

Translation as a Three-dimensional Phenomenon: A Proposed Definition

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Abstract

This paper aims at redefining translation and exploring its nature, drawing on translation theories. So, old as well as new perspectives on translation are demonstrated, discussed and accentuated. The current researchers' attempts to define translation as a science, an art, a skill, a process or a product are, thus, concentrated to highlight the tenets of each philosophy. No chronological order is sought, but rather notions are launched as if in a stream of consciousness where each concept triggers the one following it. However, theorists have had no consensus on what translation is, and have given diverse definitions to describe its real nature. A possible compromise among all the perspectives on translation can help to decide what translation is and what its dimensions are. As translation is one of the highly sophisticated activities conducted by man, looking at its different dimensions gives a clearer vision of its nature. It comprises some elements that can be seen as creative (artistic) features and some others as attributes of science. When these are fused together the process which involves cognitive efforts will result in a product that can be perceived and judged differently by different people. Finally, it is hoped that the proposed definition of translation as a three-dimensional phenomenon, and the calls for triangulating research results in translation studies will present a more realistic and comprehensive look at translation.

Keywords: Art, skill, process or product, science, translation

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Introduction

Most theorists in translation, if not all, are actually translators (Kelly, 1979; Cheung, 2006). They have themselves carried out translation tasks and have been tackling the problems that arise. Therefore, the theories they postulate usually introduce their perspectives on the nature of translation, how they translate and/or what they believe other translators do. Their viewpoints, along with translation theories, are clearly stated in their writings, starting from Cicero in the first century B.C. to the many translation specialists of the early 21st century. Since the early days of translation, theorists have had no consensus on what translation is and have given diverse definitions as to its real nature. Below is a discussion of these definitions:

Translation as a science

Translation theorists have been divided into two schools: namely, those who regard translation as a pure science and others who regard it as a creative art (Al-Abdullatif, 2004; Barnstone, 1993; Kelly, 1997). Kelly (1979, p. 34) groups translation theorists into two streams; 'linguists' and 'hermeneutic theorists'. The former, by one means or another, defines translation as 'transmission', such as, Roman Jakobson (1959/2004), J.C. Catford (1965), Nida (1964) and Vinay & Darbelnet (1995). Kelly (1979) means by transmission the transfer of the linguistic data from one language to another. Whether they are studying linguistic operations or training techniques, linguists precisely postulate translation steps and strategies which, in their opinion, scientifically describe the translation process (p. 44). As for the latter school, such as Cicero (first century BCE) and St. Jerome (fourth century CE), translation is 'an interpretative recreation of text' (Kelly, 1979, p. 44) which will be discussed in the next point below.

Proponents of the first school argue that translators are generators of the source language [SL] content in the target language [TL] with the help of linguistic devices. They reach their goal by applying a series of actions to achieve the intended results of a translation task. The systematic approach used by translators in analyzing source and target languages, with its relevance to other social, rhetorical, logical and psychological studies, gives translation scientific features that can be tested and analyzed. The core of studying translation is to examine language systems in order to disclose the built-in laws of translation, as they argued. Working independently, advocates of translation as science left behind a volume of literary work and a huge heritage of religious translated texts. The newly adopted pragmatic principles make it difficult for most of them to accept the artistic aspect of translation. In addition, linguists, in their translation theories, deal with the human variable as if it is fixed in all cases and ignore both the intention of the translator and the function of the translated text (Kelly, 1979, p. 44).

There is something more to be said about translation, the researcher believes. The role of the translator, as claimed by Nida & Taber (2003), is to produce a text that sounds natural in the target language. Thus, in order for the translator to achieve this naturalness, s/he needs something more than the linguistic data derived from language theories. Indeed, translators need to have both a sense of correctness and an intrinsic feeling that makes translation a talent show. This is a point that is clear when a translator is dealing with religious or literary texts; so if translation is not simply a science, in what other ways can we describe it?

