



Our method of questioning. Session 7 - Directions for Research

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► To cite this version:

Annegret Sturm. Our method of questioning. Session 7 - Directions for Research. Tralogy II. Trouver le sens : où sont nos manques et nos besoins respectifs ?, Jan 2013, Paris, France. 6p. hal-02497950

HAL Id: hal-02497950

<https://hal.science/hal-02497950>

Submitted on 4 Mar 2020

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TRALOGY

Our method of questioning

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TRALOGY II - Session 7
Date d'intervention : 18/01/2013

Interdisciplinary research has now been for a long time the buzz word in translation studies. Translation scholars get more and more interested in psycholinguistics, cognitive sciences and the neurological bases for the unique capacity that allows us to transfer meaning from one language to another. The question, however, is: Do Translation Studies really provide us with the sufficient fundamentals in order to construct an empirical methodology on them? Some research is still trying to make translation a research subject of other areas rather than developing a genuine research domain. Translation has a hard time emancipating from this role and using other disciplines' methodologies efficiently for its own purposes. Krings' statement that "research into the translation process is mostly occupied with generating hypotheses rather than testing hypotheses" is, although being made in 1986, still true. This paper advocates that it is high time to live up to the potentials of our questions. If we conceive translation as text engineering, we should have the same aspirations as engineers would have: the message we create should work AND we should be able to explain why – questions mere speculation cannot answer. Translation process research has done the first step towards filling the gap by integrating eye-tracking and key-logging methodology and by developing a sound tradition of triangulation (Hansen 2006). Among our sister discipline linguistics, pragmatics are now experiencing an empirical turn – a development translation studies could mirror (Noveck & Sperber 2004).

http://webcast.in2p3.fr/videos-our_method_of_questioning



"What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning."
-Werner Heisenberg

1. Do not ask what interdisciplinarity can do for you, ask what you can do for interdisciplinarity

Bilingualism is no longer an exotism, but a characteristic of our time. At the time of writing, more than 7000 languages are spoken in the world (glottology.org). As growing up with the internet, growing up bilingual is no longer an exception, but increasingly a day-to-day reality for generations to come. What does bilingualism do to the brain? How do bilingual children develop syntax, how do they deal with abrupt language switches, in which respects do they differ from monolinguals of the same age? These questions have elucidated a great number of researches, in such diverse fields as second language acquisition, neurolinguistics, psycholinguistics and computer-aided language processing. Almost unsurprisingly, the "invisible man" among those disciplines is translation. Now, there are generally two reasons for invisibility, and I will argue that both of them apply to translation.

Invisibility can be a characteristic inherent to a thing. Translation in itself is invisible: the translator is the personified rewording mechanism, the voice that reports what already has been said, shadow of sounds. But this is less a state of the world, but a state of the world we are aspiring. If change, so we assume, can be made invisible, it is not true change anymore. The imperceptible change is the humus on which equivalence grows. As translators, we strive for acceptance of our work which we hope to find in equivalence. The achievement of this goal results in the invisibility of the translator: invisible work can only come from invisible workers.

Most times, however, invisibility lies – as so many things – in the eye of the beholder. Atoms, for example, are invisible to us, since our perceptive devices are not made to discern them. During the evolution of humanity, it was simply not necessary to perceive atoms. Therefore, we are gifted with many senses none of which allows us to discern atoms. One of those gifts is the gift of language, and with it, the capacity to speak more than just one language.

When translation studies were still relatively young, translation has been modeled as process of verbal interaction that resembles the transmission of signals in a single machine or between machines where different components are involved around the core. This core at the heart of the machine was sketched as a channel, being itself a black box (that indeed was very small in the picture of the model, referring to the original model of Shannon and Weaver 1948). According to this view, translation is code-switching, and unfortunately, this seems to be the last communication about the way it understands itself translation has sent to the outside world.

All paradigm shifts that came after the machine-translation approach have led to fruitful research and valuable insights, the only problem being that they have not been effectively communicated not only to the outside world. Perhaps translators were one again striving for invisibility. Another possible explanation would be that the outside world lost its perceptual interest in translation. One could think of yet another explanation: translators were busy translating, and had no time to make up their minds about what to tell the outside world about their invisible work.

