

Translation Studies: An Introduction

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Some Personal Notes

The world of modern translation studies (TS) is for many, if not most, Bible scholars and Bible translators uncharted, even unknown territory. This observation should not surprise us. An academic curriculum for most Bible scholars and Bible translators would not have included a TS element. In my case I only discovered TS by accident in 1997 at a conference in Strasburg, France on multimedia translation. Sponsored by an agency of the European Union, the conference introduced me to some of the founders and leaders of TS, especially those connected with the Louvain, Belgium-based Centre for Communication, Culture, and Translation (CETRA). I recall leaving Strasburg deeply moved by the sincere interest and warm reception that the TS colleagues had given Bible scholarship in general and media translation in particular.

My Strasburg experience provided a kind of “awakening” for me as I realized that Bible translation had historical, theoretical, and practical ties with TS that had partly faded from view. I also felt that the fascination and appreciation of the Strasburg colleagues for Bible translation and scholarship had opened up doors for collaboration and mutual learning. Partly this TS fascination and appreciation for the Bible stemmed from the “newness” of TS and the antiquity of Bible translation, partly from the global spread of Bible work and from the astonishing range of data we bring from the field. To add to my delight I had discovered that Eugene Nida held a position of great honor among TS colleagues, partly as a Bible scholar and translator, partly as a linguist, partly as a polymath whose own interdisciplinary approach to translation matched the interdisciplinary approach of TS.

Upon returning home from Strasburg, I flipped through the writings of Nida to learn more about how Nida’s world had intersected with that of TS. Although I don’t recall finding any reference to TS as such in Nida’s work, I did find many references to scholars associated with TS. Nida knew and treasured, for example, the work of Katarina Reis and Hans Vermeer, two German translation scholars and teachers who developed what is known as *skopos* theory, an approach to translating that focused on the requirements of the target audience and language, especially on the need to reproduce in the target text the *skopos* or purpose of an original text. It was clear to me (at least) that I had located one of the streams of modern TS that had fed into what Nida would later call dynamic and functional equivalence.¹

While in Strasburg I also learned of a major research and learning opportunity organized for two weeks each September by the TS community, the so-called CETRA seminar that

¹ See Erroll Rhodes, trans., *Translation Criticism.—the Potentials and Limitations. Categories and Criteria for Translation Quality Assessment*. ABS and St. Jerome, 2000. (Katarina Riess, *Moeglichkeiten und Grenzen der Uebersetzungskritik. Kategorien und Kriterien fuer eine sachgerechte Beurteilung von Uebersetzungen* 1971). This translated work was a first effort to make German language TS resources available to a wider audience.

met in Misano Adriatico (Rimini), Italy. I attended the CETRA seminar in 1999 as a student, and then returned each year after that as a teaching staff member, with a special remit for media translation of the Bible. Thanks to support from UBS and SIL² colleagues, I was able to recruit students into a Bible track within the CETRA seminar. In 2007, this Bible track emerged on its own right as the Nida School for Translation Studies.

The Origin and Scope of Modern TS

Modern TS began as an academic discipline in the years after WW II when the mass displacement of populations and the first inklings of a united Europe hastened thinking on new language and culture policies. Part of this thinking included researching and better understanding the role of translation in helping to stabilize populations and cultures, in creating a kind of Euro-literature that transcended the boundaries of older nation states, and in overcoming centuries-old distinctions between dominant languages/peoples and marginalized languages/peoples. The modern state of Israel in this same period provided another seedbed for TS research. There translators were working around the clock to put classics of world literature into modern Hebrew so as to create a national Israeli literature, a so-called literary poly-system, to use the term that Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar³ coined.

