# THE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH IN TRANSLATION

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## 1. Development in Translation Studies

Translation Studies underwent considerable changes during the past years. The scholarly interest shifted from a description of language differences to the social role of translation in the literary context. At first, translation was defined as an inter-linguistic communication process with code-switching, so that it was seen merely as an exchange of source language material by target language material (Catford 1965; Kade 1968). Contrastive linguistics describes relationships of correspondences between languages. However, the situation is not as simple as that.

Later the scientific focus turned to text linguistics and pragmatics, as it became clear that a text is not only an interconnection of semiotic signs, but it contains also aspects from the situation and intention of an author. Comparative literature studied the effects of translations in a target culture and described various changes, shifts and adaptations for external reasons to be found in translations (Toury 1995; Bassnett 1991; Lefevere 1992). This is not a translation theory in the traditional sense but Descriptive Translation Studies. The basic approach is empirical corpus analysis.

As translations are being done by individuals, there is also a cognitive analysis of the way of thinking of those individuals called translators. Tests are being made and think-aloud protocols are written to find out how creative solutions are found (Kußmaul 1995). This again is not a theory of text production but a description of how translators are thinking, whether this is good or bad. A didactic learning effect is seen in the critical discussion of the results, however without categories of evaluation. The interest is in analyzing the origination of creative formulations that are structurally different from the source text.

As translation is more than a mere linguistic transfer, and as there should also be evaluation criteria regarding the adequacy of formulations, the question of

the translation purpose has been raised. The Functional Translation Theory or Skopos Theory maintains that the general guideline of translating is its purpose, the question for whom and to which objective we are translating (Vermeer 1996). A translation must be adequate for the addressees and the intended function, and this coherence is much more important than any similarity to the source text. Translation is purposeful text production.

It has become clear meanwhile that translating as a human activity plays an essential role in human communication, and it is not only determined by inter-linguistic factors. Translation is the work done by a translator who reformulates the message first understood from an original text. The problem of understanding, however, is not seen in the Skopos Theory; it is simply accepted as a matter of fact. It is said: "A translation is adequate, when it functions" (Hönig 1995: 74). This proposition is too unspecific for the foundation of a translation theory.

## 2. Discourse analysis

First of all there should be an investigation into the matter of discourse. The question should be raised whether understanding regards oral or written communication. This question is relevant, as there is a significant difference between interpreting as an oral transfer of speech heard, and translation as a written presentation of written texts in intercultural communication. Unfortunately this difference is at present not sufficiently seen, let alone made a subject of discussion in cognitive studies. While in speech acts with a shared presence of speaker and audience, speakers may negotiate their text representations with other speakers and listeners; in written texts the identification of a specific object from a visual scene is one of the most important comprehension tasks.

According to Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (1986), communication depends on the principle of relevance in that speakers negotiate their interpretations through an optimization of means and resources. Interpretation of utterances works by the reduction of mental models to minimally relevant schemata, from which information emerges that appears maximally new for the audience. The underlying basic cognitive strategy of all human behavior is the strategy of selecting the most plausible assumption out of the present cognitive environment. This fact results from the general principle that people will try to spend as little as possible cognitive processing effort on supplying contextual information. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986: 15) the crucial mental faculty that enables human beings to communicate with one another is the ability to draw inferences from people's behavior. Relevance Theory applies to "ostensive-inferential communication making manifest to an audience one's informative intention" (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 54). To gain maximally new information, there is the requirement "that the outcome of an act of communication has to modify some previously held assumptions in order to be found rewarding" (Gutt 2000:

28). However, this functions only in oral direct communication, when the speaker and hearer are both present and share the same context of the utterance.

The approach in understanding a written text is totally different, as hermeneutics has shown. It is a great defect of Gutt's attempt to transfer the relevance theory on translation, thinking that it would replace any other general translation theory (Gutt 2000: vii). All over Gutt's work we read about "text, utterance, speaker, author, hearer, reader" etc. The considerable difference regarding cognitive strategies in hearing or reading is not even seen. Relevance Theory cannot simply be applied on inter-lingual communication as such, if this is meant to include text translation as well.

