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Bananas

– on names and definitions in translation studies

During The Third Riga Symposium on Pragmatic Aspects of Translation in November 2002 (see Veisbergs (ed.) 2003), in a presentation on translation and advertising, a participant happened to take for granted that an essential difference may exist between translations, on the one hand, and adaptations, on the other. This is not an uncommon belief and it is one that may be supported by a number of scholars and practitioners. However, it is by no means shared by all and the issue is far from resolved. During the questions session of the presentation in question, an interesting discussion then evolved, especially concerning the importance of names and definitions within translation studies. One particular remark by Andrew Chesterman led to a considerable number of comments both immediately and on various occasions during the rest of the conference – namely, that we might as well choose to refer to different kinds of translation as bananas!

In the hope that others may join in and respond with their opinions on the issue, we have decided to publish the main points of the above-mentioned discussion. Our paper does not pretend to live up to academic standards in any traditional way, and we hope that readers will bear with us when we concentrate on explaining our views rather than documenting the truth value of our statements – and when we become rather categorical in order to stress a given point.

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In the following, all contributors attempt to answer these related questions: (1) Do names matter? (2) Do definitions matter?

Chesterman starts out by arguing that discussions about names and definitions are not useful beyond a certain point. Schjoldager reacts to this by arguing that such discussions can also be taken too lightly. Dam's viewpoint is more pragmatic, as she argues that, while names and definitions may be rather unimportant, a shared agreement certainly is not. Engberg's views are more radical, arguing that agreement may not even be essential.

Andrew Chesterman

“Never let yourself be goaded into taking seriously problems about words and their meanings. What must be taken seriously are questions of fact, and assertions about facts: theories and hypotheses; the problems they solve; and the problems they raise.”

This is Karl Popper's “anti-essentialist exhortation” to himself (Popper 1992: 19). It describes his frustration with the kind of philosophy that deals only or primarily with conceptual analysis; the kind of philosophy that appears to believe in the existence of essential, basic meanings which only need to be discovered, at some ultimate level of precision. He calls the position he is attacking “essentialism”.

On this view, arguments about definitions are simply not useful, beyond a certain point. Definitions are a question of convention, of agreement: we agree to use certain labels to refer to given phenomena in order to be able to communicate about them. Definitions are tools, means; not ends in themselves. In scientific research, they are only useful insofar as they allow us to make interesting claims, generalizations or hypotheses. I would add that definitions are in fact themselves hypotheses: interpretive hypotheses, whose justification is determined by their usefulness. (See e.g. Williams and Chesterman 2002.) Definitions are not final truths.

Atoms were originally defined by the ancient Greeks as elementary particles that could not be further split up into smaller parts – hence the name “atom”, meaning ‘that cannot be divided’. We now know that this definition is false, but it remained a useful one for a couple of millennia.

Agreed definitions – however temporary – help us to talk about things and understand each other. But they do not have to be more precise than

they need to be. In Popper's words (1992: 24), "it is always undesirable to make an effort to increase precision for its own sake – especially linguistic precision – since this usually leads to loss of clarity." So "one should never be more precise than the problem situation demands." This reminds us of Grice's Maxim of Quantity – do not give more (or less) information than is required. It also reminds translation scholars of the principle of sufficient degree of precision, proposed by Hönig and Kussmaul (1982: 58f).

Simple agreement is more important than maximum precision. A frustrating problem in translation research is the lack of agreement about the labels we use for basic concepts, and the unnecessary multiplication of labels for the same concept (Translation strategy? Procedure? Technique? Shift? Method?). This terminological mess leads to inconsistency and a lack of clarity.

Popper gives enormous importance to the value of clarity. "Every increase in clarity is of intellectual value in itself; an increase in precision or exactness has only a pragmatic value as a means to some definite end" (ibid.: 24). Aeroplane engineers need more precise definitions of various bits of equipment and standards of measurement than I do when I build a garden shed, and they must work to a much greater degree of precision. Other fields of human endeavour seem to get along very well with vague concepts – consider the typical evaluative language of concert reviews, for instance, or even translation criticism.

