A REVIEW ON CATFORD'S *A LINGUISTIC THEORY OF TRANSLATION*

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RESUMO: Este trabalho se propõe a fazer uma análise do livro *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, publicado em 1965, de autoria do renomado linguista Ian Catford, grande nome no estudo de linguística aplicada e também muito lembrado nos estudos de tradução. A intenção da análise é refletir sobre a influência da linguística aplicada na tradução, bem como questionar e contestar a influência desse manual para a tradução e o que pode ainda ser considerado para os estudos de tradução nos dias de hoje.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Tradução; Teoria da Tradução; Estudos de Tradução; Linguística; Linguística Aplicada.

ABSTRACT: This essay is an analysis of the book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, published in 1965, by famous linguist Ian Catford, a big name on applied linguistics studies, also highly regarded in translation studies. This analysis intention is to propose a reflection on the influence of applied linguistics to translation, as well as to question and debate this manual influence on translation, and what can still be considered for translation studies today.

KEYWORDS: Translation; Translation Theory; Translation Studies; Linguistics; Applied Linguistics.

"TRANSLATION is an activity of enormous importance in the modern world". With these words, Catford introduces his theorisations and speculations in the book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (Oxford University Press, 1965). In spite of the book being published in 1965, this affirmation remains true today. Written by John Cunnison "Ian" Catford, famous Scottish linguist and expert in formal phonetics, the mentioned book is a renowned manual describing a translation theory based on Linguistics principles.

Catford's expertise included recognising different dialects from speech and the ability to reproduce words and texts backwards, but this did not stop him from making theorisations in other fields, such as Translation - possibly because he taught English and phonetics all around the world (UK, Greece, Palestine, Egypt, US), so he had to deal with the issue of comparing languages and translation. Also, he was the founder of the School of Applied Linguistics at the Edinburgh University. Later in

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his life, he was also head of the Laboratory of Phonetics in the University of Michigan. Catford taught most of the Linguistics subjects at these universities and did not become inactive after his retirement, since he was invited to give lectures and write essays in prestigious universities around the world. Perhaps all this may explain why *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* is still being widely read and quoted very often, after more than 50 years.

It is worth mentioning again that his book was published in the 1960s, a very important decade in the History of Linguistics, since it saw the rise of many new fields of study, such as Generative Grammar by Noam Chomsky, Sociolinguistics by William Labov, and Michael Halliday's systemic functional linguistics – the basis for Catford's studies. In the field of Applied Linguistics there was also an important expansion, since the studies began to include the issues of language assessment, language policy, and second language acquisition. In the UK, after the foundation of the School of Applied Linguistics by Catford in Edinburgh, the British Association for Applied Linguistics was established, in 1967, in order to advance education by promoting the study of language use, language acquisition and language teaching and interdisciplinarity of these studies. In the US, Applied Linguistics also began to establish its own identity in the field.

As to Translation Studies, in the other hand, things were not so strongly recognised since the end of last century, seeking for support in several fields of study besides Linguistics: Comparative Literature, Philosophy, Philology, Semiotics, Terminology, Computer Science, etc. But much had happened before, for example, Etienne Dolet's *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en aultre* (*How to translate well from one language to another*) was published in 1540. This is one of the earliest theories of Translation we can find. Then, already in the twentieth century, other theories were published, such as works from Ezra Pound and Walter Benjamin, in the beginning of the century; and, in the second-half of the century, are theories by Vinay and Darbelnet, Roman Jakobson and Eugene Nida, together with Catford's *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, one of the firsts to establish a theory of translation from a Linguistic perspective. According to Catford, it was necessary to set a theory for translation which was based on Linguistics, since translation has to do with language. With this book, he intended to draw upon linguistic analysis to create a translation theory that could be applied to discuss its problems, even though he considers this is only an attempt and it may be incomplete. Was the author able to do that? If so, are his reflections still valid and valuable? Is the book still a good reference for Translation Studies today?

