

WHAT IS TRANSLATION STUDIES FOR?

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Abstract

What is translation studies for? Such a question, though currently relevant, may still become initially provoking, especially to established translation students. Why ask such a question? Indeed, it is a matter of choice to ask or not to ask it, nevertheless, in this paper I choose to offer an answer to this question. Essentially asking this question is only a logical consequence of the postmodern culture, to emphasize that a disciplined inquiry is to serve the student, and not the other way round. I will do it system wise, i.e. both systematically and systemically. The system treatment is to allow not a peace-meal but more holistic coverage of the subject matter, from its metaphysics to its operation. I am hoping the discussion will help translation students think big and act small in developing a more authentic project of translation studies.

Key words: *translation studies, system, postmodernism, translation problem*

Introduction

Twenty years ago or so an outspoken professor of linguistics honestly stated a similar question, although not particularly on translation studies. The answer was so highly emotional that it became irrelevant with the subject matter, "We will never invite him again". A similar question was asked in an international seminar session, again, not about translation studies. The answer was not much different, "To make a better person, of course!" "So, what?"

This time I am not expecting a similar answer, partly because I have no doubt whatsoever about the values of translation studies, and partly I am going to give it myself. Also, such a question is equally good for any disciplined inquiry and at any system level, like "What is English education for?" and "What is syntax for?". I will begin with the reason for asking the question: *Why ask?* Afterwards to continue with *translation studies as a system of disciplined inquiry and translation-inquiry problems* before closing it with a *conclusion*.

Why ask?

Not asking or asking “What translation studies is for” is, as said before, a matter of choice. If we choose to stick to classical humanism completed with modernism at the same time we will not need to ask. This is when we take the belief that knowledge inquiry is to inherit classical values, and we do so essentially positivistically. Then, we will do a disciplined inquiry the way our teacher and our teacher’s teacher have taught us to do. To keep it current it is also necessary for us to see what other people are doing, particularly those in developed countries, which we may call it standardization or benchmarking. If similar programs from developed country do not do it, why should we? The nine-point manifesto of Translation Studies of the University of Texas at Dallas, for example, does not explicitly state such a question (<http://translation.utdallas.edu/translationstudies/manifesto.htm>, 17 November 2010) Not asking such a question therefore, is easier and safer.

Today, however, is already the end of the first decade of the third millennium, the millennium that thinkers have declared as the postmodern era (Sastrapratedja, 2003). So, why ask? First it is high time that we did. Secondly, it is necessary --in the spirit of postmodernism-- for maximum productivity and meaning of human action, including for example, the probability “to think of new ways” (Venuti, 2008: viii).

Postmodernism is a term which may mean different for different people. But, as practicing academicians we need not only consider it as an object to talk about, but as an event requiring actions. In other words, we need a working definition. Here I choose to agree with those who define postmodernism as “physiologically for modernism (read “scienticism”) and culturally against modernism (read “colonialism”). Implicitly I disagree with the idea that in postmodernism all truth is relative. In other words, even in the postmodern era science and technology is still relevant, in so far as it is concerned with physiological matters. Likewise, standardization is equally relevant here. All this is necessary to improve explanation, prediction, and control for maximum efficiency and productivity.

Culturally, or humanistic wise, colonialism is essentially domination and marginalization, and postmodernism or post-colonialism is against this. Positively stated postmodernism is for equity. Equity facilitates a human person, group, and nation to make one’s own decision (autonomy). Autonomy promotes the actualization of self-decision (empowerment). Equity acknowledges that a human person, group, or nation is endowed with a potential which may be different from one another. Equity, autonomy, and empowerment therefore will facilitate a human person, group, or nation, in fact humankind, to actualize self-potentials, or to become excellent in one’s own right. Self-actualization is

the highest level of human motivation in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Chapman, 2006).

Whereas science (positivistic) and technology remains crucial for maximum efficiency and productivity of physiological matters, it is not for the promotion of equity leading to self-excellence. Re-engineering social interaction is unethical in this context. Equity requires empathic understanding, i.e. understanding based on the lived-experience of the person, group, or nation we are trying to understand. It therefore, needs not a positivistic or empirical science but a humanistic or experiential science.

Translation Studies as a Disciplined Inquiry System

Translation studies as a disciplined inquiry can be viewed as a deliberate set of complex actions and interactions. It is not a random, single action. It is not something we do then and there to complete at one shot. Being a deliberate set of complex actions and interactions translation studies requires a lot of thinking and a lot of planning before we can actually do it. The result of thinking is *concept*, of planning *design*, and the *doing* is closely represented in its *operation* planning, to be completed with its program report. Thinking, planning, and doing make up a systematic way of acting. In other words, concept, design, and operation make up the systematic components of a system. Concept is universal, design contextual, and operation interactional. This is not at all a new idea, which, using somewhat different terms, Anthony and Richards and Rodgers have devised decades ago (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Thinking systemically, our concept must have a purpose to accomplish, process to accomplish the purpose, and resources to process to accomplish the purpose. So do our design and our operation. It is also generally understood that the systemic components are made up of its input, process, and output. A system therefore, includes both its systematic components and its systemic components. Accordingly, translation studies as a system includes its concept, design, and operation, each of which is made up of its goal, process, and resources.

