

Theoretical Foundations for Translation Pedagogy: Descriptive, Prescriptive, and Speculative (in Defense of the “Good Utopian”)

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Theory: A coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena; a proposed explanation whose status is still conjectural; the branch of a science or art that deals with its principles or methods, as distinguished from its practice; a particular conception or view of something to be done or of the method of doing it; a system of rules or principles; contemplation, speculation, guess, conjecture; hypothesis.

—*Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (2nd ed., 1987)

A STRAIGHTFORWARD, theory-based, general definition of the act of translation might be “Use different words to ‘say’ the same thing to the same effect. Say no more, say no less, say it the same way.” The definition would reflect Saint Jerome’s concerns over word-for-word versus sense-for-sense rendition (Letter to Pammachius) as well as the traditions of theological and romantic hermeneutics. It would also be compliant with, and fold into itself, the twenty-three-criteria “Framework for Standardized Error Marking” applied by the American Translators Association for evaluation in its certification exam (see “Rubric”), endorsing the first principle that what most matters in such assessment is the avoidance of any substantive change in meaning (*traduttore, traditore*) between source and target language texts while producing a natural, idiomatic, useful translation product. *In other words* (a prepositional phrase that illustrates Jakobsonian intralingual rendition), translation is a restatement or reformulation of a given content and the manner in which it was originally expressed for a particular purpose, which factors in Hans Vermeer’s *Skopostheorie*. On the surface of it, the proposition of translation is plain and manageable enough for it to occur every moment of every day; it is, after all, a sun-to-sun necessity in today’s “flat” world (Friedman). But those who think or theorize about the act of translation remind us that the paradox of its *sameness in difference* and *difference in sameness* is always disquieting, always problematic in the struggle to find compatibilities between dissimilar modes, manners, and conventions of expression. A simple numeric reformulation, such as $5 + 5 = 10$ or $4 + 6 = 10$, $6 + 4 = 10$, or $3 + 4 + 2 + 1 = 10$, and so on, illustrates heuristically how different languages may on occasion arrive at the “same” meaning; yet words are not numbers, and syntactic shifts with language—for example, “from the bottom of my heart” does not equal “from the heart of my bottom”; “wrong way” does not equal “way wrong”—do affect the meanings or outcomes as difference alters or undermines the notion of sameness.¹

Burton Raffel reminds us why “exact linguistic equivalents [*sameness / same sound / same syntax / same lexicon / same meaning*] are by definition nonexistent” (11); because

1. No two languages having the same phonology, it is impossible to re-create the sounds of a work composed in one language in another language.

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2. No two languages having the same syntactic structures, it is impossible to re-create the syntax of a work composed in one language in another language.
3. No two languages having the same vocabulary, it is impossible to re-create the vocabulary of a work composed in one language in another language. (12)

In his 1937 essay “The Misery and Splendor of Translation,” the Spanish thinker José Ortega y Gasset reminded us that “it is utopian to believe that two words belonging to different languages, and which the dictionary gives us as translations of each other, refer to exactly the same objects” (96). For Ortega, heavily influenced in this particular area of inquiry by the Germanic tradition of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and especially Friedrich Schleiermacher, there are two kinds of utopian at work in the field of translation. Both share a desire “to correct the natural reality that places men within the confines of diverse languages and impedes communication between them” (98). On the one hand,

[T]he bad utopian thinks that because it is *desirable*, [translation] is possible. Believing it to be easy is just moving one step further. With such an attitude, he won’t give much thought to the question of how must one translate, and without further ado he will begin the task. (98)

On the other hand,

The good utopian promises himself to be, primarily, an inexorable realist. Only when he is certain of not having acceded to the least illusion, thus having gained the total view of a reality stripped stark naked, may he, fully arrayed, turn against that reality and strive to reform it, yet acknowledging the impossibility of the task, which is the only sensible approach. . . . To declare its impossibility is not an argument against the possible splendor of the translator’s task. (99)

