Translation Theory as Historical Problem-Solving

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Abstract: Recent calls for non-Western translation theories raise the more basic question of where Western thought comes from and how it is historically conditioned. Here we take the view that the way we translate, and the way we think about translation, depends on the problems we are trying to solve. This means that different problems can give rise to different theories, so Western problems might have given rise to Western theories. More important, this means that when we confront past theories, we should ask what specific problems they were trying to solve, without assuming any homogeneous stock of universal answers. And when we engage in our own theorizing, be it non-Western or simply effective, we should be aware of what specific problems we are trying to solve.

This perspective allows some provocative correlations like the following: "equivalence" was most needed when Europe and Canada decided to depend on translation for their multilingual laws; "dynamic equivalence" was about selling Christianity to illiterate communities; "*Skopos* theory" expressed the aspirations of a professional segment of technical translators that sought greater social recognition and pay, as well as university departments that sought independence; "Descriptive Translation Studies" was seeking the survival of smaller cultures within the West; "foreignization" responded to the Germanic privileging of language, to the French search for opening to the other, and to a well-intentioned call for American intellectuals to seem international in the absence of foreign-language competence; and "non-western" theory is a functional simulacrum designed to oppose some of these new Western theories to apparently old Western theories, in the spirit of an ageing but still hungry modernism.

These correlations should not be seen in a deterministic light. Once you have a problem to solve, the ideas you use to solve it can come from anywhere. So we should be aware of not just our own problems, but also of what others have done with theirs. And this in turn should answer the question of whether we need Eastern or Western ideas, or simply ideas that can help solve the problems we face.

Needless to say, the priority we give to problem-solving is Western.

What do we think is Western?

Thought on the nature and qualities of translation has recently been marked by critiques of positions seen as Western or, more rarely, Eurocentric. The substance of these adjectives is extremely vague, as if everyone knew what was meant. A particularly American usage tends to assume that the United States represents the West, and thus that Americans' well-intentioned self-criticism should generously be extended to everything west of the Urals. Lawrence Venuti (1995) talks more readily about an "Anglo-American" translation culture but then refers freely to "Western" traditions as having "limited acceptance" of foreignizing (107), as setting up the idea of "Eastern irrationality" (159), and as promoting "transparent discourse [...] since antiquity" (306) – the American becomes the English language, which somehow becomes the West. The New York intellectual constructs his immediate culture as that of half the civilized world.

Similarly American, Douglas Robinson (1991) more virulently constructs "mainstream Western translation theory" as a product of Christian theology, couched in the following terms:

"the ideosomatic programming that artificially (culturally) unifies Western translation theory" (37)

"Bible translation is even today the model for all Western thought about translation" (52)

"Inspiration by the Holy Spirit [...] is the great ideal of all mainstream (ideosomatically controlled) Western translation theory" (55)

"the three definitive features of mainstream Western thought about translation [...] - dualism, instrumentalism, and perfectionism" (91)

"the disabling contradictions built into the Western metaphysical tradition" (118)

"the restrictive ideosomatics of Western tradition, according to which, as Eugene Nida says [...] "Translating means Translating Meaning" (144)

Perhaps not surprisingly, those descriptions were written by an American liberal teaching in the American Bible belt, where Christianity was possibly the main debate in town. Does anyone else in the West want to reduce the whole of our history to the Bible?

A third American, Maria Tymoczko, is rather more modest when giving reasons "Why European Translators Should Want to De-Westernize Translation Studies" (2007). She reduces Western tradition to "transfer" and proposes five apparently non-Western concepts that see translation as something other than transfer. For example, an Arabic term suggests that to translate is "to pour", as when a liquid takes a different shape in a different vessel. The only problem here is that, as the medievalist within Tymoczko surely appreciates, the Latin verb *vertere* was used in exactly the same way, and the pouring metaphor is not difficult to find within European thought.

