STRUCTURALISM IN TRANSLATION THEORIES IN POLAND: SOME REMARKS ON THE "POZNAŃ SCHOOL"

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ABSTRACT

Since the late sixties of the twentieth century much research has been carried out in the field of translation studies by structuralist literary theorists and historians in Poland. In particular a group of scholars of the Institute of Polish Philology from the University of Poznań such as Jerzy Ziomek, Edward Balcerzan, Stanisław Barańczak, Anna Legeżyńska, Ewa Kraskowska (the "Poznań School") produced a kind of theoretical and descriptive research work which was characterized by an analytical approach definable as "source" and "target" oriented, micro- and macro-structural at the same time. Although the results emerged were often of considerable interest (and ahead of comparable studies carried out in the West at the same time), little is known about Poznań School in the West. Although the structuralist theoretical paradigm today is considered to be in crisis in the whole of the Western world, these studies do not appear to be incompatible with a number of current problems in the theoretical discussions on translation.

Keywords: Poznań school; translation as a semiotic process; translational series; model and empirical reader; crypto-translation; self-translation

Structuralism in Poland was the leading theoretical model in literary research for a very long period, from 1930s to the late 1970s (Głowiński 1975). The *Polish structuralist school* produced important research in the field of theory of literary communication, especially developing the diachronic dimension, with research linking literary communication with historical poetics, as well as social and above all receptive dimensions. The works which refer to Polish structuralism do not however usually mention the fact that one of the fields it has offered a major contribution to is that of translation theory, particularly thanks to the research work of a group of scholars of the Institute of Polish Philology from University of Poznań: Jerzy Ziomek (1924–1990), Edward Balcerzan (1937) and his pupils Stanisław Barańczak (1946), Anna Legeżyńska (1951) and Ewa Kraskowska (1954).

A premise: the limits of the structuralist-semiotic paradigm have already been highlighted through decades of discussions in all fields in which it has been applied. Why

bother to deal with studies based on a theoretical paradigm considered by most scholars to be "in crisis"? I would like to return to this question at the end of this article. For the moment it should be observed that, when we use expressions like *Poznań school* or *Polish translatology*, these concepts are almost unknown for most Western scholars: the research work of the Poznań school was done mostly in isolation from the rest of the Western world, and still today Western scholars tend to be unfamiliar with it. The reasons for this are easy to understand: the existence of the very language barriers that translation theory aims to contribute to knocking down, historical and political reasons, and according to some also a certain cultural prejudice which underlies the justification of the communication difficulties with the whole world behind the Iron Curtain with the idea of backwardness of the *other Europe* (Baer 2011: 1–15). All this leads back to the problem of the existence of a traditional rupture of great dimensions between Western and Eastern discussions of translation. From this point of view, the answer to the question I mentioned before should be evident. Today there is a methodological problem within the discipline of Translation Theories which cannot be overlooked: this requires that we recover those traditions that still are in the background of the so-called *international* debate. I would therefore like first of all to consider some key contributions from the Poznań school.

The outset of theoretical discussion of translation in Poland dates back to the mid-20th century. After an initial *linguistic* phase in the 1950s, *literary translation* research predominated in this field. That was conducted by a group of literary scholars of the Institute of Polish Philology at the University of Poznań. In 1965 Ziomek attempted to remove translation criticism from subjective impressionism, rather tracing the analysis of translated texts to scientific criteria, applying the theory of information to comparative stylistics (Ziomek 1965). His study was followed three years later by Balcerzan's proposal of a structuralist-semiotic model of translation, underlying the research conducted by himself and the other scholars from Poznań throughout the 1970s and 80s (Balcerzan 1968).

It should be pointed out that the interest of these researchers was not adressed to the practical needs of translation. They were above all literary theorists and historians, and they looked at translation as a special type of literary text, an a posteriori fact, a realised product of literary history. Ultimately they were interested in the use in the translated texts of the same principles and instruments made available by structuralism for the study of literary texts. The overcoming of the "normative" perspective towards a "descriptive" and "theoretical" perspective was therefore implicit in their approach.

The theoretical assumptions of it were:
1) Translation is a form of communication (of a particular type: in its horizontal and vertical dimensions the **model of translational communication** duplicates the **model of communication** it derives from);
2) Translation is a semiotic process that involves an act of interpretation.

