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Interdisciplinary Hopes and Traps

c r i t i c s :

Andrew Chesterman, *Reflections on Translation Theory. Selected Papers 1993-2014*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2017.

The theoretical study of translation doesn't enjoy wide renown. Both branches of research which comprise this field are, for a range of reasons, treated with some reserve, and their juxtaposition does more to deepen than to remove doubts. The very act of translation – in its basic, practical dimension – is a phenomenon which even in the field of humanities is often passed over in silence. This state of affairs emerges, on the one hand, from well-entrenched myths and expectations that an ideal translation is a transparent one, and, on the other, from fears about entering into a field of research demanding quite specific competencies. Theory is also a troublesome phenomenon, and as an integral element of the modern humanities, it tends to be accused of sterility, a disconnect with reality and intellectual autoeroticism. Translation theory brings upon itself all these doubts. Firstly, raising the already complex problems of translation to an even higher degree of complication and abstraction, it struggles to enter the humanities mainstream. Secondly, active translators themselves all too often contend that they do well enough without resorting to theory, often using this fact as an argument to challenge

the usefulness of reflecting upon their craft in an academic fashion. If translation theory is not useful to translators and those reading the fruits of their labours, sceptics say, is it useful only to those who busy themselves with it? Although we could easily find other examples of grumblings directed at other fields of theoretical practice, the question of the addressee – both of different sorts of theories, as well as of the book under review – is most certainly relevant.

Let us assume for the sake of orientation that within the field of humanities there appear both theoretical texts, which – depending on the topic or the way it is dealt with – can interest readers outside this specialist field, along with texts which focus on questions of importance to researchers in a given field. The majority of articles by Andrew Chesterman published in his book *Reflection on Translation Theory* clearly belong to the second category. The publication contains relatively few texts that would interest a non-specialist hungry for more enlightened reading, seeking to open their eyes to previously overlooked aspects of specific translations they would likely have previously. Nor are

translators ideal readers of this book, in spite of the fact that the author often discusses the usefulness of his observations in the teaching of translation. The analyses contained in Chesterman's articles will bring the greatest benefits to translation experts wishing to review the conceptual tools at their disposal, and the current status of the discipline they work in.

The book is made up of 28 articles originally published between 1993-2014 in specialist publications and books dealing with translation studies. Chesterman focuses on methodological questions, analyses concepts useful in research, and discusses concepts and hypotheses that are key to this particular field of research. He makes use of conceptual analysis, drawing on a handful of sample translations to illustrate his points. In individual articles, he problematises the following key categories from a range of perspectives: causality, explanation, similarities/differences, strategies, and norms and universals. Some of the articles also represent polemical discussions of influential conceptions or theoretical texts, including Skopos theory, John Catford's *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* and James S. Holmes' influential article *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies*. Chesterman's discussion on the implications of specific theories, the precision with which he constructs his research methods, and the remarkable care with which he utilises concepts can be seen as an invitation, or even a demand, to consider one's own academic skills, though the depth of this inspiration will most certainly depend on the degree to which one's research orientation overlaps with his.

Taking into consideration the state of translation theory in Poland and the degree to which foreign concepts have been assimilated, those quoted by the author offer a tangible benefit that Polish readers can extract from reading the essays contained in *Reflections on Translation Theory*. In recent years, many of the concepts dealt with

by Chesterman have also been discussed in Polish translation studies, either in translation or through the reading of influential foreign texts dealing the theory of translation. Their presence in Poland, however, is limited to their original form without taking into consideration later polemics, revisions and enhancements. There is nothing unusual about this – it is the most widely known theories that tend to be translated and referred to, while the dynamics of reception cannot keep pace with the dynamics of the discussions taking place abroad. Perceptive methodological debates should now be taking place in Poland, yet when reading publications and attending conferences devoted to translation, one gets the impression that most articles here lack systemicity, while the methodologies in them are more often simply used rather than analysed. Chesterman's analysis allows us to broaden our thinking about the concepts and terminology which often appear in Polish translation studies, such as Skopos theory, descriptive orientation or strategic concepts.

The number of articles contained in the book, the number of issues dealt with, and the degree of complication in the questions dealt with mean that it is impossible to summarise here the overall arguments made by the author: it is only possible to describe their style and point to some defining aspects. Readers familiar with Chesterman's previous works will not be surprised to find that he is much closer to the Anglo-Saxon than the Continental style of presenting theories. In dealing with matters of methodology, discussing categories used in translatology, or offering up new definitions and tools, the author attempts to consider a very broad scope. Theoretical problems within his own field are perceived by him from a general scientific methodological perspective, borrowing theoretical solutions from other fields of research, and attempting to transpose them onto the field of translation studies. As a result, the book contains references to biology, genetics and ethics. Chesterman's

universalising enthusiasm can also be seen in his powerful attachment to translation studies as a separate discipline which possesses firm scientific foundations, clearly defined aims, and its own methodology and coherent terminology. *Reflections on Translation Theory* is both an expression of a desire for this to really be true (the aim of the conceptual analyses is to achieve such a state of affairs) as well as fears regarding its current dispersed, diversified and still uncertain status as merely an inter-discipline. This notion is stated several times explicitly and is behind many of the analyses and proposals contained in the book.

