

Preface and acknowledgments

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.15.01pre>

Pages ix–xiii of

Knowledge and Skills in Translator Behavior

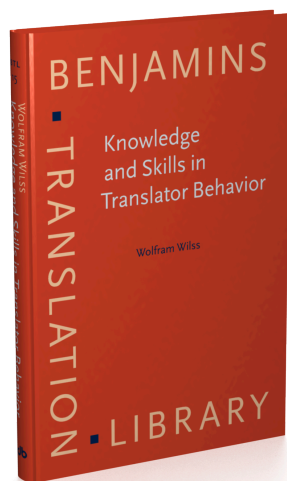
Wolfram Wilss

[Benjamins Translation Library, 15] 1996. xiii, 259 pp.

© John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way. For any reuse of this material written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

For further information, please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website at benjamins.com/rights



Preface

Some problems are interesting because they are easy to solve, others because they are not. The problems to which this book is devoted are of the second kind. They are interesting because every age of translation theory and translation methodology has come to frame its key issues anew and tried to wrestle with them in its own way. It is not known exactly when or where the preoccupation with the intricate problems of translation had its origin. Its beginning was presumably related to the awareness that humankind was by nature destined to speak many different languages, that this state of affairs was going to stay, and that it could not - and should not - be remedied either by a worldwide consensus on a truly universal, wide-ranging “lingua franca” or by coercive language-policy measures. Humanity’s polyglottism has had serious consequences for communication; these are impressively recorded in the biblical account of the Tower of Babel. The Babel myth can be looked upon as the spark which set off a perennial discussion on translation theory, translation methodology, and translation practice. These three issues can be subsumed under the superordinate concept of “translation studies” (TS), a term which was coined by James S. Holmes in 1972, i.e. at a time when translation research presented itself as a collection of methods and techniques rather than as a broadly grounded, self-conscious intellectual endeavor.

In the last 35 years, TS has seen an enormous upsurge, presumably because communication by means of translation is scientifically more demanding than monolingual communication and because in translation it is difficult to balance communicative resources with communicative needs. If we look at the ostensible expansion of interest in translation during this period, we are inclined to claim that TS in its modern form had its origin in the mid twentieth century. While it is true that translation theorists before that time lacked precision tools for empirical research and were sometimes rather one-sided in their assumptions, yet, starting perhaps with Cicero, they be-

queathed to us an enormous store of observations, hypotheses, and perspectives, together with many shrewd insights that have stood the test of time. Even their errors and blind alleys are instructive in one way or another.

At the same time, the magnitude and the complexity of the subject have led to the realizations that a combination of traditional thinking and new cognitive concepts is necessary and that the manifold observations of authentic data must be brought into the scope of a relatively small number of guiding principles. The most important of these is for me the fact that in translator performance, knowledge and skills are inseparable. This concept has important consequences for the organization of this book and for how it will be received by researchers in the field of translation pedagogy and translation teaching.

If we ask the apparently simple question, "Who founded modern TS?" we run head-on into a major problem of science in general and of our subject in particular, namely the problem of scientific invention. A possible answer may be that the roots of modern TS lie in the fertile ground of European and American thought and civilization. Even more than other scientific disciplines, TS ranges over a wide field in which philosophy, theology, anthropology, linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, comparative literature, and more recently, communication theory and computer science form a nourishing blend.

While the whole of European and American tradition has contributed to the development of translation theory, the present flowering of TS has rather pragmatic origins. In a world that is moving from mass communication to universal or global communication and becoming more and more complex in terms of technology and organization, it should come as no surprise that translation, both in oral and in written form, is increasingly important as a tool of international communication with its continuous trend toward acceleration. This development has two origins, at least in Europe:

1. There is a widespread, almost alarming lack of ability to read, understand, or write at least one foreign language. In the preamble to the European Community's foreign-language learning program, this lack is called the "Achilles Heel" of the Community-wide effort to make the free movement of persons and ideas a practical reality (Document no. 6614-89 of the 1321st session of the Council of Europe and the Ministers of Education, May 22, 1989). To put it bluntly: Everyone who thinks he or she can communicate

across Europe without translation is sadly mistaken. And this situation is likely to prevail into the next century.

2. For all its creative productivity, our era seems essentially one of reproducing, inventorying, data processing, and conveying information. Walter Benjamin, to whom we owe some highly provocative statements on the nature and function of literary translation, was to some extent correct in characterizing the twentieth century as the “century of reproduction”; the same goes for those who apostrophize the present as “the century of translation”, saying, in other words, that today there are more areas and domains of international communication than there were in the past.

This situation has provided special incentives to strike out boldly for solutions to practical interlingual and intercultural problems and to make translation the focus of scientific investigation, taking into account the fact that translation, at least when it is done professionally, is always tied to task specifications entailing the question, “Who translates what, for whom, and why?”