Translation as an Art

Back to Kelly's (1979) classification of translation theorists, mentioned previously, the second group views translation as 'literary creation' (p. 34). The shared ground of all scholars in this stream is that language is a powerful tool for expressing meanings in meaningful units. One view

under this school considers translation as high-standard imitation, such as in the writings of Cicero and St. Jerome. They claim that translators are artists that can transfer an author's **modus operandi** [method, approach, or the way in which something operates or works (memidex.com)] into their own language and for their own readership. Another view held by Dryden (1631-1700), Herder (1744-1803) and Schleiermacher (1768-1834) rejects the idea of imitation and finds it a big mistake. Proponents of this opinion differentiate between traits of translators and critics and prescribe that good translators should have both of them in order to be able to penetrate and clarify a text, i.e. simply explain it. Hence, the role of critical translators, as they argue, is to assess the source-text cultural and linguistic norms against the target ones. Kelly (1979) summarizes the view that translation is an art as follows:

It is not clear when translators began to lay claim to the status of artist. The main ground seems to be the concept of parallel creation one finds in critics as far distant as Cicero. His claim that one was to treat translation as a branch of oratory is repeated constantly as a justification for translators' freedom (p. 51).

Kelly explains the reason why advocates of this view profess to be artists as they usually feel free to share with the original writer his/her artistic creation. The sole criterion for judging their performance is the ability to achieve oratory (P.51).

On the contrary to this standpoint, other scholars insist that defining translation exclusively as an art or as a science leads one to ignore great endeavors on the part of a group of theorists. Any task of translation is a purposeful act which involves complex problem-solving techniques, and not merely aesthetic aspects. The fact that translation has intrinsic features of both science and art makes some scholars come up with a category that can integrate both traits (Azizinezhad, 2006). Therefore, Newmark (1998) prefers to label translation also as a skill.

Translation as a Skill

A skill and a craft are synonyms; both mean the ability which requires knowledge and practice (Dictionary.Reference.com, 2010). Pedagogically speaking, Azizinezhad (2006) asserts that when we consider translation as a craft, bearing in mind its scientific and artistic facets, it will be more applicable and teachable. Like any other skill, translation can be taught, can be attained and can be developed by practice. Toader (2007: 4) sums up the discussion by proposing that translation is all the three; a science, an art and a skill at the same time. It can be considered a science as 'it necessitates complete knowledge' of the structure and features of both TL and SL. Translation, to him, is an art because 'it requires artistic talent' in recreating the original text to readers who are not acquainted with the source text [ST] and experiences expressed within it. He adds that '[i]t is also a skill because it entails the ability to smooth over any difficulty in the translation, and the ability to provide the translation of something that has no equal in the target language' (Toader 2007, p. 4). The author adds her voice to his, as she believes translation in its abiding nature has continued with its need for the power of the human brain in adopting the problem-solving techniques and tuning features of two different world experiences. Many researchers hold the same perception that translation is a coalescence of the three elements (Ordudari, 2008; Toader, 2007; Azizinezhad, 2006; Newmark, 1998).

Other researchers still argue that to precisely describe the nature of translation is to get into the translator's mind, to understand all of the processes in order to find problems and to give solutions, such as in the writings of Halverson (2009), Kaur (2003/2015), El-Hilaly (2004), Gutt (2000), Bell (1991) and Nida (1964). They claim that, by analyzing both conscious and

unconscious processes, they can enhance translators' ability and hence develop the translation process as well as product. To them, translation is all about a process.

Translation as a Process

Kelly (1979) inclines towards labeling all linguistic theories of translation as process-oriented. Although experimental research on translation as a process started in the mid-eighties (Göpferich & Jääskeläinen 2009), the first linguist/translator who tries to describe what is going on in the translator's mind is Nida (1964). His work as a missionary on Bible translation justifies the endeavor to make it accessible to readers with different languages and backgrounds. The aim of his theory is mainly to help translators to overcome the linguistic difficulties and cultural gaps while translating Scriptures.

