The Translator as the Economist: An Economic Turn for Translation Studies?

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Abstract
Interdisciplinarity has been garnering considerable popularity in translation studies in the form of turns and shifts by engaging in cooperation with fields such as sociology. We should now perhaps consider an economic analysis of translation, viewing the translator as a *homo sapiens oeconomicus* and not merely a *homo sapiens*. In this paper, economics will be explored as a methodology, and, at the same time, considerable effort will be dedicated to how interdisciplinarity has been handled in translation studies. Unbeknownst to translators, economics, by virtue of its rigorous and powerful methodology, has been successful in explaining human behaviour, especially behaviour that involves repeated choice and decision making by an actor who is portrayed as a rational and egocentric individual in constant pursuit of their own interest and utility. This constitutes an accurate description of the translator, a human being who is confronted with interdependent choices to make, ambivalent or straightforward, that require sophisticated skills and tactics based on considerable information, which may or may not eventually yield the intended results. Thus, there must be a built-in mechanism with which the translator maximizes his utility while following his unspoken agenda. My argumentation will center on three trajectories of economics: game theory, choice theory and cost-benefit analysis, all of which are rigorous model-based propositions in economics.

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1. Introduction

Translation studies has come a long way since Schleiermacher, one of the forefathers of the dichotomy of foreignizing and domesticating, advocated a field of knowledge known as translation studies in the early 19th century, and yet the epistemic nature of translation apparently has yet to be fully ascertained, which, in turn, gave rise to the various methodological turns that have occurred in the scholarship. By coincidence perhaps, linguistics saw a pragmatic turn around 1970, which eventually led to the canonization of pragmatics as a full-fledge subject under the roof of linguistics, while the economic analysis of law, though never termed a “turn of jurisprudence”, was a methodological turn through and through—and a successful one too. In this sense, shifts and turns in the broader picture of interdisciplinarity are nothing new in academia, particularly in fields and areas undergoing rapid change. Since the days of James Holmes, the influential translation theorist who parted ways with the tradition of strict equivalence and faithfulness by drawing a distinction between pure translation studies and applied translation studies, there have been numerous turns in the translation studies scholarship, which, in turn, gave rise to the school of descriptive translation studies (DTS), a landmark event in translation studies to this day. Meanwhile, on the other front, economics, a fascinating vintage subject for academics and the lay public alike, has been largely successful in explaining a wide range of phenomena by virtue of its powerful and rigorous methodology. It has, for one, been particularly successful in explaining the logic, or jurisprudence, behind legal rules, viewing every individual concerned as an economic being, and therefore I believe that law and economics, one of the most successful interdisciplines involving economics, may serve as an example of this irreversible trend and also as verifiable confirmation of an economic turn for law.ii

Furthermore, in our age of self-liberation, decentralization and diversity, when everything is best approached and scrutinized from different angles, people are starting to look beyond their professional fields and exploring territories that have been beyond reach, finding out what the outside world has to offer them. As a result, many interdisciplinary scholarly works, some of them canonical, have appeared on the scene in translation studies, such as *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach* and *The Turns of Translation Studies*, both works of Mary Snell-Hornby, along with *Constructing a Sociology of Translation* by Wolf and Fukari, verifying translation studies’ need for innovative perspectives. Upon further scrutiny of the turns hitherto, one can tell that there must have been a common thread that inspired scholars to retreat from the rigid adherence to textual equivalence and, in doing so, to start searching for answers outside their usual territories. One possible impetus was the need of translation studies to survive and thrive in today’s academic environment. In her work *Trajectories of Research in Translation Studies*, Maria Tymoczko, embarking on an all-out campaign to devise new research protocols for translation theorists to consider for the sake of continuous prosperity for translation studies, recommends enhanced interaction between translation and cognitive science (Tymoczko 2005: 1091), as well as a biology of translation (Tymoczko 2005: 1093), all creative and unprecedented. Economics, which could be a cognitive science, may now respond to her call.

Admittedly, economics is an academic enterprise that deeply concerns the livelihood of everyone. The lay public is constantly informed of the status of the local economy in terms of GDP growth and money supply, and cost-effective fiscal policies loosely reflect the trustworthiness on the part of the administration. In more down-to-earth terms, parents advise
their children to spend their daily allowances wisely by not being pennywise and pound-foolish, alongside homeowners who are constantly in search of new ways of saving energy, adopting lifestyles in which energy consumption and energy efficiency are almost synonyms. But what exactly is economics as a subject? Is it nothing but an academic undertaking concerned with money and commodity supply and demand? Absolutely not.

According to economists themselves, economics is a science no different than physics or chemistry in that it comprises a set of analytical principles capable of empirical replication that feature consistent regularity, with special focus on human behaviour usually manifested through repeated decisions and choices within the context of markets (Backhouse 1994: 97), where unintended consequences and the invisible hand crop up every now and then. As it follows, then, modern economics does not just illustrate how markets should and actually do work; instead, it has more to do with how value is determined and how choices are made by human beings who are rational and self-interested. More to the point, the true subject matter of economics, at the most abstract and fundamental level, is not really money or fiscal policy but the implications of rational choice on the assumption that human beings are rational and self-serving (Friedman 2000: 8). How should the individual position himself within his community? Do they always have full information for their actions, or is there always some asymmetry of information involved? How should individual interests be aligned with collective interests? These are some of the typical questions raised by the economist. If observed closely, human behaviour is mostly induced by rational choice and sound decision based on readily available information. As economist David Friedman (2000) states quite clearly at the beginning of his book *Law's Order*:

> A mugger is a mugger for the same reason I am an economist: Given his tastes, opportunities and abilities, it is the most attractive profession open to him. What laws are passed and how they are interpreted and enforced ultimately depend on what behaviour is in the rational interest of legislators, judges and police (p. 8).

