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Hermeneutic Translation and Translation Criticism

ABSTRACT

The point of departure is the concept of translation as a social and hermeneutic activity to facilitate understanding among people with different knowledge backgrounds. Human translation is depicted as a dynamic, mind- and body-bound process that is referred to in relevant literature as embodied, embedded, extended and enactive. The decisive role of the translator's attitude is emphasised, including his or her awareness of a historical character of the mediated text. Within a hermeneutics-related approach to translation, several criteria for the translation analysis are postulated. Utmost caution is recommended in error-seeking evaluation of translation where a valid translation strategy might be confused with linguistic error.

Keywords: translator, responsibility, reflection, knowledge, translation error, manipulation

1. Introduction – The translator's responsibility

Teaching translation has long been related to Linguistics. Translation was defined as an “interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs” (Jakobson, 1959, p. 233), and an interlingual transfer was invented. When comparing target texts with source texts, Contrastive Stylistics found seven so-called “translation shifts” in “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)” (Catford, 1965, p. 20). Generations of students were treated with the respective “transfer rules” (Newmark, 1988, p. 8), when working on texts.

However, when we look at the role of translation in society, a different picture comes up. Translation is a social service that people provide to facilitate communication with others. The backdrop is Hermeneutics that questions understanding and social action. Translators are anchored in their own culture and yet they should enable communication across language barriers to foreign cultures. They will try to understand the source text message and then will write down what is present in their mind as a translation. Herein, translators have a great responsibility for precision because the readers expect to read the content of a source text unaltered so that they can themselves react to it.

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Of course, this is, to a certain extent, an utopia, which Schleiermacher (1813/1973) already exposed when he saw communication in principle as misunderstanding due to the different knowledge backgrounds of the interactants (cf. Stolze 2011, p. 79). The translator as a person with cognitive, existential and individual qualities (cf. Stanley, 2012, p. 251) is actively involved in the translation. The top terms here are “interest”, “intuition” and “creativity”.

Hermeneutics immediately places us in the quandaries of knowledge. How much knowledge do we attribute to the author? What knowledge does a work activate? What knowledge is relevant to that work? Is the person who brings more knowledge to a work a better reader? Is an ignorant reader condemned to interpretative incompetence? Is the world of interpretation a naturally competitive world? Is the best interpretation the one that commands the broadest consensus? (Scott, 2021, p. 44).

These are the issues for modern Translation Studies, but we cannot treat them all here.

”Hermeneutics cannot be reduced to a mere method of scientific or philosophical knowledge, because it is not only a collection of rules for the successful interpretation of texts or historic events, but there is a human way of life at its base, this is, understanding treatment of reality” (Govedarica, 2020, p. 631).

2. The translator in the world relationship – interest

Hartmut Rosa (2012, p. 11) defines: “It is not the world knowledge of modern subjects that is put to the test, but their world relationship [...] per se, and this is always and primarily a bodily, emotional, sensual and existential one, and only then a mental and cognitive one” [translation mine], and this offers us a new sociological basis for the question of a translator’s activity.

The starting point for an investigation into human-bound translation as a social action is thus the translator’s attitude to his or her texts, and not, for example, the visible linguistic differences between two languages and cultures.

Well-known, because it’s so easy to grasp, is the idea of the 4 E’s: *embodied*, *embedded*, *extended* and *enactive* is human action (cf. Zahavi & Michael, 2018, p. 590). It is about the context in the lived physical world, where there are relations to the experienced and the social body. Mind and body in a person are bound together and any action has social consequences. Instructions do not automatically lead to corresponding action. One can describe it like this:

- **Embodied** means that actions are to be grasped as an interplay of cognitive and physical, i.e. physical-sensory and emotional dimensions. Relevant prior knowledge is indispensable. Translation as work does not happen as a purely cognitive act doing transfer procedures. Rather, in professional translating, the concrete physical areas, the sensitivities

(disturbances), one's interest, the being touched emotionally by the text, are often relevant.