Texts carry messages from authors, but they have lost the direct stimulus character of utterances. Thus they are open to various interpretations, and the readers have to reflect their understanding dialectically, as understanding is not a matter of fact. There is no partner to negotiate the sense, but contrary to the utterance, the text remains present for repeated reading. Initial inference of supposedly relevant information may later be changed by the whole of the text and prove inadequate. Both the Skopos Theory and the Relevance Theory are based on the analysis of oral communication and neglect the problem of understanding of a written text.

What is the translator's role? He or she has the responsibility to present a message received from a text to target culture readers, so that they can understand it and interpret it in their own interest. It's not the translator's task to interpret it already for them, and to change and adapt it, so that it might be more adequate for them. As in reading an original text, it's the reader who decides whether this is acceptable or not.

The problem in translation is, that the translator is faced with an unknown text, maybe from a strange culture or with a specific domain of specialist communication (see legal or medicine texts), and s/he has to produce a design-text for target readers who again mostly are not among his or her social group, see poetry readers or specialists. So there is a double binding to an original message and to target reader expectations. To both of them the unprofessional translators may fail. Therefore their orientation in the world and their textual approach must be made the subject of translation studies.

## 3. The hermeneutic problem in history

This is the field of hermeneutics. Why is it relevant here? Instead of constantly describing what we can observe, or instead of designing an objective model of translation, we should revolve our perspective and ask, from the translator's view, what is my approach to a text? How can I understand that text in order to adapt it to target readers? Which are the criteria with which I may back up my translation? How can I say that this translation is better than that? It is hermeneutics that since long have been discussing the approach to world by man.

I would like to mention briefly some ideas that have historically determined the hermeneutic theory through ages. In antiquity the hermeneutic problem of understanding texts came up with oracles. The priest would interpret and explain what the god had expressed. This was relevant, as it determined the life of people. Later in medieval times, we had the allegoric interpretation of the Holy Scripture, as the bible has, in St. Augustine's interpretation, not only a literal meaning, but also an effect of salvation. This has to be grasped from the inner heart, and it was officially explained by the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

The real problem of understanding in our sense came up only at the beginning of modern age. With the invention of the printing press, gradually the role of the oral communication and the reading aloud of official texts were lost, in favor of reading printed texts, which now were separated from their original situation. Such texts are no longer easily understandable since all the metalinguistic signs of speech are missing. Modern hermeneutics therefore asked for rules to indicate, how a book can be understood in the same way by various individual readers. The key word is "application for life", and there is the distinction between pure literature you may read for pleasure, and authoritative texts like laws or church dogmatics, that must have a clear sense as they direct the life of people.

As long as the Catholic church could determine the only Christian doctrine, all this was no problem. With Reformation and Martin Luther in the 16th century the claim originated that the believers themselves read and understand the bible. This problem was not solved by Luther himself, he applied to the Holy Spirit to guide him rightly. It took about three hundred years to define a modern hermeneutic theory.

In the time of Enlightenment in the 17th century, understanding was not seen as a problem. Reason and method can find the truth (Descartes). Thinking is independent, and the language serves only to express one's thoughts. Logical reasoning looks for a "true sense" contrary to a wrong one, rather than the "truth of this sense". Methodology and empirism is in the focus of research, and this is the scientific model of analysis until today. Text analysis, corpus studies and procedural tests are designed in order to determine people's understanding.

Totally different is the view of the idealistic thinking in the 18th century. Truth is seen to be exclusively found in oneself, language is closely linked to thought, and culture determines people's ideas. There is great interest in literature and poetry, as here the idealistic features are best expressed. We find a trace of that again in the present intercultural debate. There translation is seen as an inter-cultural transfer, as "a kind of journey, from one point in time and space to another, a textual journey that a traveler may undertake in reality"(Bassnett 2000: 106). The boat that loaded a message and carries it across the sea is an old metaphor for translation, but is it really adequate?