It is worth noting that for Chesterman translation studies is not merely an abstract concept, but a shared space in which researchers can meet, represent different traditions and share their interests in different aspects of translation. An example of such a dialogical focus on constructing this discipline is his perceptive description of influential theoretical conceptions arrived at by other researchers. Aside from this, Chesterman formulates many of his proposals in such a way that they become invitations to discussions intended to develop an optimal model. An example of this sort of approach is an article titled *Shared Ground in Translation Studies*, written together with Rosemary Arrojo. One of the inspirations behind it was Chesterman's noticing a fundamental theoretical chasm between researchers representing "postmodern cultural studies and textual theories" and those who consider translation studies to be a field of empirical research. Chesterman and Arrojo, although rather different in their research formats, have here decided to make a list of 30 theses relating to translations which they both agree with, even though the two authors belong to different intellectual traditions. In the same vein is the text *Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath*, which opens up a discussion with other experts working in a narrow field. Chesterman contends in it that the ethical models of translation he presents in

his article are mutually incompatible, making reference to Alasdair MacIntyre's concept to offer his own, and then follows this with a formula for a multi-pointed Hieronymic oath, one to which professional translators could hold themselves.

Although concepts used in translation studies have become firmly embedded in the Polish research environment, the book's heavy focus on strengthening the discipline and making it more coherent, as well as the frequently mentioned fears of its collapsing into a narrowly focused, disconnected discipline, might be rather surprising for Polish readers. Chesterman refers to a state of affairs he is familiar with, and the desires and concerns he expresses about the potential fate of this area of research are not uncommon among Western researchers in the field. The current state of research into translation in Poland – from a theoretical angle, as well as in terms of research and institutional practices – clearly differs from that assumed by Chesterman; hence his gestures are in the Polish context not so obvious. Up until now Polish academic structures have failed to produce many departments focused solely on translation research: experts in the field come mostly from philologies or Polish literary studies, where they function and source their information, in addition quite clearly separated into literature and language/linguistics experts. Even though forums for exchange of ideas exist – conferences, journals, festivals – it is hard to conclude that a strong and resolute drive towards unification exists, be this institutional or methodological.

Acknowledging the insight evident in the book's conceptual analysis, while also maintaining a safe distance to it (ensured by work within the Polish academic space), we can consider whether the author's determined drive to develop common ground, methods and concepts is really as universally useful as Chesterman contends. The author repeatedly suggests that more cohesion within the discipline would benefit both research-

ers and translators, and he is likely to be right in this respect. Even so, not all of the ideas and arguments he presents seem to me convincing, such as the questionable benefits of choosing to aim at cohesion. Let us look firstly at the researcher's position. In order to achieve a common language in a field of research that brings together people from very different research backgrounds, one must begin with general formulations that researchers from different orientations can identify with. It can turn out, however, that for a specific research practice – especially one relating to culture, literature or philosophy – concepts developed to meet the needs of all those disciplines will prove to be substandard in relation to those created for the sake of a more specific field of analysis. Will making the discipline more cohesive really result in a researcher who is interested in how a given author's poetics spreads via translation to influence the poetics used in a different language feel more connected to a researcher who seeks to deepen an awareness of how the translators of functional texts make decisions? And if not, will either of them really lose out due to a lack of common ground? It seems to me important to draw attention to the place of a more idiosyncratic style of description, one which deviates from more widely prescribed theoretical jargon, or does very well without it. Giving up on precision means giving up on the possibility of perceiving and expressing the nuances that oftentimes are what leads participants in culture and researchers develop their interests in the first place. It also means giving up on local critical traditions, which are sometimes connected with a given context and research subject. Although in the article penned together with Arrojo we find the contention that superficially coherent concepts (such as *translation* and *Übersetzung*) can in different languages mean something different, this awareness doesn't seem to rectify Chesterman's universalising gestures.

Among the benefits arising from increased coherence in translation studies (aside from disci-

plinary prestige and ease of use for researchers), Chesterman also mentions the benefits for translators. For example, in his text titled *Problems with strategies*, in which the author does an interesting job of trying to order key terms often used as synonyms we find the thesis that terminologies should be so clear and simple that they could be used in the teaching of translation. Although it is beyond doubt that using precise categories which function in logical relation to each other should have a positive influence on the outcomes of creative processes, we could debate whether it is necessary to clarify and cohere the whole of this field. Perhaps it is enough to clarify the set of concepts used in a given space of creativity and which allows us to name the phenomena we need to name?

The suspicion that a different state of affairs is hard to achieve is further deepened once again when we recall that English is not a universal metalanguage in which all translators are trained.

Reflections on Translation Theory is a selection of twenty research theses penned by one of the most renowned representatives of contemporary translation studies. Chesterman has produced a decent standard of writing on influential theoretical concepts and ideas used in research work. Those interested in the state of and possibilities for translation studies will find within his book many ideas for its evolution and perfecting. Fans of a more individualised means of theorisation, who hold subtleties above models might feel it is tiresome. Chesterman's book in all certainty will succeed as an inspiration and a guide through the tricky process of reflecting upon their own theoretical apparatus.

translated by Mark Kazmierski

KEYWORDS

translation theory

TRANSLATION STUDIES

ABSTRACT:

This text is a review of a book by Andrew Chesterman: *Reflections on Translation Theory. Selected Papers 1993-2014* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2017). It explains the author's research methods and describes the problems covered in individual articles. Special attention is paid to a description of Chesterman's attitude to the field of translation studies, including the fears, hopes and postulates presented by the author about its shape and status. The perspectives emerging from the book are contrasted with the current state of research into translation in Poland today, and doubts are cast on the need to achieve greater coherence in this field of research.

translation research

Andrew Chesterman

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Weronika Szwebs – PhD student at the AMU Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology. She is currently working on her PhD thesis titled *Translating theoretical discourses in Polish literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries*. She has received NCN Preludium and Etiuda grants. Her articles, translations and co-translations have been published in *Przekładaniec*, *Między Oryginałem a Przekładem*, *Przestrzenie Teorii* and *Teksty Drugie*.