

LINGUISTICS AND THE STUDY OF TRANSLATION

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Abstract: During the last decades, the phenomenon of translation in its different aspects has attracted the attention of an ever-increasing number of researchers who have approached it from a variety of perspectives. The study of translation has become an important area of study and research, the rise of which is to be considered strongly connected with the developments of modern linguistics. The paper attempts to examine the relationship between linguistics and the newly conceptualized area of studies, which often claims its epistemological independence.

Keywords: linguistics, *langue*-oriented research v. *parole*-oriented research, translation studies, epistemological autonomy, institutional autonomy.

The question of the relationship between linguistics as a research field dealing with the phenomenon of language in its different aspects on the one hand and the study of the complex phenomenon of translation as a particular type of linguistic or, better, as a particular type of text production, i.e. text production based upon previously produced texts,¹ on the other has up to the present day attracted the attention of numerous scholars of different research orientations, among whom Jörn Albrecht, Eugenio Coseriu, Robert de Beaugrande, Vladimir Ivir, Mary Snell-Hornby, Gideon Toury, Anthony Pym, Mona Baker and others. The problem has been topical particularly during the last quarter-century during which time translation studies has become an increasingly important area of study and research. As is generally known,

¹ Cfr. similar definitions by Wolfram Wilss, who considers translation a “derived” linguistic activity” (1994: 133), and Albrecht Neubert, who regards it as “text-induced text production” (cited in Schäffner 1991: 1).

it was epistemologically conceptualized and given its name by James Holmes at the 1972 Applied Linguistics Congress (cfr. Holmes 1988, Snell-Hornby 1991). According to some researchers, translation studies is to be considered an autonomous (inter)discipline, which implies that although it is not unconnected with other disciplines such as linguistics or literary studies it is not supposed to make part of any of them.

As one might expect, the idea of translation studies as a separate discipline has mostly “internal” support (cfr. Doherty 1992: 8), that is, its independence is favoured mainly by those who consider themselves representatives of the new discipline (cfr. Snell-Hornby 1988a: 7 ff., 1996: 18 *passim*; Höning 1995: 16),² whereas the rest of researchers, linguists included, appear to be either more cautious about the epistemological status of the study of translation (cfr. Albrecht 1973: 1-2, de Beaugrande 1991: 27-32) or they consider it an actual or potential part of some branch of linguistics (cfr. Coseriu 1978: 17, 1992: 261; Reiß/Vermeer 1991: 1; Ivir 1996: 153-156).

Such an interest in the issue may be taken as testifying to the fact that the problem of the relationship between linguistics and the study of translation is found problematic, unresolved, unsettled, or even provocative and intellectually stimulating. The question whether the study of translation is to be considered part of linguistics or some branch of it (psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics, textual linguistics,³ applied linguistics,⁴ etc.), part of some other discipline or science or research field (like, for example, cultural studies,⁵ communication studies, literary studies, etc.) or whether it is to be regarded as an independent discipline on a par with linguistics and other disciplines is, of course, difficult to tackle and cannot be dealt with objectively and without some degree of arbitrariness, for the way one perceives reality - and in particular when the reality is that of classifications and taxonomies - is necessarily conditioned by the perspective one takes.

However, in order to be able to discuss the problem in more concrete terms, I would first like to give a brief overview of the epistemological and historical background which can serve as a basis upon which the discussions concerning the relationship between linguistics and the study of translation are to be interpreted.

First of all, it is beyond doubt that the claims made by some experts to regard the study of translation as an autonomous field of research are connected with the fact that during the decades following the second world war, and especially during the last quarter-century, the phenomenon of translation has attracted the attention of an ever-increasing number of scholars who have approached it from a variety of standpoints. Such an exceptional interest can be seen as a reflection of at least the following two factors:

² However, such a position cannot be considered general. Scepticism about independence of translation studies has been expressed by, for example, Anthony Pym (1995: 168-172).

³ The relationship between text linguistics and translation theory is examined in Snell-Hornby 1988b.

⁴ For a discussion on the role played by applied linguistics in translation studies see Agud (1993: 118-119).

⁵ The relationship between cultural and translation studies is dealt with in Baker (1996).

1. the general circumstances characteristic of the period
2. the developments made by modern linguistics in the past decades.

With regard to the extralinguistic situation at large, it can be observed that the overall conditions (including the economic, cultural, political and social aspects) of the whole postwar period up to the present day have been characterized, at the global level, by increasing demands for international crosscultural communication, and consequently by a growing need for written and oral translation. The ever-greater presence of translation has certainly stimulated its research and contributed to the introduction of translation-related subjects into university curricula.

