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ON THE POSSIBILITIES AND IMPOSSIBILITIES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

1. Introductory remarks

As is well known, the second half of the last century has witnessed an unprecedented increase in cross-cultural communication at a practical level as well as a remarkable development of research on various aspects of translation as cross-cultural communication *par excellence*. Such an interest in the study of translation appears to be directly linked with the expansion of translational activities and reflects the importance attributed to them in the society at large. At the same time, the burgeoning growth of translation studies is to be explained within the context of the expansion of the discipline of linguistics over the past half-century, an important part of which is the development of various text-oriented branches in which attention has been given to previously largely unstudied phenomena of the functioning of language in real communicative situations.

The aim of this contribution is to present an overview of the development of translation studies and also to show that it was originally made possible by function-centred approaches to research on language. An attempt will be made to sketch out the principal differences between traditional thinking about translation – which was concerned almost exclusively with the dichotomy between literal and free translation on the one hand and with the problem of translatability between natural languages on the other – and some contemporary theories which have to a large extent overcome the traditional conceptual oppositions. This is true in particular of the functional approaches to translation, in which categories such as translatability, literalness and freeness have acquired only a very relative value and are considered in terms of the concrete purpose which a given translation is expected to serve in the target culture. The new perspective has also implied a redefinition of some fundamental translational issues such as the relation between translation and text production, the question of the translator's skills, and the concepts of translational "equivalence" and of translation error.

2. Translation: a growing area of research and an expanding practical activity

For centuries, translation has attracted the attention of numerous thinkers who have been interested in various aspects of it.[1] But it has happened only relatively recently that systematic studies with solid theoretical underpinning have been dedicated to translation as an object of empirical study and not merely as an object of reflection

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[1] A variety of monographs and readers dealing with translation theories are available in English. See, for instance, Lefevere (ed.) (1992) for an overview of traditional ideas and Gentzler (1993) and Venuti (ed.) (2000) for presentations of modern approaches.

based on intuition and experience. Apart from the growing interest in translation as a research field, the activity of translation itself is becoming more and more prominent in today's world. Everywhere, and especially perhaps in small cultures and in the non-English speaking world, translated texts can be found, directly or indirectly, in the greatest majority of communicative situations. The increasing dependence on translations in our every-day lives may at first sight appear paradoxical, since parallel to the growth of translational activities there is also an increase in foreign language learning, a consequence of which is that the number of people who have a working knowledge of at least one foreign language is becoming higher and higher. However, the two phenomena, i.e. the growing amount of translational activities and the expansion of foreign-language learning, are to be considered complementary rather than oppositional, since both are related to the ever-greater intensity of international (and therefore intercultural and interlingual) communication. The importance attributed to (high-quality) translation in today's world is also reflected in the growing number of translator- and interpreter-training university departments and institutes.

However, the increase in translation research and in translational activities does not necessarily imply that any substantial change in the quality of translated texts has taken place. In actual fact, a lot of inappropriate translations are still being produced, and the reasons for their poor quality have remained largely the same for centuries: they concern, among other things, the translators' insufficient source-language and/or target-language competence, their insufficient knowledge of the textual world, their not taking into sufficient consideration the addressee and their lack of methodological preparation for their task. Likewise, the theoretical reflection on translation may also appear not to have taken any big steps forward over time.

3. Translation theory through history

The opinion that during the two millennia of its existence translation theory has largely been in a state of stagnation is not an isolated one and has been expressed by many scholars. One of them, George Steiner, in his well-known work *After Babel* observes that thinking about "the art and theory of translation" has been moving in a vicious circle, since a lot of attention has been dedicated to **the dichotomy "literal translation *vs* free translation"** on the one hand and to the similarly useless and unproductive question of **whether interlingual translation is at all possible** (Steiner 1975: 238 ff.). Let us at this point have a closer look at the two issues.

3.1. Literal translation vs free translation

The basic opposition between literal translation and free translation[2] goes back to the ancient dichotomy *verbum vs sensus,* which can be encountered in authors such as

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[2] The opposition "literal translation vs free translation" can be seen as vaguely related to the distinction between formalism and functionalism in linguistics. In actual fact, however, it has been re-elaborated in such a variety of ways, in which issues other than those of form and function have played a central role, that the analogy does not appear crucial either for our understanding of the development of the translational dichotomy through history or for the applications which are made of it today. As is the case with the majority of the dichotomies used in the study of language, this one too has a merely provisional value and does not reflect the reality of language in its actual functioning (cfr. Barbe 2001).

