In defense of communicative-functional approach to translation

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Abstract

At the present stage of translatology development we witness a collision of two approaches to translation: the text-focused approach and the communicative-functional approach. This paper offers arguments in defense of the communicative-functional approach and proves that this approach is a convenient tool of revealing the intrinsic nature of translation as a human activity. It is instrumental in solving traditional problems of translatology, including the problem of translation quality assessment. Translation quality is assessed in terms of adequacy defined as the conformity of the target text to the translation goal and the purposes of the activities performed by the communication actors.

Keywords: Translation; communicative-functional approach; text-focused approach; translation quality assessment.

1. Introduction

The landscape of Translation Studies, a comparatively young discipline, has been changing swiftly in recent decades. New approaches are used to research the phenomenon of translation, new ideas result from the collaboration of translation studies with humanities and social sciences. The science has even acquired the status of interdiscipline, as Mary Snell-Hornby termed it (Snell-Hornby, 1994).

Two distinctive stages in the development of translation studies as a science can be differentiated between. At the early stage of the translation studies development, in the 1950s–1970s, translation scholars focused their attention on the differences between the two languages that “collide” in the translation process. Since translation was viewed as transformation of a source text (ST) into a target text (TT), it was believed, therefore, that the differences between the lexical and grammatical systems of the languages present the major problems, and the efforts of the translation investigators were focused on finding the ways and means most suitable for overcoming purely linguistic obstacles.

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on the way to transforming one text into another. The efforts resulted in many classifications of what we call “transformations” now. Transformations are presented as operations performed by a translator over the lingual material of the ST, and aimed at helping a translator overcome the possible absence of correspondences between the languages.

The most striking feature of this outdated approach, which I have called “the text-focused” approach (Sdobnikov, 2011), is a lack of attention to extra-linguistic factors that influence the translation process and its outcome. Viewed from the perspective of the present-day situation in the translation studies, the text-focused approach seems to be inadequate for the task of revealing the intrinsic nature of translation as a form of human activity. When a ST is perceived as an independent and self-sufficient entity that exists in a vacuum, in isolation from the environment in which it has been produced, Translation Studies become incapable of revealing the whole complex of factors, both lingual and extra-lingual, that impact the translation process and must be taken into account by any translator or interpreter who feels responsible for the results of his/her professional activity. In practical life, the situation is even worse than in the field of theoretical investigation of translators’ activity. Translating a text as if it is isolated from any specific environment, as a text per se, translators ignore the needs of the text recipients and the goal of translation.

Opposed to the text-focused approach to translation is the so-called communicative-functional approach substantially fuelled by the ideas of many translation scholars at the second stage of translation studies development (from the 1970s to present). Among the theories that contributed much to the formulation of the communicative-functional approach to translation, scopos-theory of Hans Vermeer and Katarina Reiß (Reiß & Vermeer, 2013) further developed by their disciple Christiane Nord (Nord, 1997) deserves special attention. The communicative-functional approach suggests that a text to be translated should be viewed within a certain communicative situation in which it was produced as an instrument of communication between specific actors. It means that in order to reveal the most significant factors influencing the translation process, it is essential to take into consideration both linguistic aspects of translation, specifics of languages and texts themselves, as well as to investigate thoroughly what I would call human aspects of translation. With the development of the communicative-functional approach, the process of translation has acquired, so to speak, a “human face”. It implies special attention to the needs and expectations of humans who produce texts in source languages and use texts written or spoken by translators in target languages.

Thus, the two approaches to translation are opposed in essence. The issue is significant in terms of both theory and practice. Adherence of a translator to a certain approach is manifested in the results of his/her work, and predetermines the translation quality. Since I strongly believe that it is only the communicative-functional approach to translation that ensures the high quality of translation, its best value, I shall devote more attention to the fundamentals of this approach.

