

PROPOSITIONS ON CURRENT TRENDS
IN RUSSIAN TRANSLATION STUDIES

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In this paper, I try to cover the interrelation between tradition and diversity in Russian translation theories during the period from the end of the 1980's until the decade of 2010. From my personal standpoint, I regard translation as a kind of human information processing based on stochastic algorithms in the field of interverbal and intercultural communication. To some degree, this position may have determined the preferences in my choice of authors among a great variety of ideas and approaches.

In a brief survey of approaches to translation during the 1980's until this decade Russia has highlighted a series of models that question the predominantly linguistic principles of the period before the 1980's. The theorization of translation has developed in a few directions that may be considered from different points of view. Within the last twenty-five years, the traditionally linguistic paradigm in Russian translation studies has lost its positions and bowed to pressure of psychological, informational and semiotic approaches and/or their correlation. Translation studies in Russia have evolved towards the revision of such seemingly inviolable concepts of translation theory as equivalence, transformation (shifting) and meaning. After A. Fedorov, I. Recker, V. Komissarov, A. Švejcer and other "Founding Fathers" of Russian translation studies in 1930s-1980s, there have come independent theorists with ideas and approaches of their own, despite maintaining theoretical continuity.

Since reviewing the multiplicity of scholars in this field would require volumes of papers, I have chosen to highlight but a few of individual contributions into general translation theory, namely, those of A. Švejcer, R. Piotrovskij, R. Min'jar-Beloručev, L. Černjachovskaja, N. Rjabceva, Ju. Sorokin, and S. Tjulenev. Their approaches, perhaps, most conspicuous in the ambiguous field of translatology, are based on propositional logic as well as on elements of modelling¹ of the translation process. Apart from traditional

¹ I use this term in its general logical meaning as a theory that has descriptive, explanato-

linguistic tools (Rjabceva), they involve the means of such fields as theory of information (Piotrovskij, Min'jar-Beloručev, Černjachovskaja), hermeneutics and semiotics (Sorokin), semiotics and theory of information (Tjulenev).

Aleksander Švejcer and his Seminar in translation theory

It is reasonable to start our review with the name of A. Švejcer who may be regarded as a pivotal figure between the traditional and innovative approach in the theory of translation. Actually, the diversity of new directions in the field are in various ways connected with the outstanding figure of A. Švejcer, the translator, interpreter and theoretician. In the 1980s he was not only a legendary translator and one of the most highly esteemed conference interpreters with the highest level of responsibility and a talented scholar in linguistics and translation studies but also an efficient organizer and coordinator of translation studies in the then USSR, with the Research Institute of Linguistic Studies (Moscow, Academy of Sciences) as the centre. He gathered scholars all over the country and united them into a group officially named *The Translation Theory Commission*, or Švejcer's Seminar as we, participants, informally called it. Most of us were young scholars and many lived quite far from Moscow (imagine how huge the country is); we did not have significant supporters, grants or high connections – just scholars full of curiosity and desire to understand what translation really is. Švejcer invited us to take part in the scientific debate in a field that was then considered thoroughly investigated with such fundamental tools as equivalence, transformations (shifts) and units of translation.

Yet at his Seminar, those fundamental tools appeared to be not so steady as they might seem. He gave us sort of push towards revising the seemingly inviolable concepts. One of the concepts reconsidered was equivalence: unlike the idea of linguistic shifting on different levels, he proposed the semiotic approach of syntactic, semantic (referential and componential), and pragmatic levels of correlation, in which hierarchy the syntactic equivalence takes the lowest level while the pragmatic forms the highest.² This idea is closely connected with his conception of units of translation which, accor-

ry and prognostic force towards all possible states of the subject of studies. In translatology, the term in this meaning is mentioned in the work of U. Steccconi, *Five reasons why semiotics is good for translation studies* / Doubts and Directions in Translation Studies. Lisbon, 2004.