Against this background, economics will likely feel more secular and approachable for translation theorists as a methodology. If they realize that a translator is a human being no different than any other—be it a consumer, a politician or a criminal—and if all human beings are rational, self-interested and egocentric, then by virtue of simple syllogism, would the translator not be just as rational, self-interested and egocentric when confronted with a routine translation issue, on which a decision must be made? As Friedman (2000) further elaborates, I believe the link should be even more conspicuous:

> What I do know about them is that they, like me, have purposes they wish to achieve and tend, albeit imperfectly, to correctly choose how to achieve them. That is the predictable element in human behaviour, and it is on that element that economics is built (p. 9).

This ontological remark is impressive in that it makes economics relevant for translators—from the down-to-earth aspects in the translator’s activities all the way to the translation industry as an autonomous and integrated market with all its inherent functions and failures. After all, translators, being mindful of their clients’ requests and needs, are expected to bring energy and impetus to the work while striking a fine balance between making their work accessible to new
readers and maintaining its essential ‘foreignness’ (Paul 2009: 57). These claims duly describe a certain type of human behaviour and would be best examined and explained with economics.

2. **Interdisciplinarity: An Idea New and Old**

At this stage of human intellectual development, more and more realize that the purportedly fine line between well established disciplines should not be taken for granted, with academics otherwise trained in one subject willing to challenge the scientific objectivity and neutrality of all claims to truth, which, in turn, suggests that interdisciplinary study represents the future of the university (Moran 2006: 184). Translation studies should be part of this trend. However, counterintuitive as it may appear, interdisciplinarity is not a blunt and reckless merger of two seemingly unrelated fields; nor is it even a simplistic concept derived from holism either. Instead, as Mary Snell-Hornby duly points out, a burgeoning interdiscipline like translation studies is not simply a no-man’s land sandwiched between at least two other clearly defined and demarcated territories (Snell-Hornby 2006: 6). Indeed, there should be much more to it than that.

The idea of interdisciplinarity did not gain currency in academia for nothing. As Yale law professor Jonathan Macey asserts, the profession of teaching law would probably not attract bright and ambitious people if it offered only a monotonous life of writing comprehensive but unimaginative treatises and trying to describe legal rules to law students in daily lectures (Macey 1997: 171). Moreover, in regard to the contribution that interdisciplinarity could bring to human knowledge, Macey continued on by arguing that law professors engage in issues such as where our rules come from, what distributive effects those rules might have, whether the current rules achieve what they are expected to and how different rules would affect the way people behave in various circumstances, all of which entail critical awareness of fields as diverse as economics, race theory and sociology (Macey 1997: 171). English literature professor Julie Klein maintains that interdisciplinarity may refer to a number of things ranging from the simple communication of ideas to the mutual integration of organizing concepts, methodology, procedures, epistemology, terminology, data and organization of research and education in a fairly large field (Klein 1990: 63).

Attractive and welcoming as they may seem, these statements are by no means complete. While the term *interdisciplinarity* evokes a warm, robust and cooperative alternative to the relatively old-fashioned and introvert nature of vintage disciplines, it does face some challenges, as the term itself begs a few questions such as how existing disciplinary boundaries could, if ever, be blurred, broken down or transcended (Moran 2006: 3). Of late, we have witnessed some challenges to existing disciplinary boundaries, with extensive interaction across and among vintage disciplines—ones that have traditionally been considered full-fledged and stand-alone—being encouraged, while people are sensing the urgent need for collaboration among academic disciplines in the belief that no discipline should be granted a wholesale claim to any aspect of human knowledge.

Truth be told, the term *interdisciplinary* has but a relatively short etymology, not having appeared until the opening decades of the 20th century. To this, Roberta Frank alleges that the idea came into being in the 1920s at the corner of 42nd and Madison Avenue, where the Social Science Research Council was located (Klein 2005: 2). Due to the deep-rooted and prevalent ideas of holism, minimalism and empiricism, traditionally people used to believe that each single
discipline should function as a stand-alone entity without interference from any other, and, as such, for a specialist from one field to claim expertise in another was more the exception than it was the rule. Furthermore, the seemingly permissive and open-minded attitude towards interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives taken for granted today has, frankly, its roots in colonialism—something that may jeopardize its glory, and, as some sharp-eyed academics have conceded, the formation of the idea simply indicates the practical implementation of a politico-theoretical insight already central to the field (Huggan 2008: 4). In fact, this is rather obvious in translation studies, with Maria Tymoczko visualizing the relation between source text and target text as one of unequal power dynamics, not too different from that between an imperial power and its colonized culture in a colonialism context (Tymoczko and Gentzler 2000: xix). Thankfully, today, the inequality in status has been rethought and redefined thanks to the rise of post-colonialism (Bassnett 2002: 5).

Last but not least, understanding the potential tension between the new approach and the traditional one and resolving it is but the first step; there will undoubtedly be a series of interrelated problems to come up subsequently. Of course, no reconfiguration of a discipline will ever go unchallenged, and since an economic approach to translation studies is in se a reconfiguration, it will receive its fair share of resistance, something its predecessors of the sociological turn, the ideological turn and the cultural turn have more than attested. Needless to say, there have always been—and there will always be—some academics questioning the idea of interdisciplinarity at least in some contexts, with the enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant being one of them. In his 1798 essay entitled The Conflict of the Faculties, he argued that reason functioned as an ultimate value which transcended disciplinary divisions, its natural home within the university being in the ‘lower’ faculty of philosophy (Moran 2006: 9). In addition, he considered it essential for there to be such a faculty that has no commands to give, is free to evaluate everything, and concerns itself with the interest of the sciences, that is, with truth (Moran 2006: 9). This paradigm of his enabled him to retain his dream of unified knowledge within the reality of the most specialized university faculties. On the other hand, Karl Marx, one of the most revolutionary economists advocating against classical economics proposed by Adam Smith, was actually a very interdisciplinary figure, for his writings and ideas touched on many aspects of human knowledge, leaving everybody fascinated for more than a century. For one thing, he was one of the few thinkers to pinpoint and criticize the resulting economic and social inequality between classes from rapid industrialization during the 19th century. What set him apart from other leading economists like Smith and Keynes was his ability to weave together the philosophical, historical, sociological, psychological, political, as well as the economic into a coherent whole, rendering him a truly interdisciplinary figure (Ekelund and Hébert 1997: 227).

