

Translation as a Key Dimension of Social Life

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Abstract—Translation has now developed to the process in which translation is acknowledged as a key dimension of social life. At the same time, a translation approach to social praxis demands that we rethink basic premises of the social sciences. Taking translation as a key dimension of sociality means regarding difference as primary, and forces us to focus on the exchanges and interconnections between and across different contexts. What stands out are the multiple contextual involvements of social actors. This paper views translation as interactive and the influences of the factors of social life to translation. Based on the distinction between implicit and explicit levels of social translation, it explores the potentialities of translation as a way of reaching out to others.

Index Terms—social dimensions, social translation, social movements, universalisms

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation has been the focus of constant self-reflection. Once translation was acknowledged as an inherent feature of socio-cultural practice, it became more and more obvious that methodological prescriptions on how to translate would not do. Particular criticism has been directed at the assumption, underlying the very idea of translation, of a continuity of meaning between source and target contexts. The objective of “equivalence of meaning in translation” was countered with a position which in its extreme form claimed that translation is an impossibility—to understand means to not translate. This is a position which in fact shares basic epistemic and social assumptions with the very stance being criticized: the notion of separate worlds or contexts of praxis, and of an intermediary which, in a successful or an uneven way, attempts to bridge the gap between these worlds or which, alternatively, can make sense of (“understand”) the gap translation was discussed with respect to semantic or meaning structures, paradigmatically texts—meanings being transported from one language zone to another. Secondly and later, expanding on the first notion, translation was discussed with reference to intercultural understanding, paradigmatically the ethnographic encounter and, following this, intercultural communication in a wide sense of the term. It seems possible today that there will be a third round of reflection on translation, again expanding on the first two rounds or notions, but at the same time in significant respects reframing the issue of translation: a round in which translation is taken as a dimension of all social life. This article will discuss some aspects and issues of the possible new trend. Taking translation as a general dimension of social life requires us to learn from the first two rounds of translation debate in the humanities and cultural anthropology. But taking translation as a basic social praxis also calls for a new sociological debate, which will have repercussions for the other two debates.

The focus of debates on translation was for a long time what is transmitted and how transmission affects what is being transmitted (meanings, contents), as well as on the (usually two) contexts of the production and reproduction of meanings, usually taken as distinct and separate — as source and target contexts respectively. In so far as any closer contact or exchange between the two contexts was considered at all, it was seen as requiring the intercession of a mediating, “bridging” agency, that is, a professional translator or, for the second case, a professional anthropologist (and, by extension, any other regional specialist), or, in a critical turn, a “hybrid” postcolonial intellectual. “Translation” in the sense discussed here takes off from and transcends the *Verstehen* and interpretation approaches. In particular, it takes seriously the idea that every social actor, be it implicitly or explicitly, makes sense of and gives sense to what s/he does or experiences: understanding and interpreting one’s world are regarded as part and parcel of social praxis. But translation as discussed here also takes seriously and generalizes the experience of difference in each person’s daily life. Thus, we cannot assume that understanding someone or something will result in experiencing or seeing things the same way. Acknowledging the non-identitarian nature of things and ideas — the critique of identity logics (Adorno, Derrida) — translation has the task of addressing the question of difference and continuity (or identity). Translation takes the acknowledgement of difference between and within cultures as a starting point and undertakes to open the self towards the other, thus extending and developing target and source languages.¹⁰ The other does not figure only in the form of representations (or meta-discourses), but also as interrelations. Like the earlier hermeneutic approaches, the translation turn in the social sciences is grounded in a general social faculty of humans, furthering the inclusion of relational aspects into hermeneutics.

II. TRANSLATION WAS EXTENDED TO MEANING TRANSFERS OR MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MEANING TRANSFERS BETWEEN COMPLEX CULTURAL ENTITIES

