Chronotopos
A Journal of Translation History

Theo Hermans & Christopher Rundle

The Significance of Translation History – A Roundtable Discussion

1/2021
DOI: 10.25365/cts-2021-3-1-2

Herausgegeben am / Éditée au / Edited at the: Zentrum für Translationswissenschaft der Universität Wien

ISSN: 2617-3441

Abstract

In 2021, the Vienna Doctoral Summer School on Translation History took place for the fourth time. At the halfway point of the summer school – on a Sunday in September 2021 – two of the summer school professors – Christopher Rundle and Theo Hermans – met to discuss the question: Why do we do translation history at all?
The conversation was led by Tomasz Rozmysłowicz and Julia Richter.

Keywords: translation history, translation historiography, translation knowledge,

Zum Zitieren des Artikels / Pour citer l'article / To cite the article:
Hermans, Theo & Rundle, Christopher (2021): The Significance of Translation History – a Roundtable Discussion, *Chronotopos* 3 (1), 17-30. DOI: 10.25365/cts-2021-3-1-2

The Significance of Translation History – A Roundtable Discussion with Christopher Rundle and Theo Hermans

In 2021, the Vienna Doctoral Summer School on Translation History took place for the fourth time. At the halfway point of the summer school – on a Sunday in September 2021 – two of the summer school professors – Christopher Rundle and Theo Hermans – met to discuss the question: Why do we do translation history at all?
The conversation was led by Tomasz Rozmysłowicz and Julia Richter.

Tomasz Rozmysłowicz: *Welcome to this discussion at this ungodly hour, but perhaps Sunday morning is a very fitting time because – at least in Europe – for the last several hundred years it has been a day of self-inspection, of introspection. Today we want to take a step back and ask ourselves what the meaning of* doing translation history *actually is. I think it is not only relevant at a summer school, where young scholars are being introduced to the practice and to the community of translation history, to ask ourselves what doing translation history is good for, but perhaps it is also a good moment in the development of translation history as such, as it has gathered momentum in recent years and attracted increasing attention within translation studies. So, the questions that we will be discussing today are not so much about how to do translation history, but why do it at all: what is the significance of this endeavour? Obviously this question can be approached from different angles: What does translation history do for the development of translation studies? What is its place in relation to other disciplines dealing with historical events, perhaps also looking at translation processes? Does the function of translation history extend beyond the academic realm? Does knowledge that we produce contribute to correcting widespread stereotypes about certain epochs or the relationship between Nation States and cultures? Questions such as these are what we want to discuss today with our guest speakers Theo Hermans and Christopher Rundle, two eminent translation historians who have contributed a lot to the development of this sub-branch of translation studies not only by investigating translation history, but also by talking about it on a meta level, about its usefulness within the discipline and the way it might be carried out. Christopher Rundle and Theo Hermans already debated with each other in the well-known Translation Studies Forum[1].That was a prologue to the conversation we are about to hear and this is why they are eminently qualified to participate in this discussion about the significance of translation history.*
I'd like to start the discussion by asking Theo Hermans directly about his work. When I was reading some of your papers over the last years, I always wondered what the connection between translation history and translation theory might be for you, because you have always tried to connect these both branches of translation studies. When we ask the question 'what is the merit or significance of doing translation history?' I wondered whether to further develop concepts and theory within translation studies is

[1] *Translation Studies* Forum: Translation and History. In: Translation Studies 2012, 5 (2), 232-248.

the one main intention for you or what the contribution of translation history to translation studies is for you.

Theo Hermans: Thank you for having me in the first place. It's a pleasure to be here. You ask a number of questions, not all directly, I think, connected with each other, at least in the way that I work. I don't work at all systematically. I tend to respond to invitations or to opportunities, but I don't try, for example, to combine theory with history in a premeditated way. I've dabbled in translation history, mostly the early modern period in Western Europe and the Low Countries in particular. I recently finished a long chapter in Dutch on the history of translation in the Low Countries between 1550 and 1700; we may come back to that later on. I've also occasionally written about the 19th century, but those are just bits and pieces, nothing comprehensive or grand. What I do tends to come and go as the opportunity arises, and the same is true, I think, of what I've done in translation theory. What I have tried to do fairly systematically is to read around in other fields of study. Anthropology in the beginning, then sociology, particularly the work of Niklas Luhmann. I even tried to read theology, not because I'm interested in theology as such but to try to find ideas, angles that would give me a perspective on translation. More recently I have been reading about history, especially what professional historians have to say about history and historiography, assuming that historians know better than most what history is and how it can be done.

