

The virtues of theoretical pluralism vs the curse of Babel

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All we need is a rough, approximate, working definition, one that we can feel free to adjust as we go along. All we need is to be able to agree more or less on what we are talking about, so that we can formulate interesting descriptive or explanatory claims. (Chesterman 2003, 199)

Reality is a continuum, and our main tool for understanding it—delightfully malleable yet irritatingly rigid—is language, a coding system intent on drawing boundaries and stuffing everything into convenient *prêt-à-porter* boxes. Red is an objective reality, categorically distinct from orange and light-years away from yellow—a self-deception essential for communication, even as it distorts reality in ways that become painfully obvious when we suddenly get finicky and want to define—that is, to draw nothing less than scientific boundaries. We live huddled in self-evident concepts that barely withstand rigorous scrutiny. This is true even in the realm of the experimental sciences—the “real” ones—that secretly arouse the envy of humanities dilettantes. We all know what life is but 2,400 years after Aristotle, biologists still have not managed to offer a consensus definition, and they continue debating whether viruses are living beings or not.

If this happens in non-human domains, it is easy to gauge how difficulties rocket when we try to box in the basic concepts in which we featherless bipeds have a hand. Any social phenomenon is intrinsically unstable and subject to variation due to its historicity—from the way we greet one another to poetry, not to mention family structures, or the concept of translation. This is one of the reasons we have failed to reach lasting scientific definitions

for so many central and seemingly obvious secular phenomena. A definition is an attempt to fix the essence of something, its permanent and distinctive nature, but it is especially hard to pin down the essence of something that won't stay still. We have had poetry for more than 5,000 years, and we all intuitively know what it is—to the extent that this implicit, shared knowledge allows us to communicate about the concept without major disruptions—but it's best not to try putting it into explicit, shared terms. As soon as we move beyond a few apparent truisms—which themselves are far from defining—the matter gets fuzzy, and part of the object of study always slips through the seams of any attempt at stabilization. Nonetheless, as the quote at the beginning of these considerations suggests, it would be extremely helpful to establish a minimal common ground, at least to clarify what we mean within the discipline when we say “translation,” and to specify what kind of clarifications might be needed when we use the term in less consensual or more metaphorical senses. In this brief essay, I would like to offer a few suggestions in that direction, after attempting to provide an overview of the current state of affairs.

The elusive and multifaceted nature of the concept of translation also helps explain the various “turns” that have emerged, overlapped, and even accumulated over the past 80 years, in an effort to understand the phenomenon from different angles. Continuing with our metaphor, one could say that research has gradually exposed the default flaws or limitations of the various boxes we have used, and—as is often fortunately the case with human beings—new boxes have been tried out, some of them complementary, others contradictory.

Thus, after centuries of impressionistic muddling—largely ignoring translation except to defend particular ways of crashing against the wall of non-identity—after the Second World War came the first scientific (i.e., systematic) attempt to approach translation, the application of structuralist and generativist linguistics, focused on what Mounin (1963) vividly described as “the scandal of translation”—a process theoretically impossible (because, it must be added, it was grounded in an ontologically impossible definition of translation as identity), yet one that had been carried out for millennia with generally satisfactory results. In the final quarter of the 20th century, after this naïve attempt to define translation as the identical reproduction of the

same message in different words was definitively abandoned, the theoretical floodgates opened. What followed was the culturalist, descriptivist, or functionalist turn—perhaps best understood as variations on a single empiricist revolution, each with its own emphasis. Suddenly, thanks to revolutionary thinkers like Bassnett, Holmes, Lefevere, Toury, or Vermeer, we awoke to the realisation that we were dealing with a hugely variable phenomenon—where translation would always be different yet similar, never neutral. A phenomenon full of paradoxes: being the same but not identical; becoming more distant the closer you get; reflecting the desire to introduce you to my people the way you are, but inevitably, to varying degrees, reinventing and cannibalising you to the point of being digestible... a ubiquitous phenomenon since the very beginning of human communication, endowed with obvious social significance and intellectually really hot once its mechanical and innocuous character was discarded.

