

THE PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF TRANSLATION

Systems Theory and Historical Context

Theo Hermans

1. Introduction

Imagine that we are happily reading a translation, let's say a translated novel, and suddenly we stumble upon a real howler, a glaring anomaly, something irreconcilable with our idea - our expectation - of what a translated text should be, of what constitutes a 'proper translation'? What do we do?

The least likely response is one of relaxed acceptance, of the kind 'Oh well, this must be another way of doing it, one I had never considered as coming within the purview of translation, but there you are.' No, the common response is that, having looked twice to make sure we are not dealing with a printing error, we grow indignant. We say: 'Wrong!', 'Incompetent!', 'Unacceptable!'. We say: 'Do they call this translation?' - meaning: I don't, therefore it isn't, and everyone who knows anything about translation is bound to agree with me - which makes it very hard for any self-respecting witness to disagree. And if the fancy takes us we set to work on the text with a red pencil, or write to the publisher, or phone the translation agency. In doing so we are emphatically upholding and reaffirming our idea of 'translation', what it is, and what in our view it evidently is not. At the same time we appeal to a publicly recognized and acknowledged category, both a concept and a practice, to which, in our view, *this* translation must be made to correspond if it is to be accepted as a valid translation.

The situation is one of expectation versus transgression, of frame versus (incongruous) scene, structure versus (anomalous) event. How to respond when our expectations are disappointed by a flagrant transgression? Broadly speaking we have a choice between two alternatives: we can be flexible, and adjust our mental picture of the world to the empirical reality we observe; or we can keep our world view intact by dismissing the anomaly or by correcting it (that is, undoing it) in one way or another.

In the first case we may be said to adopt a learning attitude. This means it is *we* who change, in that we seek to incorporate the new experience into our world picture by adjusting the picture so as to accommodate the new reality. In this case we adjust our expectations about the world and the range of likely occurrences in it to the possibility of another occurrence like the apparently anomalous one we just observed. In our example this would mean accepting the apparent breach as a possible alternative way of translating. By adjusting our expectation we build in the possibility that we may encounter similar cases in the future.

In the second case we refuse to let our experience affect our idea of the nature of things. Having censured the anomalous fact, we either erase it or force it back into line with our mental picture. At best we let it pass, this once, and hope it will not happen again. This allows us to stick to our existing beliefs and to carry on as we were, despite the occurrence of an incongruous fact, which, we decide, should not have happened in the first place.

The first attitude, the adaptive, learning one, is a matter of having cognitive expectations. This is an attitude which will try to build and amend and forever rebuild hypotheses about the world. If our mental scheme of things falls out with the world, we adjust the scheme. This mode of expectation tends towards the world of science. Science seeks to understand the world as it is, and remains prepared to redesign its models of the world. The other attitude, which is unwilling to learn, corresponds to a normative expectation. It provides more peace of mind to the individual because it is more stable. It is 'counterfactually stable' in that disappointments, anomalous occurrences, even flagrant breaches do not really upset it. It carries on regardless. More than that: following disappointment it may emphatically and publicly reaffirm the validity of its model of the

world. This mode of expectation leans towards the law, which, as we know, remains intact despite frequent crimes being committed.

In the case of our renegade translation, we condemned the transgression, invoked the law and reached for the rule-book - which we reckoned the translator also knew or should have known, as everyone else seriously engaged in the profession does or should do. In essence, most translation criticism and reviewing, and a good deal of translation teaching, is of this nature, and is necessarily so: in weighing and evaluating, it apportions blame or praise against the background of a shared, known category.