If you look for TS as an academic and professional discipline today you will find it lodged often in western European universities and translation-training institutes, frequently in departments of comparative literature, for example, The Catholic University of Louvain, University College London, University of Manchester, and Tartu University in Finland. In the US, the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and SUNY-Binghamton support robust centers of TS work. The European Society of TS and now a counterpart in the USA, The American Translation and Interpreting Studies Association, bring TS scholars together at professional meetings. Leading journals include *Target*, *The Translator*, and *Babel*. Publishers such as Benjamins, Rodopi, and St. Jerome carry large inventories of TS monographs and reference works

The scope of TS is vast because TS is not a single field but a composite, interdisciplinary network (some say tangle) of data, methods, theories, and hypotheses from fields as diverse as cultural studies, modern language studies, post-colonial studies, gender studies, cognitive linguistics, anthropology, sociology, brain research, semiotics, and media and communications studies. Stefano Arduini, a distinguished linguist at the University of Urbino and the director of the San Pellegrino Institute for Translating and Interpreting (the venue for the annual Nida School) uses the metaphor of the rhizome, a kind of knotted bulb or plant root, to describe TS. What all TS scholars share in common,

² Phil Noss, former Translation Studies Coordinator for UBS; Phil Towner, former UBS Director of Translation Services (now Dean of the Nida Institute); Freddy Boswell, former Director of Translation Services for SIL International, now President and CEO, SIL International.

³ Itamar Even-Zohar, "Polysystem Theory." *Poetics Today* 1(1-2, Autumn 1997), 287-310.

however, no matter what specialized field they stand in, is a passion to research and better understand translations as instances of cultural mediation and human cognition.

Some Key Concepts and Positions of TS

Because of the composite, interdisciplinary nature of TS it is risky to generalize and isolate key concepts and positions. But here are some that (to me at least) stand for concepts and positions that are both representative of TS and of special interest to Bible scholars and Bible translators. They include 1) the ubiquity of translation; 2) the target orientation of TS; 3) the role of audience understanding; 4) a concern with the ethics of translation that includes a protest against the invisibility of the translator; 5) an understanding of translation as cultural mediation rather than as simply literary production; 6) an inclusive concept of translation that brings together a wide-ranging set of phenomena including literary, Bible, audiovisual, multimedia, technical, legal, and scientific translation, as well as film dubbing and subtitling, and conference interpreting, both consecutive and simultaneous.

1. Ubiquity of Translation

José Lambert, who along with figures such as Gideon Toury, Theo Hermans, and James Holmes is one of the founders of modern TS, still gives an annual presentation at the CETRA research seminar on the ubiquity of translation. He always begins by asking: Is there any institution, period of history, or field of human activity that does not include translation in some form? The answer seems to be No. Classic literature including sacred texts such as the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament rely heavily on translation for their dissemination. This is no less true of standard children's literature, for example, Grimm's fairy tales and Aesop's fables.

Wire services (AP, Reuters) that provide feeds for television, radio, internet, and news papers draw on translation and interpreting services to turn foreign language source material into mother tongue reports. Technical, scientific, touristic, and legal texts are regularly translated for global consumption. Without translation and interpreting services there would be no political and military institutions such as the European Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the United Nations. Nor would we have multi-national corporations such as General Electric, nor humanitarian agencies such as World Vision, nor international religious bodies such as churches and Bible societies. The arts and entertainment sectors regularly depend on dubbing, subtitling, superscripting, adaptation, rewriting and other translation strategies to communicate with global audiences.

TS has drawn an important consequence from this observed ubiquity of translation and interpreting: it has given translation the status of an object of academic research, worthy of the most careful and rigorous study and scrutiny from as many different vantage points and fields of interest as possible. By so raising translation to the status of a research object, TS has declared as obsolete a long-held (and still widespread notion) of translation and interpreting as derivative literature and discourse, less valuable than original literature and discourse. TS rejects any notion of translation and interpreting as products of untrained hack workers, destined for poor pay and invisibility. For TS,

translation and interpreting represent a universal and elevated form of human discourse, of self-disclosure, of cultural, moral and spiritual formation and mediation. The ubiquity and new status of translation has profound consequences for the ethics of translation as we will indicate below.

Point to Ponder: Given the alleged ubiquity of translation and interpreting, and the new status of translation as an object of scientific research for TS, are Bible societies and their supporting churches investing enough in the scientific study of (Bible) translation and interpreting as objects of research (as opposed to training, production, evaluation, testing, distribution and marketing)?