## 4. Modern philosophical hermeneutic approach

At this point, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), a German theologian and philosopher, has brought some very important ideas into the discussion. He argued, that neither the logical reasoning nor the individualistic evidence is a proof for the security of truth in debating about language.

Language includes aspects of both, of objective features in grammar and words that unite all in a cultural community, and subjective features as language is created and developed by individual utterances of people. Both aspects shall never be separated from each other, they can only be seen in a more or less clear emergence. Any contrastive grammar will only grasp one half of a language reality. And individual assurance of having understood rightly may be qualified by the limits of subjectivity, and functional translations according to Skopos Theory often are subjective interpretations of the source text.

Truth is never found "as such", neither objectively by methodology, nor subjectively by evidence, but only dialectically in a relation to history. Any meaning of words, any culture-specific understanding of an object, any scientific method is never absolute. It changes in history, truth can only be gained by discussion with other people. Truth is only shared. When there is a group of people for instance discussing a problem, they might after a while find a solution, gain the same opinion, they share their truth. Now somebody else comes in and has a different view on the facts, and the whole procedure begins again. This is the reason why we have so many books in our libraries. Books represent the dialectic discussion on so-called truth.

Now Schleiermacher (1838 [1977]) argues, that understanding is never automatic, it must be dialectically questioned and justified. So he sees the need to find rules of interpretation, "hermeneutics and critique". In order to back up one's understanding of a text and to explain its meaning, Schleiermacher establishes several antinomies alternating in a kind of a "circle of understanding". Nonetheless hermeneutics is art, since these "rules of understanding" have no recipe of their application, they are applied intuitively.

–   There is a circle of understanding between the whole of the text and the single element in it. Both determine each other and are not well understood separately. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, I call that *Übersummativität*, over-summary quality (Stolze 2002).
–   There is a circle between constitution and effect of the text. The author might have had other intentions than are visible from the text at first view.
–   There is a circle between primary and secondary text features. What was focused by the author, for instance with subtitles? The interpreter or translator should pay attention to that.

– There is a circle between the individual text form and the analogy to other similar text genres. Good understanding will do the comparisons. Schleiermacher has already outlined, two hundred years ago, many ideas of what later on text linguistics has methodically developed.

However, hermeneutics is by no means only a collection of rules for text analysis. This was only the beginning. It is true that in the late 19th century, Wilhelm Dilthey had conceived a methodology of humanities according to the then prevalent scientific model, but it was too dependent from the individual history.

## 5. The hermeneutic circle

In the 20th century Martin Heidegger brought a new direction into the philosophical discourse. Heidegger raises the question about the "significance of existence" (1927 [1993]: 37), and thus turns the perspective from understanding something to understanding oneself. The sense of human existence is being expressed and understood through language. The world appears to the subject as a meaningful entity. Understanding is an act of giving sense, and this depends on the individual's present situation. There is never a pure, clean objective understanding, but it is determined by one's own perspective, one's amount of knowledge given. Simple example: when I hear for the first time a lecture on, say, biochemical analysis, or Hindu belief in India, or the Housing Act in Apartheid South Africa – I will not understand it, there is no basis. Later, when I have learnt something by contact, explanation, etc. it will be different and my understanding of strange facts will vary.

This is called by Heidegger the "hermeneutic circle", and it must not be mistaken for the "circle of understanding" as described by Schleiermacher. Truth is not found in the words themselves, as Linguistics would mean, but it is behind the words, and it includes myself. This requires an openness for listening to what is meant with a certain proposition.

This so-called ontological turn in philosophy by the early Heidegger has been further developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960). Gadamer says that comprehensible existence is constituted in language. Language is not only a means of communication to express your thoughts, language creates sense. This kind of language philosophy is against all fixed concepts. Who wants to understand, rather has to look behind the words on the intentions and messages of people.

Hermeneutics is always interested in social ethical interrelationship. Not the analysis of objects is important, but the motivation of our activity and the understanding of others, and this changes constantly. There is the principle of effective history. The experience of history as a critical appropriation of a people's tradition is also the basis of cultural existence. There is no free autonomous existence, we all live in traditions, that are present in our language, and in our minds they determine our understanding of everything, they create truth that is not verifiable by scientific methods.

