Authorative translations: theory, systems, and realities

The term 'translation' here as elsewhere in Translation Studies is used about both **thinking about translation** (theory and principles) as well as **the activity of transferring linguistic messages from one language to another**. The latter activity involves translators and/or language technologies.

The theory and principles of translation are useful for shedding light on our understanding of actual translations and of the activity of translation. Translational activity is prompted by and fulfils the needs of a given society for foreign-language material and is based on the premise that specific translations can adequately render messages originally expressed in another language.

Adequacy and authoritativeness

The original used to be considered inviolate and authoritative in its own right, thanks to the dominant status of the author/creator/organisation that had brought it into being, be it an artist, a ruler, a nation or a deity.

Translations that serve the immediate (and often short-lived) needs of a situation (e.g. an interpreted rendition, a translation of a transitory text (a manual)) are adequate in the eyes of the users (senders and recipients)). Conversely, for the question of the 'authoritativeness' of a translation to arise at all, it must imply a tangible, directive impact on human actions and often a long-term perspective.

In today's world, translations are strong, perhaps the strongest forces, in modelling modern societies because no modern linguistic community can consider itself an island. Translation establishes and fulfils the needs for international communication. At first glance, this makes the question of 'authoritativeness' loom large.

Systems

This volume focuses on translation undertaken at different strata involving

- (a) Administration, governance, government and supranational organisations,
- (b) Production of goods, services and so on,
- (c) The language industries and
- (d) The educational and academic fields.

They are not on a par, since, roughly speaking, the latter two (c and d) provide the agents that serve the translational needs of (a) and (b).

The outcome of translational activity, translations, are pragmatic facts in which the agents of translation have integrated and embedded linguistic messages according to the determinants (restrictions and liberties) in the constraints of the framework or system that the agents are working in. The restrictions and liberties may be specified, implied in guidelines or work routines and will include the use of translation software.

The above-mentioned strata are different. Each of them constitutes a system with its own characteristics. Despite their differences, there is also considerable overlapping between them in the real world, and precise definitions of their characteristics will depend on factors such as politics, societal structure and language, including the bi-lingual language pairs that must be mastered

to meet the societal needs in specific translational situations. The theoretical differentiation between the systems is useful for discussing and clarifying their mutual relationship.

The role of translations

In previous ages it would often be possible to distinguish between different roles of translations depending on the relationship between the sending and the receiving sides.

At one extreme receiving cultures would **requisition** translations from other languages to be enriched and by gaining access to novel insights, notably in the cultural, educational and scientific fields. At the other extreme, the sending culture would somehow be superior (e.g. by brute force or imagined moral superiority) to the receiving culture and could therefore **impose** translations on the receiving culture (e.g. peace treaties, legislation, orders, the Christian bible). Requisitioned translations would rarely claim to be authoritative whereas imposed translations more often were. At all events authority and authoritativeness depended on both the text type and the specifics of the translational situation.

Negotiation, which is in between, and in which both parties have a say on the final outcome (and in some cases on the 'original') is dominant today.

Imposition is still found in a modified form in industrial and international translations with firms or organisations that have strict rules concerning specifics of translation. At the simplest level, this applies to the in-house terminologies for words and terms used in translations for given firms and international organisations. At a somewhat higher level it also goes for larger segments of text in which translators (in firms as well as in supranational political bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations) must follow the exact wording of previous translations that thus are or become 'authoritative'. Correspondence or consistency with antecedent authoritative texts is usually ensured by software such as Translation Memories.

The shift in translation procedures

Today originals for translation have increased prodigiously in number and in complexity. There has been a fundamental shift from cultural to administrative/governmental and technical translation which is fully appreciated by the language industry. At the same time, technologies for translation work (MT, TM, etc) have been developed and multiplied.

Procedures for translation have also become more complicated and concern the way the texts are dealt with at any stage in the translation process.

These stages can tentatively be divided into conception, procedure for translation, control and distribution. Or, into
- authoring the original (formatted for translation/not formatted)
 – preparations for translation (finding translators and identifying relevant technologies and other aids)
- translation/transfers (by human translators/by technologies/by both)
 – control (technological and/or human), and
 – consumption (distribution and use).
They can be expanded upon:

In the conception, 'originals in the source language' tend to be less respectful of 'educated style' than the originals of yesteryear. In many cases originals are conceived and written with translation in mind (e.g. controlled language). In other words, originals are no longer as inviolate and 'authoritative' as they used to be.

In the translation process there may be several 'agents' participating in given assignments, ranging from teams of human translators to nearly exclusively machine-translations of texts in highly specialised fields. Even so the 'agents' overlap so much in modern translation work that neither of these extreme forms, let alone any in-between procedure, is pure.

The texts or rather messages may also be targeted towards special recipients in the receiving culture, not only when these have the 'same' but yet slightly different languages (German vs. Austrian; French vs. Belgian), but also in terms of the knowledge and needs of the recipients (there is a difference between translations directed towards amateur and professional photographers).

Government, nation, authorities, industry and educational institutions

Government, nation and other bodies (e.g. linguistic boards) constitute systems with frameworks and constraints that translations have to abide by to be accepted by given systems. The constraints involve appropriate linguistic usage as well as such extremes as liberty of expression vs. limitations (such as imagined or real censorship). And in order to work as translators, professionals have to accept the constraints of the system they wish to work in. This applies both to the 'ideology' in the broad sense of the word as well as the soft- and hardware technologies used.