In writing this book, I have chosen an approach which is intended to give readers general insight into what translators really do and to explain the concepts and tools of the trade, bearing in mind that translation cannot be reduced to simple principles that can easily be separated from each other and thus be handled in isolation. On the whole, the book is more process- than product- (evaluation) centered. Translation is the manifestation of a dynamic interaction between the source text author, the source text (ST), the translator, the target text (TT), the TT’s reader, and, last but not least, the social environment in which the translator works. Seen in this light, translation is an activity with an intentional and a social dimension establishing links between a source language (SL) community and a target language (TL) community and therefore requiring a specific type of communicative behavior. A better understanding of this “integrated whole” called translation is the chief concern that is reflected throughout the book. To the extent that the underlying principles, assumptions, and conclusions are convincing to the reader, the practical implications of the book will, I believe, take care of themselves.

In its efforts to fit itself into an acceptable, plausible research program deriving from, and defined by, other translation-related disciplines, TS has become an “interactive” field of research, developing a mode of linguistic awareness which has recently gained many insights from work outside the established field of TS, above all from cognitive psychology in general and

from cognitive linguistics in particular. This trend toward the cognitive underpinning of TS entails a number of questions which, as a glance at the titles of the eleven chapters in the table of contents shows, occur in variegated but interlocking contexts: What happens in our mind when we translate? Is there something like a translation intelligence? If so, how do we describe it? What are its building blocks? How do we see the role of the translator as the mediating agent between the ST author and the TT recipient? What are the intellectual and moral obligations of translators? How do they use their linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge in understanding the ST and in producing the TT? Can we say that translation in its entirety is a function of interaction between different knowledge bases? Is it possible to distinguish between general and specific properties of translator behavior? Is it possible to develop a theoretical and methodological framework for translational information processing and thus to expand the horizon of TS in a manner opening vistas for badly needed empirical research? To what extent can TS be regarded as an organized body of cumulative, verifiable knowledge about translator behavior? This is the backdrop of a field which is almost too complex to be challenged. I hope, however, that it is possible to bring a large number of translation problems under cognitive control without risking the danger of overstating (or understating, for that matter) my case. On the other hand, this book is only a tentative, selective approach to TS. The subject matter I discuss, the hypotheses I put forward, and the questions I will frame are fraught with implications which are so numerous that no single person can cope with all of them. Hence, some prioritization is inevitable.

In my attempts to gather useful concepts for this book, I have incurred a heavy intellectual debt to scholars outside the traditional realm of TS. In an effort not to add to the already rather confusing tableau of different positions and approaches typical of a good deal of present-day TS, I have found especially applicable to TS arguments and concepts by the following scholars (in alphabetical order): Brown/Yule, Enkvist, Gardner, Guilford, Langacker, J.M. Mandler, Sternberg, Swales, and Wallsten (see bibliography), all names not normally discussed in standard TS literature, because their relevance for TS does not appear at first glance with equal obviousness (see, however, Wilss 1992). Admittedly, the selection of the above names contains a strong subjective element, a contributory factor having been the precise, persuasive, and elegant manner in which these authors have presented their views. The result is a “cumulative” research design meant to show that TS attempts to

argue in an interdisciplinary, cognitively embedded framework and treats the translation process as a combination of “entrenched” (standardized) and “non-entrenched” (episodic) factors. Given the need for translation to solve problems of communication, TS does not have to defend itself against the reproaches that it is busying itself with a subject which is of no current interest and that it is unable to determine which concepts are likely to contribute to finding solutions to practical needs.

Acknowledgments

The present publication is the result of a lecture series which I delivered in English at Vaasa University, Finland, in the spring of 1993. This explains the organization of the book. While the notion of knowledge and skills is maintained throughout the book, the individual chapters are relatively self-contained, but mutually supportive. They can, if desired, be read largely independently. My host at Vaasa was Professor Hartmut Schröder; so it is to him that I am particularly grateful, because without his invitation and the subsequent force of circumstances to formulate my ideas in English, this book would not have been written. I am also heavily indebted to Professor Juan Sager, who painstakingly read the whole manuscript twice, making innumerable suggestions for improvements both concerning English LSP idiomaticity and the organizational structure of the manuscript, to Dr. Peter Daniels, who helped me tremendously in many ways, and to Dr. Paul Kusssmaul, who pointed out a large number of idiomatic inconsistencies. It should be very clear, though, that any weaknesses, errors, and mistakes in this book are exclusively my own responsibility.

Other persons without whose help this book could not have been published include Mr. Andreas Blum, who helped me with collecting reference material, Mrs. Angelika Lauer, who patiently typed and retyped the manuscript in final form; my wife Ingrid for extensive proofreading, and Mrs. Bertie Kaal, who accepted the manuscript for publication in the John Benjamins Translation Library.

Wolfram Wilss

Universität des Saarlandes
Saarbrücken, December 1995