"What we need is a common language, even more than having the same methods of research." An Interview with Radegundis Stolze on Translational Hermeneutics and its Place and Role within Translation Studies

By Larisa Cercel

LC: *Dr. Stolze, you are the author of a Translation Studies bestseller (the 7th edition of* Übersetzungstheorien. Eine Einführung *was published in May 2018 by Narr Verlag in Tübingen). You are looking back on a work that testifies to the great diversity of your scholarly interests, ranging from language for specific purposes (LSP) to literary translation. However, the central point of your research on the phenomenon of translation is hermeneutics, a subject to which you have dedicated a number of publications (*Hermeneutisches Übersetzen. Linguistische Kategorien des Verstehens und Formulierens beim Übersetzen*, Narr, 1992;* Hermeneutik und Translation*, Narr, 2003;* The Translator's Approach. An Introduction to Translational Hermeneutics with Examples from Practice*, Frank & Timme, 2011). Your last book,* Hermeneutische Übersetzungskompetenz *(Frank & Timme, 2015), also deals with this field of research from a didactic perspective. Why did you want to write a book on translation competence? And is hermeneutics teachable at all? It is largely based on the principle of subjectivity and leaves much room for individuality.*

RS: I see two questions here. The first question is why we should talk about translation competence. Translation, as I see it, is in practice an activity that takes place within a society. Its goal is to help communication so that people can understand one another even across language borders. As a service, translation is a dynamic task to be performed by persons within their society and not in a vacuum. Translators are mediators of messages, and therefore they carry a lot of responsibility.

Readers of translated texts expect to receive a truthful presentation of the content. In that sense, translating is professional work and it can be learned like any other profession. People working as professionals have to know what they are doing and why, how they might justify their decisions and what their strategies are. These strategies may vary individually, there is no general step-by-step method to be standardized. That is why we talk of "translation competence". In my book, I tried to present several aspects that are part of that competence. Critical self-reflection is one of them.

As you said, the core of my academic work dealing with the phenomenon of translation has been on "hermeneutical translation", because I realized that translating is a task to be performed by living people, and not an automatic process. So the scientific subject should be an analysis of our attitude towards texts, the way we deal with them, and our outlook on the world. Hermeneutics as the methodology of interpretation is concerned with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly texts. As a methodological discipline, it offers a toolbox for efficiently treating problems of the interpretation of human actions, texts and other meaningful material. Hence, I am convinced that hermeneutics is also relevant for translation.

Secondly: Can we teach and learn hermeneutics which is based on the principle of subjectivity and leaves much room for individuality? Well, we all are living in a culture and a particular society, are we not? Our individuality is limited by the freedom of others and by the tradition of our culture. Any social activity is carried out by individual subjects and, at the same time, guided by social traditions. Hans-Georg Gadamer has underlined the principle of understanding as entering into a tradition and, as he explains, "the consciousness of being affected by history" is important (*Truth and Method*, 1990, p. 301).

Since the Ancient World, hermeneutics has been conceived as the way of understanding within a particular group: Christianity, lawyers, ideological circles. We only understand "in the light" of our given knowledge – this is the so-called "hermeneutical circle". Teaching is focused on imparting methods of how to really understand a specialized text: in law, politics or bible translation according to the Christian background. Of course hermeneutics is indeed teachable and has been taught, but individual interpretation always remains there, which promotes further debate.

In the early 19th century Friedrich Schleiermacher reversed the perspective from the text to be understood onto the question of whether understanding is actually possible, since correct understanding is not a matter of fact. He presented some aspects of grammatical understanding as a complement to understanding in divination. He called for "Hermeneutics and criticism" (1838, English translation published 1998). This, again, reduces individuality and became a basis of text linguistics later on. Phenomenology was introduced, as we ask how individuals see objects and foreign ideas. Since then, modern hermeneutics has been a language philosophy reflecting on the conditions of comprehension.

When translating is understood as the representation of a message and not as a mapping operation of sentences, then what is the first step in dealing with texts to be translated? It is the attempt, first of all, to understand that text, just in the same way that Gadamer had defined human

existence as fundamentally rooted in language, in that "being that can be understood is language" (*Truth and Method*, 1990, p. 474). That is how hermeneutics as a language philosophy comes into play for Translation Studies.

