

Macro- and Micro-level Approaches to Translated Texts - Methodological Contradictions or Mutually Enriching Perspectives? ¹

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The journal *Target* recently hosted a methodological debate on “essentialist vs. non-essentialist approaches to translation” (cf. *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies*. 12:1-13:2), in the course of which several basic methodological orientations in translation studies and related areas were discussed. I shall set out by reminding us that the debate between “essentialism” and “non-essentialism” can be understood as yet another instantiation of a wider debate between “macro-level/top down” and “micro-level/bottom up” methodologies in many disciplines concerned with socio-cultural and socio-semiotic phenomena. I wish to argue that the continuing existence of these different methodological orientations is partly due to the fact that the socio-cultural and socio-semiotic phenomena in question are themselves structured into layers of abstraction, instantiation and specification, related in complex ways by both top-down and bottom-up processes. There is thus nothing wrong or intrinsically worrying about the existence of different methodological orientations, provided that research communities working on these different layers still have enough of a shared concept of discourse, and are thus able to transmit their discourses across layers. I shall argue that a cornerstone of this shared concept of discourse has to be a general concern with *how* (translated and otherwise interlingual) texts work, this concern being logically and methodologically prior to a concern with the further questions *why and with what effects* texts function. The question of *what* translation is can be very differently answered from different perspectives, but here as well, the question of *how* should be at the centre of a shared concern in studies of translation. I shall then go on to identify what I believe to be helpful, and what I believe to be less helpful contributions to methodological debates between macro- and micro-level approaches to translated texts. I shall generally warn against the extremes of top-down abstract discourses which are not checked against any empirical data on the one hand, and against excessive bottom-up empiricism which disregards the fact that after all we are concerned with a meaningful object (text) on the other. I shall thus argue that at its very heart, the (translated and otherwise interlingual) text is a linguistic, or otherwise multimodally-semiotic, object, and that our methodologies have to maintain contact with their linguistic, and more broadly semiotic, base. Recent work by Juliane House will be discussed as an example of a positive integration of macro- and micro-level approaches.

The debate between “essentialism” and “non-essentialism” is but yet another instantiation of a wider debate between “bottom-up” and “top-down” methodologies in many disciplines concerned with socio-cultural² and socio-semiotic³ phenomena. Andrew Chesterman and Rosemary Arrojo (2000) have characterised what much of this debate means for translation studies, in attempting to outline some shared ground inside the discipline. The debate referred to revolves around oppositions such as:

- empirical and descriptive approaches vs. postmodern cultural studies and textual theories,
- essentialism vs. non-essentialism,
- inductive methodologies vs. deductive methodologies,
- non-visibility vs. visibility of the translator.

We shall add another frequently-used opposition here, that between macro-level vs. micro-level approaches.

The continuing existence of these different orientations is partly - and justifiably - due to the fact that the socio-cultural and socio-semiotic phenomena in question are themselves structured. Linguistic (and other socio-semiotic?) systems, as well as descriptions of them, can be structured according to levels and scales of *abstraction*, *specification*, and *instantiation* (cf. Matthiessen 2001; Teich 2001; following Halliday 2001). *Abstraction* yields levels such as context, semantics, lexicogrammar, phonology, the scale of *specification* yields classification and subclassification of phenomena, and the scale of *instantiation* yields at its extreme ends semiotic systems. Thus the phenomenon language is realised in situated texts. Now, for each of these levels and scales it seems to be the case that the “higher up” a piece of research moves, the more it will lean towards “top-down” characteristics, and the lower down it is situated, the more it will embrace “bottom-up” features methodologically. And there seems to be nothing wrong with a state of affairs in which some researchers in translation studies are concerned with, say, very general socio-cultural-semiotic characteristics of their object of study, while at the same time others focus on very fine-grained linguistic details of the lexicogrammatic and phonetic realization of one text. Indeed, such diversity seems welcome, provided the research communities working on these different levels and scales of abstraction still have enough of a shared discourse culture, such they can communicate with each other across levels. Furthermore, there has to be a shared concern with *how* texts function, and with *why* and *to what effect this functioning is actually realised*. The first question is clearly primary. The interest in the *why* and *to what effect* of translation is something that we necessarily and appropriately share with other research communities. And it is an area within which recent translation studies have sometimes annoyed through verbose trivialities, rather than impressed through insightful research. The interest in the *how* (and in that sense in the *what*) can usefully be seen as the province of translation studies, partly shared with its close sisters linguistics and literary studies (to the extent that these latter have a textual orientation, which cannot always be taken for granted).

The question of *what* translation is can be answered in very different ways from many different perspectives, as is well documented in Chesterman and Arrojo’s discussion (2000: 152pp.), and also in a search of the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus of British English reported and analysed in Matthiessen (2001: 43pp.). In the latter, 64 relevant instances of usage were found, inside a corpus of one million running words spread very unevenly across different genres. The instances fall into a whole range of different meanings, ranging from a material goal-directed activity (e.g. *Fred translated it into English and French*) to an abstract relation (e.g. *The word translated ‘madness’ means ‘mad revelry and wickedness’*), and many more different usages. In other words, in everyday usage just as in academic discourse, people talk (and significantly also avoid talking) about *translation* in very different genres, and with a whole range of different meanings. In view of this, I would like to re-emphasize that an interest which may serve to unify translation studies is the *how* as in *how the translated text works*, rather than a generalized and over-used *what* as in *what is translation?*. It seems to me that we have a usefully constrained discourse for talking about the former, but much less so for talking about the latter.

