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Reshaping Translation and Theories of Translation in the Digital Age

Abstract

This article analyses the reshaping of the practice of translation and of translation theories in the digital age. Focusing on the role of the “cultural turn” and of the “technological turn” of Translation Studies, and of the paradigm shift of the digital age, which value difference and variability and challenge the concept of the original, the article will investigate the new readings and perceptions of translation as a product, as well as the reshaping of future theories of translation offered by this new paradigm.

1. *Translation Studies: A History of Turns and Paradigm Shifts*

What makes Translation Studies an ever-changing field is its ability – and perhaps even its need – to constantly evolve, by generating and continuously updating discourse about almost anything that defines the domain itself, redefining the premises of this discipline, as well as the subject of its study: the practice and theory of translation.

This situation is very well represented by the many “turns” that Translation Studies has taken during the last five decades. With its roots in centuries of translation-related discourse, the academic discipline started to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century, in the 1950s and 1960s, when linguists initiated a more systematic study of translation. An independent interdisciplinary field of research emerged in the early 1970s, under the name of Translation Studies, since the publication of the influential study by James Holmes entitled “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies” (2000 [1972], 172-185), which displayed the early development of the research and contributed to its future direction.

Among the many turns that characterized the field over the last five decades, the most influential has certainly been the so-called “cultural turn” in Translation Studies, which led to a growing interdependence of the field with Cultural Studies, producing a shift in focus from viewing translation as a mere linguistic transfer of meaning to an acknowledgment of the cultural, social, and ideological dimensions inherent in the translation process.

This has opened to a multidimensional turn, leading to intersections with several fields and theories, among which we must mention at least: Deconstruction, emphasizing the instability and multiplicity of meanings (see Derrida 1987); Polysystem theory, focusing on the relationships between different cultural systems and their impact on the translation process, and viewing translation as a dynamic interaction within a larger cultural and literary system (see Even-Zohar 1990); the Manipulation School, highlighting that translations are never neutral and are influenced by ideological, political, and cultural factors (see Lefevere 1992); Gender Studies, spawning interdisciplinary research on the role that language and translation have played in the shaping of gender roles in contemporary societies (see Simon 1996; von Flotow 1997; Sofu 2019a); Postcolonial Studies, unveiling the relationship between translation and the “asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism” (Niranjana 1992, 2) and the linguistic hybridity that is part of ‘original’ writing, as well as challenging the concept of the ‘original’ (see Bassnett and Trivedi 1999).

The encounter with Cultural Studies proved so fruitful that the “cultural turn” in Translation Studies was followed by the “translation turn” in Cultural Studies (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998), and to an even wider “translational turn” (Bachmann-Medick 2009) in the humanities, making translation one of the key prisms through which the humanities have evolved over the last few decades. It has also paved the way for a wider focus on the role of power in translation, not only within the postcolonial field, leading to works such as Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler’s *Translation and Power* (2002), Mona Baker’s *Translation and Conflict* (2006) on the role of translating in war, Tymoczko’s *Translation, Resistance, Activism* (2010), a reading of two centuries of translations as ideological and political acts, and more recently, Tiphaine Samoyault’s *Traduction et violence* (2020), which unveils what has too often been hidden behind the “irenical” and “messianic” view of translation.

The transformation the field underwent through these turns led not only to interpret as translations texts and ‘objects’ which were not perceived as such

before, but also to a much more complex understanding of the relationship between the original and the translation, as well as to a much more complex understanding of the concept of ‘original’ itself. Works like Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi’s *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999) provide a vision of translation as “devouring” Europe and the “great Original” (2), an act of homage and violence at the same time, which posits the original as a form of ‘nourishment’ for the translation, rather than the opposite. As they wrote, in fact, “the history of translation has shown that the concept of the high-status original is a relatively recent phenomenon” and that “the invention of the idea of the original coincides with the period of early colonial expansion, when Europe began to reach outside its own boundaries for territory to appropriate” (Ibid.: 2).

Abandoning the idea of the ‘original’ as an untouchable sacred text allows to discover the fluidity and instability of the ‘original’. As Karen Emmerich writes in her *Literary Translation and the Making of Originals* (2017), in fact, “the ‘source’, the presumed object of translation, is not a stable ideal” (2). This obviously also assigns a new role to translations, since if “the textual condition is one of variance, not stability”, then “the process of translation both grapples with and extends that variance, defining the content and form of an ‘original’ in the very act of creating yet another textual manifestation of a literary work in a new language” (Ibid.: 2). From this perspective, the ‘original’ is then an unstable form that already includes variance, and translation is no longer a reproduction, but a new “textual manifestation” which adds another level, or multiple levels, of further variation.