² A. D. Švejcer, *Teorija perevoda: Status, problemy, aspekty* (Theory of Translation: Status, Problems, Aspects), Moskva, 1988, p. 84.

ding to him, make a system of speech (communicative) rather than linguistic units. He described such units as a system of relations between verbal signs and participants of communication, i.e. sign-author, sign-receiver, etc. In this chain, he marked out the dual relationship “sign_{SL}-translator-receiver” and “sign_{TL}-translator-author”.³ In the development of this idea, he wrote about the equivalence of non-coincident linguistic units:

The equivalence on a lower level presupposes the equivalence on all higher levels. Thus, the equivalence on the syntactic level presupposes equivalence on semantic and pragmatic levels [...]. But there is no inverse relationship [...]. Pragmatic equivalence can exist without semantic. Literal translation is connected with the violation of this rule, for example, when syntactic equivalence lacks semantic and pragmatic equivalence.⁴

Thus interpreting fundamental terms of translatology, Švejcer was one of the first to put forward the idea of modelling translation as

a process described in terms of the theory of games as a search of optimal decision that fits with many variable functional criteria. This is not a single-mission process. It is a trial-and-error method that approximates to the optimal decision step by step choosing between a number of possible variants.⁵

Švejcer's ideas were not isolated: the 1980s-1990s saw a turn from descriptive linguistics to interdisciplinary modelling in translation theories in Russia.

Certainly, there are still scholars who firmly stand by traditional (linguistically pure) principles of translatology. However, the diversity of approaches has marked the recent decades in Russian translation studies. New theories have appeared, and that progressive evolution is perhaps the most significant event in the field.

There are so many new names that it would take a thick compendium to review all of them. Nevertheless, there are figures that appear most valuable who reconsider cogent truths and dig for systemic evidence. This does not mean that all the rest are not worth considering; it only means that the models I want to dwell upon do not only aim at describing or explaining but also at prognosticating possible states and ways of translation process.

³ Ibidem, pp. 148-149.

⁴ A. D. Švejcer, *Bukvalny perevod i komunikacija / perevod i komunikacija* (Literal translation and interference / Translation and Communication), Moskva, 1997, p. 32.

⁵ A. D. Švejcer, *Übersetzung und Linguistik*, Berlin, 1987, pp. 219-224.

Rajmond Piotrovskij: probabilistic model of translation

R. G. Piotrovskij, an outstanding scholar in machine translation and mathematical linguistics, applies a probabilistic approach to reconstruct translation as secondary semiosis and uses mathematical procedures to estimate variable combinations in text transfer. His most productive idea is in the possibility of describing the nature of conflict between the static Source text (ST) and the mobility and diversity of translation decisions as found in Target text (TT).⁶ He operates such initial concepts of the theory of chaos as:

1. developing system (S) that may undergo changes or even destruction;
2. regulating parameters (features) of the system (Q);
3. external influence (fluctuations) A;
4. critical point (area of bifurcation) X.

The first results after applying formulas of probable interaction of parameters between ST and TT allowed him to work out an algorithm for finding the regular areas of bifurcation in the ST and assess to what degree the system of ST is stable or unstable in the process of translation. This procedure may help to achieve more accurate results in modelling and assessing translation, however, it requires a wider scale of comparative studies before its objectivity is proved productive for more or less sophisticated texts. Up until now, it has been tested only on the simplest examples.