This has a special meaning for translation studies, an area still celebrating its emancipation from linguistics and comparative literature, and, naturally, its disciplinary profile will be put to the test (Snell-Hornby 2006: 70). Indeed, in light of the potential to involve relevant areas of neighbouring disciplines such as psychology and sociology, Toury, for one, claimed downright that translation studies should be better regarded not as just a discipline, but an interdisciplinary (Snell-Hornby 1006: 71). However, since it is impossible to understand interdisciplinarity without having first examined the relevant disciplines one by one, we should now have a look at the epistemology of translation studies and that of economics. Translation studies has seen a wealth of turns and paradigm shifts over the years. How did these turns and shifts occur in the
first place and how have they fared in the rough waters of translation studies’ struggle for a higher status? We will now find out in the next chapter.

3. Interdisciplinarity and Turns of Translation Studies

The idea of cooperating and coordinating with another subject of inquiry is something accepted, expected and probably even encouraged in translation studies. Of course, interdisciplinarity goes far beyond blatantly bringing two historically distinct disciplines together. If translation is a social activity conducted by some people, it would, in turn, be a social phenomenon. If the translator is a social being constantly undergoing a socialization process to know how to produce a socially acceptable piece of work, then of course translation should be put to the test of sociology. That, by and large, set the background for DTS.

Under DTS, translation studies requires a methodology that can ensure that the findings of individual studies will be subjectively testable and comparable and replicable (Munday 2009: 180). To this end, Toury advocates science-based methods for the analysis of source text-target text pairs (Munday 2009: 180), and by engaging science, DTS has undoubtedly imbued translation theory with new insights, treating translation data as scientific data no different than demographic data collected from a product marketing questionnaire. DTS proponents are, technically speaking, making data-based generalizations of translation. Meanwhile, Tymoczko argues that judging from the evolution history of translation studies, one of the trajectories that translation studies will have to embark on is framing translation within the context of other areas of academic inquiry (Tymoczko 2005: 1090). This strongly resonates with claims of DTS and has sowed its seeds for the many turns to appear.

Arguably, research on translation has been decidedly enriched through interaction with related disciplines in regard to methodology, subject matter and/or paradigm, and as Snell-Hornby asserts, translation studies has, over the fifty years of development since its development worldwide, experienced and benefited from innumerable exchanges of glances and changes of viewpoint, resulting in everything from minor adjustments in familiar concepts to the presentation of completely new paradigms (Snell-Hornby 2006: 2). It is probably a bliss that the practice of interdisciplinarity has offered translation studies in the form of many turns.

In light of the status quo of translation, proponents of the sociological perspective on translation try to make sense of why translators translate the way they do, the correlations that exist between translations and other cultural products and processes and the logic behind such distinctions and social conditions (Tymoczko 2005: 1086), which, needless to say, requires considerable expertise in sociology. Next, as regards the cultural turn, Susan Bassnett claims that translation must be studied with broader issues like context, history and convention all taken into consideration (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998: 123). A translation, as she points out, never occurs out of the blue; it will, instead, always happen in a continuum of various social factors, with the translator incessantly—sometimes against their wishes—subjected to all forms of constraints, textual and extra-textual (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998: 123). Again, this perspective will require expertise in cultural studies and/or social development studies, two vintage subjects.

So, as it stands now, what do all these turns of translation studies have in common? Put another way, what was the common thread behind all these turns that gave them their justification? My understanding is that these distinct perspectives are all primarily attempts to approach and
understand the true nature, or the *raison d'etre*, of the translation phenomenon, something that has multiple dimensions to it. As a social activity, translation is never practiced—and therefore should not be theorized—outside its social setting; it mediates—wholly or partially—between individuals of different racial, religious and cultural backgrounds; instead, it must be regarded as a human activity operating in a wider system in the socio-functionalist sense. As a profession, it can be studied under the sociology of professions; as a medium for proselytism, it could probably be studied under the sociology of religion, and as an activity that involves choices and decisions, it should come under the scrutiny of economics. Moreover, translators are inherently social beings; they are born into a society, and they mature, age and die there, and, most of all, they are imbued with a worldview and mindset that are expected of them, along with some prevalent ethical and aesthetical values of the day. By becoming professionals, they remain socialized individuals with qualities reflective of their social upbringing. They may have been instructed to be compassionate and sensible, but ultimately they are still human beings subject to social norms, and not machines. Their end products, written or verbal, reflect the socialization process that they have had to go through, sometimes intuitive and subliminal even to themselves. On the surface, many decisions that translators make appear to be their own, while, in reality, the social underpinnings they underwent during their upbringing will always be lurking somewhere, creeping and seeping into their works by stealth. More specifically, proponents of the sociological turn realized that a meticulous analysis of the entire social milieu in which translators operate and survive may be required. A similar path may be formulated for the ideological turn of translation studies in that at the most primitive level, the ideological turn advocates the need to look beyond superficial faithfulness and equivalence without outright negating them, while at a more advanced level, it aims to close up the wide gap between practice and theory by exploring things such as, among others, why one text was chosen for translation at a particular point in space and time, why some expressions were left untranslated and how manipulative the translation process could be.