This prism definitively revolutionised our understanding of translation, but around the turn of the millennium, scholars such as Baker, Munday, Simon, or Venuti began to critique the limitations of this new box, and for the past 30 years they have been advocating for new perspectives—each promising, at last, a comprehensive understanding of translation. We thus speak of the ideological turn, often tinged with feminist and/or postcolonial approaches, which highlights the political implications of translation choices and translation policies; the sociological turn, which shifts the focus onto the agents involved, to the point of proposing a new field of “translator studies”; the poststructuralist turn, which emphasizes the absence of stable meanings and the need to take a stance in a task that is never neutral; the outward turn, which underscores the ubiquity of translation and pays particular attention to its intersemiotic manifestations; the cognitive turn, which appears to have resurged in strength, taking on the seemingly Sisyphean task of understanding translation as both an internal process and a socially situated activity; and the technological turn, which seems more focused on grappling with the phenomenon’s rapid evolution due to advances in computing and new collaborative dynamics on the internet than on building a new theoretical paradigm.

All these approaches or “turns” coexist today along with a few others—including the linguistic and the impressionistic, the latter still very

much alive in the discourse of most practitioners outside academia. We tend to grant the status of “turn” to those approaches that make a noise and galvanise a significant following, but none of those born in the 21st century has brought about a true paradigmatic shift in translation and interpreting studies (TIS). Rather, they have introduced new perspectives and, at times, problematically broadened the object of study. Much like what happened with the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, it is now rare in 21st-century academia for one school of thought to replace another (Zwischenberger 2023, 4). Perhaps the first two—the linguistic and the empirical—managed to achieve a certain degree of successive disciplinary consensus for brief decades during the second half of the 20th century. But all the rest coexist as partial approaches within TIS, with none seemingly poised to attain a clearly hegemonic position. This has both a positive and a potentially problematic side. On the one hand, the coexistence of such different perspectives on the same phenomenon enriches the discipline, helping us to overcome the limitations of our individual boxes. In other words, it reveals that the polyhedron of translation has many facets, and we will learn more about them if we accept that observers from different vantage points may help reveal our own blind spots—because our initial concept of translation and our methodology prevent us from considering, or even perceiving, them. The problematic side could be summarised in the concern that we may be reaching a point where theoretical diversity has become so vast that we risk using the same foundational label—translation—in increasingly metaphorical ways, potentially referring to fundamentally different things.

Building on these turns and other proposals—such as ecotranslation (Cronin 2016) or the application of complexity theories (Marais 2013), which still seem to be in an uncertain process of consolidation—it could be argued that two major models currently shape our understanding of translation: the semiotic-transformational model and the textual-representational model. Both are grounded in the idea that translation is an operation in which similarity and difference are inevitably combined—a notion that may well hold the key to establishing a shared starting framework.

The semiotic-transformational model places emphasis on difference—on the fact that a translation is never the same as its original—an idea proposed many years ago by Derrida (1982), the descriptivists, culturalists,

and the skopos-based functionalists (cf. Toury 1980; Reiss & Vermeer 1984; Hermans [ed.] 1985; Lefevere 1992), which may, in fact, bring us closer to one another than we tend to assume. Taken to its extreme, the transformation-based model dispenses with the requirement of textuality or even the presence of a linguistic code, claiming the right to apply the label of translation—and to treat it as a legitimate object of study within our discipline—to any type of transformation whatsoever. This includes, for example, the transfer from basic research to clinical application (cf. Engebretsen, Sandset & Odemark 2017), or the creation of original texts as translations of reality (Collins 2019; Norwood 2019).

The textual-representational stance, on the other hand, places the emphasis on similarity, on understanding the mechanisms by which, although a translation is never identical to its original, it always resembles it to the extent that it represents or re-presents it in response to a social need. It is therefore a more restrictive position and considers that in order to be the subject of TIS, we need a minimum of two texts (in the broadest sense of the term), that the second text represents (re-presents) the first one thanks to a relationship of similarity that can take on many faces and that the language code or something similar is present at some point in the process.

In contrast to the traditional, reductionist and unsustainable view of translation as a mechanical process of reproducing the same message in another language (cf. Franco Aixelá 2022), in 1959 Jakobson already laid the foundations of the future revolution with his famous tripartite proposal, of which the intersemiotic modality, whereby any transformation of codes can also be considered translation, is noteworthy for its destabilising potential. With this approach, and although Jakobson himself did not intend it, writing travel books is translating cultural diversity into words (Elbarbary 2023), dancing is translating because it involves transforming music or images into movement (McCartney 2019, Masiero 2019 or Minors 2019) and so we could probably continue *ad aeternum*. Jakobson (1959, 232–233), in fact, extends this omnipresence of translation even more explicitly by stating that the very act of understanding is nothing other than a translation: “For us, both as linguists and as ordinary word-users, the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign”, whereby any act of language-based communication becomes “by definition” an act of trans-

lation. In the 1980s-90s, in another attempt to break free from traditional chains, Lefevere coined his concept of rewriting, whereby translation was one of the historically changing modes of reworking a text or a reality, thus twinned with literary criticism or historiography.

