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The Changing Position of "the Translator" in Research and in Practice

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the position occupied by "the translator" in translation theory and practice. A synthesis of some general trends in translation theory is summed up before taking a closer look at the translator's position in practice. Toury (1984) criticised translation theory for assigning the translator a rather parasitic position while intuitively it would seem to make more sense to assume him/her to occupy a rather central role in translation. Since then the translator has received more attention in translation studies. Functional translation theory puts a great deal of emphasis on the translator as the central decision-maker. Empirical studies into the translation process focus on the translator as the processor and producer of texts. Also, research on the sociology of translation concentrates on various aspects of translators' work, thus highlighting their status. Meanwhile, the language industry, one of the largest employers of translators today, seems to be tempted to push the translator to the margins. Similar developments seem to affect the field of audio-visual translation as well. I will discuss these opposite trends and developments as well as their potential effects. The role of translation researchers and educators in analysing, reporting and influencing these developments will also be touched upon. Finally, more emphasis on translation political research is recommended.

1. The Field of Translation Studies

Thinking about the potential new horizons in Translation Studies (TS),

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which was the theme of the 2006 Hong Kong conference, made me (re-)focus on the central agent in the translation process, the translator, whose role and position in theory and practice have varied over time. In 1984, Gideon Toury criticised linguistically-oriented translation theory for assigning the translator a rather parasitic position. Since then, with the introduction of new theoretical approaches and new fields of research in TS, the situation has improved. The demand for translation has also increased. Paradoxically, this new development seems to have led to the marginalisation of translators. In this paper I shall take a cursory retrospective look at some of the developments in translation theory and practice. The focus is on the position that "the translator" occupies in research or on the translation market, and how that position has changed. The point of view reflects my own research interests, i.e., translation process analysis, translation technology, and audio-visual translation.

It seems likely that Toury's (1984) criticism of linguistically-oriented translation theories stemmed partly from the expanded view of the field of Translation Studies which had been outlined by James S. Holmes in 1972/1988. Thus, Holmes' (1972/1988) map of Translation Studies will be helpful for us to navigate this field of study. The map extended far beyond the then traditional realm of translation theory, which relied mainly on linguistics or literary theory. Citing Werner Koller's (1971) definition, Holmes argued that TS should include "all research activities taking the phenomena of translating and translation as their basis or focus" (Holmes 1972/1988: 71). Thus, Holmes' approach was clearly multi- or interdisciplinary.

Holmes divides TS into "pure" and applied research. Pure research is further divided into descriptive and theoretical TS. According to Holmes (1972/1988: 71–72), descriptive TS is "the branch of the discipline which constantly maintains the closest contact with the empirical phenomena under study". Theoretical TS, in turn, is interested "in using the results of descriptive translation studies, in combination with the information available from related fields and disciplines, to evolve principles, theories, and models which will serve to explain and predict what translating and translations are and will be" (Holmes 1972/1988: 73). Both descriptive and theoretical TS are further branched out into sub-categories. Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) has three main branches: product-oriented, process-oriented, and function-oriented. Product-oriented DTS focuses on the description of existing translations, whereas process-oriented DTS investigates "the process or act of translation itself" by carrying out, for

example, "systematic investigations under laboratory conditions". This is also referred to as translation psychology. Function-oriented DTS, in turn, focuses on describing the function of translations "in the recipient socio-cultural situation" (Holmes 1972/1988: 72); it is also called translation sociology. Finally, applied translation research comprises translation didactics, translation aids, translation criticism, and translation policy.

Naturally, all the branches of Translation Studies should be inter-connected and inter-dependent, so that, for example, descriptions of translational phenomena contribute to the theories, and every piece of descriptive research is guided by one theory or another (Holmes 1972/1988: 71–78). Table 1 below shows a summary of Holmes' categories.

Table 1. Holmes' (1972/1988) classification of Translation Studies

Theoretical TS	Descriptive TS	Applied TS
(1) general theory	(1) product-oriented	(1) translation didactics
(2) partial theories	(2) process-oriented	(2) translation criticism
	(3) function-oriented	(3) translation aids
		(4) translation policy

Holmes' map will serve as a point of orientation in this paper when we look at where the translator is located in TS.

