Comparison as a Method in Translation Criticism

Abstract

This article is devoted to translation criticism as one of the fields of translation studies. On the basis of the theoretical work of Edward Balcerzan, James S. Holmes, and Katharina Reiss, the article defines ideas behind and aims of translation criticism, and then looks at specific methods of analysis. The final part concerns the use of corpus linguistics in translation research and the problem of translation universals.

Keywords: translation criticism, comparing, corpus linguistics, translation universals

Translation criticism is a branch of translation studies, the existence of which has been described by Edward Balcerzan as “sporadic” (sporadyczne). James S. Holmes, the creator of the famous translation-studies map, placed it within applied research, alongside translation training and the development of translation aids (lexicographic, terminological, and grammatical). According to Holmes, the fourth area of applied research on translation would be translation policy, designed to study the place and role of translators and translations in society. While the practical dimension of research related to translation training and translation aids is unquestioned, the situation of translation criticism seems debatable in this respect, as with translation policy, though I will not discuss the latter below.

2 James S. Holmes, “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies”, in Translated! Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 67–80. It is an extended version of a paper delivered by Holmes in 1975 at the renowned Leuven conference that initiated what is referred to as the cultural turn in translation studies. Holmes created his map in the early 1970s. Contemporary development in digital technology has fundamentally revolutionized the development of translation aids. What is currently happening in the field of computer-assisted translation (CAT) – that is, translation based on large digitized linguistic corpora – would probably be beyond Holmes’s imagination.
What is translation criticism and what are its tasks? First of all, as in the case of the English term “literary criticism”, the meaning of the word “criticism” does not map precisely with krytyka in Polish, used in such phrases as krytyka literacka (literary criticism), krytyka filmowa (film criticism), and krytyka sztuki (art criticism). Those terms are mainly about review activity, i.e., reporting and evaluating works of art, while “criticism” is dominated by the research aspect: theoretical, analytical, and interpretive. Some distinguished translation researchers, including Holmes and Katharina Reiss, author of the pioneering dissertation Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Übersetzungskritik (1971), deplored the amateurishness of evaluating various types of translations, especially literary ones, and reported the need to develop clear and objective criteria for such evaluation³.

Regardless of whether objectivity is possible at all, let us note that the mere development of such criteria requires a scholarly method: the presentation of research theses, gathering representative material, careful analysis using advanced theoretical tools, developing the results and formulating conclusions. For the purposes of this article, I limit the understanding of translation criticism to research activities in the field of translation studies, omitting its amateur forms.

According to Balcerzan, “the main duty of translation criticism is axiological activity”, and its main goals are: “1) revealing the translation genesis of the analyzed work, 2) consolidating the feeling that we are dealing with a problematic work, because any translation (especially artistic) is secondary, derivative, dependent from the original, and is essentially one of many possible hypotheses about the original, 3) reinforcing the view that [...] the authorship of the translation also becomes problematic because each translation is a sum of compromises between the will of the first author [...] and the will of the translator, 4) [...] leveling the ontological difference between the outcomes of the defective [...] and sensational decisions of a translator: a bad or a good translation remains only a variant, a component of an open series”⁴.

The last point concerns this ontological difference – while both “bad” and “good” translations share the same features of translatability (they exist in series, they are not “self-sufficient”⁵, they “substitute” something else⁶), at the pragmatic level there is a significant difference between them: a “bad” translation is a type of communication failure,

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³ Holmes was born in 1924 (d. 1986), Reiss in 1923. I mention this because they represent a generation of translation scholars who link the discipline’s earlier, structuralist-semiotic phase, and the cultural turn that took place in the 1970s. Reiss and Hans Vermeer (b. 1930) founded the Skopos School in Translation Studies. In this article, I use the English translation of her dissertation on translation criticism, made thirty years later: Katharina Reiss, Translation Criticism—Potentials and Limitations: Categories and Criteria for Translation Quality Assessment, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2000).
⁶ By this I mean the fact that – firstly – in communication practice, a translation substitutes the original, and secondly – it can itself be substituted by another translation of the same original text.
a “good” translation is a communication success. One can agree with Balcerzan and other theorists of translation criticism when they say that its primary goal is to sharpen our awareness of the paradoxes of translation – a phenomenon that is poorly recognized yet omnipresent in our communication practices, and commonly ignored, in the case of literary translation, by its recipients. Thus, the more translation criticism in various forms and media, the higher the translation awareness in the circles of participants and users of culture.

