

TRADUTTORE-TRADITORE ALL OVER AGAIN?: THE CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION IN THE ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

Traduttore-traditore otra vez?: el concepto de traducción en la Teoría del Actor-Red

Gisele SILVA

NOVA University of Lisbon

giseledionisio@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The sociological approach to translation and interpreting necessarily involves incorporating theories, methods, and concepts from the social sciences. Ranking among major contributions is the actor-network theory (ANT), initially referred to as the “sociology of translation”. ANT has proven a useful tool for translation scholars in that its concepts of actor and network foreground a notion of (linguistic) translation as a process-oriented, social, and collaborative practice involving human and non-human actants that strive to achieve certain objectives. Notwithstanding the theory’s potential applicability to translation research, a closer reading of its seminal texts reveals that the concept of translation at its core is associated both with the traditional notion of translation as representation and with the post-structuralist stance of translation as transformation. This finding calls for a critical assessment of concepts borrowed from other disciplines as well as confirms the outreach of translation-related issues in other fields of knowledge.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory; sociology of translation; translation; representation; transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The sociological approach to translation, which has received growing attention on the part of Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS) scholars over the last decade, has entailed the incorporation of theoretical, methodological, and conceptual frameworks from the social sciences, to varying degrees of application. This process of “borrowing”, while confirming the interdisciplinarity long associated with this field of research, helps to draw attention away from its opposite trend, i.e. a process in which translation and interpreting research “lends” a set of contributions to other disciplines. According to Lambert (2012, 85), there appears to be a reigning and widespread assumption “that neither insights about translation nor TS [Translation Studies] research have made inroads into neighboring disciplines”, an assumption challenged by a few telling examples from the social sciences, both at theoretical level (e.g. Casanova 2002; Heilbron and Sapiro 2007) and at conceptual or even metaphorical level. An example of the latter case is the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and its central concept of *translation*.

ANT, known early on as the “sociology of translation”¹, was initially proposed by French anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour, together with Michel Callon, John Law, and other colleagues, within the domain of the sociology of science and technology, and has since been applied to a wide

1 According to Latour (2005, 106), “unfortunately the label [of sociology of translation] never held in English”, despite being a more accurate denomination for the theory at hand.

range of fields of knowledge, including TIS. Their main aim was to expose the inner workings of scientific processes via the use of ethnography, shedding light on the way certain ideas become scientific “facts” and these, in turn, go on to generate technological innovations. Grounded on the claim that science, just like any other social practice, is produced by a number of actors interacting with each other towards achieving specific objectives, this group of researchers proposed the concept of the *actor-network*, purposefully hyphenated to show the mutual composition of actors in constructing networks, or a series of connections, and of networks in influencing the role (and power) of actors. The particular ways in which an actor-network is established are, in very broad terms, what the proponents of ANT call *translation*: “neither one actor among many nor a force behind all the actors transported through some of them but a connection that transports, so to speak, transformations” (Latour 2005, 108).

Certain principles brought forth by ANT, such as the notion of network and the focus on process-oriented research, have been endorsed by TIS scholars in recent years (Abdallah 2012; Buzelin 2007; Jones 2009), but the concept of translation that is central to the theory has so far not been examined in detail. Its conceptual distance from that of conventional and linguistic-based notions of translation has been acknowledged both explicitly, e.g. by Chesterman (2006, 22) – “[ANT’s notion of translation] may be misleading for translation scholars as it has a somewhat different sense” – and Buzelin (2007, 138) – “While Latour is clearly not interested in interlinguistic transfer processes (...)” –, and through the use of visual resources, such as inverted commas (Abdallah 2012; Wolf, 2007) or italics (Buzelin 2007). Nevertheless, underlying such forms of acknowledgement is what appears to be a general tacit acceptance of the concept, which may evoke, to a certain extent, the assumption of a one-way interdisciplinarity alluded to by Lambert (2012). My contention in this paper, however, is that the notion of translation enjoys so central a position in ANT literature, in addition to having paved the way for entire bodies of knowledge in other fields², that it deserves a more detailed analysis. With this, I hope to contribute to the literature on the exploration of the concept of translation in its transdisciplinary outreach across the humanities (for a recent example, see Blumczynski 2017).

