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THE AUTHORITATIVENESS OF TRANSLATIONS

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Abstract

This article addresses ‘authoritativeness’ of translations as an issue which merits interest. The first example, an Internet translation, is used to illustrate that traditional Translation Studies concepts do not always adequately describe many factors and phenomena in translation. The present article is an attempt to show that more forces are at play. Translation is discussed as a process which, from a ‘text’, creates a ‘translation’, and it is this very process and the existence of a translation product which turns the first text into ‘an original’ when it is defined in relation to the product in the target language. It is posited that the ‘original’ and the ‘translation’ are not authoritative in the same way. This is discussed in more depth by dividing ‘translation’ into boxes, referring to (a) the first text, (b) a translational process, and (c) a translation product in a target culture. The interrelation of various agents and interlinked factors in each context is then discussed. It is shown that there is fluctuation in terms of stability of source texts and that this becomes more pronounced when texts, even prominent religious texts, are handled by target-language users. The conclusion is that the authority and authoritativeness of a translation will always be questioned in a way, with an intensity and fierceness, which that of an ‘original’ never is.

Key words: authoritativeness of a translation, relation to source text, dynamics.

Introductory comments

This article focuses on the question of the authoritative translation in a broad sense of the word, namely as ‘the approved translation’ which, it may be added, is probably the sense in which it is used by most people, including scholars.¹

Translation practice and Translation Theory are not always - some might indeed say ‘never’ - good bedfellows. Practical translation is tied to concrete contexts and situations, whereas abstract thinking usually moves in loftier realms. The indeterminate mass internationally known as ‘Translation Theory’ tends to hover uneasily between the ambition to be generally applicable to all translation and the classroom needs to come up with prescriptive or at least semi-prescriptive guidelines which students can put to use in their work with binary language pairs. Or, to phrase it differently: Translation Theory is the province of academics who are usually also teachers. ...//146 ... Therefore it is torn between (a) the urge to make universally acclaimed and globally applicable pronouncements, (b) meeting local students’ demands to be taught the right methods, and (c) fulfilling real institutions’ requirements that there is teaching in translation between specific language pairs.

This article is also born out of the conviction that both practice and theory will benefit from a heightened awareness of the immensely complex parameters which influence translation activities, and which embed and involve specific translations. The enormous progress in machine translation, above all 'Translation Memory' and huge linguistic corpora in the last few years, as well as the arrival of translation options on the Internet, make it imperative that we try to uncover such parameters and add them to - or perhaps use them to reduce the prominence of - other concepts which have long dominated. The rules in translation are changing very rapidly indeed.

Let me exemplify:

As I am writing this in March 2004, I have a look at the front page of a national Spanish newspaper, 'El Mundo' as of 9 March. I pick an arbitrary interview and get the following text:

Ya que los niños no vienen con un libro de instrucciones bajo el brazo, M^a Luisa Ferrerós ha elaborado el manual perfecto para aquellos padres dudosos respecto a esos locos bajitos que, lejos de limitarse a comer, babear y dormir, son una esponja de información a la que hay que educar desde la cuna. Es "un método práctico para desarrollar la inteligencia de tus hijos jugando" que enseña a los padres cómo divertirse mientras ayudan a los más pequeños a desarrollar su inteligencia.

Aprender a querer aprender, esa es la idea fundamental que hay que tener clara para que un hijo crezca esquivando ese pasotismo por los conocimientos que tanto predomina en nuestra sociedad. M^a Luisa Ferrerós explica en su nuevo libro cómo conseguirlo.

I now ask 'El mundo's translation service to translate into English ('traductor') and it readily obliges:

Since the children do not come with a low book of instructions the arm, M^a Luisa Ferrerós has elaborated the perfect manual stops those doubtful parents with regard to these madmen bajitos that, far from limiting itself (himself, herself) to eating, to drooling and sleeping, are a sponge of information to which it is necessary to educate from the cradle. ' Teach him to learn ' (Planet) is " a useful method stops to develop the intelligence of your children playing "that teaches (shows) to the parents how to amuse itself (himself, herself) while they help the smallest to develop his (her, your) intelligence. ...// 147 ...

To learn to want to learn, this it is the fundamental idea that it is necessary to have white of egg in order that a son grows avoiding this indifference for the knowledges over that so much it (he, she) predominates in our society. M^a Luisa Ferrerós explains in his (her, your) new book how to obtain it.

There are quite a few points to be made:

1. This is not a high-quality translation. Nevertheless, if you are a speaker of English with no Spanish, you will indeed get an overall idea.