I've tried to find angles to look at translation from different viewpoints, including some that at first sight look very unpromising like, for example, Luhmann, who never talked about translation at all. But in his ideas, I felt I could find a perspective to speak about translation in new ways. That is what drives me, if only because it annoys me that so often people in translation studies just keep repeating one another. And so, reading historians writing about historiography, I noticed that in recent decades they, too, have discovered translation. Some, of course, just take translation for granted, and in the past that was often the case. But others are quite sophisticated. There are also commonalities in the views about translation of some historians and people in translation studies. Think, for example, of historians working in memory studies. Memory, like translation, is about bringing the past into the present. The concepts developed in memory studies have a direct bearing on translation, and that's why we should pay attention to them.

***Julia Richter**: If you say that translation history is relevant to what we are doing and thinking at the moment, we can see that the study of translation history has become increasingly popular in recent years. When we, the Vienna research group on the History of Translation, (Larisa Schippel, Julia Richter, Stefanie Kremmel and Tomasz Rozmysłowicz, started doing translation history several years ago we still had the illusion of being in a niche of translation studies. Where do you think this boom in translation history comes from? If you say history tells us what is relevant for people in the present,*

why is translation history so popular now? Is there a connection to the relevance it has for people nowadays?
Not only translations studies are interested in translation history at the moment, but also other disciplines. So, there must be a relevance, I think, for these disciplines, too.
On another note: do you think that translation history that has been done in the last 10 or 20 years has already had an impact on translation studies or other disciplines like history? Do you see a cognitive surplus, as Tomasz has called it, of the translation history that has been done in the last 10 or 20 years? Is there something that translation studies or other disciplines have gained from translation history in your point of view?

Theo Hermans: Among the major gains that I can see in the study of translation over the last few decades has been a growth in complexity. The questions currently being asked are more complex and more nuanced than those of the 1970s or '80s. The study of translation history, to my mind, is adding to this nuance and complexity – the complexity of the particular, of individual cases and constellations. For me, the most attractive thing about translation history is the individuality of each case.

Christopher Rundle: Speaking of my own personal experience, when I do historical research on translation I tend to think about how it might contribute to our understanding of the historical context that interests me. You may know by now that this is primarily Fascist Italy and European fascism in general. I will focus on these as my example. My prime concern is to contribute to our understanding of that historical context. When I'm doing my historical research, I'm not really focusing on what my work may or may not contribute to translation studies as a wider field. On the other hand, when we engage in what you called the meta discourse earlier, then I feel I'm engaging more closely with translation studies as a discipline. And maybe now we can talk about a distinct disciplinary area of translation history and the meta discourse of scholars with a historical interest in translation and interpreting. So, I tend to see it in these terms. My ambition when I'm researching translation in Fascist Italy is to make a contribution to our understanding of fascism in Italy, that's my prime concern. In terms of whether translation history has an impact on translation studies on the whole, I would say it has, simply by virtue of the fact that translation history has become so visible in the last few years. This would seem to imply that an increasing number of people within translation studies are taking an interest in it. As to why that's actually happening: there's a positive view, which is that it's an interesting and exciting area to work on; there is also slightly more cynical one, which goes back to what Theo was saying earlier about translation studies tending to repeat itself. Another criticism that I would make of translation studies is that people seem to be continually searching for something new to work on. So, taking a hypothetical example, when they get tired of doing audio-visual translation, they move on to narrative theory; and when they get tired of narrative theory, or the topic has lost its cutting-edge quality, they move on to history. So, maybe there is a sense that part of this increasing visibility that translation history seems to be gaining within translation studies is due to one of these periodical

shifts of collective interest and the search for something new to research, and I suspect that this moment will pass and we will lose a certain number of people who are interested in it at the moment but may not continue to be so. That will be the moment when we actually see the extent to which translation and interpreting history has consolidated or not as a research area. But speaking of my own experience in the field that I work on, the history of translation in Fascist Italy – and I'm sorry that I keep referring to this, but I want to talk about the area that I'm familiar with, so I can make generalisations with a fair degree of accuracy – then I would say that the research that has been done in the last 20 years on translation in that historical period – not just my own of course, there's probably about 10 to 15 scholars who have worked consistently on this topic within the sphere of Italian cultural and political history in the fascist period – I would say that this research *has* made an impact and there are various ways in which you can judge this.