It is in this sense, it seems to me, that we can speak of a social entity called 'translation' and a form of behaviour called 'translating' with which, give or take a few nuances, we assume we are all familiar with in our own language and culture. This is what allows us, for example, to expect of translators that, as they go about their task, they select certain appropriate options from among an available array of permissible options. The set of permissible options constitutes 'translation'. The meaning of the term 'translation' - or of that term or cluster of terms in another language which, rightly or wrongly, we translate as 'translation' - is codified in both monolingual and multilingual dictionaries. There are professional activities called translation, we have organisations representing professional and other kinds of translators, institutes for translator training, and so on. In other words: in our own respective cultures at the present moment, in other contemporary cultures, and in past cultures, we encounter terms which, rightly or wrongly, we interpret as denoting that concept and that activity that we recognize for ourselves as constituting 'translation'. There is an extraordinary complication built into this idea to which I will return, but let us ignore it for the moment and retain that - again, rightly or wrongly - we assume that, when we use the term 'translation' or its counterpart in another language, it indicates a socially recognizable and recognized category, both a known concept and a socially acknowledged practice. The category called 'translation', that is, comprises both the production of translations that count as communications of a certain kind, and, in addition, communications about translation. The two, production and discourse about it, practice and concept, are held together by the fact that whenever we come across an instance of 'translation' (a translated text, an occurrence of the term 'translation', a statement about it), we activate a certain disposition, a set of expectations, which we assume others will share. Our expectations may be fulfilled or disappointed on some occasions, and in the latter case we tend - we don't have to, and we don't always, but we tend - to respond by branding the offending occurrence as a transgression, thus outlawing it and reaffirming the boundaries of the existing concept and the permissible practices and statements within its sphere.

There is nothing very new in this. However, approaching the matter in this way allows me to stress, firstly, that translation, as a social category, is circumscribed by expectations, which are partly cognitive but also, and even primarily, normative in nature; secondly, that, if we regard translation as consisting not only of the production and circulation of translated texts but also of the exchange of communications about translation, then there is nothing to stop us from speaking of translation in terms of a 'social system' - more about this below; thirdly, that our expectations about translation also structure the 'domain', the 'field', indeed the 'system' of translation, in a sense I will also try to explain; and fourthly, that with key operational terms like 'communication', 'system', 'expectations' and a few more that I shall introduce below, we can begin to develop a conceptual and methodological framework for considering translation as a social and historical phenomenon, a framework which I think is more promising than most existing approaches.

Before I go on, let me make it clear that when I speak of translation as constituting a social system, I have in mind the concept of 'system' as it is used by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann himself applied systems theory to every subject under the sun, including education, religion, politics, law and justice, love, ecological discourse, contemporary art and art history, science, everything except translation. Other researchers, in Germany and on the international scene, have used Luhmann's concepts and terminology as tools to approach literature and various other fields (see, for instance, De Berg 1995 for a

general account and a bibliography). To my knowledge, Andreas Poltermann is the only translation scholar to have applied Luhmann's ideas to issues of translation (Poltermann 1992). It seems to me that, if we want to understand translation in its social and historical context, we could do worse than to explore the ideas of someone like Luhmann. Moreover, an approach along these lines is, I think, perfectly compatible with existing empirical and historicizing approaches such as polysystem theory and the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and it has some additional features to recommend it.

2. Norms

In what follows I should like to do three things. First, I want to return to the issue of normative expectations, since they are important for the social and historical functioning of translation and its relative stability over time. Then I need to explain briefly some aspects of Luhmann's concept of social systems and indicate its relevance for the study of translation. Finally I will take up a single example, in an attempt to demonstrate the usefulness and productivity of this approach.

Let me begin by returning to normative expectations, or norms for short. Please bear in mind that, when I speak of a 'norm', I do not mean some abstract, static, formal or mechanical rule which relates to the practice of translation as cause to effect, of the type: if *this* is the feature displayed in a text under study, then *that* must have been the norm that triggered it. By a 'norm' I mean, rather, a particular kind of expectation. The term implies, in the case of translation, structured interaction between individuals, as clients, patrons, producers, consumers, teachers or critics of translation. It does not predetermine the interaction.

My basic assumption in all this is that translation, like other types of language use, is a matter of communication, that is, a form of social behaviour which requires a degree of cooperation among those involved. For communication to take place, the participants need to coordinate their actions to a certain extent. This can be done on the level of immediate interpersonal contact in face-to-face interaction, but it also applies across time and space. Norms, like conventions, arise as answers to interpersonal coordination problems of this kind. Why is there a problem in the first place? Because communication, like any other form of social interaction, typically involves what Luhmann calls 'double contingency' (1984: 148ff.), that broad swathe of indeterminacy between the impossible and the inevitable. When you and I meet in person, I can never be entirely sure what you are going to do next, and you cannot be sure what I am going to do next; we both know this; we know this about ourselves, and each of us knows it about the other. Expectations about the other person's most likely behaviour are therefore reassuring for all concerned: they provide a measure of stability, and help to keep panic and paralysis at bay.

