Research for training, research for society in Translation Studies

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Introduction

The call for papers written for this meeting included the following questions: What specific problems need to be addressed by research (in Translation Studies)? What specific methodologies are needed? How should we be training researchers to focus on those problems and to use those methodologies?

Let me start by recalling that basic research is not necessarily linked to particular needs and is nevertheless generally accepted by society as long as it does not require major funding—when funds for research are short, it often suffers from competition with applied research. Applied research is supposed to improve the world somehow. In the Human and Social Sciences, it is often assessed by Research Councils and similar bodies partly on the basis of its actual and/or potential impact on society (see for example the Australian Government's Department of Education, Science and Training's 2005 paper in the list of references). When asking what kind of research needs to be conducted in Translation Studies, one question is *what* interests it is supposed to serve: improvements in Translation (translation and interpreting) quality, in working conditions, in training, in communication between cultures etc.? If so, other types of action, including lobbying and awareness-raising operations conducted by professional bodies could be so much more efficient that the contribution of Translation Studies could be considered negligible or even counter-productive. For instance, AIIC conference interpreters have been defending certain working conditions, including on-site interpreting as opposed to remote interpreting, direct view of the speakers from the booth and availability of conference documents before the actual meeting, as well as certain manning standards to avoid long turns in the booth viewed as detrimental to interpreting quality. If research fails to demonstrate clearly that such conditions produce better quality, if only because high variability in samples studied makes it difficult to show statistical significance, presenting the findings to clients and regulatory bodies can be problematic.

I would therefore hesitate to answer the questions on the basis of specific needs of society. I prefer to take a wider view of the role of research in

Translation Studies, focusing more on its contributions to Translator training, to the Translators' awareness of various aspects of Translation, and to the social status of Translators in society, as explained in Gile (forthcoming).

Relevant research vs. "good" research

At this meeting, which is associated with the valuable international doctoral program at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili, I should like to argue that before thinking of the type of research or of topics to be addressed by Translation Studies, it is crucial to make sure that the overall quality of whatever research is done is good enough. Research not relevant to the needs of society may contribute little, but studies of poor quality can be counterproductive, not only because they may lead to erroneous conclusions on the topics being investigated, but also because they may discredit Translation Studies in the eyes of the academic community at large.

Poor research is still frequent in Translation Studies. By "poor research" I mean research which does not comply with the fundamental norm of rigorous thinking and which jeopardizes the credibility of Translation Studies scholars. In Gran and Fabbro (1994: 19), the authors (Fabbro is a neurolinguist) insist that interpreting researchers should publish in journals from established disciplines, meaning, as became clear to me in personal exchanges with them, that stricter refereeing than is customary in Translation Studies is required because refereeing in Translation Studies lets through publications of less than acceptable quality. Frequently found flaws include clearly non-representative samples, invalid research design, overgeneralization of findings, misrepresentation of views expressed in the literature, logical problems in inferencing or incorrect grasp of concepts imported from cognate disciplines (see also Arjona Tseng 1989, Toury 1991, Jääskeläinen 2000, Gile 1999, Gile & Hansen 2004). Such flaws can be considered uncontroversial insofar as they are identified by several readers in peer-reviews and acknowledged by the authors of the relevant studies when pointed out to them. The fact that they generally understand the nature of the problems as soon as these are brought to their attention lends some credibility to the idea that these weaknesses are attributable to lack of training, not to a lack of intellectual capability.

Priorities

My first priority would therefore be research serving as hands-on training or self-training. Note that in Translation Studies, research for degrees is far from marginal: in the literature, a sizable proportion of innovative studies are conducted in preparation for graduation theses, MA theses and doctoral dissertations. In order for such research to be most favorable to the en-

hancement of the students' research skills, I believe it should be feasible at the level of technical skills they have at the time they engage in it, and should not require the acquisition of sophisticated techniques unless competent advisors/supervisors are available and willing to help. Through relatively simple studies, one can acquire a good sense of what research entails and hopefully rigorous working methods. This is a good basis for the acquisition of more advanced techniques later.

As an instructor, my preference also goes to empirical studies, not because I believe they are intrinsically "superior" to non-empirical studies, but because the norms of empirical research generally require researchers to be explicit on the design of their studies, the underlying rationale if it is not trivial, methods used for data collection, data collected, their processing and inferences made. This makes it relatively easy to identify mistakes and weaknesses. Once rigorous thinking and working standards are understood, they can be implemented in whatever type of research is conducted later, be it empirical or not.