It is easy enough to challenge these thinkers through argument-by-catalogue, giving alternative lists of verbs, metaphors, and exceptions to the generalizations. It might also be slick to point out some easy contradictions: if binarism is supposedly Western, can we go beyond it by manipulating the huge binarism of the West vs. the rest? And then, if these claims do escape from Western tradition, how can they explain their own ability to do so? And so on.

Such debates are standard academic fare, and no one wins except fashion. Here, however, I propose a somewhat dirtier mode of questioning: What specific problems were these pronouncements designed to solve? That kind of question, I propose, could itself be the best solution to the underlying problem of what to do with Western tradition.

We will return to the American non-Westerners within a few pages. In the meantime, let us run through a few easy examples of how a problem-solving approach might handle apparently Western translation theories.

If equivalence is the answer, what was the problem?

Many of the negative aspects of Western translation theory may be summed up in the concept of "equivalence", understood here as a basic relation of equal value between two sides of an equation. This would incorporate something of the focus on binarism, the relation between texts rather than people, the fixation on meaning (if that comes close to "value"), and perhaps something of the notion of transfer (at least to the extent that there are two sides involved, and something has to be created on one of those sides).

It is very difficult to say where the concept of equivalence comes from. Something like the concept might be operative in the work of the Valencian scholar Joan Lluís Vives, whose *De ratione dicendi* of 1533 envisages a "third genre" of translation, where "the matter and the words are [both] weighed up" ("Tertium genus est, ubi & res & verba ponderantur", 1533: 168v). The interest of the reference is not so much in the "weighing up" as a possible search for anything like equal value[1]; it is more in the recognition of three rather than just two kinds of translation. If this "weighing" is the third kind, what are the other two? One pole is extreme literalism, "as if one were trying to transfer into other languages the exact words of Demosthenes or Cicero" (ibid.); the other is translation according to sense only, "when the translator must be allowed to omit that which does not concern the sense, or add whatever might clarify the sense" (ibid.). In between these two, we find the reference to a third way.

So why then and there, amid the humanism of the sixteenth century?

When I first started to study medieval translation practices, initially that of the Hispania of the twelfth century, I was frankly shocked at the diversity of what I found. Some texts, especially the protoscientific texts rendered from Arabic into Latin, were marked by occasional passages so literalist that one wonders how anyone could have made much sense of them. There were good reasons for this. First, when the translators did not understand what was going on in the Arabic, literalism was the safest bet: perhaps

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[1] Here we admit to having been initially misled – and over-excited - by the Spanish translation of this sentence as: "El tercer género de comentarios es cuando la sustancia y las palabras mantienen su *equilibrio y equivalencia*" (in López García, ed. 1996: 66, italics ours). Rener (1989: 185) also seems slightly misleading in his insistence that Vives is classifying no more than types of source texts (here Vives does seem to be classifying "versiones").

someone else, smarter or a few more centuries down the road, would be able to figure it out. Second, medieval thought on translation was marked by a hierarchy of languages, where some languages were closer to God and thus more divine. Translation usually went from the higher languages to the lower ones. In this context, literalism was a way of consciously developing an inferior language by importing resources from a supposedly superior one. Hence, for the scientists (although not for the Church), literalism was used for translations from Arabic into Latin. At the same time, precisely because the resulting translations were hard to understand, there were secondary texts that were more like lessons (some may have derived from actual class notes), where things were explained rather than translated in our contemporary sense of the word. These explanations might be extensive marginal glosses, commentaries, or separate treatments of the same text. Clagett (1953) provides an example in his reconstruction of the manuscript traditions for Adelardus de Bada's work on Euclid's Elements: the first Latin version indicates translation directly from an Arabic manuscript; the second, presumably for teaching purposes, includes didactic commentaries and omits many of the proofs; the third puts the proofs back in. The translator was either literalist, or a teacher.

So why did this partition of strategies not work so well in the sixteenth century? Presumably it was because humanism gave equal value to languages, setting the rising national vernaculars on a theoretical par with Latin. If the hierarchy no longer existed, any attempt at extreme literalism lost its ideological justification. The reason for separate pedagogical commentary similarly melted away, and the only term left standing is in the middle: something like equivalence as attending to both form and content.

