

## Contemporary Translation Theories: Mapping a Growing Field

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### ARTICLE INFO

Received: September 24, 2019

Accepted: October 27, 2019

Published: November 30, 2019

Volume: 2

Issue: 6

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.6.26

### KEYWORDS

*Translation studies,  
contemporary theories,  
functionalist approach,  
translators as agents*

### ABSTRACT

Translation Studies (TS) has always borrowed theories and approaches from other disciplines. While such openness has significantly contributed to the expansion of TS, it can also mean moving boundaries and uncertainty as to the identity of this discipline, and its status within the social sciences and the humanities. As a consequence, a cartography of translation theories becomes a necessary step towards the delineation of some epistemological boundaries for the discipline. This paper, aimed primarily at translation students and trainees, provides thus a simplified cartography of the growing body of theoretical works trying to come to grips with translation phenomena.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Translation Studies (TS) has only become a discipline in its own right in the 1970s. It has, however, substantially developed over the past few decades to become a field of knowledge unlike any other. Having been from the very beginning at the interface of disciplines, TS is indeed marked by great crossdisciplinarity, or what João F. Duarte et al. (2006, p. 4) describe as “a principle of flux, of unceasing intersections and realignments” with many disciplines. This means a proliferation of theories and approaches borrowed from other fields of inquiry. While such development testifies to the richness of TS, it can also mean moving boundaries and uncertainty as to the identity of this still relatively young discipline, and its status within the social sciences and the humanities. As a consequence, a cartography of translation theories becomes a necessary step towards the delineation of “some borders or boundaries or limits for the inquiry about translation” (Maria Tymoczko, 2005, p. 1086).

This paper, aimed primarily at translation students and trainees, provides thus a simplified overview of the growing body of theoretical works trying to account for translation phenomena. For the purposes of this essay, I will follow a mainly chronological organization in my mapping of the field. I will

therefore divide the history of contemporary translation theories into two major periods: from the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1970s, and from the 1970s, i.e. the emergence of translation studies as an interdisciplinary academic field, onwards. Within each period, I will identify the most influential theories and approaches. For constraints of space, the paper will be limited to the major theories and scholars associated with them. Theoretical reflection on translation and technology, including localization and machine translation, and on translation pedagogy, is also excluded. At the end of the paper, I will make a brief recommendation for professional translators and translation trainers in terms of the most appropriate theoretical approach.

## 2. Translation Theory: What is it?

While it is generally accepted that translation studies first emerged as a field of study in its own right in the 1970s with Holmes' seminal article “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies,” translation theory itself was not officially recognized until 1983 when it was given an entry of its own in the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography* (Edwin Gentzler, 2001, p. 1). According to Anthony Pym's (2014) definition of translation theory, however, translators have always theorized about translation. He

contends that “a theory sets the scene where the generation and selection process takes place” (p. 2). Thus, any translator who identifies a problem in the process of translating, generates possible solutions and then selects one particular solution to the problem is a translator engaged in “private, internal theorizing” (p. 2).

This inner theorizing turns into public, formal translation theory when the “generation and selection process” becomes not only a matter of discussion between translators but also a subject of disagreement (p. 2). For, then, translators-turned-theorists start coming up with names for aspects of translation, asking questions and proposing explanations from within their own theoretical position, itself shaped by their inclinations and experience. Translation theories—and it is significant how Pym talks of theories in plural and not of one all-encompassing theory of translation—therefore, serve to provide insight into the process of translation, explain aspects of this process, and offer possible solutions.

### 3. Mapping Contemporary Translation Theories: Challenges

Theorizing of translation had been underpinned for much of the (Western) history of translation, from Cicero and Horace through Dolet and Dryden to Nietzsche by one main debate, namely sense vs. form, which George Steiner (1975/1998) judges rather harshly as “sterile” (p. 319) and “philosophically naïve” (p. 292). As of the 1970s, however, and as translation studies was growing into an international, interdisciplinary field of study, it started to increasingly open up to and borrow concepts and methods from both traditional and new disciplines, such as linguistics, philosophy, literary criticism, sociology, and cultural studies. This cross-fertilization has resulted in an explosion of theories and approaches, which, in turn, complicates any attempt to draw a theoretical map for the field. As Lawrence Venuti (2000, p. 1) aptly puts it, “the broad spectrum of theories and research methodologies may doom any assessment of its ‘current state’ to partial representation, superficial synthesis and optimistic canonization.”