Translation criticism, as postulated by Holmes and Reiss, is an area in which reliable criteria and methods should be established. It is also necessary to distinguish translation criticism from the simple assessment of a translation in terms of its correctness. The former usually concentrates on texts with a high degree of linguistic complexity, primarily literary, but also philosophical or theoretical. The latter, important especially in the training of professional translators, is concerned with texts that are applied, official, legal, technical, and similar. It focuses on the presence or absence of errors in translation, although sometimes in this type of communication one also should take into account its linguistic supra-organization, and then “[...] it needs to be studied using more or less the same tools that are used to study literature”\(^7\). In scholarly periodicals and on the academic book market, there are numerous works about translations (most often literary ones, but not exclusively). They reveal technical secrets of the original and of translational work, and highlight aspects of the historical and literary processes, cultural policy and cultural life, intercultural contacts, and so on.

Knowing now what the tasks of translation criticism are, it is time to ask how it is done. It is based on the activity of comparing various textual elements, at the levels of linguistic micro- and macro-elements. Depending on the perspective adopted, such a procedure allows units of translation to be distinguished, that is, segments of a source text (the original) and a target text (the translation) on which we focus as corresponding entities. These sections can be isolated by using the criteria of meaning and coherence: a unit of translation is a text segment that is also the carrier of meaning and is characterized by a minimal degree of consistency. For example, it can be a group of phonemes when we are dealing with a meaning-creating alliteration in the text, while another such unit can be a certain entity exceeding a sentence, a longer fragment of text. Theories of equivalence deal with the development of criteria and methods for determining the suitability of translation units. The concept of equivalence, which is fundamental to the theory of translation, is still controversial and has radically different interpretations, ranging from a narrow understanding of equivalence as “semantic equivalence at the level of language” to the pragmatic approach, in which the communicative context determines whether statements in two different languages are considered equivalent\(^8\).

In the act of criticism, we hypothetically assume that the units distinguished by us are identical to the units established in the act of translation, and this is the first level of comparison, without which further stages will not be possible.

Indeed, as Antoine Berman emphasizes, translation criticism may be perceived as meta-criticism, since the translation is an act critical of the original, and in many cases critical of earlier translations as well. The study of translation series, that is, a number of translations of the same source text in a given target language (less frequently, in different languages), extends the scope of the comparative material to further variants of translation solutions.

The establishment of the translation relationship, which assumes the substitutability of the target text in relation to the source text (allowing the translation to be treated as a substitute for the original in the recipient culture) requires basic comparative work. For example, how do we know that the Elias Canetti novel *Die Blendung*, from 1935, and the book *Auto da fé*10, published by Czytelnik in Poland in 1966, are bound by such a relationship and may therefore be treated in casual literary communication as the same? Elements of the title and editorial pages and the paratextual framework of the translation indicate this – without them or without prior knowledge of the original, recognizing the text’s dependent (integrated) nature would be unlikely. The history of world literature provides quite a few examples, however, where a text functioning as a translation does well without the original. In such cases, we deal with literary mystification, effective due to the absence at the key moment of this basic critical comparative work. David Bellos comments on such cases: "[c]ountless writers have packaged originals as translations and translations as originals and gotten away with it for weeks, months, years, even centuries"11. Bellos recalls famous examples including James Macpherson and *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, and contemporary examples of pseudo-translations, such as the first three novels of Andreï Makine, the French writer of Russian origin. The three were presented to the French audience as translations from Russian made by the fictional translator Françoise Bour. In 1995, though, *Le Monde* revealed that Makine had written them in French, leading to his receiving the Prix Goncourt for his fourth novel, *Dreams of My Russian Summers* – an award given only for works written in French.