The new ideology of equivalence, admittedly without the term, coincided with the age of national vernaculars, which were supported by their nation states, their printing presses, their correspondingly standardized forms, and fixed texts to which it was possible to be equivalent. This was especially so in Europe, home of the nation state as a frame of governance. Should we then be surprised that equivalence, with the name, came to the fore in the translation theory of the 1960s and 1970s, at the very moment when European unification required translation for its new supra-national laws and governance, with the supportive promulgation of fictions of equal languages? This was when more than personal trust in the translator was required if translations were to be considered trustworthy - in European law, as in the United Nations, all language versions are considered fully valid, such that equivalence becomes a necessary legal fiction, well beyond its status as a useful pedagogical aim. Conveniently, of course, the pseudo-mathematics of the concept coincided happily with the age of structuralism and the pretensions of analytical science in the cultural realm. Equivalence was destined to gain academic as well as political legitimacy.

In parallel, and for entirely different reasons, the cause of evangelical missionaries was also served by a notion of equivalence. In the seminal work of Eugene Nida, dating from the 1940s but with major texts in the 1960s, equivalence operates between two extremes, "formal" and "dynamic". The thrust of Nida's work was certainly to operate against the traditional literalism of Bible translation, which can be traced back to Jerome, and thus to legitimize the more adaptive techniques of "dynamic equivalence". In historical context, though, Nida was implicitly adopting the view that all languages are legitimate and equal in expressive capacity, in keeping with the linguistic relativism of Sapir and Whorf, but also in line with an evangelical tradition that certainly goes back to

Luther and the humanism of Vives. At the same time, the possibility of dynamic equivalence posited a legitimate compromise between translation and commentary, thus removing one of the barriers that had long accrued power to traditionalist churches: for as long Bible translations were difficult to understand, priests were necessary to explain the scriptures. For Nida and Taber, "no better compliment could come to a translator than to have someone say, 'I never knew before that God spoke my language'." (1969/2003:173). The Christian God probably didn't, but Nida's missionaries might, and the illusion of immediate presence thus solves many linguistic impediments to evangelism.

Why did equivalence became such a powerful and dominant concept in Western translation theory? Because, we might posit, it simultaneously solved a series of only partly related problems: it provided ideological underpinning for the European nation states; it was necessary for multilingual governance; it supported a mode of trustworthiness that was supra-personal; it benefited from intellectual scientism; and it fitted in with Christian evangelism. It was the appropriate concept for an expansive Western culture.

Of course, equivalence may not be so good at solving problems in other contexts. For example, once globalization undermines the economic power of the nation state, the pretence to equal languages no longer operates. And once electronic technologies make all texts immediately modifiable, there is no longer any firm source to which we can be equivalent. Scientism then succumbed to indeterminism, and even missionaries, in the postmodern age, have realized that they profoundly change cultures, albeit beneath the veneer of saving languages.

Why *Skopos*?

From around 1984, the regime of equivalence was strongly challenged by a set of German-language theories that have come to sail under the flag of *Skopos* (more a flag of convenience than an exact denomination). Despite the claims that Western translation theory is all transfer and binarism, the prime precept here is that translations are done to fulfill a target-side purpose (*Skopos*), which is at least partly defined by the requirements of a client. Since purposes and clients change, the one source text can theoretically be translated in different ways. Further, since some purposes may require more (or less) than translation, translators can be expected, for example, to advise against translating an inappropriate text, or to add explanations, or perhaps to write a new version.

This paradigm thus allows for the category of "translatorial action", understood as the set of things that translators can do professionally. Figure 1 specifies that "translatorial action" is (reading from the top) a mode of communication that is cross-cultural and mediated. The figure further indicates that actual translations are only one of the things that translators can do.

