BOOK REVIEW:

WOLFRAM WILSS: KOGNITION UND ÜBERSETZEN: ZU THEORIE UND PRAXIS DER MENSCHLICHEN UND DER MASCHINELLEN ÜBERSETZUNG.


In this most welcome contribution to the steadily-increasing field of translation studies, from one of its most eminent authorities, the author conducts the reader with sacerdotal aplomb
through the categories, catalysts and catacombs of translation theory and practice. Dexterously 'steering a course between the Scylla of the fusty and the Charybdis of the foppish, Professor Wilss amply demonstrates in this readable work his own personal forte: the enviable ability to present an apparently well-co-ordinated evaluative overview of a complex field. For the reader, the first part of this work offers not so much a trip into a splendid world of visionary revelations, as a voyage of re-discovery: half-remembered truths and partially-grasped concepts are here revisited, neatly contextualized and docketed, and projected briefly against the larger Humanist screen in mutually-defining relief. Latent patterns are re-activated, inferences drawn, connections delineated.

And if, on certain vexed questions, no firm stand is taken, elsewhere the reader is left in little doubt as to where the author's sympathies lie. For instance, while the importance of the enduser of a translation (target audience or receiver), is noted, the source text author's intentions also receive their due, and such authorities as HOLZ-MANTTARI earn one or two gentle rebukes for their lack of consideration for the ST author. It is reassuring to find Wilss stating on p 43: "Das Verhalten des Uberstezers ist nicht nur, wie neuerdings manchmal behauptet wird, durch die Erwartungen des St Empfangers, sondern auch durch die Mitteilungsabsicht des als Autors determiniert. Der Ubersetzer...kann sich vom Ausgangstext...nicht nach Belieben l6sen..." But does this statement reflect an actual, or an ideal, state of affairs?

The book is studded with welcome and well-chosen examples, from the language pair English-German. In accordance with the author's express intention (pIX), to consider successful translation "als Ergebnis mehr oder minder systematischer ProblemlSsungsstrategien und Entscheidungsprozesse" - thus by implication extending the range of the work to embrace both translation quality assessment and didactics - a text is selected from an ENCOUNTERT article "den SNELL-HORNBY (1986) dem Bereich des gemeinsprachlichen Ubersetzens (zwischen literarischem und fachsprachlichem Ubersetzen) zuzuordnen würde..." (p. 67). On p. 112 Wilss notes en passant that the "dichotomy" between literary and LSP (no mention of "Gemeinsprache" here) texts remains a bone of contention, but avoids embroilment in that interminable wrangle, just as on p. 67, where he neatly dodges the issue by indicating that the ENCOUNTERT text, which constitutes the book's weightiest example material (p.67-82) would, in the view of some translation experts, (specifically, SNELL-HORNBY), represent "gemeinsprachliches Ubersetzen". Wilss' own definition of "fachsprachliche Texte" (p. 113) tends towards the narrow, dependent first and foremost on a limited range of possible ST author intentions: "Fachsprachliche Texte zielen auf die Beschreibung und Erklärung wissenschaftlicher und technischer Sachverhalte... Es geht in fachsprachlichen Texten nicht darum, Unbekanntes auf Bekanntes zu reduzieren, sondern darum, den wissenschaftlichen und technologischen Wissenshorizont durch die analytische Verarbeitung fachsprachlicher Argumentationszusammenhänge zu erweitern und zu festigen" WILSS 1979)..... The relationship between Sender and Receiver in LSP texts is, we learn, "tendenziell symmetrisch," (p. 113).
It would be stating the obvious to point out, yet again, the essentially fluid boundaries between LSP and Language for General Purposes, on the one hand, and between "literary" language and LGP, on the other. Indeed, Wilss' selected source text provides a classic demonstration of this, although not, perhaps, quite as intended by Wilss, who rather blithely states, (p. 77), quoting NIDA (1987 unpublished m.s.) "Es ist nicht schwierig, wie Nida sich ausdrückt, 'to capture the spirit of the text.'" Yet to the "spirit" of Max Lerner's lively text many elements contribute: both jargon and LSP, : e.g., "His odyssey as a General Electric speechmaker on the chicken circuit refreshed his insight into blue-collar lives and values".(p. 68). "--(Reagan) has failed to build a protective intellectual counter-culture that will reach the media and the academics. " (p. 69) Translation 1. (the student product) offers: "Seine Odyssee als Sprecher für "general Electric" im Radio frischte seinen Einblick in das Leben und die Werte der Leute aus dem einfachen Volk auf" (p. 70) and "... eine schützende intellektuelle Gegenkultur, die die Medien und Akademiker erreicht" (p. 72) respectively. Translation 2, the product of a group led by Professor Wilss, suggests: "Durch seine Odyssee als Redner der "General Electric" bei vielen offiziellen Veranstaltungen (mit standardisiertem Verwaltungsablauf: zuerst ein "chicken dinner", dann eine Ansprache Reagans als "guest-speaker" - Amn. der Übersetzer) (p. 72) and: "...das Vertrauen der akademischen Welt und der Medien zu gewinnen und seine Position durch einen von der Intelligenz des Landes gebildeten Schutzwall zu sichern" (p. 74).