After establishing a given translation’s substitutability in relation to a specific original, a more advanced phase of translation criticism follows, which in its course resembles

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10 Translated by Edyta Gatuszewska-Sicińska. The 1946 English translation has the same title (hyphenated), though the first French translation, in 1949, was titled *La Tour de Babel*, with *Auto-da-fé* published by Gallimard in 1968.

a hermeneutic circle. It begins with the preliminary discrete reading of the translation\textsuperscript{12}, which brings a general overview and a first impression of its quality. According to Ber-
man, this reading should be repeated several times and it should be “unhasty and pa-
tient”. At this stage, a translation critic may be satisfied with the context of the target
language because the criteria for this preliminary assessment relate to aspects including
linguistic correctness, fluency, and artistic value of the translation. Rather than two related
texts, the original and the translation, the comparison instead involves only the latter
as well as norms and usus of the language in which it was created.

Particularly noteworthy is the fluency criterion, which is very often used in the intuitive
evaluation of the translation. Researchers dealing with the problem of what are termed
translation universals have drawn attention to the phenomenon of explication: collo-
quially speaking, “smoothing out” the translation by adding linguistic elements absent
in the original, intended to create the illusion that a given text was originally written
in the target language of the translation\textsuperscript{13}. These are typically small linguistic elements,
such as conjunctions and personal pronouns, as well as explanatory information placed
in the body text. Much of the “smoothing out” is done at the level of syntax, as it is fairly
easy to recognize a text’s translational nature by the fact that sentences in the target lan-
guage, due to interference, retain syntactic features of sentences in the original language
– commonly considered a translation defect. In original literature, this is sometimes
a deliberate procedure that stylizes a work into a translation; this kind of trick is found
in the prose of Teodor Parnicki (1908–1988), a Polish author of historical fiction who
latinized his characters’ speech. Universal “smoothing” strategies include eliminating
repetitions by using synonyms, which can be seen in Polish translations of English dia-
logue, with the monotonous “said” replaced with equivalents such as powiedział, rzekł,
odparła, przytaknęła, and so on. The criterion of fluency, “naturalness” in a translation,
is more usually applied to prose and stage works than to poetry, which innately presumes
a language’s “opacity”.

Reviewers of translated literature, feeling they must respond to a translator’s work,
often stop at the stage of discrete reading, praising or rebuking that translator’s achieve-
ment. However, a professional translation critic, equipped with appropriate linguistic
competences, now moves on to the original and begins the proper comparative-herme-
neutical work. It is the original’s existence that makes translation criticism possible and
necessary: the translation, in a sense, demands analysis and evaluation because it poses

\textsuperscript{12} Referring to Barańczak’s article (Barańczak, “Artistic Translation”), Edward Balcerzan proposes that reading
a translation as a text “integrated” (związany) to the original ought to be called “confrontational reading,
or lektura konfrontacyjna”, while referring to one where the translation is treated as a text that is “self-sufficient”
(samoistny) text “discrete reading; lektura separacyjna”. Balcerzan, Tłumaczenie jako, 74.

\textsuperscript{13} See, for example: Ewa Data-Bukowska, Eksplikacja w nieprofesjonalnym przekładzie szwedzko-polskim.
Perspektywa kognitywna (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2016); Ana Frankenberg-Garcia,
“Are translations longer than source texts? A corpus-based study of explicitation”, in Corpus Use and Translating,
ed. Allison Beeby, Patricia Rodríguez Inéz, and Pilar Sánchez-Gijón (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 47–58; Anna
the question of “faithfulness” to the original in the first place, and second, as Antoine Berman suggests, it is inevitably marked by “defectivity” (défectivité), which means that errors, defects, and flaws can always be found in it. Nevertheless, or precisely because of this, contemporary theorists of translation criticism agree that it must not be exclusively negative and that it should do justice also, and even above all, to the achievements of the art of translation. The problem is that “defectivity” makes a translation visible and triggers the need to look for errors, while a translation that is “not too defective”, that is, one in which flaws are well hidden under the guise of fluency, effectively masks its translational nature.

