

## THE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH IN TRANSLATION

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The process of translating is an intercultural activity enabling communication among people. The mediation of messages across language boundaries is carried out by translators as individuals with linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Translation Studies therefore develop and describe the translator's competence.

The basic principles of translation which seem to have the status of eternal truths, as Snell-Hornby (1992: 9) put it with reference to Alexander Tytler, "might be identified as follows: mastery of both source and target language, knowledge of the material, ease of style and an understanding of the author's message." These principles of translation, serving as an approximation of the translator's competence, point to the underlying priority in translation, i.e. the necessity of understanding a text prior to proceeding further. How is that understanding possible?

### **Hermeneutics as a reflected interpretation**

Any translation theory focusing on the translator's approach to their texts may be established with good reason against the background of hermeneutics which reflects the human interpretation of the world. Hermeneutics is the art of interpreting scripture, especially the Bible and explaining the understanding.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) initiated this philosophical inquiring into the general conditions of understanding. Hermeneutics is not only a method of interpretation, since a person's speech is not only part of a language community, but it is part of the individual's thinking as well. It is never absolutely identical in all minds and is subject to understanding. Nor can the interpretation of a text be separated from the interpretation of the language as such: it is reflected cognition. A linguistic and a psychological aspect thus come together in every text and its interpretation, as stated by Schleiermacher (1977: 77). That is why the meaning of a speech cannot be found isolated in linguistic structures that can be analyzed. Understanding must complete all interpretation. The adequate interpretation of any unfamiliar object, for instance a foreign language text to be translated, means to admit one's initial non-understanding. The interpreter has to reflect on his or her own thinking when dealing with other texts.

A neutral method of text-analysis in order to produce the meaning therefore is not adequate for objects of language, since interpretations are always dependent on the interpreter's personality and his or her cultural embedding. Any scientific result depends on the mode of experimental procedure. When a fisherman, after many years at sea, discovers the "law of ichthyology" and maintains that anything smaller than 5 inches in length is not a fish (since it escaped his net), this result does not verify reality but only his reduced view of it. Or when somebody sees a structure of crossed lines, a grid, someone else might see a surface in squares, another one sees points linked by lines. It is the viewer's perspective of things that determines understanding.

On the other hand, it is also true that the basis of communication is a common language. Here the interpretation is seen as a history of understanding (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). Every person lives within a specific cultural and language environment imparted with the mother tongue. We experience that repeated words do mean the same thing, more or less, such that we can understand each other. According to Gadamer (1960 : XVIII), understanding is not human behavior but his

very “mode of existence”. Life is mediated by language - we are growing into the universe of our mother tongue. In this vein, understanding implies entering a predetermined context of experience (Gadamer 1984: 31). But the encounter of my own thinking with that inherent in a text has to be regarded as consciousness of that situation in which two worlds blend (*Horizontverschmelzung*, Gadamer 1960: 289). The interpreter’s knowledge is enriched and modified by understanding the information in a text, like in a dialogue between two people, as he or she considers the linguistic text elements to determining the interpretation. In reading a text, a learning-process is initiated which influences the reader’s thinking. The reader’s background knowledge is activated and integrated with the new information found in the text. Hermeneutics requires consciousness of one’s own ideas in order to perceive the particular message of the text, which is not to be hidden behind subjective prejudices.

### **Preparing translation by holistic text interpretation**

The basic idea that each individual understanding should be critically reflected by means of linguistic description as well as consideration of the historic development of meaning was first applied to translation by Fritz Paepcke. Some of his various articles on the problem of translation, written between 1970 and 1985, are collected in the book *Im Übersetzen leben* (Living in translation). This title is a program. The translator lives in between two languages and cultures. He or she should be aware of this condition, of one’s own role as a mediator of messages, and the contacts with two language worlds. Thus “to live in translation means to be exposed to the language and its use. Theory and practice are related to each other. Practice without theory is an empty function, but theory without practice is blind terminology” (Paepcke 1986: XV; my translation R.St.).

While others were analyzing the transfer process between a source language (SL) text and a target language (TL) text in order to classify

relationships of equivalence and rules for didactic operationalisation (Wilss 1982), Paepcke was convinced that a translation is based on the understanding of the text.