- **Embedded** means that language actors are not detached but stand in a social space of culture. In the practice of technical translation, community rules, e.g. text type conventions and terminology work, must be observed, even if the basic approach to texts is the same as in literary translation, where emotions are more prominent. Cultural differences mean that the foreign is not easily understood or that translations do not have the desired effect.
- **Extended** means that human cognition also needs tools for its social action; in the case of translation, specifically, we are working with paper, computer/telecommunication and dictionary, and issues of ergonomics influence the performance. Indeed, it has been documented that professional translators, when reflecting on their own practice, often refer to the concrete-physical dimension of the act of translation or to their sensual experiences and in this sense understand their translating work as a holistic process (cf. Hubscher-Davidson, 2017).
- **Enactive** means that there are certain expected emotional moods in people's behaviour and reactions to what they have experienced, which has an effect on concrete action. It is true that translation also unfolds medially, as in interpreting, for example, or in representations on the theatre stage; even dance interpretations or film adaptations of texts as performative translations are possible.

It becomes clear that the translation process is a dynamic, body-bound phenomenon. Taking into account the passage of time in which translation takes place, Stolze (2011, p. 191) has developed a „systemic model of translation“ that also includes a growth of the translator as a person (lifelong learning), what modifies the attitude towards texts in any new approach.

What is translated is what has been understood and is now mentally present in the translator, and the original and the translation in their content of are closely linked to each other in the translator's mind through their correspondence of meaning. However, the final cognitive representation is not obtained purely cognitively, but also emotionally and sensually. Rosa's central concept is “resonance”. He defines it like this:

Resonance is a form of world relationship formed by affectation and emotion, intrinsic interest, and self-efficacy expectation, in which subject and world touch each other and at the same time transform each other. Resonance is not an echo but a response relationship; it presupposes that both sides speak with their own voice, and this is only possible where strong values are touched. Resonance implies a moment of constitutive unavailability [translation mine] (Rosa, 2016, p. 298).

We can see this as a model of the translator's attitude towards his or her texts. One has an intrinsic interest in the message and reformulation of what is understood, and an expectation of self-efficacy in that writing. At the same time, one is affected by the foreign world showing in the text and is thus transformed oneself in the constant process of learning. The translator responds to the source text, though staying neutral in this mode of relationship.

This is what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1990, p. 434) meant when he spoke of "entering into a history of tradition" that we encounter by language. "The consciousness of being affected by history" (p. 301) is the principle of understanding here.

Language and cultural knowledge are acquired by learning that extends from one's identity of the self, over the individual environment in the family and belief, and the possession of a mother tongue with its world view and values, onto foreign languages and worlds of thought in other cultures and in subject areas with specialization. A fundamental openness and curiosity prepare us for lifelong learning because interest is based on knowledge.

3. Understanding texts - reflection

Hermeneutics says that we understand all phenomena "in the light" of what we already know, based on given knowledge, even an ideology. This is the so-called "hermeneutic circle" that connects persons to contents, and outside of this there is no good understanding.

Here it is important to distinguish between the knowledge of humanity, of cultural communities, of research groups, etc., and the knowledge of an individual. While the former is growing rapidly and can certainly be stored and passed on by media, the latter is an eminently subjective matter as an excerpt from one's own world. World knowledge or feelings that have not become our own identity-forming experience are not relevant to us, we forget them immediately. In this sense, "experiences are appropriated experiences that have been transformed into memories", says Rosa (2012, p. 318). That is why open interest is so important for translators.

Different people do not understand a text in a completely identical way because of different "previous knowledge", and even one person can see different meanings in a later reading because he or she has learned something in the meantime, has made new experiences. It is about hearing the author's voice – literary or professional – in a text, so we also call a text a "communicative event". Written texts remain present for repeated reading, and many people can perceive and read a text. Depending on the epoch of reading, one will understand the text somewhat differently, difficult passages suddenly become clear through increased knowledge. Therefore, we should ever reflect on whether our understanding is correct or requires more investigation.

Fields of orientation for understanding and writing in view of the “situational background, the discourse field, the meaning dimension and the predicative mode” have been developed and may be applied for any type of texts (Stolze 2019, pp. 80–81). Rhetorical decisions in formulating a translation may be described with linguistic categories such as *genre*, *coherence*, *stylistics* and *function*. Language aspects and empathy in the translator are combined in the task of translating, the translation competence being a subjective mixture of socio-communicative and linguistic aspects (Stolze, 2019, p. 92).