Examples from a case study

Examples of fundamental flaws in research design and inferencing are highlighted in published book reviews. Here I should like to offer several examples from a didactic exercise conducted at ESIT, Paris, in 2008, in which citations of non-ESIT Translation Studies authors by ESIT authors were studied as initial indications of potential influence from other schools of thought.

When discussing the names of authors identified as ESIT authors by the students, I found that one was selected because the word "deverbalization" appeared in a title of one of his publications, several because they had published a paper in a collective volume edited by ESIT authors and several because they defended ESIT's "interpretive theory" in a paper (!).

For this small-scale awareness-raising exercise, the sample of citing texts by ESIT authors was chosen to be of size 20. One student's sample included 4 texts by Seleskovitch and 4 texts by Lederer. This meant that the maximum number of ESIT authors whose texts could be analyzed as citing or not citing non-ESIT authors was down to 14 from a theoretical maximum of 20. This limited markedly the potential representativeness of the sample, something which the students understood as soon as it was explained to them. It was observed that choosing two texts by Seleskovitch and two texts by Lederer, one early and one recent text for each, could make sense as allowing identification of evolution over time, but selecting 4 texts by each with no specific choice of dates was not a good idea.

In one assignment, a student asserted there was interaction between ESIT and other schools of thought in Translation Studies by taking several examples of non-ESIT authors being cited and discussed… by two ESIT

authors out of the 19 she examined in her sample, without considering the citation statistics in the rest of the sample. Taking a few examples without looking at the whole data-set is particularly frequent in the rationale of Translation Studies authors. It makes sense if the whole approach is an argumentative one, with examples and counter-examples because considering the whole set of data is not feasible, but it is flawed if the investigation is designed around a sample.

After this and other awareness-raising exercises, several students commented spontaneously that they now understood the need for more rigorous thinking in research. Whether such newly-gained awareness is actually reflected in markedly improved research practice is another matter. In my view, a consolidation period with more exercises and closely supervised and/or refereed research is often necessary to achieve such a result.

Research for training vs. research "for society"

My suggestion is therefore that unless they are highly motivated for research of an argumentative type, for hermeneutics, philosophy etc., during a first stage of research skills acquisition and consolidation, it might be a good idea to guide students and young researchers towards empirical studies which would contribute both to our factual knowledge of the world of Translation and to enhancement of their research competence. It could include descriptive research on Translation process, quality assessment research, research on the interaction between translators/interpreters and their clients, naturalistic research analyzing the output of translators and interpreters under various circumstances in terms of language, information, tactics, etc. Such studies could involve "manual" text analysis or the use of software for the analysis of corpora, questionnaires and interviews, Translog and similar software. If conditions are favorable, i.e. if there is enough time for skills acquisition and if competent advisors/supervisors are available, more sophisticated tools and methods, in particular experimental methods and inferential statistics can be used. Non-sophisticated methods are not necessarily trivial in their implementation—for instance, as is well known in sociology, there are many pitfalls to be avoided in questionnaire and interview techniques, and using them rigorously requires much thought and attention. Their advantage in research-in-training stems from their being more transparent to the uninitiated and therefore applicable on the basis of an explicit rationale which can be developed/understood by beginners, as opposed to the application of recipes which is often observed when more sophisticated tools are used.

In other words, during an initial period which could last up to several years, the topic and type of research for each young researcher could be determined to a large extent by the need to acquire and consolidate research competence more than by the need to investigate particular aspects of translation or interpreting. Beyond this period, I would hesitate to impose or

even recommend particular directions or research paradigms. I think descriptive, argumentative, experimental, theoretical investigations focusing on cognitive, social, linguistic, cultural or other dimensions can all contribute to better understanding of Translation. I do not believe in "turns" that set aside one direction to embrace another. I prefer researchers to choose investigation areas and topics as they wish, as long as they work systematically and rigorously. The total volume of research in the field is still small and studies in all directions and paradigms can contribute—further opportunities and motivations may be generated when society indicates needs through calls for specific investigations with associated funding.

At a later stage, when Translation Studies has a solid research tradition and a critical mass of active researchers, the time may come to prioritize efforts towards particular explorations and associated research techniques. But at this time, it is difficult to determine which dimension of Translation or its environment is most important to society at large or to translators and interpreters and which types of research efforts will be most productive or useful.

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