Some scholars have argued that translation studies cannot really make any progress at all until we have a water-tight definition of the object of study (see e.g. Gutt 2000: 4f). I beg to differ. All we need is a rough, approximate, working definition, one that we can feel free to adjust as we go along. All we need is to be able to agree more or less on what we are talking about, so that we can formulate interesting descriptive or explanatory claims. After all, we may later come across evidence or examples that make us want to expand or refine our initial definitions.

What interesting or useful claims would require us to distinguish e.g. between translations and versions and adaptations and localizations? What added value would such a distinction confer? Until we have good claims to make which would rely on such distinctions, we could just as well agree to call them all bananas.

Anne Schjoldager

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
 By any other name would smell as sweet
 (*Romeo and Juliet*, II. ii. 33).

Of course translation and its subcategories (versions, adaptations, localizations, interpreting) would still be the same even if we decided to call them something else. Naturally it cannot be an end in itself to make *everybody* agree on denominations and detailed definitions. I certainly agree that “definitions do not have to be more precise than they need to be” (Chesterman, above). However, I also think that such issues can be taken too lightly. I am therefore rather inclined to answer both questions of the introduction in the affirmative: Yes, names matter and, yes, definitions matter.

In the following, I shall focus on the issue of names, arguing that the choice of name for our object of study and its various subcategories has significant signal value – both for research, professional and training reasons.

Scholars need a shared conceptual framework to structure the field and for orientation purposes. In particular, we need tools for describing how related objects are similar and how they are different, enabling us to see which generalizations apply to which kinds of translation, and which are more generally applicable. (See also Chesterman’s (2000) discussion of translation typology.) This helps us to establish some sort of consensus regarding which objects of study belong to our field and which do not. Formerly, for instance, activities like subtitling and dubbing might not have been studied under the heading of translation studies, but now they are, as exemplified and pointed out by Gottlieb (1994/1997: 86): “As even translation scholars grow used to the electronic media, subtitling and other types of audiovisual translation are gaining access to theoretical works on translation”. (Another example is Hatim & Mason’s (1997: 78ff) study of politeness in film subtitling in their book *The translator as communicator*.)

Thus, whereas translation previously tended to be regarded as a (mainly) written activity aimed at equivalence (invariance) between two texts, the term ‘translation’ now tends to be much more inclusive, covering most types of interlingual, mediated communication with a (rather) wide variety of aims permitted. There can be no doubt that this development

is beneficial, because it broadens our field in an interesting way and helps us to study both similarities and differences between related activities. Also, as I see it, agreeing on a particular usage influences the way people look at an activity.

The name of the academic discipline is a case in point. As pointed out by Holmes (1972/2000) in his now-famous paper “The name and nature of translation studies”, one important obstacle to the development of the research field was a lack of consensus regarding its name. Holmes (1972/2000: 174f) briefly discusses and rejects various terms in use at the time. Thus, for instance he dislikes the term ‘translation theory’ (modelled on German ‘Übersetzungswissenschaft’) because it is too restrictive; he rejects Eugene Nida’s use of ‘science of translating’ because it implies that the field belongs with the sciences, which it does not; and he dismisses a term like ‘translatology’ (modelled on French ‘traductologie’) because it is unsatisfactory English. Holmes then suggests ‘translation studies’ as the most appropriate standard term for the field: it underscores that research involves more than theorizing and that the field belongs with the humanities rather than the sciences; and the use of ‘studies’ is quite common in English when new disciplines are to be named (cf. literary studies and communication studies). There can be no doubt that such “meta-reflection” – as Holmes (1972/2000: 176) himself calls it – is both useful and necessary. At least, though it took a while for Holmes’ paper to reach a broader audience, the name that he proposed is now generally accepted without argument (cf. Baker’s (ed.) (1998) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*). With this discussion out of the way, we are free to concentrate on other and more interesting matters.

