Western translation theories as responses to equivalence

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1. Introduction - the recent paradigms of Western translation theory

Contemporary European translation theories can be seen as a series of paradigms that question the once-dominant concept of equivalence. Here we outline a narrative of that questioning, hopefully in a way that makes some sense of a vast and confusing field. Our aim is to tell old stories in a slightly different way. And if our tale can show some pattern behind all the theories, it might also be able to say where the theorization of translation might or should be heading.

Here is the narrative in a nutshell: Back in the 1950s or so, equivalence happily described not only the goal of a translation but the yardstick by which language sciences could analyze translations. It was a strong, complex paradigm of thought, but it lost its leading role. Part of the problem was the parallel existence of a rival kingdom called indeterminacy (which challenged the stability of anything apparently equivalent), although there were rarely any actual struggles between the two ways of seeing translations. Newer paradigms, however, then emphasized various aspects or problems that the theories of equivalence somehow overlooked: namely, the translation's *Skopos* or purpose (challenging the dominant role of the source text), historical and cultural relativism (challenging any absolute equivalence equations), localization (deceptively blurring the divisions between translation and adaptation), and cultural translation (seeing translation in terms of interpersonal processes rather than an affair of texts). Each of those challenges represents a paradigm shift of some kind, enacting conceptual displacements so fundamental that many debates have simply been caused by people using the same terms with different meanings. Here we briefly present the paradigms in only a loose chronological order, since they have generally developed in parallel, and they all rely on intellectual and technological currents that go back much further.

2. The complexities of equivalence

From about the 1950s, the professional and academic proximity between translation and scientific discourses meant that there was an increasing concern with accuracy, and thus an interest in making translation theory appear as scientific as possible. This tendency affected literary as well as technical translation, and it was associated with awareness of the need to train professionals for the growing social demands for translation and interpreting. If that training was to happen anywhere near tertiary educational institutions, it should nestle in some way into structuralist linguistics, which was the dominant science of the age. The

general concept of equivalence, with its vaguely mathematical heritage, suited that purpose and seemed able to underlie several new sciences of translation.

The first clear usages of the term 'equivalence' and its cognates (in Fedorov 1953, Vinay and Darbelnet 1958, Vázquez-Ayora 1977) referred to cultural adaptation of quite an extreme kind, as when the French military has 'la soupe' when British soldiers have 'tea' (example from Vinay and Darbelnet 1958, 55). The terms change so that the *function* remains equivalent – the notion of equivalence was functionalist from the very start. That kind of equivalence might be termed 'natural', since it is assumed to exist before the translator's intervention. Many theorists thus became concerned with identifying the levels and functions of the source text, since they assumed that once you have those, translation is just a mapping operation. Much translation theory has thus been applied text linguistics: mainstream examples would be Hatim and Mason in the British tradition, and Koller and Reiss in German. A best-selling textbook like Mona Baker's *In Other Words* (1992) was nothing but a summary of text-linguistic categories, somehow assumed to lead to something that everyone glibly called 'equivalence', as if the matter were clear.

The concept of equivalence nevertheless broadened out when the American Bible theorist and translator Eugene Nida (1964) recognized the polarities 'dynamic equivalence' (same function) and 'formal equivalence' (same form, probably with a different function). There were thus different kinds of equivalence that could be established, independently of whatever was considered 'natural' before the translator entered the scene. The polarities recall the dichotomies formulated by Cicero and Schleiermacher, among many others, and meet up with divisions such as 'semantic' vs. 'communicative' translation (Newmark) or 'adequacy' vs. 'acceptability' (Toury). These polarities are similar to Levý's opposition between 'illusory' and 'anti-illusory´ translations, where the terms more strictly concern the way a translation signifies its source. That second kind of opposition has been pursued by House ('covert' vs. 'overt' translations), Nord ('instrumental' vs. 'documentary') and particularly Gutt ('indirect' vs. 'direct' translations). All these oppositions fit into this alternative branch of the equivalence paradigm, marked by a general refusal to recognize just one equivalent as being 'natural'.