In line with what has already been said about the diversity of turns and their coexistence, this potential ubiquity of the concept of translation has interesting and worrying facets also from an institutional or disciplinary point of view. Firstly, it is gratifying for members of the TIS academic community to be aware that, like Terence back in 165 BCE, literally nothing is alien to us because ours is one of the most universal disciplines in modern science, with a fresh perspective to contribute in all fields. This omnipresence also helps us to better understand the extraordinary disciplinary porosity that characterises us, with our ability to take almost any sociological, philosophical, psychoanalytical, ethnographic, political, historiographical, literary, terminological, computer, cognitive, linguistic... apparatus and apply it to our field of study under the name of *turn* when the impact has been great. Secondly, and almost symmetrically to the above, it seems that, at least in our own eyes, we have gone from being a peripheral—not to say non-existent—discipline to having an approach capable of enriching the vision of all the others. And so we find frequent calls for disciplines such as those I have just mentioned to incorporate the “translation perspective” into their worldview, which would be sadly diminished without it (cf. Bassnett & Lefevere 1990, 12), or even to be wholly subsumed under the much more dynamic umbrella of translation studies, as Bassnett (1993) provocatively proposes with regard to comparative literature, although so far they have not taken any notice of us, it must be said.

As regards worrying aspects, first of all we have what could be called the Babel syndrome, whereby this omnipresence of “translation” implies the aforementioned possibility of not understanding each other, given that the term has come to mean distinctly different things depending on whose keyboard it comes out of, from the essentially identical reproduction of a text in another language (a secular illusion which, it should not be forgotten, is socially indispensable and which we academics also unconsciously apply in our daily lives) to “the process of semiotic exchange taking place in and between all organisms, even at the cellular level” (Marais & Kull 2016,

172). Secondly, there is the danger of irrelevance by wanting to be all-encompassing: if everything is translation, in the end nothing is translation. If this happens, the discipline may end up losing its internal coherence and institutional validity. In the words of Delabastita (2003, 9):

[The turns] are putting a great strain on the autonomy and coherence of the discipline, creating a deeply ironic paradox. Indeed, the more Translation Studies is coming into its own, the more its central object -translation- gets eroded and dispersed. The harder we look at translation, the softer our analytical focus appears to be getting and the more the specificity of our object seems to be dissolving. TS had to be invented, apparently, to show how blurred and how elusive a concept translation really is.

Because of these drawbacks, I believe that in order to understand each other we should try to agree on a description of translation at least as a product, if not as a process, that establishes the central core of our object of study as a common starting point and frame of reference when establishing the concept with which we work in each research.

My proposal is in line with cognitive prototypes and is similar to the “assumed transfer” posed by Toury (1995), trying to establish a central academic concept liable to admit all kinds of extensions or supplementary layers in which, according to the needs and interests of each research, the coincidences with this central and flexible notion of reference diminish. To achieve stability, this proposal must first of all establish as permanent pillars two parameters inherent to translation: the two-faced concept of similarity/difference (that a translation is always similar to its original because it constitutes an interpretation and a (re)presentation, but for that very reason it is never an identical reproduction) and that of variability (that there is no single way of translating—a certain type of similarity—that can be included as a requirement, but that each period, each society, each translator and even each text translates in a different way). Secondly, to be useful, the proposal has to establish a central core—in my case, textuality in the broad sense—that is not exclusive, but admits the existence of less common ways of conceiving this work of rewriting and reinterpretation.

We could perhaps then state that a translation is a text (in a broad sense) that (re)presents (but does not reproduce identically) a previous text, with which it maintains a relationship of similarity of a variable nature, al-

though in the great majority of cases the semantic level is prioritised in a non-exclusive manner.

To this we could add that translation is a dynamic and historically situated concept, with blurred and controversial boundaries, whose prototypical centre is constituted by interlinguistic translation, which is traditionally presented in a simplistic way as identical to another text—written or audiovisual—in another language, which it is intended to replace, and whose periphery is firstly found in intralinguistic translation (for example, the modernisation of old texts, the simplification of specialised documents or adaptation for children) and secondly by intersemiotic translation (for example, audio description, the passage from novel to film or, in an increasingly metaphorical sense due to the blurring of textuality, all manner of semiotic transformations using mechanisms of interpretation and reworking similar to inter- or intralinguistic translation, including the original works of any artistic modality, understood as the translation of images—internal or external—into words, sounds or other images, such as a musical composition describing—“translating”—paintings).