Texts as messages are growing, evolving their sense by any novel interpretation. All affirmations among people have a motivation, and that is what we have to find out. You can make this experience, when you read your own papers or translations some weeks or months later: they will appear deviating to you, because meanwhile you have learnt something.

The point is not a description of any "hermeneutic truth", but the question of an individual: How can I understand? Gadamer sees understanding as a dialogue with the text. In reading it, there is a learning process and finally this leads to the famous "melting of horizons" between the understanding person with its relevant hermeneutic knowledge and the text. In understanding I get a share in the text's meaning.

Truth thus appears as a disclosure of sense like an experience, as evidence. Hermeneutics tries to explore, how an individual can understand, it does not give a model how truth might be logically constituted. In this sense, understanding the truth of a text is never fixed, it is a dynamic process, as we all are constantly learning. In order to make this experience, it needs an attitude of openness, of receptivity towards the text. What I translate is what I have understood. Understanding a text is a cognitive phenomenon, a translation is linked to the original by its mental representation.

## 6. The translator's approach

This concept of understanding is relevant for translation. Translation is a human activity, and it means searching words for the text first understood. So far we have talked of translation as doing a "transfer" (Reiß and Vermeer 1984: 23). There has been extensive discussion about cultural differences, source and target text authors and readers, text norms etc.

In the hermeneutic theory of a melting of horizons there is no separation between source and target text. The translator has a share in the message and just utters, reproduces it again. Any well grasped message forms a cognitive representation that can be presented again in another language. There is no transfer, since the message is the same, it is shared by the text and the understanding translator, and later on by the reader.

A very common concept of translation states a simple choice: translation would mean either to bring the reader to the text or the strange text to the reader (Bassnett 2000: 106). To my opinion, this is a totally wrong view. I would like to revolve the horizontal concept of traveling between cultures and put it upside down. Translators as those persons doing the translations are not navigating one sea of words, they rather look at a message. They receive a message by reading a text, and then they will represent this message in the other language so that others also can receive and maybe even interpret it in their own interest.

The translation is neither an inter-lingual transfer nor a linguistic deduction from the source text. In the hermeneutic circle the problem of understanding is not so much the source text structure than the knowledge base given in the translator himself. The usual linguistic approach has always been the analysis of

words – in texts – as a genre – in a situation – in a culture.

This should be reversed. The translator does not analyze linguistic objects, he or she is confronted with

cultures – in a discourse field – as texts - with words – carrying sense.

Translators as the actors of translation are individual human beings integrated in their own culture and having knowledge (through language, social science, practical experience, learning of facts) of the other culture. Both cultures as a system of knowledge are being in contact within his or her mind, in other words: the translator's mind is reaching out into different cultures and various fields of scientific knowledge. So the translator is not in between the cultures, but has a share in both, and may be even part of them. The cultures are no homogeneous entities, but are composed of various sociolects from different discourse fields.

The message, the content of the original text to be translated is the same in both languages. Both versions and their truth are present in the translator's mind. Translators should reflect about the knowledge they dispose of. This will arouse the relevant knowledge base, as within the hermeneutic circle there is no independent understanding. Without a bit of previous knowledge I simply will understand nothing.

## 7. Translatoric reading

There is a threefold modality of perceiving texts.

(1)   Individuality: a text is not only an example of a certain genre or text type, every text is an individual entity with a special message to be comprehend and translated.

(2)   Oversummativity: the text is understood as a whole where the meaning is more than the addition of words. This is also an argument for the fact that we should not begin translation with an analysis of words, but by reading the whole text.

(3)   Multiperspectivity: texts are never one-dimensional, therefore various persons may have a slightly different understanding of them and produce various translations. This is trivial, but we can no longer naively say, you must just produce a "functional translation" before the understanding

problem has not been discussed. Rather, we should try to apply a broader perspective.