Horace and St Jerome and which is analogous to the older distinction between *interpres* and *orator* introduced by Cicero. Over the centuries, the dichotomy "literal vs free translation" was recycled a number of times and still appears to have preserved some of its explanatory potential.

Through history, different periods and different authors displayed different preferences for either of the two oppositional terms and put forward different interpretations of the dichotomy. For instance, in ancient Rome, literary translators tended to favour free rather than literal translation, which can be explained by their emulation of Greek authors. The free-translation principle was carried to extremes in the 18th-century French culture where elegance and compatibility with target-culture taste were the most important criteria of a good translation. This gave rise to radical shifts from the source text and to the production of the so-called *belles infidèles*. New versions of the free-translation principle have also been proposed by contemporary scholars like, for instance, Eugene A. Nida, who has mainly investigated the translation of the *Bible*[3] (see Nida 1964).

Different views were dominant, for instance, in the German culture at the end of 18th and the beginning of 19th centuries. According to Johann W. Goethe, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, to name only the most representative thinkers, translations should make the target readers aware of the difference between the source language and culture on the one hand and the target language and culture on the other, and to achieve this objective structural adaptations should be made by virtue of which the target language will be a reflection of some characteristics of the source language. In the process of translation, the target language and culture are thus enriched by the input from the source language and culture, by means of which new linguistic and cultural models are imported. This line of thought was continued by a variety of theoreticians such as Walter Benjamin – most notably in his essay "The task of the translator", ("Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers", 1923) – and more recently by Jacques Derrida, the author of the now classic treatise "Des Tours de Babel" (1985). Today, a major representative of the foreignizing principle in translation is Lawrence Venuti (see Venuti 1998), the author of a source-oriented approach, who suggests that translation be non-fluent and non-ethnocentrical in order to convey a sense of foreignness of the source text and of the source culture.

Related to the dichotomy "literal translation vs free translation" – which allows endless possibilities of interpretation – is also the concept of the *translator's fidelity,* which is extremely flexible and slippery, since a translator who is faithful may translate either literally or freely, depending on what exactly one takes the concept of fidelity to mean; in principle, it is equally applicable to those who translate according to the principle of "literal translation" (in any of its possible forms) and to those who follow the principle of "free translation" (again, in any of its possible forms). What is more, in spite of substantial differences between the single versions of the original dichotomy, all the oppositions are ultimately based upon the idea that, unavoidably, in translation either the

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[3] A thorough and systematic presentation of issues involved in *Bible* translation is offered in Krašovec (ed.) (1998).

source or the target side is favoured. In other words, it is either the reader that makes an effort to come close to the target text, in which case the latter remains more firmly rooted in the source culture, or it is the translation that "gets close" to the reader, in which case the link of the target text with the source side is weaker.

Although in the past decades translation theory has often centred upon other issues, the opposition between literal translation and free translation seems to have preserved some explanatory and heuristic value. It has been used over and over again – often also by theoreticians who do not favour either of the given terms – under old labels (*faithful translation vs unfaithful translation; translation according to the letter vs translation according to the spirit*) as well as under new ones such as *innovative translation vs conservative translation, philological translation vs free translation, source-orientated translation vs target-oriented translation, domesticating translation vs foreignizing translation, naturalization vs exotization* (van Leuven-Zwart 1990: 75), *static equivalence vs dynamic/functional equivalence* (Nida 1964), *overt translation vs covert translation* (House 1977: 188-204), *non-illusory translation vs illusory translation* (Levý, quoted in Pym 1992: 178), *documentary translation vs instrumental translation* (Nord 1991a: 105-106; 1991b: 11, 72-73; 1997: 47-52), *direct translation vs indirect translation* (Gutt 1990: 149 ff.), *semantic translation vs communicative translation* (Newmark 1982: 22-23), *adequate translation vs acceptable translation* (Toury 1995: 56-57), *opaque style vs transparent style* (Snell-Hornby, quoted in Vannerem/Snell-Hornby 1986: 191), *observational reception vs participative reception* (Pym 1992: 178), etc.