Admittedly, there seems to be some common ground shared by every turn occurring in translation studies, and the need for more prestige and recognition for the translation profession in general by way of a thorough understanding of the translation phenomenon seems to be the guiding principle (Snell-Hornby 2006: 173). In short, in regard to each turn, every effort is made to systematically quarry, document and explain the activity of translation (Hermans 2002: 1), or in more hilarious terms, to ascertain what is going on inside the black box of the translator's brain (Snell-Hornby 2006: 46).

Despite the many turns we have seen so far, however, at this stage, our efforts do not seem to have gone far enough. André Lefevere, for one, lamenting the fact that translation theorists are not paying enough attention to the history of their field, proposed a history of translation studies sub-field without outright attempting to construct a “historical turn” for translation studies; instead, he chose to recommend a more unified discourse within translation studies (Snell-Hornby 2006: 175). Tymoczko acknowledges that in order to advance further and deeper, translation studies will have to become more and more interdisciplinary in its reach in the decades to come by not focusing solely on cultural studies, a field so intrinsically interdisciplinary and so entrenched in the turns as translation studies (Tymoczko 2005: 1094). She also argues that the necessity of teaching students how to make translation choices will become central to teaching methods as teachers depart from prescriptive approaches and start
teaching students the broadest possible outlook on translation types and practices (Tymoczko 2005: 1095). And this is precisely one of the claims that feed into my proposition.

For starters, if translation studies is considered an inherently diverse and interdisciplinary subject, and if we are ready to acknowledge that the translator is constantly confronted with choices to make, then economics—the science of human choice—should never be left out of our horizon. As economists have asserted, conventional economic theory—especially microeconomic theory—has proven successful in predicting everything from consumer behaviour to public policy and even corporate marketing strategies (Coyle 2010: 131). Further afield, by virtue of its assumption of human nature and its pursuit for market equilibrium, idealistic and realistic, economic methodology has been extensively exploited in fields as diverse as education, labour relations, military science and international politics (Coyle 2010: 131). Surprisingly, though, notwithstanding the success on the part of economics with flying colours, hardly any translation theorist, despite their all-out effort to ascertain the true nature of the translation phenomenon, has attempted to fully and accurately engage economic methodology to date.\textsuperscript{vii}

If it is our position that translation must be further explored using as many methodologies as possible, then economics will definitely be worth our while, for, according to one prominent Austrian School economist, Ludwig von Mises, economics is essentially the science of human action, as manifested in the title of his book \textit{Human Action: A Treatise on Economics}. Yet, surprisingly, hardly anyone has critically categorized the nature of translation as a human activity and the status of the translator as a rational and self-interested individual. Thus, in light of the absence of extensive and persistent application of economics to translation studies, a subject that prides itself with diversity and interdisciplinarity, one cannot but wonder why the idea of a rigorous economic approach never took root.

On the other hand, as a counterexample maybe, legal science, or jurisprudence, which used to be mostly hermeneutical, has been successful in its effort of enlisting and utilizing economic methodology, and thus, it will be explored in detail in the next chapter. I believe that, in real terms, the trajectory that jurisprudence has had to follow in search of a new perspective\textsuperscript{viii}, coupled with the explanatory and predictive power inherent in economics, will shed some light on this new undertaking of ours.

4. Law and Economics as the Pivot for Translation Studies: An Analogy?

Today, law and economics is more than just a mode of thought; it is simply a miracle. In 1937, economist Friedrich Hayek published a paper in \textit{Economica} entitled \textit{Economics and Knowledge}, in which discussions on the relation between economics and knowledge were conducted, which subsequently gave rise to what is known today as “knowledge-based economy”, alongside an economics of science and an economics of knowledge (Arena 2012: 1). Law and economics, an interdisciplinary subject that attempts to conjoin the two vintage subjects of law and economics, has gained considerable momentum in recent decades, occasionally challenging steadfast beliefs held long by legal scholars. On the one hand, in the eyes of the economist, every human being is rational, calculating and self-interested—perhaps self-interested to the point of deceit—in the sense that whatever he does is treated as a consequence of motivation and human interaction, and this is precisely the bedrock foundation of modern economic analysis as acknowledged by economists (Witztum 2005: 40). While this argument, having formed the backbone of law and
economics since its inception, may be difficult for some to accept (Coyle 2010: 156), owing to its powerful methodology that involves elaborate paradigms and mathematical models typically expressed with equations and diagrams, economics has come under the spotlight for many adventurous academic endeavours to form interdisciplinary links outside usual boundaries, and, as it turns out, its cooperation with the venerable and monolithic discipline of law, apparently, has by far proven to be one of the most successful.\textsuperscript{x}

How so? On the premise that the individual is always rational and selfish, economics has been employed to explain everything from the activity of legislation with legislators being reduced to little more than rational maximizers of self-interest (Harrison 2000: 315), to the more bread-and-butter concepts such as contractual duty and torts liability (Harrison 2000: 84), all of which rely on the built-in utility functions in the parties concerned presented as economic efficiency. While, indeed, no one single approach will ever be sufficient for any analysis of law, it is undeniably true that law and economics deserves to be treated as a role model for interdisciplines in that it features a unique methodology that has the potential to overcome the limitations of less quantitative approaches to law, mainly those associated with moral philosophy or political theory (Georgakopoulos 2005: 3). In other words, it is essentially examining and evaluating law by quantifying all relevant factors and values.

Let us now turn our heads to the inception and evolution of law and economics.\textsuperscript{x} The well-known former United States Supreme Court justice Oliver W. Holmes predicted in an 1897 paper entitled \textit{The Path of the Law} that “the man of the future is the man of statistics and economics” (Harrison 2000: 1). Because of this very encouraging prophetic remark maybe, people in law have had little trouble enlisting economics as one of its complementary disciplines—one that should be taken advantage of solely for the interest of the development and perfection of law (Harrison 2000: 1). Though somewhat blatant and egocentric, they did, in a good way, compliment economics on what economic methodology has to offer outside its regular borders.