2. *The “Technological Turn” and the Digital Age of Translation*

The latest turn of Translation Studies is undoubtedly the “Technological Turn” (Jiménez-Crespo 2020), and it has brought a decisive change to our approach to translation practice and theory, just like the digital revolution has contributed to reshape our epistemological approach to the world.

The “neural turn” of Machine Translation has ushered in an unparalleled prevalence of Machine Translation in our daily lives and has triggered a transformative shift in practices within the professional realm of translations, especially in the non-literary field. Human translators frequently find themselves

in the role of “post-editors” (see Bundgaard 2017), reviewing texts translated by machines. They may also act as “pre-editors” (see Koponen et al. 2020), modifying the original text to enhance its machine processability before translation. Both pre-editing and post-editing have become commonplace in contemporary professional practices of non-literary translation, to the extent that they are now widely integrated into translator education, with these practices explicitly listed among the skills to be acquired by students within the European Master’s in Translation network (EMT 2017, 8).

This obviously transforms the figure of the translator, compelling us to rethink the role of translators in the evolving professional landscape of translation and to contemplate the potential marginalization of the human element in the translation process. Nonetheless, the recent developments of neural systems of translation include an interactive aspect, which could lead to a wider and more fruitful interaction between humans and machines. As Koehn (2020) writes:

There have been efforts to make machine translation more adaptive and interactive. Adaptive means machine translation systems learn from the translator. While a translator is translating a document, sentence by sentence, the created sentence pairs constitute new training material for machine translation systems. This is the best for training a machine, since it covers the right content in the correct style. (...) Interactive machine translation, also called interactive translation prediction is a different type of collaboration where the machine translation system makes suggestions to the translator and updates those suggestions when a translator deviates from them. So, instead of providing a static machine translation of a source sentence, the machine makes predictions in response to the professional translator’s choices. (22)

If the results of Machine Translation have seen incredible improvement since the advent of Neural Machine Translation, the most important shift is not so much in the results the machine produces, but rather in what we expect from the machine. When Bar-Hillel stated in one of the first reports ever written on Machine Translation in 1960 that achieving a “fully automatic high-quality translation” was not a “reasonable goal” in the short term, and that reasonable goals were “either fully automatic, low quality translation or partly automatic, high quality translation” (2003 [1960], 62), he was describing a situation that is not too far from today’s reality, despite the remarkable advancements in Machine Translation systems over the last decade. The notable difference lies in our altered expectations, since we do not expect machines to ‘solve’ all of

our translation problems anymore, but we all benefit nowadays from the possibility of obtaining moderate-quality, free and fast translation of short texts through the many available online applications we have become familiar with, and which cover a wide range of translation tasks, most of which would have never entered the flow of professional translation anyway.

The ‘digital natives’ can thus be considered ‘Machine Translation natives’ as well, since most of them have had the opportunity of using Machine Translation tools for their daily practices of translation since their very first approaches to digital tools and the Internet, and also since their first approaches to learning and education (see Vulchanova et al. 2017; Liubinienė 2022; Pateron 2023). Interestingly enough, this does not imply that their use of Machine Translation is adequate, as studies have shown that university students, even in advanced courses of translation, hardly differentiate between online dictionaries and Machine Translation (see Cotelli Kureth et al. 2023), and that both learners and teachers of translation lack a proper Machine Translation literacy (see Bowker and Ciro 2019; Martikainen 2023).

However, Machine Translation is far from being the only application of technology in the field of translation, because the digital age has profoundly reshaped our approach to translation in several ways, blending human expertise with technological innovations. We also have to take into account the wider changes due to the digital revolution that can be applied to translation, such as: the wider access to information (books, dictionaries, references, linguistic resources...) granted by the Internet; the interaction with Digital Humanities, which has given rise to completely new and exciting perspectives on the analysis of texts and larger corpora that have proven extremely useful for the comparison of the source text with its translation, and for a new kind of quantitative analysis which could also improve our qualitative analyses (see Sofo 2023); the possibility of interacting and exchanging ideas, or collaborating with other translators around the globe, through online platforms, to the point that Jiménez-Crespo writes that “collaboration in translation becomes the rule rather than the exception” (2017, 5).