The 'translation', if we dare use this term, took less than a second. This service has been available on the Internet since 1997. Whatever else, this is fast work.

3. This translation - as well as others made in the same way on the Internet as you are

reading this – is, if anything, a word-for-word translation. It easily beats any example of a ‘word-for-word’ translation that any book on Translation Studies has come up with. It carries conviction as a ‘word-for-word translation’.

4. And, finally, this is a direct translation from Spanish into English. There has been no relay realisation in, say, French (Dollerup 2000)

In short, shoddy, fast, direct, BUT, in many contexts, sufficient for the purpose. It does not convince us that a ‘word-for-word’ translation is a strategy to be pursued in real life, but it shows that, under certain circumstances, it works and fulfils a skopos defined as a general idea of what a text is about.

The main lesson is that we must explore translation and especially translational situations in more detail in order to cope with the challenges which this type of translational activity will pose to translation in the future. Words and concepts such as ‘formal’, ‘functional’, and ‘dynamic equivalence’ propounded by e.g. Eugene Nida (1964) are insufficient to meet the immensely complex translational situations of tomorrow. We must supplement and sophisticate the inventory for research.

The discussion of ‘authoritativeness in translation’ in this article will thus reveal that this concept alone embraces a large number of factors which bear on the realisations and activities of translation work. There must, surely, be other concepts and approaches in addition to those already explored (such as Hans Vermeer’s ‘Skopos’ and Christiane Nord’s ‘text function’) which are worth discussing in order to further our understanding of translation as a major - I believe the most important - activity in today’s intercultural and interlingual global society.

The above Internet translation is, then, not a high-quality document. On the other hand, this type of translation is in its infancy; it is awkward - one reason clearly being that the early Internet operators used simple bilingual dictionaries the copyright of which had expired.² ...// 148 ... But it is also an indication that - in many parts of the world - students, perhaps even ‘translators’, in the future (or perhaps already at present) will have draft translations done by the Internet; this will save money and time in that they do not have to acquire dictionaries and look up many unknown words.

Even the more sophisticated methods that we meet with in Translation Memories are unlikely to replace humans, but they will most definitely take the monotony out of repetitive translation work and ensure consistency in terminology. These new ways of translating will change priorities in translation teaching and translation theory and make them focus on other features than the traditional ones. The machines will give us the time and energy for improving our understanding of translation by investigating other crucial facets of a given translational situation, such as the ‘authoritativeness’ discussed here.

Above, ‘authoritativeness’ was defined as ‘the approved translation’. This immediately begs the question: ‘approved by whom’. It is the identity and nature of the ‘authority’

that imbues a translation with ‘authoritativeness’ which is addressed in the present article.

An overview

It is a tenet of mine that sequentiality is a central feature in translation: a translation always presupposes that, prior to it, there is an text in another language and that, in addition to this chronological prerequisite, the translation has a relationship to this (source) text which can be discussed meaningfully as linguistic and semantic transfer.

This brings us back to another staple, the model of communication as applicable to translation:

A sender > a message in the source language > a mediation/transfer, possibly near-simultaneous, possibly distant in time and space into the target language > the target language message > the target language recipients.

This is a time-honoured approach to translational activity. It is, however, seriously flawed because it posits that there is always an immediate relationship between the original message and the end user’s text. It does not fully take into account the fact that a translational act is also creative which, as it were, bisects the message merely by touching it, creating another text from the ‘original’. After a process of translation, we thus have two messages, each of them existing within its own language and culture.

...// 149 ...