2. *Target orientation*

The above-mentioned *skopos* theorists Reiss and Vermeer (and now today Christiane Nord) helped steer our attention toward an important goal for translation: recreating in a target language the *skopos* or purpose of an original. In focusing attention on the purpose of a document, these theorists (who were also at the same time translation educators and trainers) helped us understand that translation includes not only a linguistic and cultural task but also a teleological one.⁴

If one goal of translation is transferring the purpose of a source text to a target text (in addition to transferring linguistic and cultural messages), then some adjustments in the information flow and architecture of a text are often necessary. A client once commissioned a translator to render into French a Finnish-language travel brochure that was designed originally to prompt Finnish-speaking people to visit their own country. The information in the Finnish source text fore-grounded the natural wonders of Finland, including the lush varieties of flora and fauna. The translator knew well the French-speaking target audience and realized that this audience would be less interested in the original's emphasis on Finland's vast evergreen forests, hiking trails, elk and reindeer herds, and cross-country skiing programs. So she rearranged the information to lay greater stress on Finland's extensive culinary delights, including cuisine based on the wild game, mushroom hoards, and berry fields lodged in Finland's evergreen forests.

The target orientation of TS means, however, more than just treating purpose as a goal of translational activity. It also means that the status of a target language and the needs of a target audience and target culture command our attention as translators as much as the status of the original and the needs and expectations of the original audience and culture. Bible societies and their translators will, I think, feel on familiar ground here since the target orientation of TS matches nicely the commitment of Bible societies to translate in functionally equivalent ways for heart languages.

One consequence of this target orientation is a leveling of the playing field in terms of minority and majority languages and cultures. If you study the language policy of the

⁴ It is my hunch (though I cannot develop the point here) that Eugene Nida picked up from *skopos* theory what became a kind of axiom (however problematic) for Bible translators, namely the idea that a translation should recreate in the target audience the same response as the original did in the original audience.

European Union⁵—heavily influenced by modern TS-- you will notice two things. Older distinctions between dominant (for example, German, French, English, Spanish) languages and so-called minority ones (for example, Catalan, Basque, Flemish, Finnish) have (in principle) disappeared. All languages, regardless of the number of speakers and the status of their cultures are (in principle) equal. To make this point even more obvious, the European Union Translation Commission has done away with the distinction between original source texts and translated target texts. European Union documents are prepared in a kind of Euro-English that goes through a machine translation first draft before ending up on the desks of mother tongue translators. Thanks to this process, no one language may claim the superior status of a source or original language.

Point to ponder: In developing translation priorities and policies, Bible societies may find it significant (or not) to study the consequences that TS has drawn from its position on language priorities and the merit of so-called minority languages. What might some of the consequences be for Bible translation?

3. Role of audience understanding

Related to the target orientation of modern TS is a deep respect for the power of audiences and markets to judge what actually functions as a translation. Gideon Toury formulated a classic hypothesis on this point: it is an audience that determines whether or not a translation functions as a translation.⁶ Toury was thinking especially of the power of modern Israeli reading audiences who since the end of the Second World War have been buying and consuming vast amounts of translated literature, especially Russian literature as part of a national effort to build a literary poly-system for the modern state of Israel. In his research Toury has noted the fluid state of translated literature in literary poly-systems.⁷ As audience tastes change so does the list of accepted translated texts within a poly-system.

One consequence of this hypothesis is interesting for Bible translation. It suggests that neither the credentials of the translator(s), nor the underlying translation theory, nor the branding of an authorizing agency, nor the price point, nor the binding, nor the endorsements count as much as audience expectations and acceptability. Intuitively, Bible societies know the power of an audience. They would not expect a King James Version-only church to accept the Good News Translation or the Contemporary English Version, or vice-versa. In fact, Bible translation offers *prima facie* evidence for another TS hypothesis about the power of an audience, the creation of pseudo-translations (originals that function in the mind of an audience as translations) and pseudo-originals (translations that function in the mind of an audience as original).⁸ A case in point is the position that the King James Version holds in some circles: it is not viewed as a

⁵ The European Union website (<http://europa.eu/>) is iconic in this regard. The 23 official languages are listed in no particular order. The language policy is given at <http://europa.eu/languages/en/home>.

