The implications of a sociological turn—methodological and disciplinary questions

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Over the last two decades, Translation Studies has begun to open up to broader contexts, explicitly giving space to the reflection of cultural and social factors which not only condition the selection, production and reception of translation, but also shed light on the specific role of the agents involved in the translation process. In the history of Translation Studies, several scholars have pointed to the high degree of social contextualization of translation, without, however, providing a coherent framework for the study of translation as a social practice. Various attempts over the last decade to present such models—e.g. Gouanvic (2007), Hermans (1999: 120ff., 2007a, b), Simeoni (1998, 2007), Buzelin (2007) or Wolf (1999, 2006, 2007)—have had recourse to approaches developed in sociology, thus contributing to the conceptualization of what can be called a "sociology of translation". [1] *It seems revealing that after the first period in the development of this sub-discipline, which particularly focused on the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu, we are now witnessing a strong focus on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. After a short glance at these contributions, I will present a series of stimulating studies coming from "outside" the discipline.*

Sociological approaches: what's up?

In his recent book *The conference of the tongues*, Theo Hermans (2007b) draws extensively on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. Hermans is not so much interested in demonstrating that translation *is* a social system. He rather argues that the constructivist outlook of social systems theory means the theory assumes that there are systems. He therefore tries to "redescribe translation using the terms and perspective of social systems theory" (ibid.: 111), thus aiming for the description of translation as a social system not as an ontological proof, but as the deployment of a conceptual apparatus. In addition, he explicitly aims for a more self-reflexive Translation Studies.

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[1] This paper will not deliver a "state of the art" of the sociology of translation; for this purpose, see Wolf 2007 and several papers in Pym, Shlesinger, Simeoni 2008.

Hans J. Vermeer, too, reflects on Luhmann in terms of translation. In his *Luhmann's 'Social Systems' Theory: Preliminary Fragments of a Theory of Translation* (2006), he sets out to interpret Luhmann's social system theory in its application to translation, especially from a *Skopos* perspective. He understands a general translation system as a special type of social system, and explores the interrelations of the various entities involved in a translation "action" (translator, commissioner, source text author, reader, etc.), which/who, in turn, form a set of interdependent systems in the environment of the overall translation system. Vermeer's central assumption is that in order to conceptualize translation as a (social) system, we must go beyond Luhmann's theoretical tools. For this purpose, he suggests an analysis on three levels: the microcosmic level of microphysical elements (processes and events), the mesocosmic level of the "real world of human beings", and the macrocosmic level of memetics, which applies to the replication, spread and evolution of memes (ibid.: 5-7). His main goal is "to show the indefinite complexity of translation and, as a consequence, the translator's freedom and responsibility, when (s)he accepts a commission" (ibid.: 9).

Another attempt to apply the Luhmannian social system theory is Sergey Tyulenev's "Why (not) Luhmann? On the applicability of the social systems theory to translation studies" (forthcoming, 2009). He stresses that Luhmann's theory can help us theorize translation in a broader sense. For this purpose, he suggests that translation may be regarded within three paradigms: translation as a system in itself, translation as a subsystem within a larger system, and translation as a boundary phenomenon, i.e., it can be studied in the context of relationship between the social system and the environment. Within this last paradigm, Tyulenev particularly discusses the potential of Even-Zohar's *Polysystem Theory* and Annie Brisset's *A Sociocritique of Translation* for such a view on translation.

One of the most appealing works coming from outside the field of Translation Studies is that of Martin Fuchs, sociologist and anthropologist at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. His most recent paper "Reaching out; or, Nobody exists in one context only. Society as translation" (Fuchs 2009) deals with social integration in society from a socio-anthropological perspective. He claims that social integration is based not on consensus but on difference, and that it takes place on the level of social interaction between integrative units through translation between their respective abstract or everyday languages or meanings, and between those meanings/languages and "concrete" practices. The different institutions, systems and milieus, discourses or social fields would not coexist and intersect if not through the mediation of translations. The notion of translation opens up the opportunity for a new understanding of social praxis, and of social life in general. This "social translation" approach is thus interested in the translation dimensions of social praxis. It might be compared with the

notion of translation as used in Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, which refers to mediations, displacements and assemblages not just between persons, but also between persons/humans and objects/non-humans, and to processes which are not just semiotic but also material (see e.g. Latour 2005).

Another fascinating approach worth mentioning is that of Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny, who have been working on "cultural translation" from a philosophical perspective (see Buden 2003, and especially Buden and Nowotny forthcoming, 2009). Similarly to Martin Fuchs, they conceive of translation as a social relation and a field of social practices. Their claim is that when thought of in terms of social practices rather than of rendition, an investigation into linguistic and translational processes escapes reduction to the paradigm of communication, which precisely suggests pre-existing "linguistic communities" that enable communication, on the one hand, and "failures of communication" that necessitate the work of translators, on the other. Instead, it has to start from an analysis of *different modes of address* that are established on the grounds of a heterolingual condition. Again this foregrounds linguistic and translational processes as being based on a social relation, namely that between the addresser and the addressee. However, it also allows for an analysis of different regimes of addressing. What Naoki Sakai calls the "regime of homolingual address" (as opposed to heterolingual address, Sakai 1997: 2) can thus not only be examined in terms of its theoretical and practical presuppositions, but also in view of its direct political and social implications regarding the ways that it configures and shapes the interrelations between different subjects and subject groups.