2. Theory: The Translator at the Centre

In traditional translation theory, the translator was always present, albeit often implicitly. Traditional translation theory refers here to the scholarly writings which had accompanied translations for centuries before systematic translation research emerged. Traditional translation theory consisted of the analyses and recommendations which translators, authors, philosophers, and language scholars put forward on the basis of observing mainly their own translation processes and preferences. Traditional theory thus reflected the translator's thinking. The explicit focus, however, tended to be on texts and their linguistic features and artistic means.

Two examples illustrate this, taken from Lefevere's (1992) sourcebook. The first example is from Antoine Houdar de la Motte's (1672–1731) foreword (translated by Lefevere) to his translation of the *Iliad*. This excerpt shows how the translator analyses and justifies his way of translating, which reflects his "subjective translation theory" (Tirkkonen-Condit and Laukkanen 1996), which allows the translator to

assume the role of an original author, to cut text, to reorganise "the way matters were set forth", and to invent new material. The translator is the central agent here and actively involved in the process of translating, even though the text concentrates on reporting the textual operations the translator has deemed appropriate.

> I have followed those parts of the *Iliad* that seemed to me worth keeping, and I have taken the liberty of changing whatever I thought disagreeable. I am a translator in many parts and original author in many others. — I did cut out whole books, I did change the way matters were set forth, and I have even invented new material. — I have reduced the twenty-four books of the *Iliad* to twelve, which are even shorter than Homer's. At first sight you might think that this could only be done at the expense of many important elements …

The second example illustrates the type of theoretical writing which aims at giving instructions to translators. It also reflects a different kind of theory of translation. This excerpt is from Charles Batteux's (1713–1780) essay *Principes de la littérature* (translated by Lefevere).

> The first principle of translation is that you must use all stylistic features present in the original when both languages are amenable to this. You must never tamper with the order of things, whether facts or arguments, since that order is the same in all languages and since it is tied to human nature, not the particular genius of different nations …

The "voice" here is that of a literary scholar who addresses the translator directly and gives explicit instructions on how to translate. Interestingly, the writer seems to rely on a theory of universal language or logic of thought which precludes the possibility of rearranging the "order of things" — a clear deviation from the translator's liberal views expressed by de la Motte above.

Next we will jump over a few centuries into the 1960s to the time when traditional theorising had developed into more rigorous and systematic research. Early research into translation tended to rely on either linguistics or literary theory, which seems like the natural habitat for the study of translation. As mentioned, this orientation received criticism as well. Toury (1984) criticised linguistically-oriented theories of translation of assigning the translator a rather parasitic position in the translation process. In such theories, translations were often analysed and assessed in terms of things happening to texts or in terms of comparing the linguistic devices available in translation (i.e., contrastive linguistics) with little mention of the agent responsible for these things happening.

Although translations can be legitimately studied as texts or as the result of linguistic operations, the following excerpts from Catford's (1965) linguistic theory of translation illustrate the cause of Toury's criticism. Catford (1965: 20; emphasis added) defines translation as "the *replacement* of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)". Nominalisations (e.g., "replacement" here) are a widely used means of making the actor in the process fade into the background, intentionally or unintentionally. The same absence of the actor shows in the following quote, in which Catford introduces his discussion of translation shifts (1965: 73; emphasis added).

> "Having reviewed all types of restricted translation we return, now, to general discussion; in particular, to a brief systematic survey of some of the *changes or 'shifts' which occur* in translation. By 'shifts' we mean *departures from* formal correspondence in the *process of going from the SL to the TL*. Two major *types of 'shift' occur*: …"

This excerpt is a typical example of seeing translation as something that happens to texts: "shifts occur" in translation, and the translator who is responsible for making these shifts occur, is ignored. In the early 1980s, the expansion of TS envisioned by Holmes was in progress and new theoretical approaches emerged, which placed the translator in a more central position. Two examples will be mentioned here to illustrate the shift in emphasis, Skopos theory and process-oriented research.

Skopos theory (Reiss and Vermeer 1984) and its successor functional translation theory (e.g., Nord 1991) place a great deal of emphasis on the translator as the central decision-maker in the translation process, which marks a shift away from texts and language. Drawing on theories in other disciplines, such as activity theory, functional translation theory aims at a comprehensive picture of what happens in translation processes in the wider sense, including the commissioner, the translator, and the recipient, and every activity they engage in. Nord (e.g., 1991) wraps up the process in the concept of *loyalty*, which is a moral principle postulating that the translator is responsible for successful communication to all parties involved, including the source text (ST) sender, the commissioner of the translation task, as well as the target text (TT) recipient.