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                          Communication
                      ┌──────────┴──────────┐
                 Intracultural          Cross-cultural
                                     ┌────────┴────────┐
                                  Mediated           Direct
                            (Translatorial action)
                          ┌──────────┴──────────┐
                    Translational          Non-translational
                                      (Drafting, rewriting, terminology, advice, etc.)
                  ┌────────┴────────┐
             New function      Same function
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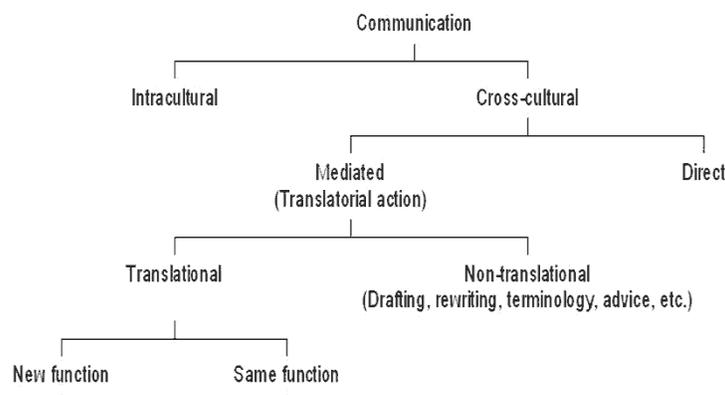
Figure 1. Translation as a form of mediated cross-cultural communication (adapted from Nord 1997: 18)

In terms of our historical narrative, this reconceptualization of the translator's task would perhaps be moving us back to the days when mediators could add or delete material at will, in accordance with pedagogical and institutional needs. That is, we would be moving back to periods prior to the humanism of Vives, indeed prior to the age of nationalized languages and print communication.

So why should this kind of theorizing have surfaced in Europe in the 1980s? What kinds of problems could it have responded to?

Some suppositions come easy. One might presume that the trainers of technical translators saw their graduates going into jobs where they were called on to do far more than translate. Major employers like the incipient software industry (many graduates went from Heidelberg and Germersheim into SAP and similar companies) did indeed require smart people to do terminology, project management and the like, in a professional environment that was later to become the localization industry. In that world, the mediator's work was not on printed text but on electronic communication, where constant updates were (and remain) the norm and there are few stable points of departure to which one could be equivalent anyway. All that would be a very new set of problems to which *Skopos* theory could have been an elegant set of answers.

The only problem with that account, however, is that none of it is mentioned in any of the texts of the days. Plough through the collected theorizings of Vermeer, Holz-Mänttäri, and Nord, and you will be very lucky to find explicit mention of electronic communication, software or localization (I have found none). Nor is there any other reference to anything that would seem to be a historically new set of translation problems - Nord tends to mention the cultural adaptation of tourist brochures, but the tourist industry had been around for a long time, and Holz-Mänttäri has intelligent things to say about translators working alongside field-experts, but technical expertise was surely nothing new either.

Instead, the theorizing makes appeals to anthropological logics of eternal communication paradigms, to an abstract mode of reason that, under the guise of common sense, would be plain to all, in all times and places. Go through those texts, consider the arguments, and the one historical problem you consistently find is more clearly that of belittling other theorists, apparently those that remain blind to the common

sense of *Skopos*. Various appeals are made to the need to "unlearn" the teachings of equivalence, linguistic exactitude, and an apparently primitive concept of translation.

So why should such arguments have appeared then and there, in the Europe of the 1980s? In historical hindsight, it is not difficult to divine the logic. This was the age when Translation Studies was struggling to establish itself as an academic discipline with substantial independence from Linguistics and Literary Studies. To argue that translators do more than reproduce texts was thus implicitly a powerful argument against the established disciplines that looked at nothing but texts. *Skopos* theory thus responded to the politically motivated problem of defining a new academic space, with all attendant chicaneries and self-interests. Beyond the long-established faculties in Germany (particularly Heidelberg and Germersheim, where these debates were internal), the wider Europe saw the former polytechnics being incorporated into the university system. There was thus significant debate as to whether the training of translators and interpreters was "academic" enough to warrant an independent place in the evolving systems. This new set of theories, with its technical terms and constant appeal to the wider frame of translatorial action, was destined to appeal in a historical situation where translator trainers sought both legitimacy and independence.