Different scholars have come up with different solutions to this problem. Eugene Nida (1991), for instance, classified theories by perspectives. In a somewhat similar fashion, Gentzler (2001) organized his map by major approaches. Venuti (2000) opted for a chronological organization, whereas Pym (2014)

organized the field by paradigms, all while pointing out that the order of paradigms roughly coincided with a chronological order. Regardless of the classification, inclusions always mean exclusions as the focus remains on the main approaches/paradigms/perspectives. They also show a development of translation theories that reflects accumulation of knowledge, dominating approaches within a single period, such as linguistic approaches, and longevity of specific paradigms and principles across the periods. Above all, they show that a theory of translation is always shaped by the theorists’ assumptions about language and meaning.

### 4. Translation Theories: Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the 1970s

Theorizing in this period was considerably shaped by two main disciplines, namely philosophy, particularly the German tradition, and linguistics.

#### 4.1 Philosophical Theories

Reflection on translation in early Twentieth-century was still very much a part of reflection on language and was rooted mainly in German philosophical tradition and hermeneutics. The most seminal work in this period is Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” (1923/2000). In this essay, Benjamin transcends the traditional dichotomy of original vs. translation by conceptualizing translation as a text that does not serve to reproduce the original, but that participates in its “afterlife.” For Benjamin, translation should do more than render a source text message in a target language. Its task is, indeed, to recreate the values that the original has acquired over time and bring out the “pure language,” i.e. the “complementary intentions” of languages despite all their differences. Equally influential in this period is Ezra Pound (2000). Like Benjamin, he believes in the autonomy of the translated text. For him, too, translation transforms, rather than reproduces, the original text. Using archaisms, he conceives of translation as either a critical “accompaniment” to the original, or an “original writing” that abides by the target language standards to rewrite the original. Another philosopher whose work was reminiscent of late twentieth century translation theory underlain by poststructuralism, but that has not engaged scholars as much as Benjamin is Jose Ortega y Gasset (2000). The latter believes that translation is not so much a copy of the original as a “path” towards this original and its culture. Advocating literalism, he argues that translation should not pretend to be a transparent reproduction of

the other by hiding behind “a literary garb.” Instead, it should reveal itself through literalist discursive strategies.

The significance of these works transcends their period as they will go to deeply influence reflection on translation decades later. This is especially true for Benjamin whose seminal essay gave rise to a full body of research on translation and engaged many translation scholars, including Antoine Berman, Henri Meschonnic, Steiner, Haroldo de Campos, Eric Cheyfitz, Venuti and Suzanne-Jill Levine (Sanders, 2003, p. 161).

#### 4.2 Linguistic Theories

Mid-twentieth century witnessed a surge of theories anchored in linguistics. Key figures of this trend include Roman Jakobson, John Catford, Nida, Jiri Levy, and Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet. Jakobson (1959/2000) adopts a scientific approach and delineates the field of translation by distinguishing between three types of translation, namely intralingual translation, i.e. paraphrase and rewording, interlingual translation, i.e. translation proper, and intersemiotic translation, i.e. transmutation. It is, therefore, a conceptualization of translation that goes beyond the traditional understanding of translation, and views all types of communication as translation. Jakobson (p. 114), however, adopts a traditional conception of translation proper that, unlike Benjamin’s or Pound’s, limits the role of translation to “recod[ing] and transmit[ting] a message received from another source.” For him, translation is a process “that involves two equivalent messages in two different codes” (p. 114). Perhaps his most significant contribution to the field is his introduction of the semiotic reflection (Snell-Hornby, 2006).

On his part, John Catford (1965) attempts to provide an account for translation based completely on “a theory of language—a general linguistic theory” (p. 1). Indeed, he believes that “the theory of translation is essentially a theory of applied linguistics” (p. 19). Accordingly, he conceives of meaning as “a property of a language” (p. 35), i.e. as language specific, and like Jakobson, defines translation rather simply as “the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language” (p. 20).

Theorizing about translation from within the bible translation tradition, Nida is rather circumspect in his

belief in linguistics’ ability to provide a wholesale account of translation, but equally scientific in his approach as flagged up in the title of his influential book *Towards a Science of Translating* (1964). Grounding his theory in Chomsky’s generative grammar, he (1964) points out that while any work offering a “descriptive analysis” of translation should have a linguistic thrust, it should not be “narrowly linguistic” since language is only “one part of total human behaviour” (p. 8). Unlike Catford, Nida believes that meaning is not a mere property of language but is made of three elements: the linguistic, the referential and the emotive, the latter concerning “the responses of the participants in the communicative act” (p. 70). This conceptualization of meaning allows him to define translation as a process shaped by three factors, namely “(1) the nature of the message, (2) the purpose or purposes of the author and, by proxy, of the translator, and (3) the type of audience” (p. 156). He then goes on to distinguish between formal equivalence, i.e. translation that is formally equivalent to the source text, and dynamic equivalence, i.e. translation that seeks to elicit a response among its readers equivalent to the response of the source text readers.

