Perspectives: Studies in Translatology

Paratranslation – a new paradigm or a re-invented wheel?

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First

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Paratranslation − a new paradigm or a re-invented wheel?

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'Paratranslation' has been proclaimed as a revolutionary approach that finally puts translation and, with it, translation studies into its proper place. After a brief analysis of the etymology of the word, the article discusses the origin of the approach and its definitions, coming to the conclusion that it starts out from a very narrow, linguistic concept of translation that was left behind by *skopos* theory and the functional approaches, among others, more than 30 years ago. If translation is seen as an interaction carried out within a situation-in-culture, there is no need for 'new' concepts which turn out to be a wheel that has been in use in many parts of the world for quite a long time.

Keywords: translation; functionalism; skopos theory; paratext; transtextuality

Preliminary remarks

Visiting the University of Vigo, Galicia, a few months ago, I was faced with a new concept: 'paratradución' (in Galician), translated into Spanish as 'paratraducción' and into French as 'paratraduction'. In English, 'paratranslation' would probably be an adequate translation. The research group T&P (Traducción & paratraducción, cf. http://www.paratraduccion.com) is mainly concerned with written texts, but, as far as I can see, their approach could also be applied to interpreting.

But what *is* paratranslation? As a person who has been interested in language and language use for the past 50 years, I start by analysing the etymology of the word (a very German way of approaching a new concept, by the way). The prefix *para-* is derived from a Greek preposition meaning 'at the side of, beside' (as in *parataxis* or *parathyroid*), 'amiss, irregular' or 'beyond' (as in *paranormal*), 'distinct from, but analogous to' (as in *paramilitary, paratyphoid*) or 'connected with and helping' (as in *paramedical*). In chemistry, it can even denote substitution at diametrically-opposite carbon atoms in a benzene ring (as in *paradichlorobenzene*). Is paratranslation, therefore, 'some activity at the side of, beside translation'? Or an 'irregular' form of translation? Or something 'distinct but analogous to' translation? Or perhaps even something 'diametrically opposite' translation? At any rate, the prefix refers to a relationship in space, and if we take a closer look at the context, the fact that 'paratranslation' always comes at the side of 'translation' shows that the two terms refer to different things that have something in common: translation.

Other words with *para-* that come to mind include: *paramedic*, a person who is trained to do medical work, especially emergency first aid, but is not a fully qualified

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doctor; and *parapsychology*, the study of mental phenomena which are excluded from or inexplicable by orthodox scientific psychology (such as hypnosis, telepathy, etc.). Before we come to the conclusion that paratranslation is a form of translation which is inexplicable by orthodox scientific translation studies and carried out by not fully-qualified persons in cases of emergency, we stop browsing the dictionary for other words beginning with *para-*. Instead, we follow J. Hillis Miller (1979, p. 219), who adequately characterizes this complicated prefix:

> *para-* is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, [. . .] something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in *para-*, moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside.

Thus, the etymological analysis did not shed much light on the concept. We shall therefore look at the definitions provided by T&P, which boasts of having found the key to a new discipline.

Paratranslation and paratext

The concept of paratranslation is based on the work of Gérard Genette, one of the most influential and original authors in literary criticism. In his book *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degrée* (1981, in English *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree*, 1997a) and later in *Seuils* (1987, in English *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, 1997b), Genette defines his concept of paratext as 'everything that surrounds or accompanies a text':

> the paratext is what enables the text to become a book, and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is rather a *threshold*, or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an undefined zone between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text". Indeed, this fringe, always a conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that, whether well or poorly understood and achieved, is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it. (Genette, 1987/1997b, pp. 1–2)

Thus, a paratext is a text that accompanies, complements, comments on and influences the interpretation of the basic or main text. The relationship between the paratext and the main text is called paratextuality. This concept is also used in intertextuality research (cf., among others, Julia Kristeva's groundbreaking work e.g. Kristeva 1980), where the paratext is regarded as belonging to the same category as the metatext or the hypertext.

According to Genette, we can make a distinction between 'authorial' and 'editorial' paratexts. *Authorial paratexts*, such as prefaces or chapter headings, are

produced by the author him or herself, whereas *editorial paratexts*, like the design of the book cover, including the title, the publication of a book as part of a series, the layout or number of copies printed, are the editor's or publisher's responsibility. In line even with a more traditional concept of translation, authorial paratexts are regarded as part of the 'source text' and usually translated (regardless of what the publisher makes of the translation later on), whereas editorial paratexts do not normally fall into the responsibility of translators.