The 1980s also witnessed the emergence of empirical studies into the translation process in the narrower sense, i.e., the process starting from the source text and resulting in a target text (e.g., Krings 1986, Gerloff 1988, Lörscher 1991, Séguinot 1989, Jääskeläinen and Tirkkonen-Condit 1991).

Process studies focus on the translator as the processor (i.e., interpreter and producer) of texts. The data collection methods were first borrowed from psychology, most notably think-aloud protocols (TAPs). Thinking aloud has been used in cognitive psychology to study a variety of tasks: chess, problem-solving tasks, writing, etc. In a nutshell, thinking aloud means asking people to externalise their thoughts and emotions while performing a task. Ideally, the resulting verbalisations should reflect the subject's thinking in a spontaneous and unedited form. In the handbook of verbal reports as data, Ericsson and Simon (1984/1993) argue that thinking aloud does not in any way alter the subject's processing, except for a slight slowing-down effect. However, research into translating points to potential sources of interference; unfortunately, with the exception of Jakobsen (2003), these have not been systematically investigated. Jakobsen's findings indicate that thinking aloud makes translators work with smaller chunks of text, which might result in less coherent target texts, for example. In fact, since the think-aloud experiments in cognitive psychology take place in monolingual and mono-cultural settings, it seems likely that a large-scale methodological survey with different language pairs and cultures as well as manipulated settings might offer interesting findings to cognitive psychologists. Translation processes have also been studied by using joint translating (translating in pairs or in small groups; e.g., House 1988, Kussmaul 1995). Most recently, research software (e.g., *Translog*; Jakobsen 1999) for recording the translator's keyboard activities, including pauses, have been designed. These provide "hard", quantitative data which can be supplemented by verbalisations (thinking aloud or retrospection).

In terms of data analysis, process-oriented studies represent a wide variety of theoretical approaches, methods, and traditions (see e.g., Jääskeläinen 1999, 2002). One of the main findings (or supportive research evidence of what we have suspected all along) of process-oriented research is highlighting the complexity of translating (see also de Groot 2000). Translators engage in a variety of problem-solving and decision-making activities, some of which may, with growing expertise, become to some extent automated. On the other hand, research has also identified a "translation-does-not-get-easier" phenomenon (Gerloff 1988, Jääskeläinen 1999, Sirén and Hakkarainen 2002), which refers to translators' increasing sensitivity to potential problems and the ability to identify more complex and intricate problems in translation tasks.

The nature of "translation expertise" (Shreve 2006) has received

increasing attention in process studies. There is accumulating evidence that translation expertise exhibits similar features to those identified in experts in other fields, such as law or medicine. For example, Sirén and Hakkarainen (2002) carried out a TAPs study in which the subjects were four translation experts and two non-experts. Two content domains, literature and medicine, were chosen for the study. In the experiment, each of the subjects translated two texts, one in each domain. Two of the translation experts were specialised in literary translation, two in translation of medical/scientific texts, and the non-experts in translation were physicians, i.e., experts in medicine. The findings provide evidence of expertise being domain-specific: literary translators are not necessarily good at translating medical texts, and vice versa. Furthermore, the non-experts found the translation tasks easier and they spent less time on performing the tasks than the translation experts. This offers support to the developmental hypothesis of translation competence, which starts from the blissfully ignorant state of the true novice (Jääskeläinen 1999).

Jakobsen (2005) provides converging evidence from two sets of data, *Translog* files and the accompanying TAPs, which allows the identification of features of translation expertise. Experts spend more time on initial orientation and end revision; they are capable of processing longer units or segments; and they have superior speed potential, materialising in instances of peak performance. All of these are features of expertise in other fields as well (cf. Chi et al. 1988, Shreve 2006). Jakobsen's findings also underline domain-specificity as a feature of translation expertise. Peak performance is possible in the domains in which the translator is specialised. While the identification of these elements of translation expertise might seem obvious to the people within the field, these findings represent a significant breakthrough in relation to the world outside Translation Studies, where translators are still too often seen as all-purpose code-switching machines with built-in dictionaries.