Whenever we talk about equivalence these days, serious theorists tend to switch off – we know all about that; it is all in the past; things have become far more sophisticated; equivalence is no more than a scientist surrogate for the millennial trope of the translator's fidelity, or servitude. It is nevertheless intriguing to pursue the opposition between natural equivalence and what we might now term 'directional' equivalence, which would be the kind assumed by all the great polarities. For theories of natural equivalence, translation can go from language A to language B, then back to exactly the same text in language A. For directional equivalence, on the other hand, the translator has active choices to make and there is no guarantee of an exact return. Directional equivalence thus becomes a theory of translative productivity and semantic indeterminacy. Together, natural and directional equivalence form a paradigm that was and remains a rich and dynamic space of investigation and dispute. Further, when we look at the historical development of the paradigm in these terms, some deceptively simple theories start to cast long shadows. We might ask, for instance, if there are any theories that successfully unite the natural and directional perspectives. There is indeed at least one: When Otto Kade (1968) pointed out

that equivalence could be *one-to-one*, *one-to-several* (or *several-to-one*), *one-to-part*, or *one-to-none*, he effectively brought both modes of thought into the one frame. The conceptual work now appears obvious, even banal. In historical context however, the theory retains an uncommon beauty.

Equivalence has thus been used in at least three different ways: to conceptualize cultural adaptation ('dynamic equivalence'), to refer to reproduction of different 'natural' source-text levels and functions (where the term does indeed recuperate the millennial discourse of 'fidelity'), and to think about the different choices facing the translator. The result is a complex paradigm, too often reduced to some of its more naïve formulations. Underlying *all* these conceptualizations is the common idea that the way one translates depends, in the last instance, on the nature of the *source* text, since that is what a translation is equivalent to. That is the point on which the late twentieth century challenged the basic concept of equivalence.

3. The doubts of indeterminism

In historical terms, it would be wrong to assume that there was a strong linguistic paradigm of equivalence that was then challenged by a series of newer paradigms. Within the narrow circles of European translation scholars, that general timeline might seem valid. On a wider view, however, the beginning of the tale must recognize at least two initial elements: equivalence on the one side, with its cues coming from the source text, and on the other side would stand indeterminism, from the very beginning, with its multiple doubts about the meaning of any text.

Our term "indeterminism" brings together several related traditions of critical thought, all of which have questioned the very possibility of equivalence.

In Europe, the intellectual genealogy of indeterminism starts from German hermeneutics, connects with the aesthetics of Modernism, then informs French post-structuralism, from which is has influenced literary and cultural studies all over the world. For most theorists, the (literary or philosophical) source text transcends individual interpretations of it, and this makes translations inferior and transitory. Rather than equivalence (of whatever kind), the best one can hope to achieve is 'similarity'. This approach inherits the part of hermeneutics that was concerned with the Bible, but its elements can be found in Croce, Walter Benjamin (who notes the 'fleetingness' with which meaning attaches to translations), Heidegger (for whom translations can be used as attempts to understand the authentic thought of the past), and through to the French translator and theorist Antoine Berman (who emphasized the need for translations to respect the 'letter' of the foreign text). One might also include the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in this list, at least with reference to the way he uses translations and comments on them in his work on Greek and German texts, as well as in his later readings of Shakespeare.

In the United States, the most cogent critique of equivalence was formulated by the linguistic philosopher Quine (1960), who used translation as a thought experiment for investigating the relation between language and meaning. Quine envisages a situation of 'radical translation', where an ethnographer is attempting to understand the speakers of a

hitherto unknown language. Quine demonstrates that there can be no absolute certainty about meaning in such cases, and that this same uncertainty is present, to various degrees, in all communicative situations. That is, our interpretations of a message are not wholly determined by the message, and meaning is therefore indeterminate. Quine's thought experiment has been of some importance in the philosophy of language, although it has never produced systematic ideas about the actual practice of translation. Indeed, the indeterminism of the analytical tradition has tended to remain quite separate from the claims of European poststructuralism, to the extent of mutual ignorance.

Although the classical theorists of indeterminism assume a transcendent source (even Quine assumes the native is saying something that we really should try to grasp), a more radical indeterminism can be applied to source texts themselves, making them just one of many possible texts. This can also be found in Benjamin, where he sees different languages as complementing each other like 'fragments of a broken vessel'. On this view, associated with deconstruction (although never condoned as such by Derrida, who remained conservative in his respect for the source), translators need have no great respect for the letter of the foreign text; they become free to betray the form of expression and to experiment with their own inevitably creative role. Elements of this second kind of indeterminism can be found in the Brazilian theorist Rosemary Arrojo, as well as in theoretical approaches that borrow from gender studies and postcolonial studies. If seen as liberation, indeterminism allows translation to respond to political agendas rather than to source texts.

The fact that Walter Benjamin can be cited by both kinds of indeterminists might indicate why his essay on translation has been fetishized by literary and cultural theorists, particularly those writing in English.