As to the second point, the paths which translation research has actually taken have been strongly influenced by the progress made by linguistics during the past decades so that the rise and growth of translation studies cannot be viewed as independent of the developments of modern linguistics, and particularly of those branches of it which study language from a functional point of view and investigate it at a suprasentential level, most notably text linguistics and pragmatics with discourse analysis. Of primary importance for the development of translation studies has been the so-called "pragmatic turn" (cfr. Snell-Hornby 1996: 14, 40, 52; Kvam 1992: 193) after which a substantial part of linguistic research became systematically oriented towards questions which had been to a great degree neglected by traditional linguistics. Simplifying matters to some extent, one may assert that now problems concerning language function and use in opposition to language system and those regarding meaning in opposition to form started to be considered particularly relevant (cfr. de Beaugrande 1991: 17, 28-29 *passim*). In view of the fact that translation concerns primarily language use (cfr. Hartmann 1970: 21) and only in the second place also language system - that is, it concerns language system inasmuch as it gets reflected in concrete instances of language use - it comes as no surprise that now translational phenomena started to be recognized as a pertinent object of linguistic research.

It is therefore understandable that the rise of suprasentential and functional approaches in modern linguistics has also provided extremely fertile ground for research on translation, a phenomenon that can successfully be investigated by methodological apparatus provided by *parole* oriented linguistics as opposed to that which concentrates upon the phenomenon of *langue* (cfr. Ivir 1996: 151 ff.). Wolfram Wilss, for instance, regards the study of translation or "translation science" - as he calls it on the model of the German terms *Translationswissenschaft* and *Übersetzungswissenschaft* - as "performance linguistics", thus separating it from "contrastive (confrontative) linguistics and bi- or plurilingual structural comparison of languages" (Wilss cited in Ivir 1996: 152).

Not surprisingly, a great deal of contemporary translation research draws heavily on the results achieved in the field of modern *parole* linguistics and a quick look at the works by some of the major representatives of translation research (e.g. Mary Snell-Hornby (1988a, 1988b, 1996), Paul Kußmaul (1995), Hans Höning (1995), Katharina Reiß/Hans Vermeer (1991)) reveals that modern linguistics still continues to provide heuristic and methodological tools essential for translation research. Concepts known from **text linguistics** (for example, "coherence", "informativity", "intention"; cfr. also the translation-specific notion of "parallel text", which could

only be developed on a conceptual basis provided by text linguistics), **semantics** (for example, “scenes” and “frames” taken from Fillmore’s “scenes-and-frames semantics”), **applied linguistics** and **contrastive analysis** (e.g. “false friends”), **lexicology** (e.g. componential analysis), from **cognitive linguistics** and from **psycholinguistics** - the last two particularly in interpretation studies (cfr., for instance, the concept of “think-aloud protocols”) - along with those originating in some other neighbouring disciplines, (e.g. Austin’s and Searle’s speech act theory, Eleanor Rosch’s prototype theory, etc.) appear to be of primary importance for translation research.

Nonetheless, it is evident that there are various aspects of translation which cannot be adequately researched if they are considered from a linguistic perspective or *exclusively* from a linguistic perspective (like, for example, the question of the role of translated texts in the formation of national literatures, problems concerning reception of foreign literary texts via translation, issues of ideological manipulation in and by means of translated texts, etc.). The complexity of translational phenomena in its various aspects must, of course, be studied from different standpoints and often in an interdisciplinary way, among which linguistically oriented research is only one of the options, although probably the most frequent one, at least among European scholars.⁶

It was precisely the multifariousness of the phenomenon of translation and the insufficiency of linguistic approaches⁷ in dealing with them which has led some scholars in the field of translation to postulate a translation-specific research paradigm and the autonomy of a corresponding field of study. Interesting as the idea might be, it remains problematic for more than one reason. Leaving aside the frequently encountered difficulties which are due to lax terminology (terms like “science”, “(academic) discipline”, “theory”, “(research) field”, “discourse”, “paradigm”, “approach”, etc. are often used quite synonymously), which may make matters even more complicated and obscure than they actually are, the question remains if translation studies can be considered as having a common denominator at all. It claims to have its own recognizable and identifiable object of study, i.e. the phenomenon of translation in its various aspects, but, as some researchers have already pointed out (The Editors 1989: 4-5, Toury 1995: 23), it is probably questionable whether the multiplicity and heterogeneity of research perspectives from which translational phenomena are observed still allow us to take the identity of the **research object** for granted. And even if one persists in assuming that there is a common object, it is nearly impossible to maintain that there exists a **methodology** which would be proper to the study of translation (cfr. Doherty 1992: 8-9).