The central concept of Piotrovskij's model is the linguistic interpretation of information and entropy. The term *information* is so widely used in a variety of scientific fields that its meaning has become vague and even contradictory. In translation studies, it often appears as a synonym to *sense*, or *content*. Consequently, the application of the term to the process of translation means its major characteristics create misunderstanding and unproductive discussions. To specify his position, R. Piotrovskij defines information by its two main aspects – variety and reflection: “Under *information* we mean a variety of data generated or kept in system A, which, reflected by system B, changes its state”.⁷ From this point of view, he specifies linguistic kinds of information that should be taken into consideration:

1. *syntactic information*, or the data of statistic and combinatorial parameters of signs;
2. *semantic information*, or the data of relationship between the sign and its referent; here he also includes connotative, or stylistic information that presents expressive properties of the sign with the perspective of secondary semiosis;

⁶ R. G. Piotrovskij, *Lingvističeskaja sinergetika: ischodnye položenija, pervye rezul'taty, perspektivy* (Linguistic synergetics: initial positions, preliminary results, perspectives), St.-Peterburg, 2006, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

3. *pragmatic information*, or the data of relationship between the sign and participants of the communicative process.

This conception seems quite productive as applied to translation because it allows the measuring of the process of recognizing, understanding, interpreting and transferring the verbal signs into another language forms without attributing to them such vague things as sense or content. At the same time, this is a weak point of the model since it does not take into consideration such characteristics as values and attitudes, which may appear crucial in translation where linguistic information can be regarded as secondary. For example, when you translate the word *horse* into Russian you may undergo such a factor as idiosyncrasy and feel aversion to the Russian word 'конь', which will make you use the word 'лошадь' instead. Such factors may enhance ambiguity and lead to a critical level of entropy in translation which all formal linguistic information does not do.

In general, this model is promising but there are too many factors and parameters that should be counted when we deal with such complicated objects as verbal and interlingual communication. Yet the idea itself seems most progressive to me because it indicates the way to avoid the traditional subjectivity of translation theories that makes them less theories than arbitrary descriptions.

Rjurik Min'jar-Beloručev: the logic of the subject in translation

R. K. Min'jar-Beloručev introduces a reasonable method of logical analysis that allows the assessment and prognostication of the translation process and its results. According to his idea, every text has its own information capability which can be reconstructed by dividing the text into logical segments and can assess their comparative value in the message. Among such values, we may distinguish between *key* (unique) informative segments, *complementary* segments, *qualifying* segments, *recurring* segments and *zero* segments.⁸ His translator experience lets him admit that ST and TT usually do not coincide as to the quantity and quality of their logical capability. The non-coincidence may be of different value: in any segment informative capability may be *lost* or there may appear *additional (surplus)* capability. The hierarchy of such losses and surpluses will descend from the most significant distortion (loss or surplus of key information) to the least significant (loss or surplus of zero information).

⁸ R. K. Min'jar-Beloručev, *Teorija i metody perevoda* (Theory and methods of translation), Moskva, 1999, p. 34.

By information Min'jar-Beloručev means the communicative value of the text, i.e. an amount of semantic data that make the integrated meaning. With that, he introduces the following scale of grading of such informational errors: first-degree errors manifest themselves through quanta of extra key information or its loss; second-degree errors are connected with quanta of extra complementary or qualifying information or its loss; third-degree errors are connected with increment or loss of recurring or zero information.

This model was worked out on the basis of interpreting and proved to be practical for the analysis of written texts as well. The advantage of this procedure is in its systemic character, yet there is always the possibility that the scale of informative values may be subjective due to the communicative principle of assessment. Yet the model is more objective in assessing translation quality in terms of difference instead of similarity. He regards all semantic errors in translation as either loss or increment of information counting it with such a tool as quanta. This is effective with texts where semantic aspect is predominant (for instance, in journalism or public speaking) but it is not so effective when pragmatic components of linguistic signs may be even more important than their semantics. The information as interrelation between signs and users, that is pragmatics, is not taken into consideration, which limits the possibilities of the model.

