

Jiménez Bellver, Jorge: Review of Tuija Kinnunen & Kaisa Koskinen (eds.). (2010). *Translators’ Agency*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 187 pp.

Over the last decade the notion of “agency” has featured increasingly in translation studies (particularly, in what has come to be known as the “sociology of translation”). If one searches any comprehensive online bibliography of translation studies, they will quickly retrieve more than a hundred entries containing agency as a keyword, most of them published in the last few years. Accordingly, several translation panels, conferences, and symposia have been organized around the notion of agency, such as the panel “Secret Agencies: Looking Behind the Author/Translator Mirror” at the 1st Conference of the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies (held at the Sookmyung Women’s University in August 2004), the international conference “Translating and Interpreting as a Social Practice” (celebrated at the University of Graz in May 2005), and the symposium “Translator’s Agency” (held at the University of Tampere in February 2008), where the seven contributions of the eponymous edited volume reviewed here were presented.

Even if, judging from the attention it is receiving in contemporary translation studies, the notion of agency appears to be yielding significant insights into translational action from a social perspective, its definition as a research term remains far from settled (very much like the term “translation” itself). For this reason, one of the main goals of the symposium was to formulate, if not a completely satisfactory definition, a working definition from which the contributions to the edited volume, as well as further lines of research, could unfold methodologically.

The resulting definition of agency was formulated collectively as: “the ‘willingness and ability to act’”. Following Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration, editors Tuija Kinnunen and Kaisa Koskinen argue that, whereas *willingness* is largely “individualistic and psychological”, *ability* is “social”, and *acting* or *action* is “continuous” and “temporal” (6). In this way, the notion of agency is mapped from a threefold perspective: 1) from translators’ awareness and understanding of agency (i.e. how does the idea of changing their social environment emerge in translators’ minds?); 2) from the effective possibilities they have to exercise their agency, as determined by constraints of power (i.e. to what extent can translators change their social environment?); and 3) from the temporal and spatial

realization of translators’ agency (i.e. how does the translators’ change of their social environment relate to their conduct over time and space?). Accordingly, the conceptual and methodological validity of the definition of agency articulated at the symposium is assessed in the contributions to the volume.

Although the contributions included in *Translators’ Agency* incorporate, to varying degrees, all three components of the proposed definition, each one pushes the notion of agency in a particular direction. From a general perspective, the contributions can be classified (however loosely) into three main categories: theory-oriented contributions (Suojanen, Koskinen), profession-oriented contributions (Abdallah, Kinnunen), and literature-oriented contributions (Kujamäki, Jänis, and Paloposki).¹

In the first category, Kaisa Koskinen explores the notion of agency by means of contrast with its alleged “direct opposite”: causality—that is, a “relation of cause and effect that is deterministic, predictable and not necessarily dependent on individual action” (165). In “Agency and causality: Towards explaining by mechanisms in translation studies”, Koskinen examines the application of causal reasoning to the study of translation and interpreting (in particular, the contributions by Gideon Toury and Andrew Chesterman) and explores further possibilities that the notions of agency and causality may yield in the field. Regarding causal approaches, Koskinen discusses the main concepts that have been coined in translation studies (that is, “translation universals”, “translation laws”, and “translation norms”) and their shortcomings for the study of agency and predictability—namely, their circular dynamics: “trying to establish casual (i.e., non-agent-dependent) relations has taken us back to – agency” (178). Koskinen argues that, even though research on causality has significantly benefitted from the notion of norms, it is not norms but *translators’ responses to norms* that actually govern translation activity. Consequently, she points to an “agency theory of causation” that combines psychological/cognitive and cultural/sociological approaches to translation in order to enhance the understanding of the relationship of the dichotomy agency-causality.