One way is that when you read history books on Fascism written in the last 10 years, both on its cultural and political history, you actually find that they cite research by scholars that are more or less closely related to translation studies and that they also consider Fascism from a translation perspective. There has also been a significant increase in the interest shown in translation by groups of scholars whose research interests are not defined by translation. So, to give you an example, there is a very significant community of book historians in Italy and there's a whole sub-discipline of book history on the Fascist period with regular conferences on the topic. Nowadays it would be unthinkable for a book history conference which addresses the Fascist period not to include a significant number of panels and papers involving translation. Whereas if we look at the conferences these book historians were organising 20 or 25 years ago, there might have been one paper on a translation-related topic and certainly no panels. So, this rather anecdotal evidence tells me that even people who've not necessarily worked consistently on translation are aware that it's an interesting topic, that it is something they need to take into account, that they need to read up on it and that therefore it has become part of the general historiographical discourse on the Fascist period. This is certainly true of those scholars who focus on the Fascist cultural policies, but also, if to a lesser extent, of those who focus more strictly on the political and ideological issues of that period.

Theo Hermans: When Chris says that the interest in history in translation studies has come about simply because people get tired of one thing and start looking elsewhere, that doesn't sound very convincing to me. Speaking for myself, I could have turned to various alternatives, but I turned to history. It seems to me that one obvious explanation for the interest is that a lot of historians and people in cultural studies have turned to transcultural or global or entangled history. Transcultural history as a global concern has become so dominant that, in a sense, all that is happening in translation studies is following that trend.

The main difference between what Chris is saying and what I have been saying is that Chris is talking primarily, it seems to me, as a historian. He wants to write about fascism, to understand fascism as a historical phenomenon, and then to see what

aspects of fascism can be illuminated by making translation part of that picture. In my case, I wasn't trained as an historian, my background is in comparative literature, and so I start from translation and then try to see what sits around it, why people do the things they do. That may well lead me to the same kind of things that Chris is interested in, but from a different angle. I don't think of myself as an historian, I think of myself as somebody working on translation but with an active interest in the environment of translation and the way that translation interacts with this environment.

Christopher Rundle: Theo, earlier you mentioned the research you've been doing on the history of translation in the Low Countries. Wouldn't you say that when you do this work you are acting as a historian? Even if your primary concern during your career has been translation, when you take up that task, then you are taking on the task of an historian. Is that not a fair comment?

Theo Hermans: Up to a point, yes. What I've been doing on translation history in the Early Modern Low Countries is part of a larger project. The book in question is now finished, and should be out in the autumn.[2] It has five authors, each author writing about their own period. Our aim is to demonstrate that translation is relevant to history, to highlight those aspects of translation that shed light on certain historical developments in a wide range of cultural and other fields, in the hope that readers, including serious historians, will appreciate the significance of translation.

Christopher Rundle: Right, but wouldn't you say that in order to achieve that objective effectively you have to also engage with the historiography?

Theo Hermans: Yes, of course.

Christopher Rundle: And that in doing so you are effectively acting as a historian? I mean, I don't want to get into an argument about disciplinary hats – but I'm focusing on this distinction because you made it yourself. So, I'm just suggesting that even if someone doesn't think of themselves primarily as a historian, when they embark on historical research, then in effect they become a historian and there are certain things that they will do that will be in common with other historians even if these don't necessarily have an interest in translation.

Theo Hermans: I'm not sure I can speak the language of historians sufficiently well to be taken seriously by them. I have found it rewarding to read historians about historiography and to look at their case studies and debates. At the same time, I've also been delighted that, coming from translation, I've been able to notice things which they haven't quite noticed in the same way.

[2] SCHOENAERS, Dirk; HERMANS, Theo; LEEMANS, Inger; KOSTER, Cees & NAAIJKENS, Ton (2021): *Vertalen in de Nederlanden. Een cultuurgeschiedenis*. Amsterdam: Boom.