If, however, one takes a look at the reality of concrete translations and at their actual functioning in communicative situations, one can soon realize how unproductive it is to insist either on the principle of free translation or on the principle of literal translation. It is obvious that neither relatively literal nor relatively free translations are able to give a realistic idea of the source culture, language and text. Any target text can never be more than an approximation of source text, which implies that "equivalence", at any level from that of the lexeme to that of the text, is no more than an illusion.[4]

3.2. The (im)possibilities of translation

The second issue which frequently preoccupied those who dealt with questions of translation in the past – and is to an extent also present in contemporary research on translation – concerns the problem of the very possibilities of interlingual translation. The main argument against the possibility of translation are the differences between natural languages in the ways in which they conceptualize the extralinguistic reality, which, according to some, implies that a message in language A can never be reproduced in language B. Behind such beliefs is the concept of "linguistic relativity"[5] put forward by American anthropological linguists, most notably by Benjamin Lee Whorf in the

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[4] The concept of "equivalence" has been dealt with extensively. See Snell-Hornby 1986: 13-16, 1988: 13-22, 1992: 21, Kußmaul 1986: 225 and Nord 1991b: 22 ff.; a different view is offered in Koller 1995.

[5] The problem of linguistic relativity and translation is examined in Pedersen 1988: 30-46. See also Kay 1996: 110-111.

1940s, although similar ideas are much older, as is generally known; they were debated by exponents of the German classical tradition such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt as well as by numerous earlier philosophers like Francis Bacon, John Locke, Giambattista Vico, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the authors of the Port Royal grammar and others, and can be traced down to Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*. In more recent times, the question of translatability has been posed again; for example, Willard van Orman Quine in his well-known essay "Meaning and Translation" (1959) speaks about the "indeterminacy of translation", which is due to the lack of immediate conceptual correlations shared by individuals intra- and interlinguistically. Indirectly, a tiny shadow of the untranslatability concept may perhaps also be present in modern translation theories inasmuch as they consider the idea of equivalence totally inadequate in terms of the actual reality of translation.

Certainly, the principle of linguistic relativity – which may hold equally for intra- and for interlingual communication – cannot easily be discarded: if it has not yet been fully proved, it has not been disproved either, nor is it likely to be in the future. But in spite of all the impossibilities of our understanding each other, interpersonal communication does seem to function, however imperfect it may be, and our messages do get across day by day, intra- and interlingually. Therefore, linguistic relativity may be considered a phenomenon which has to be taken into serious account in the study of human communication in general, it is, however, by no means an obstacle which would invalidate the feasibility of translation as such.

4. Beyond possibilities and impossibilities

The two issues discussed in the previous section may be regarded as major impediments which, over the centuries, have slowed down the development of translation studies to a considerable degree. On the other hand, it is necessary to realize that important progress in the study of translation could not be made before a theory of language became available which was broad enough to encompass the reality of the functioning of language in general, including all kinds of interlingual and intercultural communication. Once such a theory was formulated with the advent of text- and function-centred approaches to the study of language, it was possible for translation research to start to develop rapidly. As a consequence, one can now notice considerable differences between traditional reflection on translation and modern theoretical approaches to it, which can be summarized as follows:

1. Although modern approaches to translation are based in some measure on older ideas about translation, they are characterized by coherence and systematicity by virtue of which they have the nature of **proper theories,** i.e. frameworks with explanatory and predictive value.

2. Traditional reflection on translation was concerned almost exclusively with literary texts, besides, of course, Biblical texts. Modern translation theory, on the other hand, takes into consideration **texts in general,** literary as well as non-literary. This makes it possible for translation theory to be of use in translator-training curricula and, consequently, to have an impact upon the practice of translation itself.

3. Instead of dealing with the two above-mentioned issues (i.e. the question of translatability and the opposition between literal and free translation") modern translation theory, and in particular its functional branches, concentrate upon questions of **the communicative appropriateness of translations** in concrete target-culture situations, in which they are expected to function, as well as upon the role of the translator as a cross-cultural text producer. As a result, it appears that we are now in a position to understand better what translation is actually about and what exactly are the principles upon which the work of good translators is based.

As has been pointed out, the growth of translation studies *over the past decades* can only be explained in the light of the development of the study of language as communication. It is understandable that in pretextual linguistics – just as in traditional literary studies – the phenomenon of translation as a genuinely textual activity could not be of primary concern to the researcher,[6] whereas at a practical level "translation" was for centuries used (and still is) as a method of foreign-language teaching and learning. As such, however, it cannot really be compared to the activity of cross-cultural communication, since in the language classroom the method of "translation" is typically applied at levels below that of the text and usually no consideration is given to contextual factors and to the pragmatics of the actual communicative situations, which play such a central role in real-life translation (cfr. Kvam 1992: 196, Snell-Hornby 1986: 25-26). Since the functions of the two activities differ starkly, it is no exaggeration to say that they hardly have in common anything more than the name (cfr. Jakobsen 1994: 144, Snell-Hornby 1992: 18).