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Surely, as mentioned before, the book became great reference at its time of publication until present time. The ideas presented in the manual come from the author lectures, given at Edinburgh University. According to Catford, the primary intention was to analyse what translation is, and not its problems (p. vii). He emphasises the book presents an attempt to develop a linguistic theory of translation and that it may be incomplete. As for the structure, the book is very well organized. It consists of a preface and 14 chapters, subdivided in topics according to the subject

to which it concerns. The ideas are explained clearly, since a lot of examples and graphs are used to demonstrate the theories. It may be a difficult reading for a person not acquainted with Linguistics but this is only because of specific terminology – because of this, an introductory chapter was inserted. This way, Catford states that the book is for the specialised student but it shall not dismay the general reader. So, Catford's reputation may have helped with the book becoming famous, but the coherence and straightforwardness of his approach is for its benefit, and this shows during reading. It makes you want to read until the end, to understand where he wants to get what he wants with all that.

The first chapter, called "General Linguistics Theory" is the longest one; as aforementioned, it is to summarize the main ideas of Linguistics, working as a reference not only for specialized, but for general readers, too. Catford gives in this chapter a short course on linguistic theory: from what language is to its use in social situations (the interaction between performer and addressee), medium forms (phonology as spoken form and graphology as written form) and medium substances (phonic, graphic). He puts an explanation of categories of linguistic theory (unit, structure, class and system, giving importance to ranks). He explains a bit of lexis (aspects of collocation and lexical sets), a lot of grammar (sentence, clause, group, word and morphemes), always exemplifying, and even considers the existence of context and extralinguistic factors, but explains they may be put aside due to the abstractions that are made in order to study Linguistics.

Still, the focus in this chapter's "lesson" is really on phonetics issues (tone group, foot, syllable, phoneme, pitch-pattern, intonation), again, being followed by a range of examples. Definitely, this is to be expected when the author happens to be a famous phonetician. A large number of features are explained in relation to this field of study. Catford gives an end to the chapter by presenting the subfields of linguistics: General Linguistics, General Phonetics, Descriptive Linguistics, Comparative Linguistics (the synchronic or the diachronic studies), Institutional Linguistics (for language varieties) and Applied Linguistics that covers "all those applications of theory and categories of general linguistics which go beyond (i) the elucidation of how languages work and (ii) the description of a particular language or languages for its/their own sake" (p. 19). Catford adds the theory of translation should be inside this field of Applied Linguistics.

The following chapters are very concise and describe the ideas they carry in their titles: "Definition and General Types of Translation", "Equivalence", "Formal Correspondence", "Meaning and Total Translation", "Transference", "Conditions of Translation", "Phonological Translation", "Graphological Translation", "Transliteration" and "Grammatical and Lexical Translation". In "Definition and General Types of Translation" (chapter 2), the author gives the definition that is supposed to be the main argument of the book, that translation is *the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)"* (p.20) – by "SL" he means Source Language and by "TL", Target Language. He even specifies that even though this definition is may appear intentionally wide, it is not vague.

Then, he starts classifying types of translation. According to extent, he gives a technical distinction of Full Translation and Partial Translation. The first is when everything in the text is translated and the second when some parts are left "unstranslated". Total Translation and Restricted Translation are related to levels of language involved (grammar, lexis, and, consequently, phonology and graphology forms); Total Translation happens when all levels are translated and Restricted when only one is. The terms Free, Literal and Word-for-word Translation are also mentioned here, as related to ranks (word class, etc).

The next chapters are dedicated to Restricted Translation types, for example "Phonological Translation" (chapter 8), when only phonology of a language is replaced by the other and "Graphological Translation" (chapter 9) when only graphology is replaced. He differentiates the latter from the process of "Transliteration" (chapter 10), in which you replace SL graphological units by TL graphological units, according to conventionally established rules (i.e.: спутник – Sputnik). In the chapter for "Grammar and Lexical Translation" (11) he keeps on exemplifying how translation works at only one level – of grammar, of lexis. For him, these translation types must be included in a general theory of translation because they help to throw light on the conditions of translation equivalence, and hence on the more complex process of a Total Translation.

Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 are dedicated to a very important discussion: Equivalence (chapter 3). This is considered a "key-term" throughout the book. Catford states that the central problem of translation-practice is that of finding TL translation equivalents. He basically says that Equivalence between the languages does not exist; it is a matter of occasion (context). And "Formal Correspondence" (chapter 4) has to do with categories of languages that occupy the same "place" in one language and the other, a mere approximation. Therefore, he states that the SL and TL texts do not have the same meaning, in a linguistic sense, and that meaning cannot be transferred from one language to the other (chapter 5); what occurs is formal relations or contextual relations between languages. And what may be possible, according to the book, is a restricted kind of Transference (chapter 6) of meaning in translation. What happens is that Catford considers some kind of influence of context; so, SL and TL items do not have the same meaning, but they can function in the same situation (p. 49).

The three final chapters "Translation Shifts" (in relation to change of ranks), "Language Varieties" (in relation to dialects) and "The Limits of Translatability" (in relation to equivalence, meaning and context, in general) are longer. At first, one may think they are longer for developing a discussion on these issues. However, they are longer possibly because the intention then is to consider Total Translation, instead of restricted types. In addition to that, more examples and graphs are brought to explanation. These chapters are about the "problems" and "difficulties" in translation, even though solutions for them are not drawn. They are just shown and exemplified so you know what they are, that they exist.

This way, it is clear that the author's intention is to develop a descriptive study, instead of a normative one. He does not work by establishing rules for the

application of his translation theory, but by exposing it. You can really see he seeks for a Linguistic theory through his explanations and comparisons between languages. In the first chapters, the author talks about Translation issues relating it to the fields of Applied Linguistics, putting a strong effort in Phonetics, at several times, even affirming that language intonation carries meaning too. He finds support in his specific field of expertise.

Also, Catford focus on how form is important, at times. The only benefit we get from that are the reflections on Machine Translation, something that is really widespread and part of people's lives today. More than once, he mentions how formal relations and categorisations of language forms and may help to build algorithms for Machine Translation, when discussion probabilities of equivalence, what is somewhat updated for the time of publication:

> For human translators the rules can make appeal to *contextual m*eaning (…). For the purpose of Machine Translation, translation rules may be operational instructions for *co-textual search* for items marked in the machine glossary by particular diacritics (…) (p. 31).

Several times he mentions the importance of context for translation and how situational aspects may affect it, in several chapters. Also, how relevant some features may be or not and how this is a translator's decision. However, even though it seems the author will say more about it, he does not create theories on this. He just states that he understands how these features affect translation and considers how some languages may have "certain situational features in common" (p.49) and this may contribute for a "better" translation.

Instead of focusing on these issues, he includes, for example, discussions on dialects and accents, phonologic aspects – since he has much to say about it –, but maybe that affects, for example, second language learning. His posture of prioritising language when he relates translation to teaching ended up resulting in the publication of *Translation and Language Teaching* (1967). Here, in *A Linguistic Theory*, we see he was already focusing on language learning, and not on translation as a whole:

> The translation equivalent of English / d / therefore must either be Greek /t /, or Greek / nt / manifested phonetically as [nd]: Greeks normally use the latter when speaking English with a 'Greek accent' i.e. in phonological translation. (p. 56)

Perhaps, this is much more related to a theory of Comparative Linguistics than Translation Theory. And something comes to mind: for Catford, the learner/teacher is a human being, but the translator is a machine? What about the human translator? Catford sometimes forgets about this one. As of today, we know that a machine has never been able to interpret language completely by itself for translation…

Throughout the book, but mostly in the final chapters, the author continues on demonstrating how Language is a big part of these theorisations, perhaps in order to justify his Linguistic theory. But it seems language ends up being priority in discussion. In "Translation Shifts", for instance, when the discussion is about 'shift', saying that departures from Formal Correspondence may occur, in the process of translation:

> Examples of level shifts are sometimes encountered in the translation of the verbal aspects of Russian and English. Both these languages have an aspectual opposition—of very roughly the same type—seen most clearly in the 'past' or *preterite* tense: the opposition between Russian *imperfective* and *perfective* (e.g. *pisal* and *napisal)*, and between English *simple* and *continuous(wrote* and *was writing). (p.73)*

He then explains these verb tenses have different 'marks' in each language (of progress, repetition or completion) and these marks are not always passed on to translation:

> One result of this difference between Russian and English is that Russian *imperfective* (e.g. pisal) is translatable with almost equal frequency by English *simple* (wrote) or *continuous* (was writing). But the *marked* terms (napisal—was writing) are mutually untranslatable. (p. 74)

