

## REDEFINING THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION\*

Maria Paula Frota\*\*

Inherent to our history since its very beginning, nobody can deny that translation is one of the most important activities developed by mankind. Paradoxically, translation has traditionally been stigmatized by literary critics, scientists and people in general, and, worst of all, by the majority of translators themselves.

The recent and still uncommon presence of translation in academic institutions, compared to other domains of language studies, as well as the criteria that regulate the translation market, point to the lack of recognition of translation's and translators' real value. Reviewers seldom refer to good translators, whose work is magically taken to be invisible or inexistent. On the other hand, those translators who make mistakes or "misinterpret" the holy "original" are invariably subjected to ridicule, if not to worse forms of punishment.

Such a paradoxical situation, which is now being questioned by a minority, ought to be definitively overcome. To achieve this goal, it is necessary that translation researchers develop and disseminate works focusing on identifying and criticizing the traditional views of *science* and *language* that are responsible for the underestimation of our activity. It

---

\* Este trabalho foi apresentado no Translation Studies Congress, realizado de 9 a 12 de setembro de 1992, na Universidade de Viena, Áustria.

\*\* Professora do Departamento de Letras da Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

is necessary to revise the ideas concerning the constitution of meaning and, consequently, to redefine the main concepts that have ruled translation theories and practices.

I do believe that the age-old devaluation of our activity can be overcome, and that translation can achieve a new status. Our political opinions can enlarge the space of translation within academic institutions and one day strengthen it as an autonomous domain. If we put to intelligent use our power to build new realities, we can assign a different role to translation, so that it will be seen as a socially prestigious and, hopefully, financially rewarding activity. I have this firm belief because incipient but clear indications of a significant change can be felt today. These symptoms of change, in my opinion still very much restricted to the academic environment, may eventually reach the translation market and criticism.

With these concerns in mind, a few Brazilian specialists have developed, in their research work and teaching methodology, a new approach to translation. They have been much influenced by Arrojo<sup>1</sup>, a translation-studies pioneer in our country whose work undertakes a radical break with the old assumptions concerning the process of translation. In Arrojo's studies we find a fertile path, mainly inspired by lines of thought proposed in the philosophical studies of Nietzsche and Derrida, in the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Lacan, and in post-structuralistic notions such as Stanley Fish's within literary studies. The reading of these and other authors suggests alternative proposals to the traditional theories, as well as stimulates the search for elements which are able to consolidate a new way of envisaging translation.

Under this orientation, I intend to develop a critical analysis of the paradox presented — the importance of translation versus its stigmatization — aiming at contributing to the end of this schizophrenia that has victimized translation since its first studies.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Arrojo, Doctor in Comparative Literature by Johns Hopkins University, has been teaching and publishing in our area since the early eighties.

<sup>2</sup> For a historical view of translation studies and practices, see MOUNIN, Georges. *Les Problèmes Théoriques de la Traduction*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963, p.10-12; STEINER, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. London/New York/Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975, p.236-8 and BASSNETT-McGUIRE, Susan. *Translation Studies*. London/New York: Methuen, 1980.

Let me start by asking: Why is there such a paradox? Why is the *practice* of translation increasingly consolidated as a fundamental activity at the various sectors of our social and cultural life while, at the same time, it is often negatively described, particularly and curiously in *theoretical studies*, as "no doubt, a somewhat indecent act, since politeness demands it pass unnoticed"<sup>3</sup>? Or as a task which demands from us "blood, sweat and tears"<sup>4</sup>, since it is just like a "beetle that, with its blunt body, unretractable legs, and wings that are kept in a hard case, has everything against its flying"<sup>5</sup>?

Starting from the question itself, it's possible to begin to outline an answer: the traditional attitude, not exclusive to our area, separates practice from theory, presenting them as dichotomic terms. This separation provides the false idea that one can exist independently from the other, thus creating the huge abyss which exists between translation theories and practice. According to this traditional view, translation is a practice that resists, to or even that prevents the formulation of, *scientific* theories. Graham, for example, asks, at the end of one of his essays, "whether indeed translation really is a subject for theory after all"<sup>6</sup>. There are many who, giving a negative answer to Graham's question, have denied the possibility of translation theory. This denial indicates that translation is seen as a kind of "scandal"<sup>7</sup> which is incompatible with *scientific* reasoning, and thus as an activity that can be performed only with the help of a "sixth sense, a kind of instinct"<sup>8</sup>. And that's exactly the reason why the majority of translation studies is, as Mounin and Steiner point out, only an empirics of translation.