With the advent of suprasentential linguistics in the 1950s and 1960s the situation changed radically, since more and more attention began to be dedicated to the actual **language use** ("parole") as opposed to **language as a system** ("langue"; cfr. de Beaugrande 1978: 8, 95, 98; de Beaugrande 1991: 21-22 passim; Kußmaul 1986: 224; Ivir 1996: 151-156). Not surprisingly, the "pragmatic turn" ("die pragmatische Wende", Kvam 1992: 193; cfr. Hönig/Kußmaul 1982: 34) opened up new possibilities for translation research. Within this framework, translated texts, literary and non-literary alike, were immediately considered an interesting object of investigation.

It was in such an atmosphere that the functional approach to translation started to develop in the early 1970s, mostly at some German centres for the training of translators and interpreters. The approach is best represented by the so-called *skopos theory* ("Skopostheorie")[7] which was formulated by Hans J. Vermeer and Katharina

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[6] An exception were, for instance, early efforts in machine translation made in the 1950s by a group of American scholars, among whom were also Noam Chomsky and Victor Yngve (cfr. Yngve 1996: 38-39, 44-45).

[7] Apart from *skopos* theory, functionalism is also represented in some other approaches to translation which are independent of it. Among their authors are, for instance, Roger T. Bell, Basil Hatim and Ian Mason (see Bell 1991, Hatim/Mason 1990, Hatim/Mason 1997). However, these scholars do not offer their own general theories of translation which would be as broad and axiomatic as the *skopos* theory. Mention must also be made of Gideon Toury, who has developed a genuinely function-centred translation theory, which is devised almost exclusively for the study of the translation of literary texts and does not have any practical aims in the field of translator training. For a presentation of the differences between Vermeer's theory and his own see Toury 1995: 25-27. A complex function-centred framework, which has various points in common with the *skopos* theory and which, unlike Toury's approach, aims to be applicable to the training of translators, is Justa Holz-Mänttäri's "theory of translational action" (see Holz-Mänttäri 1984).

Reiß and from which a number of theoretical models were derived. The basic premise of the *skopos* theory – which can be seen as part of a broadly conceived action theory of human behaviour according to which human beings always act in a purposeful way – is that in an act of translation the translator's decisions are, prototypically, determined by the function the target text is expected to have in the target culture,[8] which implies that her/his work is guided by all kinds of contextual and pragmatic considerations (see Ožbot 2001: 139-140). If a translator is about to translate a text such as, for instance, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet,* he/she will proceed differently when the translation is intended for the stage and when it is meant to be used, as a radical adaptation, for school children in their textbooks, to mention just two out of a virtually infinite number of options[9].

The *skopos* theory has been modified by various researchers, most notably perhaps by Christiane Nord (Nord 1991b: 28-30; 1997: 124-125), who, besides *functionality,* also postulates the category of *loyalty.* Nord agrees that it is important to produce target texts on the basis of functional considerations (target function, target culture, target readership), but, she adds, translators must always be loyal to "their partners in translational interaction", at "the source and the target sides" (Nord 1997: 125), otherwise any target function could be attributed to any text-to-be-translated. At an applied level, the *skopos* theory has also been developed further by other scholars, like, for instance, Hans Hönig and Paul Kußmaul, who, as teachers of translation, have dedicated themselves primarily to research on the translator's skills, and have emphasized in particular the importance of his/her self-confidence and self-awareness, as well as of ethical issues in translation (see Hönig/Kußmaul 1982, Hönig 1995, Kußmaul 1995).

As an eminently functional approach to translation, the *skopos* theory is target-oriented, i.e. it is centred upon the text-to-be made. This can to some extent account for its great potential for being applied at a practical level. Since an act of translation always involves an attempt to produce a target text which can fit into a given target situation, it is the target rather than the source side that is necessarily of primary importance in translational practice. Translation, like text production in general, is essentially determined by contextual and pragmatic factors relevant in the concrete situation in which it is supposed to function. As a consequence, the relationship obtaining between the source text and the target text can display various degrees of closeness, but, in principle, the former is no more than a blueprint for the construction of the latter; it is always the target linguistic and extralinguistic situation rather than the source text itself which determines what the final product of the translation process

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[8] The essence of *skopos* theory is expressed in the sentence "Die Dominante aller Translation ist deren Zweck" (Reiß/Vermeer, 1991: 96).