#### 5. Translation Theories: The 1970s to the Present Day

Nida’s inclusion of contextual elements such as readers’ response and translator’s purpose in his theory not only anticipated later developments in translation studies, but also conveyed a similar sense of wariness among linguists themselves of abstract approaches to language. This wariness resulted in linguistics taking a pragmatic turn (see, for instance, John Austin, 1962 and John Searle, 1969), which had tremendous implications for translation theorists. In fact, Mary Snell-Hornby (2006, p. 37) credits this turn for the very “development of the discipline of Translation Studies” starting from the 1970s, by favouring “a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to translation, more critical and appreciative investigations of the process and product of translation.” It was thus in the 1970s, and more precisely in 1972, that this discipline took a name, “translation studies,” and shape with Holmes’s essay “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies.”

But while this field of study has grown as a discipline in its own right over the past five decades, and developed a multiplicity of foci, from localization to

publishing houses and translators' practices, its emancipation from linguistics did not mean complete divorce insofar as linguistics continued to provide conceptual tools for translation theorists.

### 5.1 More Linguistic Theories and Approaches

Kirsten Malmkjaer (2011) cites Ernst-August Gutt's 1991 relevance-theory approach to translation as one of the notable works based on linguistics. Expanding on Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory of communication, Gutt (1991) conceives translation as a process of inferential communication where the receiver/reader of the text expects the text to be optimally relevant and "yield adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost" (p. 30). Likewise, Juliane House (1997) inscribes her model of translation quality assessment mainly in systemic functional grammar. The model requires, thus, comparison between source and target texts at the levels of language/text, register and genre.

Approaching translation as a process of negotiation where the translator is a "mediator" between the author of the source text and the receivers of the target text, Basil Hatim and Ian Mason (1990) draw extensively on pragmatics and semiotics to build a model of translation process based on such concepts as text-type, discourse and context. Mona Baker is yet another translation scholar who draws extensively on linguistics in her *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (1992). Unlike Hatim and Mason, whose starting points of discussion and analysis are macro concepts such as context, Baker builds a bottom-up model of translation that goes from equivalence at word level up to pragmatic equivalence.

### 5.2 Functionalist Translation Theory

The approaches above all show that the focus of translation theory gradually shifted away from the source text and faithfulness/equivalence to it, to the process and product of translation, and the function of this product in its new context. This shift had already been anticipated by Nida when he recognized the importance of the function and effect of the target text on the target audience. It is, however, no more apparent than in the functionalist approaches to translation. Among the key figures of these approaches are Katharina Reiss, her disciple Hans Vermeer, Justa Holz-Mänttari and Christiane Nord.

In his *Skopos* theory (1978/2000), Vermeer completely rejects the notion of equivalence. For him, translation is a human action that takes place in a

cultural context, and has both an intention and a *skopos*, i.e. a purpose. "Dethroning" the source text, he asserts that translation can only be "good" if it fits its *skopos* and its product is functional to its audience, not when it achieves some kind of equivalence to the source text.

### 5.3 Polysystem Theory, Descriptive Translation Studies and the Manipulation School

Functionalist translation theory, however, was not the only theory to displace equivalence as a key concept in translation and "dethrone" the original text in the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing on Russian formalism, Itamar Even-Zohar (1978/2000) adopts a polysystem theory in his approach of literary translation. The latter is, for him, a fact of the target polysystem that should be studied in its relation to the other original systems in the target culture rather than to the source text. Drawing attention to the potential cultural role of translation, Even-Zohar maintains that translated literature can occupy a "central position," as opposed to a "peripheral" one, in the target polysystem and fulfill an "innovative" function when this polysystem is still in the process of being established or when the literary tradition in it is itself minor in relation to other literary traditions, including the source one.

Building on polysystem theory, Gideon Toury (1978/2000) took a descriptive approach to translated literature. He sets out to explain the way such target orientation undermines the concept of equivalence in translation inasmuch as translation always involves shifts and obeys target norms. He seeks, as a consequence, to identify and describe target norms as well as the shifts that result from these norms and that constitute a text acceptable in the target culture. Other 1980s' translation scholars identified with polysystem theory and adopting a descriptive approach to translation, mainly Andre Lefevere and Theo Hermans, proposed a theory of translation as rewriting and created what came to be known as the manipulation school.

