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# Translating institutions: a missing factor in translation theory

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# Translating institutions: a missing factor in translation theory

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There is an important participant missing in existing models of translation: the translating institutions (corporations, churches, governments, newspapers) which directly or indirectly use the services of translators. In my view, the goals of a translating institution are what determines the general approach taken in the translations it produces: whether they are relatively literal or free, whether the language is conventional or innovative, whether metaphors are eliminated or retained, and so forth.

Here is an example. In *Freud and Man's Soul*, Bruno Bettelheim (1984, p. 53 ff.) claims that the English translators of Freud were wrong to substitute Greco-Latin words for Freud's everyday German. Why, he asks, is «das Es» rendered as «the Id» rather than «the It»? Why not the same approach as in the French translation («le Ça»)? According to Bettelheim, the reason is that in the English-speaking world, the psychoanalytic associations under whose aegis the translations were done wanted to create a *science* of psychoanalysis, so they needed to eliminate the humanist style and substitute a scientific one.

Assuming for the sake of argument that Bettelheim's understanding of Freud as a humanist is correct, the important thing to see here is that the non-equivalence was deliberate: no change in level of language was necessary in order to adapt the text to the target culture. The change was determined by the goal of the translating institution. Indeed there is a problem with Bettelheim's calling this a mistranslation, when what he is really objecting to is the goal of the institution. Given that goal, the approach the translators used was the right one. To speak of mistranslation in such cases suggests that there exists a «correct» way of translating which can be determined just

by looking at the wording and purpose of the source-text, and constraints imposed by the target culture. (Translation criticism might benefit from a limitation on the term «mistranslation», restricting it to mechanical reading and writing errors, and errors arising from the translator's lack of language knowledge, referential knowledge and cultural knowledge.)

The institutional factor in translation is to be distinguished from two factors commonly mentioned in translation studies: the «customer» factor and the «cultural» factor. Mistranslation (as just defined) can arise from a customer's action, for example when the customer sets too short a deadline or fails to provide documentation. But the customer does not determine the approach to translation. Customers may well ask for literal renderings, but whether or not literal renderings get produced will depend on whether the institution's doctrine of translation allows for this approach.

The cultural factor in translation is a set of *background* conditions whereas as the institution is an *actor* in the translation process. Furthermore, the institution does not act on behalf of an entire culture; rather it serves specific groups by producing translations that address specific readerships. The translation method dictated by its goals may actually hinder understanding for other readers, as in the Freud case.

Note, incidentally, that the translating institution is not necessarily located within the *target* culture. It can be a bi- or multi-lingual institution, or it can be associated with a third culture (e.g. the American Bible Society, which translates Ancient Greek into the languages of Third World countries), or with the source culture (e.g. French-to-English translation by the Québec Government as opposed to the federal or Ontario government).

Returning to the main argument, many readers will perhaps agree that translation of Freud or the Bible is institutionally determined. But what about the translation of a memo on acid rain? What happens when a public servant -- let's call her Anne-Marie Lévesque -- at the Québec regional office of the Canadian Department of the Environment writes a memo on acid rain, and I translate it for her colleague Mary Smith in the Ontario region of the Department? How is the approach I take to the translation institutionally determined?

The approach I use for such texts is the one taught in our translation schools: render not the words or the structures of the source text but rather the message. I will assume familiarity with this approach, which calls in addition for a composition style that would come naturally to a writer in the target language, and for «idiomatic» language, by which I mean not colloquial or colourful, but rather consisting

of existing collocations («fire drill» not «fire exercise») and existing usage («lead a discussion» not «animate a discussion»).

Nowadays this approach to translation is often considered to be inherently correct for technical and administrative texts and the like. Peter Newmark, in his well-known essays on communicative and semantic translation, has rightly pointed out that a few passages in such texts may need to be translated more literally, but he nevertheless agrees that the «communicative» (message-oriented, idiomatic, closest-natural-equivalent) approach is on the whole the right one for texts in which the personal identity of the source author is unimportant.

What I want to suggest is that this method of translation is correct for such texts *only* in the sense that it is the one best suited to the goals of the institutions which translate them. How else might they be translated? Perhaps I can evoke an alternative by saying that it would be one in which the French verb «animer» could sometimes be *intentionally* translated unidiomatically by the English verb «animate». There would be just enough lack of idiomaticity, just enough syntactic gallicism and just enough of an absence of familiar English style to ensure that the reader *is aware that he or she is reading a translation.* (The notion that unilingual anglophones would not understand is absurd; anyone who knows a language can figure out new meanings of words provided the writer gives enough contextual clues. The kind of bad translation that appears in newspapers is often hard to understand, but that is because the translator has not carefully selected the gallicisms.)

### Canada's Federal Translation Bureau as a Translating Institution

In what follows I will be considering only French-to-English translation; the approach to translation in the opposite direction is similar, but the motivating factors are different.

The Translation Bureau uses «communicative» translation, but not because this is inherently the right mode for the type of text it translates, or because readers would otherwise have difficulty understanding. The Bureau's translators take this approach because of the institution's translating goals -- goals which are in some sense attributable to the federal government, since the Bureau carries out certain statutory responsibilities and policies of the federal government in the area of official languages.

The government's translating goals are related to its policy of bilingualism, which grew out of an effort to meet the needs of French-Canadians and which was conceived, in the final analysis, as a means of preventing the separation of Québec. The policy provides for support

of speakers of whichever language is the minority one in a particular area (notably through education of children in their own language) and for *official* bilingualism, the aim of which is to give individual French and English-speaking Canadians equal access in their own language to government services and government employment without their having to know the other language. This is achieved through translation, together with requirements for varying degrees of bilingualism in a certain number of public service jobs.