LC: *There are many translation competence models in Translation Studies (e.g. by Gyde Hansen, Susanne Göpferich, Hanna Risku, PACTE). What is the specific difference of your approach? What gap in research does your hermeneutical model of translation competence try to close?*

RS: In my book published in 2015, I mentioned various models regarding translation competence (see pages 35-48). They all present a clear description of factors that constitute expertise. Gradually, the models become more sophisticated, but the basic result of that small survey is that translation competence is a complex phenomenon, a set of various linguistic, emotional and social capacities. These capacities are qualities featured by people and the subjectivity we mentioned previously is never excluded.

However, these qualities have been drawn from empirical studies: questionnaires, translation criticism, think-aloud-protocols, interviews, comparison of the work of students and professionals. They document what translators are actually doing; they do not show how these competencies are taught in the classroom. All these models show similar aspects, though with a different terminology. It is true that, in the end, a professional translator working with a hermeneutical approach, will present similar qualities. The focus in those models is on the description of either classes of requirements (Hansen, Risku) or actual qualities of expertise found in quantitative analysis (PACTE, Göpferich). So far, no model has achieved the status of determining the discussion in general Translation Studies.

One aspect, however, is missing in these descriptive models: the question of how all of these factors are interlinked, how they are working together in the translator's mind. We have to distinguish, on the one hand, between the capacities of the person, external conditions, the translator's commission, elements of knowledge regarding languages and disciplines, etc., and the strategic dynamic application of the factors in dealing with texts on the other hand. A detailed description of the factors and parameters of translation competence will not explain whether and how the individual translator acts and brings them together in order to create an adequate translation. My approach is a prospective self-interrogation of how one should deal with the text to be translated. The goal is an interlinking and constant enlargement of one's knowledge in the strategic process of translating.

The gap in research I intend to close is the change from the horizontal description of necessary qualities to the dynamic question of how to apply one's knowledge in practice. The mere description of activity as a model will not automatically create a corresponding action in the translator. As a responsible mediator of messages, the translator has to decide for himself or herself what the special problem in a particular text is and how to deal with it.

In my didactic approach, I see the necessary combination of analysing the language form and looking behind it into the cultural background. For that purpose I have developed some "fields of orientation" for understanding the source text and for formulating it in the target language. It is a strategic reflection from a personal perspective, based on responsible attention, relevant knowledge and functional language proficiency. The notion of "embodiment" also includes reflection on one's own historical situation and on the external conditions of the work mentioned above. Hermeneutics may be said to be asking for orientation in the world when we are acting in that world.

In some of the models, when talking of the rules to be learned as a student, there is still the idea of an inter-lingual transfer, of a comparison between language structures. Conversely, my hermeneutic approach deals with the text in a holistic manner in order to grasp the message as a semiotic entity that will be represented later on in the other language. This "hermeneutic turn" in Translation Studies means a different more personalized approach to texts.

LC: *Can the holistic approach in translational hermeneutics also be seen – besides being a hallmark of a hermeneutic model of translation competence – as a research paradigm? What, in your opinion, are the salient characteristics, the place and the role of translational hermeneutics within Translation Studies?*

The holistic approach changes the translator's outlook on his or her texts. Translation is the representation of the message that is understood and that is now cognitively present in the translator's mind and will be re-presented in another language. As a research paradigm, this offers a platform for studies regarding concrete dealing with texts while translating. In my opinion, this field of studies has not yet been sufficiently examined, in particular regarding the input and procedural strategy. Let me mention some examples:

- One could ask how much specialized knowledge is actually needed to translate specialist's texts in a certain discipline by comparing translations done by educated general translators with those done by specialists with knowledge of the language. The results are relevant for translation teaching.
- Integrating phenomenology into the studies, one could ask how translators with different cultural backgrounds understand a certain text. What are the cultural metaphors capturing their attention? This might be particularly interesting for literary texts that are studied in a seminar with students from various countries.
- One could test whether students are really applying the hermeneutical approach, for instance, by analysing think-aloud protocols: are they working on a word-to-word basis or with a holistic view? How do they reason about their solutions? This may be completed by eye-tracking: where do they look– at individual sentences or longer paragraphs? Is there a difference between beginners and professionals? Are they all working in the same schematic way or not?
- Regarding the life-long learning process, one could analyse whether there is a difference when students translate all kinds of texts or when they focus mainly on a specialist's subject.

