analysis can ask "Why translate this text?" and then come up with some kind of general answer based on the various factors surrounding the translator, albeit with priority to the TT purpose. But transfer analysis can also ask the same question in a slightly different form: "Why transfer this text to a position where it needs to be translated?", leading to a different kind of answer involving far more than the individuals entering into the translator's immediate situation. Translation analysis tends to locate individual purposes for individual cases; transfer analysis looks for social purposes for general cases.

What this mode of questioning assumes is that the way a text is translated will be strongly conditioned by the social reasons motivating the physical transfer of that text. But it cannot be assumed that the translator, condemned to overcome exclusion, is necessarily condemned to follow social instructions as to the mode and nature of the

second person appropriate to the target text. Obviously, the translator may contest, reproduce or hide the interests motivating the transfer. But one would have to know the purposes of the transfer situation before one could assess the reality of the translator's liberty and thus responsibility.

From this perspective, the kind of purpose presented as all-embracing illumination on the level of translation analysis becomes, for me, the point of departure for a further series of questions. What is the intersubjective status of translation purposes? Are translation purposes universal in nature, or do different societies or social groups develop different purposes? How might one conceptualize socio-historical groups of purposes? Do purposes change with history, and if so why?

**How to question the transferred text**

The difference between transfer and translation as two different modes of approaching purpose resides in their ability to address two related but different objects: translation analysis interrogates the (real or virtual) translational product; transfer analysis, on the other hand, is interested in the (real or virtual) artefact which, for one reason or another, has reached the position where it needs to be translated. Since we are going to assume its meaningfulness for the translator, this artefact-in-position may most simply be described as the text which has been materially transferred but not yet translated. (This is a normalizing condition: obviously, the translator may work before, after or in the middle of an entire transfer trajectory, but teleological nature of the translation enables us to assume that the intervention is always "as if" the transfer had already taken place.) The status of this merely transferred text has been so consistently overlooked that it appears not to have a name. So let us call it a Y-text, to be read as the text which asks the question "why?" on at least two fronts:

• Why has this text been transferred from one place to another? (what social interests have motivated its material displacement?)

• Why should this text be translated? (why should it not be left untranslated?)

Answers to the first question—social and historical—tend to be assumed by answers to the second question—professional and ethical—, thus providing a model of the social conditioning of transfer and then translation. More importantly, the possible answers to these questions do not presuppose determination solely at the target pole. Since transfer concerns movement, more than one communication pole must be involved.

An example might reveal some of the ways this model can be applied.

**Example: "Skopos" into English**

The term "Skopos" is used in some German-language translation theories in order to absorb possible distinctions between "Ziel" and "Zweck" (cf. Vermeer 1989, 94). Interestingly, Holz-Mänttäri (1984) seems to find these latter terms relatively unproblematic, since they are comfortably covered by the tandem "Gesamtziel" and "Handlungszwecke". One might thus suspect that the use of the term "Skopos" in Reiß and Vermeer (1984) and Vermeer (passim.) has more to do with marking theoretical language off from common language about translation, as is done with the series "Translation", "Translat" and "Translator". "Skopos" is moreover significantly Greek, echoing the classicist returns of Husserl and Heidegger, thus working as something like a brand-name, becoming meaningful through its denial of its more common substitutes.

Now, let us imagine that the German theories using this term are to be translated into English, perhaps for an article or two in a publication of the Kent State University. How is "Skopos" to be rendered? I can think of at least three possibilities:

- The term "scope" was used in English in the sixteenth century to say "aim", calqued on the Italian *scopo* ("goal"), from the Latin *scopos,* from the Greek σκοπος ("target"). But this meaning is now archaic and relatively unavailable. Indeed, it was so unavailable to me that, when first reading fragments Reiß and Vermeer (1984), I radically misunderstood the German term and thought the theory was based on the *range* of possible translations of a given ST (which is not a bad idea, although it belongs to neither Reiß nor Vermeer). One could assume that selection of the term "scope" for "Skopos"—or a bastard anglicization of the German/Greek as "scopos"—is more than likely to promote significant second-person exclusion. And yet both these renderings have been attempted (in Nord 1991; redressed in Nord forthcoming).

- Alternatively, straight transliteration as "Skopos" would indicate that the "range" sense of "scope" is a misreading and that the correct meaning of the term is to be found in another context, perhaps in Greek (if so, why not write the even more exotic "σκοπος"?), but more properly in the specifically German theories concerned. When this is done, misunderstandings are avoided without creating any great understanding: the second person is invited to learn about German translation theory, hopefully eventually finding out why "Skopos" is more correct than "Ziel" or "Zweck" (although I, for one, have yet to reach this stage).

- A wholly English term like "purpose" would then tend to obscure the problematics provoked by the German "Skopos", suggesting that the theories in question have rather less specificity than they themselves believe, but nevertheless inviting the English-speaking second person to adopt a participative attitude towards those theories. That is, instead of merely telling the reader about German theory, this

rendering would tend to invite the reader to change—to improve or enliven—English-language theory.

These three translational alternatives thus indicate different capacities to create excluded, observational and participative second persons. As can be seen, the basic choice between these categories may correspond to what other theories term covert and overt translation (House) or instrumental and documental translation (Nord). Of course, as with these latter theories, few translators would make an absolute choice for any one mode, since various combinations of glosses, footnotes and parentheses are possible. One strategy, one term, must nevertheless become dominant.