Translations can only reach their goal in an “optimal way”, there is no model translation. In technical and scientific communication, the goal will be correctness. In the sense of a resonance space of communication, this means keeping to the functionally adequate level of style instead of transferring literally. Stilted translations don’t really work if you can do it better, they often seem alienating, there is no person behind them. Resonance in a technical context means speaking like a professional person would do. The aim is correspondence to the content and stylistic expectations of the target audience, and terminological precision. Of course, in addition to specialist knowledge, this requires a pronounced rhetorical and functional formulating competence in the translator as an author. And in literary translation, creativity in writing is needed to enhance emotionality and make reported situations visible.

4. Texts and translations

Emphasizing the responsibility in the translation expert might be supported by some criteria for translation analysis and criticism in the classroom. Anna Pavlova (2014) notes:

In all assessments of translation performance, it is always noticeable that no distinction is made between the situations ‘free decision of the translator’ and ‘solution forced by objective language or cultural circumstances’. Yet there are obviously cases when an experienced and highly professional translator simply ‘can’t do it any other way’, regardless of whether the result is counted among the objectively successful, less successful or even defective ones [quotes original] [translation mine] (pp. 257–258).

In the case of a translation as a product, we do not know what the translator (also the student) as the co-author was thinking. When reading a translation, it is like reading an original text: if you want to understand it, you should ask what is usual about it in the form (text type) and what came about “by the author’s free decision” (Schleiermacher, 1813/1973, p. 39). Every new reading brings about a change in the meaning of the whole text as it appears subjectively. Formulations are often only fleeting, because one can always express every thought differently. There is no absolutely correct translation that would be “objectively successful” (Pavlova, 2014, p. 257), it is always only provisional, a draft.

“Errors” then arise mainly through gaps in knowledge, misunderstandings or no understanding at all, all aspects based in the translator’s person and not “forced by language circumstances”. Gyde Hansen (2006, p. 24) has empirically investigated sources of interference in translation, which often lie in the translator’s profile as a person. On the other hand, there are also manipulations in texts through intentional or involuntary ideological reactions by a translator.

By definition, of course, translation is related to a source text, but it does not originate from the source text, but from the mental representation of its message understood by the translator. Therefore, translation criticism cannot focus on the object of the source text as a reference, but only on the idiomatic system of the target language and its grammar. It’s possible to determine “translation errors” in view of certain linguistic criteria of the target text (post-editing) on all linguistic ranks (word, sentence, text).

This is always needed at products from automatic translation. The learning computers are fed with a large corpus of texts and their translations done by humans, then they find correspondences and react accordingly. The problem is the lack of creativity: the results are very often similar, which for technical translation might be correct but for literary translation it is often boring. And any novel proposition not stored will not be translated correctly.

5. Criteria for translation criticism

In order to define something in a translation as a “translation error” and, if necessary, to sanction it, a reference point is needed, and here the three dimensions of signs in their usage, according to the Organon model of language (Bühler, 1934, p. 28), are usefully applicable (*Referent Sender Receiver / Symbol Symptom Signal / Denotation Connotation Appeal*).

In the holistic examination of a translation, violations of the target language system can first be named: Orthography, semantics (*referent, symbol, denotation*), then syntax, stylistics (*sender, symptom, connotations*), and coherence (*receiver, signal, appeal*) (cf. Stolze, 2011, p. 175). These five areas can be verified critically without comparing the translation with the original (as is usually done in translation examinations and in post-editing).

Orthography

This aspect is immensely important in professional practice. Clients do not accept texts that contain spelling mistakes, even if this is often seen as a negligible oversight in translation classes. This also includes numerical errors, and grammatical errors such as incorrect punctuation, incorrect sg./pl. endings in German, for instance, article congruence and the like. These problems are virulent among beginners in foreign language translation, but also in automatic translation, where post-editing is often limited to correcting respective errors. The question of whether the layout

of the translation meets the specifications in terms of design, text length, formality, type face, is also relevant.

Semantics

In this area of the mentioned dimension of the *denotation*, the correct translation of word meanings and the correct subject-specific *terminology* are at issue, which can be justified with dictionaries and database contents. Comparison with source text words is useful in order not to oversee semantic dimensions that perhaps were omitted. The target language-specific technical terminology must be considered (cf. Stolze 2009, pp. 113–115). Even if the translator has understood the text correctly, the translation sometimes still appears colloquial and naïve when terminological choices are awkward or missing. An important aspect is the paradigmatic semantic compatibility all over the text, the word fields around central lexemes. The message is bound in linguistic forms, in semantic fields. This can be especially observed in translation criticism.

