
TRANSLATION AND HERMENEUTICS

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I – INTRODUCTION

This presentation focuses on *The Importance of Hermeneutical Translation in a Multicultural Society*.

My interest in Translation and Hermeneutics was initially sparked off when I read *Trials of a Translator*, a book written long ago by Monsignor Ronald Knox¹ in 1949, where he addresses some problems of Bible translation relating to faulty interpretation of the Holy Scripture. Recently, my interest has been rekindled when I accepted a simultaneous interpretation assignment on legal hermeneutics, specifically the philosophical dispute between German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer² and Italian legal scholar Emilio Betti.³

Friedrich Schleiermacher⁴ initiated this philosophical inquiring into the general conditions of understanding. Hermeneutics is not only a method of interpretation, since a person's speech is not only part of a language community, but it is part of the individual's thinking as well.

Translation is a mediator, a bridge or gap-filler between languages, cultures and societies because it enables people to understand the world, thereby facilitating communication. Globalization has gradually diluted borders among

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¹ Knox, Ronald 1949. "Trials of a Translator", Sheed & Ward, New York. 74-85.

² *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960, Tübingen) 1st English ed. 1975. Trans. by W, Glen-Doepel, ed. by John Cumming and Garret Barden.

³ General Theory of Interpretation (*Teoria generale della interpretazione*, 1955–1960). Trans. and ed. by Giorgio A. Pinton, 2015. https://www.academia.edu/19613640/Emilio_Betti

⁴ Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings (*Hermeneutik und Kritik mit besonderer Beziehung auf das Neue Testament*, 1838.) Trans. by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge University Press, 1998 Paperback: ISBN 0-521-59848-6

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cultures and the concept of translation has evolved from the traditional ideas of linguistic process and equivalence of meaning to the notion of effective communication between cultures.

For an effective communication between people expressing themselves in different languages, the act of translation requires thorough interpretation of the messages to be rendered from a source language to a target language. Hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, is a useful tool for better understanding and comprehension of messages requiring effective translation.

Therefore, preparing translation by holistic text interpretation, together with creativity in target text production, may help deliver more faithful and effective versions.

After this Introduction, I will examine Key notions, namely, Communication, Translation, Hermeneutics and Culture. Then, I will deal with Hermeneutical translation, together with Cultural Translation.

Finally, I will share some Closing remarks, naturally open to discussion.

II - DEVELOPMENT

1. KEY NOTIONS

1.1. TRANSLATION is the communication of meaning from a source text to a target text. The act of translation is necessarily preceded by the act of interpretation, which involves comprehension and understanding for an effective rendering of meaning, otherwise it would be impossible. The branch of knowledge dealing with the interpretation of language, whether written or spoken, is called hermeneutics.

1.2. HERMENEUTICS is a fancy word for interpretation, which derives from *Hermes*, the Greek god of communication, the alleged inventor of language and speech, a messenger and interpreter between gods and men. Hermeneutics is a field of phenomenology, also known as "a philosophy of experience", ultimate source of meaning and value is the lived experience of human beings. This is the reason why hermeneutics reflects the interpretation of the world, a concept better defined with the German term *Dasein* meaning "being there", often translated into English with the word "existence".

- Originally, hermeneutics focused on the interpretation of sacred or religious texts (the Bible, Saint Jerome). In modern age, many philosophers (Heidegger, Husserl, Gadamer, Betti, Paul Ricoeur, among others) started studying the process of interpretation in general.

- Hermeneutics is a method of interpreting the world, which is dynamic and subject to changes. As we perceive and interpret the world generally, and texts particularly, in light of our preconceptions (prejudices, traditions, beliefs, imagination), we should be aware of cognitive biases (notions or persons confirming our values or beliefs) and remain as free as possible from unexamined presuppositions.

1.3. COMMUNICATION involves translation because it implies the use and transformation of signs, which are linguistic units that designate an object or relation showing a meaning. Even when speaking the same tongue, we convey meaning not only by words but also by gestures, tone, cultural context, and even silence, whether intentionally or not.

1.4. CULTURE can be broadly defined as “the ways of life for an entire society”, that is, the system of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people. Culture is communication, and communication is culture.

2 - HERMENEUTICAL TRANSLATION

2.1. **Hermeneutical translation.** If understanding is the essence of communication, translators should learn to read between the lines and make inferences free from the shackles of preconceptions. Hermeneutical translation requires an open mind for understanding the meaning and value of messages beyond the borders of one’s own culture. Translators who are truly committed to translating hermeneutically should take up an attitude of self-criticism, constant learning, unbiased integration of new cognitive input, courage for linguistic creativity where there is absence of equivalence in the target language, and empathy to grasp the true meaning of the message to be translated.