Isolated from the universe of theoretical and scientific production, translation is considered a kind of *handicraft* which does not deserve the attention of the academic world, scientific magazines or research finan-

<sup>3</sup> AURI, Dominique, in MOUNIN, G. Préface. Op.cit.; my translation.

<sup>4</sup> RÓNAI, Paulo. *A Tradução Viva*. Rio de Janeiro: Educom, 1976, p. 10; my translation.

<sup>5</sup> CAMPOS, Geir. *O Que é tradução*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1987, p.13; my translation.

<sup>6</sup> GRAHAM, Joseph F. Theory for Translation, in ROSE, Marilyn (ed.) *Translation Spectrum: Essays in Theory and Practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981, p.10.

<sup>7</sup> Term used by Mounin. Op. cit., p.8.

<sup>8</sup> RÓNAI, P. Op. cit., p.11; my translation.

cing institutions. The curricula of the rare university translation courses usually reflect the notion that translation is a practice that may dispense with theoretical reasoning. Translation courses, then, are in general eminently "pragmatic", "technical", practice-oriented courses, with teachers who, misled by this belief, take no notice at all of the theoretical options that necessarily rule their practices.

Another aspect clearly implied here, and which is present not only in the dichotomy mentioned above but in all dichotomies, is that, when the two terms that make up such a dichotomy are isolated, they seem to be equalized, apparently put side by side, when in fact they are in a hierarchical order. As Derrida puts it, "*an opposition of metaphysical concepts ... is never the confrontation of two terms, but a hierarchy and the order of a subordination*"<sup>9</sup>. Although discarded as an object of scientific theory, and thus deprived of its epistemological value, translation practice, in this specific case we are now examining, is nevertheless still raised to a position hierarchically superior to translation theory, since the latter is excluded or ignored.

What conception of theory is held by those who defend the thesis described above? It seems to me that it's clearly a concept based on a strong *scientism*, that is, the belief that even in the humanities the only methods that can fruitfully be used in the pursuit of knowledge are those of the natural sciences. In other words, the belief that a true scientific theory must have as its object something predictable, controllable, something that can be perfectly and completely systematized, characteristics that translation indeed doesn't have. As a matter of fact, neither do have the objects of the so-called natural sciences, as Kuhn argues<sup>10</sup>, a reasoning that reinforces even more the obsolescence of the thesis under analysis, despite its great prevalence until nowadays.

The set of ideas which I intend to outline emphasizes the need to overcome the dichotomic view of theory and practice. Each text we translate involves countless discursive options, and our choices, far from

<sup>9</sup> DERRIDA, Jacques. Signature Event Context. In: *Glyph*. Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. p.195

<sup>10</sup> KÜHN, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

being governed by exclusively pragmatic criteria, are intrinsically related to the way we envisage translation or, in other words, to our theories of translation. Every practice requires a theory and vice versa: every practice comes to life in this or that way, depending on the theory it is imbricated with; every theory of translation has practice as its reason to exist, since to constitute itself as a theory it needs practice as its object.

Besides causing the theory of translation to be seen as unnecessary or even impossible, another and even more serious problem raised by traditional studies is that of the impossibility of the practice of translation itself. Those who believe this have an idealized concept of *translation*, and claim that whatever is done under this label is far from corresponding to what in fact should be done. Mounin raises this issue when he states that, considering contemporary linguistic theories, translation should be impossible, in spite of the fact that translators exist, that they produce, and that their translations are useful to everyone<sup>11</sup>. A radical defense of the impossibility of translation is offered by the linguist Bloomfield, who argues that "*each linguistic form has a constant and specific meaning*"<sup>12</sup>, but the access to this meaning - which would require "*a scientifically accurate knowledge of everything in the speaker's world*"<sup>13</sup> - is not available to us, "*since we have no (scientific) way of defining most meanings and demonstrating their constancy*"<sup>14</sup>. Such a statement is much more common than we can imagine at first. Aren't we often told, specially in the case of so-called literary translation, that what we do is not exactly a *translation*, but an *adaptation*, a *re-creation*, a *transcreation*.