Each text is seen as an individual entity, an integral whole and a complex structure. It is possible to find a meaning when you look at the text as a whole entity. This is like looking up from a single tree to see the forest, and then back again. Knowing the character of the forest might improve one's understanding of the disease that afflicts individual trees. The difference between a translational approach searching for equivalences on the word and sentence level, and a view of the text as a whole was explained by Stolze (1982): *Grundlagen der Textübersetzung* (Fundamentals of translating texts).

In translation the text should allow a view to the outside situation. And additional information on the background enhances the comprehensibility of that text. With respect to the linguistic structure, reading the text as a whole may help to better understand certain features, which at first glance are difficult to understand. Since the meaning of the whole text is developed within that text itself and often clarified by the end, we can read and reread until we have a satisfying understanding of the whole. As long as a text sounds "strange", as there are "gaps of meaning" in our text, the understanding is not yet integral. On the other hand, when my intelligence tells me, now the text is comprehensible, the understanding is complete, I may also accept that and translate the text.

Texts are complex entities. Single text-elements only have a relative meaning. But they are all interrelated. The sense of the whole determines the meaning of the individual feature, and the collection of all of the individual features builds up the meaning of the whole entity. But it is not a simple addition. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, and those parts do not stand separately. Both, sum and parts determine each other (Paepcke 1986: 103, my translation, R. St.).

Very often texts combine several functions, such as client information and public relations and staff instruction in a firm's bulletin,

or factual information for particular target groups. In a hermeneutic view, knowledge is a prerequisite for translation. In order to express and understand the various features in texts to be translated, the translator needs cultural awareness, appropriate terminology and idiomatic proficiency.

It is true that initially the hermeneutic approach to translation was primarily source-text oriented. It strove towards an adequate understanding and reformulation of a text. According to Paepcke, translation imitates the original text. Following the author's intention is like trying on his shoes. This requires the translator's identification with the message of the text. He or she repeatedly tries to find the words to best express what has been understood. Paepcke calls the translation a "hermeneutic draft" (hermeneutischer Entwurf, 1986: 86). Translation is a representation of the original, and it will never be absolute. Every new move is a tentative draft towards an optimal response.

This is comparable to the athlete who "lives" in his performance. A javelin thrower is well prepared, he knows all the rules and practised the technique. With each throw he gives his best, he puts his whole personality, he identifies with that throw. Each successful throw, however, contains already the potential of an even better one (cf. Paepcke 1986: 87). Translation, even the most beautiful one, is never absolute. We revise it, or someone else may attempt a new one later.

### **Creativity in target text production**

Every translation has a purpose and is always intended for a given readership. It is particularly Hans J. Vermeer who has stressed the target-orientation of translations. His ideas came to be known as the "scopos-theory" (Reiss/Vermeer 1984: 96). That aspect had not been clearly assessed in Paepcke's hermeneutic considerations.

The basic idea of Radegundis Stolze in her book *Hermeneutisches Übersetzen* (1992) is that hermeneutic interpretation is only the first

part of translation. Writing a translation is a very conscious activity, distinct from the articulation of a message, where one only tries to proclaim an idea, an affirmation, regardless of whether it is understandable or not. The translator should not only understand and analyze the original, but focus on the addressees in the target culture as well. What had been called for on a theoretical level by Reiss/Vermeer is now being applied to concrete text material.

When a text has been understood with the help of our knowledge, we can try to formulate a translation. In this respect many talk of creativity, which is not meant here in the sense of generativity, i.e. to 'create a translation from the source text structure'. The translator's creativity is rather a natural skill, an innate talent to find new combinations, novel formulations, based on knowledge and language proficiency. He or she will creatively produce a first TL version. In a second stage of this work, one will go over the first draft again, assessing the result of that creativity in formulation until it is satisfactory.