Moreover, depending on the paratext's proximity or distance with regard to the main text, Genette distinguishes between *peritexts* and *epitexts*. Peritexts are those paratexts which are rather closely linked to the main text, e.g. title, subtitle, motto, preface or epilogue or dedication. In contrast, epitexts are separated from the main text and provide information about it, like a commentary, a review or an interview with the author. Traditionally, we would speak of secondary literature in these cases, whereas peritexts belong to the primary sources. It is obvious that both types of paratexts play an important role in the comprehension and interpretation of texts, and this does not only apply to literary but also to non-literary texts.

In Genette's words:

> And if the text without its paratext is sometimes like an elephant without a mahout, a power disabled, the paratext without its text is a mahout without an elephant, a silly show. (Genette, 1987/1997b: 410)

Like probably most central Europeans, I have no clear idea of what a *mahout* is. In the French original, the author uses the word *cornac*, which is not listed in an ordinary monolingual French dictionary either, but a quick search reveals that a *cornac*, in English *mahout* (a loanword from Hindi), is a person who trains and drives an elephant in India, Thailand or Vietnam, where elephants traditionally work for the forest service and for the logging business. A mahout starts as a boy, when he is assigned a young elephant, and they would be attached to each other throughout the elephant's life. Thus, in order to find out about the mahout, we had to analyse some epitexts, and in a translation into German or Spanish we would probably use the knowledge acquired from these epitexts and the (situational) context in and for which we are translating to produce a target text that is coherent for the target readership and achieves its referential function. Do we now have to call a translation which takes the context into account a 'paratranslation'? I would just call it a 'functional translation'.

The (re)appearance of pragmatics in the 1970s

Genette's first book on paratext appeared in 1981 (Genette, 1981/1997a). In linguistics, which had been dominated by Chomsky's theory of transformational grammar for a long time, until Austin and Searle with their theory of speech acts drew the attention towards the non-linguistic conditions of language use and language users, the 1970s had seen the birth of pragmatics. It could even be called a 're-invention' because the situation in which a communicative interaction takes place and the participants of this interaction had been important aspects in ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric. It seems that certain parts of knowledge tend to be forgotten over time and have to be taken up and modified in later centuries.

Back in the second century B.C.E., the Stoic Hermagoras of Temnos coined the formula *quis quid quando ubi cur quem ad modum quibus adminiculis?* (who [says] what when where why how and by which means?) to help his rhetoric students memorize the relevant factors of successful communication. This formula was framed in a hexameter verse by Matthew of Vendôme in 1170: *Quis quid ubi / quibus auxiliis / cur quomodo quando?* Almost 800 years later, in 1948, it was rediscovered and introduced into American New Rhetoric by Harold Dwight Lasswell: *Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?*, thus making its way into modern linguistics and contributing to the 'pragmatic turn' in the mid-1970s. Around the same time, literary scholars also started to focus on text reception and reader response (cf., among many others, Iser, 1976/1980). The emerging discipline of translation studies (cf. Snell-Hornby, 2006, pp. 35–40) soon followed suit. *Skopos* theory and the functional approaches (cf. Reiss & Vermeer, 1984/2012) also have to be seen in the light of these developments.

For teachers at translator training institutions, who had been looking for a theoretical framework that would take the conditions of professional practice into account, pragmatics (and, with it, pragmatic text linguistics) came as an eye-opener. Quite a few of them were working on pre-translational text analysis to teach their students how to achieve a good understanding of the source text when preparing their translations (cf. Bühler, 1984; Hönig, 1986; Reiß, 1984, to name but a few from Germany). Nord (1988/2005, p. 41) also draws on the Lasswell formula when elaborating her model of text analysis in translation, rephrasing it into a more comprehensive list of 'WH-questions' in which the pragmatic or extratextual factors are covered by the following questions: 'Who [transmits] to whom what for by which medium where when why [a text] with what function?'

In this situation, it does not come as a surprise that Genette takes a similar pragmatic view when proposing his concept of paratext. The introduction to his second book, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, is programmatic:

> The approach we will take in studying each of these elements, or rather each of these types of elements, is to consider a certain number of features that, in concert, allow us to define the status of a paratextual message, whatever it may be. These features basically describe a paratextual message's spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic and functional characteristics. More concretely: defining a paratextual element consists in determining its location (the question *where*?); the date of its appearance and, if need be, its disappearance (*when?*); its mode of existence, verbal or other (*how?*); the characteristics of its situation of communication – its sender and addressee (*from whom? to whom?*); and the function its message aims to fulfill (*to do what?*). This questionnaire is a little simplistic but because it almost entirely defines the method employed in the rest of this book, no doubt a few words of justification are in order at the outset. (Genette, 1987/1997b, p. 4)

This very brief outline of the situation which influenced Genette's way of looking at the 'environment' of the text shows how important it is to study the historical precedents (i.e. the paratext) of a new concept. Therefore, we shall now briefly outline the paratext of paratranslation.