Of course, once those historical debates were over (in many cases with the successful defense of an independent Translation Studies), *Skopos* theory was no longer solving problems. Not by chance, this is a school of thought that has generally failed to evolve beyond the circumstances of its creation.

Why Descriptive Translation Studies?

In the late 1970s and 1980s, roughly in parallel with *Skopos* theory, the literary side of translation theory took an entirely different course. Instead of analyzing translation situations and alternatives to traditional equivalence, this paradigm annulled the appeals to equivalence: Toury (1980: 63–70) assumed that all translations were always equivalent) and more generally (1995) challenged the primacy of the source text (since the new focus was on what translations do in target cultures). Both these moves contradict the transfer somehow assumed to be part and parcel of Western translation theory. Our problem, though, is to explain what kind of problem they might have responded to.

One possible answer comes from the long-standing European desire to analyze cultural products scientifically. Yet that desire, which partly explains the excruciating way some of these texts were written, dates from the positivism of the nineteenth century – it was in no way a new problem.

A second answer would place more emphasis on the kinds of cultures that these researchers came from: Israel, the former Czechoslovakia, Flanders, Holland – all relatively small language groups receiving translations from larger language groups (English, French, German, Russian). Much as this might appear accidental, the statistical reality is that relatively small cultures have relatively high percentages of translations on their bookshelves. It is only logical that such societies should produce a paradigm where what counts is the target system and the role of translations within it.

In the process, of course, this mode of theorization virtually annulled the binarism of source vs. target, along with the apparent tyranny of perfectionist transfer. Should one

therefore conclude that the problems it addressed were somehow not particularly European?

Once you set up this mode of questioning, the deceptively eternal positions start to tumble like houses of cards. We will run through only a few more.

Why foreignization?

European Translation Studies is supposed to favor domesticating translations, of the kind that would conceal the very fact of translation. As we have indicated, things were rather different in the pre-humanist age, when the hierarchy of languages meant that one of the functions of translation was to help improve inferior languages. Literalism, calques, and borrowings were in some cases the prime order of the day, in a general strategy that we would nowadays call "foreignization".

The notion of "foreignizing translation" ("verfremdende Übersetzung") nevertheless more properly belongs to European Romanticism, specifically to Schleiermacher (1813/1963), where it opposes various concepts of domestication ("verdeutschende Übersetzung"). In part, this was thanks to the same hierarchy of language, albeit now with a nationalist twist: in order to oppose the cultural hegemony of French, which sought inspiration in extreme domestication and principally from Latin, Germanic theorists turned to the opposite strategy, making the translation sound strange, and electing to privilege Greek. The selection of both strategy and source would thus make sense in terms of a nationalism that opposed Napoleon.

Why should that strategy have emerged precisely there, and specifically in defense of German? Answers are not hard to find. The German language represented a culture but not a political state. The language was thus overdetermined as the symbolic representation of the culture, and translation theory was destined to be more about the status of languages than anything else. Read Schleiermacher, or Benjamin, or Heidegger, and you cannot fail to be surprised at how quickly the discussion of translation becomes a comparison of languages. Were there no actual translators? Was there no matter to be translated? The foreignizing tradition, specifically in German, would seem to have followed through from the days when languages were all.

What is even stranger, from this perspective, is to follow the ways that same tradition has been picked up by others for entirely different purposes. When Antoine Berman (1984) sought to introduce German-language Romantic translation theory into French, it was scarcely in order to build up and defend the French language. The foreignizing aesthetic was instead recast in ethical terms, with cultural openness to the other being contrasted against cultural closure. This was in a France marked more profoundly by what might be called the "philosophy of dialogue" (in a range of flavors from Levinas to Lacan), where the prime value was exchange with the cultural other. The appeal to foreignization is still there, but for rather different reasons.

