IDEOLOGICAL TRANSLATION DECISIONS AND SOLUTIONS IN LIGHT OF HABERMAS’ THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the presuppositions and intentions underlying social change through translation. Change is hard for men as well as societies to manage. It means facing great resistance. Therefore, it requires a great effort, too. Society is not only a group of people living together, but it also consists of various sub-groups of people with similar interests. They may have different needs and embrace different ideologies. Strong ideologies tend to hold sway over other weak ideologies in society. Conflicts occur. Translators may play an important part in managing these conflicts. History can also be approached from the point of critical history which, by definition, aims to bring forward the historical reasons lying behind the events that give rise to new directions in history. This paper focuses on Étienne Dolet (1509-1546), a French translator, considered to be the first victim of the Renaissance Period in which he was burned at the stake for heresy and sedition due to the ideology of the period. A brief description of the Renaissance period was given, an example of ideology-based translation decisions was provided and some solutions were suggested by drawing on the Theory of Communicative Action put forward by Jürgen Habermas, one of the most prominent thinkers of the Critical Theory. He distinguishes between instrumental action and communicative action in his theory, thus stressing out the importance of justifying human action and developing ways of “validity claims” among stakeholders in order to prevent conflicts from happening. The theory of communicative action may help translators set strategies in translation in terms of social interaction.

Key Words: Translation, ideology, Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action
İDEOLOJİK ÇEVİRİ KARARLARI VE HABERMAS'IN İLETİŞİMSEL EYLEM KURAMI İŞİĞİNDİ ÖNERİLER

ÖZET


Anahtar Kelimeler: Çeviri, ideoloji, Habermas, İletişimsel Eylem Kuramı

Introduction

Change is hard for men as well as societies to manage. It means facing great resistance. Therefore, it requires a great effort, too. Society is not only a group of people living together, but it also consists of various sub-groups of people with similar interests. They may have different needs and embrace different ideologies. Strong ideologies tend to hold sway over other weak ideologies in society. Conflicts occur. Translators may play an important part in managing these conflicts. History can also be approached from the point of critical history which, by definition, aims to bring forward the historical reasons lying behind the events that give rise to new directions in history. This paper focuses on Étienne Dolet (1509-1546), a French translator, considered to be the first victim of the Renaissance Period in which he was burned at the stake for heresy and sedition due to the ideology of the period. A brief description of the Renaissance period was given, an example of ideology-based translation decisions was provided and some solutions were suggested by drawing on the Theory of Communicative Action put forward by Jürgen Habermas, one of the most prominent thinkers of the Critical Theory.

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The vortex of ideologies: Charges made against the translators by the Roman Inquisition

As a cultural movement, the Renaissance thinkers sought out a revival of learning from ancient texts, typically written in Latin or ancient Greek in order to keep away from the Medieval Christianity. Beginning in Florence, Italy, and spreading to the rest of Europe by the 16th century, its influence affected literature, philosophy, art, politics, science, and religion. Renaissance thinkers employed humanism that emphasized reason, scientific inquiry, and human fulfillment in the natural world and often rejected the importance of belief in God.

During this period, works of classical antiquity were studied and those which had fallen into obscurity were brought back to life. Through a thorough interpretation of such texts, the transcendental spirituality stressed by medieval Christianity was replaced by the worldly knowledge. So, the Renaissance could be viewed as a period during which the secular and worldly were revived through the ideas from antiquity.

In Christianity, church took priority over society for about 1,500 years, and oppressed everybody. This all resulted in the Renaissance people having a strong desire to bring an end to the religion. However, in such a big upheaval, they were passing through a period of transition in which they were to meet a big resistance from Christians until the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment (Brotton, 2006).