It was on the one hand from the development of semantics and pragmatics, and on the other hand from Noam Chomsky's theory of generative-transformational grammar, that Nida derived his hypotheses and jargon (Munday, 2008). Nida and his colleague Taber (1969) hypothesize that, in order to translate, the translator's mind analyzes the surface structure of an utterance in the SL and then searches for an equivalent one in the TL, and thus a formal equivalence is achieved. When the translator is unable to find an equivalent due to the SL/TL linguistic differences, his/her mind will go on to another process. The mind will analyze the surface structure of an utterance into its kernel structure (a universal aspect of all languages where meanings are related to four types of grammatical units: events, objects, abstracts, and relations) and then will reconstruct its meaning in the TL, thus achieving a dynamic equivalence (ibid). Nida's (1964) types of equivalence and translation procedures can be demonstrated as follows:

- a- *Formal equivalent*: When a formal correspondence between two languages is possible, and
- b- *Dynamic equivalent*: When a formal correspondence between two languages is impossible or incomprehensible. (pp. 165-171)

Gentzler (2001) maintains the influence of Nida's theory and puts this:

With the adaptation of Chomsky's theoretical premise, his transformational rules and his terminology, Nida's theory solidified, and the result –Toward a Science of Translating– has become the "Bible" not just for Bible translation, but for translation theory in general (p. 45, emphasis in original).

This claim is clearly exposed in the literature of translation theory and practice. Nida's theory and types of equivalence, according to many scholars, have dominated the field of translation studies for quite a long time (Baker & Saldanha, 2009; Munday, 2008). Since then the examination of translation processes has been appealing to many scholars and organizations. They aim to analyze cognitive mechanisms inside the head [the black box] of a competent translator, as Hansen has argued (2008).

In 1980, Popovic (in Sokolovsky, 2010) assumes reading the ST is a process of decoding and translating it is a process of 'recoding of a linguistic text, accompanied by the creation of its new linguistic appearance and stylistic shape' (p. 286). Similarly, Roger Bell (1991) in his book "Translation and Translating" defines translation as:

- (1) *Translating*: The activity ,i.e. the process,
- (2) *Translation*: The tangible object, i.e. the product, and
- (3) *Translation*: The concept that combines both (the process& product) (p.13).

He differentiates between translation as a process, as a product, and as a general term that refers to both. On defining the process of translation, Bell (1991) proposes that the translator analyzes a SL text and passes it to a slot in his/her memory- similar to Nida's kernel structure- which is called 'a universal (non-language-specific) semantic representation' (p.20). Within this part of the memory, the translator manipulates meanings and then generates them into a TL text. Although Bell was trying to objectively produce a comprehensive theory by defining both the process and the product, the most important part of the process is still vague. In contrast to Nida's clear definition of kernel structure, Bell's semantic representation is a blank sheet that has nothing on it.

From a pedagogical point of view, Kussmaul (1995) nominates translation as a problem-solving process. Kussmaul (1995) claims that translators are facing many difficulties while transferring meanings from one language into another. Thus, they work hard in order to overcome these difficulties by finding solutions to problems that arise. In the same vein, Theo Herman (1999) asserts that it is a decision-making process by which a translator is free to adopt SL or TL norms in the translated text. This approach is later on expanded by Munday (2012a) who applies appraisal theory to analyze translators' decision-making processes. Danks et al's (1997) volume compiles some significant findings of researches on cognitive processes in translation and interpreting, in which each piece of research discusses one aspect of the process which differs from the others. All previous opinions share one basic perception that translation is not about guessing or a random process. It is a conscious and deliberate series of actions with intended goals and outcomes.

Gutt (2000) argues that the main goal of the translation process, indeed, is communication. Many translator scholars agree with him (Sokolovsky, 2010; Darwish, 2003; Hatim & Mason, 1997). In an attempt to theorize translation, Darwish (2003) illustrates how the communication comes about with codes of two different languages. He additionally puts emphasis on Catford's statement that meaning is the property of the language. Furthermore, he equally presumes that 'concepts are the property of the mind' and exist in the human's mind outside a language, and thus they are 'universal and therefore transferable and translatable' (pp. 2-3).

According to Darwish (2003), a translator who knows two languages has 'two sets of parallel linguistic and cultural repertoires' (p. 3). When the translator starts a translation task, the meaning is transmitted from one store to the other via the concept lens and then expressed in the other language, as he argues. Darwish (2003) has suggested three phases for the translator's mind as follows:

- Text analysis; meaning, register, style, rhetoric etc.
- Translation
- Rearrangement (p. 3)

Darwish's description goes along with Bell's definition of translation as a process. Furthermore, he falls into the same trap of not defining the crucial part of his theory, that is the actual transferring process.

