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INTRODUCTION

Theories and methodologies of translation history: the value of an interdisciplinary approach

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The premise for this special issue is that some form of interdisciplinary engagement with historical studies – the term I shall use here to denote all historiography that does not define itself by its concern with translation – is desirable for those of us who work on translation history. It is desirable not in order to appease a sense of epistemological inferiority or to acquire greater institutional status (motives which Bandia attributes to me in his response at the close of this issue), but because engaging with like-minded researchers who have different approaches to a shared subject is a potentially enriching experience. All the contributions to this issue address this premise in some way, each according to the specific field of interest of their authors and their understanding of its implications.

A special issue was recently published by the *Journal of Historical Sociology* on ‘Translations and the Challenge of Interdisciplinarity’ (2011), guest-edited by Gurinder Bhambra. What is interesting about this issue is how translation is being used not so much as a physical object of study or as a practice to be analysed, but rather as a means to understand and interpret transnational and ‘global’ sociological contexts and as the defining paradigm of an interdisciplinary approach (Bhambra and Holmwood 2011, 4):

We approach interdisciplinarity as a form of translation across differences. A ‘mutual’ language evolves in the process of translation, but this language will not be a universalistic set of categories (as analytic approaches to interdisciplinarity propose), or a common agreed problem (as applied interdisciplinarity proposes), it will be closer to a ‘language of practice’ alongside the more familiar languages of disciplines.

A similar use of translation as an approach, a paradigm and an interpretative key for transcultural and transnational interdisciplinary research seems to be the common thread linking the three projects which won ‘Large Grant Awards’ (approximately £1.9 million each) in a recently launched funding initiative by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) on the theme of ‘Translating Cultures’. It is significant in my opinion that none of these projects appear, on the basis of the information available online, to have been conceived within the framework of what we would normally understand as translation studies (i.e. where translations and translation practice are the main research object) but are all led from within non-translation disciplinary areas (Italian Studies, Education and Multilingualism Studies) and collocate translation within the conceptual frames of these areas on the basis of their interdisciplinary approach.¹

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What I see as significant here is that these groups of scholars, the majority of whom would probably not define their research paths/careers in terms of translation, are tapping into an interdisciplinary potential that the study of translation offers in ways which do not appear to be taken up within the normal confines of translation studies and within its conventional methodological frameworks.

To return more specifically to translation history, another significant AHRC-funded project was ‘Languages at War. Policies and Practices of Language Contacts in Conflict’ (2008–11), coordinated by Hilary Footitt. This project also involved a group of scholars from outside translation studies whose main frame of reference was war and conflict studies. However, in this instance translation, or rather interpreting practice, was the object of their research in a way that is more akin to translation studies approaches, making it feasible for Hilary Footitt and her colleague Simona Tobia to publish articles on the same research area in both war and translation studies journals (Footitt 2010, 2012; Tobia 2010a, 2010b). Footitt in particular offers some very interesting reflections on the methodological implications of addressing both the translation studies community and historical studies (2012, 218):

What is interesting at the present time, however, is the wide gap which continues to exist between these two distinct parts of the academy – between the perception of translation scholars that language intermediaries are vital to war, and the total absence of languages, their occlusion, in the narratives which most historians construct of conflict and peace-building. To some extent, one might argue that the failure to connect these two approaches has at its root the very distinct methodological traditions of the two disciplines, translation studies and history.

Footitt goes on to discuss the way in which the research she was carrying out on translation in conflict zones needed to be grounded in what she calls a ‘historical framework’ – by which she means ‘a deliberate engagement with the relevant historiography in each case study’ (ibid., 221). So, when researching interpreting practice, Footitt does not limit herself to a superficial historical contextualisation but actively engages in the military history of her chosen case studies (the liberation and occupation of Western Europe in 1944–7 and the peacekeeping/peace-building operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995–2000) and allows key issues in that historiography to guide/drive her own research. Such an outward-looking approach to translation history, she argues (ibid.),

is both a matter of being informed about what questions are currently being posed in the general historiography, and of seeking to inform, to contribute to this historiography by moving if necessary beyond the ‘comfort zone’ of one’s own initial discipline, both in publishing and in conference presentations.

Moving beyond our ‘comfort zone’ as translation historians, as I understand it, means framing our research in the specific discourse of our chosen historical subject, a discourse in which much of the conceptual language that we take for granted in translation studies is absent. This is a step further, I believe, than the one frequently advocated of importing the theoretical insights of historical studies into translation studies (cf. the essays in Bastin and Bandia 2006). In his response in this issue, for example, Paul Bandia shows some resistance towards the idea that we should adopt a discourse that will make our research relevant to historians:

... it seems counterproductive for the translation historian to devote time and effort coaxing other historians to view translation history as a legitimate academic discipline rather than working towards constructing a serious history of translation.