More recently, research on the functions of translations and translating, i.e., Holmes' (1972/1988) translation sociology, has also contributed to understanding the role of translation and translators in different societies at different times. For example, Paloposki (2002) accounts the case of Finland, where translations were used to create different varieties of written language and literature for the Finnish language in the 18th and 19th centuries (see also Jääskeläinen and

Kujamäki 2005). Currently, the sociology of translation also covers research which concentrates on various aspects of translators' work, thus highlighting their status in society (e.g., Koskinen 2000 discusses translating in the EU Commission). Translation sociology research illustrates the complexity of the networks which operate within the translation industry as well as the vital role that translation plays in many societies. In some studies, the role of the translator may be fairly implicit; on the other hand, translation sociology research which literally goes to the field focuses more explicitly on the translator. An example of this type of research is Koskinen's (forthcoming) study of EU translators, which takes an ethnographic approach. Koskinen observed Finnish EU translators at work and at home over lengthy periods of time. To describe her findings, Koskinen applies the "nexus model" proposed by Martin (2002) to study organisational cultures. The nexus model is based on accepting ambiguities and acknowledging plurality; Koskinen also describes it as "a contextualizing and situated way of observing". According to Koskinen (forthcoming; introduction):

> Instead of trying to fix a solid interpretation of the culture of a particular organisation, the nexus approach takes the organisation as its starting point and begins to chart the various points of identification and connection around it. In other words, it starts weaving a net of identifications.

In her study, Koskinen weaves the net of identifications around the group of Finnish translators working at the European Commission in Luxembourg. The translators are at the centre of the network.

Talking about the ways in which the social and the cultural manifest themselves in Translation Studies, Pym (2006: 4) sums up the current situation trend as follows:

> We might thus posit that, for some scholars and more particularly in some fields of research, the focus has shifted from texts to mediators [i.e., translators and interpreters]. Many of us are no longer stopping at the sociocultural dimensions of source and target texts. We would like to know more about who is doing the mediating, for whom, within what networks, and with what social effects

Although the expansion of TS into a genuinely interdisciplinary field of research is usually seen as a definite improvement, it has not been entirely unproblematic. In addition to those who believe that translation research should stick to its natural habitat, the expansion may be difficult for academic institutions to accommodate. Approving interdisciplinary

MA and PhD theses may cause problems for systems which rely on traditional disciplinary boundaries. Similarly, academic positions (professors, lecturers etc.) may be officially defined on the basis of traditional disciplines which might not readily recognise interdisciplinary research merits.

In sum, it is obvious that the emphasis in TS has shifted or, perhaps more accurately, the focus has expanded to include research on translators and various aspects of their behaviour and working conditions. Meanwhile, something else is happening in the translation industry.

3. Practice: the Translator Marginalised

After witnessing the translator firmly rooted at the centre of theory and research, let us take a look at what is happening on the translation market. One might assume that everything is going splendidly, as Simon points out, "translators are enjoying something of vogue in popular culture these days" (2006: 125). Simon mentions recent films, such as *The Interpreter* or *Lost in Translation*. In the Finnish translation scene, the Finnish translator of the Harry Potter books, Jaana Kapari, has attracted almost a cult following among her young readers. Globalisation and internationalisation together with the IT revolution and e.g., the explosion of the entertainment industry have increased the demand for translation. Some fairly recent figures illustrate the rate and volume of this growth. Austermühl (2005) reports that in 1998, the global market for translation was US$10 billion; in 2003 it was US$17.3 billion. In 2003, the global turnover for software localisation was US$6.3 billion. The GILT industry (globalisation — internationalisation — localisation — translation) is one of the largest employers of translators today in many parts of the world.

Despite the fact that global markets of software products depend on the localisation/translation of their products, the GILT industry seems to be tempted to push the translator to the margins. Austermühl's (2005) recent study shows that the GILT industry barely mentions translators in their own texts. Austermühl counted the occurrences of the word "translators" in the annual reports of three major multi-language vendors (MLVs i.e., companies which provide multilingual translation services): Bowne Global Solutions, Lionbridge, and SDL International. The result is disappointing, considering that we are dealing with companies whose business it is to provide translators' services. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Occurrences of "translators" in annual reports (Austermühl 2005)

MLV	Occurrences	Total pages
Bowne	4	112
Lionbridge	1	26
SDL	0	64

The situation seems to resemble the way in which Catford (1965), for example, talks about translation — the actual agent/actor is missing from the picture.