What is this concept of *translation* that hasn't been accomplished yet, in spite of the fact that we have been translating for more than two thousand years? The answer to this question can be elaborated on the basis of the notion of *fidelity*, central to discussions of translation. The traditional concept of fidelity implies the "hauling" of *the "semantic load"*

<sup>11</sup> MOUNIN, G. Op. cit., p.8.

<sup>12</sup> BLOOMFIELD, Leonard. *Language*. London: George Allen & Unwin., 1955, p.145; emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Op.cit., p.139; emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Op.cit., p.144.

of the source text and its "distribution" over the receptor language text.<sup>15</sup> This notion of fidelity as *transference*, to the receptor language text, of the "correct" or "true" meaning supposedly *contained* in the source text is similar to the one we see in Bloomfield. The only difference is that, for the latter, the transference will only be possible when "*human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state*"<sup>16</sup>!!

It's often said that, besides being faithful to the meaning, translators ought to be faithful to *the* intention of the author, to *the* context and to *the* effects that the "original" causes in its readers. To reach such a goal, it's said that translators should perform this transference in a *neutral* way, leaving aside their history, their culture, their language. Thus conceived, translation takes over the role of a *mechanical* activity that is performed without major difficulties: we just take the load-meaning of a wagon-text and put it, intact and complete, onto another wagon, performing only the appropriate and necessary replacements and adjustments on the formal structures. If, on the contrary, we accept the position illustrated by Bloomfield's opinion that it isn't possible to perform such a transference, translation thus becomes nothing but a *betrayal*.

These are the two roles traditionally assigned to translation: transference and betrayal. Both, as I have tried to demonstrate, are derived from the same premise that the good translation, the "faithful" translation is the translation-transference. To these two roles, which are in fact but one, correspond two types of translators: those who "*consider themselves mere transferors, a kind of copyist, and those who consider themselves traditori, because they start from the assumption that their task is impossible*"<sup>17</sup>. What social or intellectual value can have an activity performed by professionals who underestimate themselves to this extent? The rare professionals who do believe in their own worth do not consider themselves translators, but transcreators, re-creators, an attitude which delays even more the necessary changes in our field.

<sup>15</sup> The terms indicated by quotation marks were used by Nida in his well-known analogy between the process of translation and the hauling of freight onto wagons. Cf. NIDA, Eugene. *Language, Structure and Translation*. California: Stanford, 1975, p.190.

<sup>16</sup> BLOOMFIELD, L. Op. cit., p.140.

<sup>17</sup> FROTA, Maria Paula. Tradução: De "Transferência" a "Diferença", in *Estudos Lingüísticos — XXI Anais de Seminários do GEL*. São Paulo: GEL, 1992, p.239-9.

It's essential, therefore, that we extirpate the basic cause of this problem, which, in my opinion, is deeply rooted in the old notion of fidelity. We may maintain the name, as long as we redefine it, as suggested by Arrojo:

*The translation we make of any text, poetic or not, will be faithful not to the "original" text, but to what we consider the original text to be, to what we consider it is made up of, that is, to our interpretation of the source text, which will always be a product of what we are, feel and think. Besides being faithful to the reading we perform of the source text, our translation will also be faithful to our own conception of translation.*<sup>18</sup>

The redefinition of *fidelity* requires also the redefinition of *text* and *meaning*, of *reader* and *translator*. There is no thing as a text-in-itself, out of which the translator-reader would *extract*, neutrally and passively, a true encapsulated meaning; we can only speak of a text or meaning-to-us, readers-translators.

The reading of a translated passage of Nietzsche's "On Truth and Falsity in their Ultramoral Sense" may help us think about the subject. I suggest that we relate the expression "original text" to what is referred to the passage as "the primal form"; and the term "translation" to what is referred to as "copy".

*As certainly as no one leaf is exactly similar to any other, so certainly is it that the idea (word) "leaf" has been formed through an arbitrary omission of these individual differences, through a forgetting of the differentiating qualities (senses), and that this idea (word) now awakens the notion that in nature there is, besides the leaves, a something called the "leaf", perhaps a primal form according to which all leaves were woven, drawn, accurately measured, co-*

<sup>18</sup> ARROJO, Rosemary. *Oficina de Tradução*. São Paulo: Ática, 186, p.44; my translation.