Therefore, in this paper I take a closer look at the explicit textual manifestations of the concept of translation in ANT, as revealed by four of its seminal texts (Callon 1986a, 1986b; Latour 2005; Law 1992). In them, the concept is associated, on the one hand, with traditional (Western) notions of translation as (often treasonous) representation and, on the other, with the post-structuralist stance of translation as transformation and displacement. Such a broad conceptual spectrum is indicative not only of the complexity and metaphorical capacity of translation as a human activity, but also of the outreach of translation research in other fields of knowledge.

2. TRANSLATION IN THE ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

According to early ANT literature and, particularly, to Callon’s (1986a) well-known article “Some elements of a sociology of translation”, the process of translation involves four stages, over which a focal actor attempts to convince other actors to strive for a particular objective, hence forming an actor-network. During such a process, “the identity of actors, the possibility of interaction and the margins of manoeuvre are negotiated and delimited” (Callon 1986a, 6). These stages are: 1) problematisation, in which the focal actor establishes him/her/itself as an obligatory passage point in the network of relationships; 2) *interessment*, in which the focal actor seeks to arouse the interest of the other actors and,

² Wæraas and Nielsen (2015, 2), working from the perspective of organisational research, refer to “translation theory” and “translation research” as being the cornerstone to many research traditions, from institutional theory, ANT, and knowledge management. However, this translation has no link whatsoever with translational phenomena investigated by TIS, which calls into question the discipline’s terminological exclusiveness to its object of research.

consequently, to ensure their allegiance to the actor-network; 3) enrolment, the immediate result of a successful *interessment*, in which a set of interrelated roles is attributed and duly accepted by the actors; 4) mobilisation of allies, in which actors are displaced and reassembled across the network in order to meet the specific needs defined by the focal actor; such a mobilisation is only possible through the presence of an actor-spokesman, a “translator”, who negotiates on behalf of the remaining actors. At the end of these four stages of translation, a network of relationships has been formed. However, Callon warns that a fifth stage, that of dissidence, can ensue at any moment following the negotiations and alliances made – such a contestation of the network is when “[t]ranslation becomes treason” (Callon 1986a, 15).

In the next two sections I present the two most recurring notions regarding translation in ANT’s seminal texts: 1) translation as representation and 2) translation as transformation.

2.1 *Translation as representation*

In order to build an actor-network, a focal actor views translation as a central strategy, responsible for “a definition of roles, a distribution of roles and the delineation of a scenario” (Callon 1986b, 26). Since enrolment, the third stage of the translation process, is not a given in the social fabric, it requires the intervention of a translator, “the spokesman of the entities he constitutes”, someone who “expresses [actors’] desires, their secret thoughts, their interests, their mechanisms of operation” (Callon 1986b, 25).

Thus, it is up to the translator-spokesman to set the balance between, on the one hand, the requirements necessary for the network to function properly and, on the other, the actors – formerly entities existing independently of any networks of relationships – needed for mobilisation. The translator’s efforts may prove successful or not, but, according to Law (1992, 388), this outcome cannot be predicted: “as with any other form of translation, representation is fallible, and it cannot be foretold whether a representative will successfully speak for (and so mask) what it claims to represent”. If success ensues, then “only voices speaking in unison will be heard” (Callon 1986a, 19) and the objectives set out by the focal actor will have been met. If not, then the representativeness of the translator-spokesman will be challenged and dissidence, or betrayal, will set in and redefine the network’s balance:

The actors implicated do not acknowledge their roles in this story nor the slow drift in which they had participated, in their opinion, wholeheartedly. As the aphorism says, *traduttore-traditore*, from translation to treason there is only a short step. (...) New displacements take the place of the previous ones but these divert the actors from the obligatory passage points that had been imposed upon them. New spokesmen are heard that deny the representativity of the previous ones. Translation continues but the equilibrium has been modified (Callon 1986a, 19).

Therefore, an effective translation, from the viewpoint of ANT, involves *speaking for others* in one’s “own language” (Callon 1986a, 26); *simplifying* the complexity of actors’ attributes in order to make them fit into the network’s demands; *concealing* the internal power struggles which led to the network’s formation and consolidation, i.e. that were needed “to achieve the seemingly natural order, where each element relates with the others” (Callon 1986a, 28).

