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Linguistic Models & Methods in the Study of Translation

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Linguistics and translation studies have had a long and productive relationship, going back at least to the late forties/early fifties, when scholars first began to discuss the possibility of developing theoretical and pedagogical models of translation in a modern academic context. In recent years, this longstanding tradition of approaching the study of translation from a linguistic perspective has been the subject of some criticism within the discipline. Some of this criticism has been justified, and more recent studies have begun to take much of it on board. However, it is also fair to say that much of the criticism that continues to be levelled against linguistically-oriented work is arguably misinformed, based on a view of linguistics that was dominant in the sixties and seventies but is no longer representative of linguistics or of linguistic approaches to the study of translation. This entry will trace the development of linguistically-oriented approaches from the early fifties to the late nineties, in an attempt to place the achievements and pitfalls of linguistic research on translation in perspective and to address some of the criticism that has been levelled against it. Fawcett (1997a) offers a detailed and balanced overview of linguistic theories of translation which also attempts to trace the progress of these approaches and to weigh their shortcomings against the achievements that have been made during the past few decades.

The following overview distinguishes between, on the one hand, linguists who have been primarily interested in trying out their favourite linguistic theory on translation because “the fact of translation is a main challenge both to linguistic theory and to philosophy” (Firth 1956a:77) and, on the other, scholars of translation whose main concern has been to promote the study of translation and who have simply looked to linguistics to provide reliable tools of analysis for achieving this end. Examples of the former include Firth (1956a, 1956b), Haas (1962), Catford (1965, 1994), Halliday (1964) and de Beaugrande (1978) and of the latter Nida (1964, 1969, 1975a, 1975b), Delisle (1980, 1993), House (1977, 1997), Blum-Kulka (1981, 1986), Wilss (1982), Hatim and Mason (1990, 1997), Mason (1994), Bell (1991), Baker (1992, 1993, 1995, 1996b), Neubert and Shreve (1992) and Harvey (1998, in progress), among many others.

Translation as a Challenge to Linguistic Theory

Generative linguists such as Noam Chomsky have never shown much interest in translation. Linguists working within the Firthian tradition, by contrast, have often devoted entire articles, and in the case of Catford (1965) an entire book, to theoretical discussions of translation. Firth himself wrote a number of articles in which he expressed an interest in translation as a *communicative event*, pretty much along the

lines of current communicative models of translation such as Hatim & Mason (1990, 1997) and House (1977, 1997). In 'Linguistic Analysis and Translation', for instance, he rejects the notion of 'naked ideas' as a measure of equivalence or a reference point for determining whether meaning has or has not been transferred in translation, suggesting that there is "no profit in the effort to state the total meaning of a word" (1956a:78). He expresses his position on the issue of translation in general as follows (1956b:91):

I want to make it clear that the linguistic systems and structures are related to the systems and structures in the events, relevant objects and people and what they are doing. You have the option of connecting structures and systems of language with structures and systems of thought or with structures and systems in situations comprising the human participants, their non-verbal behaviour, the relevant objects and other events and of these two alternatives, I suggest - difficult though as it may appear - that the situational matrix is the more manageable one and more easily related to problems of translation.

Firth consistently talks about modes or levels of meaning – namely phonological, grammatical and situational (cf. Catford 1965) – and makes it clear that it is the situational level that is relevant and likely to prove productive in any attempt to account for translational behaviour. Thus the emphasis on translation as a communicative event goes back all the way to the mid-fifties as far as linguistic approaches are concerned. And it continued to feature in the literature during the sixties and seventies, though this fact is hardly acknowledged today. In 1962, for instance, Haas reiterated the position outlined by Firth, though he did not explicitly refer to Firth. "What we abstract from different expressions as 'similarity of sense'", Haas tells us, "is a correspondence between their functions. Unless we succeed in thus explaining translation, the mystery of bare and neutral fact will continue to haunt us" (1962/1968:104). Not only does Haas reject the notion of 'correspondence of meaning' as a productive way of approaching translation, but he also explicitly states that "the translator chooses *what* units to translate" (emphasis in original), that "the translator dealing with 'free constructions' constructs freely" and "the language he works in is the translator's clay" (ibid:107-108). Later approaches which developed in the eighties and nineties within frameworks such as skopos theory and cultural studies have criticised linguistics for adopting a simplistic notion of 'meaning' and for denying translators the freedom of choice, among other things. Such criticism, as can be seen from the work cited here, has been highly selective in its review of the literature and has failed to take account of important discussions of the nature of translation which originated within linguistics and which, at least for their time, were highly sophisticated. Notwithstanding her later criticism of linguistic approaches (Lefevere and Bassnett 1990:4), Bassnett-McGuire (1980/1991:21) is one of the few scholars in translation studies to acknowledge the complex and essentially social view of meaning held by linguists such as Firth.