We thus find that, at the same time as various twentieth-century linguists pursued the modes and mysteries of equivalence, lines of philosophers were sowing seeds of doubt about the very possibility of equivalence. There was no great confrontation or debate between these two camps, probably because of a degree of professional segregation (translator-trainers on one side, literary-philosophical thinkers on the other) but also, perhaps more profoundly, because a significant degree of indeterminacy could be allowed for by directional equivalence itself. The two paradigms became each others' secret fellow travelers.

4. Theories of purpose (Skopos)

Opposition, when it came, was from a very different quarter. In the course of the 1980s German-language work on translation formed a paradigm around the concept of *Skopos*, described as the aim or purpose that a translation is designed to carry out in the situation of reception. For the German theorist Hans Vermeer, 'the dominant factor of each translation is its purpose [*Zweck*]' (in Reiss and Vermeer 1984, 96). That simple principle was presented as 'dethroning' the source text. From this perspective, translations are generally seen as fulfilling functions quite different to those of source texts, since they are for a fundamentally different audience, in a new cultural situation. The same text can therefore be translated in different ways, to suit different purposes. The translator must first decide,

in consultation with the client, what the purpose is to be, then act accordingly. This theory does not abolish equivalence by any means – it simply makes equivalence a special case, to be sought in situations where 'functional consistency' is required between the source and target situations.

Those ideas have had repercussions on the way translators are trained, and indeed on the concept of their professional role. For Holz-Mänttäri (1984), translators are experts in cross-cultural communication in general; their 'translatorial actions' can include rewriting of all kinds, including the production of a new text (if a given source is unsuitable) and cross-cultural consulting. For the general *Skopos* approach, the translator is no longer a lone figure confronting a foreign document, but is active partner in a complex communication act, where the client's instructions can be more important than the source text.

All that is well known; the opposition with the equivalence paradigm was clear and reasoned (as we have mentioned, equivalence generally meant 'same function' and was seen as a special case). That opposition, and the professional realities that underlay the insights of *Skopos*, had the potential to shift the whole field of translation theory; there was a revolution at stake. The paradigm nevertheless stagnated in the 1990s; the number of German-language contributions to research and debate on translation would seem to have declined remarkably in recent years (cf. Toury 2009); the revolution somehow had nowhere to go.

One of the problems here could be that the concept of *Skopos* (or indeed 'expertise' in Holz-Mänttäri) is as much an essentialism as the stable semantic entities assumed by equivalence theory. The *Skopos* camp never really came to terms with indeterminism, despite occasionally promising to 'liberate' translators (except when they are being trained) and welcoming a deconstructionist like Arrojo into the pages of the journal *TextconText*. Another problem could have been the very certitude with which the theoretical pronouncements were strung together, making them not only essentialist but also impervious to empirical testing. There was thus no need to do any research on actual translation practices, and the dialectical engagement with professional realities was lost. A final problem could then have been the existence of alternative paradigms better equipped to deal with empiricism, at least.

5. The import of descriptions

A long European tradition, reaching back to Russian Formalism and its antecedents in French positivism, holds that hidden rules can be revealed through the scientific analysis of cultural products. That tradition, mostly called structuralist, ran through the schools of translation theory in Prague and Bratislava, touched work at Leipzig, then flowered in the 1980s in Holland, Flanders and Israel. A loose network of scholars from those countries gave rise to a paradigm based on finding out what translations actually do as pieces of language in context, as opposed to what countless generations had opined about ideal translation. The general approach was thus 'descriptive', rather than the 'prescriptive' attitude based on opinion; it has since come to be known as Descriptive Translation Studies (after Toury 1995). The paradigm, however, has done more than just describe.

For the Israeli scholar Gideon Toury (1980), the descriptive approach should accept as axiomatic that all translations are equivalent to their sources, so that research can then discover the modes of that equivalence. Thus, at the same time as *Skopos* theory made equivalence a special case, descriptivism made it a banal presupposition. This might also have provided a coherent answer to the doubts of indeterminism ("let's go and see what the jungle linguists actually do…"), but that connection was never made.

This descriptive approach was nevertheless quite able to theorize what translations do in the world. For the Tel Aviv school founded by Itamar Even-Zohar and continued by Toury, the target culture could be seen as a system (in fact a 'polysystem', a system comprising systems). Within that system, translations can be either 'central', where they play an innovative role and help to change the culture, or 'peripheral', where they conform to established patterns and play a reinforcing role. For Even-Zohar (1978), translations are normally in peripheral positions, although they may become central when the target culture feels itself to be inferior to the source culture. This proposed 'law' thus correlates modes of translating with cross-cultural dynamics. Its implicit sociology of translation completely undermines all the prescriptions about how all translations should be carried out: if a culture feels inferior, it will tend to prefer literalist translations; if not, then not.