At the same time, individual translators are, either before or shortly after being hired, certified in some way.

Certification

Educational institutions must prepare students for translation work, i.e. to adaptation to situational parameters by

1. training students in the basics of translation between specific language pairs, including all aspects ranging from linguistic to cultural and supranational features involved in translation.
2. training students in the use of professional techniques and procedures.
3. training students in the application as well as the implications of technologies available, and
4. preparing students for further adaptation once they have graduated.

Graduation is a type of certification of future translators; by examining students and issuing degrees, the institutions guarantee that graduates meet some minimum requirements and criteria for quality translation (which may vary between nations as well as national institutions).

In most cases there are further 'tests' - in the widest sense - to be passed for specific types of certification, notably for jobs in the language industry, in production, and for academe.

Most international organisations prefer to conduct their own aptitude tests and examinations for screening potential employees, although they usually demand that candidates are university graduates and have thus been 'certified' (although not in the language field).

Industry (and government) may take over part of the preparation for job-training by offering internships in which students get to know the ropes and are familiarised with specific systems. But internships are not identical with aptitude tests and posts with trial periods.

Constraints and authoritativeness

A translation is a pragmatic given and its authoritativeness depends and changes according to the system it is made in. The present-day world is one in which we find numerous translation systems, they are constantly changing and they vary from being isolated to being parts of complex interplaying translation activities: e.g. when an international body like the European Union issues directives that affect national governments and their actions.

We cannot argue that a translation is authoritative on purely theoretical grounds. Specific translations may be authoritative, provided they are pronounced and considered to be so by experts in hand and/or by senders and target-language recipients. Furthermore, the authoritativeness will always depend on the constraints imposed by the systems involved and will differ from one situation to another and from case to case.

This can be illustrated by the following examples:

1. The US government will have bilingual or multilingual agreements with other nations. Such agreements are rendered in authoritative translations in the languages of the countries involved. Similarly, the resolutions of the Security Council of the UN in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish versions are authoritative. In these cases the translations have been checked by legal experts.
2. Conversely, no US embassy will issue an authoritative (or 'official') translation of the President's annual State of the Union address. And
3. when a medical interpreter has successfully conveyed the message from a Canadian doctor to a Somali patient that aids is not cured by herbs, the communication is adequate. Yet few would argue that it is 'authoritative' – at least at first glance.

Authoritativeness
The traditional view

This begs a question: what is the common denominator for authoritativeness? According to the traditional view one crucial factor is that 'powerful' institutions or organised systems support the translation. Another element is that the translation is intended for a prolonged existence. And a third element would concern the directive influence it is intended to have on recipients.

Whereas the visibility of institutions that are 'authoritative' has increased, their number appears to have dwindled over time. In other words, there are fewer bodies that insist that translations made within their systems are authoritative.

Today authoritative translations appear at (a) intergovernmental and governmental levels, in (b) religious systems in that all denominations claim that their translations of the Christian bible are authoritative (as opposed to the prohibition against translating the Qur'ān), and in (c) the certifications and/or the exams of the language industry.

These three types are carefully controlled, respectively by legal expert, by religious scholars, by teachers and (sometimes) moderators. At the same time, the pragmatic translations

from one of these fields are not automatically accepted as 'authoritative' in the other two fields, thus illustrating the point made above that authoritativeness is intimately connected to the specific systems that translators work in and the constraints under which translations are created.

The specific extent of the use of software technologies in 'authoritative' translations is determined individually by the system(s) that constitutes the framework for the original and the translations. The use or non-use of new technologies will, in itself, have no bearing on the 'authoritativeness' of given translations.

Within each system, 'authoritative' translations seem to be made with a long-term perspective, for longevity. Even so, we are nowadays fully aware that no translation will last forever since every language is constantly changing. In turn these changes make for new perceptions and therefore affect the interpretations of the same physical 'linguistic' original.

Witness the facts: (a) that ever so often there are new translations of the bible in most Christian societies; (b) that the EU and UN linguistic services are aware that some of the texts from the founding years are sounding old-fashioned, and (c) that the European Union is replacing old treaties by new ones in all the languages of the member states.

The alternative view

The above view would be the one to which most would subscribe. The main component is that authoritativeness is imposed by societal forces – and, as mentioned – the societal aspect is essential to the understanding of translation.

Times change. So do our professional perception of the surrounding world as well as our knowledge of the nature of translation. In the past no theorist would pay attention to translations that exist only for a limited time. But given the conditions for translation in today's world this stance calls for reconsideration.

There is no doubt that to be authoritative, senders, recipients and controllers (if any) must be convinced and willing to convince others that the message of a translation is adequate. Yet it is the systems, academics, and the professionals who decide whether the concept of authoritativeness should be expanded to embrace all translations that meet some (specified) communicative needs.

If so, the main characteristics of authoritative translations would be that they are not challenged in part or in their entirety by other and alternative renditions. As long as a translation is unchallenged it would be authoritative. This is in keeping with the fact that, independent of the percentage of the translation work that is based on new technologies, most translations made by professionals (for money) are unique in the sense that they are the only translations made. This view would imply that any adequate translation that is not challenged is authoritative and may direct human actions.