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# What I really meant by «Translatology»

**Brian Harris**

Early in 1972 the present author read a paper entitled «La Traductologie, la traduction naturelle, la traduction automatique et la sémantique» to a linguistics symposium at the Université du Québec à Montréal. It was published the following year (Harris, 1973). That was the first use of the term *«traductologie»* in Canada.

I had come to the study of translation with a background in linguistics, and as well I was addressing a meeting of «linguisticians», so it was natural that I should endeavour to justify the neologism by analogies with the terminology of that discipline:

> Par exemple, l'opération qui consiste à énoncer des sons s'appelle la *prononciation*... La traduction [elle aussi] est une opération linguistique... pratiquée par le sujet parlant. La traduction se place ainsi au même niveau [épistémologique] que la prononciation. Or, si on ne fait pas la traduction, mais par contre *on en parle*, lorsqu'on analyse... ce que c'est la traduction, on atteint alors un niveau [épistémologique] égal à celui de la *phonologie* par rapport à la prononciation. Comment dénommer cette méta-opération?

At that point I acknowledged the attempts made by Nida and Catford to fill the lexical gap, the former by his *Science of translation* (Nida, 1964) and the latter with *Linguistic theory of translation* (Catford, 1965). However, I criticized their terms by pursuing my analogy:

> De telles périphrases ne font que souligner le besoin d'un terme plus concis. Imaginez-vous, si chaque fois qu'on voulait parler de phonologie, il fallait dire *la théorie linguistique de la prononciation*! Nous proposons donc un néologisme pour combler la lacune. Nous conserverons *traduction* pour l'opération que pratique le traducteur, mais adopterons *traductologie* pour toute référence à l'analyse... du phénomène.

Actually it was only out of ignorance that I thought in 1972 either that I had identified a new need or that I was the first to coin a single word to fulfil it. I made amends to my predecessors, however, in a note in *Meta* in 1977 by tracing back what appeared to be the true origin:

> In 1968, a *groupe international de professeurs, d'interprètes et de terminologues* in Brussels ventured to set up a Centre international *d'étude de la traduction.* Their manifesto was published in *Babel* 14:3.143 over the names of R. Goffin, P. Hurbin and J.-M. Vandermeerschen. ...it includes the following: La traductiologie [sic] participe des disciplines linguistiques et extra-linguistiques...
>
> [Later on] another suggestion came from Jean Hesse, a retired UNO translator. He wrote to the Comité d'études des termes techniques français to propose *translatique...* This was immediately subjected to some *critique caustique* from [the well-known French technical translator] Jean Maillot... because [among other reasons] it evokes *transatlantique...*
>
> Maillot goes on to recommend adoption of «...un terme compréhensible de tous, tel celui de *traductologie*, déjà employé par des auteurs belges et canadiens, et, par là même, susceptible d'être admis dans toute la francophonie». (Harris, 1977)

My note in *Meta* was followed in the same issue by one from Irène Spilka defending *translatique* (Spilka, 1977). She wanted me to continue the debate, but I declined because, as I had said in the 1972 paper, «l'important dans cette terminologie n'est pas sa nomenclature mais la compréhension des concepts qui s'y rattachent».

In the meantime bilingualism had obliged me to find an English translation for *traductologie* and so I launched *translatology*. It remains a matter of regret to me, as an unrepentant translatologist and an anglophone, that *translatology* has not caught on to the extent that *traductologie* has. The different degrees of acceptance are evidenced by the founding last year of a new Canadian learned society under the bilingual name of Association canadienne de *traductologie* / Canadian Association for *Translation Studies*. Perhaps, however, the objection is not so much to the word form as to «les concepts qui s'y rattachent». Perhaps, that is to say, the objection comes from people who do not look on the study of translation as a *scientific* pursuit.

In fact my own understanding of translatology had evolved significantly between 1972 and 1977. The 1972 paper was, as indicated above, full of allusions to linguistics: translatology is described in it as «l'analyse linguistique de la traduction». In that respect it was the

product of its time: Nida, Catford, Mounin, Vinay, Darbelnet and many other leading writers on translation theory in the sixties and early seventies, were structural linguists. Nevertheless that paper also marked my first steps in some new directions, namely:

1. The recognition that «la traduction est, comme le souligne Ljudskanov, une opération». Ljudskanov was my first mentor in this field, and it was in his *Traduction humaine et traduction mécanique*, that I had first glimpsed *l'opération traduisante* as «linguistique et, éventuellement, *psycholinguistique* [my emphasis]» (Ljudskanov, 1969).
   By 1977, the work of what I would call the 'psychology' school of researchers on interpreting (Gerver in England, Barik in Canada, Seleskovitch in France, and so on) culminating in that year's NATO conference at Venice (Gerver & Sinaiko, 1978), combined with my own investigations of 'natural translation' (Harris & Sherwood, 1978), had convinced me that empirical research on translat*ors* instead of on translat*ions* was both feasible and full of exciting insights into a basic human linguistic skill -- and I had reason by then to emphasize the notion *basic*.