2. Fundamentals of the communicative-functional approach to translation

As has been stated above, the communicative-functional approach implies consideration of a translation event in a certain, frequently imaginary, supposed, yet realistic environment within which this event happens or may happen. The term “environment” may be replaced by the more traditional and specific concept of “communicative situation”. The latter term seems to be more precise, too, as it implies an interaction of human beings. It should be borne in mind that people interact only when they need to or have to. The necessity to interact arises when any substantive work performed by people cannot be done unless they communicate. The communication can be both direct and indirect. In case the communication actors are divided by a language barrier, mediation by a translator/interpreter is needed. It is self-evident that a translator who performs the role of the mediator between the communication actors is supposed to take into consideration the aims with which they get engaged into the communication process, the needs and requirements of their substantive work, possible or definite ways in which they will use the target text produced. E. Gentzler states that “…a client who hires a translator has specific goals that need consideration; the receiving audience has certain expectations that need to be addressed; translation is a form of action, a communicative interaction” (Gentzler, 2001). Only after the translator has realized the needs and expectations of the target audience, he/she is able to understand and formulate the translation goal. The notion of the translation goal is widely discussed and even widely disputed by many translation scholars. Those who admit the relevance of the notion offer different definitions of the translation goal, according to the approach they use. The principal translation goal is not to simply produce a text that would be acknowledged as equivalent to the ST by an idle outsider who is capable of comparing the TT to the ST. It is noteworthy that in real life a translation is rarely assessed by professional critics or by those who pretend to be
“critics”. It is communication actors who eagerly or reluctantly assess the translation in terms of its usefulness for the activities they perform. No wonder, Christiane Nord has emphatically titled her book as “Translating as a Purposeful Activity”. Thus, generally speaking, the genuine translation goal is to produce a text that would be instrumental in the activities performed by its end users.

Consequently, translation must be viewed as both the instrument of communication and the instrument of any substantive work being done by communication actors. It follows that in a professional setting, a translation event is always triggered by some aim or intention. But the question arises: whose intention is it? It seems that it is the intention of the communication actors that triggers a translation event, which is not always true. The personality of another actor is most essential in our considerations, and the actor is the initiator of translation. As Gentzler points out, it may be a person, a group, or an institution whose goals or aims may be different from those of the source-text author, the target-text receiver, and the translator (Gentzler, 2001). The translation initiator can or cannot be directly involved in the act of communication between the actors, as the case may be. But it is always he or she (or, maybe, it, in case of some institution) who defines the character of the translation setting and, ultimately, determines the translation strategy. As I have previously pointed out, the translation strategy is a function of the initiator’s goal (Sdobnikov, 2011).

Understanding by the translator of the initiator’s goal and the expectations of the source-text author and the target-text receivers’ results from the analysis of the communicative situation, or the translation setting, which is indispensable of any professional translation activity. The communicative situations in which translation is performed are strikingly diverse. Yet, despite this diversity, all of them fall into two main categories: 1) situations in which translation is initially planned, and 2) situations in which translation is not initially planned. In the first class of situations the text is addressed directly to the audience that speaks another language. In the second class of situations the text is addressed to the audience speaking the same language, and only after that the translation is done, in a different setting, culture and time.

On the basis of the above premises, I can define translation as a translator’s speech activity aimed at producing a text that serves to be an instrument of the substantive work done by the translation initiator and communication actors in the given communicative situation.

3. Communicative-functional approach vs text-focused approach: A dispute

I have already noted that the communicative-functional approach to translation emerged at the second stage of Translation Studies development. Nonetheless, some translation scholars argue that functionalism has always been the foundation of the science. I state that it is not true. To prove their viewpoint, our opponents refer to the works by Yakov Rezker and Vladimir Gak who were among the founders of the translation theory in Russia. In particular, they quote Y. Rezker who stated that “an analysis of any masterfully made translation proves that the basis for stating the equivalence of language means can be only functional, not formal” (Rezker, 2007). What is ignored here is the fact that Y. Rezker speaks about the “equivalence of language means” but not about the equivalence of texts. This contradicts the essence of functionalist theories and the communicative-functional approach, according to which only texts but not words or syntactical structures can be used as communication tools. Apparently, in Y. Rezker’s perception, the “functional basis” implies, at least, the functions that words perform in a text. But, at the same time, function is given a very narrow definition and refers to the possibility to equal one word to another only because they have the same referent.