Figure 1: The relationship between an original and a translation

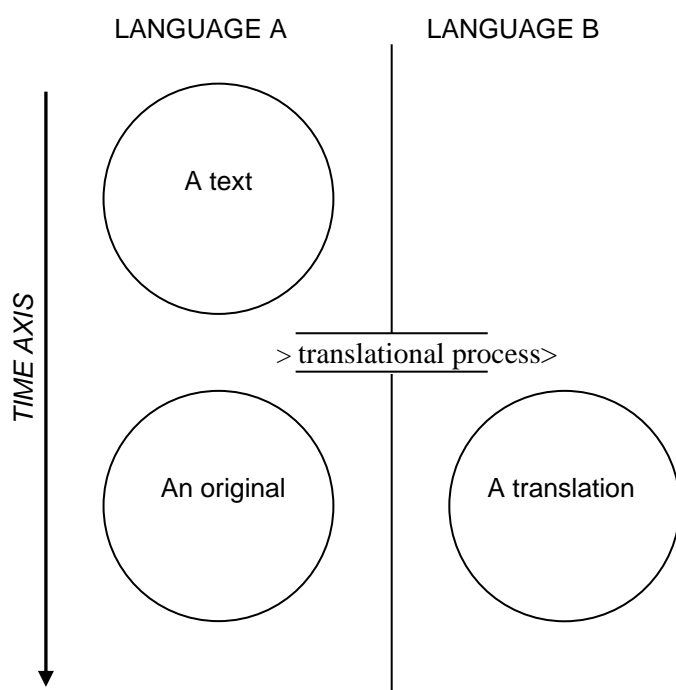


Illustration 1 uses the time axis to the left as its point of departure. A text comes into being in language A. It moves in time and is, at some stage, translated in a unilateral, sequential process. The translation process does not affect the source text which continues to 'exist' as it previously did in language A. But the fact that there is 'a translation' in language B means that in relation to this translation, the text in language A is 'the original'.

Neither in concrete nor in ontological terms are the two messages the same. *Furthermore, the messages are not authoritative in the same way.*

Scholars of translation, notably teachers, are led astray by the fact that in their work, they straddle both the original and the translated text; these two texts legitimately co-exist in the teachers' and students' discussions and in correction work. But in real life, with real senders and real recipients, the texts do not coexist as concrete messages for recipients, although they may coexist physically and as *principles*, for instance as multilingual instructions for cameras which are printed in the same brochure, or when both American and Italian public are 'reading' books by Umberto Eco in their respective languages.

Therefore the below division into boxes offers a better overview of the chain of communication in translation in a model for discussion:

...//150...

A model for discussing ‘Translation’**BOX 1**

Sender > recipient 1 (in the same language as the message)
 recipient 2
 recipient 3, etc.
 recipient x = a translator

BOX 2

A translator and a translation process

BOX 3

The translator as a sender > recipient 1
 recipient 2
 recipient 3, etc.

In principle, the translator wields authority in the process of translation. In the sense that translators interpret and render messages in subtly individual ways, this is, of course, correct, notably when we study ‘cultural texts’ (see e.g. Gullin 1998; Baker 2001 (for linguistic variations between two contemporary translators); Dollerup 1999: 199-236 for many translators over 170 years).

Once we disregard this feature and ask who authorises the translational product, the picture which emerges is complex indeed.

The message and BOX 1

As long as there is no translation in sight for a message in BOX 1, it is invariably the message which is authoritative, unless, of course, the sender changes it. This is by no means unheard of. Poets rewrite their poems, novelists change words and phrases, speakers may rephrase their sentences, people may change their views, industry may produce new models of established products and change their instructions and manuals accordingly. But the public is rarely in any doubt about which text is authoritative at a given time.

The moment a message is translated, this picture is changed and there is complete instability if not anarchy.

The relationship between the interlocutors

The situation changes according to the respective positions of the sender and the recipient.

If the parties are equals making, say, bilateral political agreements, the text is authoritative, provided both parties accept this is so: in both languages the points of agreement must be clear, whereas ambiguities which are part of the agreement must be rendered as ambiguities. The same goes for legal documents, such as international contracts and the like (e.g. Schäffner 1997; Wagner 2001).

When there is a disparity between the sender and the recipient, there are some scenarios in which the message alone is the overriding 'authority':

In legal proceedings court interpreters must not intervene, but must stick closely to what the parties involved are saying: in principle, the court interpreter must be objective (see e.g. Gentile et al. 1997).

A manual or an instruction for export goods will usually have the source text for its authority, which is, in turn, based on and refers to a number of factors, such as specific features of the product, as well as the fact that the exporting firm is, as it were, imposing its product on another nation, and that it may have to use LSP, in-house or brand terminology (e. g. Kingscott 2002).

But this holds good only up to a point and with some products: I meet translations which follow the original text 'slavishly' only in instructions for appliances and the like and these tend to be particularly obvious with small firms. This is in no small degree due to linguistic insensitivity among authors of instructions, as well as to legal problems - but the bulk of such translation produce has increased tremendously since the European Union has introduced rules to the effect that products must have instructions of the languages of all the countries in which they are marketed.³ Some firms have advertisements which are highly similar worldwide: Coca-cola is probably the best example.