Christopher Rundle: Exactly.

Theo Hermans: Can I give one particular example, from the world around Spinoza? In the 1660s and '70s there was a group of very unorthodox thinkers active in Amsterdam. Spinoza was by far the sharpest mind among them, but the group also included several translators, such as Jan Hendrik Glazemaker, who translated nearly all of Descartes and several works by Spinoza into Dutch. Now, Glazemaker and his companions translated in a very particular way, a purist way. They wanted to write a Dutch language that would be transparent and self-explanatory in the sense that for any foreign-derived word like pedagogy, for example, they would create a Dutch term made up of home-grown components, so that anybody who didn't understand a word like pedagogy would nevertheless understand the word in Dutch, The aim was to make philosophical works accessible to the common reader who did not know any foreign languages and had had no formal training. And they succeeded in their democratising agenda to make philosophy available to all. We know of a number of amateur philosophers at the end of the 17th and into the 18th century, who knew no languages other than Dutch and who developed their ideas exclusively on the basis of these purist translations. And it matters in this respect that the tradition of purist writing and translating goes back over a hundred years, to the 1550s. Historians have not paid much attention to this tradition because they're not linguists, and yet in the 1670s and after these translations produced such very concrete effects. Noticing something like this and tracing it back gives me real joy.

Christopher Rundle: And I would say that having found such an interesting source makes you just as much a historian as those other historians that you read on the same period, whether or not you were trained as a historian. And anyway, historians don't all work in the same way or have the same way of dealing with their sources. Wouldn't you agree?

Theo Hermans: Yes. We converge, if you like, coming from slightly different angles. There are very few people that I can think of who work on both translation and history and who are taken seriously by both sides.

Christopher Rundle: Indeed!

Theo Hermans: I can think of only three: Peter Burke, Lydia Liu and Rafael Vicente.

Christopher Rundle: I would suggest Hillary Footitt as well.

The Hermans: Oh yes, indeed.

Tomasz Rozmysłowicz: *There is – Theo also mentioned it – a common thread in both your positions: that you're trying to understand certain historical context or the*

environment of translation by studying certain historical translation processes and thus adding to the understanding of certain historical events or processes such as fascism in Italy. How would you pinpoint the contribution or the difference that taking into account translation when trying to understand history actually makes? Is there a way you could describe that particular difference? For instance, Chris, how does our understanding of Italian fascism differ when we take into account translation? Does the image of fascism change when we look at translation as well?

Christopher Rundle: Well, I would say it does. When I first started working on this topic, which was in the mid-1990s, the widely held perception of Fascist Italy was that it was essentially a closed political and cultural system. This was the wider perception of the general public, not just that of scholars. So generally, if you mentioned Fascist Italy, people expected an extremely repressive regime where cultural products were very severely censored. These were preconceptions that were to some extent based on assumptions that people make about what constitutes a fascist system. Maybe because people tend to judge Fascist Italy in the light of their knowledge of, say, Nazi Germany, I don't know. These are just hypotheses. But one of the things that research on translation has certainly shown, is that the situation was much more complex than that. There are undoubtedly areas in which the Fascist regime was extremely repressive and aggressive, particularly towards Jews, of course, but also towards any form of political dissent, which was effectively silenced, if not actually physically destroyed in most cases. But in terms of the cultural sphere, their policies were actually more flexible and subtle than you might expect. It's difficult to determine the extent to which this was by design or by accident, and I suspect it's a combination of both. Certainly, some of the people involved in managing the cultural sphere within the Fascist regime were actually quite sophisticated intellectuals, people with a genuine understanding of the cultural field, of the book market and the film industry and so on. To some extent I think we have to give them credit for designing policies with a certain degree of awareness of what they were trying to achieve. One of the interesting things about Fascism, and one of the great difficulties in studying it, is one has to always be careful not to take them at their word. For example, in 1942 the regime decided to apply a quota of 25% on the number of translations that could be published by each publishing house. But the fact that they announced this quota does not mean that we can take it for granted that it was actually applied. It could be that they were content with the face-saving device of making the announcement and left it at that. We need to check and see whether they actually intervened or not. There is an interesting contrast between the times when the regime felt it had to intervene and the times when talking about intervening was enough in terms of the political and propaganda effect that these statements had. For a long time, members of the regime would complain about the number of translations that were being published and say that the country was being invaded by translations, but they never actually did anything about it. There was no intervention against translations on the part of the regime until quite late on, when there was already official racism, and Italy was already in the build-up towards the war. I think that research on translation has contributed to our understanding of the