2. As a corollary of my desire to make translatology truly *descriptive*, as the linguists say, I wanted to get it away from

   > ...les cours destinés à la formation [et au perfectionnement] professionnels du traducteur pratiquant. Certes, de tels cours sont nécessaires, mais ils laissent la traductologie deux siècles en arrière par rapport aux autres courants de la recherche contemporaine. Car le résultat de cette orientation, ce dont Ljudskanov se plaint à juste titre, est une traductologie nettement *prescriptive*. D'ailleurs la recherche connexe à ces cours (thèses de M.A., etc.), même si elle est parfois descriptive, atteint rarement *l'explication*. [Here I was echoing Chomsky's exhortation to linguists to look beyond description to explanation.]

Consequently, in the 1977 note I defined translatology not in terms of *linguistic* analysis, but as «a word meaning *the scientific study of translation*». By that time I definitely had in mind the non-prescriptive study of the operations that go on in the translator's mind. This kind of study would not merely take into account the translations actually produced but would also entail the observation of the way in which translators go about producing them in real working situations.

That then was what I myself understood by *translatology*, though by that time other researchers understood it diffferently according to their interests. I would sum my concept up by the following definition:

> The objectively recorded observation and scientific analysis of what translators do, how they do it, what they produce, and how other people perceive what they do and produce; with the aim of investigating translators' mental processes from the most elementary to the most sophisticated levels as their bilingual language skills develop under social conditioning.

Limited space allows me to make only two points arising from this definition.

First, it is primarily and intentionally a prescription for basic research, not applied. As such it may seem far removed from the preoccupations of those of us who are actually doing translation or teaching others how to do it. However, my own recent experience in applied research, in connection with the Canadian Department of Communications' translator workstation project (Gurstein et al., 1986) goes to confirm the platitude that good applied research and development needs to be founded on adequate basic research and suitable theoretical models. The investigators had to spend a large proportion of their time observing what ought to have been already recorded.

Secondly, the risk that observation of reality may become biased by prescriptive attitudes is particularly virulent for us who teach translation, because in order to teach effectively we are forced to be prescriptive to some degree. We want students to learn good habits so we set up idealized models for them to aim at, knowing there are real-life constraints which will eventually prevent them from adhering to them perfectly. The danger is, though, that idealism may degenerate into dogmatism. Let me illustrate from two recent writings, both of which appeared in the October 1987 issue of *Traduire*, the journal of the Société Française des Traducteurs. In the first of these, Karla Dejean le Féal of the Ecole Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (Paris III), a school which prides itself on its research as well as on its teaching, takes issue with a very experienced translator, Jean Maillot (the same Maillot I quoted earlier), because the latter had stated that «la traduction professionnelle comporte toujours une part de transcodage» (Dejean le Féal, 1987). (*Transcodage* means direct passage from an SL expression to its translation, possibly with structural transformations but without integrating the content with the translator's *bagage cognitif*, i.e. his extra-linguistic knowledge.) Her argument amounts to saying that *transcodage* is not important because it is not sufficient. Then without really refuting Maillot's

assertion that «la traduction professionnelle comporte toujours *une part* [my emphasis] de transcodage», she goes on to conclude that «il ne présente donc aucun intérêt pratique... il ne mérite pas non plus d'être mentionné dans un ouvrage didactique».

By coincidence, I too was subjected to a sharp dose of realism on reading, on the very page facing le Féal's polemic, the account of another working translator. How many teachers tell students that they should always read through at least the first paragraphs of the source text before they start translating it? I certainly do. Here is what this translator advises: «Do not read the text first. Sit down... and begin immediately to translate.» The iconoclasm comes from Betty Howell, a reputable Montréal translator, and her article is entitled «The method that works for me» (Howell, 1987).

I hope it is clear from these two examples why empirical researchers must look at translators as they are and not as they would like them to be.

Let me conclude with a quotation from Roger Bell's article «Translation theory: where are we going?»

> What is desperately needed now, and needed fast, is an approach to translation which maximizes the *individuality* of the process, probes the phenomenon as it takes place in the mind of the translator and seeks to build, on the basis of models of the process, an explanation of what it means to translate (Bell, 1987).

I cannot say it better. It is really only the extension to written translation of what is already well-established in research on interpretation. So may the fledgling Association canadienne de traductologie\ Canadian Association for Translation Studies continue to foster translatology in Canada, thereby helping to put us on what I believe is becoming the leading edge of translation research.

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