Furthermore, beyond the direct application of digital tools to the study and practice of translation, we have to understand that the paradigm shift of the digital age, in which humans and machines co-exist and co-evolve (see Stiegler 2018), can contribute and has already contributed to a different understanding of the theory and practice of translation. As Luciano Floridi writes, “the digital is re-on-

tologizing the very nature of (and hence what we mean by) our environments as the infosphere is progressively becoming the world in which we live” (2023, 25), and “by *re-ontologizing modernity* (...) the digital is *re-epistemologizing modern mentality* (that is, many of our old conceptions and ideas) as well” (Ibid.: 9).

In what Michael Cronin has defined the “translation age” (2013, 103), the digital revolution is itself the fruit of several levels of translation, and the tools we use in our daily life entail many instances of translation, from translation proper to the many levels of coding and decoding of information that are involved in our uses of digital tools. As Cronin has put it:

The variability of outputs of these machines is made possible, in part, by the universal convertibility of binary code, the ability of words, images, sounds to be converted to the universal language of code. In this sense, the radical changes that have been wrought in all areas of life as a result of the advent of information technology are to be placed under the sign of convertibility or translation. It is precisely the metamorphic or transformative effects of the convertible which are at the heart of the digital revolution that makes translation the most appropriate standpoint from which to view critically what happens to languages, societies, and cultures under a regime of advanced convertibility, and to understand what happens when that convertibility breaks down or reaches its limits. (Ibid.: 3)

We are all translated and translating at the same time through our presence and our actions in the digital-enhanced space we inhabit, every day and everywhere, and this inevitably changes the way we perceive translation, as well as the way we perceive the world we inhabit.

Another aspect that connects the epistemic approach of the digital age and the evolution of theories of translation that I have highlighted before is the challenging of the ‘original’ and of ‘identity’ in favor of ‘difference’ and ‘variability’, and of a rhizomatic approach to knowledge and cultural production:

It is in this respect indeed that the age of digital production and reproduction is the age of translation. In navigating a culture that is increasingly shaped by the paradigms of difference and variability, which require a qualitatively different set of responses than those demanded by the semantic regime of modernity, there can be no richer tradition of recorded human experience and response to the new world of the objectile than millennia of translation practice. (Ibid.: 89)

The “open-endedness, variability, interactivity, and participation” that “are the technological quintessence of the digital age” (Carpo 2011, 126) are in

fact also part of the new paradigm of translation, and this is certainly not a coincidence. If anything, since “variability is the signature tune of the translator’s art”, it is precisely “the very variable nature of translation practice that places it at the centre of the profound changes in the culture of the digital age” (Cronin 2013, 87).

Translating in the digital age and in the digital space becomes thus an act of variation, of renewal, and maybe even of ‘liberation’ of the source text towards all of its possible realizations, and as Tong King Lee writes, “this gives rise to a new ontology of translation that extrapolates an original toward multiple potential realizations, which together network into a more expansive microtext”, and it opens the field to “new objects of study, such as hyper-performative or digital re-mediations of literary writing” (2022, 21).

In the exploration of all the multiple dimensions of the text that digital tools and the digital age allow and that this “new ontology of translation” encourages, the source text is a starting point to create variance and movement, rather than an untouchable sacred text, and it is thus not just ‘explored’, but also ‘exploded’, opening to a deflagration of its possible meanings into all possible directions. This inevitably involves a drastic change in our understanding of both the original and its translations, which must be accompanied by new practices of translation, allowing us to perceive the source text in all of its dimensions, and giving free rein to all of its potentialities.

3. *Enhancing the Original: Multimodal and Intersemiotic Translation as a Field of Possibilities*

In the context of this new understanding of translation, theories of translation have moved gradually toward an increasing presence and visibility of the translation process and of translators, opening to multimodal and intersemiotic translation as forms of exploration of the source text, considered as a field of possibilities. This perspective, as Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal point out, “reverses the traditional notion of the translator’s invisibility and makes the translator’s gaze explicitly apparent or *visible* to the reader/viewer/audience/spectator (...) by becoming *entangled* in the translated artefact or event” (2019, 17). The translator thus gifts the original text with a new voice, a new possibility to explore all of its potential meanings.