Leonora Černjachovskaja: sense as information in translation

Yet another original approach to sense as the object of translation belongs to Leonora Černjachovskaja who starts her propositions with the sacred question: "What is the sense of the text?"⁹ It appears that the question is not so trivial as it might seem at first sight. Although current models of translation (with few exceptions) admit that we do not translate linguistic units but, instead, speech situations, almost all of them describe equivalence (adequacy) and Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) in terms of 'words' or other lexical and/or grammatical units. Even such a vague area as pragmatics in translation is also measured with linguistic tools, such as morpheme, word, phrase, etc.¹⁰

According to Černjachovskaja, "the sense of the text" arises only in the course of interrelation between signs and the receiver whose verbal and cul-

⁹ L. Černjachovskaja, *Informacionnyj podchod k perevodu* (Informational approach to translation), "Mir perevoda", № 22, 2009, p. 39.

¹⁰ See M. Baker, *In Other Words*, New York, Routledge, 2006.

tural experience is sufficient to recognize, understand and interpret them. Thus, she explains the sense as some cognitive, psychic and emotional experience caused by such interrelation. This experience depends on a certain amount of knowledge about the language (in the case of translation, Source language - Target language [SL-TL]), the communicative situation, the culture, the world in general or in particular. However, this knowledge is activated only in contact with a text. The interaction of knowledge and text forms the sense, or, in terms of Černjachovskaja, information.

Her approach correlates with the above mentioned theory of R. Piotrovskij, since, unlike most humanitarian researchers, she defines the term *information* as “the function of interaction of socially oriented human brain with the environment”.¹¹ On this theoretical basis, she distinguishes certain types of information that determine verbal communication in general and the translation process in particular. Among those types she mentions cognitive information as the knowledge of relationship between the language and world, which, according to her, “exceeds the bounds of the semantic space of the language”;¹² communicative information; and eidetic information (the image of non-verbal reality).

The process of translation involves all those types of information, and the task of the translator is “to realize how the informational structure of eidetic images is represented in the text with the SL verbal means and what TL means are required to reconstruct it”.¹³ The main tenet of the model is that, in translation, we do not reconstruct the text but the informational components of eidetic images encoded in it, cognitive and communicative information included. Černjachovskaja positions her theory as an informational approach but, actually, her model can be characterized, rather, as an interdisciplinary study for it involves cognitive linguistics, psychology, philosophy of the language, theory of information to explain the nature of translation and prognosticate its process.

Jurij Sorokin and the interpretative/hermeneutic approach in translation studies

Jurij Sorokin applies hermeneutic procedures to translation studies in view of the psychosemiotic basis of translation. His approach may be classified as an interpretative theory of translation. Units of translation are not parallel to

¹¹ L. Černjachovskaja, *Informacionnyj podchod k perevodu*, cit., p. 40.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 41.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

linguistic units – he speaks about structures as parts of the text system and divides them into compatibles and incompatibles;¹⁴ he defines the latter category by two terms – *discomfortive* (deceived stylistic expectation) and *destructema* (*damaged structure*) – together they describe the feeling of stylistic discomfort when perceiving a translation text.¹⁵ Discomfortive is a more general term that includes some new or unusual linguistic units like realia, i.e. personal names or cultural details.

Destructema, in Sorokin's terms, denotes a structural (combinatorial) unit that breaks the norms of TL; it is not necessarily a mistake, though a mistake it may be; it is some new, or unusual, or seemingly damaged unit by norms of TL. Unlike mistake, it may strike root in the TL and become established in the TL norm.¹⁶

Sorokin regards such *damaged structures* (*abnormal forms*) as the systemic feature of translation process, which opens the perspective for comparative / contrastive linguistics on the basis of comparative means of expressing imagery and enriches relationships between languages, literary traditions and cultures. In his opinion, the new generation of dictionaries will be based on such principles as comparative chromatography (means of representing colours in SL and TL in their difference and similarity), comparative zoography (means of representing animals in SL-TL), etc. The third language of translation manifests itself in discomfortive stylistics, the factor of which is countable: by Sorokin, it depends on the number of stylistic breaches (abnormalities) in TT and allows assessing the stylistic intention of the translator.¹⁷ The receiver of the translated text feels (even if for no apparent reason) certain discomfort at its language not only in the case of verbal and / or cultural interlingual lacunes but also for unusual verbal occurrences. The nature of such strange occurrences is not properly described, although it is characteristic for the "third language".