*loured, crinkled, painted, but by unskilled hands, so that no copy had turned out correct and trustworthy as a true copy of the primal form.*<sup>19</sup>

It must be denied, therefore, that there is *one* immanent meaning in the text, and it is essential to show the necessary participation of the reader-translator in the formulation of meanings, in the construction of a *new* text, a text that at each new reading, even if it is read in the same language, will constitute *another* text. However, we cannot let ourselves fall into a second trap, and move the single source of emanation of meanings from the text to the translator's subjectivity. In this sense, the reading of Fish's texts may help us avoid the danger of "*reifying the text in its independence and the mind in its freedom*"<sup>20</sup>, or, in other words, of considering meanings as property of fixed and stable texts, on one hand, and, on the other hand, of considering readers as free and independent.

*The conclusion, therefore, is that all objects (texts and meanings) are made and not found, and that they are made by the interpretive strategies we set in motion. This does not, however, commit me to subjectivity because the means by which they are made are social and conventional. That is, the "you" who does the interpretative work ... is a communal you and not an isolated individual. No one of us ... does wholly original things ... because we could not do them, because the mental operations we can perform are limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded. These institutions precede us, and it is only by inhabiting them, or being inhabited by them, that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make. Insofar as the system constrains us, it also fashions us, furnishing us with categories*

<sup>19</sup> NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. *Early Greek Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Maximilien A. Mügge. London/Edinburgh: T. W. Foulis, 1911, p.179.

<sup>20</sup> FISH, Stanley. Working on the Chain Gang: Interpretation in the Law and in Literary Criticism, in MITCHELL, W. J. T. (ed.) *The Politics of Interpretation*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983, p.278.



*of understanding, with which we in turn fashion the entities to which we can then point. In short, to the list of made or constructed objects we must add ourselves, for we no less than the (texts) we see are the products of social and cultural patterns of thought.*<sup>21</sup>

Such categories or conventions, in their turn, do not have an objective nature either, since we also interpret<sup>22</sup> them. That is, such interpretative conventions should not be taken as superstructures *external* to us.

The notion that neither the subject-translator nor the object-text have an identity of their own, and that neither of them should be taken as parts of a dichotomic relation, leads us to the conclusion that translations and meanings are constituted from and within the reading *relationships* which are established between them. Considering that the subject-translator is not absolutely free, since he is constrained by social conventions and institutionalized uses of language; but considering also that neither is he absolutely constrained, since he does have a history or a genealogy of his own, the translator-text relationship — as well as the author-text and reader-text relationships — is necessarily *multiple*, even within the scope of the same language, the same text and the same reader.

Besides being multiple, meanings are to a great extent unplumbable, as numberless unconscious factors are activated in their production. Paraphrasing what Freud said in respect to dreams, there is at least one spot in every text at which it is unplumbable — a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown<sup>23</sup>. This *difference* and this *incompleteness* are the very place of language and, therefore, of man, who develops himself within its boundaries.

If we see language as *difference* and as the premise for us to consider our own constitution, as well as the constitution of our practices and

<sup>21</sup> FISH, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?* The Authority of Interpretative Communities. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1980, p.331-2.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to note here that I use "interpret" in the sense of "assign meanings to the language constructions" and not as "bring out or set forth the meaning of", the definition that is generally given to it in the dictionaries.

<sup>23</sup> FREUD, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated and edited by J. Strachey. London : George Allen & Unwin, 1967, p.111.

theories — seen here as necessarily imbricated; if we consider that objects do not exist in themselves, but are a result of the senses each one of us builds up and assigns to them at the non-dichotomous relationships we maintain with them; considering all that, we conclude that translation does not have, and could not have, a role of transference, and that, above all, it is an activity as possible and legitimate as everything else in our lives, since our lives are made up within the interpretative relationships that we establish the whole time with everything and with everybody. The role of translation is, and has always been, one of *creation*, of *production* of meanings.

We may even say that, qualitatively, the translator's work is comparable to the author's, since the latter, when creating a text of his own, does not build up anything *original*, primary or originating, but builds up a *translation* of the world and of other texts, of numberless experiences, sensations and histories. The time has come to free ourselves from the Babel myth that turned the plurality of languages, and, consequently, translation, into a curse. The plurality of languages and translation are not at all a curse, quite the opposite, they constitute one of the greatest riches of mankind.