This, of course, is always to be intended within the limits of the ‘respect’ or ‘loyalty’ due to the original text. But ‘respect’ and ‘loyalty’ are quite different from the concept of ‘faithfulness’, which has gradually disappeared from discourse on translation. As Campbell and Vidal write, in fact, “in today’s multimodal and intermedial ‘semiospheres’ it is more apposite to speak of loyalty and duty to the source artefact as entailing a multi-agented intermedial process towards resemblance or iconicity” (Ibid.: 15), offering a completely new understanding of the kind of relationship that the translation establishes with its source.

The paradigm of translation has thus been almost entirely reversed. A discipline born out of the quest for ‘identity’ has become the paladin of ‘variability’. In opposition to any idea of supposed invisibility, the diversity imposed by the encounter of the original text with another language is now regarded as necessary and desirable. Lee, in his analysis of Clive Scott’s description of this new approach to translation, has given a fascinating description of how both the source text and the translation are transformed by this paradigm shift:

[T]ranslation goes beyond language as such. It performs a synaesthetic morphism, ‘a sliding across languages or linguistic material, across the senses, across the participating body, in order to achieve an ever-changing inclusivity, a variational play’ (...). As an experimental site that registers the [...] translator’s perceptual response to the stimulus offered by the source text, translation expands and self-multiplies, opening up to develop ‘its own multimedial discursive space’ [...]. In doing so, it places the source text ‘at the cutting edge of its own progress through time’, imbuing an original work with new potentialities and articulating it toward ‘its possible futures, its strategy of textual self-regeneration’. (2022, 11)

This has obviously opened the way to views of translation which move even beyond textuality and language, in which the practice of translation is understood as “a subjective, synaesthetic and relational experience to be rendered, rather than a message or content-and-form package to be conveyed or carried across modal or medial boundaries” (Campbell and Vidal 2019, 31). And this perspective, which is in evident contrast with the idea of a binary opposition between source text and target text, can also lead to a challenging of the binary opposition between source language and target language. Lucia Quaquarelli and Myriam Suchet wrote in 2017:

The unity of a language is above all a fiction and a regulating idea, a narrative that was written at a certain moment of History, to participate, with other narratives (nation, cul-

ture, identity...), in the construction of our Modernity. If the unity of ‘the’ language, of any language, is above all a fiction, the translation conceived as transfer from A to B is one of the forms of the staging of this fiction and, thereby, one of the forms of its legitimation, its persistence and its resistance. (14)

Such a view of language and of the role of translation obviously has significant consequences. Translation becomes a “kinship” (Campbell and Vidal 2019, 3), rather than a passage from one reality to another, usually represented by the image of translation as a bridge, because “to approach the translation after having established that ‘the language’ does not exist, is a bit like collapsing a bridge: there is no language left that is stable enough to constitute a bank” (Suchet 2014, 32).

These new approaches to translation have been reinforced by the epistemic approach of the digital age. If, on the one hand, the increased fluidity of machine translation and the wider availability of machine translation softwares for the general public could partially lead to a revitalization of the idea of translation as a process of automatic generation of equivalence, on the other hand, the application of digital tools to the field of translation, especially through an intersemiotic and experiential approach, has contributed to a wider pluralization, hybridism, and to a wider challenging of the authority of ‘original’ forms. Furthermore, given the amount of translation tasks that can now be easily covered by Machine Translation, humans have inevitably been (and will be, more and more) driven towards more creative tasks which cannot be accomplished by the machine, in which the human intervention is essential, and in which the variation produced by the translation is an advantage rather than a ‘fault’.

Human translation is thus moving from an exercise in finding equivalences for a text written in a language into another language to a process of creation generated by the encounter with a source text. Instead of disappearing, human translation is specializing itself, bringing to the extreme the paradigm shift of a field that was initially perceived as a science that could help us establish equivalences between a stable original, written in a stable language, and an ideal copy of that original in an equally stable language, and has now become an artistic form of creation of difference and plurality, starting from an equally unstable source, which is itself the fruit of movement and variation.

4. A Cultural Shift in the Understanding of Translation and Translators

The “technological turn” of Translation Studies and the wider influence of the epistemic approach of the digital age on the field have defined a turning point in our present understanding of translation and of the role of translators.

At the same time, the constant skepticism harbored by many translators and scholars of Translation Studies toward both Machine Translation and Computer-Assisted Translation, has led to a significant gap between research in Machine Translation and that in human translation, creating the striking paradox that “research on language technology and MT and research on translation studies have proceeded on fundamentally separate tracks” (Palumbo 2019, 237).