When we ask how to proceed from the source text to a translation, we may find a paradigm in the concept of symmetry, which by no means is only a mirror image. In Greek philosophy it meant "a harmonious correspondence among elements of a structure", i.e. a higher order of equal parts. And this concept is now the paradigm for theories of modern evolution. Natural evolution is not determined or fixed, but as a rule it is subject to constant development in temporal irreversibility. In search for a general order in spite of the non-linear evolution, scientists have found the concept of symmetry. Evolution in nature is seen as the creation of a superior form by a series of permanent local ruptures in symmetry, which however do not break the overall integral symmetry.

Such description of evolution towards a target of global symmetry is a suitable paradigm for the translation process (Stolze 1992: 72). Global symmetry between source and target texts is the translator's goal to ensure the integrity of meaning in both texts. Because of the differences in the structure of the languages, this can only be identified

in the local asymmetries of the textual structures and linguistic forms in direct comparison. The precise form of the goal is not given in advance; translation remains a hermeneutic draft.

In translation, as in natural evolution, the actual state is changed considerably by contingent mutation. There are creative notions in the translation process, which enrich the text's comprehensibility and result in changes in the structural form. This creates a dialectic process in which the message comprehended gradually is at the same time better expressed in the target language. The translator's identification with his message fosters creative and understandable TL formulations.

Translation cannot stop at a representation of the original text, since it has to serve the needs of interpersonal communication. The intended receivers of the translation are very important. While an author concentrates on the formulation of his message, a translator has to concentrate on his or her intermediary role. We need to adapt the content of the source text to the target conditions of communication, an interpretive faculty, functions of style as well as cultural constants and variables. The translator's work is receiver-oriented. In translating commercials, the translator makes himself the advocate of the message. In translating technical texts, the translator speaks like a specialist, because the translation of a professional text must not be deviant or strange compared to what is normal in genuine target texts of the same type. And in literature, the translator will attempt to realize the full potential of creative language.

### **Applying categories as metacognitive elements for the translator's competence**

The translator needs some reference points in order to control his or her translation procedure. Such metacognitive knowledge as part of the translator's competence can be defined by "translatoric categories" such as "thematics, lexis, pragmatics and stylistics" (Stolze 1992: 89). They do not work on sentence level but on text level. It is a translation

strategy designed to teach how to revise a first draft translation with reference to language aspects.

As Hönig (1993: 54-63) explains explicitly, the translator needs a macrostrategy to guide his or her decisions in order to avoid becoming preoccupied with microstrategies that focus on the local asymmetries between SL and TL text. These macrostrategies can be defined by the translatoric categories. Those categories should be based on linguistics, since translation deals with language. Translation is a process to select linguistic material in the target language. The hermeneutic approach to translation is reflected in the deliberate application of such categories.

The first category of 'thematics' comprises a description of the overall structure of the text to be translated in view of the thematic progress, discourse markers, syntax and coherence, as well as from the embedding situation, author, place of publication and medium. The holistic pre-understanding of a text is rendered more precise by means of a conscious analysis, and on the other hand it decisively determines any other strategy adopted by the translator. His or her activity will differ according to whether one has to translate an old or a modern text, literature, advertisement, or a technical text. By implication, irrelevant strategies are eliminated.

The speaker's perspective (grammatical person, imperative, passive voice) reveals the syntactic profile of the source text. Passive forms may point to an administrative text, while direct speech is a sign of literary texts. The thematic analysis also takes into consideration the formal text structure and layout. The analysis of the central word fields is also part of it. A coherent text normally has a theme appearing in a network of semantic relations. Their description provides the translator with a framework of context-specific semantic strategies to explain the coherence of meaning in a translation.

The second translatoric category of 'lexis' points to the important field of translation for specific purposes. Terminology as the most obvious characteristic of specialist texts presents significant differences, when comparing the disciplines. The specialist terminology in the



natural sciences serves the progress of knowledge and the description of objects. It contains the terms with fixed definition in a closed system. The number of terms is constantly extended by deduction, and that requires standardization and notation as data. The translator searches for exact equivalents, the main problem being terminology management. A particular difficulty are synonyms often created contemporaneously from different scientific perspectives, and only standardization can help here. In the area of technology, texts often have a linear structure in order not to present obstacles to understanding.