Because enough translators are indeed bad utopians, while others are subject to the pressures and contractual realities of too often having to behave as such—that is, translation problems must increasingly be resolved quickly and efficiently, since translations must be completed to meet tight deadlines—a primary task of translation pedagogy in American higher education should be to help develop translators who are good utopians, who give “much thought to the question of how must one translate.” The teaching of translation involves mentoring in methodology, which presupposes theory, interwoven diachronically and synchronically, that ranges from descriptive to prescriptive to speculative; all are important considerations for the practicing or would-be translator who benefits from being theoretically informed and therefore more self-critically and confidently engaged in the act of translation. Despite those who voice reservations, such as Gideon Toury, who “explicitly rejects any idea that the object of translation theory is to improve the quality of translations,” Susan Bassnett argues that “theory and practice are indissolubly linked, and are not in conflict. Understanding of the processes can only help in the production” (7, 43–44). The bibliography on such matters is extensive and growing.

Descriptive theory, which describes the process, type, or product of translation, dates back in the West at least to the Greeks and Romans and to statements such as the following by Cicero, who around 55 BCE had written (in another language), “If I render word for word, the result will sound uncouth, and if compelled by necessity

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I alter anything in the order or wording, I shall seem to have departed from the function of a translator” (qtd. in Bassnett 9). Saint Jerome, the patron saint of translators, reissued the caveat against verbatim translation sometime between 405 and 410: “If I translate word for word I produce nonsense, but if I have to change something in the order of the words or their sound I could be accused of failing in my duties as a translator” (48). An enduring challenge of translation pedagogy is teaching students how to use the words and phrasing of a source language text as a point of departure and as an anchor for meaning while simultaneously helping them pry themselves away from those words and wording so that they can restate or shift the meaning to a natural, idiomatic, and localized reexpression in a target language text (the real-world *skopos* of most nonliterary translation and indeed of most literary translation, which is part of the commerce of culture and therefore needs consumers to help publishers at least break even). Although the times and critico-theoretical terminology are different, the issue of word-for-word versus sense-for-sense (dependent on discourse typology and genre) endures, and Cicero and Saint Jerome, for example, historically situate both the modern American student and the instructor of translation within a tradition.

John Dryden, in his 1680 preface to his translation of Ovid’s *Epistles*, assigned three descriptive heads to translation, further contextualizing the tradition from which today’s translation pedagogy continues to be nurtured (even if only implicitly):

First, that of metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another. . . . The second way is that of paraphrase, or translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense. . . . The third way is that of imitation, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion . . . run[ning] division on the groundwork. (17)

In his 1813 treatise “On the Different Methods of Translating,” Schleiermacher demonstrates that “paraphrase is applied more in the field of scholarship, imitation more in that of the arts,” on his way to describing the only two “paths” available: “Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader” (42). With this, the cline between literal and liberal rendition is enriched by a different image, in which contemporary reconsiderations of foreignization, domestication, and “invisibility” find their roots. Descriptive theory of translation, of course, is varied and extensive, covering much more than the single genealogical strand selected above, and it is incumbent on those involved in translation pedagogy to include in their methodology many other figures, ranging, for example, from Roman Jakobson (intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation) to Vladimir Nabokov (for whom “the clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase” and who “want[s] translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity” [127, 143]) to Eugene Nida and Charles Taber (“dynamic equivalence” whereby the “the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors” [200–01]).

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Examples of normative theory in the West can also be found at least as far back as Horace, who around 10 BCE addressed the issues of fidelity and literal versus free rendition: “Do not worry about rendering word for word, faithful translator, but render sense for sense.” In his 1540 poetics “On the Way of Translating Well from One Language into Another,” the French translator Étienne Dolet provided a methodological blueprint, the fundamentals of which prove hard to improve on. His prescription consists of five recommendations:

1. The translator must understand to perfection the meaning and the subject matter of the author he translates.
2. The translator should know the language of the author he translates to perfection and he should have achieved the same excellence in the language he wants to translate into.
3. The translator should not enter into slavery to the point of rendering word for word.
4. The translator should be satisfied with common usage and not foolishly introduce novelties except in cases of dire need.
5. The translator should observe the figures of speech.