complexity of the way in which the regime managed the cultural sphere and has maybe helped to dismantle some of the preconceptions that people tended to have about the Fascist regime just because it was called Fascist. The other thing about the regime is that it was a relatively broad school in the sense that some people within the Fascist regime were die-hard Fascists and were supporters of Mussolini literally to the death, such as the cultural minister Alessandro Pavolini, who was shot alongside him by the partisans. While others were there because it was the best way to have a career, but they didn't necessarily feel very strongly about Fascism: there were very different levels of conviction. So, in doing research on Fascism, we need to be aware that we can't consider all members of the regime to have the same levels of conviction; and therefore, each time that they introduce a policy or make a statement about culture or about foreign literature, we need to weigh that statement against what we know about their personal profile in order to be able to decide how convincing it is or how genuinely they intended to act on it. I think it's fair to say that the other thing that studies on translation have contributed, and this does not just concern the Fascist period, but our understanding of the history of Italian literature as a whole – this sounds obvious to us of course, but it wasn't so obvious up until fairly recently amongst cultural/literary historians – is that you can't write a history of Italian literature without including foreign literature in translation, and that foreign literature in translation is a part of the history of Italian literature. To people who welcome translation this is neither a surprising nor a new idea, but it is a relatively new idea within Italian literary studies. Italian Studies and Italian literature studies is quite a politically charged field within Italian academia. It is one with a lot of institutional status and power and with a lot of very defensive scholars guarding the borders of their disciplinary area. So this is probably a more revolutionary idea that it might sound to us here today.

Theo Hermans: Kate Sturge has done work on Nazi Germany that is similar to what you have done on Fascist Italy, and indeed the two of you have worked together. Kate's research made it very clear that cultural policy in Nazi Germany was much more complicated and less consistent than one might have thought. There was plenty of infighting, there were inconsistencies in the way that policies were applied and changed. The more general point here is that translation can serve as an index of cultural identity, because it tells us what a particular cultural constellation imports, what it keeps out, on what terms things are brought in, how they are adapted to local purposes and what effect they subsequently have. That is probably quite a useful way to describe in general what translation can do to our understanding of history. It opens a window on the wider world. Even if traditional history, including traditional literary history, glosses over translation, once you start digging you notice that, as Chris just said, translated literature is very much part of literature. You can't think it away. And bringing that out had his own purpose. Again, to give a specific example from the things I've been working on: some years ago I became interested in Early Modern Jesuit translators, and I've looked especially at one 17th-century translator, Franciscus de Smidt, who was based in Antwerp and translated around thirty books from French, Spanish and Latin into Dutch. The Jesuits at this time were helping to make the Spanish

Netherlands, now roughly Belgium, into a bastion of the Counter-Reformation. De Smidt fully subscribed to this agenda, and in this sense, there is nothing unusual about his work. He translated almost exclusively other Jesuits, always devotional works, hence a very narrow range. It's the people to whom he dedicated his books that make his case interesting. They include a surprising number of women, mostly unmarried women or widows who had donated large amounts of money to the Jesuits. You can see the material interest. At the same time, you can see De Smidt maintaining an influential social network and contributing to significant political and ideological developments. That's what I mean when I speak of translation as an index of cultural identity.

Julia Richter: *I would like to come back a little bit closer to translation studies or translation theory. In my research on translation history, I have repeatedly encountered the diversity of motivations that give rise to translation events. From my point of view, it becomes clear from dealing with concrete translation events that translation happens in order to accumulate economic, social and/or cultural capital or symbolic capital. And I think that the different motivations probably also lead to different approaches to translation and thus to different processes and products of translation. On the other hand, translation is almost exclusively described in definitions as a means of overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers and so the question arises for me: can or should the study of translation history change the concept and term of translation? From your point of view, how has the study of translation history in recent years influenced the imaginary of translation? What effects has translation history had on the concept and term of translation and can translation history break down stereotypes about translation and if so, do we need a translation history that adapts translation studies perspectives and emancipates itself from the paths of literary or cultural history?*

