

Response by Scarpa to “Invariance orientation: Identifying an object for translation studies”

Federica Scarpa

Dipartimento di Scienze giuridiche, del linguaggio, dell’interpretazione e della traduzione (IUSLIT), Università di Trieste, Italy

Brian Mossop’s “Invariance orientation: Identifying an Object for Translation Studies” is both provocative and ambitious; coming up with a theoretical definition of translation which is both unequivocal and universal is in fact a gigantic task. This third and latest attempt (cf. Mossop 1998, 2003) also shows Mossop’s courage in acknowledging that a scholar’s thinking can change over time.

I endorse his broad premise of giving a more central place in translation studies to professional practice, represented here by the invariance-oriented mental stance of most producers in the translation industry. This stance is a defining feature of translation that Mossop (2003) earlier referred to as “imitation”; that is, “a subjective, translator-centred approach to meaning-sameness, in terms of intention”. He rightly argues that, in the real world, translators work mainly on specialized genres (legal, technological, financial, scientific, medical and administrative) calling for such an approach. Nonetheless, for the last couple of decades mainstream academic research has been dealing with issues that reflect only marginally everyday translation situations, because the emphasis has consistently been on how translations *differ* from their sources, rather than on the translator’s quest for *sameness* between source and target text. These issues are “marginal” because

they relate to only a minority of the world's translators, such as those translating literature/poetry or mediating in "extreme" work settings such as conflict and war. As I and other colleagues have stated elsewhere (Scarpa, Musacchio, and Palumbo 2009, 34), this excessive focus of academic research on translation's creative and political side may be explained by the fact that only a minority of researchers are also practitioners – translators and/or translator trainers – and therefore they do not see translation primarily as a professional service activity. This may well lead to a view of everyday translation situations as less empowering and intriguing than other more marginal but also more "challenging" types of translation, largely doing away with the service side which overwhelmingly characterizes the industry today.

Admittedly, however, vis-à-vis this "theoretical" research focusing mainly on translation as cross-cultural communication/mediation, applied strands of translation studies have been studying professional translation (e.g. translation teaching and practice, the development of translation aids) – so Mossop's suggestion that the object of translation studies be drawn from the translation industry is rather less "shocking" than claimed. One example of research by scholar-practitioners is Hatim's (2001) "practitioner research", an applied perspective on translation pedagogy and research oriented towards building professional competence in students by identifying problems along with appropriate solutions and explanations. But there are many others, such as a growing interest in translation quality assessment and the specialized genres of translation (to name just the most recent books: Drugan 2013; Krüger 2015; Rogers 2015; Olohan 2016) and, more generally, in the translator rather than translations as texts (see e.g. Chesterman 2009). Surprisingly, Mossop's piece refers to none of these strands of professionally oriented research, which are not inconsiderable, especially when taken to include much of the growing corpus of empirical studies using various technologies (e.g. keystroke-logging, eye-tracking, think-aloud-protocols) to understand – in Mossop's words – "what happens when people translate".

I support his view that the main object(s) of translation studies should be drawn from the translation industry, or at least that much more research should be invariance-oriented, namely the discipline's core should focus on the mental stance of translators to produce sameness. As someone who has taught specialized translation at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels for the last 25 years, I see my main aim as providing students with the necessary skills to make their *intention* to convey their interpretation of the source text coincide as much as possible with their *outcome* – their target texts. By the same token, as a translation studies researcher, my approach reflects a practical orientation, its primary aim being to help evaluate and inform practice in real-life translation situations, ultimately giving academic dignity to professional (specialized) translation.

Let me now concentrate on aspects of the proposal with which I disagree or at least see as problematic. The first is Mossop's insistence that the translator's *mental stance* – his/her point of view at the moment of production that is pivotal in his invariance-oriented approach – needs to be sharply distinguished from the point of view of translation users. This links with the claim that his proposal can "be described negatively as not sociological and not cultural, and positively as translator-centred and process-focused" and "does not start from the scholar's after-the-fact point of view but from the producer's, at the moment of production". Though he explains later that, at the moment of production, the translator's mind has in fact been already impacted on by all the other relevant social forces (employers, commissioners, publishers, project managers, etc.) and

these effects are therefore a given, Mossop's insistence on the two oppositions "mental stance vs. 'after-the-fact' investigation" and "production of translation in the translator's mind vs. reception of translation in the target-language culture" is not very helpful for understanding how translation can actually be studied and taught. The questions and hypotheses suggested under "Investigating the Object" refer in fact mostly to the *outcome* of that stance; that is, the translation product and its reception by revisers and users. Also, in order to identify an activity as translating, he rightly references "the *social* [rather than cognitive] circumstances of production" when claiming that "maximization of invariance" is not maximum semantic correspondence between source text and translation. And again, at the very end of the article, Mossop calls upon both "the cognitive and *social* processes involved in deriving one chunk of signifying material from another" to investigate what happens during the translation process.