Surprisingly, he adds some considerations that really expose the significance of external factors, in the middle of the discussion, such as here when talking about register:

> In translation, the selection of an appropriate register in the TL is often important. Here, if the TL has no equivalent register, untranslatability may result. One of the problems of translating scientific texts into certain languages which have recently become National Languages, such as Hindi, is that of finding, or creating, an equivalent scientific register. (p. 90)

Unfortunately, the pointing out of languages that recently became National really does illustrate the book's period of publication; this shows how it is not so recent, when reading. But still, it is interesting how he is sort of considering the difficulties of use of terminology and translation for the first time. And even though he is aware of the influence of something extra linguistic, he pushes this to a Linguistic point of view, much concerned about form of language which may be classified.

In examples like this, but mostly in the previous ones, it is clear to see that the singularity of languages is highlighted, and not an attempt of theory of translation, as if it was not possible because of the properties of 'marks' in different languages, and, again, of their forms and structures. It seems that Catford's knowledge of multiple languages makes author struggles to accept (actually, he does not accept) that meaning can be transformed or passed from one language to the other – the core intention of Translation. By knowing so many languages, by being able to understand and communicate with different languages, he gets so intimate with them that he fears that a translation may "diminish" the richness of a particular language. He really considers each language has its own different "meanings" and all losses end up resulting in untranslatability, at some level. This turns out to be even clearer when he divides the concept of untranslatability between Cultural and Linguistic Untranslatability:

> In *linguistic untranslatability* the functionally relevant features include some which are in fact formal features of the *language* of the SL text. If the TL has no formally corresponding feature, the text, or the item, is (relatively) untranslatable. (p. 94)

And Cultural untranslatability is when a situational feature is completely absent from culture of which the TL is a part. Therefore, in the author's point of view, this is "less absolute" than linguistic untranslatability, again, as if giving more importance to language. An example is given with the word "*sauna*" from Finnish, and "*yukata*", from Japanese. The first means a birch-scented shared bathroom where people lay on hot benches and the second means a robe that is used both inside and outside, differently than a robe one may use after bath. Their contextual meanings create this cultural untranslatability and, for the author, an attempt to translate them would result in a "bad translation":

> We *can,* in other words, say that *bathroom* and *bath-robe* are bad translations, and if *no* other English lexical items, less suprising in these co-texts, can be found—then we may say that the SL items *sauna* and *yukata* are untranslatable— for cultural reasons. (p. 102)

Trying to qualify translation with "good" or "bad" is something not very appreciated. Today, we know for a fact that different types of translations can be done for different purposes. In relation to Cultural untranslatability, we may intend to create a cultural shock or not and it is part of the translator's competencies to choose what is relevant, as he actually mentions in the book. He adds, surprisingly, that footnotes may be used for this problem. However, he ends up reshaping this idea of Cultural Untranslatability and goes back to Linguistic, by saying that the difference in culture creates a difficulty in collocation, and that is also a linguistic problem, not culture. For Catford's theory, if cultural untranslatability may be a variety of linguistic untranslatability, the horizon for Machine Translation will have been

enlarged, then, the properties of translation may be calculated into algorithms. We see his vision is pushed forward, strongly based on Linguistics, because he comprehends Cultural untranslatability inside Linguistic untranslatability so this may be easier to classify and theorise. This is always the book's intention, throughout the chapters.

The intention was good, but some things lack in this perspective, as we can see. In the short chapters, the author does not do enough, by restricting too much the subject – as he says, those chapters concerned "Restricted Translation". Even though, as mentioned, restriction is necessary in order to study Language, some of the abstractions he makes turned out to be unrealistic; even absurd, if not for reflection purposes. That's the case with Graphological Translation, for example, when he tried to translate letters according to their traces. In the longer chapters, Catford goes wrong by missing the focus – he mentioned the book was an attempt to explain what translation is, that it was not about its problems. But then, we end up seeing a bunch of terms and things translation is not, and not knowing what translation is. And his final chapters are about problems and difficulties: "The Limits of Translatability" says it all.

