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# The conceptualisation of translation in translation studies: a response

Yves Gambier

School of Languages and Translation Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

## ABSTRACT

“Translation” yesterday (in the 1980s and 1990s) was defined in a certain context. Today, in a more globalized and digitalized world, the concept is changing, becoming more fluid while scholars in TS are becoming more nomadic (in their affiliations, and between disciplines). To avoid as much as possible a terminological inflation in TS and a monolithic and static concept of translation, we must consider the socio-cultural context in which we try not only to define our object of investigation but also to clarify the purpose of our definition(s), considering the wide range of translators and interpreters with different status and working with different e-tools. In addition, a historical perspective is needed: two paradigms are changing, sometimes overlapping. Thus, the feeling of confusion.

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Today, theatre, dance, video, bodies, performance, text, ideas, social concerns, etc. together compose a certain number of representations mixing each other’s codes according to a cross-disciplinarity that sometimes resembles a crash-disciplinarity. Mixed, hybrid cultural forms proliferate under various names: adaptations, remediations, gamifications, remixes, intermedialities, appropriations, etc. Some will also say that a film, a play or a painting are themselves “translations” of the ideas, visions or values of a person or a number of people “translated” (interpreted?) in turn by users, spectators and receivers on the basis of their background, knowledge, feelings, etc. In a word, everything would be “translation”, justifying the expression “translational turn” (Bachmann-Medick 2013), which would thus take “translation” towards a semantic and metaphorical extension of the conventional term (the transfer of a document from one language-culture to another). It can be noted that this extension overlaps with the conception that makes any communication a “translation” – a conception that goes from George Steiner (1975) to Kobus Marais (in this volume), via the interlingual translation of Roman Jakobson (1959), according to which seeking a synonym, proposing an explanation or a definition, paraphrasing a sentence, removing a lexical ambiguity, etc. in an ordinary conversation or in popularising a science would also fall under “translation”. This would entail “translation” being all meaning-making

**CONTACT** Yves Gambier  [yves.gambier@utu.fi](mailto:yves.gambier@utu.fi)

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and all meaning-taking actions which underlie any interaction between living-being organisms, including between human beings. All these actions and processes would explain the emergence of society-culture. The complexity of global climate change, biological organisms and the human brain – if it is “translation” or systemic interaction between various components, it is much more than the “translation” understood in the traditional sense of text-translator-receiver/user. However, this special issue of *Translation Studies* refers explicitly to translation in TS and therefore immediately limits itself to a certain conceptualisation of translation, professional or not, paid or not, subject to constraints of productivity, risk, quality and responsibility. It is therefore from this perspective that I respond to the contributions.

A translation was, is or would be representation, reported speech, comment, transfer, interpretation, mediation, creation, negotiation etc. There are countless definitions of translation (including modes of interpretation or not), definitive or approximate, reasoned or impromptu, depending on the perspectives and authors developed over the last five or six decades,<sup>1</sup> since it was “locked” into an academic discipline: translation studies (TS). “Locked up”, we should say, in one language – the one that has contributed and still contributes to the internationalisation of the discipline, namely English. This is undoubtedly a question, rarely discussed, even if the paradox is frequently emphasised: approaching “translations” in a single language when translators confront hundreds of language pairs on a daily basis, and when the historiography of TS has rarely questioned the presuppositions and implications of these TS in English, as if TS, *Übersetzungswissenschaft*, *perevodovedenie*, *translatologie*, *traductologie* etc., were modelled on each other, ignoring the epistemological bases of any conceptualisation – historically and culturally marked foundations. If the question used to be, more than twenty years ago, what is Translation, what is TS, do we still have to ask the same questions today or rather try to understand where, when, how, and what kinds of cultures are at stake? Instead of searching for a definitive definition, we are now confronted with a fluid concept of translation. Moreover, the discipline, which emerged rather as a poly-discipline – crossing linguistics, literature, philosophy and semiotics – aroused a desire for interdisciplinarity very early on, often for methodological reasons. So, we have on the one hand the TS corseted in a language and in a geo-cultural framework, and on the other, the need to expand the boundaries of this same TS. This double question of the English lingua franca of TS and the historical and cultural backgrounds of TS is barely sketched out<sup>2</sup> in this special issue of *Translation Studies*, while the nomadism of concepts, between fields of knowledge and diversified practices under the influence of technologies, raises much interest.