Which input is relevant? This could be found out by means of a long-term study that compares translation criticism in subject-oriented or in multi-dimensional training courses for the same people.

- One could also enquire about how modern tools are changing the learning and knowledge of student translators. What are the consequences when they stay close to the structural data of Translation Memories. Maybe such tools are better used by professionals only, who already dispose of a relevant knowledge regarding the discourse field of the text.

- Regarding the testing of didactic methods, there could be a course teaching the transfer rules of contrastive linguistics and another course (with the same texts) teaching the hermeneutical approach. Is there really a difference in the results of the work, both in quality and in the time needed to accomplish the task? Questionnaires in both groups on the degree of difficulty felt in the text would also be interesting.

- Qualitative interviews with translators can give insight into their awareness of problems and methodology, their attitude towards their work and their experience. Thus a profile of the personality of the translator could be created. This might be combined with an analysis of their output.

- In the analysis of sub-titling, one could check whether an overall message in a film has been preserved or whether there are misunderstandings in individual propositions that lead to a distorted presentation of a character.

- With videos of conversations among persons with different linguistic backgrounds one could try to find out different cultural habits, e.g. body language, and the consciousness of such persons in language games. A reflective self-awareness in role plays can be informative.

- Regarding the behaviour of the translator one might study records of self-observation, memories, the discussion of one's own ideas, thus analysing the cognitive progress during translating.

- Introspection may show precisely the process of translating written texts and how the translator's thinking is changed by that. What questions are posed by the text, how do target solutions arise, how is a first version revised rhetorically?

- Translators work within social networks, and this has consequences for translation management in practice. The observation of professional activities will show the development of social processes among job colleagues and in a team of translators.

Hermeneutics as a research paradigm in Translation Studies offers many opportunities for new studies on the translators' activity. In my book, *Hermeneutische Übersetzungskompetenz*, 2015, pp. 347-353, I mentioned several studies in this context that have already been carried out, some of them under the topic of cognitive research.

LC: *In 1988, Mary Snell-Hornby wrote about the hermeneutical approach in her book* Translation Studies. An Integrated Approach: *"In most translation theories of the 1980s, however, hermeneutic principles are not central. Indeed, they are generally considered too vague to be a dependable basis*

for the theoretical approach" (p. 43). Does this statement need an update now, 30 years later? Hermeneutic principles seem to be operative in major research areas of current Translation Studies.

RS: Absolutely, you are right. The reason for this is that, in the eighties, Translation Studies had a different perspective. Theory concentrated on the comparison of languages, on so-called language-specific difficulties in translating, on rules of inter-lingual transfer (Newmark). Linguistic analysis could work with exact data and, seen from that perspective, hermeneutic principles of course appeared much too vague. A hermeneutical approach, in those days, was also considered too subjective.

It was only in the nineties that the cultural turn widened the horizon a bit and it became clear that translation is located within different cultures, with their history and particularities. The old statement that you mentioned really needs an update now.

After the turn of the millennium, interest grew in analysing the activity of persons who actually are expressing their thought in languages. Language as a system is no longer the sole subject of scholarly interest, now the focus is more on differences in cultures and in the cognitive capacities of people. And gradually more interest in hermeneutics came about. There are many empirical studies regarding the performance of translators and many of them support hermeneutic notions, even though often with a different terminology. I see a convergence between cognitive and psycholinguistic studies and hermeneutics when we look at language as a medium of expression.

LC: *It may be time to take stock of the development of translational hermeneutics in the last 30 years and to ask: what has been achieved in this time? And above all: what is still open and should constitute the future agenda of translational hermeneutics?*

RS: I think that the first step to mention was the slowly growing self-awareness among scholars with a hermeneutical view over the last 30 years. What actually began as a rather clandestine movement of sending private e-mails and in conversations during conferences has grown into a community of hermeneutical scholars now. Initially, there was the feeling in many places that hermeneutical ideas were not mainstream, that they were not accepted among scholars, and there are still no chairs in this subject. Thus, respective publications remained a marginal and isolated affair. The first conference on "Translational Hermeneutics" held in Cologne in 2011 constituted a milestone and avaluable platform to bring together interested scholars from many countries. This gave an initial thrust to more cooperation among those who, so far, had been only in occasional contact. Meanwhile the second volume on such a conference has been published in 2018 under the title "Philosophy and Practice in Translational Hermeneutics".