Translation beyond representation means an engagement of some sort with new meanings and other people, both in different kinds of combinations. Like interpretation, translation needs to be investigated as a human faculty. What “translation” requires is a deepening sociological discussion, one which takes it as a social activity, as interactive and interpretive praxis, and which also undertakes to analytically distinguish the various aspects and dimensions of translatorial action. One scholar pursuing such an endeavour is Joachim Renn (2006), but sociology in general has still to rise to the task. However, I would stress that we must be careful: in this process sociology will have to give up its attitude of being the master of all discourse on the social, of writing the theory or script which all other disciplines of the social have to follow, and as sociologists of being the ones who alone can formulate the basic principles governing social life and social action everywhere. The postcolonial and anthropological critique of Western universalist claims and the biases built into them was of central significance for the humanities and social sciences, and still holds; the contemporary reflection on translation is a notable outcome of this. To be sure, this culturally critical and self-critical attitude has yet to reach most (Western, but not only Western) sociologists. But for those of us who have partially imbibed it and are attempting the next steps in an exploration of the terrain of intercultural understanding and analysis, there is much to gain from including sociological considerations of translation once these are rephrased in a new, self-critical mode. An interactional concept of translation changes the understanding of social relationships. The following is written from a social science background, combining anthropological and sociological aspects. But it does not deal with the social as just one special field among others. It takes the social as a dimension which, when considered from the angle of Different theories (the critique of identity logic), includes or articulates all aspects and dimensions of human understanding.

The frame: basic dimensions of social translation considering translation as an interactional process of transfer of meanings, but a transfer which changes these very meanings, opens up a new field. Basically, the notion of nonequivalency in translation forces us to take into account the fact or possibility that people relate to others, and even interact with them, across and through differences, across boundaries — differences or boundaries, I mean, between discourses, between cultural contexts, between social positions, or between social fields (subsystems or institutions). People can understand each other, or new things, without the guarantee or even the possibility of a fully shared understanding of the meanings involved. Recognizing the nonequivalency of translations actually implies that contexts are ultimately not bounded or clearly circumscribed. One makes sense of the “other” in one’s own context, but one’s context does not exist in isolation. Or, put differently, nobody exists in one context only, or in one homogeneous context. Contexts are themselves complex, interlacing various and by definition different discourses, cultures, positions and social fields a certain way”. Social actors can and do, in some pragmatic way, connect to meanings or meaning practices arising in one discourse or life form or culture or social field, and refer to them in another discourse or culture or social field in the language of that other context.¹² This means there is understanding without full (that is, identical) understanding or agreement, and it also means that differences lie “within” oneself, that one lives difference, or lives in difference need to start not from the assumption of two separate, unconnected contexts but from the fact of contact, if not, as is actually usually the case, of interpenetration of different contexts, discourses and social fields. Secondly, the person translating is not outside the contexts involved, nor does s/he inhabit a place “in-between”. Rather, the translator—in fact, each social actor—has her/his feet in both or all the camps involved and constantly moves between them when translating. Thirdly, translations are made in everyday life by everyone; translation happens in each person’s mind—one lives in translation. Finally, meanings are usually, or often, shared only partially across contexts. Taking up meanings of one context in another one, and thus resituating and repositioning them, is a pragmatic affair. The statement that social actors take up meanings pragmatically in a second context must be explored further. This cannot be done in detail here, but it seems that at least two different modalities are conceivable. One would be “paraphrasing”: the meanings from one context trigger off certain meanings in another context in the hands, or voice, of the person translating. The other modality would be widening each actor’s horizon or the horizon of a discourse — an attempt to capture the meanings from the first context as comprehensively as possible, looking for the different connotations, etymologies, and so on and integrating them, or some of them, into another context by enlarging and reformulating the second context, discourse or social field. The first scenario or modality involves entering a different, but parallel, “world” (language, discourse, institutional field) from the first context. The second entails self-transformation. The first one means not caring too much for adequacy of meaning but just continuing according to the rhythm of the new field or discourse. The second scenario is more explorative. In the end it means acknowledging that everything is always already translated. The attempt to integrate other ideas, concepts or practices is, however, limited by the inner logic or autonomy of each of the discourses and fields involved, since even if rephrased, the content transferred and the context to which it has been transferred follow separate rationales which limit the degree of absorption.

III. CONCLUSION

Translation here thus means acknowledging and living with difference within a larger frame. What has to be emphasized is that such translation and amalgamation happens on both sides of the translation relationship, thus not privileging one side (and clearly not one side’s knowledge faculties). Secondly, instead of outright fusion what stands out here is the continuity, even if in changed form, of difference, of different internal dynamics in the very process of amalgamation, integration or exchange, as well as the requirement to transform one’s self and one’s ideas in the process.

Meanings show resilience not only in the process of social change, but rather because of the changes social actors make that affect them: because of translation. Meanings set new contexts.

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