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Sociolinguistics and translation

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The development of Translation Studies (TS) as a discipline has, at times, been marked by an (already plentifully diagnosed) tension between linguistic and cultural approaches to translation. Fortunately, it is now frequently acknowledged that both disciplines have much to offer to each other, thus rendering such a dichotomy largely obsolete. Regarding the particular case of Sociolinguistics, it is important to first contextualise the attention given to it by translation scholars within a broader functional and communicative approach to text during the 1980s and 1990s along with the turn from structural to functional linguistics. One of the central criticisms of linguistic approaches to TS is in the underlying assumption that meaning is stable, as well as independent of language and culture. Such a view is in stark opposition to Sociolinguistics, which understands meaning as dynamic, subjective and context-dependent, as briefly explored in the following section.

1.The scope of sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics encompasses a very broad area of research, which, as Meyerhoff (2006) puts it, "can be confusing if you are coming new to the field". Hence, it is important to start by clarifying what can be taken as sociolinguistic research.

In clear contrast with other linguistic approaches (such as Psycholinguistics), the focus of Sociolinguistics is on language use, that is, on what can be said in a particular language, by whom, to

whom, in whose presence, when and where, in what manner and under what social circumstances. For sociolinguists, the process of acquiring a language is not just a cognitive process involving the activation of a predisposition in the brain, but a social process as well. It is thus not enough to acknowledge language as a set of linguistic items. The focus lies on understanding the uses of language within a society. This implies studying the possible relationship between linguistic items and concepts such as identity, class, power, status, solidarity and gender.

Within Sociolinguistics, a distinction has sometimes been made between core Sociolinguistics and Sociology of Language. Though the distinction is not always clear-cut, Sociolinguistics is largely concerned with the study of the possible correlations between certain social attributes (e.g. class, sex, age) and certain language varieties or patterns of use in an attempt to understand how social structures influence the way people talk. Sociology of Language, on the other hand, focuses on issues such as how these social groups can be better understood through language, the attitudes behind the use and distribution of speech forms in society, the protection, replacement or change in languages and the interaction of different speech communities (Coulmas, 1997: 2). There is also a methodological division between authors who believe sociolinguistic research should be limited to correlation studies, and authors claiming that the aim of Sociolinguistics should be not only to provide an account of how language is used in a given community but also to investigate its causes (Chambers, 2003: 226). This second perspective shows an underlying assumption of language use as an identity-creating practice, thereby stimulating studies into how power relations in society constrain linguistic expression as well as interpretation. It sees language as a system and focuses on the rules governing that system. As sociolinguistic variation is to be regarded as correlated with contextual elements rather than merely fortuitous, there are social and cultural dimensions to the language choices to be considered. Hence, the dynamics of discourse can be analysed to expose cultural conventions and individual strategies, relationships of power and solidarity, status and stigma or conflict and consensus. In this article, Sociolinguistics will be taken in the broader sense as encompassing both fields.

Sociolinguistics is thus a vast field, operating as an umbrella for studies focusing on multiple variables with an impact on language use. Contrary to popular belief, it is by no means limited to regional and social dialectology and the study of language variation according to geographic areas and social groups – a line of inquiry that has in fact been criticised for being one-dimensional and unable to account for variables such as register that cut across dialect and social variation. Indeed, the concept of register and the study of language variation according to situation is another important area of study that has become very influential in other disciplines. Within register analysis, the model proposed by Halliday & Hasan (1991) has been particularly well received by TS scholars. This model studies language as communication, assuming meaning in the speaker/writer's choices, which, in turn, are systematically contextualised and interpreted within a broader sociocultural framework.

Other areas of study within Sociolinguistics are language change, multilingualism, language interaction, language contact and language planning/policy. Regarding language change, sociolinguists focus on variation in time, on how a given change spreads internally within a language and possible correlations between that change and concepts such as prestige. But change can also happen through language contact with other languages and, in this respect, Sociolinguistics focuses on the outcomes for speakers and their languages when new languages are introduced into a speech community. This area of study develops concepts such as power, prestige and status, and considers different forms of interaction from colonisation to immigration. This is very much related to another area of study, multilingualism, concerned with variation and language use in communities with two

or more languages and looking at how multilingual speakers choose which language to use on a given occasion. Another aspect of interest to sociolinguists is language interaction and how forms of language are used to communicative effect in particular cultural contexts. This directly challenges the one-directional assumption that context impacts on language in the sense that it is now accepted that in speaking in a particular way, speakers may help to construct contexts as well.

