

Between idealism and precariousness: a brief overview of translation theory

There is an inevitable gap between theories of translation and the actual practice of many working translators. Theories can be descriptive or prescriptive but many theorists may not be prolific translators and many translators do not necessarily adhere to or are even aware of translation theories (López Guix 163; Shaffner 42, 45, 60; Newmark). However, both the process of thinking about translation and the experience of many years of practice acquired by working on a variety of texts offer insight for the working translator.

Translation theorists have tried to understand and define translation from a variety of perspectives. More recent theories come from concepts related to disciplines such as linguistics, literary theory and cultural studies. Structuralists have worked with scientific approaches that analyze texts for semantic, grammatical or syntactical units and then find equivalent units between the source language (SL) and the Target Language (TL) that should produce a more accurate text (Adewuni; de la Cuesta 32-33; Karimi; Leonardi; López Guix 175-6). This perspective works best when applied to technical and simplified texts such as forms or for more literal translations, but does not sufficiently account for the process of translating complex texts that employ poetic language or deal with cultural themes being translated between very unrelated languages and cultures. Not satisfied with scientific approaches, other theorists have focused on the translator as writer who must be attuned to the style, tone and meaning of the text, thus communicating the textual nuances of the SL in a way that the TL reader can appreciate and understand (Lydersen; López Guix 178; Venuti). Cultural theorists have reminded the translator of the ethical importance of attaining a profound understanding of the cultures and subcultures of both the SL and TL languages in order to overcome the inevitable lack of equivalences and adhere to an obligation to represent the culture of the translated text in the most accurate and respectful way (Karamanian; Adewuni; Thriveni, Shaffner 44).

No theory has been devised that can definitively explain the act of translation. The lack of equivalences between languages and cultures means that the work of the translator borders on interpretation (López Guix 19). Translators, therefore, must consider the inherent power in the choices that are made when presenting and potentially speaking for another (Lefevere,

Adeguni). While for many, theory is a worthwhile and helpful endeavor, once again, we are reminded that the reality of working translators necessarily must take into account practical constraints which may not include a careful application of theory (Shaffner, Newmark). In the end, it seems that what determines a translator's choices will be his or her specific circumstances, which may include the purpose of the text, the prime reader, knowledge of the SL and TL and their respective cultures, the complexity of the text, economic and time constraints, exigencies of employers and clients and the individual translator's knowledge, awareness and interest in theory.