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Preface

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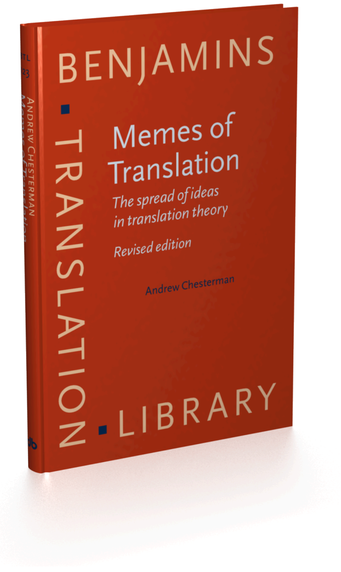
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Memes of Translation
The spread of ideas in translation theory
Revised edition
Andrew Chesterman
ANDREW CHESTERMAN
BTL
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Andrew Chesterman
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Preface

> I see humanity as a family that has hardly met. I see the meeting of people, bodies, thoughts, emotions or actions as the start of most change. Each link created by a meeting is like a filament, which, if they were all visible, would make the world look as though it is covered with gossamer. Every individual is connected to others, loosely or closely, by a unique combination of filaments, which stretch across the frontiers of space and time. Every individual assembles past loyalties, present needs and visions of the future in a web of different contours, with the help of heterogeneous elements borrowed from other individuals; and this constant give-and-take has been the main stimulus of humanity’s energy. Once people see themselves as influencing one another, they cannot be merely victims: anyone, however modest, then becomes a person capable of making a difference, minute though it might be, to the shape of reality. New attitudes are not promulgated by law, but spread, almost like an infection, from one person to another.
>
> (Zeldin [1994] 1995: 465–466)

In Classical Greece the source of truth, knowledge, revelation, was the oracle. A person officially designated to go and consult an oracle was known as a *theoros* (θεωρός; Liddell and Scott 1940: s.v.). Interestingly enough, the same term was also used of someone who was sent to attend a festival in some official capacity. Yet another sense of the word is that of ‘magistrate’, and more generally ‘spectator’, or ‘one who travels to see’ people and places (ibid.). The *theoros,* then, was interested in truth, knowledge, but also in pleasure. The word contains a sense of rational judgement (as a magistrate’s title), but the core meaning is simply someone who sees, who sees with a purpose.

From this noun came the verb *theorein* (θεωρεῖν) ‘to see, gaze upon’. This seeing was distinct from older verbs of seeing, in that it emphasized the function of the seeing rather than the seeing itself. It meant ‘to be a spectator’, i.e. a spectator *of something*; it stressed the conscious, deliberate activity of seeing rather than some kind of purely passive perception (Snell 1975: 15).

And by this path came the noun *theoria*, (θεωρῖα) ‘theory’. It carried both the outward sense of ‘a looking at, a viewing‘ and the inner sense of ‘contemplation, speculation’ (OED, s.v. *theory*).

There is a delightful anecdote in Herodotus ([1920] Book I, §29–30) about the wise man Solon, who had come to work as a legislator for the Athenians, and then evidently felt that he needed a break. So he left home and set out on a voyage "to see the world", as Godley translates it. The original Greek literally states that he went out into the world "for the sake of *theoria*" – i.e. in order to see and contemplate.

It is in this sense that the term "theory" is used in this book. Theories themselves come in many shapes and sizes: some are a good deal more scholarly/scientific or more formalized than others, some are empirical, others metaphorical; some are at a high level of generality, others are more specific.

The book has three main aims. The first is metatheoretical: it offers a view of theory, in fact quite a few theories. It explores some of the main ways in which translation has been seen and contemplated, and suggests a conceptual framework within which a number of disparate views of translation can be linked.

The second aim is theoretical. On this level, I set out to develop a particular theoretical view of translation, one that has been greatly influenced by the philosophy of Karl Popper. I propose, in effect, a Popperian theory of translation. I also draw on norm theory and to some extent on action theory, in an attempt to weave various strands into a coherent whole. My fundamental building-blocks are the concepts of norm, strategy and value, plus Popper's concepts of tentative theory, error elimination , and the evolution of objective knowledge.