On the other end of the spectrum, economists and jurists have been increasingly aware of the importance of the interaction between law and economics since the days of two of the greatest philosophers of economics known to mankind—Adam Smith and Karl Marx (Harrison 2000: 1). Several decades ago, economists such as Irving Fisher and John Commons\textsuperscript{xi} were advocating the absolute need for an understanding of the impact of legal institutions on economic development, predicting how economic change may induce legal change (Harrison 2000: 2). In the 1960s, when the Chicago School was in its heyday, law and economics was marked by efforts to describe what the law may become if courts and law enforcement authorities subscribed to economic efficiency for their guidelines (Harrison 2000: 2). More recently, David Friedman went to great lengths to explain why economics should be applied to every branch of law and what the law has to teach economists in one of the chapters in his work \textit{Law’s Order} (Friedman 2000: 8 et seq.), presumably in an effort to accord an equal amount of credit to both disciplines for their accidentally mutual contribution to the establishment of law and economics as a successful interdisciplinary.

It did not happen merely out of luck or coincidence; it had more to do with timing and mutual trust and, more importantly, mutual compatibility between disciplines. At the structural core of
law and economics are two basic assumptions, namely rationality and self-interestedness, which lays down the foundation of legal institutions and individual legal rules. This worked perfectly well for law. In essence, the basic line of thinking is that rational individuals will always—subconsciously or unconsciously—adjust their actions to the legal rules that are imposed on them for maximum utility. Alternatively, the economic approach to law could be understood as a two-way street in the sense that it provides a way of evaluating legal rules, and then a way of deciding how competent they are to achieve that objective; conversely, starting off with a system of legal rules, it provides a way of understanding those rules—by determining what objective it is supposed to achieve (Friedman 2000: 3-4). And that is a multivalent approach: descriptive and prescriptive.

That said, quite understandably, the economic approach to law did not come without controversy; it has undergone its fair share of resistance and criticism. While some are sceptical about the inherent ideological hypotheses taken for granted by economists being extended to law, others are relatively open-minded about the idea of positioning the two vintage subjects of law and economics into a broader spectrum of a higher order in general (Harrison 2000: 3). Even more dramatically, some sharp criticisms are directed towards the possibility and ethics of quantifying—usually in currency terms—every quality and value. At any rate, propositions made in law and economics are comparable to claims on human behaviour made elsewhere in the literature on economics (Harrison 2000: 4).

All in all, returning to the topic of a new turn for translation studies, in light of what law and economics had to experience and overcome, in regard to our focus on a potential interdiscipline involving translation studies and economics, we should now probably take into account the subject matter and methodology of both disciplines, which, once again, requires a look at the history of law and economics. One of the heralds of law and economics as an interdiscipline was Richard Posner, who once asserted that the economic analysis of law has heuristic, descriptive and normative aspects to it (Posner 2001: 4). In his eyes, law and economics, as a heuristic discipline, features underlying unities across legal doctrines and institutions. Furthermore, using his descriptive model, he seeks to identify the economic logic and effects of doctrines and institutions and the economic causes behind legal change; also, the normative aspect of law and economics is explored and understood as an advisory for judges, lawmakers and policymakers on the most efficient methods of regulating and motivating conduct by means of law (Posner 2001: 4). Indeed, topics covered by the economic analysis of law are generally very broad and extensive, and, contrary to common belief, only minimal reference to monetary wealth is made for argumentation. Yet by no means are topics limited to the age-old domains of direct government regulation and administration, anti-trust and taxation; instead, Posner believes that the trajectory of law and economics can be expanded to cover and explain virtually any aspect of law as long as it involves human behaviour. As a result, the “developed” and “revised” economics analysis of law started to embrace more and more branches of law including family law, criminal law, administrative procedure, the regulation of employee health and safety, all of which have little to do with market mechanism on the surface, much less any marketing strategy (Posner 2001: 4). Indeed, today, proponents of the economic analysis of law are largely successful in their endeavour in areas such as environmental law, where tradable emission rights are a hallmark of economic efficiency, as well as divorce law (Scott in Dnes and Rowthorn 2002: 44).
Finally, law, has for a long time been quite open-minded about interdisciplinarity, having formed interdisciplines with sociology and economics—two heavyweight vintage subjects. As a prelude to my next chapter, if law, as a human activity, can be approached from both the sociological perspective and the economic one, then translation should not be denied the same privilege. Therefore, translation, something no less of a human activity than law, can deservedly be explored from the standpoint of sociology—both prescriptively and descriptively, which scholars such as Michaela Wolf and Gideon Toury have demonstrated. Convinced that translation is a social activity that must comply with accepted social norms, translators have long accepted the sociological approach to translation, and sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu being one of them, have been extensively cited in translation studies literature. In the same vein, on the assumption that translation is a human activity comparable to law, it should lend itself to the stringent yet scientific criteria of economics. It is therefore my steadfast position that translation, as a human activity with both social and economic dimensions, will survive—and perhaps even benefit from—rigorous economic methodology, and it is certainly a shame that this has been largely overlooked. However, thankfully, at this moment, as we will see in the next chapter, at least one academic, which happens to be Jiri Levý, has taken an initial step that deserves some reflection.

5. Economics and Translation: What is the Link?

Surprisingly, as disparate as the two fields of economics and translation studies may appear, there remains considerable common ground to be explored and elaborated on. In light of how economic methodology was loaned, refined and adapted for legal research, a similar path might possibly be formulated for translation studies. Indeed, translators are human beings with basic human needs to fulfill and personal agendas to pursue. In fact, translators have been reprimanded as partial and biased, who, notwithstanding this shortcoming in their personality, must make choices, selecting bits and chunks of a text to transpose, suppress and emphasize—or not to (Tymoczko and Gentzler 2000: vxiii). As it follows, then, a translator’s possible choices apparently form a spectrum expanding across a number of parameters, including but not limited to, ideology, audience reception, literal equivalence, physical length and aesthetics, all presented on the same scale and possibly given equal weight. This conforms to the assumption made by economists that people—in this case, the translator—are rational and self-interested human beings made of flesh and blood who aim for utility maximization when confronted with difficult choices to make.