His main work in the theory of translation,¹⁸ in which he considers the problems of poetry translation from Chinese into Russian in the terms of possible homomorphic structures, has become a theoretical bestseller (in the positive meaning of the word).

¹⁴ See also P. Ricoeur, *On Translation*, London-New York, 2003.

¹⁵ Ju. A. Sorokin, *Perevodovedenie: status perevodčika i psihogermenevtičeskie procedury* (Translatology: the status of the translator and psychohermeneutic procedures), Moskva, 2003, pp. 142-144.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

Sergej Tjulenev and the principles of representativity in translation

In his major study *Teorija perevoda* (The Translation Theory) S. Tjulenev revises the concept of equivalence and puts forward the idea of informational representation of ST in a variety of possible TTs. His approach is based on such mathematical concepts as free information, entropy and the second type of feedback. This basis allows him to explain and prognosticate the inevitable destruction of free information in human processing due to the “noise” in the channel of decoding the source information by an individual.¹⁹

The measure of such destruction, according to Tjulenev, is established by the volume of information transferred from individual to individual and from culture to culture. He defines this measure as representation capacity, or *representativity*²⁰ and differentiates between two types of it depending on the communicative task of the translated text. The first type of representation capacity is irrelative to stylistic information, i.e. functional style, stylistic means, figures of speech, etc. It fits the minimum requirements and represents only the subject and logical message of the source text. The second type of representation capacity is focused upon the transfer of maximum data; this capacity covers both logic (the subject message) and stylistic information.²¹

Accordingly, representation of the ST information can be measured on different levels: microlevel (components of the text) and macrolevel (text as a whole). Tjulenev dwells upon the techniques of representation on both levels and the assessment of their results. The assessment presupposes the factor of a variety of codes involved into the process of translation. By Tjulenev, they are the situational code (time, space, circumstances); the verbal code (he calls this factor “the Ban of Babel”); the cultural code (perhaps the most powerful source of the informational noise due to the difference and, sometimes, even conflict of cultures); and the individual translator code as a source of psychological interference.²²

A certain part of his concept admits the role of cultural factors in translation, by which he means the aims and circumstances of translation rather than its cultural environment, which, in translation studies, “has almost become a

¹⁹ S. V. Tjulenev, *Teorija perevoda* (The Theory of Translation), Moskva, 2004, p. 129.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 132.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 144-145.

platitude that one does not translate across languages but across cultures”.²³ In this aspect, his ideas correlate with those of the widely famous *skopos*-theory (H. J. Vermeer, K. Reiss, W. Wills, etc.).

Nadežda Rjabceva: development of linguistic approach in translation modeling

Nadežda Rjabceva puts forward the model “Sense – Text” to explore the properties of translation.²⁴ Using the term “linguistic approach”, I might not be quite accurate for Rjabceva prefers to define her model of translation activity as metalinguistic (in the meaning of *applied*) following the Švejcer idea of “translation as a complex phenomenon whose definition requires a holistic conception of the language structure, linguistic competence [...], interlingual relations, translation problem, the translator’s decision, and others have a metalinguistic nature; their definition goes beyond the bounds of linguistics [...]”.²⁵ Three major tenets of this approach can be summarized in the following definitions:

1. translation should be described in linguistic terms;
2. translation activity requires holistic conception;
3. metalinguistics of translation aims at determining interrelated characteristics of the translation process.

The structure of the natural language differs fundamentally from any ‘secondary’ artificial language, first of all, by its close natural connection with the human brain and manifests itself in practical usage. Rjabceva discusses the most significant features of this human-oriented connection: meaning (in her terms, equal to sense), interpretation, polysemy, syncretism, idiomaticity, implicitness, synonymy, pragmatics, concept, and language picture of the world.²⁶ Language is a universal semiotic system, whose signs can express any possible sense. Its natural synonymity is based on the fundamental asymmetry between form and meaning. The same form can express several meanings, and the same meaning can be expressed in a variety of forms.

