TRANSLATION AS THEORY

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Mamy translators seem to be suspicious of "theory". I think this is partly because what they are suspicious of may simply be bad theory, but it is also partly because translators themselves have a strange theory of "theory".

The English word *theory* goes back through Latin to a Greek word meaning 'to look at'. A "theory" of something is ultimately "a looking at it, a view of it", and, by extension from concrete to abstract, "a contemplation of it, a speculation", even.

In Herodotus (I. 29-30) for instance, we are told that the wise man Solon once set out a voyage "to see the world", as the English translation has it; a literal translation from the Greek would be "for the sake of theory" – and *theoria* meant precisely 'seeing the world', or *kattoo vahan mualimmaa* as the Lotto TV ad in Finland used to put it. Theory was not separate from life. It meant looking at life.

COMMON SENSE: THE FIRST THEORY

To translate without a theory would therefore be to translate blind. To translate without seeing or knowing what one is doing. With no self-awareness, no self-criticism. It would mean relying entirely on common sense, one might say.

I have nothing against common sense, of course. Indeed, common sense might be claimed to be the first theory anyone uses to solve any problem, or to do anything at all (perhaps after instinct). But if common sense is *all* we need, universities and translator training schools are wasting their time... A first, "common sense" theory of something is where we start, but not necessarily where we end up. (It is not common sense that space is cuverd, is it?)

What translators need is not no theory, but a theory of theory that makes some sense to them. The philosophy of Karl Popper can be most helpful here.

POPPER'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Popper argues that all knowledge, and in particular all science, proceeds by solving problems. Science does not start with data, or with theoretical axioms, but with problems. Popper illustrates his view of scientific method in a simple formula which he since applied to many other areas of life, from evolution to politics. The formula is:

P1 → TT → EE → P2

Pl is the first problem, which can arise in any way, from any source. It is simply something that puzzles or interests someone, something for which an answer is sought, at any level of seriousness or triviality.

TT stands for Tentative Therory. This is the first hypothesis, the first possible solution that occurs or that someone proposes. Common sense, perhaps. But now comes the interesting stage, the most demanding stage. And it is this stage that distinguishes science from other forms of knowledge. This Tentative Theory must be rigorously tested.

And EE stands for Error Elimination: the process whereby the first theory is tested and refined. In Popper's view, at this stage scientists should do all they can to falsify the theory, to criticize it from all possible angles. No theory is perfect. Ali theories are only hypotheses: they can never be proved true, but they can be shown to be wrong or inadequate. Popper thus places enormous emphasis on the value of criticism.

The goal of science is not some kind of absolute truth, but rather "verisimilitude" or "maximal truthlikeness". The result of Error Elimination is not "the truth" or "the right answer", but a new problem, P2. This might be only slightly different from Pl or a refined version of it; or it might be a consequence of it. And P2 in turn is subjected to the same process of tentative solutions and tests, and so it goes on: knowledge is never final.

Pl: HOW TO TRANSLATE THIS TEXT?

What might the relevance of this theory of knowledge to translators? Well, what is the problem translators start with? Surely: how to translate this text? This encompasses a host of other questions too, of course, on a more detailed level, having to do with all possible choices and strategies. So the same questions are also posed for individual aspects of the text: how to translate this word, this sentence, this rhythm, this humour etc. But the problem solving process is the same, regardless of the level of the question.

TT: THE FIRST DRAFT

The translation proposed, or perhaps better, the first draft of it, is then the first answer to the question. Your translation is your theory, your tentative theory. A naive, blind, unaware, nontheoretical translator might of course stop there, assume that the "right answer" had been arrived at. But this would mean neglecting the key stage of error elimination.

EE: REVISION

It is at this stage that we see the difference between aware, self-critical professional and the amateur. And it is this stage that a professional can benefit most from things other people have said about translation. For the more you know about testing a translation, about the criteria according to which it should be assessed, about possible alternatives, about the relevant sociolinguistic factors, about readers response, about linguistics, about stylistics, readability, text types, kinds of equivalence, target language norms, etc. etc., the more rigorous will be your demands on the translation and the more rigorously you will be able to test it. And so the better it will become.

TESTING AGAINST NORMS

One useful way of testing a translation is to compare it with certain norms. Some norms are product norms: they describe the standards which a given product is required or

expected to meet. Obvious examples of product norms for translations would the target culture expectation concerning the syntax, textual coherence and discourse structure of a text of a given type.

Other norms are process norms, describing the standards or principles according to which given processes are to be carried out. Three process norms of relevance to translation are:

1) the relation norm: translators are expected to work in such a way that an appropriate relation is established and maintaned between source text and target text.

2) the communication norm: translators ar expected to work in a way that optimizes communication.

3) the ethical norm: translators are expected to work in an ethically responsible way.

NORM-BREAKING

There are various ways in which a translation may break any of these norms. Some norm-breaking may be deliberate, to enhance the function of the translation. Some advertisements, for instance, make deliberate use of odd spellings or structures just to catch people's attention. (You might even say that people expect this happen occasionally in this text type, and so in this sense the norms are not actually broken.) Highly marked structures might be justified in poetry translations; or in humour: a famous French translation of the English nusery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall" starts "Un petit d'un petit/S'etonne aux Halles" – translating the sounds only but making very little semantic sense!

A second type of norm-breaking is function-preserving. Formal expectations are not met, but the message is clear enough. Much translation done by non-native speakers of the target language falls into category. A note on a hotel bathroom door in Vienna asks visitors to "contribute greatly to the rational use of water and washing powder, and actively help preserving the nature" by not putting their towels out to wash every night. The English is odd, ungrammatical in places (syntactic and discourse norms are broken), but the function of the message is quite clear: it communicates well.

The most serious type of norm-breaking is where this involves an unintended change of function: in other words, the communication norm is broken. Badly written advertisements or brochures make people laugh, and do not convince readers that the company in question needs to be taken seriously: its products are probably of the same poor quelity as its advertising text. In literary translation the effect of this kind of norm-breaking may be disastrous, ruining the whole aesthetic effect of a work. When Jotuni's Hilda Husso says to her ex-lover (several years after their affair) that she is thinking of getting married to someone else (she is well into middle age now, and feeling it), she puts it like this:

"Arvelin ottaa miehen, kun on sopiva. On asioita, jotka puhuvat sen puolesta. Jalat ja vanhuus."

But the published English translation unfortunately has:

'I've been thinking of saying yes to him. He will do. There are few things to be said for him. His legs and his oldness."

This translation breaks several norms: not only the relation norm (since the Finnish has been grossly misunderstood – a typical weakness of native target-language translators), but also the communication norm and ethical norm as well. It is irresponsible to submit such errors for publication (and it is iresponsible, moreover, to accept them for publication). The error eradication stage has evidently been omitted entirely.

REVISION

Testing a translation means revising it, literally "seeing it again". New problems arise, perhaps unintended consequences of the first solution proposed. A different reviser might see yet other problems that needed attention. The revised version should then be a better theory – and this is why revision is crucial. The more drafts the better!

PS

A last point for those who are still suspicious of "theory": this essay uses many abstract theoretical concepts, such as the concept of theory itself. Personally at least, I find these ideas extremely useful and practical, in my work both as a translator and a teacher of translation. Without some idea of "theory", it would not be possible even to think about these kinds of questions: we would not have the tools.

PPS

This essay (and the original talk) was prompted by the problem question "what is the point of theory?" The essay itself represents my TT for this P l. The EE is up to you...

Two suggestions for further reading:

Popper, Karl R. (1972) * Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bartsch, Renate (1987) * Norms of Language.* London: Longman.