# MEMES OF TRANSLATION

*The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory*

## 翻 译 模 因 论：
### 翻译理论中的思想传播

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# 出 版 说 明

　　近年来，国内翻译研究取得了很大进展，有关翻译研究的丛书也出了多套。不过，长期以来，国内引进的原版翻译著作匮乏，不少研究都是根据二手资料；另外，学习翻译专业的研究生人数越来越多，这种状况若继续存在，将十分不利于学科的发展和翻译人才的培养。鉴于此，上海外语教育出版社约请了多名国内翻译研究著名学者分别开列出最值得引进的国外翻译研究论著的书目，并对这些书目进行整理、排序，最终确定了准备引进的正式书单。该丛书涉及的论著时间跨度大，既有经典，也有新论；内容的覆盖面也相当广泛，既有翻译本体的研究，也有跨学科的研究。这套丛书的引进将会满足翻译专业研究生教学原版参考书和翻译理论研究的需要。

　　上海外语教育出版社谨以此丛书献给我国的翻译学界。

# "国外翻译研究丛书"专家委员会

# 借 鉴 和 创 造
## (代序)

　　上海外语教育出版社从成立以来一直是我国外语教育最优秀的后勤部和侦调部。因为它不但为我国各个层次（尤其本科与研究生层次）的外语教育提供了多种高水平的教材、教参和工具书，而且还出版了多学科、多语种和多系列的中文版和外文版的学术著作，比如"现代语言学丛书"、"牛津应用语言学丛书"、"美国文学史论译丛"、"外国文学史丛书"、"剑桥文学指南丛书"、"当代英语语言学丛书"以及列入国家及教育部规划的人文社科重点项目的外国语言文学、文化等方面的图书等。为了适应我国现代化建设和教育改革的需要，还出版了一批国际金融、对外贸易、涉外保险、国际经济法、国际新闻和管理科学等方面的教材与专著。这些著作在外语的学科建设与学术研究以及复合型人才培养等方面都在发挥着强有力的侦察、调研和指导作用。这是外语界有口皆碑的。

　　随着中外文化交流的纵深发展以及我国现代化建设对人才的需求，对比语言学和翻译学近些年来在我国有了较快的发展，最突出的证据就是①外语类硕士博士点上研究对比与翻译方向的学生在逐年迅速增多，而且我们的高校已经有了翻译学院和翻译系（当然还太少）。②外语专业的学生考中文、法律等其他人文社科专业的硕士、博士以及反方向的走向已经起步。这种跨学科的人才已成为人才资源竞争的最主要对象，因此发展趋势定会看好。上海外语教育出版社为适应这种高层次人才培养和新学科建设的需要，不但积极出版国内关于对比研究和翻译研究的专著和论文集，最近又推出了原版"国外翻译研究丛书"，这套丛书时间跨度丛古代到现代，所选书目皆为译学发展史上有里程碑作用的名家名著，堪称译学经典。他们计划分批出版，以满足读者的需求。

这套丛书的出版首先可以解决国内翻译教学原版参考书多年匮乏的困难，真可以说是我国翻译教学与理论研究的及时雨。我想学习和关心这个学科的师生和其他人士定会对这套书的引进为之欢呼，为之祝贺。

这套丛书的价值还在于能大大促进我国翻译学科建设的发展。译学学科的发展依赖于研究者在三个方面的深入研究和结合。一是对本国译学的继承性研究；二是对外国译学的借鉴性研究；三是对翻译实践和翻译教学中新问题的探索性研究。只有这三者研究深入并结合好了，才可能从经验与技巧逐步升华为具有科学性的译学理论。这三个方面的研究，改革开放以来，在我国已取得了很显著的成就，这是有目共睹的。翻译学在我国已于20世纪80年代末有了独立学科的初级形态，90年代又有了新的发展，对学科的独立性以及理论体系的结构与功能有了更多的探讨。依照学科建设的规律和研究现状，我们尚需在上述三个方面加大研究力度，而这套丛书就是借鉴性研究的主要资源。从这个角度讲，这套丛书的引进也是我国文化基本建设的重要工程之一。