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that many linguists, even those working within the

Firthian tradition, started out with similar assumptions to those of Firth and Haas in the sixties and seventies but ultimately failed to take up the challenge posed by Firth in practice. They seem in some cases to have been distracted by a self-imposed requirement to construct watertight linguistic categories for every type of translational behaviour, if need be at the expense of the validity of the emerging theoretical models. Catford (1965) who, unlike Halliday (1964), attempts to account for translation as a linguistic phenomenon rather than as a method of language teaching, is a case in point. Catford's is in fact the best known linguistic theory of translation and the one that has been widely cited to discredit linguistically-oriented discussions of translation. Even among linguists, it is now generally agreed that "Catford's "theory of translation" stands as an allegory of the limitations of linguistics" at a particular moment in time (de Beaugrande 1978:11).

Like many linguists who wrote on translation during the sixties and seventies, Catford essentially saw translation as an operation on languages, an operation which involves the replacement of textual material in one language with textual material in another language. His emphasis throughout is on exploring the potential of language as such. Thus he relates types of translation to, on the one hand, the levels of language (resulting in the well-known categories of total translation and restricted translation, with the latter being further subdivided into grammatical, lexical, phonological and graphological translation) and on the other to the grammatical rank at which (he assumed) translation equivalence is established (leading to categories such as bounded and unbounded translation). This kind of emphasis on potential rather than actual translational behaviour is no longer favoured among linguistically-oriented scholars, and yet it would be unreasonable to dismiss it altogether. Examples of phonological translation do exist and demonstrate the relevance of at least some of Catford's categories (see in particular humorous collections such as *Mots D'Heures: Gousses, Rames. The d'Antin Manuscript* and *N'Heures Souris Rames. The Coucy Castle Manuscript*).

Catford also developed a typology of translation shifts which proved attractive to a number of scholars, some of whom later developed their own, more meaningful typologies of shifts (see in particular Popovič 1970 and Leuven-Zwart 1984, 1989, 1990). Indeed, one of the most prominent figures in translation studies in the eighties and nineties, Gideon Toury, has made extensive use of the notion of shifts in his own work (see in particular Toury 1980; the notion resurfaces again in the analysis of individual case studies in Toury 1995). Catford is credited with being the first to discuss the notion of shifts explicitly and to elaborate it in some detail. However, if we do not restrict 'shifts' to changes at the structural level, as Catford chose to do, it becomes clear that the notion is implicit in any kind of comparison of source and target texts and is therefore central to practically all product-oriented descriptive work in translation studies, including work that does not adopt a linguistic perspective. The only exception is perhaps recent work done on comparable corpora, discussed later in this entry, which compares original and translated *language* rather than original and translated *text* and therefore makes no use of the notion of shifts as such. At any rate, one of the many weaknesses of Catford's model is that it does not differentiate between

obligatory and optional shifts (a distinction later made by other scholars such as Toury). This is precisely because Catford – notwithstanding the title of his book – is representative of a generation of linguists who have been more interested in using translation as a tool of formal linguistic analysis than in accounting for translation as a linguistic and social phenomenon.

Though heavily criticized within translation studies, it is important to remember that Catford's work represents the first ever attempt to elaborate a coherent theoretical account of linguistic aspects of translation at large – rather than just literary translation or Bible translation, for instance. Divorced from the realities of translation activity in many respects and unduly restricted to the sentence as the uppermost unit of analysis, Catford's theory nonetheless has a certain elegance which derives from its own internal consistency and definitional rigour.