According to Lefevere (1992), for instance, translation—much like many such activities taking place in the polysystem as literary criticism, historiography and anthologization—is a "refraction" of the source text, i.e. a processing of the source text "for a certain audience (children, e.g.), or [adaptation] to a certain poetics or a certain ideology" (p. 72). Parting with the positivistic view of translation as a linear and transparent linguistic transfer, Lefevere (1992) argues, in fact, that translation is a "rewriting"

of the original text that is circumscribed ideologically by the power of patrons and aesthetically by that of critics (p. 205).

#### **5.4 The Ethics of Difference**

While the scholars associated with Descriptive Translation Studies were criticized for being apolitical in their approach to translation (see Douglas Robinson, 1997 & Venuti, 1998), they paved the way for what came to be known as the “cultural turn” in translation studies by introducing a paradigmatic shift in the discipline from studying the way translation should be carried out, to studying the translated text in its new cultural context. As a consequence, and under the further influence of Cultural Studies and poststructuralism, translation studies scholars turned increasingly to studying the way translation contributed to cultural identity formation and how it is harnessed for ideological and political purposes. Thus, as of the early 1990s, a substantial body of literature started growing around issues of translation, power differentials and identity. This growing awareness of the ideological power of translation also meant increasing theoretical interest in the ethics of translation.

Key contributions to reflection on the ethics of translation starting from the 1980s are Berman (1984, 1985/1999) and Venuti (1995, 1998). Drawing on Benjamin and Meschonnic, Berman advocates a literalist translation that seeks to release the “pure language” existing in all languages (1984, p. 24). Berman’s ethics is, in Pym’s (2002) words, based on “the defence of otherness and the critique of ethnocentric textual practices” (p. 35). The same objective fuels Venuti’s “ethics of difference.” Drawing on both Schleiermacher and Berman, Venuti (1995, 1998) decries what he calls domesticating, fluent translations for their neo-imperialist and ethnocentric underpinnings. He (1995) calls, therefore, for a foreignizing or “resistant” translation (p. 24) based on a militant ethics. Such translation, according to him, can dismantle hegemony and destabilize unequal power structures. Despite its share of criticism, too, Venuti’s reflection has had a significant impact on both postcolonial and feminist theoretical reflections on translation (Robinson, 1997).

#### **5.5 Postcolonial Translation Theory**

Postcolonial translation theory gained momentum as of the 1990s, with significant input from other

disciplines. Eric Cheyfitz (1991), for instance, explored the role of translation in the conquest of the Americas to conclude that translation “was, and still is, the central act of European colonization and imperialism of the Americas” (p. 104). Vicente Rafael (1993) explored what he termed the “uneasy relationship” (p. ix) between translation and Christian conversion and their role in the colonization of the Tagalog of the Philippines by the Spanish.

From India, several scholars looked into the workings of translation in British colonization, most notably Tijaswini Niranjana (1992), and Harish Trivedi (1995, 1997). Niranjana (1992), for instance, maintains that translation of Indian texts, including literary ones, into English played as significant a role in colonialism as the teaching of the English language and English literature to the colonized. These practices sought, according to her (pp. 30-31), to construct a colonial subject that is more “English than Hindu,” and that sees the world through the same orientalist prism as the British colonizer, i.e. a subject that interiorized “ways of seeing ... or modes of representation that came to be accepted as ‘natural,’” but that were inscribed in “a teleological and hierarchical model of cultures that places Europe at the pinnacle of civilization” (p. 18).

Similar works emerged around another local reality, that of Ireland. Studying the translation of early Irish literature into English, Tymoczko (1999) aptly shows how translation, as a way of gathering information about the Other, can be a tool as much of colonization as of resistance and self-determination (p. 294). From Canada, two important studies engaging with the Quebecois reality from a postcolonial perspective came to fruition, namely Annie Brisset (1990) and Sherry Simon (1994).

#### **5.6 Feminist Theory**

The cultural turn heralded by Lefevere and Susan Bassnett (1990) also opened the discipline to feminist theory. In fact, Simon (1996) credits the reconceptualization of translation as “re-writing,” together with the mounting interest within the social and human sciences in issues of gender and identity, for the “alliance” that would form between feminist theory and translation theory. This development gave birth to several theoretical works and translation projects grounded in gendered identity politics and “engaging directly with power differentials that rule relations between the sexes [...] and that are often

revealed in the detailed study of translated literatures” (Luise von Flotow, 2011, p. 2).

Main scholars associated with this trend include Lori Chamberlain (1988), who explores the way the gendering of translation was mapped onto the productive/reproductive oppositional paradigm; Simon (1996) who further explores what she calls the “gendered theorization” of translation and sheds valuable light into the equally “gendered positions” taken by feminist translators and translation theorists, like Suzanne Jill Levine and Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood; and Barbara Godard (1990) who advocates a feminist translation where the feminist translator “womanhandles” the literary text (p. 50).