⁶ G. Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, Benjamins, 1995, 23-39, 147-166.

⁷ G. Toury, "Literature as a Polysystem," *Hasifrut*, 18-19, 1-19. 1974. [Hebrew. Extensive English summary: i-iii.]

⁸ Toury, *ibid.*, 40-52.

translation but as a *de facto* original. The Latin Vulgate within the Roman Catholic Church functioned for centuries as a pseudo-original.

From the perspective of multimedia Bible translation and communication studies, the work of Paul Soukup, S.J. has advanced our understanding of the power of audiences in similar ways. His research into models of audience understanding examines critically, for instance, the one-way, bullet model of communication in which a sender (read “translator”) “shoots” information and meaning into the head of receiver. He contrasts the bullet model with a dialogic model of communication in which a sender (read “translator”) and a reader or viewer negotiate the relevance and meaning of information). Soukup points to the television remote control as an example of the power of audiences to shape their own programming.⁹

Point to Ponder: Where do Bible societies stand in regard to the modern discussion of the power of audiences? Are we closer to the bullet model of thinking or the dialogic one?

4. Ethics of translation

In 2001, TS scholar Anthony Pym edited a special edition of the journal *The Translator* which was devoted to the topic of the ethics of translation.¹⁰ This edition made it plain that the theme of ethics, raised provocatively already by Lawrence Venuti in 1998,¹¹ had engaged the attention of the TS guild. At the invitation of the UBS Translation Services Coordinator Phil Noss, Pym lectured on ethics and translation at the 2003 UBS Triennial Translation Workshop in Iguassu Falls, Brazil. Subsequently, Noss’s successor, Phil Towner, launched a UBS seminar on the topic, one of the fruits of which is the recent publication by Esteban Voth,¹² UBS translation coordinator for the Americas.

In its simplest form, the ethics of translation deals with the decisions (and their assumptions and after-effects) that translators, clients, translation agencies, Bible societies, churches, publishers, and even consumers make as they design, implement, and respond to translation policies, translation projects, translation marketing strategies, and translation resourcing.

Translation policies establish, for example, norms such as similarity, fidelity, and equivalence and strategies such as adaptation, re-writing, paraphrasing, or (in Bible societies) functional and formal equivalence approaches; they also determine priorities among products (books, films, audio tapes, television programming) and languages and people groups (minority and majority) determined “worthy” and “needy” of translation. Translation projects make decisions about the composition, training and oversight of

⁹ P. Soukup, S.J., “Understanding Audience Understanding,” in P. Soukup, S.J. and R. Hodgson, Jr., eds., *From One Medium to Another. Communicating the Bible through Multimedia*. ABS and Sheed & Ward, 1997, 91-107; “Communication Models, Translation, and Fidelity,” in *Fidelity and Translation. Communicating the Bible in New Media*. ABS and Sheed & Ward, 219-231.

¹⁰ Anthony Pym., ed., *The Return to Ethics*. Special issue of *The Translator*. St Jerome Publishing, 2001.

¹¹ Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation. Toward an Ethics of Difference*. Routledge, 1998.

¹² <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=754>.

teams, and about the scope of a project and its deadlines; translation marketing strategies determine when, where, and how to present a translation product to a consuming public in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Translation resourcing must decide how to market translation to philanthropic communities that are increasingly “investment” minded and want some level of involvement in the deploying of their investments. Translation resourcing must decide how to distribute ever scarcer resources among a multitude of translation projects and interests.