Theo Hermans: Translation history makes it obvious that talk about translation universals is nonsense. The further you go back in time and the more culturally diverse the situations you look at, the clearer it becomes that what we call translation in today's English has only limited currency. In Early Modern Europe translation was a subdivision of imitation, the overarching, classical Latin concept of *imitatio,* which had no room for the contrast between original and translation as we understand this contrast today. And I imagine that Judy Wakabayashi, for example, could tell you that in the Japanese context, too, you find historical practices that just do not fit what we think of as translation today. So, when we engage in translation history we have to be prepared to step back from what we think we know as translation and to try and develop an eye for different cultural practices. Translation historiography requires that kind of openness, a willingness to let go of what you think you know about translation.

Julia Richter: *I really like this view on translation history but on the other side so you don't think that any epochs, typologies, or categories would be possible for translation history? Because this would also be a way to structure the knowledge. We have all these case studies*

and therefore I feel the need to structure them and to put them into categories or a structure to make it comparable. So, you think this is not possible or not even desirable?

Theo Hermans: I know that you have thought about these issues.[3] Judy Wakabayashi, too, has written about periodisation and the different periodisation which are possible in principle.[4] Of course, none really works fully or consistently or comprehensively in all situations, so we need to adapt them all the time.

Julia Richter: *Yes, but that's true for all categories, I think.*

Theo Hermans: Sure. The risk is that that one assumes there is a way of structuring the history of translation globally, across all time and all space, and that I would be extremely wary of. But we can look at what seems convenient for a particular purpose. In the case of the Low Countries' history that I mentioned before, we didn't actually spend much time discussing periodisation. It was partly a matter of convenience, of who was available and what kind of specialism individuals brought to the project, and partly a matter of falling in with the broadly accepted divisions of the cultural history of Western Europe over the last 1500 years or so. The result is a conventional periodisation that can be challenged but still seems preferable to a structure based on ways of translating. The latter might be a desirable option in theory, but it might put off general readers, and ways of translating do not necessarily match changes elsewhere, for example in art history or in political or economic or social history. The French history of translation[5], the most comprehensive that I know of, also seems follow the broad period divisions of cultural history.

Julia Richter: *Yes, but maybe in social history in different nations or languages it works better than to look at one National History in all the genres that you have. Maybe it's better to look at translation history in sociology over the world? Because you mentioned this history of translation into French, but it's a national history and I think translation is something much more transcultural after all. Maybe it would be better to look at different genres of translation texts in different times and spaces and not to put it in geographical categories.*

Theo Hermans: Yes, but the options tend to vary from case to case. Let me give two examples. One is the history of translation in Latin America, which was actually published in the form of a dictionary because all the contributors who were available had worked on individual countries: Cuba, Argentina, Chile and so on. There's only one chapter in the entire book which covers more or less all of Latin America and that's about the colonial period. There's next to nothing about pre-colonial Latin America,

[3] RICHTER, Julia (2020): *Translationshistoriographie. Perspektiven und Methoden.* Vienna: new academic press.
[4] WAKABAYASHI, Judy (2019): Time Matters: Conceptual and Methodological Considerations in Translation Timescapes, *Chronotopos* 1 (1), 23-39. https://doi.org/10.25365/cts-2019-1-1-3
[5] *Histoire des traductions en langue française* (2012-2019). 4 vol. Paris: Verdier.

again because the research just isn't available.[6] The other example is the book that Antoine Chalvin and his colleagues put together about Central Europe.[7] They defined Central Europe as roughly the area between Germany in the west and Russia in the east. Sixteen languages, hence very transnational and very transcultural, but they held things together by identifying five commonalities that applied to the whole area. These were things like the emergence of written vernaculars and of national movements, the practice of cultural borrowing from Western Europe, and the shared experience of totalitarianism post-1945. Of course, individual chapters may focus more on this or that country, as the case may be. It's a loose structure because the commonalities are very broad.