A standard name for the activity is also important for professional reasons. First and foremost, translators who have an accepted standard name for their profession are more likely to be seen as belonging to a distinct profession (and I think they should be) than if they do not; and, as implied above in my discussion of the term ‘translation’, I happen to like ‘translator’ as a unifying term. Furthermore, having a well-defined professional profile will help practitioners explain how their particular competences differ from those of other professionals – say, lawyers (cf. legal translation) or engineers (cf. technical translation). (Cf. Vermeer’s (1989/2000: 222) insistence that translators are experts in translational action.)

Finally, trainers need precise conceptual tools to help students understand the task at hand. Let me mention an example: When, as a student, I was first taught interpreting, our instructor was insistent that we understood that interpreting was *not* translation, but I never quite saw why this was necessary. (I still do not, actually.) For instance, when urging us always to correct future clients who referred to us as translators if, in fact, we were acting as interpreters, our instructor seemed to imply that this was because translation was *always* written and *always* aimed at complete and accurate transfer, in a rather absolute sense, whereas neither could *ever* be the case for interpreting, but I am still not sure if this was really our instructor's intended meaning. To say the least, this situation was unsatisfactory and it led to some unfortunate confusion. It would have been helpful, I think, if this and other instructors had been explicit about their use of terms (and definitions).

Helle V. Dam

In this contribution to the discussion on the role of definitions and names in translation studies, I should like to take a pragmatic stand arguing that what is important is that we reach basic **agreement**, preferably once and for all. The precise definitions and labels themselves are relatively unimportant, as long as we *agree* on the definitions of central concepts and the names we use to describe them. Thus, I have no objections to the use of for example the term 'bananas' – as suggested by Chesterman above – to cover e.g. translations, versions, adaptations and localizations, provided that we all agree that this is a good term and that we all decide to actually use that particular label – and that one only – to refer to these probably not too different products of translation.

Achieving such fundamental agreement would in itself constitute progress in translation studies. As it is, the long and often unproductive meta-discussions, including discussions on names and definitions, take up far too much space in the literature on translation, not to mention time and effort in the translation scholars who engage in them – time and effort that could have been invested in 'real', productive research like the identification of interesting problems and formulation and testing of intriguing hypotheses. If James Holmes found that meta-reflections were scarce when he wrote his seminal paper on *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies* in 1972 (Holmes 1972/2000: 176), such reflections

certainly have taken up a lot of space since then, and continue to do so – as also pointed out by Holmes himself at a later point (Holmes 1975/1988: 79). For example, most books and articles on interpreting – which I would say was a subfield of translation, although certainly not everyone would agree (!) – dedicate entire chapters or sections to discussions of names and definitions (e.g. Schjoldager 1998; Mason 2000). Also, there is a plethora of articles dealing exclusively with these issues (e.g. Mead 1999; Roy 1993/2002).

Apart from the time, space and energy that the more or less futile meta-discussions take up, the current lack of agreement in translation studies leads to a different problem, namely that of multiple naming: the many different names we use to denote apparently identical activities or phenomena are bound to create confusion. For example in the literature on interpreting it is quite common to refer to what is usually taken to be (almost) the same phenomenon as both ‘community interpreting’, ‘public service interpreting’ and ‘cultural interpreting’ – labels that are sometimes (but not always, mind you) also taken to be synonymous with ‘dialogue interpreting’, ‘bilateral interpreting’ and ‘liaison interpreting’ – and the list is not even exhaustive. Although the different terms may reveal slight differences in the backgrounds, orientations and approaches of those who use them, the confusion caused by multiple naming clearly outweighs the advantages it offers in terms of fine-grained differentiation (cf. Chesterman’s discussion of clarity vs. precision above). In my opinion we would be much better off if we simply chose *one* of the above terms and used it consistently whenever we wished to talk about the particular type of interpreting it refers to. Or, alternatively, in order to avoid discriminatory treatment of the existing terms, we might choose an entirely different label – perhaps something in line with the term ‘bananas’ suggested by Chesterman as a cover term for all products of translation. Choosing one, unitary term – no matter which – would satisfy what is my overriding concern here: that we reach agreement about terminological usage, preferably once and for all, in order to pave the way for more productive scholarly work.