2.2 *Translation as transformation*

In ANT literature, effective actors are those able to induce others to do things, i.e. to act. They are viewed as *mediators*, whose input does not help predict their output and who “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour 2005, 39). Mediators are opposed to *intermediaries*, entities which faithfully transport “meaning or force without transfor-

mation” (2005, 39) and whose “inputs predict outputs fairly well” (2005, 58). Therefore, the unpredictability of the network’s outcomes is directly related to the equally unpredictable connections effected by the actors as mediators.

A network is thus constructed, according to Latour (2005, 107, emphasis in the original), “not by transporting a force that would remain the *same* throughout as some sort of faithful intermediary, but by generating *transformations*”. The fact that actors induce others to act, creating a type of ripple effect in the network, reveals a performative dimension to their role; following Latour’s (2005, 37) reasoning, whereas “the object of an ostensive definition remains there, whatever happens to the index of the onlooker (...) the object of a performative definition vanishes when it is no longer performed”. This trait prevents the formulation of ready-made assumptions regarding the relationships between a set of actors and requires that the researcher starts his/her analysis of a given network anew.

With regard to the transformations effected by translation, Callon (1986a, 1986b) prefers to use the term *displacement*. To him, displacements in the literal sense – i.e. physical and social – are inherent to all four stages of translation, but, above all, to mobilisation, since “[t]o mobilize, as the word indicates, is to render entities mobile which were not so beforehand” (Callon 1986a, 14). The imposition of particular itineraries on the part of the translator-spokesman, in other words, the establishment of obligatory points of passage, necessarily entails actors’ movement. If actors remain mobilised to the purposes initially outlined by the focal actor, then the network is stable; if, on the other hand, they start to challenge the legitimacy of their spokesman, new displacements substitute the previous ones and instability sets in. The network has to be constructed anew.

3. FINAL REMARKS

As highlighted in the Introduction, my first and foremost aim in this paper was to present the textual references employed by the major proponents of ANT to describe and explain translation as the theory’s central concept. This was motivated by an (as yet initial) effort to shed some light on the way the entire conceptual and methodological framework of ANT is grounded on a form of translation that resonates, to a greater or lesser degree, with certain approaches to language-based translation adopted by past and present TIS scholars. It must be acknowledged, however, that analysing a concept based solely on textual materiality potentially overlooks subtler underpinnings; after all, what is left unsaid is often as meaningful as what is actually said – or even more so. Therefore, while this may be a limitation of the present research, it leaves open a whole new domain still to be explored.

Even though ANT’s concept of translation is far removed from the more familiar notions of linguistic- and text-based translation known to TIS scholars, as pointed out by Chesterman (2006) and Buzelin (2007), several of the textual references in Latour’s, Callon’s, and Law’s essays reveal expressions and notions long associated with (linguistic) translation: “transport”, “treason”, “substitution”, “simplification”, “representation”. While such references may stem from a commonsensical view of translation, the *traduttore-traditore* adage may be an indication that ANT proponents (particularly Callon, who seems to have first introduced the concept) came into contact with more specialised – and prescriptive – reflections on the subject.

Another set of references signals, in turn, a post-structuralist approach to translation: “movement”, “displacement”, “transformation”, “instability”. According to Buzelin (2005, 195), this is not a random assortment of concepts, since Latour’s work and ANT literature in general are “symptomatic of the (...) development of a poststructuralist thinking that would place greater emphasis both on agency and on the analysis of the dynamics of science and power”. Moreover, the very fact that translation in ANT’s perspective accommodates both conceptual paradigms – “to translate is to speak for, to be indispensa-

ble, *and to displace*” (Callon 1986b, 28, emphasis added) – evokes, to a certain extent, theoretical reflections that underscore the paradoxical nature of translation, such as deconstruction and post-colonial studies.

In summary, the realisation that translation enjoys a considerable outreach over a transdisciplinary spectrum, including even fields of knowledge outside the humanities, must be followed closely by empirical efforts to outline its conceptual contours. In the specific case of ANT, understanding the underlying premises of its particular form of translation is a necessary step for researchers interested in the theory’s potential applicability to TIS. In spite of the evident conceptual differences already highlighted, some of ANT’s major principles, e.g. the notion of network as a suitable framework to describe relationships between social actors, the focus on social processes (and, consequently, on process-oriented research), and the analysis of the mechanics of power may offer valuable insights to researchers in TIS, particularly those pursuing a more agent-oriented perspective. Therefore, the sociology of translation proposed by Latour and his colleagues may still contribute significantly to furthering the sociology in TIS.

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