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IJoC Translations

Tytti Suojanen, Kaisa Koskinen, and Tiina Tuominen, **User-Centered Translation (Translation Practices Explained)**, Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2015, 184 pp., $37.57 (paperback).

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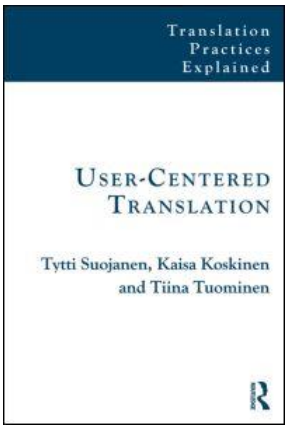

It is rare to see a proposal for a new approach to translation research and practice; it is even rarer for this to happen in a course book. However, this is the case for ***User-Centered Translation***, a systematic and well-written book adapted and extended from the Finnish book *Käyttäjäkeskeinen kääntäminen* published by the University of Tampere in 2012. The title of the book presents in condensed form the authors' aim: a wish to emphasize that the users or readers of translations should be given the central role in the translation process. Authors Tytti Suojanen, Kaisa Koskinen, and Tiina Tuominen argue that although the awareness of the importance of target readers is not new in translation practice and research, an explicit focus on the fact that users of translations should be taken into account already within the translation process tends to be implicit in translation practice and undertheorized in translation studies (TS) research.

Despite its novel character, this new user-centered approach to translation practice and research is not without roots: The authors overtly acknowledge the influence of the functionalist translation theory. Although functionalist approaches to translation were influential in the German-speaking translation community in the last decades of the twentieth century, this theoretical approach (derived from Hans J. Vermeer's *skopostheorie,* developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s) seems to have lost its appeal today. User-centered translation, however, brings this method up to date and openly draws on its basic tenets, but not without reservations. While the authors acknowledge the seminal influence of this current on the development of the user-centered translation, they also indicate some important points of divergence. Vermeer, for example, emphasized that the guiding principle of the translator's work should be the *skopos*, that is, the goal or the aim of the translation that is defined by the client or commissioner. According to Vermeer (1996), each commissioner wants their translation for a particular purpose; *skopostheorie,* therefore, emphasizes the need for the translation to serve this intended purpose in the target culture. Thus one of the main tenets of *skopos* theory is that it is a shared task of the translator and the client (commissioner) to agree on the purpose of the translation— although target recipients are taken into account, they are not central to this specification of the intended *skopos*. User-centered translation, on the other hand, stresses the central role of users in the production of translations: The authors argue that information about users should be gathered throughout the process and that this information should then be used to create usable translations (Suojanen, Koskinen, & Tuominen, 2015, p.

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x). In user-centered translation, the definition of the aim or *skopos* of a particular translation therefore shifts from the client to the target users. The authors recognize a theoretical basis for this focus on the user in the work of Eugene Nida, another great name in the history of translation theory, from the 1960s. The authors call Nida a "pioneer of user-centeredness" (p. 42) with whom they find numerous points of contact: Particularly valuable for them are Nida's focus on the needs of the end user of the translation and his descriptions of some early examples of usability testing.

Since *User-Centered Translation* is published as part of Translation Practices Explained, a series of course books designed for self-learners and teachers of translation, its structure is overtly didactic. The authors have three target groups or intended readers in mind: MA students of translation, translator teachers/researchers, and professional translators. Each chapter is introduced by key points, and the language aims to be comprehensible to all members of the designated target groups. The book also includes activities and exercises that could be used by self-learners, but seem even more suitable for teachers for direct application in class or for preparation of their own material.