In his article "Die Übersetzung von Bildern. Das Beispiel von Pierre Bourdieus *La distinction*", Ulf Wuggenig (2008) from Lüneburg University, Germany, discusses the pictures (including those on the book cover) of 12 translations of Bourdieu's seminal work *La Distinction*. He combines methodologies from Sociology, Visual Arts and Translation Studies—even if in applying the latter he still widely follows a loss-and-gain imperative. His analysis aims to look more closely into "transnational translation processes" (ibid.: 165) and reveals the culturally specific strategies of publishing houses in terms of the in-/exclusion and arrangement of the book's visual material. One of the main issues of his analysis is a discussion of the reasons for the "mortality" (ibid.: 177) of some of the pictures in the various translations. It remains to be studied whether they can be correlated with the "mortality" of some central ideas in the translations of Bourdieu's text.

As we can see from these various thought-provoking examples, there is much fresh air coming especially from outside the discipline, which of course is one more argument in favor of fostering transdisciplinary work. Differences in scholarly expectations, scholarly discourse and mental perception should not be a hindrance in promoting conjoint studies on both theoretical and empirical levels.

Negotiating research questions with (and within) Translation Studies

The view of translation—from varying perspectives—as a social practice entails specific questions which, among others, relate to the ethical and sociopolitical responsibility of the agents involved in the translation process. If these questions are pursued, it is paramount that we take account of the shifting meanings attributed to the concept of translation as adopted within Translation Studies but also in other disciplines, as we have already seen in the approaches developed by Fuchs, Buden and Nowotny and, to a certain extent, Wuggenig. Once it is realized that students studying translation are not to be educated for the market—as several sectors in the discipline claim—but primarily for society, with all the implications of that, we also realize that this claim has far-reaching consequences. One is the effect on the concept of translation; another is the effect on the research domain. I would like to discuss the first of these in more detail.

A recent "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament" carries the title "Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment" (Europe 2008). The communication opens with the noble words "The harmonious co-existence of many languages in Europe is a powerful symbol of the European Union's aspiration to be united in diversity, one of the cornerstones of the European project. Languages define personal identities, but are also part of a shared inheritance. They can serve as a bridge to other people and open access to other countries and cultures, promoting mutual understanding". This aspiration sounds indeed like a challenging project. Undoubtedly there has been a lot of progress in the European Union in terms of minority languages; a striking example in this respect is the Macedo-Romanian language Aromunian, which would have continued to be seen by Greek authorities as a Greek dialect without the powerful intervention of the European Union and the subsequent recognition of Aromunian as a minority language with all its consequences. But what is the role of translation in this Communication? Quite—or not?—surprisingly, the term translation is primarily used in the chapter "languages and competitiveness" where it is meant to foster business relations, and secondly in the context of new technologies and media: "The media, new technologies and human and automatic translation services can bring the increasing of languages and cultures in the EU closer to citizens and provide the means to cross language barriers". And the chapter triumphantly closes with the words: "Finally, human translation is also of course a major way of accessing other cultures. As Umberto Eco said, 'The language of Europe is translation'".

What translation concept is meant here? Translation "for better understanding" between the EU citizens, of course—but how can this be handled when translation is seen as a mere instrument to guarantee communication from an obviously objective, unbiased perspective? Who translates what, for

which purpose, with which strategies? Such papers—and we can find many similar ones on the European Union's websites—create a mythical concept of translation, as the ultimate means to achieve a congruous co-existence of people with equal social and political rights. The everyday situation of migrants in the European Union is one of the shameful proofs of the failure of this translation concept.

Recently, the notion of translation has been used quite extensively in other disciplines (see e.g. Butler 2002, Bhabha 2004: 247f., Latour 2005, Renn 2006). I agree with Michael Cronin, who points out that the frequent use of translation as a metaphor is often accompanied by a lack of engagement with existing work in Translation Studies. Perhaps, he argues, this is partially due to the nomadic nature of the discipline: "It is not just the translating subjects of the discipline that are engaged in a nomadic practice as they translate; the discipline itself is nomadic in its disciplinary journeying from subject area to subject area" (Cronin 2000: 104). Umberto Eco, in one of his recent publications on theoretical and practical questions on translation, emphasizes that "rewriting[2] is certainly a case of interpretation, and is translation proper only in part, if not in the sense in which (on the basis of a critical interpretation of the original text) it has pretensions to conveying, not the letter of the original, but its 'guiding spirit' (whatever that means)" (Eco 2001: 117). And Harish Trivedi goes as far as to say: "Meanwhile, instead of a cultural turn in translation studies, we have on our hands a beast of similar name but very different fur and fibre—something called Cultural Translation" (Trivedi 2005: 255).

But is the danger as grave as that? Or hasn't the scenario sketched by those quotations become reality? Already in 2000—and not unlike Michael Cronin—Else Vieira stressed the "nomadic character" of the translation term:

> 'Nomadology' as an umbrella term subsumes translation and such cultural contacts as migration, colonization, education, the media, telecommunications, and the globalized economy. (Vieira 2000: 319)

Similarly, Lieven D'hulst critically discusses the "migration of concepts" and detects two possible paths: either "translation is a partial object of study for several disciplines, or a global object of study for one discipline that is a sort of 'interdiscipline' in itself" (D'hulst 2008: 222).

Consequently, if we see translation not least in the context of its social and political constraints, the question arises "who is the owner of the translation term?" I argue that banning a metaphorical variant of the translation notion—i.e. what has been called "cultural translation"—from the

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[2] Here, "rewriting" is not meant in André Lefevere's (1992) sense, but as a general metaphorical use of translation.

field of research of Translation Studies would ultimately mean rejecting any sort of interdisciplinary work in this respect. Interdisciplinarity, however, has been constitutive for the discipline from its very beginning. Once we take account of these two sets of problems—a better socio-political orientation of research and a re-definition of translation concepts—this plea must be taken seriously.

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