There is no space here to comment in detail on the implications of such a notion, but the main intention is to propose a very open perspective that is at the same time clear enough to avoid the babelic confusion I referred to earlier. As I have already mentioned, conceptual boundaries are almost always blurred, and in our case perhaps the clearest example is the age-old problem of establishing the difference between translation and adaptation. Once it is admitted that a translation cannot be identical to its original, to look for this gender of angels is tantamount to objectifying the percentage of similarity/difference from which a given text is a translation or becomes an adaptation, something unfeasible. And yet, this difference between two indistinguishable concepts is so real and operative that it actually is the key to the separation between two sister disciplines, both consolidated and institutionally distinct, namely translation studies and adaptation studies. Yet again, this distinction is so tangible that in the drama market, for instance, the rights are not the same for an adaptation as they are for a “simple translation”. To make matters more perplexing, we are talking about two very close disciplines that curiously tend to live with their backs turned, as evidenced by the fact that in 2025 neither the *Journal of Adaptation Studies*

(2023) nor the *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* (2017) mention on their web presentations the word *translation* even once, but the latter includes very familiar concerns for TIS, such as that modern adaptation studies are facing a “critique of the previous paradigms of fidelity”. Exactly the same is true for the three historical TIS journals (*Babel*, *Meta* and *Target*), which also constitute channels where the fidelity paradigm is heavily questioned, but which in 2025 do not mention the term *adaptation* in any corner of their web presentations. The lack of clarity about the object of study can also lead to conflicts (cf. Lehoux-Jobim 2025, 8) or to hard to understand mutual ignorance between related disciplines.

It seems ultimately clear that terms and the concepts they carry about have no axiomatic meaning or limits beyond the consensus of their speakers—speakers engaged in research in this case—and this proposal seeks to sketch out something akin to the first steps towards such a disciplinary consensus. The proposal is not meant to imply that interlinguistic translation is the only one that deserves the label of “translation proper”, but it does constitute a prototype of the concept of translation that could be agreed upon also due to its being the object of study of the vast majority of past and present research (Doorslaer 2019), and thus the frame of reference from which to propose other modalities that complement and enrich the disciplinary landscape.

Academically, translation is a treat because of its omnipresence and multidimensionality, which logically leads to it being the subject of all kinds of approaches, which in our discipline tend to be described as turns, each of which seeks to emphasise a different component and to focus on one of the colours refracted by the research prism. From structuralist linguistics, which affirmed the essential identity of translation as an interlinguistic mechanical transfer, only to then shake its head at the impossibility of this same identity, to the postmodern schools, which emphasise difference and ideology, which claim the right to consider any semiotic act involving a movement, a transformation, as a translation and the object of TIS. This stance has brought about a methodological pluralism that is always good news as it allows us to approach our object of study from more angles, along the lines proposed by Bachmann-Medick (2006). Moreover, it has been an important wake-up call to what in some of the research of the last quarter

of the twentieth century could be considered a tendency towards scientism that included a certain disconnection from the real world, especially as regards ideological and ethical issues. In addition, it has succeeded in making the research community aware of the importance of avoiding Eurocentrism and including the countries of the Global South in the debate, which can be seen as good news for the democratisation of science, although it is not without its own paradoxes and there is still a long way to go. In the same vein, semiotic-transformational approaches may have served to attract researchers from parts of the world, such as Brazil or India, whose academic traditions would probably not have been so happy to heed the call of empiricism. Likewise, the claim that our discipline has something to say about virtually any semiotic act is a very interesting initiative in an epistemological landscape in which we have been characterised by a massive and systematic reception of ideas from other disciplines, but with little reciprocal impact (Zwischenberger 2019, 257). However, the idea that virtually any transformation can be considered an act of translation can lead to a certain disciplinary confusion that I have tried to highlight here, along with a proposal of ways in which we might move forward to avoid this.

Probably, as Popper (1992, 19) states, it is neither intelligent nor productive to let oneself “be goaded into taking seriously problems about words and their meanings”, that bound-setting/defining is much less important than the facts and theories about those facts, but it would also be good to know that when two TIS scholars utter the word *translation* they do not just plunge hopelessly into a dialogue of the deaf.

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