Another development was the realization that hermeneutical thinking was also present in other regions. The language border between German, English and French was overcome by the translations of authors like Steiner, Berman and Ricœur, who in earlier days were not read sufficiently by German scholars. The same is valid for the other countries, where German publications are

underrepresented because of a lack of language proficiency. Translations into English of Gadamer and Heidegger appeared only at the end of the nineties.

What is still open, and in my opinion constitutes a great issue is the question of terminology. Many scholars argue more or less with a similar world view, both in the original hermeneutics area of literary translation and in the field of cognitive research and specialized translation, but they do not really understand each other. There is still much individual proposition but no dialogue. What we need is a common language, this is even more important than having similar methods of research. A research method depends on what you want to find out, but the problem, then, is how you talk about it, how gathered data are interpreted. It is common for disciplines of the liberal arts to have a dispute over terms and notions. This debate must also take place in translational hermeneutics. It begins with the question of what a "translation" really is. And what is communication, understanding, meaning, etc.? These quasi philosophical ideas are also being discussed in neighbouring disciplines such as psychology, sociology, brain research, semiotics, communicology and cultural studies, but a basis for common discussion has not yet seriously been laid. There is too much demarcation, indifference and mistrust among each of those disciplines. Maybe a bigger conference on these questions, and not only on "translational hermeneutics", could be helpful here.

LC: *In my opinion, publications in recent years and the three conferences held in Cologne so far have brought to light one further important point to be mentioned here, namely the interest in hermeneutic thinking outside the German-French-English area. Translation scholars from Central and Eastern Europe and from several Arab countries seem especially interested in the hermeneutical approach. Are there new perspectives and research impulses coming from these directions?*

RS: It is true that there is much interest in hermeneutic thinking outside the traditional European area. However, these scholars are all working in English or French as well, so the language barrier mentioned earlier still exists. Unfortunately, I cannot see any new perspectives and research impulses coming from these directions. What I have seen so far is the attempt to understand and integrate hermeneutical approaches to local problems. But this is not a new perspective or even a new research impulse. On the other hand, I see a deeper receptivity for hermeneutic thinking in Central and Eastern Europe, based on their philosophical tradition, which is so different from the Anglo-Saxon world. But there is another linguistic barrier with the Slavonic languages. Important Russian authors have not yet been sufficiently accepted in the West. It might be a good idea to continue an intensive dialogue with those scholars in order to see what their concept of hermeneutics really is.

LC: *From your answers, many suggestions and hopes for future research emerge for both Translational Hermeneutics and general Translation Studies. What is your personal agenda for the next few years? On what research questions and projects are you working?*

RS: My interest is more in didactics and less in research. I am presently working on a book about religion and language, a field where not much has been done so far, but it is relevant, and not the least for translation. I am also working on a compilation of terms or concepts for philosophical notions, with their translation in German, English and French. Perhaps that could be a contribution to a better understanding among scholars.

LC: *An important idea of Friedrich Schleiermacher, one of the key figures of a hermeneutical approach in translational hermeneutics, was that hermeneutical processes always and without exception have to be accompanied by critical reflection. With this in mind, I would suggest to you now, at the end of our discussion, a critical exercise, namely a critical look at Translational Hermeneutics from inside. What, in your opinion, are the problematic aspects of this approach?*

RS: The problem is that, indeed, critical self-reflection is not very well developed among the various authors. Everyone makes statements that often are rather self-righteous, and isolated. Unfortunately, I do not see much collaboration in a team, for instance with a joint research project. This has nothing to do with the subjectivity we have mentioned. I see the reason more in the marginal position of translational hermeneutics within the scholarly community at the universities.

Another problem is the way we speak and write, particularly in older German contributions. For readers trained in hard science, this is difficult to understand. Therefore, we should try to use clear, straightforward language. The past literary attempts are not adequate in academic discourse. Self-reflection grows by critical debate with others, by the exchange of ideas. And of course we need a common language for this, so that a mutual dialogue and convincing argumentation can be developed. In this respect the past symposiums in Cologne have been very valuable events.

LC: *Ms. Stolze, thank you for this discussion and your openness.*