Similar phases have been also proposed by Iida (2008) and Carl & Buck-Kromann (2010). Hansen (2008) demonstrates the advantages of the process-oriented researches in that scholars can provide us with 'the most precise expressions in order to facilitate optimal perception of the phenomenon under study' (p. 9). Hence, our understanding of the nature of translation will be increased. Other researchers claim that not only better understanding of translation processes, but also the development of high-quality machine translation programs can be obtained from the

result of such researches (Carl & Buck-Kromann, 2010; Gentzler, 2001; Nida, 1964). To this point, I can summarize all translation cognitive processes that have been suggested into three main phases: (1) the input stage; (2) the manipulating process stage; and (3) the output stage.

Going further beyond the cognitive processes, other researchers focus on the metacognitive awareness of the translator. El-Hilaly (2004) proposes a relationship between translation processes and metacognition. He suggests that 'the correspondence between translation and metacognition lies in the translators' awareness of the process of translation and the control they have in adopting a particular strategy for a specific translation task' (p.2). According to him, the three metacognitive phases can be identified as follows:

1. Planning: A pre-translation stage in which the translator should set his goal and know where to find help.
2. Monitoring: A during-translation stage in which the translator should ask him/herself questions about the appropriateness of the equivalents selected and review his selection in the light of translation theories.
3. Evaluating: A post-translation stage in which the translator should adjust his/her effort to fine-tuning the semantic and pragmatic equivalence of the SL text so as to be sure there is no omission or mistranslation (pp. 2-10).

All these metacognitive phases involve technical translation strategies, as he demonstrates in his paper (ibid). Similar findings have been revealed by other researchers like Kaur (2003/2015) and Aly (2004).

I do agree with El-Hilaly's proposal that in most cases translation is not merely an automatic cognitive process, but a more competent task where the translator needs a high mental ability in order to fine-tune his/her production and/or to find alternative solutions when facing problems. Yet I disagree with the notion of confining translation to only the three conscious and fully controlled processes; metacognitive processes. Translation is more complicated and 'encompasses more conscious and controlled processes and more intuitive and automatic processes' (Albir & Alves, 2009, p. 63). The study of metacognitive processes is really helpful in designing and teaching translation training courses for the acquisition of 'expert' translation competence (p. 67).

Except for Bell (1991) who analyzed process along with product, all previously mentioned theories and theorists have studied translation as a process. Other scholars find it more logical to study translation as a product. They state that the starting point of any translation activity is the original text which stimulates these processes, and not vice versa (see House, 2015). The translator, in their opinion, is a mediator of a SL text which already exists with certain linguistic conventions, and is thus challenged to keep the same function within the TL text conventions. Therefore, theorists would rather prescribe the ends (the product/ text) than the means (the process), as they argue.

Translation as a Pproduct

The platform provided for scholars to describe translation as a product is that of the diverse textual structures imposed by each language. As claimed by Toury (1995), it is the norms of TL and/or SL text that govern the translator's choice of equivalents. The attitude regarding paying more attention to the translation product is clearly stressed in Nida & Taber's (2003) modified definition of translation when stating that it 'consists in reproducing in the

receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style' (p. 12). Thus, defining translation by the processes of analyzing, transferring, and then reconstructing is later on modified by the re-production of the natural equivalent of a given message.

The literature of text-based translation and text quality assessment models is quite rich. Theorists such as Hatim and Mason (1990, 1997), Reiss (2000), Wilss (1982, 1996), Koller (1995), House (1997, 2015) and Nord (2005) are prominent figures in the field (cf. Mehrach, 2003). As claimed by Munday (2008), the most 'representative' work is proposed by Vinay & Darbelnet (1995) and by Catford (1965), with his innovation of the 'translation shifts' (p. 56).