Any attentive reader not devoid of common sense would readily agree that the approach professed by the Russian founders of Translation Studies was purely text-focused. It might be said that the term “text-focused approach” is not a happy one because its usage in any description of translation, allegedly, leads to the distortion of the nature of this activity, to a distorted interpretation of translation. The following arguments are presented in support of this: any translator’s efforts are always focused on a text; a text is the object of translation; the aim of the translation activity is to produce a text; therefore, the source text is always the focal point of the translation analysis and translation process. In my view, treating a text as the focal point of the translation process and ignoring extra-linguistic information, i.e. an extra-linguistic situation that lies behind the text or, figuratively speaking, embraces the text, we unreasonably limit our investigation field, chopping off everything which is not in the text. In practice, it means that translation is not a “purposeful activity”, as Ch. Nord calls it, but a sort of a game: the source text tells the translator: “Translate me”, the translator plays the game applying some translation technology, and the target text emerges. Game over.
I do not insist on differentiating between the central and peripheral areas in the translation research. Moreover, I am utterly against opposing one approach to the other, because such an opposition would imply that some aspects of translation would seem to be more significant (because they are “in the center”) while others would seem to be less significant (because they are “in the peripheral zone”). Putting a stress on purely linguistic aspects of translation, placing them in the center of attention means that extra-linguistic factors are ignored. I believe that both linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects of translation are equally important. A responsible translator or interpreter should take into account the whole complex of them while analyzing the source text, including linguistic discrepancies between the languages, on the one hand, and situational factors influencing the translation process, on the other. Only in this case he/she would be able to realize what is expected of him/her, what needs of the translation initiator and the communication actors must be satisfied. This fact escaped the authors of early translation theories, both in Russia and in the West. Hence, the text-focused approach dominant at the early stages of Translation Studies development. The major difference between the two approaches was precisely formulated by C. Yan and J. Huang: “Different from linguistic approach, functionalist approach attached more importance to the function but not the language equivalence” (Yan, Huang, 2014).

Adherents of the text-focused approach to translation accuse supporters of the communicative-functional approach of dethroning the source text and fetishizing the translation goal. (The accusations have been voiced when a dissertation based on the communicative-functional approach was defended at a meeting of a dissertation council in Moscow.) The former accusation requires no comments. Only one thing can be added: it is due to misunderstanding. There is no appeal to ignore the source text in any of functionalist translation theories. In fact, the reason for the second accusation is also misunderstanding. But unlike the issue of the “source text dethroning”, it is not the approach to translation which is misunderstood but the nature of translation itself. To understand the nature of translation, one should admit that translation is a goal-oriented activity. There are two key words in the last statement: “activity” and “goal-orientation”; and the notions designated are inextricably intertwined. Any human activity is goal-oriented and based on motivation, especially a professional one, and translation is not an exception. But what distinguishes translation from other human activities is the fact that its goal is not related to a translator’s personal motives and needs; it is connected with the needs of other people, in our case – with the needs of the translation initiator, the TT receiver and the ST author. It has been repeated as a mantra for many centuries that a translator performs the role of mediator in the act of cross-cultural communication, and proponents of the text-focused approach to translation readily agree with the statement. It is even more surprising that despite the recognition of the translator as the mediator in communication, they are reluctant to admit that the translator cannot but take into account the needs and expectations of the communication actors, i.e. those persons whose interests he or she serves. Dominated by the feeling of self-respect and dignity, proponents of the text-focused approach say that the communicative-functional approach downgrades translation to the level of a service. In my perception, there is nothing offensive in the idea because translation is a service. And only the servant who understands why he/she is doing what he/she is doing, i.e. performs a purposeful, goal-oriented activity, can be called a real professional. We may justly say that the translator and his/her “masters” come to a consensus: the translator is ready to offer a product that satisfies the needs of the communication actors while the communication actors are inclined to believe that the translator offers them some information in the form and in the amount compliant with their expectations and the needs of their substantive work.