One more jump and we reach the defense of foreignization formulated in Venuti (1995). The same terms are there, more or less, but now we find no talk of using this strategy to build up the status of English (scarcely in an inferior position on any political hierarchy), and there is no real concept of dialogue with a cultural other. Venuti's arguments instead hinge on slightly strange writing as a way of getting noticed: if translators are thus seen, their work will be better recognized, they may receive more pay,

and there could perhaps be more cultural diversity within Anglo-American cultural hegemony. The conceptual links are extremely tenuous, but the basic problem being handled by Venuti is that of making a (monolingual) leftist intellectual culture appear international, in an age and in a country where operational knowledge of foreign languages is dwindling pitifully.

We thus find the notion of foreignization being used to address three quite different problems, in three very different cultural contexts, all of them presumably Western.

Why corpora?

Another quick example: Why did corpus linguistics become a way of analyzing translations? Historically, the tool came to the fore in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s – a convenient landmark is Baker (1993). Part of the reason would be the general prestige of scientism and technological toys, all of which was part of the same campaign to legitimize Translation Studies within the university system. The same prestige had been manipulated by Descriptive Translation Studies (which had similarly pretended to surpass a "pre-scientific" age), not to mention the re-naming programs of *Skopos* theory (with its calls to "unlearn" the lessons of tradition). So what was new in corpus linguistics? It could scarcely claim to be doing any kind of exact science, since it was using a quantitative tool in the apparent absence of probabilistic statistics. Yet it somehow succeeded.

One of the most innovative moves made by the corpus linguistics was to compare corpora of translations in English with corpora of non-translations also in English. In theory, this comparison would enable researchers to identify the linguistic features specific to translational English (features then dressed up as possible "universals" of translation). Why this research method caught on must seem something of a mystery. After all, translation universals had been hypothesized in work done by the Tel Aviv School in the early 1980s (see Pym 2010: 78-81), and it was scarcely a burning issue for practitioners or theorists in other parts of the world. The concept had none of the transformationalist power of Chomsky's early appeal to universals.

One reason behind this peculiar success might be found in the pressures on British universities to attract international students. Students from all over the world do indeed pay hefty fees to study in an environment that speaks English, and the study and teaching of English is, not surprisingly, a major industry. It follows that Applied Linguistics is particularly successful in the United Kingdom, and that most of the translation research done in that country has remained within that field. That is why a tool used to analyze language use could become a tool for analyzing the language in translation – in apparent oblivion of the fact that corpora of this kind have only rarely been used as professional translation tools, and completely in parallel to the professional use of bi-text corpora in translation memories. No matter. The great beauty of this particular piece of Applied Linguistics is that it becomes possible to study translation entirely in English: the corpus of translations is in English, and so is the corpus of non-translations. Why should anyone want to study translations entirely in English? The financial argument is fairly obvious: you can then attract students from all over the world and pretend to teach them about

translation, without the teaching staff having to go through all the bother of learning, teaching, or analyzing foreign languages. A major organizational problem is thus solved.

(Note also that the same trick works with the apotheosis of theory: students are asked to theorize their translation problems in English, and are then evaluated on that, rather than on the actual translation. And the overarching conceit is to play on the term "Translation Studies", pretending that an academic discipline of research and theory can also mean "studying to be a translator". *N'importe quoi...*)

As is well known, the monolingual study of translation remains fundamentally unable to model the causation of what it finds (if translational language is different, can the causes of that difference be found in a corpus?), just as it willfully does away with the problematics of cultural alterity. We note, however, that this school has very few of the features that are supposed to be essential to Western translation theory.

Why cultural translation?

A parting shot: Since the late 1990s, one trend in English-language translation theory has been to study relations between cultures in terms of translation. The landmark work here would be Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), which associates the term "cultural translation" with the dynamics of cultural hybridity, particularly in contexts of decolonization and immigration. In opposition to the fundamental binarism of source vs. target, here we have a model of multiple mixes and overlaps, where translation of necessity loses any simple directionality.

Without chasing up the diverse metaphorics of this concept of translation, let us simply locate what problem it might have responded to. Part of the answer requires little guesswork: postcolonial societies, in both the colonies and the metropolises, have become culturally complex, to the point where few actual transfers occur between entirely distinct systems. This explains the attraction of a notion of translation that recognizes complexity and is able to undo the naïve binarism of previous models. Problem solved.

