RETHINKING TRANSLATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

In the latest decades the concept of translation has dramatically changed: we have gone from absolute equivalence to a widening of the definition of this field which sometimes reaches unforeseen limits. Translation certainly reflects the kind of society which produces it and, thus, it is hardly surprising that a culture like the western one – contradictory, hybrid and enriched thanks to migration but at the same time burdened with problems arising from cross-cultural clashes – offers a definition of translation as a never-neutral and ethically-complex process. The different current theories provide much help when pondering over these issues and reflect the choices which we, translators, constantly make, our negotiations and the margins of (in)fidelity between which we move, always around a core meaning which is no longer universal.

Resum

El concepte de traducció ha canviat moltíssim durant les darreres dècades: hem passat de l'equivalència absoluta a l'ampliació de la definició d'aquest camp fins a límits de vegades insospitats. I és que, efectivament, la traducció és sempre reflex del tipus de societat que la genera, així que no és d'estranyar que una cultura com l'occidental, contradictòria, híbrida, enriquida per les migracions però també carregada de problemes pels xocs interculturals, oferisca una definició de traducció que és ara un procés mai neutre i èticament complex. Les distintes teories contemporànies ajuden molt a reflexionar sobre tot açò, i reflecteixen les eleccions que com a traductors fem constantment, les nostres negociacions i els marges d'(in)fidelitat en què ens moguem respecte a un nucli de significat que ha deixat de ser universal.

Keywords: Translation. Neutrality. Ideology. Culture.

> Cocinar exige recetas y técnicas que se basan en suposiciones de lo que constituye una buena comida. Si los traductores son como cocineros, entonces se guían por una teoría que rige la elección de los ingredientes, las estrategias y los efectos. Necesitan aprender qué es lo que tienen a su disposición y qué usos le pueden dar; y, en especial, qué usos culturales y políticos[1].
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> Lawrence Venuti (2000: 34)

> La mala suerte de cualquier teoría de la traducción es que debería partir de una noción comprensible (y férrea) de "equivalencia de significado", mientras que lo que suele pasar es que en muchas páginas de semántica y filosofía del lenguaje se define el significado como lo que permanece inalterado (o equivalente) en los procesos de traducción. Círculo vicioso como pocos[2].
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> Umberto Eco (2008: 35)

For a long time, translating was, almost intuitively, a synonym for finding an equivalent for a source text, for saying the same thing in another language, for replacing or substituting. In fact, the term *translation* belongs to that group of terms which the general public claims to understand without any problem. However, this is not only a feature of non-specialized circles: for centuries, the main aim of translation was to find the way of transferring meaning from one language to another without altering the message of the source text at all. And, certainly, this seems to be the most logical approach. However, in practice, we all know that things finally prove to be much more complex: nowadays many translation scholars (Hermans 1999; Tymoczko 2007; Davis 2001 *et al.*) and translators (I could name here important translators such as Miguel Sáenz, Juan Gabriel López-Guix, Dora Sales, Gayatri Spivak and many others) confidently assert that the translator is not invisible and, thus, translation is at the same time a complex and fascinating activity:

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1. Cooking requires recipes and techniques based on assumptions about what a good meal is. If translators are like cooks, they are guided by a theory which regulates the choice of ingredients, strategies and effects. They need to learn what is available for them, what this can be used for and, especially, what this can be used for in cultural and political arenas. [Translated by Aída Martínez-Gómez.]
2. The misfortune of any translation theory lies in the fact that it should be based upon an understandable (and solid) notion of "equivalence of meaning", whereas what actually happens is that meaning is usually defined, in the fields of semantics and philosophy of language, as what remains unaltered (or equivalent) in translation processes. A real vicious circle. [Translated by Aída Martínez-Gómez.]

> It would be natural enough, *prima facie*, to bring these two activities – of translating and theorizing about meaning – together, because of the simplest of beginning thoughts about translation: namely that it is an attempt to find ways of saying in one language something that means the same as what has been said in another. What I would like to do in this essay is to explore some of the reasons why it is that this *prima facie* thought should be resisted: I shall argue that most of what interests us in the translations that interest us most is not meaning, in the sense that philosophy of language uses the term: in many cases […] getting the meaning, in this sense, right is hardly even a first step towards understanding (Appiah 2000: 418).