The question of agreement is a bit more complicated when it comes to definitions. Unlike the case with names, the possibility of reaching final, ‘once-and-for-all’ agreements on the definitions of central concepts is highly unlikely. Like other kinds of hypotheses (cf. Chesterman above),

definitions are bound to change over time, as new insights are reached, or realities change. In other words, definitions are – by definition – dynamic in nature. Let me give an example from the field of interpreting: Up to now there has been ample consensus on defining interpreting as a special type of translation, with ‘orality’ as its distinctive feature. Interpreting is therefore usually defined more or less as oral translation of oral texts (or utterances, messages, etc.). However, more recently some scholars have pointed out that this definition is too restrictive insofar as it excludes sign language interpreting – an area that has attracted increasing attention over the last decade – from interpreting studies. Consequently, in recent years several attempts have been made to come up with a new definition that would rightly accommodate sign language interpreting within the broader field of interpreting. In particular, in some of his recent work Franz Pöchhacker, drawing i.a. on Otto Kade’s early translation-theoretical work (especially Kade 1968), has suggested replacing ‘orality’ with ‘immediacy’ as the distinctive feature of interpreting (Pöchhacker 2000 and in press), thus accommodating i.a. sign language interpreting within the definition of interpreting. I have little doubt that this (re)definition of interpreting will gain wide support in the future, not only because it is well-founded, but mainly because there is currently a serious need for a revision of the existing definition of interpreting in accordance with the expanding field.

As this example shows, definitions require occasional modifications, as new needs arise or new insights are reached. This means that we cannot ever expect to be able to establish final definitions, once and for all. Still, it would be useful if we at least *tried* to reach basic agreement on our definitions of central concepts and then decided to stick to the agreed definitions for as long as possible, i.e. until circumstances have unmistakably changed.

In sum, the definitions of central concepts, and the words we choose to name them by, are unimportant *per se*. What is crucial is that we reach basic **agreement** on how to define and label our concepts, so that we can get to work. Why not agree to agree, just for once?

Jan Engberg

In the following discussion of the role of definitions and names in translation studies I argue that disagreement is actually better for the discipline

than agreement. In my view, not only is the name chosen for the discipline itself without importance (contrary to what Schjoldager claims above), but an attempt to establish even temporarily a basic agreement on definitions of the object to be studied by translation scholars is more detrimental than helpful to the development of the discipline. Such an agreement could only be an agreement on some prototypical kind of translation (as suggested i.a. by Halverson (1998, especially 507-510) and Tirkkonen-Condit et al (2002)), which would apply solely to a very small number of the actual activities belonging to the field of translation. And to my mind such a solution does not solve the inevitable definition problem every time we go outside the prototypical centre of the field. What we need instead are open minds to communication and debate between conflicting points of view.

The core problem in this complex lies in the fact that definitions are (as stated by Chesterman as well as by Dam above) merely hypotheses about the object studied. An important consequence of this fact is that definitions must therefore be dependent on the theoretical stance held by the researcher studying the object (Chesterman & Arrojo 2000: 152). This being the case, agreement on basic definitions would imply agreement between the many different approaches to translation in spite of the fact that they are based on theoretically fairly different grounds. I take such an effort of creating a kind of common basis to be an unnecessary task. This is backed up by the fact, as stated by Neubert (2002: 334), that one of the most important insights gained in translation studies so far is that the field of translation has a huge number of facets, and that this characteristic of being multifaceted may best be described by combining a number of different research perspectives. Because “looking at the field from different angles puts different aspects of the processes and products into focus” (ibid.).