Closely related to this, whilst agreeing with his claim that "invariance-seeking does not aim at a low degree of change" because it focuses on sameness, I think that the methodology of comparing the outcomes of a set of translations with their sources is applied by translation scholars not only to find different degrees of variance, as Mossop states, but more often than not also to find different degrees of *invariance*. In fact, comparing different translation products of the same source text – a research activity that incidentally is central to Toury's heuristic approach, which Mossop claims is one from which his own is derived – is a useful exercise for building the mental stances of future translators, with particular reference to their ability to detect variance, which is the first step to achieving the invariance orientation stance at the heart of his proposal. Similarly, I do not see the practical usefulness, for either pedagogy or research, of his sharp distinction between the concepts of invariance/sameness and equivalence, namely "the mental stance of the translator at the moment of production" vs. what results from "after-the-fact comparisons of source text and translation wordings". Further, contrary to Mossop's rather sweeping statement that specifying the concept "means the same" "is a matter for linguists and philosophers, not translation theorists", the teacher/researcher's task to be actively involved in helping students discover which translations are deemed of acceptable quality in different contexts in the translation industry (cf. Scarpa 2008), where the parameter of "acceptability" is defined also in terms of meaning-sameness. On the one hand, I fully share Mossop's view that in the last decades most translation scholars have wrongly rejected the theoretical notion of equivalence as irrelevant or downright damaging to translation studies, whilst in fact all evidence points to it being a prototypical mental concept for both professional translators and translator trainees alike. On the other, drawing on Mossop's differentiation between these two concepts of sameness/invariance and equivalence, it seems more useful to consider them as different sides of the same coin, both pointing to the fact that the translated text's close relationship to the source text is at the very heart of what makes it a translation.

Another rather "sticky" point in Mossop's proposal is his attempt¹ at defining the exact scope of translation studies' object of study by making a black-and-white distinction between "invariance-orientation", taken as the criterion for inclusion, and "variance-oriented production", taken as all work resulting from a "lexicographical approach" (an umbrella term for all the "intersemiotic, intralingual and variance-oriented interlingual work, and cross-cultural communication in general"), which is not to be included in translation studies. As far as I understand from his article, the lexicographical approach also includes activities such as expressing in other words or in another (usually simpler) form,

interpreting the significance of and converting into another form or medium, which are branded by Mossop as being inevitably variance-oriented. But why rule out altogether that the mental stance of somebody explaining in a foreign – or indeed the same – language the meaning of, say, the word “serendipity” should not be oriented toward conveying sameness of meaning? Also, as any translator trainer informed by professional practice knows all too well, today’s translators should possess a wider variety of language-related skills than the mere ability to express the sense of a written text in another language. Significantly, the competencies to be mastered by professional translators at the end of training as listed in the European Master’s in Translation (EMT) framework (EMT Expert Group 2009) include the following: “Knowing how to extract and summarise the essential information in a document (ability to summarise)” and “Knowing how to draft, rephrase, restructure, condense, and post-edit rapidly and well (in languages A and B)”.

Though agreeing with Mossop’s claim that professional translation should have a more central position than it has had as an object of study, I also think that under the umbrella term “translation” there should indeed be room for a variety of phenomena, which could be easily studied with an approach based on different *degrees* of invariance, in order to accommodate also studies analysing the work of professional translators, where the first focus on change and the second (mostly) focus on sameness. All in all, such a prototypical view of the concept of translation seems to me more productive: though having at its core invariance-orientation (or some kind of equivalence/sameness relation between source and target texts), it also addresses more peripheral areas such as the less typical ways of translating provided by paraphrasing, summarizing, adapting, giving a commentary, or composing multilingual promotional texts (cf. Chesterman 2004, 96). But this is exactly the sort of view, apparently, that Mossop now rejects,² given that his wholesale rejection of the lexicographical approach also entails one of its two resulting concepts: “a prototype concept where interlingual work is central but surrounded by a penumbra of other kinds of signifying work” (Halverson 2000).

By the same token, unlike Mossop, I think that translation’s interdisciplinarity – encompassing as it does various aspects, approaches and methodologies from neighbouring disciplines – is a source of empowerment rather than a problem. Interdisciplinarity not only enables the type of enriching dialogue that can occur only between different fields of study, but also reinforces translation studies’ position as an academic field of enquiry. Frankly, I do not see anything wrong with the prospect that “more people can publish in the field and the number of journals can expand as the audience grows. And more graduate students (with attendant funding!) can be attracted to translation departments.” In fact, quite the opposite. Provided, of course, that this interdisciplinarity (and/or *transdisciplinarity*) of translation studies does not become the disintegration described by Chesterman (2004, 96) as the blurring of the boundaries of the concept of translation, or indeed the fragmentation described by Delabastita (2013, 13–15), with the research community artificially creating different sub-disciplines and research models for their personal credit in an increasingly competitive market of higher education. And provided of course that professional translation benefits as well from the flourishing of the field.

One final comment concerns Mossop’s view of legal translation. The example of invariance-seeking he has chosen – the translation of a high court decision commissioned by a justice ministry – closely reflects his own experience as a government translator in Canada, where, as he openly admits, his work (a)typically involved a single culture which was

expressed in both English and French. Instead, in most other parts of the world legal translation is not merely interlingual but also eminently intercultural, as any legal translator (at least, in Europe!) translating between different legal systems can testify.

Notes

1. Granted, halfway through his piece Mossop seems to tone down this black-and-white approach (see e.g. ft. 6 of his article, which acknowledges the difficulty of deciding the objects of study definitely falling outside the scope of translation studies).
2. In fact, Mossop (1998, 262) seemed to find a central/marginal distinction between translating and “a wide variety of language production activities, both interlingual and intralingual” more than acceptable.

Note on contributor

Federica Scarpa is professor of English language and translation at the SSLMIT of the Department of Legal, Language, Interpreting and Translation Studies at the University of Trieste, where she teaches specialized translation. She was the coordinator of the PhD programme in interpreting and translation studies from 2009 to 2016 and since 2012 is the director of the post-MA master in legal translation. Scarpa has published extensively on specialized translation, with particular reference to the domains of information technology, social sciences and law. The French translation of the second edition of her book *La traduzione specializzata. Un approccio didattico professionale* (2008) was published by University of Ottawa Press in 2010 (*La traduction spécialisée. Une approche professionnelle à l'enseignement de la traduction*).

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