



Scientia Translationis

Pós-Graduação em Estudos da Tradução - PGET

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

IS THE GLASS HALF EMPTY OR HALF FULL?
REFLECTIONS ON TRANSLATION THEORY AND PRACTICE IN BRAZIL

by Alice LEAL, 2014. [Transkulturalität - Translation – Transfer] Volume 12.
Berlin: Frank & Timme, 334 pp. ISBN 978-3-7329-0068-8



CARLOS S. C. TEIXEIRA

Alice Leal's *Is the glass half empty or half full? Reflections on translation theory and practice in Brazil* is a thorough study of many different topics that are relevant to Translation Studies these days. The book is ambitious in the sense that it addresses topics as diverse as translator professionalization (and the status of the profession), the goals of Translation Studies, the institutionalisation of Translation Studies, essentialism vs. non-essentialism, theory vs. practice, and translator training. It also goes beyond the scope of Translation Studies by touching on epistemological issues such as modern vs. post-modern theories, scientism, and the role of higher education.

The 'glass' allegory in the title of the book is used by Leal to illustrate how different standpoints can affect the perception of the same object. It also allows her to talk about optimism vs. pessimism, since deconstruction has often been accused of being pessimistic and nihilist. Finally, it serves the purpose of showing how two apparently opposite concepts (full vs. empty) can actually be part of the same integral understanding of a given object; this brings in the opportunity to introduce the Derridian concept of *double bind*.

Although the title also announces that the book will focus on Brazil, the topics that are covered are universal enough to be of interest to scholars in many countries. When the topics are specifically Brazilian, any cultural references are explained in detail, so the foreign reader will find it easy to follow the discussions.

On the structural level, the book has several useful (backward and forward) cross-references. While these can make the text sound repetitive at times, they also allow for a non-linear reading and turn the book into a good reference work. The chapter titles are well chosen and typographical errors are hardly to be found, indicating a positive concern with the reader and sound proofreading.

The book is divided into four parts. In Part I, Leal presents the main concepts that will be dealt with and the questions that will be addressed throughout the book. Parts II and III are dedicated to two Brazilian scholars – Rosemary Arrojo and Paulo Henriques Britto, respectively – who represent opposing views on the topics covered in the book. Finally, Part IV wraps up the discussion raised in Part I and illustrated in Parts II and III.

From the Acknowledgments we learn that the book is the result of Leal's doctoral thesis, whose main idea matured when she attended the CETRA Summer School in 2009. While her initial idea was to write about "contemporary translation studies in Brazil, [she] soon realised it was a far too vast subject [...] to cover in one thesis" (p. 12). This explains why she chose to analyse two scholars in greater depth rather than to give an (inevitably superficial) overview of the most important scholars in Brazil. This was certainly a wise decision, although one remains with the impression that she still tried to cover too much in a single volume. As often happens when one is defining the topic of one's thesis, it seems that she felt the need to "compensate" the scholars she would leave out of the book by including additional topics of a very complex nature, such as the relation between theory and practice and the meanders of post-structuralism. This is not to say that she was superficial in her analysis; on the contrary, she manages to cover all the concepts in depth and does not leave a single loose end. But at times the reader might become confused when trying to make a connection between the different topics and even forgets that the book title promises to cover translation theory and practice *in Brazil*.

The "Interchapter" in Part I is dedicated to clarifying the notions of deconstruction, post-structuralism, post-modernism and (non-)essentialism used throughout the book. In I-1 Leal exposes her academic background and unveils her motivations, explaining how she perceived the issue of theory vs. practice through her own eyes and those of her colleagues and teachers both in Brazil, where she had her education up to MA level, and in Austria, where she did her PhD and is currently a lecturer. Going deeper into the merits of theory as it is understood in "modern" (here understood as essentialist and mostly structuralist) circles, she criticises research in Translation Studies for being "predominantly applied and empirical" (p. 36) and for its "near obsession with the Popperian model of falsifiability and testability as the pillar of the scientific method" (p. 34). Leal reveals her affinities with post-modern and deconstructionist tendencies, in a gesture of honesty towards the reader, along the same lines of what she does when presenting Arrojo's and Britto's standpoints later in the book. In other words, she does not pretend to be neutral, unbiased or invisible (cf. p. 295).