User-Centered Translation is divided into 10 clearly defined chapters. The first 4 chapters are dedicated to the outline of the theoretical background of the user-centered translation: basic concepts are defined, existing usability research (in particular, in technical communication) is reviewed, the usability of text within the context of translation studies and the textual elements of usability (such as legibility, readability, comprehensibility, and accessibility) are presented. In the next chapters, concrete tools and methods for taking the user of translation into account in the translation process are outlined: Methods of profiling the future users of translations, such as intertextual reader positions (i.e., reader positions built into texts, for example: an implied reader), audience design (where translators shape their translation in view of the recipients defined by five audience categories), and personas (fictive archetypes of users) are described. Then several usability heuristics are discussed (such as quality checklists and style guides), and a proposal for a general translation usability heuristic is put up. In the final chapters some key usability testing methods are presented. First, the researcher or a professional translator is urged to focus on real users, that is, on a heterogeneous, ambiguous, and unpredictable group, using methods such as thinking aloud, eye-tracking, questionnaires, interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork. The description of these methods is followed by the presentation of a plethora of interesting case studies from translation studies literature. This part of the book will undoubtedly prove particularly useful to researchers. Second, attention is drawn to academically oriented reception research, and it is argued that the translation industry could find the reception studies as they developed within TS useful for its purpose. Finally, the possibility of connecting user-centered translation with the contemporary translation industry is discussed. The authors argue that usability could be used for evaluation purposes as an alternative to more traditional quality assessment, especially because in a user-centered process, translation, revision, and quality assessment are done iteratively rather than in a linear fashion and because user-centered translation methods are less intimidating for translators than is traditional quality assessment.

This exciting new paradigm is, however, aware of its potential limitations. The authors admit that the user-centered approach seems to be particularly useful when dealing with informative text types, that is, the texts that primarily serve the interests of the user (e.g., instructive technical texts whose purpose is to indicate to the reader how to act). The approach seems to be less appropriate for operative text

types, where the writers use texts to advance their own interests, or for expressive (i.e., literary) texts (see Reiss, 1971). It seems easier to test the usability of translated mobile phone instructions, for example, than that of a philosophical tract or a lyrical poem. And although the authors nevertheless argue that the approach could be used for all genres and text types, it is not surprising that the few existing studies that focus on the usability of translations are predominantly limited to the field of technical translation.

Similarly, a user-centered approach to research might not be the best tool to study ideological and political interventions in translations, for example, or other manipulations of the target text that are the result of the practice of self-censorship by the translator or of external censorial pressure. The history of translation reveals that in the target text "not only can we say the same thing *in another way*, but we can say something *other* than what is the case" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 28). While the user-centered approach is justified in urging the translators to focus on the end users' preferences and not (only) on the client's wishes and to give priority to end users when the preferences of the two clash (see chapter 9), this approach may be less useful in research focusing on possible manipulations of the target text. In chapter 9, the authors argue, "This is a crucial issue in UCT: It is not about completing clients' wishes but about making sure, together with the client, that the end users' needs are fulfilled." (p. 133) The description of translation practice in Franco's or Salazar's regimes, Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, or socialist states (to name just a few) unfortunately reveals that not all clients are benevolent toward the users of the commissioned translations. In such cases, it might be more useful if the researcher were more focused on the commissioners and *their* definition of what is appropriate for the users, rather than on the target users of the translation.

And, finally, the authors also mention that they received feedback on their Finnish book from professional translators who doubted the applicability of user-centered translation in the translation industry. And indeed, outdatedness is today one of the most serious criticisms of *skopos* theory: Vermeer wrote about and for an individual professional translator that was in direct contact with the client and was able to assume the role of an expert in this relationship. Today, when much of the translation market is governed by the high-volume translation industry, translators who work as subcontractors for large translation companies have lost much of their previous decision-making power; they are often outsiders in the translation process and are typically not involved even in negotiations with clients, let alone being allowed to spend time focusing on end users. The authors hope that this degradation of professional translators is intrinsic only to fringe markets and that the environment in central cities may be more open to new ideas and different models—unfortunately, recent surveys, such as a 2014 CIUTI survey[1] of 2,813 graduates from 42 translator and interpreter training institutions from 19 countries, revealed that this trend toward the proletarization of translators is a worldwide phenomenon.

All in all, despite these potential limitations, the attempt of *User-Centered Translation* to shift the attention of researchers, translators, and translator trainers to the end users of translations is a praiseworthy endeavor. The book will prove particularly useful for the purpose of TS academic inquiry, especially in the field of public-service translation and technical translation, and will provide researchers

[1] http://www.ciuti.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/CIUTI-Survey2014_Schmitt.pdf.

with useful and clear descriptions of new trends in research methodology and techniques that they may use in their MA theses or PhD dissertations. Translator trainers will also find this excellent and appealing book a very helpful tool that will enable them to assist their students not only with research methodology but also with translation production, urging them to allow users to play participatory roles during the entire target text production and thus, hopefully, also to empower those users.

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