Let us immediately situate the eight contributions to better understand this thematic issue, which focuses mainly on current conceptualisations of translation. Kobus Marais proposes a definition by speculation, “hors sol”, while Sergey Tyulenev, James St André and Zarja Vršič bring (verbal) “translation” closer to music, computer code, and painting. It is through interdisciplinarity that Roberto Valdeón (journalism studies) and Marina Manfredi and Chiara Bartolini (museum studies) seek to open up a certain conception of “translation”. Finally, Franz Pöchhacker and Bingham Zheng et al. position themselves in relation to practices (professional or amateur) and academic implications. For the others, it is difficult to identify where they speak from and what their epistemological motivation to redefine “translation” is. It should be noted that diachronic perspectives are almost entirely absent from this special issue and that the contributions

presuppose that their questions are internationally valid, as if the defining changes and suspicions underway here simultaneously affected all societies, all cultures, and all translational practices. Some of the contributions of this special issue tackle certain (intersemiotic) practices and question the validity of “translation” (Tyulenev, Valdeón, Zheng et al., Manfredi and Bartolini, Vršič, Pöchhacker), taking a kind of bottom-up approach, which differs from the top-down (Marais) or the transversal approach (St. André).

Why do we need to (re)define a concept, a discipline, a research field and different practices? In what context (understood as the socio-cultural background in which the definitions are formulated)? For what purpose (theoretical, practical, didactic)? Most of the contributions do not answer these questions.

Can we have TS with no static object of investigation? The growing demand and digitalisation have facilitated the multiplication of labels to name practices. True, there is a kind of terminological inflation in TS. We are thinking here of the names imposed by various professional sectors (business, industry, media, information technology etc.), by sponsors of translations, refusing the word itself in favour of designations such as:

- *localisation*, a term first launched in the computer industry;
- *adaptation*, long in competition with translation, since the emphasis is on the receivers and no longer on the source text, for example for comics, plays, children’s books, advertisements, tourist brochures, etc.;
- *transcreation*, a term recently used in marketing and the advertising industry, especially to highlight the creativity of international campaigns;
- *language mediation*, or how, under different multilingual and multicultural conditions, a change of language(s) occurs, a kind of *code-switching* alternative that is not always controlled by a formally qualified translator or interpreter;
- *translanguaging*, which is like language mediation when multilingual speakers navigate between complex social and cognitive demands, thanks to their strategic use of their languages – for example, at school, in bi- or plurilingual families or in marketplaces in a multilingual city;
- *transediting*, a term used in some written media to make it clear that journalists do not “translate” but seek accurate information beyond adherence to the source text (if it exists), always have their readers in mind, and are concerned about readability;
- *multilingual technical writing*, a phrase used when writing documents in multiple languages from similar data. This could include multilingual *documentation*, written from notes in English, for example (and not from a text already written);
- *co-drafting*, for example, of legal texts that are both legally binding;
- *versioning* or audiovisual translation with its different modalities (subtitling, dubbing, voice-over, etc.);
- *revision* of a translated text, including *post-editing* of a text produced by machine translation (MT). Interestingly, the more we refer to post-editing, the more “creation” occurs in the discourse on translations.

This list is not exhaustive and does not apply everywhere at the same time. These new names for translation certainly appear at different speeds in different societies and languages. Nevertheless, it confirms that translation cannot be conceptualised today in a monolithic and permanent way. It is a polymorphic concept always to be negotiated,

while being a global, universal practice.<sup>3</sup> Discrepancies in names can be confusing and sometimes difficult to understand. Returning to our question: What is the object of investigation of TS? To what extent, could *translation* be a generic, umbrella term?

Major disruptions (e.g. innovations altering the ways users, industry, and business perceive translation and operate with translation) have occurred in the last 20–30 years:

- end users are able to access raw machine outputs and can produce translations directly;
- translators are often post-editing draft translations produced by e-tools (memory translation software, neural MT, etc.);
- clients have a larger choice from a range of services.

In a digital world, the question “Is MT translation?” – the title of a panel convened during the last EST congress in Oslo in June 2022 – has become relevant and justifies a (re)examination of the field of TS.

Over the past two decades, there has also been an increase in the number of translators and interpreters with a wide range of status, practice, and workload. For instance, different prosumers (a portmanteau of producer and consumer), fans and volunteers are now starting to translate, thanks to CAT and MT tools facilitating localisation, subtitling, post-editing, etc., without necessarily having appropriate training, medium or long-term experience, or even a precise awareness of what translating can mean.