⁶ Despite substantial internal diversity of European translation research, it remains to a considerable extent centred on non-literary (i.e. linguistic, textual, pragmatic) dimensions of the phenomenon of translation rather than on its literary aspects. There are, however, also groups of researchers, for example those based at Göttingen University (Germany) and at Leuven University (Belgium), whose research endeavours in the field of translation tend to be predominantly literature-oriented and therefore in certain aspects close to some major non-European (e.g. Israeli, Canadian and American) research orientations.

Overviews of approaches to translation are offered by, for instance, Larose (1989), Gentzler (1993) and Stolze (1994).

⁷ The same kind of inadequacy is necessarily encountered when the application of other approaches to translation - for example those characteristic of literary or cultural studies - is generalized.

There is, however, also the other side of the coin: although the claims to consider translation studies an independent (though interdisciplinary) field of study and research may seem arguable and exaggerated, they are nevertheless indicative and worthy of attention. They can be interpreted as a reaction to some major interests of traditional linguistics, particularly the philologically oriented ones, and to some branches of modern sentential linguistics like generative grammar (cfr. de Beaugrande 1978: 7-14) which, in general, favour research of competence phenomena much more than those of performance.⁸

Anyhow, it is significant that the majority of advocates of translation studies as an autonomous discipline have degrees in traditional linguistics, i.e. philology, which implies that in their university curricula translation was either considered a matter of literature or reduced to an exercise, to a method for learning foreign languages (cfr. Jakobsen 1994: 144, Snell-Hornby 1992: 18). Since it neglected translation of nonliterary (pragmatic, practical) texts and failed to offer any important tools for translation research and translation pedagogy, traditional linguistics has been labelled as a futile and useless endeavour, at least from the point of view of translation theory and practice. And the intensity of the antiphilological and antilingualistic reaction on the part of contemporary translation researchers has varied according to and in proportion with the strength of the philological tradition characteristic of their academic backgrounds, which helps to explain why the claims for an emancipated study of translation have been made mainly by scholars whose academic backgrounds were strongly characterized by philological orientation.

Regardless of the attitude one takes towards the **epistemological autonomy** of translation studies with respect to linguistics as well as to some other disciplines, it is unquestionable that in some way the emancipation of the study of translation has definitely taken place; what I have in mind is its **autonomy at the institutional level** (cfr. also Klein 1992: 105, 109; Kaindl 1997: 52, 60) which was reached when translational phenomena became a subject of study in academia from a practical as well as from a theoretical perspective. New institutes for translation and interpreting were founded, new journals and book series dedicated to issues of translation were established, and the number of publications dealing with translation-related questions started increasing enormously. This means that the search for academic affirmation and power (cfr. Pym 1995: 172) has been very successful and that from the institutional point of view the emancipation of translation studies has definitely taken place. It seems, however - I believe - rather difficult to defend its autonomy from an epistemological perspective; as a research field, it is extremely heterogeneous, fragmented and without a *differentia specifica* which would allow one to recognize a paradigm proper to the study of translation and a methodology, interdisciplinary as it might be, of its own (cfr. Pym 1995: 170, Baker 1996: 9).

⁸ Again, this is a simplified interpretation of the reality, which must not be considered from such a black-and-white perspective. For example, it has been argued that concepts developed by Noam Chomsky in the 50s and early 60s were integrated into Eugene Nida's pioneering translation research (cfr. Gentzler 1993: 44-60).

- A. Lindegaard (eds.)), 143-150. John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.
- KAINDL, K. (1997). Von Hauptdarstellern und Statisten: Zur Rolle des Textes im Translationswissenschaftlichen Handlungsspiel. In: *Text-Kultur-Kommunikation: Translation als Forschungsaufgabe; Festschrift aus Anlaß des 50jährigen Bestehens des Instituts für Übersetzer- und Dolmetscherausbildung an der Universität Graz* (N. Grbić and M. Wolf (eds.)), 53-65. Stauffenburg, Tübingen.
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By way of conclusion it can be observed that on the one hand the phenomenon of translation constitutes (and will continue to do so) an interesting object of research for many branches of linguistics and that, on the other, virtually all major trends of contemporary translation studies (except for those which concentrate chiefly on literary aspects of translated texts) draw very heavily on tools for research, pedagogy and practice offered by modern linguistics. As to the linguistic research itself, the increased interest in the phenomenon of translation has not only offered it new opportunities but has also stimulated the cooperation between linguistics and neighbouring fields of study.

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