My underlying metaphor for translation comes from the notion of memes: a meme is simply an idea that spreads (memes are explained in more detail in Chapter 1). The metaphor comes from sociobiology: ideas spread, replicate themselves, like genes do. My motive in using this metaphor as an umbrella-idea to cover many aspects of this book is to provide an alternative to the traditional transfer metaphor of translation. The meme metaphor highlights an aspect of the translation phenomenon that I want to foregound: the way that ideas spread and change as they are translated, just as biological evolution involves mutations. In this light, a translator is not someone whose task is to conserve something but to propagate something, to spread and even develop it: translators are agents of change. Translators, in fact, make a difference… The metaphor thus gives less priority to the notions of "preserving identity" or "sameness" which underlie the more traditional image of "carrying something across", a something that somehow remains unchanged. I offer the meme metaphor as a helpful way to look at translation. If it works as a way of stimulating new insights, fine; if not, we can forget about it. The applications of Popper's ideas do not depend on the meme metaphor; nor do my arguments about norms, strategies and values.

The third aim is more practical. Many practising professional translators are suspicious of theory, or may be of the opinion that there is no such thing as a theory of translation anyway. Translator trainees, too, often feel that what they need is simply more practice, not high-flown talk about abstract theory. In response to such claims, I argue that a translator must have a theory of translation: to translate without a theory is to translate blind. I also argue that theoretical concepts can be essential tools for thought and decision-making during the translation process. My third aim is thus to demonstrate that translation theory can be useful – to translators themselves, to trainees and to their teachers.

The book thus attempts to cover a fairly wide field, but certainly not the whole of Translation Studies. In particular, I do not focus on the technical side of translation: computer aids, terminological databases and the like; nor on interpreting. Nor am I interested in giving prescriptive advice: my attitude to norms is descriptive, not prescriptive.

The overall movement of the book goes from theory to practice. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of the meme, borrowed from sociobiology into cultural evolution studies. By way of illustration, it discusses five "supermemes" of translation theory: the source-target metaphor, the equivalence idea, the myth of untranslatability, the free-vs-literal argument, and the idea that all writing is a kind of translating. Memes are then argued to exist primarily in Popper's World 3, and a Popperian meme is introduced that will be a recurrent theme in the book.

Chapter 2 outlines the evolution of (Western) translation theory, in terms of eight major stages, each building on and reacting to its antecedents and overlapping with them. These stages are not transitory but cumulative, so that the present picture we have of the phenomenon called translation – the total pool of ideas about translation, as it were – is composed of strata from all the previous stages. The chapter ends with a review of some conflicting ideas about translation theory in the current "meme pool".

Chapter 3 argues that some ideas about translation eventually become norms, and that norm theory provides powerful tools for thinking about both translation theory and translation practice.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus from product to process. Given that there are translation norms, how do translators seek to conform to them? This question is discussed in terms of the notion of translation strategies, which depend on and are oriented towards translation norms.

How do we assess attempts to conform to norms? Chapter 5 offers a Popperian approach to translation assessment, based on the view that any translation is itself a theory: a theory of the source text. As such, it undergoes the same sort of assessment, criticism, error elimination and corroboration as any other theory.

Chapter 6 is practical, pedagogical. It discusses what implications a Popperian translation theory has for translator training. What relation might there be between the evolution of translation theory and the maturing of an individual translator?

Chapters 1–3 thus explore how translation norms arise, and Chapters 4–6 discuss various effects they have on translation practice. Chapter 7 then focuses on the ethical values underlying the norms that govern translational action.

Update

This revised edition includes Update sections at the end of each chapter, where I outline some of the later developments in research concerning the theme of the chapter, and in my own thinking, since the book was first published in 1997. I have also made some minor textual improvements and corrections and added some later references to the text.

Acknowledgements

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Any remaining weaknesses or errors are of course my own responsibility.

AC, Helsinki, January 1997
Revised edition: Helsinki, December 2015