In each of these areas, decisions are made with clear ethical components. Lawrence Venuti, for instance, has raised the issue of the inevitable invisibility of the translator with all of the consequences for the low pay and diminished social and professional status of translators and interpreters.¹³ Himself an award-winning translator of Italian literature into English, Venuti presses home the point that translators are authors in their own right, and that publishers and commissioning agents owe the same respect to the translator of a work as they do to the original author. After all, translators create new works that would otherwise not be available.

Point to Ponder: Do you agree or disagree that there is an ethical component within Bible translation? How would you assess Venuti’s assertion that a translator has the same right to recognition as an original author? How would Venuti’s position affect Bible society policies that (often) preclude the identification of translators and translation team members?

5. Translation and cultural mediation

Translation is often thought of as a linguistic and literary activity which of course it is. But translation is also an act of cultural mediation. Consider the case of Shakespeare. Reviewing John Pemble’s *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France*¹⁴, Lenard R. Berlanstein writes: “The first French translation of Shakespeare’s works appeared in 1746, and the term “*shakespeareien*” entered the French language in the 1780s. For the next two centuries, French cultural leaders would contend with Shakespeare’s genius and its import for their own cultural traditions... John Pemble argues that Shakespeare was ‘crucial to the long and painful adjustment of French consciousness to a world in which France and the French were no longer paramount.’”¹⁵

One way that translation functions as a form of cultural mediation is by presenting translated works to an established literary poly-system. Such is the case with French translations of Shakespeare that entered the French literary canon in the eighteenth century. Another way is through the creation of what Antony Pym has described as the ‘inter-culture.’¹⁶

¹³ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility. A History of Translation*. Routledge, 1995.

¹⁴ Continuum, 2005.

¹⁵ <http://www.h-france.net/vol5reviews/berlanstein.html>.

¹⁶ Anthony Pym, *Negotiating the Frontier: Translators and Intercultures in Hispanic History*. St. Jerome, 2000.

An inter-culture is an ideological and material space that is created and inhabited by translators who must live and work in a world they create when they bring together two unrelated languages, cultures and people groups in a single space--a translator's (or translation team's) mind and workshop. An inter-culture is neither the source culture nor the target culture, but the meeting ground for both. Pym's analysis of Bible translation in medieval Spain--a venue that brought together Christian, Jewish and Islamic scholar-translators-- sparked the hypothesis of translational inter-cultures.

One effect of an inter-culture is to transform, through translation, both a source and target culture, or at the very least our understanding of those cultures. The Lakota Sioux translation project of the Nida Institute is a case in point. The preparation of a Scripture portion combining prophetic texts on God's care for the poor and marginalized with short devotionals by Lakota pastors created an inter-cultural space (literally the basement of a local Lutheran church!) inhabited by the translation team, community checkers and the Bible society consultants. Out of that inter-culture came a Scripture portion that treated the Sioux people, not as outsiders and heathen in need of purging from traditional culture before they could be redeemed, but as part of God's people, not *in spite of*, but *because of* their Lakota heritage. Out of that same inter-culture in the basement of a Lutheran church came transforming moments for the dominant culture. Lakota Sioux translator and community activist Rosalie Little Thunder spoke to an American Bible Society fundraising event about how the portion had validated traditional Lakota culture and instilled new pride and hope into the team and their communities. In her presentation, Rosalie Little Thunder met not unexpectedly with mixed responses. Some attendees' spoke about how Rosalie had helped them overcome their own cultural biases toward native Americans; other attendees felt less inclined to address the issues of cultural biases.

Point To Ponder. Would you agree or disagree that Bible Societies represent the kind of inter-cultures that Pym is describing? If Bible societies do represent inter-cultures, are there any implications of this role for our own ethics of translation?

6. *What is Translation?*

When Doug Douglas Robinson published in 1997 *What is Translation? Centrifugal Theories and Critical Interventions*,¹⁷ he took a snapshot of a decade of TS research into definitions of translation as a *process*. Looking over the field, he found definitions as diverse as cultural mediation, manipulation of literature, rewriting, word substitution, and re-presentation. Other surveys from this period found wide-ranging definitions of translation as a *product*, definitions that identified everything from books, audio-tapes, films, television programming, art work, and artistic performances as the material expression of translation.¹⁸

¹⁷ Kent State University Press, 1997.