在新的世纪，文化（包括各类科学技术）会多方面快速深入人类的日常生活，各国之间的交流会空前深广，因此翻译的功能会逐步扩大，实用性翻译人才的需求量定会空前增加。这就要求我们除了做好高层次研究型人才的培养以外，还应十分重视实用性人才的培养和应用译学的研究。我想出版社一定会关注和引导译学建设的理论研究与应用的发展趋势。

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2001年3月28日

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# Contents

# Preface

> I see humanity as a family that has hardly met. I see the meeting of people,
> bodies, thoughts, emotions or actions as the start of most change. Each link
> created by a meeting is like a filament, which, if they were all-visible, would
> make the world look as though it is covered with gossamer. Every
> individual is connected to others, loosely or closely, by a unique
> combination of filaments, which stretch across the frontiers of space and
> time. Every individual assembles past loyalties, present needs and visions of
> the future in a web of different contours, with the help of heterogeneous
> elements borrowed from other individuals; and this constant give-and-take
> has been the main stimulus of humanity's energy. Once people see
> themselves as influencing one another, they cannot be merely victims:
> anyone, however modest, then becomes a person capable of making a
> difference, minute though it might be, to the shape of reality. New attitudes
> are not promulgated by law, but spread, almost like an infection, from one
> person to another. (Zeldin [1994] 1995: 465-6)

In Classical Greece the source of truth, knowledge, revelation, was the oracle. A
person officially designated to go and consult an oracle was known as a *theoros*
(θεωρός; Liddell and Scott 1940: s.v.). Interestingly enough, the same term was
also used of someone who was sent to attend a festival in some official capacity.
Yet another sense of the word is that of 'magistrate', and more generally
'spectator', or 'one who travels to see' people and places (ibid.). The *theoros*,
then, was interested in truth, knowledge, but also in pleasure. The word contains
a sense of rational judgement (as a magistrate's title), but the core meaning is
simply someone who sees, who sees with a purpose.

From this noun came the verb *theorein* (θεωρεῖν) 'to see, gaze upon'.
This seeing was distinct from older verbs of seeing, in that it emphasized the
function of the seeing rather than the seeing itself. It meant 'to be a spectator',
i.e. a spectator *of something*; it stressed the conscious, deliberate activity of
seeing rather than some kind of purely passive perception (Snell 1975: 15).

And by this path came the noun *theoria*, (θεωρία) 'theory'. It carried both the outward sense of 'a looking at, a viewing' and the inner sense of 'contemplation, speculation' (OED, s.v. *theory*).

There is a delightful anecdote in Herodotus ([1920] Book I, §§29-30) about the wise man Solon, who had come to work as a legislator for the Athenians, and then evidently felt that he needed a break. So he left home and set out on a voyage "to see the world", as Godley translates it. The original Greek literally states that he went out into the world "for the sake of *theoria*" — i.e. in order to see and contemplate.

It is in this sense that the term "theory" is used in this book. Theories themselves come in many shapes and sizes: some are a good deal more formalized than others, some are empirical, others metaphorical; some are at a high level of generality, others are more specific.

The book has three main aims. The first is metatheoretical: it offers a view of theory, in fact of several theories. It explores some of the main ways in which translation has been seen and contemplated, and suggests a conceptual framework within which a number of disparate views of translation can be linked.

The second aim is theoretical. On this level, I set out to develop a particular theoretical view of translation, one that has been greatly influenced by the philosophy of Karl Popper. I propose, in effect, a Popperian theory of translation. I also draw on norm theory and to some extent on action theory, in an attempt to weave various strands into a coherent whole. My fundamental building-blocks are the concepts of norm, strategy and value, plus Popper's concepts of tentative theory, error elimination, and the evolution of objective knowledge.