The aim, in my opinion, is not to coax history scholars into recognising us and thus gain some form of legitimisation. The issue is essentially one of expertise. If I seek a dialogue with a 'conventional' historian who works on my same historical subject, it is because that historian will have a similar expertise to mine and will therefore be in a position to appreciate the value of any historical insight that I have to offer. He or she will have been to the same archives, worked on the same sources and read the same secondary literature. In a word, we engage in the same discourse and he or she will be in a position both to appreciate my own position and influence it. If I engage in a dialogue with a translation scholar/historian who has no expertise in my particular historical subject, then our exchange will either remain historically superficial or will shift towards shared issues of methodology – which are perfectly valid in their own right, of course, but only if they function as a preamble to the search for new insights.

I have previously characterised this way of conducting research into translation history as considering translation an approach to a given historical subject rather than a historical object in itself (Rundle 2012). It is fair to say that all the authors in this issue see such an approach as worthwhile, while probably feeling that my characterisation is too binary and exclusionary. I accept that this is probably true. It is not my intention to delegitimise in any way those who see translation itself as their historical object; I merely wish to suggest that there is an alternative approach to the prevalent 'translation as history' (to use Bandia's phrase in his response) and it is one that, in my experience at least, can bring real benefits in terms of interdisciplinary exchange and methodological and theoretical awareness. And in this respect I disagree with Bandia's idea that a translation historian's primary purpose must be that of 'facilitating translation practice and enhancing knowledge in translation studies'.

While working on this issue, however, my understanding of what interdisciplinary translation history can mean has evolved. It would be more accurate to say that when I first proposed this issue I saw the question more in terms of how to engage with historical studies, as I have just described; a rather unilateral process that essentially involved my adapting to the discourse within historiography. This suited my particular research project on translation under fascism well, but I am more aware now of the extent to which this is not necessarily representative of the experience of other translation historians. The key factor in relating my own research experience to that of other translation historians is, I see now, a more bilateral and flexible understanding of interdisciplinarity in translation history – and, by extension, in translation studies – as demonstrated by the articles in this issue.

The contribution which devotes the most time to reflecting explicitly on these issues is probably **Maeve Olohan's**. Olohan's area of interest is the role of translation in the history of science – itself a complex interdisciplinary area. She looks in detail at the methodological issues and in particular focuses on the contribution that transnational approaches can make to overcoming disciplinary boundaries. She sees recent moves towards a more transnational view of scientific history as a 'key conceptual and methodological shift ... away from binary relations to a network approach, facilitated by systems and/or network theories'; a shift which can provide a 'fertile meeting ground' for the history of science and the history of translation in which translation would be pivotal to the 'to the realisation of transnational science, and translation scholars would therefore make ideal

interlocutors for historians of science as both engage sets of scholars in conceptualising and studying the transnational character of science’.

Stefan Baumgarten and **Edith Gruber** also see transnationalism as a key concept. In their case it represents a ‘progressive’ approach that can usefully replace an interpretation of history that is centred on the idea of nation – an interpretation which in their view, and based on their research into Welsh history, tends to reinforce the political and cultural hegemony of certain nations to the detriment of less powerful cultures whose national status is more vulnerable and whose identity is bound up in what they term a ‘non-state language’. Taking their cue from Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the Angel of History, Baumgarten and Gruber relate these issues to a sophisticated reflection on the ethical responsibility of historians to address ‘hegemonic asymmetry’ and preserve ontological and epistemological diversity, which, in their detailed study of cultural relations between Wales and England, Welsh and English, the authors see as being threatened by the ‘prevailing hegemony of a rationalist and scientific-positivist mindset in governance and science’. Instead of this, the authors wish to promote ‘integrationist translation practices which strive for an *ethics of plurality*’.

Marie-Alice Belle’s paper explores the interface between translation history and literary history through a case study of the trope of ‘progress’ in translations and retranslations of classical literature in seventeenth-century England. This interface represents one of the most well-established forms of interdisciplinary research in translation history, and literary history is arguably one of the disciplinary areas in which translation research has been most successfully introduced into the historical narrative. Nevertheless, Belle underlines the need for a greater awareness in literary history of the evolution of the discourse on translation. She criticises the ‘tendency to assimilate translation within narratives of the development of English literature’ without sufficient attention being paid to the historical contexts in which the translations were being carried out, and with a general desire to affirm a teleological sense of progress – one which is increasingly being questioned within translation studies. Belle therefore suggests that Foucault’s thinking on the Nietzschean concept of genealogy and its implications for the writing of history are particularly appropriate here. Foucault posits an opposition between ‘historians’ history’, which tends to focus on major historical figures and events, and a more genealogical approach which focuses on ‘the unearthing of the material, physical and banal – in a word, the all-too-human origins of historical trends and phenomena’.