The classic definition of convention (by David Lewis, 1969) hinges on exactly this point. Conventions, as Lewis defines them, imply the expectation, shared by all, that in a given situation one member of the group is likely to do one thing rather than another. A family may develop the pattern, for example, that when they start playing a certain board game, the youngest child always takes the first turn at throwing the dice. After a while that is indeed what every family member expects to happen whenever the game is played. The convention thus has a regulatory function. It restricts the number of practically available options in recurrent situations of a given type by offering a particular option as the one known to be preferred by everyone involved. In so doing, in promoting coordination, the convention makes everyone's behaviour more predictable. It reduces uncertainty and contingency.

The main difference between a norm and a convention lies in the modality of the expectation. A convention is a purely probabilistic expectation. Norms tell individual members of a community not just how everyone else reckons they are probably going to behave in a given situation, but how they *ought* to behave. Norms imply that there is, among the range of possible options that present themselves, a particular course of action which is

generally accepted as 'proper', or 'correct', or 'appropriate'. That course of action, it is agreed, *should* therefore be adopted by all who find themselves in that type of situation. And each time a norm is observed, its validity is confirmed and reinforced.

Norms can and will be broken. Even if it is not observed by all, it remains valid. Provided the breaches do not occur persistently and on a large scale without sanctions of one kind or another, norms are able to cope with a certain amount of discrepant, erratic, idiosyncratic behaviour. The conventions and norms that govern, say, our behaviour when we pick up the telephone or attend a reception, a funeral service or an academic lecture, are not invalidated every time someone fails or refuses to behave in the way everyone else expects everyone else to behave.

Which norms are observed or broken by whom, where and when, will depend on such things as the nature and strength of the norm, the kind of sanction that might apply, the individual's status in the relevant community, and other such factors. When, in the 1960s, Louis and Celia Zukofsky rendered Latin poetry into English mimicking the sound of the words and playing down everything else including the meaning of the Latin words, it is relevant to know that this was done in a literary context, that even in that domain it was generally interpreted as a provocative and norm-breaking gesture, and that already at this time Louis Zukofsky was widely recognized as a prominent poet in his own right. The newly graduated translator who has just been given a job in the United Nations headquarters in New York and wants to make a career there would be ill-advised to follow the Zukovskys' example.

Norms can be strong or weak, limited or extensive in scope, more or less enduring over time. They take the form of obligations or prohibitions, and exert different kinds of pressure on the choices which individuals make. At the same time, because in an irreversible temporal sequence no two situations are exactly the same, every instance of compliance *or* non-compliance with a norm changes the norm, however slightly. Whether the expectation is fulfilled or disappointed in a given instance, it incorporates that experience and becomes stronger or weaker. Norms therefore change continually.

Norms are not innate. They are inculcated as part of the process of socialization. Just as learning to speak is learning to speak 'properly', in accordance with the linguistic norms of the relevant community (the family, the circle of friends, the school, the workplace), so learning to translate means learning to operate the norms of translation, to operate, that is, with them and within them, anticipating, accommodating, calculating, negotiating the expectations of others concerning the social institution called translation. In the same way readers, too, learn what they can and cannot expect when they pick up a book labelled 'translation'. On both sides of the equation, in fact on all sides since the production and consumption of translation involves more than two parties, certain expectations are activated, certain bonds and contracts entered into. They may be clearly stated and understood by all concerned, or remain vague and unspoken. The question of who controls whom in this respect depends on power and position. In other words, norms are not independent of local conditions and of the social relations within communities, whether these relations are material (economic, legal, financial) or what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'symbolic' and bear on status and legitimacy.

Large, complex and differentiated societies accommodate a multiplicity of different, overlapping and often conflicting norms. The translator's work is inevitably entangled in several of these networks at once, if only because the product of the translator's labour is never a 'translation *per se*' but a specific kind of translated text, say a translated computer manual, a translated novel or a translated medical record. In each case the translator enters an existing network of discourses and social relations. The translational discourse comes to occupy a place in this network. It is part of the ambivalence of translated texts that they are expected to comply with both the translational *and* the textual norms regarded as pertinent by a given community in a given domain. If translations manage to do this, as a consequence of the translator having made the requisite choices, they will be deemed 'legitimate' translations.