Neither reading the original nor reading the translation should be limited to a single act. At this stage, the mechanism of comparative procedure is initially activated, with generalized translation features stored in a critic’s memory being contrasted with generalized properties of the source text. Only on this ground can excerpts from both texts be selected as samples that will become the subject of wider analysis. Basic selection criteria are: a) the “tangency” (styczność) of these samples in the original and in the translation (in the case of translation reduction and amplification, this will be a 1:0 relationship, rather than 1:1), b) the semantic shift between them, and c) this shift’s meaning-creating character. The size and type of a critical translation text (review, article, monograph) and the genre of the analyzed works (poem, novel, play, philosophical treatise, etc.) determine the number and size of such samples. Comparative material collected in this way is the basis for painstaking though often very rewarding interpretative work that is the foundation for translation criticism.

At this point, it is worth paying attention to the didactic aspect of exercises in translation criticism. In the light of translation, the most subtle elements from an artist’s method can be seen, which are easy to overlook in a discrete reading. A careful confrontational reading of the original-translation pair therefore teaches text hermeneutics in the best way imaginable. Moreover, if the act of translation is the most in-depth analysis and interpretation of an original text, permitting features to be revealed that even the author is not aware, the critical-translation act “repeats” (to some extent) the work done by the translator while also reverse-engineering outcomes of that work. The critical-translation cycle ends with summing up results of comparative work carried out, then drawing conclusions. These conclusions relate primarily to the textual matter of the translation: the observed translation regularities at the individual level – for example, the tendency of a translator to use amplification or reduction, a predilection to exoticize or domesticate the translation, and so forth – and at the level of the structure and usus of a given language. This allows us to formulate general theses both on individual translation strategies and systemic regularities.

But is this where a translation critic can stop their work? Theoretically, yes, and quite often this proves to be the case, or at least it has until recently. The antigenetic attitude of structuralist research meant that the focus in translation studies was predominantly on linguistic and textual phenomena, pushing to the background all extra-textual contexts and diminishing their interpretative value.
However, the cultural turn in translation research has fundamentally redefined its subject matter and methods as well, opening it up to previously neglected areas. The status of certain issues that have been discussed traditionally was reduced (an example is the equivalence between source and target text), resulting in downgrading the original’s importance as the main semantic element and as reference point for translation. As Magdalena Heydel says, “attention has been shifted away from the philological level to the level of politics and ethics”\(^\text{14}\) and to translation’s function in the target culture.

While this does not leave a translation critic exempt from doing philological comparative work, it may limit the scope of that work or make it unnecessary for the critic to present it in great detail in research outcomes, which often makes for more readable articles and monographs on translation criticism. Contemporary publications in the translation-studies field differ significantly from several decades ago. First of all, publications outline the translator more sharply. “Seek out the translator”, says Antoine Berman\(^\text{15}\), “this is a crucial phase of our methodology, one that is all the more essential now that we know that one of the tasks of a hermeneutics of translation is to take into account the translating subject”. Berman indicates three factors apart from basic factual and personal data that need to be considered in this context: a translator’s “position”, their translation project, and the horizon of translation. The last factor, in particular, is connected with the necessity to launch a comparative perspective: according to Berman’s broad definition, it is “the constellation of all the linguistic, literary, cultural and historical parameters that determine how a translator feels, acts, and thinks”\(^\text{16}\) in the process of translation.

Without going into detail about Berman’s postulates, it suffices to say that a comprehensive exploration of the translation experience’s cognitive aspect still lies in the future, although efforts made in this area seem very promising\(^\text{17}\). In addition to directing attention to the translating subject, the cultural turn has generated interest in the translation phenomena’s entire infrastructure, so to speak – institutions and people participating and mediating in translation communication, situated in a specific historical, social, and political reality – which has significantly changed the critic’s translation workshop. Philological methods and theoretical approaches have given way to the socio-logical perspective and historiography as well as inquiries into various types of archives, and new generations of translation scholars willingly accept this change.

