TRANSLATION THEORY AND THE PROBLEM OF EQUIVALENCE

Mariano GARCÍA-LANDA
Intérprete independiente
Doctor en Traducción, Sorbonne Paris III
Email: glanda@compuserve.com

A theory is an ensemble of concepts which explains a part of reality. Theories are not necessary but they are very useful. Mankind has lived for thousands of years without knowing physics but it is useful to know physics, you can drive cars and have electricity and computers and telephones. Medicine men have cured or killed humans for thousands of years but it is useful to have hospitals and laboratories and drugs and all that the medical science has created, you can live longer and better. People have translated for thousands of years, nowadays half the planet is busy translating what the other half says. The XXth century is being called many names, the best name is the "century of translation". Never before in the course of human history, have so many translated the words of so many. But believe or not, we still have no theory of translation, no science of translation although thousands of pages are being written about particular aspects of the translation activity. Practitioners, teachers and clients, we all live with wrong ideas about what translating is. Millions of people still believe that there is such a thing as a literal translation. And they pay for literal translations and then they pay again for a rewriting into journalistic language of that literal translation. We need a science to know that all translations must come already "rewritten", because all professional translations are made, not in the abstract, not in the void, but for somebody, for the professor of translations, for a revisor, for the client, preferably for a reader or a group of readers. We need a science that tells us that you can only translate for your reader, for the people we are going to read your translation, like any other writer. We need a science but there is no such a science. Much is written on translation, sometimes useful even interesting, but there is no translation theory on sight as Sandra Halverston, of the University of Bergen, writes in her article "The Concept of Equivalence in Translation Studies: Much ado about Something" , published in "Target 9:2.", a very serious review. It is the most intelligent observation written on translation in the last 50 years. Sandra Halverston says that none of the things which claim nowadays to be theories can explain equivalence in translation. And, therefore, they are not theories of translation.

The problem with equivalence is this. We know that equivalence is the real thing in translation, that there is no translation if there is no equivalence between the original text and the translated text. And we know of course that equivalence exists, that is not the real problem. The real problem is to explain how. A translation theory should do exactly that as its main task. It has to explain many other secondary things but to explain equivalence is the first and most important thing.

I propose to explain equivalence in the following two theoretical moves:

First move: let us consider translating as another way of speaking. Explanation: there are many ways of speaking, many "language games", as Wittgenstein would say: we speak to explain, to cheat, to convince, to impress, to win votes, or we speak to say again what somebody has just said in another language and that is translating. This is our first move. And included in this first move is the revelation that speaking is using sign systems to produce and convey messages, and that therefore, as Montaigne wrote, to write is another way of speaking. There are three ways of speaking: talking orally, talking to yourself and talking to a piece of paper. That is included in our first move.

Second move: Speaking is using a sign system to produce speech perceptions using the possibilities of perceptual systems. Explanation: My perceptual system allows me to hear noises and also to hear noises which are being modulated in such a way that they become "signs". A sign is a noise which forces me to think, not of itself, but of absent things. Sign systems (also called 'languages') are, therefore, perceptual systems. PAVLOV, the man with the salivating dog, remember? calls them, second degree signals. Let us call them "social perceptual systems". And this is the main tenet of our second move: to speak is to use social perceptual sign chains (which come from sign systems) to produce second degree perceptions, which are different from the sign chains. This is the heart of our theory. People produce perceptions when they speak. Speaking is producing perceptions with sign chains. But perceptions are different from the signals which produce them. Therefore, speech perceptions produced with sign chains in speech acts are different from these sign chains. That is why we can produce the same perceptions with different signs of the same sign systems. We can say that our sign systems are built in such a way that the same perception can be produced with different sign chains. This the principle of repeatability enunciated by Paul Ricoeur in his book Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

Now we can construct a theory of translation by simply saying : translating is to speak again to re-produce the same perceptions with a given sign system that somebody has previously produced with signs of another sign system. It is as simple as that. Now we have a conceptual system which allows us to explain equivalence as the identity of two speech perceptions produced with different sign structures.

Please note that in this summing up of the theory, we never use words like "meaning" or "sentences" or "utterances" or " languages". We go beyond linguistics to a territory where there is only people speaking, that is, producing perceptions. This is not a linguistic theory, it is a perceptual theory of speech.

The rest of the theory consists of developing a model of the speech act which shows how speech perceptions are produced. Let us call it the First Speech Act. The model describe how some one, the Speaker, has a Speech Perception which he wants to transmit to somebody else, the Hearer, and he does so by producing a series of sign chains in a social field integrated by three systems, the system of signs, the system of knowledge and the system of social rules. The Hearer understands what the Speaker is trying to say and this means that he, the Hearer, produces a Speech Perception which has to be identical to the Speech Perception the Speaker wanted to convey. There must be identity, otherwise there is no comprehension. Now, the facts of social life shows that society

functions, therefore there is comprehension, and therefore there must be identity between what people say and what people understand. It is useless and a bit silly, a waste of time really, to pretend for a moment that there is no possibility of comprehension. There are of course misunderstandings but they are elucidated. Speech comprehension is not made out of incommunicable subjective experiences. True, natural perceptions are private experiences in all animal species, except in our species because we have language (sign systems) which allow us to discuss whether what you have seen or heard is the same as what I have heard or seen. We share experiences and that is why they become public property. The same applies, only more so, to speech perceptions. They are what, among others, Searle 95 calls "objectivized subjective experiences".

The main thing is that there must be perceptual identity between what I mean and what you understand. Can you deny, my dear reader, that you are getting my point right now? Identity is communication. No identity, no communication. And if there is identity between what I say and what you understand, than there is identity between what that Speaker or Writer says and what the interpreter or translator understand and what they resay and what their clients understand. There can be no doubt about it. How to explain it?

We just did. We try it again.

First Speech Act: The Speaker/Author speaks to say something (Speech Perception 1 = SP1) and this something is understood by the Interpreter/Translator who produce a Speech Perception 2 which is identical to SP1. Allow me to write this in shorthand to see clearly what I mean:

(1) SP2 = SP1

Let us call (1) the principle of identity or of comprehension in normal speech.

Second Speech Act: the interpreter/translator opens his mouth or his keyboard to resay SP2 (what they have understood, which is equal to SP1) using another sign system and addressing a public who produced a SP3. If SP3 is equal to SP1 there is "translation", that is, there is communication between people using different sign systems.

(2) SP3 = SP1

Let us call (2) the principle of identity or of communication in translation theory.

Translation theory allows us to see translation as the relationship of two Speech Acts in different sign systems which share the same Speech Perceptions.

This is the first stone of translation theory. On this stone one can build many things. Without it there is no theory. Let me finish with an anecdote. I developed this theory for the first time in my Doctoral Sorbonne thesis in 1978 but the first time it was presented to the public was in the Mons Interpreters School in 1979. Since then I have tried to develop its possibilities in several articles. See my bibliography below. This brief declaration is a development of a presentation made at the recent World Congress of the International Translators Federation, held in the Mons Interpreters' School in August 1999.

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