Julia Richter: *They argued that there was an "aire traductionelle". This was the idea that there is something in common in this area, but maybe this isn't the case over all the decades and then none of the commonalities chosen to argue this "aire traductionelle" were really translation-based, they were based on history of literature or history of religion or political history.*

Theo Hermans: In one case something happened maybe in 1100 and something similar happened elsewhere but three hundred years later. You can't have a continuous history from beginning to end if you use these general commonalities. But it works, and it is a very informative history. Of course, the larger and more diverse the geographical area, the thinner the commonalities are likely to become. Judy Wakabayashi has written about what she calls 'Sinitic Asia' – China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam – on the basis of commonalities as well. In her case they concerned things like the use of Chinese script, the prestige of the Chinese classics in the past and the semi-colonialism of the 19th century.[8]

Christopher Rundle: All the categories that you've mentioned are categories that have historical significance and are not abstract.

Julia Richter: *Yes!*

Christopher Rundle: And that's why they work. So, in the example that Theo just gave: it works because it's a historical fact that they used Chinese script and that Chinese classical culture enjoyed a high status. It's not an abstract category that was applied from an ahistorical point of view. That's why they work. If they weren't historically rooted, then they wouldn't have any meaning.

---

[6] LAFARGA, Francisco & PEGENAUTE, Luis (eds.) (2013): *Diccionario histórico de la traducción en Hispanomérica*. Madrid & Frankfurt: Iberoamericana & Vervuert.

[7] CHALVIN, Antoine; MULLER, Jean-Léon; TALVISTE, Katre & VRINAT-NIKOLOV, Marie (dir.) (2019): *Histoire de la traduction littéraire en Europe médiane. Des origines à 1989.* Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes.

[8] WAKABAYASHI, Judy (2005): Translation in the East Asian Cultural Sphere. Shared Roots, Divergent Paths? In: HUNG, E. & WAKABAYASHI, J. (eds.): *Asian Translation Traditions*. Manchester: St Jerome, 17-65.

Theo Hermans: It grows out of the local situation rather than being imposed as a concept from the outside.

Christopher Rundle: Exactly, and the same is true, I would say, for the example you gave before of the Central European countries.

Julia Richter: *In the book, which Antoine Chalvin co-edited with others, an "aire traductionelle" is described on the basis of various criteria. The great achievement of this volume is its transculturality. The small drawback is that the criteria according to which nations do or do not fit into this "aire traductionelle" are historical, linguistic-historical, literary-historical, or religious-historical. From my point of view, it would be desirable to be able to describe spaces and epochs according to translation-historical criteria.*

Christopher Rundle: An example of the kind of approach you are describing, is Lawrence Venuti's article 'Translation, History, Narrative' published in 2005[9], in which he applies a set of translation studies paradigms to 13 different historical contexts. Would you accept that this leads to a very abstracted form of history? One where you have a set of key questions which are applied to different historical contexts, but in a sense the questions pre-determine the answer because you're assuming that the same questions, or categories, can be equally relevant and applicable to different historical situations. But I would argue that they can't, that every historical situation needs a specific or customized set of categories or questions. That's not to say that there aren't historical contexts or historical themes, like the examples you have just given, where it is possible to engage in some form of comparison.
I think it works when your categories have a historical meaning, when they are derived from the history and not conceived *a priori*. So, in reference to what you said earlier about emancipating ourselves from literature and history. Personally, I don't see that as either desirable or feasible, to be honest. I don't see how you can do history and be emancipated from history at the same time. Maybe you can elaborate on that?

Julia Richter: *I think we can and should emancipate ourselves from the paths of historiography in the sense that we describe, for example, time spans and spaces that are interesting from a translation history perspective. I think that some caesuras that play a role in political, literary, religious, or linguistic history are quite suitable as caesuras for translation history as well. But some are not. And from my point of view, it is important to find out which caesuras and periods are best suited to describe translation history. In this sense, the task of a certain emancipation arises for me, because often enough we make use of the models of the historiography of other disciplines simply because translation phenomena were also traditionally described in these disciplines (literary studies, linguistics, religious studies), among other things because there was still no translation science and certainly no translation history.*

[9] VENUTI, Lawrence (2005): Translation, History, Narrative, *Meta* 50 (3), 800-816.

A major caesura from the perspective of translation history might be, for example, the invention of printing or the increasing commercialization of printed books. These are moments in which the way translation is done and perceived changes drastically.