Learning to translate correctly, then, means precisely the acquisition of this competence, which consists of the skills required to select and apply the norms that will help to produce legitimate translations, that is, translations socially recognized as legitimate within a certain community and its concept of translation. Furthermore, just as one of the main functions of the educational system is that of transmitting the requisite social skills, expectations and ‘dispositions’ (in Bourdieu’s sense), continually reproducing and reaffirming the community’s dominant values and models in the process, so, in the field of translation, one of the roles of the translator training institute consists in transmitting the skills and dispositions that we associate with professional translating. To do this, the training institute reproduces within itself the social institution called translation, which in turn contributes to the very process of the institutionalization of translation. Let me add immediately that other discourses about translation, including so-called descriptive and historicizing discourses, do very much the same thing, if perhaps more covertly. They all contribute to the ongoing self-reproduction of translation, and to its self-description.

3. Communication, expectation and system

Terms like ‘self-reproduction’ and ‘self-description’ bring us close to the vocabulary of modern systems theory. In what follows I would like to sketch an approach to translation based on Niklas Luhmann’s theorizing about social systems. It will be a very rough sketch, but I hope to be able to suggest that the approach has research potential.

Systems, in this context, are conceived as composite, adaptive, self-reproducing wholes that have differentiated themselves from what lies outside them, from their environment. Social systems are self-reproducing systems in that they continually produce and reproduce the elements of which they consist. These elements - and this is crucial - are communications, communicative acts. In other words, social systems consist, not of individuals or of groups of people, but of communications, and of specific types of communication. These communications have not only to be produced and processed by means of signs, they also have to be linked and connected in a temporal sequence for the system to continue to exist. There are no social systems without communication, but at the same time communications are momentary, fleeting phenomena, here one moment and gone the next. This explains the need for connectivity, for structures that can endure over time.

Another important point is that Luhmann does not conceive of communication in terms of the transmission of a pre-given message. Rather, meaning is construed by the recipient as a result of recognizing selectivity. What is offered acquires meaning against the background of the possibilities that were available in principle but have been excluded. The element of selection concerns both the utterance, the intentional act of producing a communication, and the information, the referential level of what the communication is about.

Because communication takes place in a certain context and at a certain moment in time, understanding a communication means being alive not only to the difference between utterance and information, but also to the communication’s selective aspects, its negative foil, the difference between what has been included (that is, selected) and what has been excluded (left aside, negated). One Luhmann commentator speaks of the “temporalization of semantics” (De Berg 1993: 50), a useful phrase, especially when we want to engage in historical study.

It follows from this that texts have no fixed meaning in themselves. They are invested with meaning as communications in a selective, differential context. When we look at texts (or other communications) in this way, through their ‘temporalized semantics’, we may be able to glimpse the speaker’s agenda. How likely was this communication in these particular circumstances? Why were this theme, and this mode of transmission, selected at this moment, against which set of potential alternatives? What issue or problem has it chosen to address, and what other issues are being obscured as a result? How did this particular communication ‘connect’ and how does it, in turn, contribute to the establishment of a new

context, a new range of possibilities?

If this is true of texts, it is true also of translations. Their 'meaning', their 'sense', their 'point' as communications does not reside in 'the words on the page', decipherable by means of linguistic and other codes in a social or historical vacuum. Nor can it be reduced to some semantic or other relation with a source text. Such reductions ignore the selectivity of communication. It is part of the meaning of a translated text as communication that this and no other foreign-language text was selected from among a range of potential candidates, that it was selected for translation and not for some alternative form of transmission or importation, and that a particular 'translational mode' was selected, one particular style of representing the original against the possibility of other available and permissible styles.

Invoking the array of available and permissible styles take us straight back to the cognitive and normative expectations governing translation, and hence to translation as institution. It is clear that we are talking about expectations within a limited range of options. The domain of translation, of that which is termed 'translation', has its limits, a socially acknowledged boundary differentiating it, sometimes sharply, sometimes only diffusely, from other modes of representing anterior discourses such as paraphrase, adaptation, plagiarism, summary, quotation, imitation, and so on. The expectations which police the boundaries of translation as institution are usually referred to as the 'constitutive norms' of translation. If you breach them you are perceived as doing something which will no longer be called 'translation', at least not by the group that sees itself as being addressed and as having a legitimate claim to the definition of 'translation'. In that sense we can speak of these expectations as circumscribing the domain of translation. Within the perimeter of the constitutive norms it is customary to speak of 'regulatory norms'. The term refers to expectations concerning what is appropriate in certain cases, regarding certain types or areas of discourse. These expectations constitute the structure of the translation system, in a sense compatible with Luhmann's terminology. Luhmann holds that whereas social systems consist of communications in that communications are the elements the system is made of, expectations about communications build the structure of a social system. Social structures are structures of expectation (Luhmann 1984:139, 377ff.). Structure here means precisely that some occurrences and some combinations are more likely than others. If all occurrences and all combinations were all equally likely, this would produce entropy in the system.