Linguistic Theories within Translation Studies

As early as the late forties/early fifties, various scholars within the then emerging discipline of translation studies began to look to linguistics for theoretical and pedagogical models that can fruitfully be applied to translation (see for example Nida 1945, Casagrande 1954). The interest in linguistics made sense at the time, and arguably still does. There is, to start with, the obvious fact that language is the raw material of translation, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that a discipline engaged in accounting for linguistic behaviour will have much to offer scholars interested in studying translation. But there were also tactical reasons for the adoption of linguistic models at the time. The forties and fifties saw the emergence of linguistics itself as a 'scientific' discipline, with a highly formalized and rigorous machinery for describing languages, and a consequent strengthening of its position in the academy. This 'scientific' machinery is one aspect that has attracted serious criticism within translation studies in recent years, and linguistic approaches are sometimes referred to, pejoratively, as 'scientistic'. Nevertheless, at that time it was clearly an attractive proposition for both linguistics and translation studies to align themselves with scientific disciplines in order to secure a place in the academy. The success of linguistics in tackling problems and improving performance in areas such as language teaching and lexicography further increased its appeal as a potential role model for translation studies.

Linguistic approaches to translation started out – and a few arguably remain – rather restricted in their outlook, concentrating on units below the sentence and attempting to apply theoretical concepts from linguistics piecemeal (see, for instance, Nida's 1975b attempt to apply componential analysis to translation and the chapters on the application of case grammar or the use of componential analysis in Newmark 1988). They were also characterized in the early days by their tendency to assume that meaning and 'reality' can be separated from language and transferred intact in the process of translation; this contrasts sharply with the position of mainstream linguists such as Firth, Malinowski, Halliday and Sinclair. Rabin, for instance, describes translation as "a process by which a spoken or written utterance takes place in one

language which is intended and presumed to convey *the same meaning* as a previously existing utterance in another language” (1958:23; emphasis added). Some brands of linguistics and some linguistic approaches to translation still proceed on the assumption that at least a substantial part of language can be pinned down and anchored to independent ‘meanings’, but the majority accept, with Frawley (1984:164), that “there is no meaning apart from the code” and that “translation is nothing short of an essential problem of semiosis”. This is the position explicitly or implicitly adopted by practically all the leading theorists of translation and interpreting who are associated with the linguistics paradigm today, including Hatim and Mason, House, Bell, Baker, Delisle, Sager, Shlesinger, Blum-Kulka and many others.

During this early period, the overall orientation was also largely pedagogical, with few – if any – descriptive studies and little or no attempt at developing theoretical models (Jakobson 1959 is a notable exception). Two main types of study dominated the literature: studies which set out to present contrastive analyses of a specific pair of languages with a view to highlighting problematic areas in translation (for example Vinay & Darbelnet 1958 for English and French), and studies which attempted to formalize general, non-language-specific strategies of translation. Much of the work published by Bible translators falls into this second category. Both approaches had as their main objective the need to develop clear guidelines for solving structural problems in translation.

The late seventies, eighties, and particularly the nineties, saw the development of a number of distinct but complementary approaches within the ‘linguistic school’ of translation studies. Some studies such as House (1977, 1997) and Bell (1991) have drawn heavily on a particular theory of language (Hallidayan systemic linguistics in both cases cited here) while others have explored the way in which specific types of linguistic patterning are handled in translation. Blum-Kulka (1986) and Shlesinger (1996), for example, look at shifts in patterns of cohesion in translation and simultaneous interpreting, respectively; Baker (1992) explores various types of linguistic patterning in translation, including lexical patterning, theme-rheme organisation and cohesion. Others still, like Hatim and Mason (1990, 1997), have attempted to develop their own theory of translation based mostly or largely on a particular brand of linguistics (rather than a particular theory of language), in this case critical linguistics. Gutt (1990, 1991) is a particularly interesting case because he not only draws on relevance theory in the way that, for instance, Bell draws on systemic linguistics, but he explicitly argues that there is no need to develop an independent theory of translation since relevance theory can provide a full account of translational behaviour (for detailed criticism of this position see Malmkjær 1992).