Étienne Dolet lived in a time when the Church was believed to go through a reform process before which religious reformers from Luther to Calvin had challenged traditional teachings. Protestantism grew out of the Reformation in 1517 and they eventually broke from the Catholic Church and struggled against the Papal authority. He was condemned by the Roman Catholic church. Humanist Dolet was accused of heresy and atheism, and finally burned at the stake. The fact that his translations played a significant part in Dolet’s death at the stake puts him on the focus of this paper.

The Inquisition was a Roman Catholic tribunal for discovery and punishment of heresy. The Roman Inquisition which had the task of defending the integrity of the faith was one of the three biggest Inquisitions ever established. Many scientists including translators such as Dolet were among those accused of heresy. Silvio Dellico, who was sentenced to lifetime imprisonment, and Andre Chenier whose head was cut off by guillotine are just to name a few. Galileo Galilei had to step back from his ideas that he held while Giordano Bruno held his stance against the church and was burned at the stake. Descartes, who learnt from the painful ordeal that Galilei had been put through, was not very eager to publish his works and chose to burn them by himself instead of being burned.

The Renaissance thinkers couldn’t escape eventual persecution, and the works couldn’t either. In 1500, in Andalucia, Spain, over a million Arabic and Hebrew books from one of the richest collections in history were burned on the orders of Cisneros, Archbishop of Granada. In 1525 & 1526 William Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament was burned wherever the authorities could find them. As the church grew stronger in the Middle Ages, those opposing the accepted doctrine ended up being banished from social life. As a by-product of the Renaissance thought Humanism began to fight against Christianity. Protestantism grew strong against the Catholic church with the help of Luther’s or Calvin’s supporters. That is why the Roman Inquisition was established by Pope Paul III in order to struggle against them. Dolet was the first to be accused of heresy and burned at the stake.
Ideology and Translation

If it had been in our day, Dolet’s life wouldn’t have ended up this way. Ideology is a term coined by A. Destutt de Tracy in 1796 as the science of ideas (Kennedy, 1979:353; Van Dijk, 1998:1). All ideologies embody an account of social and political reality and enable us to make sense of the social world we live in (Eccleshall, 2003:2). It is defined as a set of ideas and beliefs proposed by the dominant class of a society to all members of this society. The main purpose behind an ideology is to offer change in society through ideas and to maintain it. Ideologies are systems of abstract thought applied to public matters and thus make this concept central to politics.

Translation is a socially regulated activity (Hermans, 1997:10). He gives the concept of norms a major position by focusing on its relevance to power and ideology. Norms are in all stages of translation. The relative interests and positions of the participants play a crucial part in contextualizing the production and reception of translation (Hermans, 1997:42). The patronage system put forth by Andre Lefevere is also determined mainly by ideology and power (Lefevere, 1998:48). Venuti conceives of translation as...cultural, political practice...transgressing values in the target language, and that human action is intentional (Venuti, 1996:206). Verschueren conceives of intervention as the recontextualization of meaning (Verschueren, 2007:79-80). Munday mentions that the interpretation and negotiation of meaning is a form of intervention. Each choice, concious or unconcious, represents an intervention (Munday, 2007:xiii). Of all the factors leading to intervention in translation, Eser points out the idea of ideology. Intervention is visible in many ways in that it ranges from syntax to re-contextualisation. Meaning can be obscure and people are insecure in some way unless intervention is not justified (Eser, 2014:382).

If the ruling ideology falls behind the times, it will place constraints on processes of communication and prevent effective communication from being established. For individuals who are in conflict with the society they live in, it would increase the chances of a conflict to be resolved in the future if the conflict were approached in a way that relations are established and maintained communicatively by way of consensus, not in a way that they are broken off. In this respect, the Theory of Communicative Action put forward by Habermas will shed some light on the matter at hand. But at this point it will be better to give a brief example of the ideology-based translational decisions that Dolet once made, and therefore was accused of heresy.