Syntax

The aim here is to formulate thoughts idiomatically in the target language, free from interference by the source language, avoiding the so-called stilted, bumpy translations (translationese). Unsatisfactory results arise here primarily from a transfer-linguistic approach in the sense of literal translation, where one sticks to the sentence structures and only allows modulation in the case of grammatical-linguistic differences. The knowledge about technical text genres is decisive. The linearity of sentences, e. g., is different between English and German (Clyne 1991), the English relative sentences sometimes hinder a good German translation. The analysis of complex sentence constructions in English technical texts causes problems for many students, just as the technical word compounding in German, on the other hand. This area also includes speech acts, and target language text blocks and phraseology (Stolze, 2009, p. 182), which may look different from the source text. The possibility of using proverbs common in the target culture should also be considered if the source text presents such sayings.

Stylistics

According to the *symbolic function* of signs, the style of a text is an indication of both the subject-specific diction and the style of an author, as the translational style must be adequate to the text's message regarding dialect, epoch, register. According to the rhetorical rules of stylistics, style should be appropriate to the textual message itself (Clyne, 1991), hence expressive connotations such as “outdated, pathetic, elevated, regional, technical, politically correct or colloquial” etc. are relevant here and their imitation might be a literary effect. Deviations from the appropriate use can seem alienating, and stylistically inappropriate

formulations in the translation may impair the perception of whole situations, characters, or their relationships. On the other hand, respective connotations in style also make the translator symptomatically visible what is not always wanted when his or her personal formulation preferences in a dialect become visible.

It is also worth mentioning here that the substitution of literal transfer, mainly in English-German translation, by linguistic condensation, would lead to more concise expressions (cf. discussion of examples in Stolze, 2011, pp. 164–176). Conversely, ambiguous passages in the text, which in literary terms often represent a suspense, and in technical-legal terms are usually an indication of the original cultural circumstances, should not be resolved and thus be levelled into the familiar. Only when the translator (student) has the courage to leave unclear passages as they are, does the author's world view become transparent. In most cases, a stronger orientation towards conspicuous stylistic features in the source text may be advisable, precisely to enable a reading experience in view of the original author. A translation criticism should also take this into account. Ambiguous and compact formulations are to be accepted and translated literally, because they testify to a higher degree of reflection.

Coherence

It is the aim of every translation to produce a coherent text in the target area. This involves correction of errors in the logic of the text's message, lacunae or omitted sentences, the consistency of the terminology in the overall text, the compatibility of semantic word fields. The dimension of an intended *appeal* function (Bühler) of the text can only be achieved with a coherent, consistent statement. There are, for instance, inappropriate logical connectors in German (such as *auch*, *und*, *demgegenüber*, *aber*, etc.) whose unsuccessful choice in English would impair the logical flow and coherence of facts through confused thought or, in translations, show that the text was not fully understood after all, cf. Stolze (2009, p. 385). Students often forget to check the finished translation once again at the end as a convincing holistic unit, where corresponding deficiencies would easily become visible. As long as a translation text seems "strange", it has not yet been fully understood.

6. So-called manipulations in texts

After assessing a translation based on the above-mentioned five linguistic aspects under the dimensions of the Bühler's Organon model, some so-called "manipulations" can now also be observed as textual changes in comparison with the original text, and they may be the result of a deliberate or unconscious decision on a higher level on the part of the translator as a person. These can hardly be called "errors", since a reference point of the "correct" is missing. But here, too, we can name some aspects, since corresponding textual changes may discursively

be justified, and these are *functional adaptation, metaphorical compensation, political ideology, time-bound interpretation, artistic adaptation*.

Functional adaptation

From the very beginning, the aim of the so-called Skopos Theory (Reiß & Vermeer, 1984) had been to encourage translation students not to stick literally to the text in their work, but to make functionally appropriate changes: “A translational act depends on the purpose of the translation”, and one should therefore not be afraid to “re-text poorly composed source texts [...] [translation mine] (p. 41). Because texts are always also a “cultural transfer” (p. 30), culture-specific textual changes can also be useful to facilitate an understanding of the translation in the target area. This always requests non-literal translation.