[9] Such an example shows that in order to perform well as cross-cultural communicators translators must possess a variety of different skills, among which source-language competence and target-language competence should not be overestimated. Equally important are also source-culture competence and target-culture competence, knowledge of the source textual tradition and of the target textual tradition, knowledge of the textual world and, last but not least, translation competence in a narrow sense, i.e. professional knowledge about *what* it actually means to translate and *how* to do it (Ožbot 1997).

will be like. It is not surprising that within such a concept of translation, translation error is not identical to language error: the translator commits an error when he/she produces a target text which is functionally inappropriate either as a whole or in one or more of its parts.

In view of all this, the two issues presented above, which occupied a central position in traditional translation theory, lose virtually all their significance when considered in the light of a functional approach to translation. The opposition between literal translation and free translation appears trivial unless it is considered in terms of the function a given translation is supposed to perform in the target culture and even then the two options are no more than the translator's "working techniques", with a merely relative value. Likewise, the translatability question is not regarded as theoretically pertinent at all. If the process of translation, which essentially consists in message mediation, is taken as a primarily cultural and not linguistic phenomenon, what is being translated are texts or textual contents, not words as such; or, to say it with Coseriu, it is what is extralinguistic or, better, "non language-specific" ("übereinzelsprachlich"; Coseriu 1978: 20) that is conveyed in translation.

5. Translation studies and linguistics

By way of conclusion, let us examine briefly the nature of the relationship between the study of translation and linguistics, which is a complex one. This is due to a number of interconnected reasons, among which the following two seem to be particularly important: first, if it is true that the development of translation studies was made possible, as this paper has tried to show, only after new research perspectives on language had began to establish themselves, it is equally true that at the time when such new perspectives were being developed *langue*-centred traditional linguistics was still dominant. This is why early endeavours of translation scholars to have their subject accepted as an academic (sub)discipline often met with opposition, which created an impression of an irreconcilable discrepancy between the study of language on the one hand and the study of translation on the other. This antagonism lasted for decades and the 1980s and 1990s saw a heated debate on the epistemological status of translation studies (see Snell-Hornby 1988: 7 ff., 1996: 18 passim, Hönig 1995: 16; cfr. also Ožbot 1998) which has only recently began to calm down (Baker 2001). Second, given that in any translational activity language is fundamental as a means to which translations as texts own their existence and that, at the same time, translation involves much more than "just" language, translation studies may indeed appear to be a discipline which transcends linguistics.

However, the presence of other elements besides language does not determine only translational activities, but is a fundamental characteristic of the production of texts in general. Therefore it seems reasonable to conclude that the study of translations as texts necessarily falls within the scope of a broadly conceived discipline concerned with the study of texts (cfr. Reiß/Vermeer 1991: 1-2, Coseriu 1978), both at a theoretical and at an applied level.

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Povzetek
O MOŽNOSTIH IN NEMOŽNOSTIH MEDKULTURNE KOMUNIKACIJE

V članku je predstavljen nastanek prevodoslovja kot raziskovalnega področja, ki ga je omogočil razvoj nadstavčnega jezikoslovja v zadnjega pol stoletja. Nakazane so poglavitne razlike med tradicionalno prevodno refleksijo – v kateri sta zavzemala osrednje mesto dihotomija med dobesednim in svobodnim prevajanjem in vprašanje o tem, ali je prevedljivost med naravnimi jeziki sploh mogoča – in sodobno teorijo prevajanja funkcijske usmeritve, ki so pogojene prav s spremembami v jezikoslovni raziskovalni paradigmi. Ko je jezikoslovje začelo proučevati poleg jezikovnega sistema tudi jezikovno rabo in s tem besedilno delovanje jezika v realnih komunikacijskih situacijah, so postala raziskovalno relevantna tudi vprašanja o prevodih kot besedilih oz., natančneje, o značilnostih in zakonitostih njihovega tvorjenja in funkcioniranja, medtem ko so se z nove perspektive problemi tradicionalne prevodne refleksije, kakršna sta omenjena dva, izkazali za povsem obrobne in so zadobili le relativno, predvsem hevristično in razlagalno vrednost. Članek se zaključi z razmišljanjem o razmerju med jezikoslovjem in prevodnim raziskovanjem, pri čemer je slednje umeščeno v okvir široko zasnovane vede o besedilih.