But in the domain of translation there is a field that is bepraised as something mysterious and incognizable in its nature. It is literary translation, a purely creative, artistic activity. As such it is improperly said to be devoid of any goal-orientation. Instead, some intangible impulse is believed to be the only trigger of the literary translation process, the driver that plunges a translator into the ocean of creativity. Sometimes, the feelings experienced by a literary translator are expressed with the phrase: “I have no definite goal, but it is hard not to translate.” It is obvious that the proponents of the idea substitute their own sensations for reasonable explanations. I believe that literary translation does not differ at all from other types of translation in terms of goal-orientation. Literary translation is goal-oriented in the same way as any other translation. But we should differentiate between the goal as the rationale of translation and the translator’s motive as a factor perceived emotionally. Sergey Rubinstein argued that the direct goal of a socially organized human activity is the performance of some social function while satisfaction of personal needs may serve as the motive of an individual’s activity (Rubinstein, 2008).

Yet, the translation goal may be treated differently by adherers of different approaches to translation. Some say that the translator’s task is to ensure understanding of the text by its receivers in accordance with the author’s intention. Eugene Nida offers a different perspective of understanding: “The translation process has been defined on the basis that the receptors of the translation should comprehend the translated text to such an extent that they can understand
how the original receptors must have understood the original text” (Waard, & Nida, 1986). No doubt, Nida’s vision is closer to the reality of the translation process. As for the adherers of the text-focused approach, their vision of what should be done in translation distorts the reality. They ignore the fact that a text is a container of various types of information (cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, etc.), and to understand a text means to perceive the information contained in it as well as to visualize the situation described by the text. But does the target-text receiver really need all the information provided by the text? Frequently, it is not the case. He/she can need only that information that is useful for his/her substantive work. It should be borne in mind that in many cases the goal of the target-text receiver (and the translation initiator) is different from that of the source-text author. The latter has created the text which starts to exist independently of its creator, it starts to live its own independent life. It may be used for various purposes which are determined by the specifics of the substantive work performed by the text’s end user. So, it is not a rare case when the author intends the text to be used for one purpose and the target-text receiver uses it for another purpose. Jeremy Munday states referring to K. Riess that there are occasions when the function of the TT may differ from that of the ST. One of the examples if translation of Jonathan Swift’s “Gulliver’s Travels”: “originally written as a satirical novel to attack the government of the day…. it is nowadays normally read and translated as ordinary entertaining fiction” (Munday, 2001). Erich Prunč argues that different relevance can be assigned to different elements and parts of the ST from the recipient’s perspective (Prunč, 2015). It follows that the translator is not only free to decide what information must be reproduced in the given situation; he/she is obliged to think about what information is useful for the target-text receiver and in which form this information must be offered to be suitable for use in the substantive activity of the target-text receiver. The conclusion is: the translator’s task is to produce a text that is suitable in terms of the substantive activity of the user.