The paratext of paratranslation

José Yuste Frías, professor at the University of Vigo, Galicia, Spain, and founder of the research group T&P, who credits himself as having 'invented' the new concept (Yuste

Frías, 2010), adopts Genette's view and amplifies it. In the motto (=paratext) of his programmatic paper 'Au seuil de la traduction: la paratraduction' (On the threshold of translation: paratranslation; Yuste Frías, 2010a), he quotes Roland Barthes:

> Certains veulent un texte (un art, une peinture) sans ombre, coupé de l'«idéologie dominante»; mais c'est vouloir un texte sans fécondité, sans productivité, un texte stérile [...]. Le texte a besoin de son ombre [...]. (Barthes, 1973, pp. 45–46)

> There are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow, without the "dominant ideology"; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text [...]. The text needs its shadow [...]. (Barthes, 1973/1975, p. 32)

Yuste Frías' definition of paratranslation is mapped exactly on Genette's definition of paratext (Genette, 1987/1997b, p. 4), which we have quoted above (the italicized passages have been borrowed from the English translation):

> Paratranslation is the *zone of transition and transaction* of any transcultural exchange, the decisive location for the success or failure of any process of cultural mediation. From an exclusively spatial point of view, paratranslation is located at the periphery of a text that has to be translated or has been translated because it is a *threshold*, a *vestibule*, *an undefined zone between the inside and the outside, a fringe between text and off-text*. Paratranslation is always on the threshold of translation, where the translator is another agent who works (a) in *a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public that, whether well or poorly understood and achieved, is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it.*[1] (Trans. C. Nord)

Yuste Frías emphasizes the importance of the situation; in former days we would have said of the situational context: 'Il ne peut y avoir un texte sans paratexte', there cannot be a text without a paratext, and he goes on to say: 'Les textes n'existent pas seuls', texts do not exist in isolation. In former days we would have said: texts do not fall from the blue, they are communicative occurrences-in-situation. As translatological functionalists we would even go further: texts are communicative occurrences-in-situation-in-culture because situations are always embedded in cultures which, in turn, determine situations. Or, as Reiß and Vermeer have put it in their seminal book on translational action (Reiß & Vermeer, 1984/2012, ch. 2.1):

> Both the producer and the recipient of a text are "communication partners" and, as such, form part of the "situation". Apart from being embedded in a socio-cultural community, both are also individuals with personal "histories". These individual features, in addition to the uniqueness of the time and place of the communicative event, affect the production and reception of the text as well. The "situation" consists of the following factors: the cultural background, the specific environment in which the interaction takes place, the psychological and social circumstances of the communication partners and the relationship existing between them. One element of culture is language. The factors of this model of communication (which does not claim to be exhaustive) are characterized by individual and supra-individual (i.e. social) features.

This is probably what Yuste Frías refers to, but he does not say so.

Genette links his 'paratexts' to the outer appearance of the book, primarily (but not exclusively) the literary book. In a note, he makes clear that

> I now say *texts* and not only *works* in the "noble" sense of that word (literary or artistic productions in contrast to nonliterary ones) as the need for a paratext is thrust on every

kind of book with or without aesthetic ambition, even if this study is limited to the paratext of literary works. (Genette, 1997, p. 3, note 6)

In contrast, Yuste Frías also takes other media into consideration, which today dispute the privileged status of books, and this means that he also includes non-literary texts. In the paper mentioned above, Yuste Frías asks:

> What does it mean for the "sense" of a text if the text is surrounded by a system of different signs? If we become aware of the fact that paratexts consisting of verbal and/or nonverbal signifiers are translated (have to be translated) together with their texts on a sdaily basis, a new concept is called for: paratranslation. For it is the material and iconic presentation of everyday translation which puts the whole range of international economic and commercial exchange at stake [...], and this zone of first transaction, which clients usually commission to other experts (designers, webmasters, lay-outers), is the threshold for any translation: paratranslation. (Yuste Frías, 2010)

This is an idea to which we can agree wholeheartedly. However, we expect of a new concept that it describes something new, something that has not been described before, either because it did not exist or because people had not seen it. 'Translation as a purposeful activity' is a concept of the second kind. From time immemorial, translations have been produced for one purpose or another, but people looking at translation with an exclusive focus on diverging language systems and language structures have simply lost sight of this well-known fact.