Translation appeared as a text on an equal footing with the other works in a specific literary tradition, on the one hand, sharing the same structural norms as other works (intratextual, intertextual, synchronic and diachronic norms), on the other, being at the same time subject to its own system of norms (the **translational code**) which changes over time in connection with the whole system (from this point of view: translation is like a specific genre in evolution).

All these assumptions were already clearly formulated in Balcerzan's fundamental study of 1968, *The Style and Poetics of Bruno Jasieński Bilingual Writing*, a work on literary bilingualism and self-translation devoted to the bilingual output of the poet Bruno Jasieński (they were also summarized in part in a brief article of the same year – Balcerzan 1968b). This study, little known in the West, marked a turning point in the debate on translation in Poland, introducing some fundamental concepts which are still valid today.

Balcerzan (1968: 32–38) overcame the views of translation held in the linguistic discussions of the time, which focused on the problem of untranslatability and of the definition of equivalence. Concentrating on literary translation, instead he proposed a semiotic definition of it as a process of structural reconstruction of the source text not only in the signs of a different language, but also in those of a different literary code, a different system of (metric, stylistic, compositional and literary genre …) norms in evolution. The result of this semiotic process was then a new text which, although keeping its invariant elements, lives in a different context, in a network of completely different extra-textual ties. Rejecting the labels he considered "moralistic", such as *fidelity* and *betrayal*, Balcerzan proposed investigating the changes undergone by the source text during the translation process, not as deviations from the source text, but rather in relation to the system of norms in which the translated text lay, taking into account all the subjects and elements defining the translational model of communication (code, sender, receiver, context …).

His perspective, like that characterising Translation Studies in the West, was *target oriented*. It led to the consideration:
1) Of the action exercised by the translation on the target system (as the realisation of unrealised possibilities of the paradigmatic system);
2) Of the action that the system itself exercises on the structure of the translation (for example by means of the system of expectations of translation receivers, or, general current norms).

The scholar also overcame the prejudice of subalternity, the artistic inferiority of the target text compared to the original works. From the viewpoint of the action carried out by the literary system, translation could act in the same way as other works in the same system: namely in relation to the target system, it was found to play the same function of stylistic innovation or replica played by any literary work (Balcerzan 1968: 80–86).

Moreover, the value of the translation ceased to be dependent on that of the original (from this point of view in fact, totally irrelevant), instead being defined simply according to the intrinsic features of the translation in relation to the context it was received in; secondary to this was also the strategy adopted by the translator.

> In the position of "discovery" [of a new style – L. C.] many "faithful" and "unfaithful" translations can be found. Moreover, the directives of the original do not define the place a given text should occupy in a foreign system of systems. The original may in fact be a "discovery" set against the background of its own tradition, and – transposed into the field of another – become an ordinary element (…) It is also easy to imagine the exact opposite occurring: an absolutely secondary text "on home ground" in the field of foreign traditions projects an innovating style. And so on (Balcerzan 1968: 82 – transl. L. C.).

In 1968 Balcerzan also introduced the concept of the **translational series** (1968b: 23). Underlining the interpretative nature of translating, he deviated from the myth of the ide-

al, perfect translation. He noticed that, if the transformations accompanying this process are linked to the change of code, the interpreting subject, the system and context in which the interpretation takes place, which in turn undergoes continuous historical evolution, then translation is a reconstruction which can *a priori* be repeated infinitely, generating different results each time. Balcerzan was then aware of the historical value of the translational interpretation: the single translation – he observed – is a concrete product with a precise historical and cultural value, one possibility among many. Balcerzan defined the "series" as the linkage of infinite concurrent translational interpretations, real or merely potential infinite realisations. "The translation of a given foreign work is always one possibility among many. The essential feature of translations is therefore their repeatability and multiplicability" (Balcerzan 1968b: 23).

The series concept was one of the most productive of Polish translatology: many translation analysis-studies have focused specifically on some series of translations. This appears to be a particular application to the translation field of the diachronous perspective, typical of the research works of the Polish structuralist school in the literary field. The translated texts are studied not merely individually in relation to the target system but also in relation to previous translations of the same work. In this way the "conventions" characterising the translation of the same work, the structure of the series and its evolution are all taken into consideration (see Filipowicz-Rudek 2000).

As already mentioned, Jasieński study was the forerunner to subsequent investigations by the Poznań scholars. Overall, they can be viewed as theoretical studies of translation starting from the subjects which define the translational model of communication. I'll not offer a full description of all these investigations, but I would like to mention some of them.