Excellent “how-to” advice comes from many key sources, including Martin Luther’s circa 1530 tenet that to translate into German is “to Germanize” the source language text. Pedagogically, this strategy is a compelling one for teaching translation: when translating most texts into American English, the fundamental task of the translator is to “Americanize” the foreign text, to localize it just as Luther did with the Bible. The political and aesthetic counterbalance to such domestication as the concealment or obliteration of the foreign source language text (i.e., to strategically “introduce novelties”) takes us back to what the Roman translations did with Greek texts and to Schleiermacher and back up through Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility*.

When we enter the realm of speculative theory, which moves beyond description and prescription, a thinker and good utopian such as George Steiner, a precursor to Venuti and his reminders about the importance of retaining foreignizing remainders in a literary or cultural translation, argues in his four-step hermeneutic movement—trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution—that the assimilative (domesticating and localizing) translations produced by stopping at incorporation call for a trailing corrective or adjustment in which, for example, the target language text is transformed (foreignized) “through pressure from [source language] phrasings” or Dolet’s “novelties” (Robinson, “Hermeneutic Motion” 98). On the one hand, the “incorporation” stage means that a good translation does not read like a translation, it does not call attention to its own status as such; on the other, “restitution” compensates for this ethical shortcoming, sleight of hand, and power play by flipping the coin of the realm upside down such that a good translation is one that does indeed remind the reader, even if subtly, of its status as such. Other examples of speculative theory, which is more conjectural regarding matters of translation, language, and intercultural communication, can be found in thinkers such as Walter Benjamin (the task of the translator is to reach out and release the potentiality of pure language, “which marks the point of interrelationship where languages converge and express what is beyond expression and history” [Bush 194]) and Octavio Paz (the

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first instance of translation is the source language text itself, and “translation and creation are twin processes” [160]).

The point is that translation pedagogy should involve more than mere instruction in the method (art, science, craft, mechanics) of moving a text from one language and culture to another. It is increasingly insufficient for an instructor of translation to simply be a person whose main credentials are limited to multilingualism. The teaching of translating and translation studies presupposes theoretical foundations that may be considered in at least descriptive, prescriptive, and speculative terms. Theory gives the translator more angles of repose, more options, more ways of conceiving and doing translation. It provides a historical context (Western and beyond, which exceeds the scope of this short essay) and a discourse by which to acknowledge, specify, and better cope with the complexities of the undertaking. Despite the fact that most, if not all, translators are guilty of falling at least occasionally into the category of bad utopianism, theoretical awareness characterizes Ortega’s good utopian, who is aware that, in the words of Leonardo Bruni, as translated by Lefevere, “a correct translation is . . . a great and difficult thing” (83). No less a requirement of translation pedagogy should it be that the instructor or mentor *also* be a good utopian, theoretically speaking, as he or she guides the student on a journey through landscapes as varied as theological and romantic hermeneutics and crowd-sourced, social-networked online translation; *skopos*; issues of “invisibility”; the politics of translation, nation building and rebuilding, and technologies and translation; and the poetics of writerly competition, disruption, damage control, and untranslatability, out of which Ortega’s “splendor” emerges often enough. As translation studies continues growing into “an exciting new area of study in the humanities . . . attracting undergraduate majors and graduate students, for whom it is becoming a bona fide field of scholarly endeavor” (Furman 4), it should never be enough that an instructor simply fulfill Dolet’s five methodological steps (even without acknowledging Dolet!), because it is theory-based translation pedagogy that helps anchor translation studies firmly in the humanities.²

Notes

1. As Nelly Furman writes, “Any bilingual person understands that translation cannot be a literal translation of words” (4). Yet we must remember that being bi- or multilingual does not a translator make.
2. There are many useful theoretical points of entry that, in addition to the theorists already mentioned, might include the following core works: Bassnett; Lefevere; Schulte and Biguenet; Baker, *In Other Words* and *Routledge Encyclopedia*; Robinson, *Western Translation Theory*; Gentzler; Munday; and Venuti, *Translation Studies Reader*.

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