Both constitutive and regulatory expectations and their respective normative loads are continually negotiated and confirmed by practising translators and by all who are recognized as having a legitimate claim to discourse about translation. In that sense we can speak of translation as a social system, that is, a self-regulating, self-reflexive and self-reproducing (or 'autopoietic') system. The elements of the translation system are translations and discourses about translation. The system's temporal dimension lies in the fact that communication generates communication. We can translate because there are translations and because, when we translate or speak about translation, we routinely take account of the conditioning factors which govern the concepts and practices we call 'translation' in our respective cultures. This creates the necessary connectivity and a sufficient 'horizon of expectations' to produce further translations and statements about translation. These expectations constitute the structure of the translation system. The system's function consists in supplying representations of existing communications across semiotic boundaries. Its identity as a differentiated functional system, its 'guiding difference' (Luhmann speaks of a 'code'), is based on this specific role. In the course of history the terms of this basic code can be, and have been, fleshed out in very different ways, in the form of 'programmes', the various poetics of translation, in the way specific legal traditions, for example, can be understood as 'programmes' of the legal system.

Now, translation does not operate in and for itself. It caters for other interests, other systems. The normal mode of existence of a translation, as we saw, is not as a translation per se but as a translated legal document, a translated philosophical treatise, and so on. Translations integrate into existing discursive forms and text types. In this sense translation can be said to be overdetermined: they normally defer, and are expected to defer, to the

prevailing discourse of the client system. A systems-theoretical account of this form of entanglement or complicity can be found in the notions of ‘structural coupling’ and ‘interpenetration.’ The terms mean that the system may adjust its structures to the demands of another system, and even, in the stronger case of interpenetration, that the norms, criteria and resources of one system are largely internalized by another system. Since translation is on the whole much less clearly differentiated and hence much less autonomous than, say, modern art or religion, it is particularly prone to this kind of internal modification.

To the extent however that the translation system has its own momentum, its identity and relative stability as a system, it continually reproduces itself. This means that whatever its entanglement in other systems, it interprets its environment in terms of its own interests and priorities. In doing so, it reflects and builds on its own experience and maintains its own distinctive difference. Without such an independent and self-reflexive momentum it would not be a system. Nevertheless it is important to realize that in this perspective the term ‘translation’ has no fixed, inherent or immanent meaning. Rather, the category ‘translation’, including what I called its representational function, is constantly being reproduced by means of communication. Its semantics changes in the process of reproduction, just as historically its basic code is occupied by a succession of different terms, oppositions and values, that is, by different programmes. Its only durability and stability, as a concept and a practice, comes from its constant autopoiesis as a system.

4. Illustration: Adrianus de Buck’s Boethius

Let me try to illustrate some of these points with a brief historical example. It concerns a seventeenth-century Flemish Catholic priest, one Adrianus de Buck, a now totally forgotten figure who lived in the town of Veurne (Furnes), close to the French border. We know of only two publications by him: a book of prayers, and his translation, in 1653, of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, from Latin into Dutch (De Buck 1653; Hermans 1996). Just two copies of De Buck’s Boethius have come down to us; the copy I consulted is in the University Library in Ghent. The book was printed and published in Bruges, in what was known at the time as the Southern Netherlands, a region then still under Catholic Spanish rule. The mainly Protestant – more particularly, Calvinist – Northern Netherlands had, after a prolonged war with Spain, become an independent and extremely prosperous republic with a flourishing cultural life that produced the likes of Rembrandt and Vermeer, Spinoza and Christiaan Huygens. Spain formally recognized the Dutch Republic as an independent state in 1648.

De Buck dedicated his translation to a number of local dignitaries. The dedication leaves the reader in no doubt that the translator is green with envy at the miracle of Dutch culture in the Northern Netherlands, not least because, as he observes, they have appropriated the learning of every other language in the world, including Hebrew, Turkish and Arabic. Clearly, De Buck was acutely aware of living in what, by comparison with the Northern republic, was rapidly becoming a cultural backwater. Not only that, the Southern Netherlands were also a vulnerable region that had already felt the effects of the expansionism of its powerful neighbour, France. De Buck’s home town of Veurne had been overrun by Louis XIV’s troops a few years earlier.