To my delight, economics has had interactions with the language sciences, with sparse works scattered across the scholarship. To begin with, in his work *Paying the Piper*, Alan Peacock presented—in basic economically quantified terms—the importance of art in regard to how much government subsidy should be injected into it and how much contribution art will make for the general public in the end (Peacock 1993: 11). Next, to a greater extent, economics has come into close contact with sociolinguistics, and quite a few works have been published there. The book *How Many Languages Do We Need* by Ginsburgh and Weber is an intellectual collection of monographs that elaborate on the effects of language diversity in the context of multilingualism and multiculturalism as legislated and enforced in various jurisdictions, including India, Canada and the European Union. In addition, the potential cost for translation as required by law for the
benefit of linguistic minorities (Ginsburgh and Weber: 26 et seq.), along with the potential disenfranchisement due to the absence of a right to translation (Ginsburgh and Weber: 108 et seq.), all come with sophisticated indices and mathematical equations that are designed to explain the potential effects of an efficient and effective language policy, as well as the potential harm an inefficient one may cause. Nevertheless, it is somewhat regrettable that the line of argument stopped at the milestone mark of the economics of language and went little further. Granted, the progress of the economics of language may serve as an inspiration for an economic analysis of translation in that it demonstrates how economics, as a methodology, can be duly enlisted to explain the logic behind phenomena such as governmental language policy and translation policy, which, by falling victim to bipartisan politics, often fail to achieve the objectives they were meant for. This path, though not entirely panoramic, does show that for translation theorists, who are in constant need of new perspectives and who typically have a strong background in languages, what economic methodology might have to offer them.

How exactly can and should economic methodology be incorporated into translation studies to the benefit of the latter? Economics is, after all, a science that explores human nature at the most primitive level, transcending most social factors such as ethnicity, gender, religion and educational background; it is about what happens in a person’s mind in the course of a critical and prolonged decision process, often beleaguered with risks, externalities and insufficient information, with or without the decision maker’s knowledge. In short, it requires quantified parameters in order to be in a position to explain things. However, to my surprise, the only translation theorist that has attempted to treat translation as an economic process was the late Czech translation theorist Jiří Levý, a descriptivist scholar deeply influenced by Russian formalism. For his alleged research on translation and economics, he attempted to engage game theory in his argumentation. This is what he claims in his paper Translation as a Decision Process:

…the translator at any moment of his work (that is from the pragmatic point of view), translating is a DECISION PROCESS: a series of a certain number of consecutive situations—moves, as in a game—situations imposing on the translator the necessity of choosing among a certain (and very often exactly definable) number of alternatives. (emphasis original) (Levý in Venuti 2000: 148)

Next, he cites the play Der gute Mensch von Sezuan by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht as an example.

In translating the title of this play into English…He has to decide between two possibilities: “The Good Man of Sechuan” and “The Good Woman of Sechuan”. These are the components of the decision problem:

The SITUATION (i.e., an abstraction of reality, which, in a formalized theory, would be expressed by means of a model): in English, there is no single word equivalent in meaning and stylistic value to the German “Mensch” (since “person” belongs to a different stylistic level); the range of meaning is covered by two words: “man” and “woman”. (Levý in Venuti 2000: 149)
Then, immediately after that, he will have to be restricted by this choice on all subsequent occasions:

Once the translator has decided in favour of one of the alternatives, he has predetermined his own choice in a number of subsequent moves: he has predetermined his decisions concerning such technical things as grammatical forms, and such “philosophical” matters as, in our example, the interpretation of the “hero” of the play and the whole manner of its staging. (emphasis mine) (Levý in Venuti 2000: 149)

Apparently, Levý intended to treat the ongoing, repeated and interdependent choice-making process in the course of translation as a game, with a game, as he understood it, presumably being a situation in which all one’s previous decisions will have an impact, negative or positive, on all subsequent choices. Yet, in reality, a game is a situation where all actors concerned seek cooperative solutions for social dilemmas (Hermans et al. 2014: 14), and game theory, by inference, is best suited to explain how certain rules and contextual factors shape incentives for behavior, and what correlation exists between the evolution of institutions over time and the actors that seek cooperative solutions for social dilemmas (Hermans et al. 2014: 14). Thus, game theory should be treated as the mathematical modeling of conflict and cooperation between rational decision-makers, where a game, by definition, refers to a situation involving two or more individuals making thought-out decisions, voluntary or involuntary, that will potentially have an impact on one another’s welfare (Myerson 1991: 1).

With that in mind, to my disappointment, much as I appreciate Levý’s efforts, the crucial—and fatal—problem with Levy’s understanding and application of game theory lies in the hard fact that in his examples from Der gute Mensch von Sezuan, there is only one decision maker—the translator, while game theory requires at least two parties acting alongside each other, cooperatively or contentiously. In order to make game theory work to his advantage, he should have approached translation as a game between the translator and his potential reader and/or his publisher, each trying to guess what others are trying to pursue when deciding on their own action. Of course, such scenario would probably have necessitated a completely different paradigm with complex quantifiable factors and parameters.