Summing up Yuste Frias' definition of the concept of paratranslation, we can state the following: if the paratext is everything that (according to Genette) enables the text to become a book and be presented to the readers as such, paratranslation would be everything that enables the *translatum* to become a *translatum* and be presented to the readers as such. Not only in the form of a book but also in many other formats: on the screen, in an advertizing brochure, as a cd-rom, dvd, video game, website etc. Moreover, paratranslation does not only take the aesthetic, political, ideological and social impact of paratexts into account, but also the whole paratextual environment of any translatorial activity (cf. Yuste Frías, 2010), e.g. the role and status of translators, such as their habitus, the decisions publishers take in favour of, or against, the publication of a particular work and, above all, the nonverbal or paraverbal characteristics of (translated and non-translated) texts, like the relationship between text and image.

According to Yuste Frías, 'paratranslators' are engaged in the following activities: localization, adaptation, multilingual documentation, cross-cultural technical writing, editing and cultural mediation, to name but a few. Now I am getting really confused: isn't this what we have been teaching our trainee translators during the past decades? It seems that we are all paratranslators, in one way or another. But, if this is true, what would be the use of a new concept? Wouldn't it be sufficient to explain (to anybody involved in the translation business, above all to commissioners of translations) that translating is *not* transcoding, i.e. transferring a text from one linguistic code to another?

An example

In an article published on his website (Yuste Frías, 2011), Yuste Frías analyses the logo and the 2009 slogan of the Opel company: 'Wir leben Autos' (literally: 'we live

cars', which, in German, is a wordplay between 'we love cars' and 'we live for cars', cars are our passion). This German slogan is used in Opel's advertizing campaigns all over the world and represents, so to speak, the 'Germanness' of the Opel cars. In France, for example, one video clip shows an actor who is walking around an Opel Astra describing (in German!) all the important features of this car. As prescribed by French law, the whole clip has French subtitles, and ends with the surprising statement: 'Pas besoin de parler l'allemand pour comprendre que cette Opel est une vraie voiture allemande'. No need to speak German to understand that this Opel is a truly German car.

Motivated by the great success of the Opel clip, Opel's French competitor Renault followed with a very similar video clip for its Mégane. Here, a very similar type of actor is walking around a Renault Mégane describing all its important features, in French, but peppered with a number of German words pronounced with a French accent (e.g. *seehr spacieux!*, 'veeri spacieux!'), which, however, did not interfere with the comprehensibility of the text. The clip also had French subtitles, although the recipient would not have needed them. At the end of the clip, the actor even translates the typical French *oui, oui, oui* to the (not very typical) German *ja, ja, ja.* This shows very clearly that the Renault clip was meant to parody the Opel clip.

Yuste Frías is right in emphasizing the irony produced by the fact that Opel is (still) a daughter of the US company General Motors. But I do not agree with him when he concludes by saying that this is an example of paratranslation. As I see it, it is paratranslation in the sense of *paramilitary* as described above: something distinct from, but in a certain way similar to, translation. Genette would speak of 'transtextuality', i.e. the complete transformation of a text in the form of a parody or travesty which uses the same content giving it a different form (such as transforming *Little Red Riding Hood* into a police report) or of a pastiche or satirical persiflage which imitates the form providing it with a different content.

A new discipline?

Although the example is well chosen and accurately observed, it shows that the concept of paratranslation is too broad to be of real use. This is also illustrated by the list of topics and research fields the T&P group presents on their website. To name but a few examples: translation policy, translation techniques in the media, typography and translation, the translator's habitus, the translation of proper names, interpreting in the context of immigration ('Pregnant woman needs interpreter of flesh and blood'), audiovisual translation and its major challenges, translation of comic strips and translation of advertising material.

Looking at these topics, one might be tempted to think of some old wheels which have been in use for a long time without anybody calling them 'wheels'. A few of the older ones are listed below.

- As early as in the beginning of the1960s, Justa Holz-Mänttäri defined the text as a combination of verbal and paraverbal or nonverbal means of expression (Holz-Mänttäri, 1984a).
- The relationship between images or the nonverbal paratext and the verbal text was emphasized by Katharina Reiß in her translation-relevant text typology (Reiß, 1971/2000), in which she complemented her three-type model of informative, expressive and appellative or operative texts by a fourth type,

which she called 'audiomedial' or 'multimedial' (Reiß, 1976). This was also highlighted by Riitta Oittinen, translator and illustrator of children's books (Oittinen, 1989 and later); by Peter A. Schmitt with regard to technical texts (from the mid-1980s, e.g. Schmitt, 1986); by Klaus Kaindl with regard to comic strips, operas, musicals and pop songs (from the 1990s, e.g. Kaindl, 1995 and 2004); by Frank Austermühl with regard to software localization (from the end of the 1990s, e.g. Austermühl, 2001).