In other cases, however, there is variation: It is rarely described in literature, but it is not completely unheard of for translators to turn to clients and point out, for instance, muddled phrasings and poor targeting. Clients are known to have subsequently changed the original, not only for export purposes but also for the home market. At one level, this is merely a revision. At another, the translator provided feedback within the source culture. It is, however, obvious that only translators with considerable status can do this - so it probably only happens when there is a relationship of mutual trust with the client (e.g. Pagnoulle 1996; Franklin and Wilton 2000).

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The translator, the translation, and BOX 2

BOX 2 comprises the translation process and the translator, for, as noted, translators

leave individual imprints – at least with cultural translation.

Conversely, nearly all Western societies also have specifically entrusted translators whose translation is legally binding, be they called ‘public’ or ‘certified’. These translators represent the pinnacle of ‘authority’ vested in individual translators.

There are also cases where translators turn to the senders (in BOX 1) who thus, mostly as far as words, phrases and occasionally passages, gain a fraction of the authority they had over the original in the source language. This spans from the consecutive interpreter who asks for elaboration, via the Scandinavian literary translators who routinely write to the authors of books they are translating in order to get clarification of obscure points, to the rare cases, such as the German author Günter Grass and the Italian Umberto Eco who try to inform their translators about the meaning of selected features and passages (see further Dollerup 1987).

Complex interplay

In a similar fashion, but in another way, the texts in bi- or multilateral political agreements between equals, two (possibly more) texts are not only fine tuned in meetings, but also collated and thus affect one another repeatedly before they are released (e. g. Schäffner 1997; 2001). There is mutual influence in the establishment of the ‘authoritative texts’. At institutions such as the UN and the European Union, words, passages and details in documents and agreements which are legally binding, are first translated, then discussed and changed, then collated, and finally checked against one another by linguists who are also legal experts. In such cases, the authoritative text is the product of a multiplicity of decisions leading up to the translations and eventually a final collation. It is indeed somewhere in the ‘process of translation’, but there is no one exact point at which the ‘authoritativeness’ all of sudden becomes clear. The complexity of the procedure also explains why, for instance, the European Union institutions are now all for the ‘subsidiarity’ principle. It means that, whereas the overall common guidelines are set up in agreement among the Member States, the actual legal phrasing, its embedding in legislation and subsequent implementation is to take place in the Member States rather than made centrally in Bruxelles (Dollerup 2001).

Furthermore, this is an illustration of translation which is well-nigh instantaneous and in which the ‘original senders’ and the ‘end recipients’ can, in principle, communicate. ...//
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This near-simultaneity is also found in places which are not immediately obvious, such as in the translation of manuals. True, there is no feedback to senders, but translators will use word-lists, specialist terminology and LSP for common reference. In these cases, the authority is vested with the texts thanks to their alignment with special terms be they domain-specific or used in-house by firms. Alignment as decisive for ‘authoritativeness’ is al-

so found in the literary domain in which special genres sometimes have to align to target language and target culture norms. It would apply to, say, fairytales, to some extent to children's books, and, to a large extent, to poetry.

There is feedback to senders in interpreting. In simultaneous conference interpreting this takes place, above all, during debates in which delegates can physically see one another and get input based on body language in addition to interpreted discourse. It may be noted that, in principle, individual speakers exert authority over their speeches in so far as they may correct or repeat them, if they believe they have been misunderstood. But it is the assembly as a collective and corporate body which asserts the authority of the final 'outcome', mostly so by approving the minutes next time they meet.

In liaison interpreting outside legal settings, there is a highly dynamic interplay where the interpreter must ensure that the message gets through, for instance, from a patient to a doctor and vice versa. Here, too, the outcome will be authoritative, which justifies any intervention by the mediators at the linguistic level, ranging from individual utterances to a summary or an explication of the proceedings.

Translation and BOX 3

Simultaneity has a side effect: This is one of the cases where many participants in the communicational act will actually feel that since the topic dealt with is identifiable, indeed, the same, the texts uttered in the separate languages are also 'the same'. However, in the present context, it must be stressed that it is the outcome, not the process, which is authoritative.

So, the question of 'authority' now finally brings us to BOX 3, the target language sphere.

The co-existence of BOX 1 and BOX 3 products

Especially when we refer to the target language text, it is highly relevant to keep in mind that we are dealing with two texts as shown in illustration 1 (above).