¹⁸ Yves Gambier and Henrik Gottlieb, eds., *Concepts, Practices, Research: Papers presented at two conferences held Sept. 26-27, 1997, near Rimini, Italy and Oct. 15-16, 1998, Berlin, Germany* Benjamins, 2001.

In the years since these and other surveys, the question What is Translation? has yielded ever more sophisticated analyses and definitions of translation as process and product. Today researchers from TS and Bible translation regularly ask, for example, What is a translation norm?¹⁹ What is translation epistemology?²⁰ and What is translation methodology?²¹

Behind this granular approach to translation that is broadening our understanding of translation as process and product lie several factors. One is the kind of descriptive research conducted by TS into all the phenomena that have historically functioned as translations, whether they were called translations or not. Another is the brute market forces that demand translation media products (including Bibles) that go beyond printed books.²² Another is the active audience phenomenon, which Gideon Toury and Paul Soukup have so solidly researched from the perspectives of comparative literature and communications studies, respectively. Another is research into secondary orality, literacy, and intelligence that make it plain that humans depend on many media and forms of expression, not just reading and writing, for information, education, and spiritual formation.

I believe that there is another factor involved, one that goes back to work that connected translation and semiotics (the study of signs, sign-systems, and meaning-making).²³ This body of research commended to us a view of translation that treated translation as the exchange of meaning not just between two natural languages, say, biblical Hebrew and modern English, but as an exchange of meaning between any two sign systems, say between novel and its film adaptation, between speaking and interpreting in sign language, and between biblical text and the studio and performing arts.

One postulate of a semiotic approach to translation is that in principle all sign systems are equally valid modes of expression within their own contexts and limitations. The dance of honey bees is as perfect a communication tool for hungry honey bees as is modern spoken French for French-speaking peoples. Of course in practice, translators and their clients (at least since the Gutenberg revolution) have privileged one sign system—writing—and one material expression—the book. But a semiotic approach to translation would query this privilege especially when and if it means that resources earmarked for

¹⁹ Christina Schaeffner, ed., *Translation and Norms*. Multilingual Matters, 1999.

²⁰ Anthony Pym, "On Historical Epistemologies of Bible Translating," in P. Noss., ed., *The History of Bible Translation*, vol. 1. Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2007, 195-215

²¹ Lourens de Vries. "Introduction to Section III: Methodology of Bible Translation" in P. Noss, ed.; *The History of Bible Translation*, vol. 1. Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2007, 267-278.

²² Logos Software is an example of a for-profit company that has specialized in the development and marketing of digital Scripture resources.

²³ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, 1976; Umberto Eco and Siri Nergaard, "Semiotic Approaches to Translation," in Mona Baker and Kirsten Malmkjaer, eds., *Routledge Dictionary of Translation*. Routledge, 1998, 218-222. Towards the end of his career, Eugene Nida began to integrate social-semiotics into his own work. See Eugene Nida and Jan de Waard, *From One Language to Another*. Nelson, 1986; Robert Hodgson, Jr., "Semiotics, Fidelity, and New Media Translation," in Paul Soukup and Robert Hodgson, eds., *Fidelity and Translation. Papers Read at the TTW 1997, Mérida, Mexico*. ABS and Sheed & Ward, 1997, 233-248.

translation services are primarily channeled into printed products rather than multimedia ones.

Point to Ponder: Do you agree or disagree with an approach to (Bible) translation that would extend the concept of translation to media products as well as print products? What difference would such an extension make to Bible societies as they set translation policies and priorities?

Conclusion

Modern TS provides a powerful framework of research and critical thinking that illuminates the task of Bible translation with new approaches, methods, models, theories and hypothesis. For its part, Bible translation offers modern TS a treasure trove of historical experience and contemporary inter-cultural fields of work and data that can test and help revise the work of modern TS. One of the goals of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship is to support the interaction and collaboration between TS, Bible translation and Bible scholarship.

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