

XXI. The Memes of Translation

What is a meme of translation? As Andrew Chesterman points out on (p.151) of *Memes of Translation*, a meme is a conceptual tool, a way of examining translation and also finding solutions to translation problems. Chesterman uses Richard Dawkins' concept of the meme in *The Selfish Gene*:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions [...] memes propagate themselves by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain.

Adapting to the world of human sciences, Chesterman sees a meme is a unit of cultural transmission which competes, as do genes in their Darwinian context, with other memes for dominance. In Chapter one, "Survival machines for memes", Chesterman introduces the dominant supermemes in translation studies nowadays, which are:

The Source-Target meme, the concept of the carrying of information across from one language to another. Chesterman suggests a revision of this dominant metaphor

as translations do not merely carry across but rather spread and replicate.

The Equivalence meme, usually stressing the desire for 100% faithfulness. However, Chesterman suggests, with the advent of postmodern theory and the awareness that this 100% equivalence will never be achieved, that this meme is on the decline.

The Untranslatability meme, a legacy of the concept that the divine word should not be tampered with, and the Romantic idea that the greatest literature can never be replicated in a foreign language.

The Free v Literal meme, centred around how free or literal a translator should be when translating, has been another dominant meme in discourse on translation.

The All-Writing-Is-Translation meme breaks down the distinctions between translating from one language to another and the translation of meanings into words in the same language. Deconstruction theory sees all texts as translations of other texts: there is never an original, a logos; we are translating all the time.

Chapter 2, “The Evolution of Translation Memes”, describes the historical development of translation studies which can also be seen through its dominant memes which have

changed through time. Firstly, early theory on translation emphasized literalness, the importance of the Word. By meddling with the word we would be meddling with the Word of God and disrespecting authority. Jerome argued that non-religious texts should be translated more freely, sense for sense, thus stressing the Rhetoric meme. This was developed by 16th and 17th metaphors of translation, which emphasize that the translator should not be slavish towards the original text and should consider the audience reception. Here we move towards the *belles infidèles* and Pope's Homer in powdered wigs.

Schleiermacher, Goethe and the German pre-Romantics emphasized the importance of the formal effect. Translation could feed and extend the target language and help to shape the recently created German nation. Language was the Logos, the creative force of expression and enlightenment. The critique of the logos meme is central to the deconstructive theories of Jacques Derrida and Rosemary Arrojo. There is no original unique source. The source text will be a translation of another text. And no "logical" objective meaning will be transferred. Translations will continually be feeding off each other and giving life to each other. True, essential meaning can never be tied down.

When memes gain a certain prestige within a community, they become norms, particular practices within a given community which regulate behaviour to make it easier for the majority to live. This is the subject of Chapter 3, "From Memes to Norms". Translators will follow the norms of their

society, or their community of translators. Chesterman mentions Toury's preliminary and operational norms and introduces his own expectancy norms, which will contain the following elements: accountability to the commissioner of the translation; an obligation to optimize communication; and a requirement to develop an appropriate relationship between the source and target texts.

Text by: John Milton, Memes of Translation by Andrew Chesterman, Review. 1997.

Guidelines:

Interdisciplinarity means the fusion of material from different disciplines into one topic and one text. Translation theorists, for instance, like in this text can benefit from biology. We, readers and translators, have to have tolerance for material coming from outside our discipline.

Q.I Give the exact meaning of the following words first in English and second in Arabic: conceptual, catch-phrases, propagate, leaping, catches on, merely, replicate, advent, decline, legacy, tampered with, deconstruction, meddling with, slavish, powdered wigs, logos, norms, operational, expectancy, accountability, commissioner, optimize.

Q.II Derive as many words as you can from the following words: selfish, propagate, competes, replicated, distinctions, deconstruction, rhetoric, force, unique, expectancy, accountability.

Q.III Give the opposites of the words below and use them in good English sentences of your own: selfish, dominant, on the decline, firstly, literalness, slavish, creative, regulate, preliminary, develop.

Q.IV Answer the following questions briefly:

1. Who are Andrew Chesterman and Richard Dawkins? How does Chesterman view the meme?
2. How are memes defined in Dawkins's *The Selfish Meme*?
3. What do Genes and memes aspire to achieve?
4. What are the supermemes, and what is meant by each one of them?
5. What is meant by the rhetoric meme?
6. What is meant by the logos meme?
7. What does happen when a meme acquire prestige?
8. What are norms and what are the different kinds?

Q.V Translate paragraph 1 into plain Arabic. How would you reflect the italicized words in the paragraph?

Research Activity:

What are memes? What are the other types of memes besides the supermemes?

Quote of the Day:

Fidelity to meaning alone in translation is a kind of betrayal.

[Paul Valéry](#)