Christopher Rundle: The examples you have just given us, rather than being new categories – the word category is problematic to my mind because it's rather abstract – are a series of historical events where, you are suggesting, the perspective through which they are viewed or the significance that we attribute to them are different depending on whether you see them from the point of view of translation or from the point of view of historical studies. I think that's perfectly right and fair, so I would agree with what you've just explained, which I didn't understand in those terms when you first talked about finding categories. Just to go back quickly to what Theo was saying about Japan. There's a chapter that's about to be published precisely on this topic if you're interested, in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation History* (Rundle 2021)[10] which is coming out at the end of the month – so I'll just put the link in the chat. It's by Rebekah Clements[11] and it examines the different terms used for translation in premodern Japan.

Theo Hermans: I agree with what Chris was just saying, but I would like to add that translation is never done for its own sake. Nobody translates in order to translate. Translators want to achieve something that lies beyond translation, and that makes it hard for me to envisage a translation history based on ways of translating. You mentioned print culture. The invention of the printing press was a technological event that had economic, social and intellectual consequences. Translation is simply part of much bigger changes, and I don't see the benefit of isolating translation in that context.

Julia Richter: *Yes, I agree with you completely. Translation cannot be isolated from its context. For me, it's about finding the moments within cultural history that change the way translation is done and thought about.*

Theo Hermans: Yes, but if the way translation is done and thought about changes, it's because things have changed in the world around translation. Think, for example, of the commercialisation of printed translations in early 19th-century Germany, especially the so-called translation factories that Norbert Bachleitner has written about.[12] These factories churned out translations on an industrial scale never seen before, but they resulted from a combination of other factors. A new kind of mechanised press made the production of books much quicker. Literacy had improved, increasing the potential book-buying public. Postal services, too, had become much better, delivering to

[10] RUNDLE, Christopher (ed.) (2021): *The Routledge Handbook of Translation History*. London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315640129

[11] CLEMENTS, Rebekah (2021): In search of translation: Why was hon'yaku not the term of choice in premodern Japan? In: RUNDLE, C. (ed.): *The Routledge Handbook of Translation History*. London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315640129-18

[12] BACHLEITNER, Norbert (1989): „Übersetzungsfabriken". Das deutsche Übersetzungswesen in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts, *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 14, 1-49.

individuals, book clubs and libraries. Improved transport meant that books could be distributed quickly, and there were numerous publishers entering the market and competing with one another to be the first to get their translation out because copyright was virtually non-existent. That put enormous pressure on translators who translated at great speed. Bachleitner mentions one translator dictating to three or four scribes simultaneously, with no time for revision. Of course, the translations were criticised for being careless and shoddy, and these criticisms were perfectly justified and perfectly irrelevant because what mattered was the commercial aspect of selling the books as quickly as possible to the largest possible number of people. You could look at the way translation changes in these circumstances but that doesn't really provide you with an insight, because what's going on is a social and economic process driven by technological changes and changes in a whole series of material and intellectual conditions.

Julia Richter: *Yes of course, but there are also social events that don't change the way translations are done and thought of at all. Let's take for example these national borders that some translation histories work in. I mean maybe we don't see important things of these translation histories because the borders are national and maybe the phenomenon is transcultural. All I want to say is that we have to look at these historical events and social changes that are taking place from a translation perspective and to see whether these borders or these moments are important to translation history and not to take them for granted and try to squeeze the translational phenomena we observe into the categories, boundaries, and notions of history merely because they have always been there. We must look with our translation studies eyes at this borders categories and boxes.*

Theo Hermans: You're right. Indeed, when I look back at the earliest things I wrote, forty years ago, I'm struck by how readily they assume that languages are discrete entities: one language here and another language there, and in most cases a national border around them. That's a very 19th-century way of looking, and historians did the same thing. They wrote national histories. But I think we've left that behind us a while ago now, just as historians now talk about transnational history, transcultural history, global history and all that kind of thing. That's what I meant earlier when I talked about increased complexity. The questions we ask today no longer assume there is a Danish culture which is in Denmark and bordered by the Danish language, for example. Today we realise not only that languages are diverse within themselves and that national borders are not linguistic borders, but also that things are much more fluid and messier – and therefor so much more interesting.

Tomasz Rozmysłowicz: *A whole series of deep and relevant issues has been raised. We thank Christopher Rundle and Theo Hermans for taking the time and the energy on a Sunday to be here with us and sharing their experience in doing translation history in the context of this summer school. Thank you very much.*