To give a very broad example: in how many cases the research in literary translation has given way to practical application of the research findings; be it within the field of translation studies, e.g. in improving teaching material for students in literary translation; be it in the industry closely related with literary translation, namely in informing the publishing houses about those research findings, so that they can adapt their translation policies accordingly; be it for the interest of the large public in vulgarizing communications about translation?

Bizarrely, there is a paradox: translation happens out in the field, but translation studies have frozen in the ivory tower. In today's world where data transmission has evolved so that any piece of information can be made available within the fraction of a second for anybody on the planet, people are getting more and more concerned about the origins of information and the evolution of a message along the huge communication channel which is the Internet. Translation as one of the keys to the world as we know it is of ever growing importance – at any level.

During history, “interdisciplinary research in translation” often meant that translation studies were fitted into the existing framework of other disciplines that has several presuppositions about language, bilingualism and how experimental settings involving both should be modeled (Halverson 2011) while at the same time not taking into account that the models and concepts of translation studies may be distinct of those. Why have translation studies not communicated their distinctive nature?

What is meant may be shown in reference to psycholinguistics. As the name indicates, psycholinguistics is a combination of psychology and linguistics. Being an interdiscipline, it combines the theoretical foundations and methods of both sciences. Taking a closer look, it is remarkable that for a quite long time in the history of psycholinguistics, the mutual collaboration has kept at the stage of joining forces in terms of theoretical foundations, since linguistics up to now hardly employed any experimental methods. That means that psychology did provide both the theoretical grounding and the methods for experimental testing, making it the principal contributor to the common project of psycholinguistics (what may be the reason for the non-existence of a discipline named linguopsychology).

For further illustration, what follows shall sketch the evolution of the so-called “cognitive turn” in translation studies that occurred when researchers became interested in the small black box that yet was at the center of Shannon's and Weaver's model. This cognitive turn resulted in the first place in the application of psycholinguistic methods to translation studies. Research in translation has been mostly conceptualized as deepening the research conducted so far in language and bilingualism research. Examples of studies conducted within this framework contain experiments in bilingual memory representation, disambiguation and vertical vs. horizontal translation (cf. Danks et al. 1997). It was also at that time that the psycholinguist Annette de Groot stated: “All in all, I believe cognitive psychology should embrace translation as an object of study.” (in Danks et al. 1997, p. 31). In her article, the Groot describes different experiments all of which are common in two respects: either they use translation as a method of investigation or as mere material for investigation, e.g. in the creation of multilingual material for the tasks.

This shows that not only has translation a long history as a method of investigation, but also that sometimes, people refer to “translation research” when they actually contrast shadowing, paraphrasing and interpreting in order to study the language switch crucial as the variable they wish to investigate. “Language switch”, however, a term that is also used in neurosciences as synonym to translation (Abutalebi & Green 2008), does not account for the multi-layer textual analysis that the actual translation process demands, neither does it model the multiple facets implicated in the elaboration of a translation. The work quoted above states openly that their aim in studying translation lies in their interest for the “potential of the human mind” (ibid). At the end, their results boil down to the beginning understanding of a complex cognitive task and how the brain is managing it. Translation had consequently been conceptualized as a specialization of bilingualism research, subordinated to the research interests of this area. The value of the studies emerging from this framework cannot be denied, and yet the very same research fails in precisising to which degree it answers translational questions, and how it is contributing to the science of translation.

Linguistic pragmatics is now experiencing a fruitful empirical turn (Noveck & Sperber 2004, Zufferey 2010). Experimental studies about reference, contextual effects, pragmatic inferences as well as the testing of cognitive and communicative principles of relevance and the role of

discourse connectives in the development of Theory of Mind allow for reaching further in the genuine discipline of linguistics than has been done by psycholinguistics.

Still, linguistics can teach us something, namely not to forget that the potential lying within our discipline is not only limited to what we may think it is the first place.

After borrowing methodologies from behavioral psychology, like Think-Aloud-Protocols (TAPs) translation-specific key stroke logging software (i.e. a technique that is conceived for the purpose of research in the specific field of translation and that is not taken from other [monolingual] disciplines) has been developed by translation scholars for translation scholars. Used alone or in combination with eye-tracking and the knowledge psycholinguistics provide us with, the findings gained about the different forms of text segmentation behavior of professional translators and novices during the translation process, for example, can be used to improve teaching methods and techniques in translation studies (Dragsted 2005). Furthermore, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data concerning profiles of translators, processes and products of translation do not only provide us with precious findings that allow for the improvement of our discipline in general (Hansen 2006), but do also help sending an unequivocal picture of the aim and nature of translation studies that can be communicated efficiently to the outside world. Research settings are designed according to the specific models and concepts developed so far in translation studies. In contrast to previous research, the combination and triangulation of methods in longitudinal studies (Hansen, Dragsted, Göpferich) allow for a generalization of this knowledge since by now, statistical power can be claimed for the results obtained. Clearly, this will never be the case for anecdotal evidence.