- The status and role of translators in a modern society, characterized by the division of labour, has been one of the favoured topics discussed by Justa Holz-Mänttäri (since the beginning of the 1980s, e.g. Holz-Mänttäri, 1984b).
- The importance of layout and typography for translation has been a lifelong concern of Jürgen Schopp, a trained typesetter, since the beginning of the 1990s; only recently he published an exciting book on typography and translation (cf. Schopp, 2011).
- Book titles, headings of short texts or chapters and of pericopes (sections) of Biblical texts have been investigated by Christiane Nord (since the beginning of the 1990s, e.g. Nord, 1993, 1995).
- Paralanguage in literary translation was investigated by Nord (1997).
- Mottos and intertextuality was a topic of study for Rosemarie Gläser (1997).
- Ideology and translation has been a much-debated topic in postcolonial Translation Studies and Deconstruction.

Conclusions

The above may sound like Miss Know-it-all criticizing the youth for not being aware of what the old ones found out long ago. Is it impossible to 'invent' new concepts in translation studies because there is nothing new under the sun anyway? This is not the point I wanted to make in this paper. If scholars investigate the relationship between text and images in (the translation of) advertizing material, for example, the fact that they are not aware of working in the field of 'paratranslation' does not disqualify their research. I actually like the concept of 'paratranslation'; it is a nice and practical umbrella term for all the verbal and nonverbal texts constituting the 'environment' of a translation. But research focusing on this environment is not a phenomenon discovered by the 'Vigo school'.

The first point is: like the concept of paratext proposed by Genette in the early 1980s, new concepts have a history that they draw on, and the history of one concept is always linked to the history of other concepts. It is, therefore, essential to limit the scope of a new term and define it with regard to existing concepts. If Yuste Frías had looked at the not-so-recent history of translation studies (not only in Spain or France but also outside the Romance-speaking area), he might have found that the idea that 'today, translation is no longer a transfer of linguistic material from one language to another' (Yuste Frías, 2010a) is not such a brand new idea after all (cf. Vermeer, 1987, among other publications). This is why we teach our students to look at the 'state-of-the–art' before venturing into something that seems 'revolutionary' to them, but which may well be just a nice new name for an old wheel.

The second point is related to terminology. If *paratext* is the sum total of utterances (to avoid the duplication of *text*) constituting the environment of a text,

paratranslation would be the sum total of utterances constituting the environment of a translation. Like *paratext*, *paratranslation*, therefore, refers to the object of research, not to the research itself or to the activity of taking paratranslation into consideration in a translation process. Consequently, it does not make sense to speak of 'paratranslators', as Yuste Frías does.

In this context, it may be worth noticing that Genette himself relates translation to paratext when he writes towards the end of his 1987 book:

> I have [...] left out three practices whose paratextual relevance seems to me undeniable but investigating each one individually might demand as much work as was required for treating this subject as a whole. The first of the three practices is translation, particularly when it is more or less revised or checked by the author. (Genette, 1987/ 1997b, p. 405).

This is an interesting idea, which reminds me of the Russian doll; is the translation a paratext of its source text, or is the source text a paratext of its target text (and thus a paratranslation)? Would a translation that is 'more or less revised or checked by the author' be regarded as a peritext for which the author is somehow responsible? What is the status of the translator in such a case? What about translations that have not been checked or revised by the author? In what respect can they be regarded as epitexts? At any rate, it is obvious that the concept of paratranslation can trigger exciting research questions, even though it may not constitute a new research paradigm in itself.

Note

1. [L]a paratraduction est la zone de transition et de transaction de tout échange transculturel, le lieu décisif pour le succès ou l'échec de tout processus de médiation culturelle. D'un point de vue purement spatial, la paratraduction se situe dans la périphérie de tout texte à traduire ou de tout texte traduit car il s'agit d'un seuil, d'un vestibule, d'une zone indécise, d'une zone intermédiaire entre le dedans et le dehors, d'une frange, d'une marge entre traduction et hors-traduction. La paratraduction est toujours au seuil de la traduction, là où le traducteur est un agent de plus qui travaille dans: (a) Un lieu privilégié d'une pragmatique et d'une stratégie, d'une action sur le public au service, bien ou mal compris et accompli, d'un meilleur accueil de la traduction et d'une lecture plus pertinente du texte traduit, Un lieu où s'impose l'image et où se mêlent deux séries de codes: le code social, dans son aspect publicitaire, et les codes producteurs ou régulateurs de sens du texte traduit. (Yuste Frías, 2010)

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