Comparing the SL text with its corresponding TL text, Catford (1965) successfully distinguishes two kinds of equivalence in translation. One kind is nominated as a 'formal correspondent' by which a structural unit or class of any language functions exactly the same as a structural class or unit in another language. The second kind is prescribed as a 'textual equivalent' which refers to a text or a part of text that happens to be equivalent to another text or part of text of any given language (p. 27). Catford's (1965) immense contribution to translation studies is the initiation of the concept of translation shifts. He depicts the term 'shifts' by saying that they are 'departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the SL to the TL' (p. 73). Two kinds of shifts are indicated by Catford (ibid) as follows:

- 1- *Level shift*: This includes the shift from grammar to lexis or vice-versa in the search of equivalence between two languages, and
- 2- *Category shift* : Four subcategories of shift are mainly included:
 - a. *Structure-shift*: This occurs in all ranks of grammar, yet frequently appears in the alteration of clause-structures of languages.
 - b. *Class shift*: It takes place when the equivalent of an item in the SL belongs to another class in the TL.
 - c. *Unit shift*: It occurs when there is correspondence between two different ranks of linguistic units in the SL and TL.
 - d. *Intra-system shift*: This occurs when there is an approximate formal correspondence between two language systems; nevertheless, a non-corresponding equivalent needs to be chosen in the target text (pp. 73-82).
 - e.

Although Catford has been of great help to other linguists in the field, his examples are invented and have never been above the sentence level, as pointed out by Munday (2012b, p. 94).

The other remarkable work was contributed by Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet in France. Vinay & Darbelnet's (1995) model of translation discriminates between two translation methods: 'direct translation' and 'oblique translation'. Each method has its micro-strategies of translation. For the former, the subdivision techniques are, namely; borrowing, calque and literal translation, whereas, transposition, modulation, equivalence and adaptation are translation subcategories of the latter (pp. 30-40). The seven procedures are to be applied to three levels of language while translating. These levels are 'lexis, syntactic structure, and message' according to which their whole work is structured (pp. 40-289).

Starting from the late 1960s onward, the emergence of text-linguistics plus the work carried out by the Prague Circle shed light on the importance of studying the text's functions. Hence, the focus of translation theorists was shifted from seeking equivalents of words and sentences to seeking translation equivalence at text level. The text has become the unit of

translation in most modern translation theories (Al-Abdullatif, 2004; Mehrach, 2003; Gentzler, 2001).

One prominent example of functionalists' work is the skopos theory presented by Katharina Reiss and Hans J. Vermeer in 1984 (cf. Gentzler, 2001). Skopos is a Greek term which means goal or intention, and is used in this particular theory to refer to the communicative goal of the target text in the target culture. They (Reiss & Vermeer, 2013) also summarize the main principles of their theory as:

- 1- The function of the translational action is the skopos, i.e. the purpose of translation,
- 2- The TT [Target Text] introduces 'an offer of information' in the target culture and language about 'an offer of information' displayed in a source language and its culture, and
- 3- The TT does not propose the information in an exact 'reversible' way, yet produces via imitation a 'culture-specific version' (p. 94).

The main goal of the target text (TT) is decided by the initiator of the translation task; the client, the institution or the translator him/herself. The relationship between the TT and ST is vague, as Munday (2009) puts it:

The focus on achieving the skopos of the communication means that criteria based on close equivalence with the ST are not necessarily appropriate for assessing the TT. Instead, a coherence rule and a loyalty/fidelity rule are invoked: the TT should be coherent enough for it to be understood by the target audience, yet sufficiently loyal to the ST (p. 227).

The instability of the skopos means that a commercial use and perspective of the translation might abuse the language and/or the ST intention. Kelly (1979) stresses the development of text functional theories which integrate the work done by both linguists and literary scholars'. This integration has made the scientific and artistic nature of translation complementary rather than contradictory (p.66).

In recent decades, the nature of translation has been examined from a perspective of empirical research methods. The argument over translation as a science, an art, a skill, a process or a product has no way out. Hansen-Schirra et al (2010), therefore, propose that an empirical translation theory might open a new avenue to help us understand what translation is. They maintain the following:

In a more general perspective, our research can be seen as compiling a wide range of empirical findings on different aspects of translation (both process- and product- based) which serve as building blocks for a comprehensive empirical model of translation that combines source language-, target language- and translator-related aspects. This opens up new horizons for an interdisciplinary and empirical view on the translation process, the translation product and the translator (p. 2).

The author therefore reaches the conclusion that translation is a three-dimensional phenomenon. A process and a product it certainly is; but, first of all, translation is a human ability. To properly

describe it, translation scholars need to specify their standpoints and the way they would like to tackle this phenomenon, as can be illustrated by Figure 1.