Finally, another area that has attracted attention within Sociolinguistics since the 1960s is language planning, concerned with all conscious efforts aiming at changing the linguistic behaviour of a given community, such as the role of minority languages in education, the selection process of an official language, etc. Along with language planning we can find the concept of language policy, concerned with more general linguistic, political and social purposes behind the actual language planning process.

The development of these concepts has only been possible because Sociolinguistics has been open to insights from other disciplines such as Pragmatics, Sociology and Ethnography. In this respect, it is important to mention the development of what Mesthrie et al. (2009) have called Critical Sociolinguistics, an umbrella term for what came to be known as Critical Linguistics and, more recently, Critical Discourse Analysis. With authors such as Fowler and Fairclough as their key proponents, this area of study is concerned with exploring how language creates, sustains and replicates fundamental inequalities and identity structures in society.

2. Sociolinguistics and translation

The attention given to Sociolinguistics by translation scholars needs to be considered within the broader context of what came to be called the “Cultural Turn” by Bassnett & Lef  vre in the famous introduction to *Translation, History and Culture* (1990) (see *The turns of Translation Studies*). With the move towards translation as a social practice conditioned by social configurations, there was a clear break with formal linguistics (and formalist linguistic approaches to translation), bringing TS closer to a branch of linguistics that had pioneered a similar move within Linguistics. For authors such as Nida, the bond between these two disciplines is indeed “a very natural one, since sociolinguists deal primarily with language as it is used by society in communicating” and that the “different ways in which societies employ language in interpersonal relations are crucial for anyone concerned with translating” (1992: 25).

Since Nida, many translation scholars have built on sociolinguistic concepts to examine translation and the contextual elements conditioning it. The points of contact between the two disciplines have in fact multiplied with the growth of TS as a discipline and the diversification of its areas of study.

Let us now look more closely at the points where the paths of these two disciplines cross.

2.1 Translation and dialectology

The days are now gone when most articles focusing on the translation of any form of linguistic variation would start by proclaiming the impossibility of translating culture-specific elements. Studies into regional and social dialectology have been of clear use in this matter. They have allowed both scholars and translators to better identify which varieties were being used and their communicative meaning in the source text. This, in turn, has helped translators make informed decisions about how to better recreate linguistic varieties in the target text, while scholars have been helped to better interpret the translational options. Building on sociolinguistic studies regarding the status recognised to dialects and sociolects, and their relationship with the concepts of prestige, power, solidarity and stereotype, authors such as Leppihalme (2000) and Nevalainen

(2004), have been working towards a model capable of accessing the varieties' communicative meaning in the text.

Similar power relations have been recognised at a more macro level, and concepts such as standardisation (i.e. the use of the standard variety in the target text when regional or social varieties are used in the source text) have entered the discussion along with the contextual aspects leading to them. Factors promoting standardisation include censorship, institutional pressure, translation status and notions of language correctness (Ramos Pinto 2009). This has, in fact, been such a recurrent phenomenon in translated texts that it has already been proposed as one of the translation universals. However, the opposite movement of using regional or social varieties in the target text when the standard variety was being used in the source text has also been identified along with the promotion of contextual elements (Brisset 1996).

2.2 Register analysis and translation

Like dialectology, register analysis has not only facilitated an understanding of context in fiction (enabling a more accurate characterisation of the situation in which characters' speech occurs) but has also encouraged consideration of context at macro level (i.e. the situation surrounding the translation itself as communicative act). This raises questions of discourse variation in accordance with factors such as genre (the discursive characteristics of an instruction manual are very different from those of a science textbook, with each genre having its own established discourse community, even though this may differ from culture to culture), tenor and target audience (e.g. differences between translation for children or adults; see *Children's literature and translation*) or mode (discursive differences between speech and writing). This last aspect is particularly relevant in subtitling (where the spoken source text appears simultaneously with the written target text) and theatre translation (where both the source and target texts are written to be spoken; see *Drama translation*).