My underlying metaphor for translation comes from the notion of memes: a meme is simply an idea that spreads (memes are explained in more detail in chapter 1). The metaphor comes from sociobiology: ideas spread, replicate themselves, like genes do. My motive in using this metaphor as an umbrella-idea to cover many aspects of this book is to provide an alternative to the traditional transfer-metaphor of translation. The meme-metaphor highlights an aspect of the translation phenomenon that I want to foreground: the way that ideas spread and change as they are translated, just as biological evolution involves mutations. In this light, a translator is not someone whose task is to conserve something but to propagate something, to spread and develop it: translators are agents of change. Translators, in fact, make a difference... The metaphor thus gives less priority to the notions of "preserving identity" or "sameness" which underlie the more traditional image of "carrying something across", a something that somehow

remains unchanged. I offer the meme-metaphor as a helpful way to look at translation. If it works as a way of stimulating new insights, fine; if not, we can forget about it. The applications of Popper's ideas do not depend on the meme-metaphor; nor do my arguments about norms, strategies and values.

The third aim is more practical. Many practising professional translators are suspicious of theory, or may be of the opinion that there is no such thing as a theory of translation anyway. Translator trainees, too, often feel that what they need is simply more practice, not high-flown talk about abstract theory. In response to such claims, I argue that a translator must have a theory of translation: to translate without a theory is to translate blind. I also argue that theoretical concepts can be essential tools for thought and decision-making during the translation process. My third aim is thus to demonstrate that translation theory can be useful — to translators themselves, to trainees and to their teachers.

The book thus attempts to cover a fairly wide field, but certainly not the whole of Translation Studies. In particular, I do not focus on the technical side of translation: computer aids, terminological databases and the like; nor on interpretation research. Nor am I interested in giving prescriptive advice: my attitude to norms is descriptive, not prescriptive. A norm describes a kind of consensus of opinion about what something should be like, how it should be done. A norm-statement describes what such a consensus *is*, not what it *should* be.

The overall movement of the book goes from theory to practice. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of the meme, borrowed from sociobiology into cultural evolution studies. By way of illustration, it discusses five "supermemes" of translation theory: the source-target metaphor, the equivalence idea, the myth of untranslatability, the free-vs-literal argument, and the idea that all writing is a kind of translating. Memes are then shown to exist primarily in Popper's World 3, and a Popperian meme is introduced that will be a recurrent theme in the book.

Chapter 2 outlines the evolution of (Western) translation theory, in terms of eight major stages, each building on and reacting to its antecedents and overlapping with them. These stages are not transitory but cumulative, so that the present picture we have of the phenomenon called translation — the total pool of ideas about translation, as it were — is composed of strata from all the previous stages. The chapter ends with a review of some conflicting ideas about translation theory in the current "meme-pool".

Chapter 3 argues that some ideas about translation eventually become norms, and that norm theory provides powerful tools for thinking about both translation theory and translation practice.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus from product to process. Given that there are translation norms, how do translators seek to conform to them? This question is

discussed in terms of the notion of translation strategies, which depend on and are oriented towards translation norms.

How do we assess attempts to conform to norms? Chapter 5 offers a Popperian approach to translation assessment, based on the view that any translation is itself a theory: a theory of the source text. As such, it undergoes the same sort of assessment, criticism, error elimination and corroboration as any other theory.

Chapter 6 is practical, pedagogical. It discusses what implications a Popperian translation theory has for translator training. What relation is there between the evolution of translation theory and the maturing of an individual translator?

Chapters 1-3 thus explore how translation norms arise, and chapters 4-6 discuss various effects they have on translation practice. Chapter 7 then focuses on the ethical values underlying the norms that govern translational action.

## Acknowledgements

Several friends and colleagues have been kind enough to comment on parts or preliminary versions of the text, and thus been of invaluable assistance in the error elimination process. Thank you: Ritva Leppihalme, Mary Hatakka, Nely Keinänen, Seija Paddon, Ria Bülow-Møller. Thank you too, anonymous reviewers, for some critical comments on earlier versions and for drawing my attention to works I had overlooked. And special thanks to whoever it was who anonymously left in my pigeon-hole the Morgenstern poem and its translation, discovered in a concert programme, as "a small contribution to translation theory".

Any remaining weaknesses or errors are of course my own responsibility.

I dedicate the book to my wife Marja: most significant Other, site and source of much translation.

AC, Helsinki, January 1997.

This paperback edition incorporates a few minor corrections.
AC, Helsinki, July 2000.