in patient detail, the ‘double bind’ of translation as both impossible and necessary. Perhaps no other contemporary thinker has lavished such attention on the eminently hermeneutical problems and paradoxes of language, meaning and translation.

See also:

BIBLE, JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN; CULTURAL TRANSLATION; CULTURE; DECONSTRUCTION; ETHICS; INTERPRETIVE APPROACH; TRANSLATABILITY

Further reading


THEO HERMANS

History

Interest in the history of translation has been growing steadily since the early 1990s. Woodworth (1998) provides a comprehensive overview of developments up until 1995; this entry focuses on developments from 1995 onwards.

Like most fields within the humanities and social sciences, history has taken a ‘cultural turn’ under the influence of postmodernism. There has been a shift from a (presumably) factual and objective, Eurocentric, top-down history, concerned with great men, great ideas and discrete political events and nations, to a history that is seen as narrative in nature, subjective, bottom-up, concerned with either local or worldwide systems, with ordinary people, popular culture, and the development of social institutions across political borders and over longer periods of time. As a result, the ‘great men of history’ approach (Cary 1963) has given way to studies of individual translators considered in their larger social, political or cultural context (Wilhelm 2004b). The individual translator is now seen as representative of a larger social group, for example middle-class Spanish participants in the conquest and governance of South America (Fossa 2005). There has been a concomitant tendency to take into account issues such as GENDER AND SEXUALITY (Krontiris 1992). POSTCOLONIAL contexts (Tymoczko 1999a) and the interplay between history and CULTURE (Frank 1992). Two related recent developments include examining paratexts (prologue, epilogue, notes, etc.) as data for historical research (Lavigne 2004; St André 2004) and looking at the role of translation in the writing and shaping of history (Payás 2004; Bastin and Echeverri 2004).

Aims and methods

Despite the growing volume of literature on translation history since the early 1990s, there have been few attempts at reflecting on how and why the history
of translation should be researched and documented. Scattered individual articles have appeared, more often asking questions such as ‘what is the history of translation?’ than answering them, or simply calling for more studies (Berman 1984; D’hulst 1991; Lambert 1993; Pym 1992b; Bastin 2004). The one salient exception is Pym’s Method in Translation History (1998). Pym argues that a history of translation should focus on translators rather than texts, address the social context and be relevant to the present. He gives concrete and detailed advice on how to locate, compile and interpret the material necessary to achieve those aims. For example, Pym suggests the use of CORPORA as a methodological tool to systematize data for historical analysis, although this suggestion pulls him away from the translator and towards bibliographic research of translations. His discussion of the need for reliable data harks back to Bragt’s (1989) call for such work and puts the spotlight on resources such as UNESCO’s Index Translationum, a database of titles in translation which was begun in the 1930s. Originally covering just five languages in six countries, and with a hiatus in publication due to World War II, the Index Translationum expanded rapidly in the 1950s and an online version has been available since 2000. There are, however, some inaccuracies in the information provided, and the almost total lack of records dealing with translations into certain languages (most notably Chinese) means that such resources must be used with caution, bearing in
mind potential inbuilt biases and cross-checking with other sources whenever possible (see Foz and Serrano 2005 for insights into the problems and pitfalls of compiling bibliographies of translations from databases).

Scope

The scope of a history of translation concerns questions relating to the boundaries of legitimate inquiry: What counts as a translation? Who counts as a translator? What other types of activities, either associated with translation (such as editing, printing, publishing) or with translators (their background, finances, other professional activities, etc.), can or should be discussed when writing a history of translation? Historically, translation has not been pursued as a career (Pym 1998), and many works that were considered translations at the time they were produced would not be considered so by current professional standards. To what extent do we wish to use modern criteria to evaluate the past? If we choose to be more inclusive, what are the implications for the contemporary relevance of a history of translation? Finally, the role of PSEUDOTRANSRATION; ADAPTATION, summary and other grey areas needs to be tackled.

Due to the lack of consensus around these issues, and to practical concerns regarding delimitation and focus (a comprehensive history of translation would involve countless languages, be unmanageably long and probably unreadable), in practice each historian draws their own boundaries.

History of translation theory and criticism

Many historians of translation are attracted to writing the history of translation CRITICISM and theory rather than of translation proper, perhaps because such works form a relatively restricted set. Some have dealt with the development of ideas in one geographical region over a limited period of time. D’Hulst (1990), for example, focuses on the history of translation in France, and Balliu (2005a) on Russia. A pan-European approach, generally from Greco-Roman times until the early twentieth century, has also been popular (Ballard 1992; Robinson 1997c).

Steiner (1975/1992) combines a history of European translation theory along with his own theoretical model of translation. Steiner is not alone in combining historical research and theoretical arguments of his own; indeed, the potential for a history of translation theory to offer useful insights or correctives to the development of contemporary or future theoretical models is one of its strengths. Such a use of history can be traced as far back at least as Johnson’s use of translation history to advocate and justify free translation (Johnson 1759/1963:211–17). Venuti (1995a), too, uses historical material to advance a theoretical argument, and critics of that work have also used historical data to challenge his theory (Pym 1996a). Gile (2001) is unique in tracing the history of research into conference interpreting.

History of translation practice
Although some fairly ambitious works covering a wide geographic and temporal area have been attempted (Kelly 1979), historians working individually commonly use delimiters from political history, such as the nation (Delisle 2005). An example can be seen in Wyler (2005), who focuses on the Brazilian tradition. Such studies may be further restricted in terms of time period, as is the case in Milton and Euzebio (2004), who focus on the 1930s–1950s, also within the Brazilian context. The medieval and early Renaissance period in Europe seem to have attracted a great deal of attention, although this was perhaps more true in the late 1980s and 1990s (see Woodsworth 1998).