The fact that there are two different texts makes it possible to compare them, for checking the translation against the original. In literary translation, this is sometimes done by publishing houses in Scandinavia and Peter Bush (1997) mentions some examples in the UK. ...// 154 ... But by and large, revision is made solely in terms of the target text system. It is a stylistic check undertaken by a house editor of the type discussed by Kinga Klaudy (1996). Let me mention one example: The Danish writer Peter Høeg who wrote the best seller *Miss Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1994) found what he considered many mistranslations in the US translation. He wrote to the translator who - the way Peter Høeg saw it - corrected some and disregarded others (Follin 1997). To me it illustrated that Høeg did not know how house editors

affect literary work, including translations, in the US, and also that translators are probably better judges than authors of what adjustments should be made in order for books to be successful. Books carry conviction and have authority only when they captivate readers in the target culture - with which the original author is, after all, rarely familiar.

Authority as copyright

At this point we might also ponder the phenomenon which first called my attention to the question of ‘authority of translations’. When, in 1997, the Italian mime artist Dario Fo received the Nobel Prize, it turned out that several of his works had been translated into Danish, but only one or two of these by the person who claimed to be ‘the authorised translator’. He is a well-known personality in the theatre business and must at some stage have met Dario Fo and asked to be authorised. But clearly Dario Fo has no possibility of checking the Danish translations. Looking back in Danish translated literature, I recall coming across “authorised” translations of foreign authors, for instance of Conan Doyle whose Danish was also non-existent. One may therefore wonder who authorised the translator: In all likelihood, it was the publisher who in this fashion tried to signal to the public that the book was issued with due recognition of copyright. But it is no guarantee that the translation is adequate in the eyes of professionals, or indeed an ‘authoritative translation’.

Authority in the hands of target-language audiences

I have noticed that, over the years, firms dealing with exports who previously insisted that a translation literally looked the same in several languages, now tend to localise (Eselink 2000). In some cases it is merely by referring to standards in the target country, for instance by referring to local safety measures for electrical appliances or by inserting a sentence allowing for some features in local legislation. But in others, they leave advertising and the description of the products entirely to locals. Understandably so, since the product is intended for sale and consumption in the target country and localisation is usually most successful when native speakers and salesmen are given the ‘authority’ to communicate in the target-market language. ...// 155 ... There is also another crucial point in these cases, namely that the clients trust the mediators. Although these mediators are not necessarily translators, it seems as if this trust extends to translation: the greater the trust a client has in a translator’s discretion, the more freedom for the translator to adapt a text towards the target audience.

This then leaves us to ponder the curious phenomenon of the ‘authorised’ or, for that matter, the ‘authoritative’ Bible translation, which is found in many creeds and denominations, such as the King James Bible in the Anglican Church and the Bible of the Danish Lutheran State Church. In these cases one cannot resort to the sender, and the original of the New Testament is already a relay translation in that it is Greek or Latin version of the

Aramaic spoken by Jesus and his disciples. The Bible is, nevertheless, retranslated at irregular intervals, in a prolonged process involving numerous people. What is particularly interesting in the present context is that in the most recent version in Denmark, the ecclesiastical establishment dictated some phrasing - a fact which led to a heated debate since some people accused them of suppressing the correct message. Nevertheless, it now stands as the authorised translation in Denmark. ...// 156 ...

Conclusion

So, where does this take us? I hope it has been understood that the article has addressed a feature which is interesting because it illustrates the constant shifts occurring in our studies of translation and which also make translation so dynamic. The 'original' is authoritative in the source culture and this authority is largely unquestioned. The moment this 'original' is subjected to translation and a simulacrum is created in BOX 2, the questions of authority and authoritativeness are raised. Once produced, the translation is a new text, one which exists in addition to the 'original'. This text has a relationship to the 'original' which may be defined in many ways, one of which is 'authoritative'. It is obvious that if there is only one translation, that translation will, in the end, become authoritative. But otherwise, the question of 'authority' depends on translational situations; it intersects with virtually all types of translation; and it interacts with strong forces in any given society. At one extreme authority is vested in the communicational discourse - and at the other it rests securely with translators. **But the authority and authoritativeness of a translation will always be questioned in a way, with an intensity and fierceness, which that of an 'original' never is.** So in this sense, 'authoritativeness' is indeed central to an understanding of the nature of translation.

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1. The present article is not based on previous research by others. It does, however, refer to phenomena or attitudes and views found elsewhere in Translation Studies. Phenomena are therefore indicated by references to publications where they are researched or described at more length, and attitudes and views by reference to a publication central to them, indicated by an 'e.g.'

2. This was easily inferred from a pilot study I conducted of Internet translations in January 2000: they could not cope with neologisms.

3. That is to say: Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, Hungarian, German, Greek, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Slovakian, Slovene, Spanish, and Swedish. (The southern part of Cyprus is Greek)