Halliday's model has become one of the most popular among Translation Studies scholars, and multiple articles could be cited in this respect. However, two pioneering publications by Basil Hatim and Ian Mason – *Discourse and the Translator* (1990) and *The Translator as Communicator* (1997) – deserve special mention. Halliday's textual function has attracted the attention of scholars such as House (1997), but Hatim and Mason focus their analysis on the ideational and interpersonal functions, adding a semiotic level of discourse. These authors claim that a multiple-layered analysis is capable of accounting for the way tradition and power relations are negotiated, challenged or perpetrated in translation. More recently, register has deserved attention by scholars such as Marco (2001), working with literary analysis, Pettit (2005) working on audiovisual translation or Marmkjaer (2005) on a broader perspective on translation.

2.3 Language change and translation

Another area of Sociolinguistics that has influenced Translation Studies is the area of language change. This is a growing area of research not only because translation can be a promoting agent for language change (Kranich et al. 2011), but also because the natural changes in a language can promote translation activity. In this context, it is important to consider the phenomenon of retranslation, the production of new translations of works that have previously been translated into a particular language. This is an important fact to consider within Translation Studies as the need to update or modernize a given translation's discourse has often been given as a reason for the existence of more than one translation of the same text. This issue has received particular attention by scholars working on the translation of religious texts. However, scholars in other areas – drama

translation (Aaltonen 2003), audiovisual translation (Ramos Pinto 2009) or translation theory (Brownlie 2006) – have also looked into the phenomenon of retranslation, focusing on the aesthetic, linguistic, ideological, and commercial factors that motivate the production of those new translations.

2.4 Language contact, multilingualism and translation

Taking a more synchronic view of language change through translation, some TS scholars have turned their attention to aspects of language contact, as confirmed by the special issue of *Target* devoted to *Heterolingualism in/and Translation* 18:1 (2006, ed. Reine Meylaerts). As Meylaerts explains in her introduction, “[...] the issues of linguistic diversity and multilingualism are inherently tied to translation. The question of which language(s) can/cannot/must be used necessarily implies: which one(s) can/cannot/must be translated from or into, by whom, in what way, in which geo-temporal, institutional framework, etc. This is why translation seems heavily institutionalised in multilingual societies” (2006: 2)

Multilingualism has traditionally been considered one of the insurmountable “translation problems”. However, recently, freed from the tag of the “untranslatable”, it has been perceived in a new light and found to shake the foundations of the “traditional dichotomy of source text vs target text, as well as many other structural notions such as fidelity and equivalence” (Suchet 2008: 151) (see *Multilingualism and translation*).

2.5 Language planning/policy and translation

Language planning and language policy has been a growing area of study since the 1960s, and since these tend to include translation policies, more attention is being given to translation in this context. Multiple studies have been promoted into community interpreting in order to explore the links between interpreting policies and interpreting services. However, despite this, the field is still lacking a systematic account of translation policies and the link between these and translation services.

3. Final remarks

The rapprochement between TS and Sociolinguistics, mostly promoted by the former, was motivated by the need to include the contextual elements surrounding the production, circulation and reception of translated texts in TS analysis. Context can either be considered at the micro level of the text or at the macro level of the context of translation, and the theoretical models and concepts developed in Sociolinguistics have proved to be relevant at both levels. At micro level, it has allowed a better understanding of communicative acts and specific situational contexts, while at macro level, it has stimulated a new approach to translation as the product of a communicative act itself, promoter of change or a safe keeper of specific speech communities.

Context can, nevertheless, be a daunting concept for translators and scholars alike as there are many factors to be taken into consideration. In a world paradoxically becoming more global as well as local, context is simultaneously becoming larger and more diversified as well as smaller and more specific. Drawing its analytical tools both from social sciences and Linguistics, Sociolinguistics seems to be a natural and fruitful friend to TS, whose insights can have an important impact both on methodological and theoretical terms.

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