On the whole, it is probably fair to say that linguistic approaches to translation have gained considerably in sophistication over the years. This is partly due to natural development, especially since modern linguistics itself has now widened its scope to look increasingly at language in use rather than language as an abstract system of relations, and partly in response to the criticism voiced by scholars of translation working outside the framework of linguistics. Both Hatim and Mason and House have

produced fairly substantial revisions of their models in 1997, where they explicitly acknowledge the importance of issues such as ideology, political climate, market forces, etc. and even attempt, in the case of Hatim and Mason, to build some of these elements into their theory. House (1997:118-119) responds directly to recent criticism which questions the validity of any linguistic study of translation by both acknowledging that non-linguistic factors do influence translational behaviour and stressing that translation can still be studied fruitfully from a linguistic angle:

The choice of an *overt* or a *covert* translation depends not just on the translator himself, or on the text or the translator's personal interpretation of the text, but also, and to a considerable extent, on the reasons for the translation, on the implied readers, on publishing and marketing policies. In other words, in translation there are many factors that cannot be controlled by the translator and have nothing to do with translation as a *linguistic* procedure or with the translator's linguacultural competence. Such factors are social factors, they concern human agents and socio-political or even ideological constraints that normally have far greater power and influence than the translator. Still, a translation is also a linguistic-textual phenomenon and can be legitimately described, analysed and assessed as such.

Other work, see below, has taken up the challenge of addressing the issue of ideology within a linguistic framework in a more detailed way.

Recent Developments

From the late eighties onwards, several scholars working within the linguistic tradition began to emphasise the role of world view, ideology and power play in shaping translational behaviour (Sa'adeddin 1989, 1990; Ireland 1989; Williams 1992; Fawcett 1995). This meant that translators and interpreters ceased to be seen as mere conduits, faithfully and objectively passing on information contained in a source text or utterance. Studies in court and community interpreting in particular have shown that interpreters do play an active part in the communication and that their behaviour (and the behaviour of other participants such as jurors) is influenced by the dynamics of power which operate in any given situation (see in particular Roy 1989, 1993; Berk-Seligson 1988, 1990; Wadensjö 1992; Hale 1997). These studies are largely informed by research in sociolinguistics, the ethnography of speaking and Hallidayan linguistics. Similarly, research on signed language interpreting draws heavily on various areas of linguistics and emphasises the role of ideology and power play.

The most promising developments within this broad orientation, however, are inspired by work done in critical linguistics, or critical discourse analysis as it is sometimes called. In critical linguistics, and in studies of translation informed by it, language is seen as an instrument of control as well as communication and ideology as "a systematic body of ideas, organized from a particular point of view" (Hodge & Kress 1979/1993:6). What distinguishes this linguistic approach to ideology from other approaches is its insistence that "ideology need not function at the level of conscious or

intentional bias” (Stubbs 1996:93). For example, Mason (1994) sets out to show “how ideology impinges on the translation process in subtle ways” (ibid:23) by investigating the traces of systematic ideological shifts in the language used in a text about Mexican history and its translation. But, in the tradition of critical linguistics, he argues that the ideological skewing of the target text may not be deliberate: mediation is often a largely subconscious process, and we are all constrained by our view of the world. Fawcett (1997b) similarly reveals racist elements in Stuart Gilbert’s translation of André Malraux’s *La Voile royale* but concludes that Gilbert was not necessarily a racist: he was simply “living and writing in times when the pressure of the dominant discourse made such language almost inescapable, since it was part of the wallpaper, so to speak” (ibid:264).