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Overall, by doing abstractions and restrictions, Catford is much influenced by Phonetics and Phonology when developing his ideas. For example, he does not even mention the importance of Semiotics – what is strange, since he mentions Saussure and 'value', once – and Semantics or Pragmatics – which are fields of Linguistics. It seems that he does not even know these theories exist in order to explain meaning, for example. The book ends up dealing with the linguistic aspects of translating aimed at formal relations rather than meaningful ones. This focus on processes is very productive, but greater attention needs to be paid to the pragmatic features of the original message and to the circumstances regarding the use of a translation.

So, basically, what happens is that Catford may consider other fields do exist, but he always goes back to his comfort zone to his attempt of translation theory. Because of this, we end up knowing a lot of things that are something else, but not translation. The book ends up clarifying what is not translation and the initial idea was to say what it is. In addition to that, the author's intention was also not discuss its problems, even though the concept of Equivalence he talks so much about is a problem – we also end up knowing what equivalence is not -, and the three last chapters are exclusively dedicated to difficulties and problems. It is not naïve to affirm that a linguist will always have troubles when trying to classify translation, because what happens is a lot of abstraction and the theory ends up lacking perspectives that may be much more helpful.

It is quite strange, because Roman Jakobson (1959) was one linguist who also wrote ideas on translation, contemporary to Catford, indeed, and he was much more able to discuss meaning supported by those fields that, in fact, focus on the study of meaning or interpretation and how the text as a whole is important. Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) were also contemporaries that had their theory of translation from

the Linguistic perspective, the difference is that their study about "Translation Methods" is actually a normative one and not descriptive.

One may think a Linguistic theory for translation works best if normative. Perhaps that was what happened to Nida (1964), who was able to develop his Dynamic-Equivalence theory through practice, with the Bible translation, but that is another discussion. Still, a descriptive study is rather valid and this lack of pretension to norms together with the impossibility of classifying pragmatic dimensions of translation must not result in a status of Translation as an unscientific field, of secondary importance. Considering this, it is impossible to that *A Linguistic Theory* has contributed to the fields of Linguistics and Translation besides its limitations.

Translators know, today, that Translation has to merge with other fields: Pragmatics, Communication theories, Literature, etc. This explains that it does not have to be separated, exclusively, from Linguistics because their principles are the same. That is why Catford's attempt is rather valid. Translation operates through language and the analysis and discussion of its processes should use categories established for Language description, Linguistic Theory. And Translation is part of human Linguistic Competence. The thing is the interest of Translation Theory is not restricted to comparisons of vocabulary, grammar or phonetics. It is about the relation of words leading to the same result of the relation of words in the other language. It is about semantic results of syntax, lexis and morphology. Linguistics does contribute with Translation because of this. Today, we see these two areas getting more and more separated, in order to develop a specific Field of study for Translation. This book is valid for still being an example of how the fields can be merged. It may be useful until today to study, going back to the start to find the gaps and fulfill them.

This analysis was an attempt to criticize the work in a respectful manner, because even if some ideas can be refuted today, the book is indeed a prestigious reference and the theory has its significance. Actually, the importance of the book is given not exactly by in the content it brings inside it, but for what it represents historically. Definitely, the book was much more influenced by the progress the fields of Linguistics were having at the time, and not by Translation Studies and this explains much of the weaknesses of it. Yet, the author knew Translation was a significant subject to talk about – "in the modern world". So, this review is to help to understand how Translation was seen in the period the book was written and to point out the ideas that are to some extent outdated and how one could learn from them. This way, the ones who can make use of this book today are the specialized readers, to read it critically. A general reader would only be confused or would be accepting ideas that, seen today, are incomplete.

And this is not only Catford's fault. The world has much changed since the writing of the book, aspects that could create untranslatability long ago, may be looked up on the internet, for example. People are much more aware of cultural differences in the world, they can get more information and, at the same time, translators are also freer to domesticate texts and explain in translation. Globalisation influences in translatability, what perhaps did not happen 50 years ago. Also, some

of the problems in his text are Linguistics problems until today, especially the ones related to equivalence and meaning. These issues are still being questioned, since before the time of publication, and different branches of study with different perspectives try to explain what meaning really is. Even if the ideas of meaning can still change or be influenced by future studies, Catford could have considered to mention some of this discussion in his great book.

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