I believe this situation is also responsible for another interesting paradox in our understanding of translation, which has never been the subject of a meaningful discussion. We know that translators’ errors have not only been at the center of translation theory from its beginnings, but are also at least partly responsible for the birth of critical reflection on translation (see Sofu 2019b). The translator has thus long served as the ‘scapegoat’ of theory, and translation itself, in its attempt to reproduce an untouchable original, has often been described as a ‘sin’ of hubris, though this approach seems to forget how necessary this form of hubris is for the dissemination of literature.

Now that Machine Translation products are more reliable, rather than increasing, these accusations seem to have decreased, and scholars of Translation Studies have increasingly insisted on the irreplaceability of the human role in translation, often portraying translators as ‘victims’ of this process of automation and semi-automation. While this might partially also be a consequence of the shift in the notion of the original that I have described, translators are no longer seen as responsible for an imperfect mechanism of reproduction, able to produce bad copies of the original at its best, but rather seem to have become a ‘protected species’, thanks to this renewed emphasis on their traditional role in the production and creation of literature.

We should of course rejoice in this new understanding of the fundamental role of translation and of translators, but the paradox is evident, and my fear is that this shift does not signal a genuine appreciation of the role of the human, but rather the attempt to negate the possible advantages of a deeper collaboration between the human and the machine. As Cronin has rightfully put it, we should avoid both the “temptation to see the digital present as evidence of

an irredeemably fallen state of translation affairs” (2013, 2) and the “equally strong temptation to see the digital present as a world of miracles and wonders” (Ibid.: 2). On the one hand, digital tools have proved useful to improve the translators’ work on a daily basis, and they have especially granted a much wider access to translation for the general public; on the other hand, the ethical issues at the basis of translation have been further complicated by the recent developments of translation practice, and are very far from being solved (see Bowker 2020).

The encounter between translation and digital technologies has undoubtedly allowed us to look at translation in different ways, to perceive its multiple and often hidden dimensions (Dufour and Schulte 2015), generating new readings of the process and products of translation. As we have seen, we have finally come to terms with the fact that “human translation and machine translation do not exist in separate worlds” (Froeliger, Gledhill and Zimina-Poirot 2023, 126). Not only they coexist, but they influence each other, and by joining forces they could contribute to a new understanding of translation in the future, since much more can still be done to put digital technologies to use, increasing our possibilities of exploring and interpreting translation.

What is rarely acknowledged, for example, is that the functioning of Neural Machine Translation often eludes its programmers, since the parameters used by the machine to treat the text are not entirely controlled by the humans who designed the software (see Ding et al. 2017). If we look at how writing by Artificial Intelligence is produced, we know that the shift from GPT-3 to GPT-4 has greatly increased the number of parameters used by the software to compose the text. GPT-3.5 used 175 billion parameters, and though we have no definitive numbers for GPT-4 yet, we know it will be at least 1 trillion parameters, and some argue it could be even up to 100 trillion. Although this does not mean that machines will become better than humans at writing or translating, it certainly does mean that machines use parameters that we will never be able to conceive, develop, nor understand fully. Greater understanding of this reality would help us to better grasp the possibilities of language and translation and of the very nature of language in the digital age.

Our practices of writing, and consequently of translating, have in fact changed profoundly over the last decade. We need to detect what texts or ‘objects’ we will consider ‘translations’ in the near future, what forms will human translation and machine translation take (and especially if they will take dif-

ferent paths), how the linguistic hybridity of all contemporary writings affects translation in the digital age (see Laghi 2024), and also how processes of translation (in the forms of linguistic translation, but also of coding) will participate in the shaping of 'original' writings by machines and humans.

In parallel to this process of investigation of the processes of translation at work in the digital age, we also have to start thinking of new ways to read and perceive translation, that make use of the possibilities offered by the encounter between the new approaches I introduced, such as intersemiotic translation and its perception of the source text as a field of possibilities to be explored by the translation, and the tools offered by digital technologies, which allow us to read and act upon the text in ways that were not possible before.

What is certain, however, is that the implementation of digital technologies in translation practice and in translation theory, and the wider influence of the epistemic shift of the digital age in our processes of cultural production, have drastically changed our perception of translation, and are bound to change it even more drastically in the future, because they are certainly here to stay. The faster we understand that there can no longer be any theory of translation that does not take technology into account, the sooner we will be able to improve contemporary practices and theories of translation and influence the directions taken by the interaction between humans and digital technologies in the field of translation in the digital age.

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