It follows from the above considerations that the form of the text can change significantly as a result of translation. As C. Yan and J. Huang put it, “translation should vary for the sake of different readers. For example, translation for children must be easy to understand and interesting to convey the surface meaning, whereas for expertise must be professional” (Yan, & Huang, 2014). The transformation may be so profound that the activity that resulted in a text changed beyond recognition can hardly deserve the name of translation. Backers of the text-focused approach distinguish between “translation proper” and various kinds of interlinguistic mediation which are called “adaptive transcoding” in the Russian translatology. Adaptive transcoding is usually defined as interlinguistic transcoding which results in a transformed text with the preliminary specified amount and character of information. Examples include abridged translation, adaptation, abstracting, etc., and are usually contrasted to translation proper in purely linguistic Translation Theory. Supporters of the text-focused approach to translation honestly believe that translation proper and other kinds of interlinguistic mediation are essentially different. Is it really so? To answer the question, we should first recall our definition of translation given above. If we stick to this definition, we must agree that the notion of translation applies to any language activity of a translator aimed at producing a target text on the basis of a source text, regardless of the form the TT acquires. It does not matter whether the translator renders the whole amount of information contained in the source text, at the same time preserving relevant formal features of the ST, or selects some specific bits of information and presents them in another form congruent with the needs and expectations of the communication actors. At the root, the translator’s actions are essentially the same, at least from the psycholinguistic perspective. Certainly, they are not the same in terms of translation technology, because in different situations the translator performs different sets of operations over the language material of the text; but purely technological aspects of translation are of no relevance now. What is important is the fact that in all situations of interlinguistic and intercultural communication the translator (and I insist on it) does the same job: he/she analyzes the situation in which the communication occurs, realizes the essence of the “translation brief” (a term introduced by Ch. Nord) which is a kind of voiced or unvoiced instruction of the Client to the translator, comprehends the Client’s expectations, and then makes a decision whether to reproduce the whole text in its initial form (of course, with due account of the rules and requirements of the target language) or to change its form and content to produce an abridged version, an adaptation or an abstract. Only after that the translator’s decision, or the translation brief, is materialized by means of necessary operations. Thus, according to the communicative-functional approach there are no essential differences between forms of interlinguistic mediation, translation proper and adaptive transcoding included. I’ll go as far as to say that everything a translator produces in the process of interlinguistic mediation is translation.

An initial conclusion would be that different approaches to translation investigation result in different translation theories, different definitions of the key concepts of Translation Studies – and in different outcomes of the practical activities performed by translators. Each approach formulated theoretically makes an impact on the translators’ minds, on their understanding of the tasks a translator is expected to solve, and sooner or later is applied practically. It is the
essence of the approach that has been chosen by the translator or put into his or her head (which is more the case) which determines the translation quality in practice – and the translator’s overall level of satisfaction with his/her profession.

Translation quality and principles of translation quality assessment (TQA) constitute another field of Translation Studies which, due to its paramount importance, justifies the very existence of our science.

4. Communicative-functional approach to TQA

The last statement might seem to be somewhat pompous and exaggerated. Yet, upon the whole, it is essentially true. Translation Studies as a science has the right to exist only if it gives a clear insight into the ways of how translation quality can be improved in practice. I strongly believe that Translation Studies is an applied science; at least, it should be.

Meanwhile, the problem of drafting criteria for assessing translation quality is usually solved in theory without any reference to real life. The methodology used in monographs and articles on the problem of TQA is typical of the text-focused approach to translation: all assumptions and conclusions are made as a result of comparing the target text with the source text. The translation quality is described in terms of equivalence and adequacy, the both of which acquire different meanings in different papers depending on the standpoints of their authors. But there is something in common between various definitions of “equivalence”. Usually, the term implies some relations between the ST and the TT. In other concepts, it means some semantic and structural resemblance of the two texts. The meaning of the term “adequacy” is more vague: most frequently, it means that the translation in question is “good”, i.e. meets certain requirements (for example, when the meaning of the ST is rendered without any distortions and the relevant structural and stylistic features are reproduced in the TT without any violations of the TT rules, scholars say that the translation is adequate). Now, let us ask a question: can the target text be always compared to the source text in a real life setting? Certainly, not. It may be the case, but not always. True, we can imagine situations when an editor of some translation agency or a publishing house evaluates a translation submitted. But such situations are rare in comparison with the multitude of events when the Client is in no position to compare the TT with the ST for a very simple reason: he/she has no command of the source language. At international conferences many in the audience do not understand what speakers say, and, thus, have to rely on the interpreters’ skillfulness. When we read a book or an article translated from Japanese into our mother-tongue, we have no opportunity to compare the text we read with the original text. Naturally, even in these situations there can be people who assess the translation or interpretation quality with due scrutiny (representatives of the conference organizers, editors of the publishing house). But, again, their number is much lesser than that of the TT receivers.