But what happens to our invaluable comparison as a translation-research method in this situation? It seems that this tool, gradually but irrevocably, is being taken over by computers, or at least they are taking over the procedure’s most laborious and tedious part, the collection and organization of linguistic material, leaving us to interpret it\(^\text{18}\).

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\(^{15}\) See footnote 9.

\(^{16}\) Berman, Toward Translation Criticism.


\(^{18}\) Computer programs also perform in part interpretative work traditionally ascribed to the human factor, through visualizing results obtained of the comparison, in the form of maps, diagrams, charts, and so on.
Since the 1970s, the face of translation studies has also been changing with the development of electronic-corpus linguistics, a completely new, revolutionary branch of linguistics. Today’s digital linguistic corpora are a phenomenon that can be described as Jorge Luis Borges’ vision of the Library of Babel come true before our very eyes. These comprise collections of digitized texts of various types and structures, depending on research needs, that are unimaginably large (for an “ordinary” scholar). Most known and generally available are general corpora of national languages, with resources that are constantly expanding. For translators and researchers of translation phenomena, comparative and parallel corpora are particularly useful. The latter contain source texts and their translations into one or more languages. Their ancient prototype is the famous Rosetta Stone from 196 BC, on which the same text was written in two languages, Egyptian and Greek, in three types of writing, Greek, Demotica, and hieroglyphs. Due to the Rosetta Stone, Jean-François Champollion solved the mystery of hieroglyphs. Today we owe the abrupt qualitative leap in translational capabilities of Google Translate to the dynamic development of such corpora. Comparative corpora, on the other hand, are not translation-oriented, instead containing texts comparable in terms of specific parameters, such as genre, subject, period, etc.

Both types of corpora can be applied in translation research in a variety of ways. For example, a parallel corpus enables analyses of translation strategies, relations between them, and a target language’s norms. It also allows us to discover (then use) “translational correspondences”, that is, equivalents of words and entire phrases from language A to B, often used by professional translators, and then to compare them, for instance, with the suggestions of traditional bilingual dictionaries. It may turn out – and usually does – that dictionary translations do not work well in practice. It’s not possible to overestimate the function of parallel corpora as a tool in educating translators and teaching foreign languages. Comparative corpora, on the other hand, composed of texts that are not translations and texts translated in one language, play a key role in the research and discussion on translation universals mentioned above. The theme of translation universals appeared in translation studies in the 1993 article by Mona Baker19 and still arouses strong emotions. What follows are reflections with a few notes on that subject.

Translation universals, according to the simplest definition, “are linguistic features which typically occur in translated rather than original texts”20. Researchers supporting the thesis about these universals’ existence often prefer to speak of tendencies or laws instead of universals, as it is impossible to demonstrate their universality. Stylometric analyses conducted on comparative corpora, meanwhile, do confirm that something like a “translation style” can be gleaned from this linguistic material on a macro scale.


So far, translation properties contend for the status of universals are simplification, reduction of repetition, explication, normalization, transfer of discourses, and the distinctive distribution of lexical units. Reduction of repetition and explication have been discussed above; simplification may be manifested in simplifying syntax; normalization is the result of adapting the translated text’s language to the target language’s norms (for example, despite nonnormative features of the original style); the transfer of discourse occurs in translation when we deal with linguistic interference; words’ distinctive distribution is an increased (thus noticeable) frequency of occurrence of specific lexemes in translation texts in relation to their frequency in the corresponding source texts, and in non-translated texts in the target language.

Observations about the existence of such general translation tendencies can be formulated at an intuitive level; empirically, however, they can only be confirmed in comparative corpus-based stylometric studies. Thanks to this, the ongoing dispute among translators about possible determinants of a hypothetical “translation style” now can finally be resolved. Discussion on universals may also have a major impact on the development of translation techniques and raise linguistic awareness among translators.

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