Neubert’s statement is primarily concerned with opening up a variety of angles within translation studies, although he seems to have the idea (like Dam above) that at least there should be (or perhaps there is) a loose agreement as to what is the object of study for translation studies. Even at this point I fail to see the real benefit of an agreement. It may be that discussions among scholars lead to some kind of actual agreement, because a particular way of circumscribing the object turns out to be the only sensible way to describe and define it. But I do not see this as a kind

of ideal state of the development of translation studies. Along the same lines for example Pym (2001: 336) says rightly that limiting translation studies to a specific kind of activity agreed upon by some group of scholars may lead to an unwanted restriction as to the activities studied. There are lots of alternative ways of cross-cultural communication which also have explanatory relevance for what goes on in prototypical translation, and excluding them from translation studies could be detrimental to the development of the discipline. And for example studies like Gutt (2000) have brought very good insights into processes centrally involved in the process of translation, even though his basic point of view is that this process is not really an object of its own, but basically just communication; translation therefore draws upon exactly the same procedures and cognitive abilities as any other kind of communication (op.cit., 22-23).

The only place where it may really be important to be able to distinguish for example a translation from other kinds of text production, and where consequently a definition could possibly be needed, is within academia itself. As also stated i.a. by Tirkkonen-Condit et al (2002: 340), the practising translator does not bother. But in the scholarly world we need the distinctions in order to be able to create our own departments, to get exactly the right persons for the different positions, and to distinguish not only translation scholars from for example foreign language scholars, but also different kinds of translation scholars from each other – in other words to be able to create an “us-and-them” kind of situation. Much of the heated debate on the concept of equivalence going on in the 80s and 90s, especially in the German literature on translation, could actually be seen as a reflection of this need of claiming the object of study. But I do not think that the effect of creating in-group and out-group persons that this work on definitions may have is actually worth the effort put into it. I am sure that we can find more fruitful ways of securing our different territories than to keep on banging definitions onto each others’ heads. There is enough evidence in the last few centuries of the study of translation and in the professional field of translators to secure the discipline, even if we give up the idea of it being ideal, necessary, or even possible to reach any kind of agreement about what we look at within the discipline. So even in this respect I doubt that looking for the right definition is useful.

On these grounds, the only kind of “definition” we may need would be something mechanical and empirically founded, like “Translation is what the translator does in his professional life”. This kind of definition does not require agreement, but can be established by asking the relevant people, and it does not produce any kind of neat picture. As Gentzler (2001: 163-64) says, the work of a translator and thus the “definition” of a translator has changed a lot over the last ten years, making the translator responsible not only for rendering information from a source language into a target language, but also for subtitling, editing, proof reading, layouting, and designing documents. If we took the position that translation may be “defined” as stated above, this rapid development of the profession would potentially lead to a very fast development of the discipline itself. Naturally, it is debatable whether translation studies should actually be the study of everything a translator does within his profession, but here we are precisely approaching the central point that I want to make: In order to produce insights relevant for scholars and practitioners alike (which should in my opinion be the optimal goal for the scientific study of translation), and in order to respect the multifaceted nature of the activity of translating, we need different and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the object we study. What we need is therefore not agreement, but open minds to disagreement and a will to communicate and exchange points of view.

So what we definitely need in order to avoid dull and useless discussions (which is probably what we all have in mind when we criticise the role played by discussions of names and definitions in translation studies) is not agreement on basic definitions or common grounds, but acceptance of the multifaceted character of the object of study and thus of the possibility of differing positions being equally adequate, but reflecting different aspects of the object of study. Concerning names, we might as well call them bananas. And concerning definitions: precisely by not requiring agreement on basic definitions, but instead *allowing and accepting disagreement as a point of departure for communication*, we create new insights. The important thing is not agreement on content, but agreement to keep on communicating across disagreement on content – in other words a discipline open for discussions in which we agree to disagree.

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