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The Problems of Literary Translation



A Study of the Theory and Practice
of Translation from English into Spanish

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Introduction

The present book is a slightly modified and updated version of the doctoral thesis which, under the fuller title ‘The Problems of Literary Translation: A study of the theory and practice of translation, with special relevance to the problems of translating literary texts from English into Spanish’, was successfully submitted to the University of Bradford two years ago. Its aim is to offer a useful insight into the general field of Translation Studies, and to do so by approaching this field more specifically from a Spanish viewpoint.

Translation studies can still be considered a relatively recent discipline, yet it has already produced a bibliography which, rather than simply amazing, is becoming overwhelming. Whether translation is an art or a science; whether it has nothing to do with Linguistics or whether it is one of its branches; whether equivalence is possible across languages – what, in any case, does it mean; what exactly goes through a translator’s mind in the process of translating; do translators need any ‘theory of translation’ – if there such a thing as a ‘theory of translation’... These and other related questions are debated in innumerable books and periodicals, in conferences, symposia and translation ‘encounters’ of all sorts and all over the world. Pronouncements on how to translate are made by practitioners and by people who have never translated in their lives or, even worse, who use examples from languages they are not really familiar with. Translation specialists of international repute bombard us with definitions which we have to read two or three times before we begin to understand them.

The above paragraph sums up the questions the present book sets out to explore. It begins with a summary of what translators have had to say about their work, from the earliest times until approximately the mid-twentieth century, as a sort of background to the time when linguists began to see translation as one branch of their subject. This, in itself, is to be seen as a sort of introduction to the main topics covered by what has come to be known as Translation Theory, or simply – depending on individual preferences – as Translation Studies. It is precisely because

of this that I have called the first part of my book ‘Translation as Theory’ and I have started it with a historical background to ‘Translation Studies’. Part One attempts to clarify what translation is by examining to what extent it can be seen as a science or whether it should rather be considered an art. The various approaches to translation one comes across tend more and more to the conclusion that translation is a multidisciplinary activity and that, if there is a theory of translation, inevitably it will have to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, but none of them seems to be able to offer a precise definition of equivalence – the crucial point of any translating activity. This is the reason why I have given special attention to the term by discussing its linguistic, textual, cultural, and pragmatic characteristics.

Theory without practice cannot give us a clear picture of what actually happens when translators set down to write in their target language a text that has originally been written in another language – the source text. How does the translator do it? How acceptable is the resulting translation? Translation as product is there for all of us to see, but translation as process is a highly individual experience that makes each translating act unique and non-transferable. And the whole question becomes even more complicated the minute we start to consider not the target text, but the source text because then we realise that the writer had ended up with one possible version of what he or she had meant to say; in other words, the writer had really gone through the same process as the translator will go through later on. So the question arises: is there a lot of difference between writing an original text and translating it? If so, what difference is there? The question becomes even more relevant when we remember that in our own time many traditional academic circles still see translation as little more than classroom entertainment, devoid of any real creativity. I have therefore devoted the beginning of Part Two to some consideration of what it means to write an original text and what it means to translate it.

However, one thing is to discuss whether translating involves creativity or not and another is to try and decide whether translation is, strictly speaking, possible. To this end, I have examined a lot of translated passages, prose and poetry, which cover from classical writers still often translated into Spanish – such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Wilde, Hardy – to some of the latest best-sellers. After some consideration

of the linguistic and cultural problems encountered in translation, I have included a reference to non-standard language in literature and its translation problems, focusing on three well-known literary works which make use of dialect. Finally, as a form of summing-up, I have attempted to illustrate in as much detail as possible, by means of a practical example, the difficult problem of translation as process, how the translator's mind works in the process of transferring the source text to the target text. (In this context of 'source text', 'target text', etc., I assume that anybody interested in translation is familiar enough with abbreviations such as ST, TT, SL, TL.)

One thing that perhaps I ought to add is that I have not made any reference to the practical problems translators come across in their dealings with publishers and editors. Important though these are, they fall outside the scope of my research, which is centred on the linguistic and cultural problems posed by translation. In any case, my task is daunting enough, because no book, however long, could give a final answer to the elusive question – what is translation? On the whole, however, I hope I have managed to convey the complexity of the activity we know as translation and the challenge it presents to the most competent of its practitioners. Above all, given how our mind works and how we try to express its working by means of language, I also hope I may have contributed a little to a wider realization of the fact that what a good translator gives us, in the field of literary translation, is one major re-creation of one possible written version of somebody else's thoughts.

Manchester, April 2007