Similar developments can be identified in the field of audio-visual translation. The growth of the entertainment industry, together with the digitalisation of the media, have increased the demand for audio-visual translation. As a result, there are now increasing numbers of (multi-national) translation agencies specialising in audio-visual translation. In Finland, a few years ago the translation agencies' fierce competition for translation contracts resulted in a 60 per cent drop in translation fees. The reduced rates, in turn, resulted in the agencies providing strict instructions on how much time can be spent on a translation task. For example, a feature film was given 12 hours, while individual translation problems were allowed five minutes search-time on the Internet (Kynsijärvi, personal communication). Obviously such limitations cannot be controlled by any agency; however, faced with these limitations, the translator has a hard decision to make: whether to aspire for quality at his or her own expense or to produce the level of quality feasible in such circumstances.

Abdallah (2003) carried out a case study of freelance student translators working for one of the Finnish subtitling agencies. Interestingly — and ironically — the agency claimed to produce high-quality translations; in contrast, the students working for the agency felt frustrated in a situation in which they felt that they could not produce the kind of quality they had been educated to strive for. As a remedy, Abdallah suggests the creation of explicitly defined quality classifications, on which to base translation fees, ranging from draft translations for comprehension purposes to polished texts ready for publication. It seems unlikely that translators will be able to turn out products which would simultaneously meet the criteria of "good", "cheap" and "fast" — perhaps two out of three might be feasible (Chesterman 2005).

One cannot escape the impression that with the persistent failures of fully-automated machine translation, the aim is now to make human

translators work like translating machines. Another image which comes to mind is that of a translation sweat-shop: rows and rows of translators turning out translations at maximum speed (and minimum quality?). It is time to focus on the translator from a slightly different angle.

4. New Horizons

We need more research on the psychology and the sociology of translation to further clarify and illustrate the complexity and importance of translation. For example, evidence of translation expertise might help overcome the persistent misconception of translation as a parasitic by-product of language knowledge. However, considering the threats — and the promises — that our graduates will face when entering the labour market, we also need research into translation policies. This is indeed what Holmes had in mind when he designed his map of TS. His sub-field of applied translation studies includes research on translation policy, which he describes as follows:

> The task of the translation scholar in this area is to render *informed advice to others in defining the place and role of translators, translating, and translations in society at large*: such questions, for instance, as determining what works need to be translated in a given socio-cultural situation, *what the social and economic position of the translator is and should be*, or — what part translating should play in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. (Holmes 1972/1988: 77–78, emphasis added.)

To be able to give informed advice we need research findings on these questions. For example, the effects caused by translators' poor working conditions (available resources, level of pay-rates) in the field of audio-visual translation should be investigated further. Fortunately, translation sociology and translation policy are currently "hot" research topics, as evidenced by specialised conferences or sub-sections dedicated to these topics in recent TS events (see also Pym et al. 2006).

A research project is currently being planned at the University of Joensuu, which aims at addressing this problem by identifying the ways in which deviations from good subtitling practice affect viewers' reception of subtitles (Jääskeläinen 2006).[1] This will be done by showing informants both well-formed and manipulated subtitles, and measuring their responses at an unconscious level (using eye-movement cameras) as well as at the conscious level (using interviews and questionnaires). If

considerable negative effects on the consumers' viewing experiences can be identified, we will be able to recommend that the working conditions be improved. If there is little effect, perhaps qualified translators may have to direct their expertise to other purposes where they can fulfil their full potential.

As in the case of the previous expansions, here, too, it could be asked whether it makes any sense that TS research branches out to the translators' work situation — should that be left to the labour union activists or to sociologists? The problem with that scenario is that, on the one hand, research is not the main task of labour union activists and, furthermore, translators' arguments for their own case can easily be dismissed. On the other hand, most sociologists probably could not care less about what is going on in the translation industry. The TS community can hardly wait for somebody from the outside to become interested in their problems. The situation could be compared to the earlier situation in relation to translation process research: translation scholars did not wait for interested psychologists to start shedding light on the cognitive processes involved in translating (although luckily there are some, e.g., de Groot 2000) but started to expand their own research in the direction of psychology. Furthermore, particularly those of us who are also involved in translator training programmes might have some kind of moral obligation to be aware of and interested in what kind of market we are training our students for.

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Note

1. The reception study is a part of a larger research project. The other part utilises the YLE subtitling corpus which has been compiled as a joint effort by the University of Joensuu (Translation Studies, Savonlinna) and the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE. The corpus contains the subtitles broadcast by YLE in 1990–2005 and comprises about 100 million words.

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