It is evident that the emerging field of translation process research uses experimental settings that are very distinct from those used in psycholinguistics: in our discipline, stimuli cannot be as controlled as in psycholinguistics, precisely because psycholinguistics up to now cannot explain such complex processes as translation. We still rely on the complementarity of different research fields and their specific methods. But why should we renounce to model the process we are studying according to our actual understanding? Why should translation be used unilaterally as stimuli material and a method when this leads to the general ignorance of the potential it holds as a genuine research discipline?

Another important weakness of translation studies has been to ignore that they and the theoretical foundations they provide are of huge interest to other disciplines.

To illustrate my claim, I shall mention the fields of psychology and medicine. As the globalized world is growing together, people tend to be more or less bilingual, ever reducing the number of monolinguals. Even if most bilingual people are of course no translators and even if there will never be as many professional translators as bilingual people on the world, translation becomes crucial for this ever growing population as soon as it comes to health problems. Test batteries and assessment tools for psychological and neurological disorders have been developed by monolingual research teams for monolingual patients. Although there are now different materials available in several languages (such as the Bilingual Aphasia Test battery, BAT, or the Reading the Mind in the Eyes test used in Autism Research) and efforts have been made to adapt those materials not only linguistically, but also culturally, a lot remains still to be done.

Many "translation tasks" in those assessment tests for bilingual and polyglot patients consist in one-word-translation and picture-naming tasks – tasks that do clearly not depict the way we speak in our daily lives. It is this misconception, however, that reflects the view the outside world has on translation and that puts at risk the adequacy and usefulness of those tests. One outstanding example is the dementia test battery for deaf signers developed by Atkinson (2011). Showing that the use of common test batteries being translated by a sign language interpreter was inadequate for the diagnosis, she developed the first BSL dementia test battery as she is a BSL signer herself and therefore has experience with translators and interpreters. This new test battery allowed for more accuracy in the diagnosis of deaf signers with dementia and

consequently helped improving therapy. Any treatment is better the better your understanding of the illness is. Translation is a natural contributor to understanding and should not leave those fields of application unconsidered.

What else can be done to communicate the self-image of the discipline more efficiently? A possible starting point could be translation at school. Many educational systems use translation as a method for language teaching and assessment. Students receive, however, hardly any training in translation. The same goes for the teaching of ancient languages such as Greek and Latin where translation is even used at university as a major teaching tool without ever being the interest of preliminary discussions about which tasks the translation should fulfill and how students could use the findings of translation process research for monitoring the progress they make in their own works. Yet, the absence of such teaching should not be mistaken as an absence of interest. Since language interactions become increasingly important, and so is foreign language teaching. Methods for translation teaching should therefore be made widely available.

Again, an example may help to illustrate the point. Physics is a very sophisticated (and to the non-initiated person) a very complicated subject. But this does not keep any physicist from writing popular vulgarizing books for children, adolescents and other groups of non-professional physicists. Numerous didactic methods for teaching physics at any point of age have been developed, be it in the scholarly framework, be it by playful experiments or workshops. Why doesn't translation have a similar presence in daily life?

2. Conclusion

Translation studies have experienced many shifts, and by now countless research projects testify that interdisciplinarity has established not only itself within translation studies but has also helped translation studies to emerge as a discipline in its own right. The outside world's interest in translation is ever increasing, and so should be our curiosity in discovering the inherent potential of this fascinating field of study. It is paradox that translation as a science of communication has such a hard time communicating itself to the outside world. Yet, the interest for translation is high. According to the arguments presented above, not only will teaching in the future need TS knowledge in order to prepare children for their life in the global Babel, as any other people-centered-services like medicine and rehabilitation will have to consider but also the applications translation theory can provide them with.

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For available BAT versions in different languages, see:
<http://www.mcgill.ca/linguistics/research/bat/>
 last consulted on December 19th 2012

For translations of Autism tests, see:
http://www.autismresearchcentre.com/arc_tests