While the main thrust of research grounded in feminist translation theory initially took place in North America, it soon spread to the peripheries at a time when feminist theory itself was integrating a new concept, that of intersectionality, whereby gender difference is only one among other differences, including race, nation, class and religion, that intersect to make identity. Gayatri Spivak (1993) and Rosemary Arrojo (1999) are among the first theoreticians to explore intersectionality in translation, mainly by looking into representational practices pertaining to the Other woman from the double perspective of feminist and postcolonial theory.

### 5.7 Sociological Approaches

Once the focus of translation theory shifted from the source text to the process and product of translation, it was only a matter of time before it turned to the main agents in this process, i.e. translators. Moreover, the present conjecture of armed conflicts, military occupation and massive numbers of refugees has heightened the need for translators’ and interpreters’ services, bringing to the fore their agency and putting to the test their assumed neutrality. As a consequence, and with the influence of and insight from other disciplines, mainly sociology and anthropology, translation studies witnessed a proliferation of sociological approaches exploring not only the role and agency of translators but also the role of publishing houses.

In fact, Andrew Chesterman (2006) identifies a whole line of enquiry within translation studies, which he calls “the sociology of translation.” It includes theoretical works dealing mostly with the sociology of translations and the sociology of translators. The first category would include, according to Chesterman (pp.

14-15), Lefevere’s reflection on patronage and sponsors in translation, as well as works informed by critical discourse analysis, particularly Norman Fairclough’s model (1992) with its emphasis on social change.

Theoretical works belonging to the sociology of translators include H  l  ne Buzelin (2007) who draws on Bruno Latour’s symmetric anthropology in her exploration of translation as a collective process of production. They also include scholars such as Baker (2006, 2007), Jerry Palmer (2007), Mila Dragovic-Drouet (2007) and Moira Inghilleri (2009), who turned to the investigation of the agency of translators as “individuals positioned within networks of power relationships” (Myriam Salama-Carr, 2007, p. 2).

### 6. Translation Theory for Pedagogical and Professional Purposes

For both translators and translation trainers, functionalist translation theory offers the ideal theoretical and conceptual foundation necessary for translators and translation teachers alike. Despite the criticism levelled at the approach (see, for instance, House 1997 on the concept of function, and Gentzler 2001 on what he calls the “sales mission” underlying the theory), the theory takes into consideration the main variables that impinge on the translation process, including the producer of the original text and his/her own *skopos*, the initiator and his/her commission with the various work conditions it sets (time, mode of delivery, communication...), and the receptors of the target text with their needs and expectations. In so doing, it best responds to the reality of the profession, and accounts for the constraints within which the translator works.

Breaking with prescriptivism and the sterile debate of faithfulness vs. freedom, functionalist theory also introduces the concept of loyalty. Unlike the concept of faithfulness, which implies a relationship between source and target texts, loyalty is an ethical concept meant to regulate the relationship between the translator and author, on the one hand, and the translator and readers of the target text, on the other hand. In other words, the functionalists view translators as free agents who still negotiate their way between the constraints and expectations of the other agents involved in the process. This concept allows for the variety and diversity of strategies that professional translators use, including within the same translation project. As Nord (1997, p. 29) points out, translators in this theory can choose between “a ‘free’ or a

‘faithful’ translation, or anything between these two poles, depending on the purpose for which the translation is needed.” In other words, there is no right or wrong translation, as long as it fits the bill and satisfies the client but still without being disloyal to the author of the original.

Moreover, and while functionalist translation theory might seem to be exclusively adapted or at least better suited to non-literary translation, the concepts of loyalty, function and *skopos* make it equally adaptable to literary translation. Indeed, the functionalists conceive literature itself like any other text: as a communicational action with an author/sender, intentions, receptors, a message and an effect or function. The theory thus provides “a theoretical foundation for literary translation that allows translators to justify their decisions” whatever the decision is (Nord, 1997, p. 91).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Translation studies has evolved tremendously over the past few decades. With new undergraduate and graduate programs and new summer schools every year, increasing numbers of book-length studies, journals and international conferences, it has become an established discipline with a more affirmed epistemological identity. This evolution has only been possible because TS remained open to new paradigms and new theories borrowed from other fields of inquiry. In fact, and as Alexis Nouss (1995) has so well put it, undergirding translation studies is “an epistemology of openness, unaccepting of all totalizing knowledge and embracing of the idea that translation is dialogue” (p. 341; my translation).

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