Book Review

Gregory M. Shreve and Erik Angelone (eds)
Translation and Cognition

Translation and Cognition is a collection of papers intended to give a state-of-the-art appraisal of cognitively-oriented process research in translation. It is a very carefully organized volume, giving an insight not only into the achievements of cognitively-oriented process research, but also into the challenges facing this new paradigm.

This volume is indeed a treasure trove of information on the subject indicated in its title. All the studies represent high quality research. In the following I will try to say a few words about each paper and give a more detailed account of the studies that I think are representative of the focal points of cognitive translation studies.

The introductory essay by the editors (Translation and Cognition. Recent developments) gives a clear account of the narrative of cognitively-oriented process research. It claims that cognitive translation process research is distinguished by interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary collaboration, theoretical rigour, methodological innovation, integration with models of bilingualism, SLA, research on memory and cognition. Based on these features, the cognitive approach promises to improve the quality of research and enable researchers to more confidently generalize their results and to verify the findings of other researchers (p. 11).

One may argue that most of the features listed above should not be peculiar to a cognitive approach. Theoretical rigour and methodological innovation are in general desirable features in any scientific discipline. Replicability, use of statistical procedures and all the paraphernalia of experimental sciences does not depend on cognitivism: corpus-based TS is moving in the same direction. Expanding research collaboration, again, is not a necessary or distinctive feature of cognitive approaches, although a “critical mass” of researchers working along the same lines may greatly improve the quality of research. If cognitive translation studies is distinguished by its methodology, we must ask, does methodology make the paradigm?

In spite of the saliency of the new methodologies, it is perhaps its research topics and integration with psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic and cognitive science research that distinguish cognitive approaches from earlier approaches in TS. The research topics include the connection between general cognitive abili-
ties like memory and attention and the processes of translation and interpretation, coordination of the processes of comprehension and production, the acquisition of expertise and the role of metacognition. In addition, some old concepts, such as translation competence and translation strategies, are being re-examined in the light of cognitive science and neuroscience.

One of the things that I find attractive about this introductory paper (and many others in the same volume) is that the authors are aware of the problems and limitations of cognitive translation studies. One problem that they recognize is that “widespread and commonly accepted process models of translation have yet to emerge” (p. 4). The same concern is expressed in several other papers. Although the editors claim that “New consensus on theoretical frameworks and research paradigms is emerging”, this seems to be wishful thinking rather than fact, as evidenced by the more pessimistic note struck by Halverson in the entry on psycholinguistic and cognitive approaches in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies (RET) (Halverson 2009:212). Apparently, intradisciplinary integration of cognitive translation studies with other branches of TS is also desirable. Although some of the studies (e.g. Dragsted, Alves et al., Hansen) call for integration between product and process research, this volume offers little explicit information on how cognitive translation studies can be integrated with, e.g., the cultural, sociological or textual aspects of translation, how knowledge of the differences between SL and TL culture and the purpose of the translation determine the way the translator will translate culture-specific items to satisfy the principle of relevance.

Cognitive studies of translation have developed or adopted a number of sophisticated devices to study translators’ behaviour: more objective information on the processes can be obtained by keystroke logging, eye tracking, screen recording, neuroimaging etc. In this way, cognitive translation studies is an experimental science producing objective findings. What is objective, however, is only the data: interpretation of the data, as the editors note, is often subjective and indirect. This fact is reflected in several papers in the volume by the word speculation and speculative as well as the modal may.

I cannot help wondering whether TS will go the way of psycholinguistics, where experimental designs are rigorous, procedures are sophisticated, and findings are “robust.” Yet these robust findings represent indirect evidence and can be interpreted in several ways, leading to several equally plausible theories. At present, we have three excellent and contradictory theories for language control in bilinguals (Copsta et al. 2008). Furthermore, the findings obtained in laboratory conditions may lack ecological validity. The “translation tasks” used in psycholinguistics actually consist of word translation, which is light years away from translating a text for a client. “Robust” findings may be influenced by artificial tasks: thus, e.g., after decades of basing psycholinguistic theories on results in Stroop tasks, it occurred to some researchers that the unnaturalness of