And so he translates Boethius. As is well known, Boethius (lived 480-526) wrote his *Consolation of Philosophy* when he was in prison, awaiting his execution. The book consists of both verse and prose. De Buck has translated it, he tells us in his dedication, partly to offer consolation to his compatriots who have suffered at the hands of the French, partly because he reckons that the Protestant heretics in the North have left Boethius untranslated on account of the references to free will and purgatory in the *Consolation* (both concepts are unacceptable to Calvinist theology),¹ and partly because he wants to prove that, as he puts it,

¹ De Buck is only partly correct in assuming that Boethius had been left untranslated in the Dutch Republic for reasons of theological dogma. The *Consolation* was available there in D.V. Coornhert’s

“the sun also shines on our Flemish land and there is fire in our souls too.” This last point may well be the reason why in his translation De Buck renders every one of the poems in Boethius not once, but twice, in two different metres.

Through his decision to translate, through his selection of a particular text to translate, through opting for a particular mode of translating, and through his reflection on his own work and motivation, De Buck offers us a cultural self-description, a self-positioning which is religious and political as well a cultural and, more narrowly, literary. An interpretation – or, if you like, a translation – of De Buck’s Boethius in systems terms cannot alter the material facts. It can, however, put things in a new light, which, I hope, will prove illuminating. What such a reading might draw attention to are aspects like the following.

Firstly, in De Buck’s choice of a particular source text for translation, various systemic relations come together. They are all part of the translation’s “temporalized semantics.” In this sense we can view the choice in relation to the function of the translation, as De Buck explains it in his dedication. He wants to render a service to the community as a whole, that is, to his compatriots as citizens. Just as Boethius drew comfort from philosophical speculation at a time when he was facing imminent death, so the hard-pressed citizens of Flanders will find consolation by reading Boethius in their hour of need. That is what makes Boethius an apt choice for De Buck, in preference to an unspecified number of alternative texts he could have translated instead. In providing comfort and a morale-booster, the translation constitutes an answer to a problem, or at least to a perceived problem.

But we can also consider De Buck’s choice of Boethius in relation to the cultural system in the Northern Netherlands. De Buck notes that Boethius is not selected for translation there, for religious reasons. In this respect his own choice becomes both oppositional and differential. It challenges the North politically and ideologically, and it contributes to the differentiation of the Southern cultural system vis-à-vis that of the North. More particularly, De Buck’s choice of Boethius feeds into the ongoing redefinition and repositioning of Southern culture in the broader context of the deployment of translation – as of other cultural resources – in support of the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

The alignment and subordination of culture to religion, politics and ideology can readily be described in terms of structural coupling. In this case it means that, in De Buck’s Southern Netherlands, the criteria for source text selection prevalent in one system are imposed on another system. In addition, it is clear that De Buck’s selection of a particular source text is governed by normative constraints which are more like those of Catholic Spain than those of the more tolerant Northern Netherlands. De Buck’s compliance with the Catholic norm will in turn influence the issue of source text selection for subsequent translators. In other words, in pinpointing religion as a significant point of difference between North and South, and in placing translation, as a cultural activity, under the aegis of the Counter-Reformation, De Buck’s choice signals the emergence of translation in the Spanish Netherlands as a system separate from the Northern Netherlands and emphatically allied with Catholic Europe.

Secondly, if translation is viewed as representation, as the production of a text that resembles a source text in such a way that it can act as its representative, it can be understood as also observing its source text. The translation points to its original, brings the original into view and thus observes this original. It also makes a statement about it. In claiming to represent Boethius’ Latin text, De Buck’s translation presents us with a communication about it, and puts it in a certain light. As representation, moreover, it offers a selection of a particular mode of representation from among a range of available, permissible modes. This selection determines the translation’s specific modulation, what we may call its style. Style, understood here as the orchestration of a translation in respect of its intended function,

version printed in Leiden in 1585 and reprinted in Amsterdam in 1616. But it is true that the independently-minded Coornhert was not a Calvinist but preferred to see himself as a universal Christian.

allows us to see two things at once: firstly, how a translation relates to a certain tradition, to prevailing expectations regarding the ‘adequacy’ of the representation, and, secondly, what it contributes to the subsequent strengthening or modification of these expectations. In this way style organizes the contribution that an individual text makes to the self-reproduction or autopoiesis of the system (Luhmann 1986; 1990).