In his paper on the use of translator archives, **Jeremy Munday** takes inspiration from microhistorical approaches within historical studies and looks at the methodological implications for translation historians. There is a clear parallel to be drawn between the frequent objective in translation history to render the contribution of translators (and their translations) more visible and those approaches in historical studies, such as the Annales school, which are intended to reconstruct the history of ordinary men and women, away from the canonised narratives of nations and their leaders. As Munday shows, such a microhistorical approach can fit well with research that seeks to reconstruct translator practice in depth and detail; he looks at both the benefits and the risks of using different primary sources, including personal papers and oral testimonies. Munday discusses the issue of their reliability and argues that the ‘circumspection’ with which such extra-textual material is viewed within very empirical approaches to the study of translation is exaggerated. The microhistories we can construct using these sources ‘have the potential to challenge dominant historical discourses of text production, which are in turn dominated by prominent literary figures and translators’.

Nayelli Castro uses an interdisciplinary case study on the development of a historicist philosophical tradition in Mexico to show how the narratives of translation history and the history of philosophy can be merged to form ‘a story of philosophy in the making’ and to establish whether translations ‘can truly be the raw materials of a history of philosophy’. One of the interesting issues to emerge concerns the supposed universality of philosophical ideas, an ideal that tends to impose an artificial degree of unity and brings with it the need to minimise anything that foregrounds divisions and incompatibilities. Consequently, the interlinguistic transferability of philosophical ideas is taken for granted and little thought is given to the possible ways in which these ideas are altered in the process. As Castro puts it:

To begin to bridge the gap between the history of philosophy and the history of translation thus requires an acknowledgement of the tension between universality and untranslatability: in other words, between the claim that philosophy is translatable and hence a universal philosophical canon is possible, and the counter claim that the particularity of languages and national philosophies makes clear that translatability must always be relative.

Anne Lange and **Daniele Monticelli**’s study of translation in Estonia during the Soviet period also shows how translations can serve as an important interpretative key in the construction of a more sophisticated history of a given socio-historical context. Taking inspiration from the Bakhtinian concept of ‘outsideness’ in culture, time and space, Lange and Monticelli use the three concepts of estrangement (Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*), anachrony and dislocation to undermine the myth of a clear separation between totalitarian and non-totalitarian societies by ‘[separating] the totalitarian phenomenon into degrees of socio-cultural monologisation that should be measured comparatively as different layers of the historical situations being studied’. Their approach to translation history is one of a flexible interdisciplinarity which implies ‘not only the study of some translations of the past or a “different” kind of study of either translation or history, but, more significantly, a new relevance for both, presented now within their vital contexts – translation in the context of history, and history in the context of translation’.

The special issue closes with a response by **Paul Bandia** to the contributions summarised above. The idea was to create a dialectic within the issue, and I hope readers will find that this has only been enhanced by the disagreements which emerge. Bandia takes his cue from my position paper (Rundle 2012) in which I outline the choice I feel translation historians have to make between addressing either the translation studies or historical studies communities when presenting their research. As I anticipated above, he rightly points out that the contributors to this issue do not share my rather stark and binary characterisation of this choice; Bandia, too, appreciates the less oppositionary approach to interdisciplinary translation history that their contributions represent. The key issue that Bandia picks out from the contributions is the value of both a microhistorical and a transnational approach. In their different ways, and in line with Bandia’s own interest in postcolonial studies, these challenge both the Eurocentric nature of much translation history and those historical narratives that foreground hegemonic states and cultures. For Bandia,

microhistories can constitute the building blocks for a transnational history of translation through a careful alignment of themes or tropes drawn from current research in historiography across specific national or local translational experiences.

While appreciating the ethical value of these aims, I feel that Bandia perhaps overestimates the significance of microhistorical approaches. They are valuable because they foster a close engagement with our historical sources but they are not going to bring about any major paradigm shift in translation history, which is already quite open to such approaches and to the idea of foregrounding the experience of the ordinary man or woman and bringing what was previously considered peripheral into the centre of our narrative. On the other hand, microhistorical approaches do constitute a shared methodology with many scholars in historical studies, and as such can make an important contribution to the development of a lively interdisciplinary interface. By the same token, Bandia may well be right in suggesting that transnational perspectives ‘can provide a fertile meeting ground for translation historians and other historians who share similar historical interests’.

However, as I have suggested above, and in the light of the research presented in this special issue, I believe that such interdisciplinary exchange should be a more bilateral process than just ‘drawing on historiography for relevant themes or tropes’, as Bandia suggests, or asking only ‘what translation can tell us about history’, as I have formerly argued (Rundle 2012, 239). The key, in my opinion, is to see translation *both* as a historical object in its own right and as an approach to interpreting other historical subjects, on the understanding that the introduction of this latter approach (without excluding the former) is a necessary step towards developing a genuinely interdisciplinary discourse on translation history.

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Note

1. For details of this funding theme, and in particular the Large Grant Awards, see the AHRC website: <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funding-Opportunities/Research-funding/Themes/Translating-Cultures/Pages/Large-Grant-Awards.aspx> (last accessed 30 November 2013).

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