An important modulation of this kind of law is offered by the notion of translation norms (Toury 1995). For Toury, the study of numerous translations reveals that translators behave differently in different cultures and historical settings, and their behaviours may be patterned. Those patterns form norms if and when there is some kind of sanction for non-compliance. For example, in the France of *les belles infidèles* the dominant norm was to adapt foreign texts to French culture, and to render foreign verse as French prose. A translator who did not adhere to those norms could expect less success. The notion of norms thus opens a relativist vision of translation practices, and this vision has expanded as scholars have explored many non-Western conceptualizations of translation. The notion of norms has also been an important step in the rationalization of translator training. Trainees can be asked to render the one text several times, in accordance with different norms. Trainers' prescriptions can in turn be seen as predictions of future failure, pertinent to particular reception situations (Chesterman 1999).

The Tel Aviv school also contributed research on the ways translations tend to be different from non-translations. The hypothetical "universals of translation" can be listed as follows: 1) *lexical simplification*, since translations tend to use a narrower range of different words (Blum-Kulka and Levenston 1983); 2) *explicitation*, since translations tend to be more redundant, particularly with respect to cohesion devices (Blum-Kulka 1986/2004); 3) *adaptation*, since translations tend to adopt the discursive norms of the target culture (Zellermayer 1987); and 4) *equalizing*, since translations tend avoid the extremes of discursive ranges, particularly on the oral-literate continuum (Shlesinger 1989). Further research has affirmed and extended these hypotheses with respect to particular language pairs.

Descriptive studies have thus produced a highly relativistic vision of translation at the same time as they have spawned ideas about what features might be universal to all translations.

This is by no means a banal intellectual achievement; it is not easily reduced to a naïve untheorized empiricism.

At the same time, remarkably little has come from the various pretensions of descriptivism to found a 'translation science' (cf. Zybatov 2004). One might lament the way that the careful linguistic thought of Leipzig ran into loggerheads with the facile revolution of *Skopos*; or the way the dense methodological prose of Tel Aviv completely failed to connect with the dynamic literary comparatism of the United States; or indeed the failure within the descriptive camps to settle on a unified terminology for their pursuit. If the success of a science is to be measured in terms of the way its research components are coordinated, then there is little cause for jubilation here. And if success is supposed to ensue from the way other sciences respect and cite you, then descriptivism entirely missed the boat: flavor-of-the-month Translation Studies, of the kind now found in American comparatism, draws far more readily on philosophical snippets from indeterminist theory plus the occasional literary prejudice. But if, on the other hand, success is to be measured in terms of discoveries, then the proposed laws and universals deserve to be better recognized and further discussed.

So how does descriptivism relate to the other paradigms of translation theory? As is remarked commonly enough, both Toury and Vermeer (to pick a name from each camp) downplay equivalence, focus on the target side, aim to study 'functions', and were once quite prepared to be the *enfants terribles* of their respective milieux. We might also add that neither has really come to terms with indeterminism. On the other hand, Vermeer made equivalence quite a small thing, whereas Toury made it a very common thing, almost without conceptual substance; Vermeer's early theorizing works in the relatively small scene of a communication act, whereas Toury's assumes the dimensions of entire cultural systems; Vermeer refers to 'function' in terms of the role given to a piece of language in an action, whereas Toury's functionalism refers to what translations do in an entire cultural system; Vermeer does not require empirical justification (theoretical reflection is enough), whereas Toury has always actively sought it.

Each paradigm has responded to equivalence, but ultimately in quite different ways.

6. Localization

About ten years ago, our story might have ended there, perhaps with some trite hope that the *Skopos* and descriptive paradigms would eventually work together. That hope is not altogether forlorn – it is implicitly expressed by recent calls for new sociologies of translation, where descriptive methods would be brought to bear on the power (and/or cooperative) relations between translators, publishers, readerships, and the like. At the same time, however, the translation industry itself, far from remaining a passive object of theoretical or empirical inquiry, has been developing its own modes of theorization. Industry discourse must now be accorded a role in any short account of translation theories.

While *Skopos* theory reduced equivalence to a special case, descriptive studies were finding it everywhere, and indeterminism continued to question its existence, the translation industry was confronting the more practical problems of economic globalization. In the late

1980s and more especially in the 1990s, the software industry started to talk about 'localization'. The term generally refers to a work process in which a source text, perhaps a piece of software, is first stripped of its culture-specific features (thus becoming 'internationalized') and is then translated into a number of target languages simultaneously, with each translation team inserting the features appropriate to the specific target 'locale' (whence the term 'localization'). This process has benefited from advances in translation-memory technologies and the integration of machine translation, making the localization industry a significant generator of new concepts of cross-cultural communication.