Barańczak (1974), for instance, focused his attention on the receivers of the target text, and on the distinction between the **model** and **empirical reader**. He noticed that translations are received by empirical readers in relation to the source text (as translations) or as autonomous text. But he also noticed that these two different **styles of reception** of the translation are "programmes of reception" projected in the very structure of the text, intrinsic features of it (we may think for example of the use or otherwise of parallel text). Furthemore, and importantly, the translator's choice between the different programmes could once again be linked to the influences that lead to supra-individual conventions in force at a given time and in a given society, or the relationship between different cultures.

In an analytical study of some series of translations in their own development and in relation to that of a number of literary genres in Poland, Legeżyńska (1986) focused her attention on the translator, a particular receiver and interpreter with author competences, raising the problem of translator as "second author" of the text.

Ziomek (1975) also returned to tackle the problem of translation. Adopting the semiotic perspective of his pupil Balcerzan, he dealt with the inevitable transformations of the structure of a text during the translation process, and the superimposition in the "polyphony" of translation of the choices made by the two senders – author and translator.

In this context I would like to recall the research works of a scholar from Lublin, but very close to the research of Poznań school, Jerzy Święch. He intervened on the problem of the link between translation and historical poetics, on the evolutionary, historical character of the translational code (Święch 1976). The translation – he noticed – uses a double

code: the general code of the literary target system and also the translational code – a set of norms and conventions regulating translational production. There are in fact translational conventions (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit) that are not equal to those of the literary system. And the nature of the directives of the translational code is that of an evolving system: they change over time, showing a less prescriptive character in relation to the weaker, peripheral or less canonized, less subject to collective control … parts of the system (for example a given genre in a given period).

Indeed, again in his study of 1968, Balcerzan focused on the translator's "relationship" with and attitude towards the source text. In this context he also introduced the category of **crypto-translation**, a polemic remake in which the translator criticizes the source text, but in which the relationship with the latter is not explicit (even though its recognition is required) (Balcerzan 1968: 218 and fol.). Thus a form of translation similar to the pastiche, the paraphrase, the parody, etc. According to Balcerzan, all these literary forms shared the same "poetics of reminiscence". The concept of crypto-translation is very interesting as it moved into a territory in which the distinction between "translation" and "original work" is very transient, given that the original works (as the scholar indeed commented) are themselves the result of a collage of citations, and that translations and original works participate in the same intertextual development of literature (Balcerzan 1985: 148 and fol.).

Balcerzan's 1968 study is also one of the very first essays devoted to the problem of "literary bilingualism", the importance of which has only recently been underlined in international translatological debate. In this study the scholar observed that, if the bilingual person is defined as a person able to use two language systems, the bilingual writer is a writer able to use equally the norms and conventions of both linguistic and literary and cultural systems. The bilingualism was then defined by Balcerzan as "bi-systemicity" and "bi-culturality" (Balcerzan 1968: 6–10). Research on self-translation highlighted once again the illusory nature of the view of translation as a simple transposition of meanings which remain unchanged in the linguistic re-coding, instead showing how the structure of the translation is heavily conditioned by the directives of the literary system even when the author of the translation is the author of the original (which would seem to guarantee the greatest possible level of "fidelity" to the original).

The case presented by Balcerzan posed another important question: if the self-translation, totally different from the original, in any case possesses the same authority (being produced by the same author), to what extent was it really possible to talk of "original" and "translation"? The problem was developed by Kraskowska, who (in the late 80s) reflected on the consequences the concept of literary bilingualism seems to imply for the stability of a precise criterion of distinction for the concepts of "translation" and "original" (Kraskowska 1985, 1989). Analysing cases in which the author of the source text intervened in the text of the translation, introducing authentic author's variants, or even other cases in which the writing and self-translation of two texts were a contemporary and bidirectional process, she observed that it was not possible to accept the conclusion that of the two variants one is to be considered "more original" than the other. The problem of bilingualism also posed important questions on the concept of "national literature", or of "literary system" intended as a closed set: where should we place self-translations and bilingual writers? Debating with Balcerzan, who offered an analysis and a typolo-

gy of literary bilingualism based exclusively on the literary evaluation of the produced texts, Kraskowska also underlined how the analysis of bilingualism should consider many other aspects (considered by the orthodox structuralism as extra-literary), such as the moments of learning the two languages, the prevalent use of one of the two languages, the author's emotional relationship with the two languages, as well as social factors which may escape any precise systematics, but which are in any case considered pertinent for the interpretation of the work (1989: 22).