Therefore, despite my appreciation of Levý’s efforts for a new trajectory for translation research by enlisting game theory a few decades ago, he did not, unfortunately, seem to have done it properly. Again, in my opinion, to put game theory in perspective for translators, the scenario should have been a multiparty one, and also a scenario in which the joint interest, or group interest, does not necessarily correspond with the sum of individual interests. In other words, in order for game theory and its decision-making principles to fit into the context of translation, the translation platform must be conceptualized as a venue where the translator (for example, most favorable translation end result in terms of equivalence, geopolitics, aesthetics, market orientation…), the publisher (greatest potential market yield, possibility of bypassing the censors…), the reader (the lowest price, legibility, comprehensibility in target culture…) and the author (faithfulness to author…) all come together to fight for their own rights and interests on asymmetrical information. Moreover, at the end of a game, ideally, an equilibrium should preferably be reached when the two or more possible strategies offer the same payoff (Friedman 1996: 152), in which each player’s strategy is a best response to the strategy profiles of their rivals, and the relevant dominant strategies will hold stable against all deviant individual actions.
(Heifetz 2012: 250). Putting that in perspective for us, if the action on the part of any player (say, the publisher) could be shown to have a ripple effect on the translator, whose decision will eventually have some bearing on the decisions and choices made by the target reader and vice versa, then game theory would likely work for Levý’s scenario.

That having been said, nevertheless, it would be somewhat unjust to dismiss Levý’s undertaking altogether; in fact, in no way am I suggesting that Levý’s ideas were nothing but some empty words. Quite to the contrary, Levý’s illustration of translation (e.g., how people’s action are predetermined by their previous ones) conforms to choice theory without outright referring to it as such, reflecting the idea of bounded rationality in the context of choice making, which is a bedrock underpinning of psychology and behavioural economics. Indeed, due to inherent psychological and physical constraints, human rationality, as initially discovered by economists Herbert Simon, is nothing but an extremely crude and simplified approximation to the kind of global rationality that is implied (Manski 2007: 311). In plain words, what bounded rationality reveals is that people, with greed and fear hardwired into their brains, can only think and predict up to a certain distance, temporal or spatial, and any single choice may come back to haunt them later on, and so they will most likely perceive post-decision frustration and regret at some stage. To make matters worse, most major decisions are largely non-reversible, or even when they are reversible, it usually involves substantial costs—in time, energy, emotion and money (Schwartz 2004: 144). Unbeknownst to himself maybe, that is what Levý has given a detailed illustration of with his translation examples.

Incomplete as it is, however, Levý’s position did provide me with an insight into an aspect of translation that deserves some attention, which, in turn, may have provided me with the foundation of my arguments. As a matter of fact, the fundamental underpinnings of game theory, difficult and occult as they are, deserve a mention here. Game theory, despite its origins in mathematics and economics, seems to have garnered considerable attention across the translation studies enterprise lately, but with mixed virtues. Anthony Pym, for one, launched a unique approach to uncertainty using game theory, arguing that while there will always be a certain degree of uncertainty about what we are translating despite our endeavour to translate in the best way possible, there are still several ways to show how translation is possible in a world of uncertainty (Pym 2010: 90). Even though his claim by no means gives us the whole picture as to what game theory can do for translation studies, he does, in lodging his claim, acknowledge that translation, while possible and necessary, consists of a series of indeterminate and repeat decisions that require sophisticated calculation and assessment on the basis of incomplete information, comparable to a game of chess. Again, even though I do not think that he has applied game theory accurately, his proposition is a great step forward since the days of Jiri Levý, and by his own acknowledgement, game theory may initiate a link onto a new and vast field that merits thorough exploration by translation theorists (Pym 2010: 102).

On a final note, another trajectory that may serve as a point of reference would be choice theory, a branch of economics in which choice lies at the root of investigation. On a smaller scale, the focus is on individual choice, and sometimes, on a larger scale, it is on how the global economy at large responds to and regulates such choices, paving the way for collective choice, and at still other times, choice theory has interactive choice as its topic (Heap et al. 1997: x). Choice, as an inevitable element of life, as psychologist Barry Schwartz strongly argues, is always mystically
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intertwined with opportunity, comparison, happiness and regret, none of which can ever be evaluated in absolute terms (Schwartz 2004: 181-182). And this probably explains why sometimes less could feel like more for the translator, adding yet another boost to the economic perspective for translation studies.

In sum, in light of how economics has transformed the legal scholarship by providing it with an unprecedented—and verifiable—perspective, what economics can potentially do for translation studies is beyond description. The pervasive and dominant idea of choice lies at the root of all translation activity, and all written and unwritten rules followed by translators—at least in principle—can be expressed with concrete expressions and algorithms. That said, however, it all comes with mixed virtues, and one must use caution when venturing a methodological link between economics and translation studies, as there might be some institutionally fundamental conflicts and contradictions that are almost impossible to resolve or assume away, such as the possibility of quantifying every value (e.g., political correctness) and parameter (e.g., equivalence) for translators, especially if it is to be presented in terms of money. At any rate, the scientific nature of economics unquestionably entails an epistemic advantage over other methodologies; and because economic methodology is empirically verifiable and objective, it has been instrumental for the new perspectives in law. I have every confidence that it will be able to stand the test of time and that translation studies will be able to benefit from it.

6. Conclusion
A reshuffle of the disciplines as a result of rapid development and evolution of science has, with the passage of time, stimulated the need for more perspectives in translation studies. This will do humanity great service, as it will not grant any individual person or community the final say on anything, but it is easier said than done. Indeed, continuous and rigorous efforts and experiments will be required to engender, implement and employ ideas in response to any interdisciplinarity movement, and it will not happen overnight. From past experience, we ought to be aware that despite its fame and glory today, the sociological turn did not receive wholehearted applause in the beginning; instead, it did take some “getting used to” for some people.