Leal associates the discussion of theory vs. practice with the role of higher education, which is the main topic of I-2. Here Leal cites Jacques Derrida extensively, for whom the university should foster "thought". The main discussion in the chapter can be summarised in Aristotle's question of whether the purpose of education should be "virtue" or "utility" (p. 44; 48). In I-3 the reader is offered the broadest overview of people related to translation in Brazil – both as researchers and practitioners. This is illustrated with excerpts from interviews with "professional translators" and "professors of Translation Studies", with a few names that combine both activities, taken mainly from Benedetti & Sobral (2003/2007). By comparing those different views and by reviewing Chesterman & Wagner (2002), Leal points to the existence of at least two views: one that "presupposes the marriage of theory and practice" and a second one that "is not practice-oriented, but rather awareness-raising" (p. 59).

In I-4 Leal attributes those different views to what she calls "standpoints" (i.e. "interests and motivations", cf. p. 312). Chapter I-5 is a review of Arrojo's (1998b) paper, which in turn reviews several authors such as Georges Mounin, Leonard Bloomfield, Mona Baker, André Lefevere and Peeter Torop, while

focusing on the concept of essentialism in translation. Arrojo argues that even those authors with reportedly anti-essentialist affiliations are in fact essentialist in their assumptions about language and translation. I-6 is a review of Cristina Rodrigues (1999), who also shows the pervasiveness of essentialist views in authors such as Nida, Catford, Lefevere and Toury. She mentions the role that the Saussurean dichotomy between signifier and signified may have had for the notion of 'equivalence' in Translation Studies, although she indicates the non-essentialist nature of Saussure's sign. For Saussure, "signs do not contain an essence that can define them, but rather can only be defined through their differences to other signs in the system" (p. 87, citing Rodrigues). A non-essentialist view of language, according to Leal (and Rodrigues), such as the one advocated for by Derrida, does not question the Saussurean dichotomy but rather stresses the unstable relationship between signified and signifier. In this context, post-structuralism is presented as complementary to structuralism, rather than *radically* opposing it.

Part II is dedicated to Rosemary Arrojo, the most prominent Brazilian scholar to have written about deconstruction and post-modernism in Translation Studies. The first chapter (II-1) presents Arrojo's 'academic biography', from her undergraduate studies through her three Masters degrees and her PhD to her work as a professor in universities in Brazil and abroad. Leal indicates how Arrojo dedicated her research to post-structuralist thought since early on, with a shift only in the last decade. Chapter II-2 is divided into four sub-chapters: the three first ones are each dedicated to one of her books, while the fourth sub-chapter is dedicated to her most relevant papers. This chapter provides a thorough review of Arrojo's works – published mainly in Portuguese until her move to the United States in the early 2000s, offering an excellent account of her scholarship for those who cannot read her texts in the original. (Some of those papers had been translated into German for an anthology edited by Michaela Wolf in 1997 as *Übersetzungswissenschaft in Brasilien*.) In addition to Arrojo's main ideas on deconstruction, Part II introduces the concepts she takes from psychoanalysis in their relation with translation, namely the *unconscious* and *transference*. At all times, those concepts and the post-modern view on language and translation are opposed to the 'modern' view, which believes in stable meanings and conscious decisions made by authors and translators. Of particular interest is the famous debate between Rosemary Arrojo and Andrew Chesterman on the pages of *Target* (issues 12 to 14), with the participation of many TS scholars.

Part III is devoted to Paulo Henriques Britto, a renowned Brazilian poet, poetry translator and translation teacher. Following the same structure used in Part II, Leal first presents Britto's biography and then reviews his most relevant publications, namely those that confront post-structuralism. Britto is described as an "atypical academic", in the sense that he has a strong practical record and no formal PhD. "His production as a literary translator and writer [...] unquestionably outshines his academic production", Leal says (pp. 210-1). Still, the justification for choosing him for the book is that he is the most serious critic of post-structuralism (in Brazil): "unlike many of his peers, he invests time and effort in this undertaking, which contributes greatly to the debate" (p. 284). In III-3 Leal gives a fair account of Britto's criticism of different aspects of post-structuralism, and then proceeds to undermine each of those arguments. One of Leal's counter-arguments is that Britto – like many other detractors of post-structuralism have done – seems to attribute to post-structuralism a radicalism that is not there. If it were not for that apparent

radicalism, Leal actually finds a surprising “theoretical similarity” between Arrojo’s and Britto’s ideas (p. 223). The remaining sub-chapters in this part cover Britto’s papers on poetry translation vs. creation, where he analyses the “processes” of poetry translation; and his papers on translation criticism, where he outlines his “mathematical” method for assessing the translation of poetry.