What we need is "translatoric reading" (Stolze 2002: 170). This means to position the text in its original motivation, to look at the context of culture, domains and speakers' group. We will have to read the text as a whole. The translator's knowledge base is constantly growing. Initially we will only get an individual understanding of a text and need further corresponding research, later the professional translator will have more routine and be able to infer the relevant knowledge right from the beginning.

Before we translate, we must understand the text. The first step is not a translation commission or any analysis of the target situation. First I must know, what I want to say in that target situation. Otherwise I would have a selective reading of that text, limiting my understanding. Only when I have got an idea of that text I may decide which features should be kept in the translation, and what might be defective or irrelevant. I will have to identify with the message conceived and try to formulate it in the translation as if it were an original text. There is no transfer, but a presentation, like on stage.

## 8. Autopoietic formulation

The translator's task is to create a presence for the message. The text is represented cognitively in a schematic form in the translator's mind. From there it shall find its way through to target language forms. This is an intuitive act, and it is called *autopoiesis*, an autonomous creation out of something else (the message given). The translation is not deducted directly from the source text structures, but the interaction with already memorized knowledge leads to an intuitive apparition of target language words and formulations wherein this message is "present." Thinking is a kind of internal speaking. That process is intuitive, it cannot be determined, controlled, operationalized as such. *Autopoiesis* is an intrinsic feature of living systems, such as human beings, when they act as translators. The original text is made "present"; it is represented for the target readers.

This process is evolutionary. You search for the words, you know very well what you want to say, but first it does not come out. Sometimes you try it several times. This process of creativity in language is in each stage a sketch, every correction is again a sketch. We speak of successful or congenial translation, and if this does not happen, we will have to try again. Sometimes it helps to attempt a visual representation of the subject to be formulated in translation. At this point the Scenes-and-Frames Theory is very useful (Fillmore 1977) . The input of linguistic frames arouses certain scenes which tend to associate other frames.

The relationship between the source and target language text is not one of linguistic or structural equivalence. In a translation critique you might find many differences. The similarity is in the content as a whole, since both texts have

their sharing in the one truth, present in the translator's mind. Maybe one should give up the traditional concept of "source text" and "target text" and rather speak of "original" and "translation" as two different versions of the same message.

## 9. Quality evaluation categories

The formulation is the real problem in translation. As this is an intuitive draft, we need valuable evaluation criteria in order to back up our decision. For this purpose of quality assurance we may apply linguistic categories, because a translation in the last instance is a linguistic formulation of ideas. The first step is the translatoric reading as a positioning of the text in its culture, discourse field and central concepts. This determines decisively any other strategy adopted by the translator. His or her activity will be different according to the findings, whether one has to translate an old or a modern text, literature, advertisement, or a technical text. Irrelevant strategies will be eliminated already now.

The quality evaluation categories as aspects to be observed by a sensible translator can be presented in a model:

Figure 1.

| Positioning of text | Literature | Specialist texts |
|---|---|---|
| Culture | people, country | area of research and work (science, humanities) |
| Discourse field | social background and field of communication | discipline and domain |
| Concepts | cultural associations, key words | scientific terminological conceptualization (definition/deduction vs. convention/interpretation) |

Figure 2.

| Translatoric categories | General language | Language for Special Purposes (LSP) |
|---|---|---|
| Semantics | isotopy, titles, compatibility, semantic axes, intertextuality | equivalence of terminology, specification of concepts, word compounding |
| Text function | style, discourse markers, speaker's perspective, tense | genre norms, macrostructure, addressees |
| Predicative mode | idioms, mood, focusing, quotations | speech acts, phraseology, passive voice |
| Stylistics | rhetorical means, rhyme, metaphors, alliteration | functional style, standard formulae, fixed components, controlled language |
| Form | rhythm, prosody, text shape, pictures, verse order | illustrations, layout, script fonts |

What are our own knowledge structures? Are we able to understand the text? We ask regarding the *culture*: which country, which people, or in specialist communication which area of research and work: science or humanities, is visible from that text? The *discourse field* is decisive. We should know about the problems of specialist texts, that there are various disciplines with different domains and that they require specific knowledge. In general language texts, we should observe that the social place of a group and the background of the people as a culture is no homogeneous entity. The thinking of people reflects in the *concepts*. We should know about cultural associations and keywords, whilst in specialist communication there is the difference in conceptualization between exact definitions and systemic deduction in science, and academic convention and interpretation in humanities (Stolze 1999: 46). Once we have grasped an introductory overall understanding of the text by its positioning on the basis of our own knowledge, we can apply translatoric categories for more precision in the translation.