The practice of translation is almost as old as the human race, but the academic field of translation studies is but a burgeoning one, and I think that this will provide fertile soil for new turns and perspectives in translation studies to occur and flourish. Over the past century or so, thanks to the ebb and flow of political ideologies and the integration of world markets, translation has transformed into a large industry with a borderless platform that transcends space, time, race and culture while academics are still trying to understand the true nature of it. Of course, what I am arguing herein is not only the removal of market barriers throughout the translation industry for the sake of more translation from and into underrepresented languages, something proposed by Venuti, but also the idea that any choice that any translator makes in regard to a particular lexical item from the source text is hardly ever random; it is, almost without fail, both economic and economical and thus should be investigated with economics. After all, translators are human beings through and through, who are only mindful of their welfare and understand how to make rational choices under time and funding constraints. In this sense, therefore, I believe that what happens in a translator’s mind and across the entire translation profession, as well as anything and everything in between, must be put to the test of economics.
Albert Einstein once suggested that imagination is probably more important than knowledge, and I guess that is what translation specialists are still lacking: imagination. In addition to imagination, courage will also be needed—the courage to challenge every long-held and yet precarious claim. Alfred Marshall, one of the most influential economists of the last century, once relentlessly claimed that economics should be devoted to the resolution of all social problems—and not just monetary and fiscal ones. His insightful remarks continue to remind us that economic methodology will prove to be a useful tool for explaining and justifying all elements of human society, translation and law both included, and new approaches will help produce innovative theories that lend themselves to a fuller understanding of the truth by way of interaction and cooperation among all academic disciplines. Despite the inherent limits to interdisciplinarity and the huge gap across boundaries, judging from what has been transpiring in the translation studies scholarship, an economic turn will no longer be a distant dream.

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1 By the term turn, I am roughly referring to any new direction taken by an academic subject, which in no way purports to hold prejudice against any claims to it made by any academic.

2 Interestingly enough, for some reason, the terms shift and turn never gained popularity in law as they have in translation studies.

3 **Invisible hand** is a term widely used in economics to justify free market under capitalism and to fend off all government intervention. It was first introduced by the British economist Adam Smith sometime in the 18th century.

4 Of course, all undertakings by economists come with controversy and challenge, with scholars from different traditions, such as the feminist, the Marxist and the instrumentalist traditions, deviating from the basic assumptions of human nature, claiming that efficiency and equity are not **sine qua non** for economic research. An ethics of economics has, thus, come into being. Please refer to the work by George F. DeMartino entitled The Economist’s Oath.

5 Holism is the philosophical idea that the whole of anything, abstract or concrete, is not simply the veritable summation of its parts, and therefore the properties of a natural system should be studied as a whole, and not treated as a collective of multiple isolated parts.

6 In fact, almost every thinker of the French Enlightenment, with the notable exception of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, considered history a constructive and healthy progression always leading mankind towards reason and truth, and few philosophers considered the social phenomena caused by social inequity in those days unnatural at all.

7 Interestingly enough, turns have also been part and parcel of economics, as a discipline. Behavioural economics, as claimed by some, flourished out of a branch of psychology named behavioural decision research, and this, in turn, caused some to assert that behavioural economics is part of an empirical turn in microeconomics that seeks to integrate fields of research as diverse as, in addition to behavioural economics, experimental economics and neuroeconomics, just to name a few. *Vide* Davis and Hands, The Elgar Companion to Recent Economics Methodology, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011, p.35.
The term *turn* was never used in the scholarship of law, so I am calling it a perspective here. Yet, indeed, the hypothetical term of “the economic turn of jurisprudence” could have been adopted.

In no way does this imply that law and economics has never been challenged. Quite to the contrary, it has undergone its share of criticism, with Anthony Kronman suggesting that law and economics should be held responsible for many pathological conditions in today’s legal education and legal practice. Anthony T. Kronman, The Lost Lawyer: Failing Ideals of the Legal Profession 166 (1993).

The interdisciplinary field at issue, which involves law and economics, have taken on several different names over the years, including, but not limited to, law and economics, the economic analysis of law, the economics of law, with some academics preferring one over the others claiming that they mean different things. In this paper, however, I will be using mostly the first two almost interchangeable to mean the same thing.

Some academics even go as far as to claim the two as the true “founding fathers” of what we refer to as law and economics today.


The economics of language is a relatively new field of study on topics such as the effect that language may have on culture, income, markets for language-related goods and services, and the costs and benefits of language planning options, preservation of minority languages. Quite understandably, it forms the backbone of the formation of most governmental language policies.

Of course, the potential that economics may have in store for translation is beyond description. Lawrence Venuti has, in light of the large numbers of translations from the three “major” languages of English, French and German, pointed out time and again the so-called “hegemony” of translation, lamenting the lack of translation works into English from languages with not so many speakers, such as Estonian and Nepali. And that is yet another topic that translation theorists can embark on from an economic perspective (e.g., the economic laws of supply and demand), which is still something unheard of.

Note the term *actors* is in plural form, indicating that multiple actors being involved are needed for a legitimate game to happen.

Of course, in order to invoke game theory, the model will have to change too, engaging a payoff matrix that involves at least two players (presumably the translator and his target audience) both trying to figure out what to do in their best interest.

Please take note that by no means am I suggesting that game theory is in the best position to explain all human activity. In fact, by economists’ own admission, while game theory may assist in structuring information that is available and accessible on actor decision making, it cannot render a full and complete account of all incidentals such as emotions and personality ambitions in its implementation. Vide Hermans et al., 2014, p. 15.

Choice theory is a branch in economics that attempts to ascertain the rationale for the calculation of net benefits behind the choices people make in light of all possible outcomes and their associated utility and shortcomings.
On a side note, the economic concept of opportunity cost and methods of reducing it by making one’s decision non-reversible, as economist Barry Schwartz claims, could be an advisable path to take for further elaboration of LeVý’s argument.

In fact, similar controversies have arisen for law and economics, with the dichotomy between equity and efficiency being the utmost. Despite extra care being taken in the Kaldor-Hicks test in its pursuit of a value-free criterion for economic improvement, critics denounce the separation of aggregate gains and distributional considerations, even if compensation can be provided to parties whose interests were considered expendable. Presumably, this issue is mostly an ethical one.

References