Conversely, Titty Suojanen explores in “Comparing translation and technical communication: A holistic approach” the intersections of translation and technical communication (often regarded as a subsection of the translation field) by

¹ The edited volume is freely available online at: <http://tampub.uta.fi/english/tulos.php?tiedot=340>

examining similarities and differences as reflected in three aspects: the competence aspect, the professional aspect, and the transdisciplinary aspect. Regarding competence, Suojanen argues that, while both require text production competence (where the target audience and textual conventions come into play), translation and technical communication differ significantly in issues of documentation, information design, and use of resources. Likewise, although cases of translators migrating to technical writing are pointed out, Suojanen sees the emergence of a distinct professional identity for technical communicators as a consequence of important differences in the tasks they perform from those of translators and the desire to gain more visibility and distinction as a professional activity. Furthermore, the transdisciplinary nature of technical communication makes it problematic to subsume technical writing under the rubric of translation. Suojanen calls for the adoption of a more “holistic” view of the relationship of translation and technical communication where the latter is not readily regarded a subsection of the former and the educational and theoretical implications of their intersections are reflected upon.

Within the second category, an application of qualitative analysis of the translation profession to the study of agency can be found in the contribution by Kristiina Abdallah: “Translators’ Agency in Production Networks”. Abdallah analyzes a series of in-depth interviews with eight Finnish professional translators to approach the role of translators in principal-agent relationships (more specifically, the relation of translators with the reader and the translation company). Borrowing the concepts of “asymmetric and incomplete information”, “adverse selection” and “moral hazard” from agency theory, she firstly addresses particular problems affecting performance that the interviewed translators faced in their working environment (such as inadequate product information, lack of contact with the major client, unaligned demands of the reader, the translation company, and the client company, and low fees) to explore the way translators retain their agency in production networks. Secondly, she draws from Jack Barbalet’s thesis on the emotional nature of agency to approach translators’ “coping strategies” in situations of lack of mutual trust and cooperation among client companies, translation companies, translators, and readers—which include keeping records of what the translation company agrees on with the translator in order to prevent conflicts of interests and different types of retaliation when asymmetries of commitment arise. Abdallah concludes that effective cooperation in principal-agent relationships is seriously affected by the “low social capital” of translation production networks

(where the agency of translators is considerably restricted) and suggests the creation of a system of quality definition and alignment that promotes the participation of translators as legitimate experts.

Similarly, in “Agency, activity and court interpreting”, Tuija Kinnunen draws from a related professional environment (that of court interpreters in Finland) to identify contradictions in multilingual court work from the perspective of interpreters’ agency (which appear driven by the assumption that court procedures in multilingual settings should be carried out in the very same way as court procedures in monolingual settings). Kinnunen follows activity theory, which incorporates the notion of “needs” to the discussion of agency, to analyze contradictions within interprofessional collaborative practices as reflected in a corpus of data that she collected, including interviews with practitioners, observations in court settings, and recordings of court interpretations. She formulates a total of eight contradictions between the rules governing court procedure and the object of the activity system (many of which are consistent with the problems affecting translators’ performance pointed out by Abdallah, such as asymmetric information, divergent professional practices, and motivation imbalances). In light of the contradictions addressed, the author argues that agency is determined by the contextual structure of interaction and the individual’s own capacity and *need* to interact (although she points out that ignorance of the institutional context may also function as a catalyst of agency). Ultimately, Kinnunen calls for a reconsideration of the role of interpreters in court work that includes a change in the process regulation whereby the roles and practices of the participating actors are clearly outlined and, more specifically, the conduct of the interpreter is not only defined but also described (i.e. what court interpreters actually do and do not do).

Sociological approaches to the study of literary translation also open promising avenues of research on the concept of agency, as the contributions by Pekka Kujamäki, Marja Jänis, and Outi Paloposki illustrate. Kujamäki uses the concept of “narrative” as developed respectively by Mona Baker and Stephen Lawler to approach public narratives of Finnish national identity (particularly after the creation of the Die Nordische Gesellschaft in 1933, where they took on strongly racial overtones) as reflected in the *œuvre* of Rita and Johannes Öhquist, who played a crucial role during the first half of the twentieth century as intermediaries between the Finnish and the German literary and cultural systems through translation and patronage. In “Reconstructing a translator’s network and their narrative agenda”,

Kujamäki draws an intricate network of intercultural connections between German and Finnish publishing houses and the Öhquist team to discuss the agency adopted by the couple in German-Finnish cultural and political relations. Kujamäki concludes that, rather than as separate nodes in the network, Rita and Johannes Öhquist functioned as a team whose mediation was vital for the varied interests of the different parties involved (namely, Finnish and German publishing houses): not only did they participate in a significant amount of translation projects that were key for the development of Finnish-German relationships, but they also mediated original German-language books to Finland, managed copyrights of contemporary Finnish works in the German literary market, and published extensively in Finnish and German newspapers and journals on literary, political, and economic issues.