This recognition of the “habitualization of discourse” (Fowler 1991:89) means that linguistically-oriented scholars take seriously the task of analysing linguistic patterning in considerable detail in order to bring to the surface connections which are normally hidden from view precisely because they are ‘habitualized’. Thus Mason (1994) provides a more detailed analysis of patterns of ideological skewing, and at more linguistic levels, than the kind of analyses offered in work that is not informed by linguistics. He analyses skewing at the level of individual lexical choice, lexical and collocational cohesion, thematic arrangement, and overall text structure. This contrasts with studies that are not informed by linguistics, where the analysis tends to be restricted to a small set of categories at one or two levels at most. Venuti (1995, 1996), for example, uses a small set of categories such as archaisms, dialect, idiolect, syntactical inversions. From a linguistic, and particularly a critical linguistic perspective, these categories are arguably too few and too broad; their explanatory power is therefore restricted as far as linguistic patterning is concerned.

Another important development within linguistically-based approaches, broadly speaking, concerns the nature of translation as a linguistic phenomenon. Although the majority of linguists tend to think of translation – when they think of it at all – simply as a sub-field of applied linguistics, linguistics itself interestingly offers some of the most powerful tools available for proving the opposite: that translation is a sufficiently unique and distinct phenomenon to justify posing it as the object of an independent discipline, namely translation studies.

Two particular factors suggest that translation is likely to prove unique as a variety of language use and therefore to exhibit its own distinctive patterning. The first is that a translated text/utterance is normally constrained by a fully articulated text or utterance in another language; this is not true of other types of language production. The second is that translators are likely to respond, consciously or subconsciously, to the perceived social status of the text they are producing. They know that translations are not normally received in the same way as original texts, at least not in most contemporary societies. This may explain a feature which is associated in the literature with translated text, namely that it tends to conform to and even exaggerate typical patterns of the target language.

Translation then has to be recognised as “a communicative event which is shaped by its own goals, pressures and context of production” (Baker 1996b:175). If we accept that all language patterning is influenced by the constraints that operate in the environment of language use at any given time, then we have to accept that the patterning of translated text is likely to prove different from that of original text production. In other words, the nature and pressures of the translation process must leave traces in the language that translators produce (ibid:176). The question is how we investigate such traces in practice. The methodology used here does not consist of comparing source texts with their translations but of comparing original and translated texts *in the same language* and in a similar kind of domain. The two collections of text, which are held in machine-readable form and are therefore amenable to automatic or sem-automatic analysis, are known as a ‘comparable corpus’ (Baker 1995).

Recent work within and outside the framework of corpus-based translation studies has begun to demonstrate that translation is indeed a unique communicative activity which is qualitatively different from original text production. For example, translated texts have been found to exhibit lower lexical density than comparable original texts in the same language (i.e. they have a lower ratio of lexical as opposed to grammatical words) and lower type-token ratio (which means that they draw on a narrower range of vocabulary) (Laviosa-Braithwaite 1995, 1996). This suggests that translators may subconsciously simplify the language they use in attempting to communicate a foreign message to a new audience: by building in redundancy in the first case and by restricting the range of vocabulary used in the second. Similarly, translators tend to normalize punctuation, even when the use of punctuation in the original text is experimental in nature (May 1997, Malmkjær 1997), while interpreters tend to round off unfinished sentences, grammaticize ungrammatical utterances, and omit hesitations and false starts, even when they are produced intentionally by the speaker (Shlesinger 1991:150; Berk-Seligson 1990). This tendency to ‘normalize’ the language of translation and to adhere closely to the conventions of the target language suggests, again, that translators subconsciously respond to the perceived textual status of the texts or utterances they produce.

The Current Scene

Translation studies today is characterised by a great deal of diversity in terms of the range of issues that attract scholarly attention and the variety of perspectives and research methods used to address those issues. Translation scholars are increasingly inclined to ‘shop around’ for tools of analysis, whatever their origin. The result is that the difference between linguistic and non-linguistic approaches to translation today is arguably not as clear cut as it once was. Scholars working within a cultural studies tradition in particular are still inclined to think of any approach that either draws on linguistic tools of analysis or fails to politicize the study of translation as belonging to the linguistic tradition. And yet we find that many scholars who draw heavily on linguistic tools of analysis also draw on research in literary theory, critical norms, theories of cultural planning, and much more, which makes it difficult (not to say unproductive) to classify their work as ‘linguistically-’ or ‘non-linguistically-oriented’.