²³ K. Koskinen, *Shared culture? Reflections on recent trends in Translation Studies*, “Target”, Vol. 16, Issue 1, 2004, p. 144.

²⁴ N. K. Rjabceva, *Prikladnye problemy perevodovedenija* (Applied Aspects of Translatology), Moskva, 2013, p. 23.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

According to Rjabceva, synonymous means of a language do not only provide the effectiveness of its discursive capacity but also determine the inevitable asymmetry of interlingual equivalents.²⁷ Importantly, in the process of translation this asymmetry requires correlating its functional rather than structural concordance between SL and TL. Rjabceva defines this principle as *recursive* and distinguishes it from a linear process of using structural equivalents. In her opinion, the recursive principle, i.e. the reciprocating search, is characteristic for professional translation while the straight-line decisions based on structural parallels are characteristic for non-professional translators. Thus, using linguistic terms, the author, actually, applies them to the speech activity describing it from the position of linguistic competence of the translator. Yet she mentions that the relationship between language and man, i.e., the essence of linguistic competence, has not been properly described and even less explained. If to summarize the holistic formula of Rjabceva's model, the translation is the transfer of neither text nor sense as separate properties but of the Sense – Text as cohesion. This, mainly, cognitive model takes into consideration a few approaches in translation studies: structural linguistics, applied linguistics and cognitive linguistics.

Conclusion: preliminary evidence

Reviewing these few approaches, we can immediately see that in the last few decades the focus of the translation theory in Russia has moved from the strictly linguistic requirements (the so called interlingual equivalence) towards cognitive, informational and psychosemiotic procedures and / or their interrelationship in the process of translation. Translatology does not just count “verbal and structural equivalents” but searches into the nature of human processing of informational and communicative functions of verbal forms in juxtaposed languages. Cultural and psychological approaches that, in the early 1980s, were seldom taken into consideration as “extralinguistic matters”, have gradually gained points in theoretical modelling, which, to my mind, allows not only describing but explaining and prognosticating the events and results of processing information in translation. This move makes translation studies look ‘more like a theory’ than they used to be 30-40 years ago. We slowly move to the status of a theory of translation.

A wide variety of approaches in Russian translation studies of late is not an unprecedented phenomenon: actually, this is a long-lasting tradition in the culture that has borrowed much from translation – ideas, information, literary

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 33.

forms – to transform and spiritually enrich them in accordance with the national language and character. Yet, in the past few decades, marked by historic tectonics, global perspectives have been put forward, one of which is educating a new generation of translators in many languages, fields of knowledge and activities. This task requires a more effective method of training and, accordingly, more efficient models of translation. I think, the situation challenges not only Russia but also the international translation community for nowadays we are still disconnected and, mostly, isolated within national traditions and / or closed groups. Historically, Russian translation studies have always been closely connected with Slavic countries, and the names of Bulgarian, Czech, Polish, Slovak, Ukrainian, many other European researchers and translators are well known both in their original languages and in Russian. The phenomenon of ‘Russian foreigners’ in translation studies has manifested itself in a very interesting review by Polish scholar Tadeusz Szczerbowski²⁸ where, alongside with Russian translato­logists, he also considers such outstanding foreign researchers as Jiří Levý, Anton Popovič, Laura Salmon – authors whose works are famous not only in their own languages but also in Russian and often cited in the works of Russian scholars.

To conclude, the current trends in Russian theories of translation demonstrate a crucial turn to the paradigm of interdisciplinary modelling – even if linguistic terminology is used, it is linguistics of the new generation, 21st century, with its evident bias towards the search of universal regularities in the relationship between language and man.

²⁸ T. Szczerbowski, *Rosyjskie teorie przekładu literackiego* (Russian theories of literary translation), Kraków, 2011.