Conversely, Jänis draws from a contemporary translation of Russian journalistic texts by Antti Karppinen to discuss the relationships between Finland and Russia after the annexation of the former by the Russian Empire in 1809 and through the end of Russian rule in 1917, as reflected in Finnish translated journalistic texts dealing with ideological and political issues. In “Ethics of translator’s agency: Translating Russian journalistic texts into Finnish”, Jänis underscores that, in spite of significant divergences between Finnish and Russian regarding the composition norms of journalistic texts, literal renderings of Russian texts were the norm in Finnish translations. However, the author contends that those texts were consciously rendered *ad verbum* to introduce Finnish readers to Russian ways of thinking, following an “ethics of service” (as developed by Andrew Chesterman) to (pro-communist) clients. By contrast, recent translations of Russian journalistic texts by Antti Karppinen’s (included in the 2006 compilation *Sirppi, vasara ja tähti*), reveal a significant shift from the “ethics of service” to the “ethics of communication” displayed by Karppinen, whose ultimate goal is to foster cooperation between Finland and Russia by rendering Russian critical political discourse *understandable* without putting readers off by the divergences in the composition of journalistic texts between the languages involved. Jänis supports Karppinen’s ethical motivation in light of the contemporary need of cooperation between Finland and Russia.

Rather than translations *per se*, Paloposki draws from a corpus of around 700 footnotes in 98 books of translated fiction in Finland from 1870 through 1929 to approach the concept of agency, as footnotes “provide a window on translator’s perception of their audience, and on their views of their own task and role” (90) –furthermore, the period in question was a time in Finland when the translations

published outnumbered the original works published. Paloposki incorporates a series of variables for the study of the corpus of footnotes (i.e. “source language”, “translator”, “gender”, “genre”, and “publisher”). The results of the analysis show that footnoting was an accepted, even expected, practice in translation, which allowed translators an agentive role to provide readers with the information they regarded relevant for them to know and, therefore, to articulate their voice as actors (particularly at a time when translation was regarded as highly relevant for the progress of the Finnish nation). Nevertheless, the use of footnotes did not necessarily go against the grain, but responded to translators’ perceived *need*. In this regard, Paloposki’s findings are in line both with Kinunen’s incorporation of the notion of “needs” to the discussion of agency and Koskinen’s call for an agency theory of causation, as the author contends that translators “use annotations NEITHER because of collective norms making them do so, NOR because they are bending the rules and creating a new system” (105).

Indeed, rather than confirm the effectiveness of the definition that was formulated at the symposium in Tampere, the contributions included in *Translator’s Agency* reveal the epistemological shortcomings of a “triadic” definition of agency (i.e. willingness, ability, action) and underscore the need for further research on the concept of agency and for a reconsideration of the relationship of agency and structure. In this regard, even though in the introduction the editors criticize Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” for its “deterministic and static nature” (8), the proposed definition of agency as willingness remains elusive. On the one hand, determining how the idea of changing their social environment emerges in translators’ minds is not only methodologically complex but, as the contribution by Kujämäki illustrates, runs the risk of creating clear and simple relationships and power relations that are far from accurate. Furthermore, as pointed out by Kinnunen, significant agency can also be attained through conscious or unconscious ignorance of institutional norms in multilingual court work settings, hence problematizing and informing the notion of agency as willingness. On the other hand, Suojanen, Koskinen and Paloposki underscore the need for more complex research on the definition of agency and its dynamic relation to causal mechanisms in translation and interpreting. Ultimately, as reflected in the contributions by Abdallah and Jänis, a more intricate understanding of translators’ agency will result in the improvement of the translation industry and the strengthening of international cooperation.