As can be seen by these brief overviews, in many cases the research of the Poznań school went far beyond the limits usually attributed to classic structuralism. Many of the innovative elements which came from the research works of the Poznań school are still valid today. Generally speaking, two characteristics appear to be typical of Poznań translation studies, and they seem to derive directly from trends in the Polish structuralist school in the literary theory field. They are:

1) Interest in reception – both at system level (study of the relationship of translation with the target system), and that of the internal structure of the text (for example, study of the model of the receiver projected into the structure of the translation);

2) Interest in the historical (diachronic) aspect – covering research on the relationship between translations and the development of literary genres, the historical development of the very translational norms, as well as studies on **translation series** (in which translated texts are studied in relation to the overall tradition of the translations of an individual work, the conventions characterising the translation of a text, the series structure and its evolution thus being taken into consideration).

The Poznań scholars deserve recognition for having indicated the interpretative nature of translation, as well as the *target oriented* perspective. The analysis of target text performed by these scholars was on the whole micro- and macro-structural, setting out to interpret the transformations undergone by the text in the transition from one semiotic system to another, in relation to the intricate network of system relations.

Certainly their theoretical studies never strayed beyond a specifically literary dimension. We may consider for example the original concept of translation series, which has always been applied to the literary system and has never been developed in an inter-semiotic perspective (for example, by considering audiovisual transpositions based on literary works). This limit actually derives from the specific interest of these scholars who, as mentioned earlier, were literary theorists and historians and not translation theorists as we understand today. However, it should be said that the proposed theoretical model does not exclude the possibility for development in this direction, which is particularly fertile today.

We can also see how the route of the sociological perspective was not pursued by the Poznań scholars (this is rather characteristic of both the structuralist research works in theoretical and literary fields in Poland and of Translation Studies in the West). Also in this case, the semiotic definition did not exclude such possibility (that, indeed, was investigated in 1987 by another Polish scholar, from Wrocław, Wojciech Soliński).

As is typical of structuralism, the research of the Poznań school focused on the study of the mechanisms governing the production of texts, and on the relationship between text and code and between text and reciever. Excluded from the field of investigation remain, as we might say, the "human factor" and the dimension linking the real author

(his emotional, psychological, subjective universe) to the text, as this was impossible to investigate using scientific instruments. It is well known that this dimension was brought to the centre of attention in more recent post-structuralist research works. For example, by cognitive linguistics and stylistics. And here we need to clarify a point that takes us back to the initial question. Although the cognitive perspective is included in the group of post-structuralisms, the use of this label can lead to misunderstandings. The opposition between cognitive stylistics and structuralism, we can see, does not concern, as in the case of many post-structuralisms, the area of presumed objectivity or the possibility to construct a theory based on scientific principles. In fact it concerns the very same founding principles (for which cognitivism offered a radical revision) and the object: on one hand the subjective dimension of the production of texts with a recovery of the mental basis, and on the other the regularity governing the dynamics of attribution and sharing of meaning and values. These are different perspectives, not irreconcilable but rather complementary.

Then why bother to deal with studies based on a theoretical paradigm considered by most scholars to be "in crisis"? The crisis of the structuralist perspective is emphasised today by the use of the term *post-structuralist*, which seems to define the current state of research in the Western world. But in the present post-structuralist phase, we can find methodological orientations that differ greatly from each other, not always in a position of total opposition to structuralism. Similarly the situation of the translation theories seems dominated by a variety of viewpoints.

Distinction must be made in this context between anti-structuralist approaches which, criticising the logocentric perspective of structuralism, in their most extreme relativistic manifestations are incompatible with structuralism, and other approaches, which (despite having underlined certain limits of classical structuralism) develop compatible perspectives (this is the case of sociological or cognitive research). The traditional opposition between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* methods is today replaced by another: between a logocentric, scientist paradigm and an anti-logocentric, anti-scientist paradigm. In any case, generally speaking, interest has shifted from the code-text relationship to the author-work relationship (thanks to new tools used to investigate the subjective factor in a new non-impressionistic perspective – as in the case of some cognitive and neurocognitive investigations), or to the text-readers, text-contexts or context-context relationship (as in the case of some sociological and cultural investigations). On one hand, some studies are placed in the realm of continuity (those which focus on ideological and sociological factors) or complementarity (cognitive field), and on the other hand, other studies are placed in the field of irreconcilability (those which totally deny the possibility for an objective reading of the translational processes, promoting theoretical relativity).

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