A key to finding adequate formulations is the *subject* treated which is found in central word fields. It is often already indicated in the title. A coherent text normally has a theme appearing in a network of semantic relations we call isotopy. Their description provides the translator with a framework of context-specific semantic strategies for explaining the meaning in a text. A first step could be to define a word field and to look for corresponding lexemes in the target language to be used as a formulation potential. Semantic compatibility within collocations is important to preserve the idiomatic coherence of a text.

In communication for specific purposes the equivalence and persistence of terminology is crucial. One should observe the special forms of terminological word compounding, as scientific concepts are being expressed in a special frame. In humanities, the conceptual terms often come from general language words that carry a specification of concept within the respective domain.

There should also be observed the *text function*, as it is part of the author's intention to be presented in translation. It shows in the particular style of the text that characterizes its author. Discourse markers structure that message, the speaker's perspective (*I, we, anonymous one*) should always be recognized, as well as the tense. Only then you may decide whether this is relevant for translation or not. In LSP texts we have certain genres. A genre represents a cognitive writing model for the message to be used in the translation. Translators should have knowledge about certain macrostructures, as they correspond to the addressees' reading expectations.

Each text also shows a certain *predicative mode*. There are idioms and phrases that should be adequate in the target text, mood and focusing tell us something about what was important to the author and what not. Quotations in literature should be observed and checked carefully. In LSP texts we observe speech acts to indicate directives or legal obligations, and terminological phraseology. Passive voice often indicates official texts.

The translatoric category of *stylistics* points out to rhetorical means like expressive forms in literary texts or publicity, rhymes, metaphors, alliteration etc. In poetic texts all those forms are expressly set, they should not be neglected. In LSP texts we have a special functional style, standard formulae and fixed text components according to the genre, sometimes even controlled language with its rules.

Finally the *form* of the text plays a role. In concrete poetry for instance we may see the text arranged in a special shape, there is rhythm, prosody, verse order, and even pictures. The translator will have to consider what can be preserved in translation. In LSP texts the relation to illustrations and the layout requirements often are a special translation problem. Script fonts have different appeal in various cultures.

## 10. Conclusion

In the revision of an initial translation draft, all the mentioned categories play an important role. The translator will have to decide in each case which aspect is prevalent. From this model of the quality assessment categories we can see that the positioning of a text into its culture, discourse field and relevant concepts is part of the understanding, the phase of receptivity. The translatoric categories regarding semantics, text function, predicative mode, stylistics and form are part of the formulation, the phase of text production.

The translator's overall hermeneutic approach to texts, whether literature or specialist texts is the same. However, there are cognitive differences. Literature is situated in a society with its cultural aspects and linguistic creativity. It exploits the full potential of the language. Specialist communication on the other hand is situated in a certain area of work and research within a domain and discipline including a particular scientific way of conceptualization. This makes texts more difficult to understand, as we have to do research and learn about domain specifics. LSP texts on the side of translatoric categories then present a certain restriction of the linguistic potential. Only some particular functional forms in word compounding, genre structures, phraseology, functional style are being used. Therefore the mentioned categories appear here in their concretized form. This also makes translation easier, as there are several norms that may become a routine. In the case of literary texts however, there is the requirement of creativity, vision and rhythmic freedom in language. The translator needs courage and confidence in his or her idiomatic proficiency.

In conclusion we might say: Translation is a responsible presentation of a message understood from a text. Only if there is responsibility in the professional translator, the reader will accept the translation as an adequate text. On grounds of the historical rooting of all human interpretation and activity, the goal of translation can only be reached in optimal, never in an absolute way. Otherwise automatic translation with adapted methods would be the solution.

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