In the context of our story, the main paradox of localization is that, although it would appear to promote cultural adaptation, its processes actually rely on rather simplistic models of equivalence. When translation memories store paired segments, the assumption is made that the pairing is valid for future re-use. And when translation is conceptualized as only one part of the localization process, this automatic pairing is what translation is assumed to be. The result is a remarkably non-functionalist theory of equivalence, far simpler than the theories put forward in the 1950s. The theories of *Skopos*, descriptive relativism and indeterminism seem to have had no effect at all on the ideas actually at work in industrial practice.

This state of affairs is good for any company aiming to have vast amounts of linguistic material rendered quickly into many languages. It is perhaps not so good for the users of that linguistic material, who somehow learn the jargon or just learn English. And it is often less than good for the translators engaged in the process, who are often reduced to donkey-work replacement exercises or advance to non-translational jobs – the problem here being that 'translation' is effectively separated from major conceptual input on the problems of cultural adaptation.

From our narrative perspective, the message could be even more worrying. Both *Skopos* theory and descriptivism, each in its way, once made an appeal to actual translation practice, broadly in the hope that they could somehow allow practice to somehow erupt within theory, bringing in battle-hardened principles about the ways translations should be done (for Skopers) or are usually done (for describers). And now what do we find? Actual practice, or at least one very powerful strand of it, has no need of such theories and apparently contradicts them on the very basics of equivalence. As moral beings, we should logically seek to have humanizing theory re-shape localization practice. But when we muster the theories available, we find that they are at least ambivalent with respect to how much they can give to (or take from) practice.

Either way, localization theory returns equivalence to square one. That might be a neat place to end a story. But it would not be a happy ending, so we continue.

7. Translation without translations

If localization theory reduces the term 'translation' to a boring phrase-replacement exercise (and you have to work on a software localization project to realize the extent to which this can happen), a logical way to undermine the theory is to use the term 'translation' in a

variety of broader contexts, hopefully with more humanistic horizons. This is more or less what is happening, if you know where to look.

The term 'translation' is increasingly used to describe intercultural dynamics that do far more than relate two texts to each other. For example, the Indian theorist Homi Bhabha sees 'cultural translation' as a practice in which hybridity is produced, mostly as a result of migrations and the new cultural spaces thus created. For the Indian translator and theorist Gayatri Spivak (2007), 'translation' can be the way a person acquires a culture, be it their first, second or third. For the French sociologists Callon and Latour (1981/2006), 'translation' is the way social actors interact so that some can later speak 'on behalf of' others (so translation is at the core of all politics). For the German sociologist Joachim Renn (2006), translation is the way that the groups in fragmented postmodern societies manage to communicate in order to ensure governance, without assuming complete understanding. Many similar instances can be found in literary, cultural and philosophical theories.

Although these uses of the term 'translation' do not concern translations as such, they are influencing the way the work of translators is perceived in academic circles. That influence is not necessarily negative. Globalization is producing countless situations in which translation now responds to the movements of *people*, not texts. Translation is increasingly necessary *within* our current societies, and not just between them. Translation is thus playing a role in which our *power relations* are enacted, rather than ensuring a stable equivalence between texts. On all those fronts, the extended metaphors of translation can be expected to reframe many of the traditional questions about how, and why, anyone should translate.

8. Ideas for the future of translation

What has happened to equivalence? From its original questioning by indeterminism, it has been reduced to a special case in *Skopos* theory, extended into banality by descriptivism, resurrected in its most restrictive form by localization theory, and now is increasingly disregarded by the fragments of what we might still call 'cultural translation'. If we had to choose between the two most recent paths, between the technocracy of localization and the intellectual dissipation of cultural translation, we would certainly select the latter – it might, after all, lead to more interesting places.

Happily, the dialectics of theory rarely require such an either/or choice. The great virtue of cultural translation, as a way of asking questions, is that it takes some account of the *people* involved. It is quite legitimate to look at the localization industry and ask, beyond all the criteria of efficiency and productivity, about the way it is affecting the cultures of globalization. The answer will concern people, not things. And it is also quite possible to ask, given the long and not ignoble history of equivalence, not just "equivalent to what?" (the prime problem of indeterminism), not only "equivalent for whom?" (a question for both *Skopos* theory and descriptivism), but also "why any equivalence at all?" (that is, "why translation?"). The answer will depend, sooner or later, on enhanced awareness of the many modes of cooperation that are *alternatives* to translation. And on studies of how those modes affect people's lives.

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