Other studies tend to be even more sharply focused, often on the works of a particular writer or one particular text (Foz and Serrano 2005; Léger 2004). Such studies frequently touch on the issues of RETRANSATION and RELAY (St André 2003a). Moving the spotlight from the author to the translator, Moyal (2005) discusses how Guizot, a French Restoration translator, used his translations of SHAKESPEARE and Gibbon to advance his ideological agenda in France; Wilhelm (2004b) looks at Mme de Staël and the emergence of liberalism, while St André (2004) situates the translator George Staunton
within British debates on the nature of law and Chinese society.

Greek and Roman classics, despite having been translated several times through European history, have attracted surprisingly little attention to date in translation studies, although endless debates over the ‘best’ or ‘proper’ way to translate Homer echo down the ages (see, for example, Arnold and Newman 1914; see CLASSICAL TEXTS). By contrast, translation of the BIBLE was one of the first areas to attract the attention of twentieth-century historians (Norlie 1934) and remains popular today (Sneddon 2002; Delisle 2005). Translation of the Bible often merges into other areas of historical inquiry, such as LITERARY TRANSLATION (Barnstone 1993), print culture (Van Kempen 1997) and TERMINOLOGY (Prickett 1993). The translation activities of missionaries have also begun to receive attention (Rafaël 1993; Demers 2004; Lai 2007). Perhaps because both the Jewish and Islamic traditions insist that believers recite holy texts in the original language, there has been less written on the history of translation in these religions, although there have been some studies of the translation of the QUR’AN (Bobzin 1993; Versteegh 1991). The translation of Buddhist scriptures has attracted more attention (Zacchetti 1996; Cheng 2003; Tajadod 2002; see CHINESE TRADITION).

In general, the history of translation has focused on literary (Corbett 1999; Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2004) and religious texts. However, a few other areas have received coverage, most notably science (Montgomery 2000; see SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL TRANSLATION).

Due to its ephemeral nature, the history of interpreting has received relatively little attention, although there have been a few articles on the history of CONFERENCE INTERPRETING (Keiser 2004; Baigorri-Jalón 2005), at least one book (Roland 1999), and some interesting uses of indirect documentation to study the role of interpreters in pre-modern society (Demers 2003; Karttunen 1994; Kaufmann 2005; Lung and Li 2005).

Moving outside Europe

Sánchez and Pinilla (2004) note that certain traditions in Europe, such as the Portuguese tradition, are relatively neglected. Scattered articles indicate that various other cultures have rich and varied historiographical traditions in translation (Baccouche 2000), but because of the lack of translation of scholarly articles into European languages, they remain little known to the Western reader. A notable exception is Bandia (2005) on Africa. Articles concerning the history of translation criticism in China and Asia have also begun to appear in English (Yu 2000; Cheung 2006; Hung and Wakabayashi 2005b; see also SOUTHEAST ASIAN TRADITION). The Chinese have a highly developed historiographical tradition which has long featured the history of translation to and from Chinese as a significant area of research. Chen (1975) collects together many significant essays from 1895 to 1965, including works on the history of the translation of Buddhist texts and the translation of Western scientific works into Chinese. An entire book is dedicated to the history of translation in Central Asia from the remote past down to the thirteenth century.
(Maitiniyazi 1994), and many articles have been published on the translations by the Jesuits in the Ming and the Qing dynasties (Li 2000, 2001).

A ‘Canadian School’?

Credit for fostering some of the most recent developments in translation history must be given to several members of the Canadian Association for Translation Studies, including Jean Delisle, Judith Woodworth, Georges Bastin and Paul Bandia. In 2004 and 2005 they produced two special issues of META devoted to the history of translation, plus an edited volume based on the special theme for their 2004 annual meeting ‘Translation and History’ (Bastin and Bandia 2006). They have also been responsible for pioneering work on the history of translation in Central and South America (Milton and Euzebio 2004; Payás 2004; Bastin and Echeverri 2004; Fossa 2005).

The Canadian School has also led the way in collective approaches, but with mixed results. A FIT project launched in the 1960s languished for some years before eventually coming to partial fruition as Delisle and Woodworth (1995), which opted for a selective and representative approach rather than the grand narrative of
world history that was originally envisaged. Baker (1998) and the present volume collect essays on various regions, but no attempt is made to connect them together.

Reflections on the practice of translation history

There has been a concerted effort to argue for the increased visibility and recognition of translators through the examination of their influence in one culture or in a wide variety of cultures over one millennium (Delisle and Woodsworth 1995). This type of history may be perceived as a sort of ‘lobbying’ by a professional organization to show the world that translation matters and that translators should therefore be treated better. However, this desire to celebrate the role of the translator threatens to turn all history of translation into hagiography. In a curious way, the history of translation today resembles early twentieth-century American history, which uncritically celebrated the founding fathers. To date, few historians of translation have followed in the footsteps of revisionist American historians such as Beard (1925). There is a need for critical reflection on what uses translation has and may be put to, either by the translator, the client, or the reader. The history of translation is inevitably bound up with ethical considerations (see ETHICS) and must ultimately address questions such as why we are writing the history of translation, who the intended audience of this history is, and what possible impact our research might have, both on our evaluation of the past actions of other people and on our future plans.

See also:

BIBLE, JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN; CENSORSHIP; CLASSICAL TEXTS; PSEUDOTRANSLATION; QUR’ÄN; RELAY; RETRANSLATION; REWRITING.

Further reading


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