Examples include Tymoczko (1985, in press) and Delabastita (1993). Moreover, even scholars who openly dissociate themselves from the linguistic tradition and criticise it for a variety of reasons cannot help but draw heavily on linguistic tools of analysis as soon as they become engaged in any kind of descriptive work or any discussion of pedagogical issues. For how else does one even begin to consider analysing a translation or proceed to train translators?

For example, the late André Lefevere was one of the most outspoken critics of linguistic approaches (see in particular Lefevere and Bassnett 1990:4). And yet he made extensive use of mainstream linguistic notions such as locutionary and illocutionary force in his own work (Lefevere 1992). He also occasionally adopted a tone which is traditionally thought typical of scholars working within the linguistic tradition. Translators, Lefevere tells us,

should be able to relate tactical decisions made on the universe-of-discourse level and on the level of illocutionary language use to the strategy devised in response to the questions listed above. If they cannot, *the decisions are mistakes*, reflecting the *failures* of the translators to properly understand the source text. (1992:111; emphasis added).

Authoritarian pronouncements of this type are sometimes wrongly associated with linguistically-oriented work, but very few linguistic studies have in fact adopted this tone since the late seventies.

Venuti (1996) makes use of notions such as ‘syntactical inversions’, ‘lexicons’ and ‘dialect’; these are all notions that have been elaborated within linguistics, even if scholars from other disciplines have come to use them regularly. Interestingly, Venuti draws on such notions even as he effectively argues a case against linguistics by asserting that “linguistics-oriented approaches ... would seem to *block* the ethical and political agenda” which he advocates for minoritizing translation, and that Gricean maxims “effectively *repress* the working of the remainder in any translation” (ibid: 105, 104; emphasis added). Such strong claims are difficult to justify at any time, but particularly so in view of recent developments which are informed by areas such as critical linguistics and in view of the diverse and interdisciplinary profile that translation studies has acquired in the eighties and nineties. Venuti’s final recommendation that linguistic approaches can, after all, “be useful in training translators and analyzing translations” (ibid:109) seems to *repress* (to use his own term) this growing interdisciplinarity by perpetuating the myth of clear-cut divisions in translation studies.

A good example of this move towards interdisciplinarity can be seen in the work of Keith Harvey (Harvey 1998; in progress). Harvey sets out to investigate the translation strategies employed in rendering aspects of ‘camp’ talk (a particular speech style characteristic of homosexual male characters) in the works of writers such as Gore Vidal, Genet, Kramer and Kushner, from both a formal and functional point of view. Formal features of camp, as Harvey demonstrates, have to be linked to its larger

cultural role as a sign of marginalisation and of gay identity in order to explain the type of strategies used in translating it. Moreover, this formal/functional analysis at the level of language must also be complemented by an investigation into such issues as the existence and visibility of gay subcultural codes within the larger source and target cultural settings (in this case Britain, the States and France), the existence or absence of an established 'gay literature' in the target culture, as well as the sexual identity of the translator and his or her identification with a gay subcultural group. Harvey represents a new generation of translation scholars who defy being assigned to the linguistic or any other approach. His work demonstrates that linguistic analyses of translation need not be divorced from its cultural settings and, indeed, are capable of drawing productively on the methods and insights of other disciplines to provide a more comprehensive account of translational behaviour than we have been able to offer so far. For a similarly detailed study of both the linguistic and cultural environment of translation in a postcolonial setting, see Tymoczko (in press).

Linguistic approaches to translation have had their limitations in the past but they have widened their scope and refined their methodologies considerably in recent years. Insofar as we can still talk of distinct approaches in the current climate of interdisciplinarity, they continue to be among the most productive approaches to the study of translation: simply because some level of linguistic analysis must, at the very least, form the starting point of any study of translation. It is a stage that cannot be circumvented in most types of research in translation studies. This explains both the resilience of linguistic approaches to translation and the frustration which their pervasiveness sometimes provokes in the discipline.

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