The choice of a particular style amounts to a self-reflexive statement about stylistic choice. Assuming that more than one mode of representation is available, the selection of one mode rather than another highlights the exclusions. Selecting a particular mode thus points in two directions at once. It highlights both the existence of alternative possibilities, of paths not chosen, and the stylistic allegiances that align this translation with similar choices made by previous translators. In De Buck’s Boethius this is made explicit. It is thematized in the translator’s unusual decision to render the Latin poems not once, as we might expect, but twice, in two different forms. The ‘double’ translation does not really serve the translation’s function as representation at all. Translation normally makes do with just one target text to representing the source. So how to read De Buck’s ‘double’ translation of Boethius’ verse?

In one way, the double rendering dramatizes the fact that there *are* alternative possibilities, and in that sense it provides an emphatic comment on permissible modes of translating, and therefore on the very structure of the translation system itself. In addition, it underlines the fact that the system’s basic function, that of supplying representations of existing texts, can be fulfilled in more ways than one, in accordance with different programmes or poetics, and that the two different ways which the translator is illustrating here are both valid – and there is no suggestion that they exhaust the range of valid modes. In that sense De Buck’s dramatization, or thematization, of modes of translating shows him observing his own practice as a translator, his own mode of treating the original together with potential other modes. Through his double translation he presents an observation on the ways in which translations observe originals and their own relations to them. It is a supremely self-reflexive moment.

At the same time, on a different level, the ‘double’ translation supports a conspicuous claim to legitimacy by a Southern translator vis-à-vis what he evidently perceives as the stronger system in the North. The South may be a backwater, he appears to be saying, but it is not devoid of talent. By demonstrating competence and even virtuosity, he claims professional equality as a practitioner, but he still distances himself ideologically from the North. The ideological distance is highlighted at the level of the mode of translation by De Buck’s emphatically Catholic rendering of the passages on divine providence and free will. In these passages his vocabulary borrows directly from the terminological and discursive resources of the Catholic Church. But it is worth noting that what is alignment in one direction – the Catholic Church – is polemic in another – the Protestant North.

Finally, if De Buck’s self-reflexive comment on his own mode or style of translation, in which the system can be said to observe itself from within, is called second-order observation (the observation of observation, Luhmann 1990), then ‘third-order’ observation would be a matter of observing second-order observation, that is, the observation of self-reflexive behaviour. This is what happens when we comment on De Buck as I have been doing. Here we can raise issues like the relative strength of the normative and other expectations that structure a system and the place De Buck seems to accord himself in this network, the way its organizing codes are fleshed out by particular programmes, the manner in which the system marks its boundaries and the relations it entertains with other systems. To do this properly we would need to put De Buck’s theory and practice of translation in a broader historical context. The endeavour would have to include other translations and prevailing ideas about translation, other modes of writing and of representation by means of writing, and a fuller picture of the temporal sequence of which De Buck’s work forms part, showing how his work connects with earlier translations and with discourses about translation, and how it affects the spectrum of connectivity for subsequent translations. Needless to say, this line of inquiry would lead us further afield than I can take it here.

5. Coda: Translating translation

Let me end on an altogether different note, by drawing attention to a particularly unsettling actor which affects – perhaps I should say: which infects, or afflicts – all our attempts to speak about translation. I remarked in passing, above, that we could interpret, “or translate,” De Buck’s Boethius in system-theoretical terms. The description of the case itself constitutes a representation of it across semiotic boundaries. The transposition of this description into a different conceptual scheme amounts to another translation, at least if we accept Roman Jakobson’s view that translation comprises not only interlingual but also intralingual and intersemiotic representations (Jakobson 1959). In speaking about De Buck’s Boethius I am also translating that translation. Communication about translation means translating translation: the discourse about translation translates the practice of translation. But this entails that we translate according to our contemporary, culture-bound concept of translation, and into this concept of translation. Once we realize this, the neat distinction between object-level and meta-level which descriptive studies have cherished, collapses, and we are reminded of the uncomfortable fact that the study of translation is likely to rebound on our own categories and assumptions, our own disciplinary modes of translating translation. There is no escape from this dilemma. But by conceptualizing it in terms of the self-reproducing and self-reflexive operations of a system, we can at least become aware of it – as we must, since it is a fundamental problem that affects, infects and afflicts all our work.

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