Concept

The concept of a disciplined inquiry, including translation studies, tries to define *what it is*, *why it is studied*, and *how it is studied*, all mainly referring to the metaphysics of the subject matter. Philosophers do this, where every one of them may have their own philosophy. Accordingly, there are different ways of classifying philosophies of knowledge inquiries. Philosophers have their problems, and their problems are not ours. Academic practitioners like us will only take what we need, to help us think big in our small action. As we have seen, postmodernism is an example. Most professional cooks do not usually understand the

engineering of a mixing machine, but they can use it comfortably enough and legally.

Here, for simplicity and practicality I have chosen to refer initially to: Classical Humanism, Reconstructionism, Progressivism, and New-Pragmatism (Skilbeck, 1987 as quoted in Finney, 2001). Occasionally I take the liberty of referring to Classical Humanism and Reconstructivism as traditional, and New-Pragmatism as synonymous to Postmodern, Pragmatic-Progressive, Late-modern, Reflective, Critical-theory, even Positive Education. Pragmatic-Progressivism (Cf. Holliday, 2002: ix) is eventually the position I essentially take in discussing translation studies here.

What is translation studies? It is part of linguistic disciplined inquiry which deals essentially with the meaning transference of a text of one language to another. The meaning may be empirical or experiential, or some of their combination. What is it for? Translation studies as a disciplined inquiry is part of human efforts to participate in improving life quality. Like other disciplined inquiries, the pragmatic side of translation studies is eventually life-quality improvement. The life-quality improvement may be related to physiological or humanistic, empirical or experiential quality, or some of their combination. And, how is it done? When dealing with the physiological aspects of translation studies, logical positivism or post positivism is used: to explain, predict and control better, and eventually to become more efficient and productive. When dealing with humanistic interaction on the other hand, humanistic studies is used, to improve empathic understanding, leading to equity and self-excellence, personal and social.

Design

A design is a plan, a lay out before a set of actions and interactions is actually carried out. It is to ensure that the intended set of actions and interactions run most efficiently and effectively. A design is contextual. It is an implementation of a selected concept, restricted and specified in given contexts. Some of the significant contexts, which need identification, include the participant group, time, and facility access. The design may refer to both translation-study programs or translation projects.

When the selected concept and contexts have been adequately identified, the first systemic component to deliberate is the goal. The goal is generally regarded as the expected result of a program or project. It can be a closed-type goal or an open-type goal. It is generally categorized into general and specific goals or similar statements like competency standards and basic competencies. The process includes the sequence of all actions and interactions among personnel and resources. The resources list all that is needed in order to process in order to accomplish

the goal. The design of a translation-study program may include its curriculum, syllabus, and interactional plan. That of a translation-study project may include its research proposal, and a translation project its manuscript submission and other management matters.

Operation

An operation is an implementation of a design, or, the implementation at a given time span. It is interactional, therefore empirical. Personnel act using accessible resources for a specific objective, in a specific time frame. Almost everything here is observable: the achievement of the objective, the process, and resources actually used. Here is where the thinking and the planning or the concept and design are reflected in what actually happens in daily interactions.

Translation Inquiry Problems

What makes up a translation inquiry problem? Again, when we take the traditional way we will look at what has been done thus far or at what other translation students elsewhere have been doing. It is not that previous research reports and research resources are to be ignored, on the contrary, any student working on a research project is obliged to review them. Many of them, such as Hatim (2001), are very helpful, but they still need critical eyes to look at nevertheless. If uncritical we will simply select a similar problem, replacing some variables, variable combinations, relationship types, or even location. It is easy partly because we can use the same methodology again and again, replacing variables and theories. It is safer because that is what many experts in the same discipline have been doing. So, if others have done the translation of positional prepositions, I can legally do directional prepositions, or articles, or words meaning "carry". Here, I will accumulate all those words from a given texts, classify the meanings according to "theories", put them all in a table, and do counting. And, that is the result of my research. What for? No, this question is irrelevant. After all there is always a normative statement of research benefit somewhere.

Thinking big or globally we consider a translation problem as a problem which, if solved, will contribute to the improvement of life quality. Obviously it is life-quality improvement which is relevant to translation studies or translation work. Empirically or physiologically the solution will help improve the translation or translation-study quality of explanation, prediction, and control, leading to better efficiency and productivity of the translation or translation studies, or of people involved in it. This includes among others: the equivalence of empirical meaning, translation speed, accuracy, and management (e.g. documentation, retrieval, pricing, marketing). Experientially or humanistic wise, the prospective solution of the problem shall help improve the translation or translation-study quality of empathic

understanding, leading to equity, autonomy, empowerment, and self-actualization, of persons, groups, nations and humanity. Alternatively, the problem and solution may be related with some combination of empirical and humanistic life quality. Here, on one hand, physiological adequacy may facilitate self-actualization, on the other self-actualization may lead to higher efficiency and productivity.

Conclusion

Considering translation studies an event, we need to think big and act small. Part of thinking big is questioning what it is for, and for whom. In fact, such a question is relevant at all levels, from the metaphysic to operational. This coincides with the currently adopted postmodern culture, which places the person, and not the subject-matter as the master. The answer to the question helps clarify the identification of a translation-study problem and its probable solution: it is to contribute to the improvement of life quality, empirical or experiential, or some of their combination. Asking "Why?" or "What ... for?" at every system component and level helps students ensure authentic projects, projects which are relevant to actual world realities. I am hoping this presentation helps translation students treat translation-study problems not only more productively but also meaningfully.

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