Let me briefly try to identify what I believe to be helpful, and what I believe to be less helpful contributions to methodological debates between macro- and micro-level approaches to translated texts. Positive examples of a constrained discourse about the *how* of translated texts - from very different theoretical backgrounds - appear to me to be traditions of study such as those of Doherty (1999), Koller (1992), or Toury (1995), or the one that I myself share most with methodologically exemplified in House (1977/1997), Hatim and Mason (1990), Steiner and Yallop (2001), Steiner (2002). Significantly, although these approaches are very different in their theoretical background, what they do share is their openness to

considerations on macro- and micro levels, and a detailed interest in *how* the translated text works. What I would warn against would be top-down abstract discourses about texts - whose content cannot be tested against empirical data - such as in some variants of post-modernist, and non-essentialist discourse. If, however, we engage in a discourse whose terms and statements are not interpretable in terms of lower-level textual features, we may find ourselves in the lofty no-man's land of discourses-about-discourses-about-discourses... which makes translation studies not a success story, but a narrative of subjectivist despair and dogmatic decadence. But what seems to me equally harmful is an excessive bottom-up empiricism which disregards the fact that after all, we are concerned with a meaningful object (text). This object is not "given" to us in a naively empirical objectivist, and essentialist, form, but rather, is already and necessarily an interpreted network of relations, thus requiring models of meaning in order to be "understood". In other words, our object of study is not knowable in the form of atheoretical "raw" data, such as numbers of letters or phonological units in a text or discourse, but rather always requires some form of interpretation, preferably one based on a rich model of what language is and what texts are - rich in terms of levels of description and scales of abstraction (cf. Teich 2001; Hansen 2002).

The work of Juliane House on translated, and in a wider sense, multilingual texts appears to me to be a particularly good example of how the consideration of macro- and micro-level phenomena can be integrated, rather than separated and opposed to each other, in analysis. In recent comparative analyses of texts in English and German (cf. House 2002), she tests hypotheses about whether German textual norms are adapted to Anglophone ones, either in parallel texts, or in translations. The corpus covers the genres computer instructions, popular science texts, and external business communication. The hypotheses relate to:

- a possible shift to a typically English interpersonal, from a typically German ideational orientation,
- a shift to a typically English inference-inducing implicitness from a German informational explicitness,
- a shift towards less informational density as in English, from an assumed higher informational density typical of German,
- a shift away from the German *Satzklammer* to greater syntactic fluency among the parts of a sentence, as in English.

Now, the phenomena in terms of which these hypotheses can be operationalised ultimately have to be lexicogrammatical, that is to say "micro-level", but the factors which allow the investigation of how lexicogrammatical features fall into relevant configurations have to be "macro-level", i.e. notions such as "register" and "genre". This is particularly well documented in the careful discussion (House 2002: 204pp.) of how and possibly why the initial hypotheses have to be at least investigated on a wider empirical basis, and quite possibly modified in the light of anticipated results.

What appears to be particularly promising in the work of House is the fact that the opposition between "macro- and micro-" does not arise methodologically, or to the extent that it does, it can be reconciled in insightful ways. Macro-level categories, such as genre or register, are not neglected, but serve an important function both in the generation of hypotheses, and in the interpretation of results. On the other hand, the entire investigation is made empirical by operationalising the hypotheses in terms of lexicogrammatical features, in terms of which hypotheses can be evaluated, further developed and changed.

We have in our own work in Saarbrücken attempted something similar - and in some respects complementary - to House's work, with a somewhat shifted emphasis towards

lexicogrammatical realization and thus micro-level (cf. Steiner 2001, 2002; Teich 2001; Hansen 2002), and towards developing and adapting electronic tools (cf. Teich, Hansen and Fankhauser 2001). And like House, we have found the macro-level work of Halliday and Hasan (1989) and of Martin (1992) particularly useful (cf. also Steiner 1991), as well as micro-level work by Halliday (1994), Halliday and Matthiessen (1999), Doherty (1996, 1999), Fabricius-Hansen (1996). Finally, we are placing a high value on relating cross-cultural studies to language comparison (cf. Steiner & Teich, in press).

Let us finally return to the overriding question of this paper on whether macro- and micro-level approaches to translated texts are methodological contradictions or mutually enriching perspectives. Maybe controversially for some in the field of translation studies, I am arguing that at its very heart, the (translated and otherwise interlingual) text is a linguistic, and also very often a multimodally semiotic object⁴. Accordingly, our methodologies, however widely we may wish to cast our net, have to maintain contact with their linguistic, and more generally semiotic, base. What is therefore urgently needed is a model of language and text/discourse, within which the different levels of organisation of language, the different degrees of abstraction, and certainly the breadth and depth of empirical phenomena can be situated. The interest in the *why and to what effect* of translation is something that we do, and must, share with other research communities. It is the interest in the *how* (and in that sense in *what*) that may helpfully serve as the identifying methodological and thematic core of systematic studies of translation and other forms of multilingual text production.

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¹ The following is an extended and revised version of Steiner (in press).

² For example social formations in sociology and anthropology, or the individual in psychology.

³ Relationships between and within different texts in different modalities, including language in particular.

⁴ For an insightful multimodal tool for translation didactics cf. Taylor and Baldry (2001).

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