The specialist terminology in the humanities and the social sciences is, however, open to interpretation. It describes the feelings and ideas of people as well as processes of life. The definitions as the content of the concepts are not drawn systematically or fixed as terminology, but agreed upon conventionally among the authors in their academic discourse. Understanding departs from the a priori evidence for the meaning, but often the words remain tentative. A scholar in the humanities will, therefore, define his terms before proceeding. Any concept can only be understood adequately against the background of the relevant philosophy. As a conclusion the translator will have to know the difference between the academic schools and use the right expressions.

The extratextual point of view is then mentioned under the translatoric category of 'pragmatics'. The purpose of speech determines the choice of words. The text function is decisive for the translation. One will have to keep in mind any official rules on legal translation. In Germany for example the rule is to preserve the formal text structure in the translation to enable direct comparison of sentences. Official translations are certified. On the other hand there are advertisement texts and literature that present cultural problems. The translator's reaction to cultural differences is target-oriented adaptation, which is realized by means of adjustment strategies (Stolze 1993: 267-271).

What is equally important is the target readers' sociolinguistic embedding and their background. Membership in a speakers' group

can be ascertained by the professional jargon, for instance in the ecumenical diction of the clergy, in the ideological usage among feminists, in trade unions, political parties, and development agencies, etc. In order to assure the acceptability of a translation it is very important to consider sociolinguistic preferences and norms in their own right as distinct from those obtaining in the source text. That means that the first draft translation has to be revised in terms of the category of 'pragmatics'. The compliance with corporate identity in a translation might be occasionally more important for business firms than the similarity between text and translation.

Although meaning is carried by words, translation is more than verbal transcoding. The translatoric category of 'stylistics' focuses on the formulation itself as the upholder of sense. Style is not just a decoration, it is the appropriate way of using the language in a given situation. The awareness of functional norms, text-type conventions and ways of expressive language are part of the translator's competence regarding stylistic proficiency.

While the full stylistic potential of a language is realized in poetic literature, many other uses know a functional selection from it. We should be aware of the technological phraseology, the typical language of administration, the linguistic forms of creating metaphors and their images, the functional style of text-types with standard formula, nominalisation, special collocations, trends in terminological word compounds, aspects of sound and speech rhythm, and other stylistic phenomena. Göpferich (1995: 217) extensively analyses the recurrent syntactic elements in specialist texts. They constitute the subject matter in technical writing. If such norms are at variance between the source and the target language, the translator will apply the target style, backing up the choice according to the category of 'stylistics'. Any professional jargon or scholarly diction should be observed in translations, in order to make them more acceptable for the intended readers.

In the revision of an initial translation draft, all of the categories play an important role. The translator will have to decide in each

individual case which aspect is dominant. I am not talking of equivalence between a source and a target text. In a dialogue each participant in the conversation has a part of the whole meaning which belongs to both of them together. Similarly the integrity of meaning between the original and the translation, i.e. the intertextual coherence, can only be viewed in the overall text. This relationship of integrity might only be partly apparent when comparing single sentences.

The text is seen as an integral whole, and this whole is a multifaceted entity. Many aspects of sense are interrelated in a text, and it cannot only be reduced to one function. Cultural traces will be adapted or explained, whereas the technical information has to be preserved by transparent formulations, and stylistic ease in accordance with the norms of the applicable target language text-type will ensure the acceptability of the translation for the target readers.

Any critique of overtranslation or "undertranslation", etc. (cf. Newmark 1988: 24), therefore, cannot only revolve around the "translation units" of corresponding sentences. It must also take into account the whole text and apply the translatoric categories. If you know, why you wrote a certain formulation, you may also defend it against criticism and discuss it. And different choices under the translatoric categories may also lead to different translations, which all realize a sort of integrity of meaning between the translation and the original text. The application of those categories is a translational macrostrategy, as we need certain reference points for the assessment of translation quality. The translatoric categories of "thematics, lexis, pragmatics and stylistics" together with their application in the translation process can be a subject of translation pedagogy. Shifting the focus of Translation Didactics away from the syntactic-structural phenomena to texts as a greater entity might also help to overcome the learner's microstrategies of focusing on individual words and text structures without viewing on the whole text and its situation.

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