Reiß and Vermeer (1984, pp. 26–30) provide many examples of this, which can be used to justify a textual change. We might think of compensatory translation strategies in the case of comprehension barriers in the target audience, such as explication or adaptation of unknown aspects. Supposedly necessary “text improvements” can, of course, also be based on a lack of understanding of the technical source text. Then they are not acceptable, as the new version would be an ideological or solipsistic manipulation. But when a translator emotionally rejects the affirmation in a source text, he or she might look at it more deeply and find more precise formulations.

Metaphorical compensation

Often, metaphors in literary texts, but not only there, are culture-specific, so that respective literal affirmations are no longer comprehensible in another target area. For this reason, many literary translators state that they would formally compensate elsewhere for an established metaphor or figurative expression, by with which a certain statement is made in terms of content, i.e. they would insert a target-language metaphor at a point where there is none in the source text. Such a translation decision may be discussed. It is similar with the deliberate omission of certain structures in the source text because this is considered unnecessary for the target text. Katharina Reiß has commented on this in detail, referring to various text types (*informative-expressive-operative*) as justification for this (Reiß & Vermeer, 1984, pp. 204–216). Here, Bühler’s Organon model of language functions is used again as the basis for text types, and this can lead to a more appropriate, fairer assessment of translations.

Political ideology

In the field of translational sociology there have now been calls to introduce a particular political belief into translations, or to reinforce aspects of such beliefs visible in source texts. This is referred to as a perfectly legitimate “translational

ethics” (Tymoczko, 2006). Similarly, in the field of feminist translation research, the demand has arisen to produce specific deviations, as “creative mistranslations” (Prunč, 2007, p. 292) (in relation to literal transfer), precisely in order to make female dimensions more visible. If, for example, a Bible translation speaks of brothers and sisters instead of literally the brothers, or of female and male disciples of Jesus, then this change is not a “translation error” but can be discursively justified with this political ideology.

Time-bound interpretation

For centuries, it was customary to transform foreign texts according to one’s own world view; the French made “belles infidèles” in order to find such a thing readable at all; Schleiermacher (1813/1973, p. 70) pleaded for an education of readers in foreign languages; Schlegel had “his Shakespeare”, which was long considered a “naturalized” translation, as it were, of Shakespeare’s dramas into German; the ethnocentrism of older translations from the British colonial empire, which often enough did not understand the source culture and thus changed it, is subject of much criticism. Manipulations of this kind are mainly based in unconscious reactions to the text. This can be revised by conscious reflection which is a prerequisite of hermeneutical translation.

Such interpretations are the reason for the provisional nature, the tendency of translations to age. When this is then revised in a later novel translation, often a completely different original world view will appear. Detailed annotations may reveal the buried network of old literary references and quotations behind the text. Another phenomenon is the personal emotional reaction to a source text what might lead to some exaggerated formulations in the translation. These findings go beyond the system of linguistic “translation errors” and elude conventional scholastic translation criticism. One may discuss about it.

Artistic rendering

As already defined by Roman Jakobson (1959, p. 261), there is also “intersemiotic translation”, i.e., a transfer of linguistic texts into other sign forms. This is practiced extensively today in the field of art as “performance” (Fischer-Lichte, 2012), with adaptations of historical literary texts, for example, on stage, in film settings, etc., even in dance and paintings. This is a particular expression of the translators’ emotional world. Such artistic interpretations elude the usual translation criticism, but they can be the subject of interesting discussions. Creativity in translational formulation is central here.

We might present an overview of the criteria for translation analysis as presented above:

Table 1. Criteria for translation analysis

Target language proficiency				
Reference		Sender		Receiver
Orthography	Semantics	Syntax	Stylistics	Coherence
Manipulations on holistic level				
Functional adaptation	Metaphorical compensation	Political ideology	Time-bound interpretation	Artistic rendering

If someone is looking for a classification of translation errors, then the linguistic criteria according to the Organon model of the target language are applicable. However, whether this already leads to “objectively successful translations” (Pavlova, 2014) is questionable. Other translation strategies based on a specific goal by “free decision of the translator” (Pavlova, 2014, p. 257) cannot be called “mistakes”. Their result must be discussed in terms of more or less appropriateness. Thus, a translation is always only approximately possible, it remains a “hermeneutic draft” (Paepcke, 1978, p. 86).

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