It is, therefore, very difficult to define translation, basically because the task of translating has always run parallel to the epistemology of an era, to cultures, to societies and to every philosophic, artistic and scientific change which has influenced mankind. Everything influences translation, which is not foreign to anything. This is precisely the reason why it is one of the most fascinating activities one can carry out. Statements such as "defining translation is easy" or "anyone can translate with the help of a dictionary" (as once ironically suggested by Susan Bassnett when making her readers reflect upon the complexity of translating) are fallacies in themselves. They are fallacies firstly because there are many different kinds of translations (from self-translations, authenticated official documents and Constitutions with several versions – such as the Swiss one, with German and French versions, none of which is considered to be a "translation" – to the so-called pseudotranslations, multilingual texts or "zero translations", among others; cf. Tymoczko 2007: 66-67), and secondly because even the concepts used to explain the translation process – from the concept of language to that of text or communicative system – are problematic themselves (Tymoczko 2007: 54ff). It is surprising that the more we know about translation and the more we reflect upon it, the less sure we are that it is something as easy as we would like it to be, as shown, for instance, in such interesting observations as "When is a Translation not a Translation?" (Bassnett 1998: 25-40), "Defining Translation" (Tymoczko 2007: 54-106) or "Undefining Translation" (Hermans 1999: 46-54), among others.

Almost every traditional definition of translation stems from the idea of equivalence, from the possibility of replacing a text for one written in the target language. Nevertheless, even if equivalence is a concept which works in the scientific arena, the more one analyzes it, the more problematic it becomes (Hermans 1999: 47). Today, in the era of globalization, it is obvious that translating does not mean saying *the same thing*, but saying *almost the same thing*. And besides, we must always bear in mind how difficult it is to define that *thing* and never forget that we are often seriously uncertain of what

saying means (Eco 2008: 13). The question, then, may not be whether equivalence exists or not (it is already clear nowadays that absolute equivalence in translation is impossible), but "to what degree should a translation exhibit this or that species of equivalence […] what is the minimum equivalence required […] And who decides" (Hermans 1999: 48).

The discussion about faithfulness in translation or about the importance and meaning of the term "equivalence" has led to questions which redefine the object of study of the discipline: "what is studied is text embedded within its network of both source and target cultural signs" (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990: 11-12). Thanks to the advances in traductology, especially during the second half of the 80s and throughout the 90s, wide issues related to ideology, ethics and culture have been included in translation research (Bassnett 2007: 14). Translation theories of the 21st century consider neither equivalence nor the definition of an absolute criterion to produce a good target text as a priority (Cronin 2000 & 2003; Gentzler 2001; Hardwick 2000). On the contrary, the activity developed by the translator reflects an intrinsic connection with the problems which seriously concern today's society, from migrations and national identities to the problem of margins – common issues in institutional and legal translation and in social mediation, which are particularly relevant in our country as can be evidenced by the work of some research groups in universities such as those of Granada and Alcalá de Henares, to name only a few. Thus, translation is not understood as a simple intellectual task – it is not possible to "'simply' translate –translations are ethical-political acts" (Davis 2001: 51) –, but as an ethical problem, as a possibility for linguistic hospitality (Ricoeur 2005) and even for conflict (Baker 2006), since translating means enabling interaction between cultures whose mutual relationship is, in many cases, asymmetrical.

Nowadays, when translation is the language of Europe (quoting Umberto Eco), when, in the age of globalization, we are facing an ethically challenging activity – since it needs to combine identity and otherness in a world which is becoming richer thanks to migration, the coming and going of peoples and the resulting pluralism and cultural relativism, but which is also confronted with the problems this may lead to – translation is much more than just a mirror. One of the main reasons for that, as Borges reminds us in *El idioma de los argentinos*, is that we cannot be so naïve as to forget that language is like the moon, and has a shadowed hemisphere. Speaking is not neutral. Objectivity does not exist, nor do the alleged equivalence and faithful conveyance of information from one side to the other. Translators' choices are always determined by their universe of discourse and this not only results in

different translations, but also, and most importantly, it reflects different ways of understanding the world. As Cristina Peretti (1995: 9) states, translation is closely linked to philosophy, and philosophy – together with metaphysics – is the discipline which forces us to reflect upon our own identity and the identity of other people.

Therefore, translating is a serious task (Eco 2008: 31), since it influences all spheres of life. People access reality through translations, versions of realities which are temporary, circumstantial, interesting and self-interested, which continuously become contextualized, corrected and translated along with one's hermeneutic and ethical trajectories. As the anthropologist Lluís Duch explains in *Mito, interpretación y cultura,* if living is speaking and speaking is translating, it is obvious that living is translating: translation, as an unavoidable process which every human being is subject to from birth until death, is a clear sign of the deep alienation of mankind. We speak because *immediacy*, despite the great efforts we make to reach it, is unattainable for mortals (Duch 1998: 467). We are translating from the very moment we open our eyes every morning. This is why it is not easy to define translation (*ibid.*: 34).