Successive governments since the mid-1960s have pursued this policy of emphasizing *individual* equality, which paradoxically does not simply allow but actually promotes unilingualism, since it obviates the need for language learning by all but a few people. One can imagine an alternative, emphasizing inter-*community* understanding, that would be implemented mainly through non-linguistic policies, but would also encourage language learning.[1]

It may be that politicians have felt constrained by traditional animosities between English and French Canadians. (Indeed, one might wonder whether the government wants to ensure, in material translated from French, that it is addressing English Canadians in a language with no hint of Frenchness in order to avoid giving offence to francophobes!) However I do not think that the emphasis on individual language equality rather than inter-community understanding merely *reflects* existing relations between English and French Canada. It has also helped create them, and translation has played a role in this: when the goal is to let technical-administrative messages pass between equal individuals, «communicative» translation is the right approach, because it makes reading easier. If inter-community understanding were also a goal, then this method would not be used, *because it conceals the existence of the source-language community.*

Consider that memo from Québec on acid rain. When I translate it «communicatively», the technical-administrative message gets through to Mary Smith in Toronto, but the community affiliation of the author is not deemed «pertinent information» and is lost; there is no mark of it other than the signature at the end. The French presence in the public service, and indeed in Canada, is thus not evoked in Mary's mind as the translation is read.

Anne-Marie Lévesque, as an individual, is able to write her memo in French, and Mary receives the technical-administrative content without having to know any French. In this sense, communication is promoted. But it is also hindered, because Anne-Marie as a representative of a community vanishes as I compose my translation. No cultural contact is achieved between her and her Anglophone counterpart. The «two solitudes» do not touch each other.

## Translating Institutions and Translation Theory

In this concluding section I want to look at the implications of including translating institutions in translation theory. The very term «institution» requires elaboration, and this means bringing sociological concepts into translation studies. For instance, a glance at Webster's definitions of the word indicates the need for a distinction between what might be called «concrete» and «abstract» institutions. The former are particular organizations, the latter are social structures, consisting of a set of roles which are played either by individuals or by concrete institutions. The education system is an abstract institution, or structure, in which a given concrete institution, such as the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, may play a role. The Translation Bureau, a concrete institution, plays a role in the abstract institution of the state.

Alongside social structures, there are social *movements* that seek to change those structures, and these movements likewise involve both individuals and concrete institutions. (For instance, a movement has appeared among translators in recent years to promote a certain image of the translator, as a kind of writer, for example, with translators' associations being formed for this purpose.) Understanding writing of any kind requires consideration of both institutions and movements, as Raymond Williams (1981) has demonstrated.

The translating institutions of this article are obviously concrete institutions, but not in the restricted sense in which one often hears about «institutional translation»: the translating of texts of a technical or administrative nature by large modern organizations conceived as purely economic-political entities. Translating institutions may in fact be quite small. They may produce literary translations; and in the past, they took forms unfamiliar in the modern period: a post-Renaissance patron of writers who translated is an example of a concrete institution.

More importantly, concrete institutions are ideological entities as well as economic-political ones. Take a small English-Canadian literary house that decides on a program of translating Québec novels. Economically, it is producing translations for sale on the market, and that will make its activities different from those of an organization that is producing translations for its own use (a government translating tax regulations). But there is also an ideological aspect to its activity: for instance, the owners may be part of a literary movement that is trying to convey something about Québec to English-Canadian readers.

Institutionality, thus understood, is a central feature of (written) translation as opposed to (oral) interpretation. Most interpretation is non-institutional, as when children of immigrants interpret for

their parents; professional conference interpretation is exceptional in being institutionalized. In written translation, on the other hand, the non-institutionalized forms are the exception, as is true of writing generally: personal letters, diaries and scribbled notes to friends are not typical. Most writing throughout history has been done on behalf of concrete institutions.

Literary translation is no different from non-literary translation in this regard. While some individual literary translators may directly play a role in social structures or movements, I think an investigation would show that in most cases they work on behalf of concrete institutions, like universities, churches, or publishers connected to movements.

Implicit in an institutional approach to translation is a certain direction for translation studies: emphasis on the *production* of translations (by institutions in particular historical conditions), rather than on their *reception* in the target culture; priority to a *sociological* focus on translation as a unique form of cultural production, rather than a *psycholinguistic* focus on the processes in the translator's mind, or a «language engineering» focus on human translation as a socially neutral language-processing technique; a *unified* theory of literary and technical-administrative translation; an attempt at *explaining* the approach taken in particular translations, rather than just *describing* translations formally using comparative grammar and stylistics; finally, attention to *non-equivalence* as well as equivalence, in order to elucidate the notion of sameness of meaning in translation, and perhaps in language generally.

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## Note

1. Proficiency in French by anglophones outside Québec is still very low, maybe even declining among the population as a whole. See my «Translating Institutions and Idiomatic Translation», forthcoming in *Meta*, for some figures on proficiency and school enrolment. French immersion still involves only a tiny fraction of the school-age population, and according to a 1984 Gallup poll, done for Canadian Parents for French, the main motivation of parents wishing to have their children learn French is «employment opportunities» (44.8%), or other personal benefits such as «intellectual development» (16.3%) and «travel» (12.1%), as opposed to «contribution to national unity» (7.8%) or «cultural enrichment» (14%).

## References

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