2.2. Steiner’s Hermeneutical Motion. Franco-American scholar George Steiner developed a hermeneutic model of translation based on his belief that translation is central to understanding and interpretation. He envisions the hermeneutic act of translating as a “movement or motion” divided into four stages: **initiative trust, aggressive intrusion, incorporation, and restitution of balance.**

The first stage of “trust” implies that a translator may not fully understand a text that is foreign to him, but he believes that there is meaning in it -that there is something to be understood. “All understanding starts with an act of trust.”

The second stage of “aggressive intrusion” means invading the text actively to extract the meaning from the source text, and to preserve it in the target text. “The translator invades, extracts and brings home.”

The third stage of “incorporation” involves an embodiment of meaning into the target language text, that is, the creation of a new form which does not come from a vacuum, since it is generally affected by culture, prejudice and cognitive bias.

The fourth and most important stage of “restitution” means restoring the balance between the text in the source language and the translation into the target language, which implies striking a balance between two cultures in the target language text. A major challenge today, when cultures have become so diverse, being most of them inhabited by plurality.

Quotations from George Steiner: (i) All understanding starts with an act of trust; (ii) The translator invades, extracts and brings home; (iii) Fidelity is not literalism; (iv) No language or culture imports without risk of being transformed

3 - CULTURAL TRANSLATION

3.1. Cultural translation belongs to the domain of cultural anthropology, a field of anthropology focusing on cultural issues among humans. As culture and language are closely related, it should be mentioned that another field of anthropology, known as Linguistic anthropology, studies how language influences social life. Since translation is questioned through cultural differences, the act of translating is not only based on language issues, but also on cultural contexts between people.

3.2. Language and culture are determining factors of translation. The translator renders into another language what the words in the original message mean in their culture. As culture gives language different contexts, translators should be familiar with cultural aspects, particularly where culture-specific terms and expressions fail to have equivalence of meaning in the target language. Therefore, translators will face the challenge of coining new words to fill such gap.⁵ One of the most commonly used techniques is "borrowing", by which words from other languages enter common use, such as *kindergarten*, *sushi*, *latte*, and the like.

3.3. The cultural issues in translation arise from differences between the two languages in expressing identity and lifestyle, such as (i) unfamiliarity with cultural expressions in the source language, e.g., *sobremesa*: after-dinner/lunch conversation; *estrenar*: to wear something for the first time; (ii) failure to achieve the equivalence in the second language, specifically where concepts from the source language are completely unknown in the target language, inter alia, *merendar*: to have an afternoon snack; *te quiero*: more than "I like you" and less than "I love you", meaning "I care about you", it may be used as "I love you" in a non-romantic relationship; and (iii) ambiguity of some cultural expressions in the target language, for example, *Americano* meaning someone from the Americas, and *estadounidense* meaning someone from the USA, the right choice for the latter term being *American*; or *tutear*, meaning to address someone informally as "tú" instead of the more formal "usted."

3.4. In order to prevent misunderstandings, translators who are aware of similarities and differences, lexical context and syntax, ideologies, value systems and ways of life in a given culture, need to know their audience in both languages and also consider variants of the target language. The culture of each language involved in a translation will determine the creation and interpretation of meaning, and the translator will find that the hermeneutic approach to

⁵ Alonso de Turzi, Maria Herminia 2001. *The relationship between the technical-scientific translator and the specialist in the creation of neologisms*. The ATA Chronicle, translated by Alicia Marshall. Originally published in the Colegio de Traductores Públicos de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires Monthly Bulletin *Voces* under the title of *La relación del traductor científico-técnico con el especialista en la creación de neologismos*.

translation is a useful tool to get the precise meaning from the source text and deliver a faithful message in the target language across cultures.

Before closing, some food for thought about machine translation.

Although machine translation software has greatly improved thanks to the application of AI resources, mimicking how neural networks function and predicting the likelihood of a sequence of words or notions, translators should always practise their hermeneutic skills in order to avoid technology bias.,

III - CLOSING REMARKS

1. Translators should practise their hermeneutic skills to find equivalence of meaning in a global world defined by cultural diversity.
2. The hermeneutic approach in translation is a useful tool for translators to better understand source texts, and check whether human/machine versions are faithful to the original message.
3. The cultural approach in translation focusing on the importance of extralinguistic elements helps translators produce more holistic versions.
4. Translators should enhance their hermeneutic skills to stay creative, and be free from technology bias, particularly regarding machine translations.

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