French humanist Étienne Dolet did the same thing as what William Tyndale (1494–1536) did in England, and Martin Luther (1483–1546) in Germany. They all translated the Bible into their own languages. However, the problem was that he didn’t conform to the integrity of the Christian faith and perverted some ideas in his translation of the Holy Book as if they really existed. Seen from the point of view prevailing in the Renaissance, it was sure that his ideology-based translational decisions had to take effect in society. That he used blasphemous words towards religion, and that he published Erasmus’s works was enough evidence for him to be accused of heresy.

In his seminal book entitled “Introducing Translation Studies – Theories and Applications”, Jeremy Munday deals with how Dolet incorporated his ideology into the text he translated. Those who dissented from the officially accepted dogma of the religion was, at that time, labelled as heretic by the Roman Catholic Church. Étienne Dolet was condemned by the theological faculty of the Sorbonne University in 1546 for adding in his translation of one of Plato’s dialogues the phrase “rien du tout (nothing at all)” in a passage about what existed after death. This was considered blasphemous, and he was sentenced to death at the stake (Munday, 2001:22).
Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action and Social Conflicts through Translation

The critical theory is a set of theoretical works influenced by the dialectical philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel and K. Marx. It is also known as the Frankfurt School Theory. It had four main characteristics: Interdisciplinary, reflective, dialectical, and critical. The Frankfurt School approached questions such as morality, religion, science, reason, and rationality from different perspectives and disciplines simultaneously. They believed that bringing different disciplines together would yield insights that were unobtainable by working within specialized academic domains.

According to Max Horkheimer, director of the Frankfurt School in the 1930’s, a critical theory should be critical as well as practical: that is, the task of a theory should aim not just to bring about correct understanding, but to help create social and political conditions for the better. The theory had two different types of normative aim: Diagnostic, and remedial. The goal was to understand social life, and to help transform society. For Theodor Adorno, the best way to protect individuals against ideology was to equip them with the capacities that would enable them to resist such ideas. Jürgen Habermas, by contrast, was for identifying the social and institutional conditions through the critical theory. Emancipation comes with the creation of truly democratic institutions (Habermas, 1987).

In 1981, Habermas put forward the Theory of Communicative Action in which he distinguished between communicative action, and instrumental and strategic action. He reinterpreted the concepts of ideology and ideology criticism with the help of this theory. Instrumental action is what an individual does in order to attain a desired goal, and strategic action involves getting people together to realize an end. Competition and conflicts among people seem to be ordinary values, where necessary. On the other hand, communicative action is based on mutual understanding and consensus, and therefore, prioritizes speech and language use to make sure that effective communication can be established. In doing so, people get into certain commitments so as to realize their actions for a good reason. Habermas calls these commitments “validity claims”. They are moral as they are obligations towards other people, and rational because they serve good reasons, and they are functional since they involve managing human actions. When people can justify their actions as they are based on speech and mutual recognition of good reasons, then they will not give rise to conflicts (Leiter and Rosen, 2007:322) (Habermas, 1971).

The problem is not that people act irrationally. It is that they are manipulated to use instrumental rationality under certain economical and/or political systems.

Conclusion in light of the Critical Theory

The suffering which Étienne Dolet had been through was social in nature. There is, of course, a need to remember that there wasn’t much of the intellectual background which we consider to be normal today for the structural transformation taking place in the 16th century. History had to witness the advent of the Cartesian rationality in the 17th century, Kantian critique of pure reason in the 18th century, and Hegelian dialectics in the 19th century.

In the Renaissance period, a transformation in the social structure was envisaged, and in doing so, certain attempts were made by translating texts of antiquity and the Holy Book. It is significant to know Habermas’ theory of communicative action in order to fully understand the transformation process in the 16th century, and to see that translators would rather make translational decisions which don’t lead to death by being burned at the stake.

Étienne Dolet was sure to have made ideologically-guided translational decisions. His ideology was visible in his translations even when the text to be translated hadn’t been decided on

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yet. Ideology was elevated into a position to influence his translational strategy. If we were to criticize Dolet in light of the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, he wouldn’t have been burned at the stake.

REFERENCES