Part IV summarises the main topics covered in the book and wraps up the discussions that were suggested in Part I and further illustrated in Parts II and III. Leal does not promise to give answers to the questions she raises; instead her stated intention is to foster the debate, to shift viewpoints and to raise awareness, as for her this is the main purpose of theory anyway. Drawing on Baker and Arrojo, Leal believes that “theorisation will lead to the elevation of the translator’s status in society”, especially if this theorisation is done through “poststructuralist reflection [which] enables us to legitimise our *interference*, our *presence* and our *visibility*” (p. 274, her emphases).

In IV-2 Leal addresses the three main criticisms of post-structuralism: that it is too radical, too pessimistic and too permissive. Leal concedes to some of those criticisms, agreeing that “there does seem to be a tendency for those committed to post-structuralist perspectives to express themselves in a way that may come across as radical and even aggressive” (p. 285), and Arrojo is no exception. Having made that concession, Leal attributes most of the criticism to “hasty and impressionistic conclusions drawn from second hand readings”, made by scholars as prominent as Andrew Chesterman. Leal then goes on to undermine each one of the three points mentioned above. Post-structuralism is not too radical because it does not “abolish” or “destroy” basic assumptions such as the Saussurean dichotomy (p. 286). It is not pessimistic or nihilist either, unless “one hastily takes relativisation as abolishment, and questioning as negation” (p. 289); after all, Leal reminds us, “the process of deconstruction of our convictions can be rather painful” (p. 290). Finally, post-structuralism should not be viewed as too permissive (as in justifying any kind of behaviour and interpretation), because it does account for “the social and conventional aspect of language [...] very much in tune with Stanley Fish’s notion of interpretive communities” (p. 291).

Leal goes to the heart of the matter when she isolates the quest for practical applications as the main source of objections to deconstruction. She suggests that theories “need not be exclusively practice-oriented” nor should they be exclusively applied or empirical (pp. 298-9). This is connected to her views on the role of higher education – and of education in general. When asking whether we should “be taught to do or to think”, she answers: “certainly both, though it seems easier to come up with actions and strategies based on awareness and reflection than to depart from mechanical actions and achieve greater awareness” (p. 272). In my opinion, such a statement should not go unchallenged; for example, it could all depend on learning styles: some people learn from bottom up (they learn by doing then build a theoretical knowledge based on their practical experience) while others prefer to reflect first about what they are to do later, ‘applying’ their theoretical knowledge to their practical actions. This consideration seems to be absent in the discussion proposed by Leal, as is the case with the distinction between competence and performance (as it is used in Linguistics) when she mentions Britto’s “forest analogy” (comparing the hypothetical attitudes of theoreticians and practitioners while trying to find their way out of a forest).

The broad range of topics addressed in the volume reappear in different places throughout the book, as in the questions presented on pages 294 and 304-5: whether and how translation studies should be institutionalised, whether it needs to embrace scientism to be taken seriously as a discipline, whether research in the area should be applied and empirical, whether translation theory should be useful to translation practice and the market, how TS should interact with other areas, what is the role of higher education, and how universities should interact with the external world. The answers to those questions are not simple, and what Leal calls repeatedly for is *awareness* and *critical attitude*, rather than looking for a utilitarian purpose for theory or indeed any intellectual endeavour.

Despite the many topics covered, one could still argue that the book gives an incomplete view of Translation Studies in general and of TS in Brazil, because of its excessive focus on literary translation as its object of study and on post-structuralism as the theoretical framework used to analyse the many topics listed above. I wonder whether post-structuralism would provide a relevant conceptual framework to analyse other objects of study dealt with by TS today, such as localisation, technical, legal and medical translation, translation technologies, as well as interpreting.

There are some other very relevant topics that are dealt with in passing in the book, most of which have been the object of other books and papers by Leal. One of those topics is the widespread use of English as a lingua franca in the field and the absence of interpreting provisions at most TS events. In other words, Leal criticises the fact that scholars who discuss translation refuse to work through translation and refuse to discuss why they do so (p. 306).

Leal's book is definitely worth reading for those who are interested in learning about several aspects of translation studies in Brazil, especially in the field of literary translation, and for those who want to reflect on post-modern thought and its interaction with the studies of language and translation. After all, as Leal puts it, even if post-modernism and deconstruction have not been overtly embraced by many scholars, "today it is not uncommon for thinkers with clear essential affinities to say that we cannot speak of fidelity and equivalence in the same way that we used to" (p. 309). If she is right, the debate over deconstruction has been successful in raising awareness among translation scholars and practitioners, in Brazil and elsewhere.

Carlos S. C. Teixeira

carlostx@linguanativa.com.br

Intercultural Studies Group

Prof. Dr., Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Spain