Let us consider for a moment the historical reasons why literary theorists, now self-recycled as cultural theorists, would want to turn to the concept of translation. If we go back to the 1980s, translation theorists in the "descriptive" camp were complaining about mainstream literary scholarship sidelining translations, not considering them serious objects of study, and too readily assuming cultures to be discrete systems (see, for example, the various complaints in Hermans 1985). That is, the binarisms were being used by literary theorists themselves, particularly in their division of academic space into separate "literatures" (with Comparative Literature as a category for general theory and left-overs). Seen from that perspective, the new metaphorics of translation respond to a problem internal to literary theory itself – the problem of basically binary categories. "Cultural translation" does not solve any problem that concerns actual translations.

Does this mean Translation Studies has somehow been brought in from the cold? Hardly. What has been taken from translation is little more than its conceptual geometry: the idea that something can be communicated across differences, so there is a space in which the same and the other are both operative, and translation is always transformation. From that basic idea, for which no more than a reading of Walter Benjamin is *de rigueur*, it is easy enough to apply the term "translation" to anything in hermeneutics, immigration,

travel, cultural heritage, multicultural governance, and the rest. The last thing anyone in this paradigm wants to do is actually analyze a set of translations. That is simply not the problem that had to be solved.

Of course, they then turn around and say that the traditional study of translations is concerned with no more than accuracy and equivalence (cf. Apter 2006: 5), which are presented as sad illusions that the experts in cultural translation can now dispel.

But that was not the problem we started from here.

Different problems, same solutions?

More examples could be given. The basic points should nevertheless be clear enough by now:

1. Very few of these theories actually fit into the mould created by those who talk about "Western translation theory": pre-humanist literalism and pedagogy, *Skopos*, target-side descriptivism, foreignization, corpora, and cultural translation are not precisely models of essentialist transfer. So are they perhaps not Western?

2. In many cases, we find the one translation concept being used to solve different intellectual problems, in different periods and institutional circumstances. This means that the theories are not being produced or determined by the problems, in the way that a question might determine a simple answer. If you will, the one answer can help address several very different questions.

These two points should now help us suggest what could be done with the history of translation theory.

First, why should anyone want to divide the world of solutions into something as banal as the West vs. the rest? What is the problem addressed by Americans falling over themselves to write off the West? The theorists cited at the beginning of the paper – Venuti, Robinson, Tymoczko – would hopefully find quite a few good things in the various theories we have mentioned above. They would readily concede that there are exceptions to the rules, and that their criticisms were only directed at what they identify as the benightedness of "mainstream" theorizing. Fair enough. So the problem being addressed is not really that of the West vs. the rest, but of "new" Western vs. "old", and implicitly "good" vs. "bad". In short, the virtue of the non-Western has been conscripted into an argument for progress, wholly within the ideology of an expansionist modernism. Or are any of these theorists exceptionally aware of non-Western translation theories?

Second, if the one solution can help solve various different problems, there is no reason to discard any set of theories simply because of the circumstances in which they were produced. An idea from the West might help solve a problem from the East (or North, or South), and vice versa. And no idea is going to be superior simply because it came from a particular direction.

What is to be done?

From the above, it does not follow that you should go out and study a lot of different translation theories simply in the brave hope that one idea might one day be useful.

On the contrary, a lot of basic effort has to be invested in the serious identification of problems requiring solution, here and now, for a particular society or set of societies. It is not for me to try to list those problems: they will be those of the translators, professions, institutions, technologies and cultures around you. They may be of the kind you will read about in notes from afar (this week's list might include the specifics of Asian languages, sustainability, machine translation, interactive technologies, and volunteer translation), but they are more likely to be the ones that rise up and hit you, when you are looking the other way.

Then, once you have the problem, go in search of the ways others have tried to solve it, or problems like it. A good solution will be good because it helps you name, understand, and improve what is happening, not because of where it comes from.

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