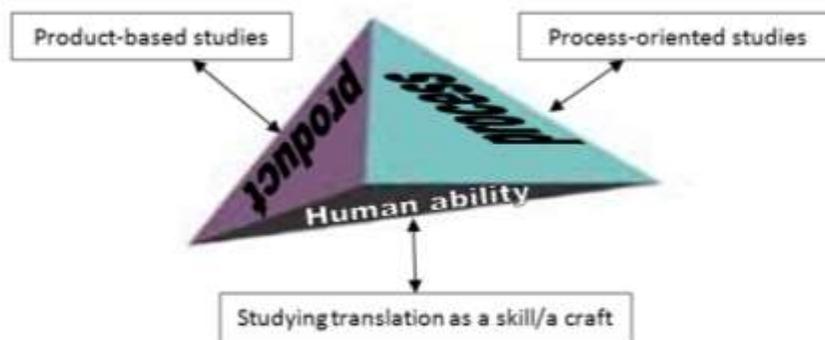


Figure 1. Translation: A Three-dimensional Phenomenon

A hypothetical segregation between its three facets is reasonable for study purposes. What has been happening in all existing translation theories is that each theorist has added more emphasis on one aspect of translation over the others. It is recommended that in order to be able to comprehensively prescribe what translation is, you should investigate its three dimensions at the same time. Hansen (2008) is projecting the same idea when he suggests triangulation of research methods in translation studies:

In this context, it proved useful to keep the original metaphor, i.e. the meaning of a 'triangle' in mind (...).

Triangulation, in accordance with the original meaning of the term, was used to obtain new results or new knowledge from already given results. This procedure guarantees clarity and coherence during processes of investigation and description of complex phenomena (p. 8).

He carries on the discussion and gives an example of the kind of result that comes out of triangulated researches by saying:

Data from interviews or questionnaires about the personal background of subjects can be combined with product data (the evaluation of the target texts), or the same data can be combined with process data from introspection. Triangulated, the results of both combinations can supplement each other or reveal gaps or discrepancies and, thus, can provide new knowledge about causal relationships between personal profiles, processes and products (p.8)

This means that a comprehensive analysis of the product needs to count for the process and the human ability at the same time. It is clear that, in translation, the human mind with all its previous experiences uses its scientific knowledge of linguistics to produce that magnum opus,

i.e. the translated text. Likewise, Sokolovsky (2010) verifies the nature of translation saying that '[t]he special relationship between the original and translation (i.e. existence of semiotic interconnections) is determined by the ability of translation to approximate a multilingual communication to a monolingual one. This trait is based on gnoseological status of translation' (p. 287). This view is reflected by the Qur'an in the following verses:

- (1) The Most Merciful (2) Taught the Qur'an, (3) Created man, (4) [And] taught him eloquence (Qur'an 55:1-4, Saheeh International).
- And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed in that are signs for those of knowledge (Qur'an 30:22, Saheeh International).
-

These verses show that though we are speaking different languages, human beings, the eloquent species, are made able to communicate meanings by various means, among which is translation. Kelly (1979) is definitely right when saying that 'Just as features of an utterance reveal purpose and expressive needs, so do those of a translated text' (p. 227). Thus translation fulfills our needs in the same way our mother tongues do.

Conclusion

The 'simplest' definition, as claimed by Barnstone (1993), that 'translation is the transposition of messages between tongues' is not simple at all (p. 227). It is so because translation penetrates all aspects of our life. It is utilized to transfer commercial, economic, religious, or political messages nowadays which a crucial and critical need in such a conflict-ridden world. As has been shown, the study of translation as a science, skill, process...etc. is much less fruitful. Translation is a complex phenomenon that needs to be examined taking into consideration all its three dimensions: the process, product and human ability. Triangulation is a promising method that opens a new avenue in translation studies. It helps eliminating the fog of discrepancy in some research results and/or drawing new conclusions from previously established ones.

Finally, the author asserts the genuineness of Barnstone words when he stresses that 'having said this we have said everything and nothing about the activity of translation' (Barnstone 1993: 227). The field of translation with its intricate nature stands in need of further investigation and analysis.

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