Inevitably I have touched upon the issue of who performs the role of the translation quality assessor. Apparently, it is not an idle outsider who speaks both the languages and eagerly evaluates the translation that is neither addressed to him nor related to his own substantive work. Academics conducting research in translology fall into this category, principally, because the ST senders have never intended to address their texts to them.

The TQA problem can be effectively solved only if the communicative-functional approach to translation is applied, and the major issue here is that of the TQ assessor. It should be recognized that the TQ assessor can be found not outside the translation event but within the translation event. Each time it is someone who is interested in the translation. Thus, the TT receivers are principal assessors of translation. The same role may be performed by the translation initiator, but not always. It is not important whether the translation initiator can or cannot speak the both languages. In any case, in his or her judgment of the translator’s work quality he/she relies upon the reaction of the TT receivers, i.e. end-users, to the translation/interpretation. In some situations the translation can be assessed by persons not directly involved in the communication act (e.g., editors of a publishing house or a translation agency). Therefore, in each communicative situation the number of TQ assessors can be different, the assessors fall into different categories, but it is always the end-user, the TT receiver who makes the final judgment of the translation quality.

A question arises: how can the TT receiver evaluate the translation if he/she is not able to compare it to the source text? The answer is very simple and obvious: the end-user does not need to compare it to the ST. His judgment is based upon the satisfaction or dissatisfaction he/she experiences while using the TT. If the TT receiver feels comfortable with the TT and can use it easily in the substantive work, the translation is considered to be good (certainly, the TT receiver almost never uses such terms as “adequate” and “equivalent” in his/her judgments).
passing, I would like to note that translators should not feel offended or humiliated when end-users do not think of them at all. It only means that the translation is good and suits the end-users’ activity; the fact which is sufficiently gratifying in itself. And only when translation causes some problems for the TT receivers (because it is poorly written or is against the common sense), when they feel uncomfortable with it, the translator is paid attention to.

Having defined the TQ assessor, we can move further to the definition of the traditional terms “equivalence” and “adequacy”. In my view, equivalence implies some degree of semantic and structural resemblance of the ST and the TT. “Some degree” means that the resemblance may be different in different situations, depending on the needs and expectations of the translations initiator and the communication actors. Translation is adequate when it satisfies the needs of the end-users in the framework of their substantive activities. In other words, translation adequacy means the conformity of the TT to the translation goal.

One might say that a text in the TL that is not oriented to the ST can also satisfy the needs of the end-user, thus, translation can turn into some kind of mystification. I would say that this is a matter of translation ethics which must be strictly observed in the professional activity. In the ideal situation the translator does not deceive, intentionally or unintentionally, the TT receiver while reproducing the content and the structural features of the ST and, at the same time meeting the expectations of the TT receivers.

5. Conclusion

At the present stage of the translation science development, we witness a collision of two approaches to translation or, in a broad sense, a collision of two ideologies. According to the text-focused approach, what matters in translation is the source text itself. It is the only object of the translator’s analysis and interpretation, and the only source of the clues of what should be done while translating it. Text-orientation deprives investigators of translation of the opportunity to take account of the whole range of factors influencing the translation process and its results, primarily, the extralinguistic aspects of translation. Moreover, it inspires false ideas in students of translation and makes the efforts to improve the general translation quality futile.

Slowly but steadily, translatology frees itself from the vices of the past, becoming human-oriented instead of text-focused. The communicative-functional approach being a new translation ideology equips researchers with the tools of discovering the genuine nature of translation that must be seen as a human activity aimed at helping people solve their problems. With this purpose in view, translators inevitably will be able to increase the level of professionalism and efficiency.

References