Now, the selection of one term or another will ultimately depend on how the translator responds to the specific transfer situation concerned. Here we find a significant ambiguity. It might be assumed that the purpose of the transfer—let us say, from Leipzig to Kent State—is to tell English-language readers about Translation Studies in Germany. But it might also be assumed that the international intellectual community is such that the transfer is designed to improve translation theory in general, in accordance with participative attitudes. One would have to analyze the beach-heads already established in the target culture. One would have to establish whether the criteria of the publishers and various selection committees go towards observational or participative attitudes. But then again, perhaps both these positions are idealistic extremes. Does this transfer not take place in the context of a further major transfer, namely that of an entire country from East to West? Perhaps the real exchange in this case is of prestige or Europeanness for dollars, or even of ideologies for markets. Transfer analysis does give the translator any easy answers. But it certainly presents an interesting set of problems to be addressed.

There is no one purpose on the level of transfer that can preselect the way purposes should be attained on the level of translation. But there is a very complex social, political and ultimately ethical situation to which translators can and should respond. Moreover, the way that translators respond—for example, in the choice between "scope", "Skopos" and "purpose"—will tend to influence future transfer situations, either opening up the channel from one language to another, or perhaps closing it by creating excessive opacity in the name of exactitude or fidelity.

In choosing to talk of "purpose" I have already indicated my own response to this particular transfer situation. But it is not at all a comfortable decision. Although participation certainly has its democratic virtues, ¿tantos millones hablaremos inglés?

**How transfer analysis responds to the problems of purpose**

Serious attention to material transfer would be a waste of time if it did not lead to some general answers to the methodological problems facing current Translation Studies. Let

us see how the few notions we have outlined could be used to respond to the five questions I have asked of the purpose-paradigm:

- If all activities are teleological, is not purpose an empty concept?

  Although transfer clearly cannot tell us anything about non-teleological activities (if there are any), it does make the concept of purpose meaningful by revealing its pragmatic plurality. That is, in addition to the image of the lone translator seeking a unitary answer to the question "Why should this text be translated?", we have the wider and more general question "Why has this text been transferred?". This second question cannot be answered in terms of singular purposes, quite simply because no one person can absolutely control a movement in time and space (concrete means are required, as well as degrees of second-person cooperation). On this material level, the question of purposes really becomes a question of the relative power to move, the capacity (pouvoir) to remain meaningful over distance. Transfer is not individual, nor universal, but a question of intersubjective constraints. That is, its purposes are plural and social.

- Does the purpose paradigm offer any discovery procedures?

  The very fact that there are two questions to ask of the transferred text opens up space for a dialectic hermeneutics: the answer given on one level becomes a question for the other, and vice versa, and so on. That is, instead of drawing up a monoplanar categorization of the various parts of translation, we are concerned with the way translators actively respond to transfer situations and thereby help to determine future transfer situations. There is something to be discovered in the passage from one level to the other. This internal dialogue not only acts as a contestation of more comfortable normative or descriptive approaches, but also enables discovery procedures to adopt a far wider scope (not "Skopos"!). A given text transfer may be accorded significance not in terms of any individual society, but within other general networks of intersocietal transfer (political, economic, military, "technology" or "expertise" transfer). Research in translation history may thus be organized in terms of general regimes of intersocietal transfer on all levels. Hopefully, the study of translation might then tell us something about how different cultures interrelate, and how they should interrelate.

- Is translation ethical or mercenary service?

  If we can accept that the translator responds to a transfer situation, there should be no risk of analyzing anonymous technicians carrying out their anonymous duties. Unlike many categorical functionalist approaches, transfer analysis allows for recognition of translational responsibility and thereby an ethical assessment of

translational purposes. If this line of thought is followed through to the study of regimes as indicated above, translational ethics should ideally be based on an ethics of intercultural relations.

- Cultural relativism?

  Transfer analysis requires no assumptions about the meaning of a source-text or the understanding of a source-culture, thus avoiding problems of transcendental signifieds, cultural relativity and semantic or functional universals. Unlike system theory it does not restrict its vision to the function of a text in either the sending or receiving cultures but finds its point of departure in the dynamic contact between the two cultures. In historical research, this in fact makes it possible to avoid initial delimitations of the related cultures, since the fact of translation itself can be defined as an index of an intercultural frontier. In this way, Translation Studies can actively help to define the fields of comparative cultural studies, instead of passively accepting the predefined borders of sacred cultural specificities.

- Can transfer be incorporated into Translation Studies?

  The purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate that transfer can and indeed should be incorporated into Translation Studies. However, according to the theory, the meaningfulness of my proposal is destined to be modified by the transfer of this text to you. Evidence of this is that one theorist has bluntly told me that material transfer is immaterial to the translator. One would then suppose that I have failed to achieve my purpose, or that I have not found enough discursive power to overcome the challenges of distance. But this also depends on the second person. If you believe that the purpose of translation theory is only to give direct guidance to practising translators, then I must admit that the criticism seems quite justified: the materialities of transfer are indeed mostly unappreciated by individuals struggling with individual texts. If, however, you believe that translation is also a general intercultural process, if you believe that its field includes phenomena of pseudo-translating or false translations only definable on the basis of transfer, and if you believe that one of the purposes of translation theory is to relate Translation Studies to other social sciences, then I think I have successfully demonstrated that the concept of material transfer is one of the most potentially interesting and useful interdisciplinary links we have available.

That is, the study of transfer can and should be used to reinforce and enrich the paradigm of purpose as it is currently applied in Translation Studies.

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