Do all these new practices disqualify these people from being regarded as translators? Do they de-professionalise full-time translators? That translation does not belong only to translators who claim to be such is not new in history. What is certain, however, is that collaboration, participation, collective project management, and the technologies that facilitate these practices change the working conditions of all translators, regardless of their status and the perception of translation. The above-mentioned changes in the fields of translation, the impact of technology, the diversification of practices and designations, and the multiplication of types of translators and interpreters have not emerged without tension as these transformations are rapid, interact with each other, and impact on our behaviours and values. The concomitant development of globalisation and technologisation has given our societies little time to assimilate and reassess their fundamental structures. Nevertheless, a certain historical hindsight makes it possible to consider the implementation of new paradigms. A clash of paradigms is taking place now, hence the hesitation to describe what we do when we “translate”, transcreate, transedit, and localise. As of today, two paradigms have been changing for nearly thirty years. On the one hand, the now conventional conception of translation centred on languages, texts, and based on the paradigm of equivalence, has evolved towards a conception oriented towards the target audience, namely the paradigm of the cultural turn. This first paradigm exists in parallel with another paradigm that is also undergoing transformation and which reflects the media through which translations circulate. The paradigm of print and books (from which emerged the paradigm of equivalence), dominant from the fifteenth century to the early 2000s, is being transformed into the paradigm of “digital” and “Web” (where the texts to be translated become multimodal). In this context of rapid change, as we have mentioned earlier, there is reason for the proliferation of terms now used to designate what was/is “translation” and the ambiguities attached to what is still

called “text”, how it is produced and how it is received. Is this enough to talk about post-TS? This label implicitly implies a frozen conceptualisation of translation, as if the concept were forever stable, absolute, and ahistorical; as if translation were never to be negotiated according to a power struggle between languages and cultures. Is the term itself generic or specific; all-encompassing or designating a particular mode of transfer?

Be that as it may, TS is in competition (at least financial and institutional) with many other “studies”: adaptation studies, intercultural studies, transfer studies, media studies, knowledge management, internet studies, web science, globalisation studies, usability studies, accessibility studies, human–computer interaction studies, and social semiotics. Separated as academic subjects, these studies have in common the complexity of interactive communications and behaviour but, with the exception of TS, ignore or do not consider linguistic diversity, language contact, cultural interference, translation and interpretation. Could we not envisage a transversal discipline capable of dealing with how groups, individuals, and cultures manage, value (or not), negotiate and mean differences and connections? This intertwined discipline would surely open up the concept of translation and would perhaps de-Westernise it (Chakrabarty 2000/2007; Susam-Saraeva 2017; Gambier and Stecconi 2019).

The social sciences have often been criticised for their conceptual and terminological confusion (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 27, about the “bricoleur”; Law 2004) and TS is not immune to these criticisms (Tahir Gürçağlar 2007, 725–726; Gambier and van Doorslaer 2007), either. I have some doubts whether this special issue has clarified the mess (why it should be done, how and by whom). However, two elements could help us reconsider the concept of translation, starting from and beyond the diversity of its names and practices: materiality (as already suggested above) and copyright – both largely absent from contributions in this volume, but calling for analysis from a historical perspective to grasp the needs of and motivations for defining changes.

There is no place now to trace the material history of translations, from scrolls, codices to printed matter and today to digitised texts (Littau 2011). However, such a history, linked to the media, production, distribution, circulation and reception of translations, linked to all the agents and craftsmen involved in these processes and procedures, illuminates many points of view and discourses on translation and many definitions of translation, such as the notion of equivalence in relation to the printed page, the notions of usability and acceptability with multimodal texts. As for the notions of intellectual property, moral rights, copyright and *droit d’auteur* (Basalamah 2012; Lee 2022), they would shed light on the evolution of ways of conceiving creation, originality, appropriation, the economy of rights, authorship and translatorship, from the Statute of Anne (1710), through the Berne Convention (1886–1971) and the World Intellectual Property Organization Treaty (1996), to the European Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market (2019). They would also indirectly make it possible to situate translations in relation to other textual productions and other types of transfers and adaptation, even in today’s environment of accelerated digitisation, and to situate the translator in relation to the author, where the former, long invisible, is now defined rather by his/her skills and work while the latter, once having held a hegemonic position, has been declared dead since Roland Barthes (1968).

## Notes

1. And even since ancient times, if we believe Jean Delisle (2007) who has listed more than 3000 aphorisms, eulogies, injunctions, opinions, judgments, images, figures and metaphors gleaned from more than 800 authors. These clichés about thought and unthought about translation reveal how much play there is in any translation and in any effort to define it.
2. Only Franz Pöschhacker wonders, at the end of his article, about the possible impact of this single language, but opts to postpone the discussion.
3. Current denominative varieties cannot make us forget the varieties in the past (mimesis, appropriation, imitation, comment) or the various concepts defined in other cultural areas of the contemporary world: Indian, Chinese, Arab, Turkish, Malaysian etc. (reversal, transmigration, metamorphosis, substitution, etc.).

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