> Si interpréter, c'était mettre lentement en lumière une signification enfouie dans l'origine, seule la métaphysique pourrait interpréter le devenir de l'humanité. Mais si interpréter, c'est s'emparer, par violence ou subreption, d'un système de règles qui n'a pas en soi de signification essentielle, et lui imposer une direction, le ployer à une volonté nouvelle, le faire entrer dans un autre jeu et le soumettre à des règles secondes, alors le devenir de l'humanité est une série d'interprétations. (Foucault 1971: 145-146)[3]

Therefore, the concept of translation has changed as other epistemological fields have evolved, since translation is an activity which is closely related to existence. Evidence of this is that, especially during the 20ᵗʰ century – when the notion of knowledge itself changed radically (Tymoczko 2007: 18ff), when post-structuralism replaced structuralism and postmodernity replaced modernity and when analytical philosophy opened new paths towards the

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3. If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. [Foucault, Michel. (1977) "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History". In: Bouchard, Donald F. (ed.) *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews.* Trans. Donald Bouchard & Sherry Simon. New York: Cornell University Press. pp. 139-164. (This quote appears in pages 151-152)]

linguistic turn, the semiotic turn or the cultural turn –, we began seeing translation in a new light. It was then when we realized that the important thing "is not to solve the problems but to problematize the solutions" (Tymoczko 2007: 18ff) and when we started wondering about the role of the translator after the Second World War or, later on, in the new institutions created by the European Union – situations where one element was highlighted: "the significance of translators' choices and their processes of decision making, indicating that these choices determine meaning itself in the target text and that translated texts are constitutive of representations of their subject matter" (Tymoczko 2007: 189).

This is the reason why it is so important to reflect upon the foundations on which the translation process has been constructed from the beginning. There are already relevant contributions in this sense, such as those by Susan Bassnett & André Lefevere (1998), Michael Cronin (2003), Theo Hermans (2006) or Maria Tymoczko (2007). These authors, among others, warn of the westernization of translation studies – we forget that translation is also carried out in other continents – and suggest that, in the 21st century, the discipline must be able to face new challenges which entail leaving homogenizing and universalistic positions aside.

Given the current situation, and bearing in mind that we live in a globalized era characterized by constant migration, our aim as translators can only be to find the most appropriate association for the local and the global, for the Self and the Other, through specific cultural experiences which are also related to what is alien, unknown and different to us (Cronin 2006: 3). This is precisely the key: the dual nature – or better, the multiple nature – of cultural experiences, both specific and interrelated, will lead us to an *in-between* space where neither exotization nor domestication in translation will prevail. This solution, far from being perfect, although being the best choice available, is not utopian. It will enable us, translators, to face an era which has undoubtedly witnessed dramatic changes resulting in a revolution in the very nature of societies. On the one hand, globalization has transformed the epistemological approaches to everyday life and individual discourses and experiences, partly because the new technologies contribute to bringing societies together and partly because the notion of diversity itself is blurred, as is that of cross-cultural gaps and misunderstandings, given the uneven nature of globalization, ruled by the homogenizing patterns set by world powers. Our age, that of cultural pluralism, cannot allow nihilism and lack of values nor authoritarism and absolute equivalences: the perfect scenario would be a situation of constant compensation, as Bauman (2002: 92) suggests, where

the dilemma does not lie in the fact of living according to certain values or not, or living according to one set of values or another, but in the fact of acknowledging the validity of other values, different to ours, without underestimating our identity or feeling tempted to discredit what is different.

On the other hand, alongside knowledge, migrations have become global – a phenomenon which has transformed lifestyles, demography and the composition of societies. In this scenario, the challenge which translation faces is obvious: the everyday professional activity needs to be rethought, from the literary to the legal fields, but especially in the latter, since its norm favors absolute equivalence and assumes equality-based cross-cultural relationships, whereas reality has proved to be far beyond these theories. Therefore, translation is not just a mirror, but rather seems closer to Alice's looking glass, that which turns everything upside down, enters it and scans what lies at the other side. According to Bauman (1999: xlvii), translating is, at the same time, a process of self-creation and of mutual creation, where neither the author nor the translator are able to exercise their authority in absolute terms:

> There is no supra-cultural and supra-historical (and so free from all contingency) observation point from which the true and universal meaning can be sighted and subsequently portrayed; none of the partners in the encounter occupies such a point. Translation is an ongoing, unfinished and inconclusive *dialogue* which is bound to remain such. The meeting of two contingencies is itself a contingency, and no effort will ever stop it from being such. The act of translation is not a one-off event which will put paid to the need of further translating effort […]. Cross-cultural translation is a continuous process which serves as much as constitutes the cohabitation of people who can afford neither occupying the same space nor mapping that common space in their own, separate ways. No act of translation leaves either of the partners intact. Both emerge from their encounter changed, different at the end of an act from what they were at its beginning […] and that reciprocal change is the work of translation (Bauman 1999: xlviii)

Nowadays, in the era of globalization, the translator seems to understand very clearly that the idea of "universal" words such as "die", "live", "star", "swim", and even ubiquitous artifacts like "mirror" and "table", which are not problematic from the point of view of translation (Newmark 1988: 94), is impossible (Fernández González 2008: 45-47). The fact that not even words which designate allegedly universal concepts are universal themselves – a fact which translators are well aware of – proves to be extremely important, for instance, in the field of legal translation (one just needs to remember the changes suffered by the approach to legal translation following the Critical Legal Studies, the Feminist Jurisprudence or the Critical Race Theory). Nevertheless, the re-

al problem in translation is to be found in the limits. We know that translating unavoidably entails manipulating, but to what extent? Translating, today,

> significa siempre "limar" algunas de las consecuencias que el término original implicaba. En este sentido, al traducir, *no se dice nunca lo mismo*. La interpretación que precede a la traducción debe establecer cuántas y cuáles de las posibles consecuencias ilativas que el término sugiere pueden limarse. Sin estar nunca completamente seguros de no haber perdido un destello ultravioleta, una alusión infrarroja.
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> Así y todo, la negociación no es siempre un proceso que distribuye equitativamente pérdidas y ganancias entre las partes en juego. Puedo considerar satisfactoria incluso una negociación donde le he concedido a la parte contraria más de lo que ella me ha concedido a mí y, aun así, considerarme igualmente satisfecho al tener en cuenta mi propósito inicial y saber que partía en condiciones de neta desventaja. (Umberto Eco 2008: 119)[4]

Theory helps – a lot – with the translating task. It helps us to reflect upon the problems of a text and to ask ourselves questions about who commissioned the translation of this precise text, who the target reader is, why we were chosen to translate it, etc. However, theory may also influence the choices we constantly make, since the negotiation process mentioned by Eco allows for certain infidelity margins around an allegedly faithful core which depends on the purposes of the translator (Eco 2008: 23). Eco is one of the most fervent current supporters of the fact that there is what he calls a Core Content in every translation process (2008: 105ff), where a certain degree of universalism may be discerned, even if the author himself admits that neither the definition of universal nor the criteria for homogeneity is clear. Eco believes that we have gone too far when interpreting Peirce's infinite semiosis and what he himself named "open work" in the 60s (Eco 1992), and thinks that we must respect that core meaning which is common to every translator and reader of the text and which would enable us to understand the same thing and yet interpret different nuances. From his point of view, the translator is under the obligation to legally respect what others have said, even if determining what is

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4. Always means "trimming" some of the consequences which the source term implies. In this sense, when one translates, one never says the same thing. During the interpreting process previous to translating one thing must be decided upon: how many and which potential illative consequences of the term can be trimmed away. And still, one can never be completely sure that an ultraviolet sparkle or an infrared reference have not been missed.

   Even so, negotiation is not always a process which equally distributes gains and losses between the parties to the game. I can consider a negotiation satisfactory even if I have awarded the other party more than what it has awarded me, and yet feel satisfied, since I am aware of my initial purpose and my clearly disadvantaged initial position. [Translated by Aída Martínez-Gómez.]

understood by respect for what others have said, when moving from one language to another, constitutes an interesting legal problem (Eco 2008: 27-28).

Other theoretical approaches, however, encourage us to go further, which could also be matter of discussion or which, at least, would raise ethical concerns if translators finally become a dominant centre, that Foucaultian *Self* which they wanted to fight at first. The theory or theories which we adopt as a starting point for the actual task of translating will provide different answers for our texts; they will offer different possibilities and choices. Nevertheless, the most important thing is to be aware, as 21st-century translators, of the fact that such choices will not be irrelevant, because "choices that might be thought of as merely linguistic always imply ethical standards as well, which has made the activity of translating itself the vehicle of such values as integrity, responsibility, fidelity, boldness, humility" (Sontag 2007).

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