Again, "grit" and "soul" are concepts so bound up with various aspects of the All-American myth, that they demand a more profound degree of "Landeskunde" than is revealed by either "Tr. 1.: "Mut und Geist" (p. 71) or Tr. 2 "eine lange charakterliche und seelische Bewährungsprobe" (p. 73). And there occur, moreover, in this so-called "Gemeinsprachlicher Text", elements which someone, somewhere, would surely classify as "literary language"; for example,"alarums and excursions" (alarum: poetical for "alarm". Universal Dictionary of the English Language, H. C. WYLDE, 1961) (Tr 2. "Hektik und Getöse"). All these multifarious elements go to make up the richly varied, racy, just-short-of-slick, professionalism that imbues this style of international journalism with its highly individual flavour. Is this quality quite unrelated to the "spirit" of the text? If not, in target language versions like the above, can that spirit truly be said to have survived the translation process? I think not. Again, in the discussion (p. 67) of H. P. KRINGs' unusual work: "Was in den Köpfen von Übersetzern vorgeht" (1986), Wilss voices the very reasonable doubt whether the self-monitoring of a translation process through the "thinking-aloud" method is genuinely capable of recording, "laufend und vollständig", the processes leading to the production of a TL text; but he ignores another, equally valid, consideration: whether this "raising of the level of consciousness", this foregrounding of the stages of the translation process, which appears to combine empiricism, information, and "linguistic intuitions", does not in fact lead the investigator further away from the my-
sterious "Ubersetzerintuitionen" which belong to the black box, and therefore from a possible identification of the nature of that arcane and hypothetical entity, rather than bring him closer to his goal. The same objection might be raised, more pragmatically, in connection with the two alternative target language versions of the ENCOUNTER article, the Härtling story, etc., the first of which was in a majority of cases produced either by a group of students working without professorial guidance, or by a paid translator working for a publisher, while the second represented the result of seminar work led by Professor Wilss. We are not told whether the second group were familiar with the first translation attempt (although one assumes Professor Wilss was). If so, the role played by the linguist's innate "Besserwisser" inclinations; his heightened consciousness of the language, styles and translatorial cruces of the Source text; the different aim and purpose of the translation process in which he was involved, etc., should have been discussed, if valid comparisons are to be made and conclusions drawn. And why did the regional differences so apparent to native speakers of English, between the "commercially produced", and the Canadian-seminar participants' versions of the Härtling story (p. 118-119) not receive a comment, in the face of the claim that these texts would be assessed as "qualitativ ungefähr gleichrangig?"

In the second half of the book, the balanced view taken of machine translation is pragmatic, realistic and, again, full of interesting and useful examples. Arthur Koestler's division of theoretical and finalistic branches of knowledge into "Yogi-Wissenschaft" and "Kommissar-Wissenschaft" is mentioned; the preoccupation of our society with, not the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge harnessed and applied, knowledge with a high productivity value, in the service of "homo instrumentalis". But translation belongs to the humanities, Wilss concludes, and his informative and detailed chapter on machine translation ends with the pious hope that (p. 251) "Es wird nich zuletzt eine Aufgabe der MU-Forschung sein, frei von einer kontraproduktiven intellektualistischen Zwangsneurose hier pragmatisch Klarheit zu schaffen und den Zusammenhang von heuristischen und algorithmischen Zuständen und Prozeduren von Diskursivität und Digitalität leidenschaftslos zu erforschen. Die MU-Forschung hat also nicht nur eine diagnostische, sondern auch eine therapeutische Funktion. Sie kann zu neuen Einsichten in die Natur kognitiver Übersetzungsprozesse und ihrer Operationalisierbarkeit gelangen. Und sie kann im Wechselspiel von Erscheinungsvielfalt und Methodenvielfalt eine klare Grenze zwischen Utopie und Realität ziehen, und der Furcht des "Lebensweltler" vor der Kolonialisierung der Geisteswissenschaften durch die technokratisch-funktionalistische Intelligenz ein Ende bereiten."

In view of the modesty of the aims with which the author sets out, namely (p. IX) "im Rahmen eines bescheidenen Begriffsapparats und ohne grossartigen Notationsaufwand einige Gedanken zu
einer kognitiven Theorie und Praxis der Übersetzens beizusteuern", and taking into account the ambivalent nature of translation in general, it would scarcely be fair to expect epoch-making revolutionary conclusions, even from so seasoned a campaigner. When Wilss voices (p. VIII) the hope that at last a cognitive "white box" may replace the "notorious Behaviourist black box", the heart soars - only to sink again when, on p. IX, we read that cognition theory has not, alas, reached this stage. Again, schön wäre es... do such statements belong to theory or to pretheory?

Likewise, it appears problematic to describe (p. 42) the "black box" as "ein hypothetisches Konstrukt, das man nicht beobachten, sondern nur diagnostisch erschliessen kann. Genau genommen ist dieser Begriff nur ein Name für unerforschte 'Wenn-Dann' Beziehungen und hat dementsprechend nur "einen gedanklichen Stellenwert", and (p. 245) as "vage und schillernd", and yet on p. 129, this hypothetical construct achieves datum-status through the remark "Übersetzungsintuition ist Teil der geheimnisvollen notorischen "black box" des Übersetzers, von der man zwar weiß dass es sie gibt ....." etc. The positing of a model for convenience sake here dangerously approaches a transition into factual acceptance, the classic theoretical flaw.

Yet if guidance is to be sought for, it is to such as Professor Wilss that the questing and despairing translatologist must turn, rather than to the whizz kids, in hopes of finding a serious attempt to chart and survey these troubled waters. For the linguists - the psychos, the socios, the applieds, the mathematicals and the die-hard traditionalists - are grown aweary of the whizz kids. No sooner, it seems, have the latest tenets of faith been laboriously acquired, new terminologies established in place of old, than the latest doctrines too are declared ideologically suspect. Whizz kids come, and whizz kids go, but WILSS goes on ...not, perhaps, with the endearing grace of NIDA, nor the lightning charisma of de BEAUGRANDE, but steadily, soberly, reassuringly.

Many things there are deserving of praise in this book, besides its thoroughness, its honesty, the urge to educate, in the world's truest sense, to which it bears witness. Wilss does not attempt to cower behind a screen of anonymity: the reader is left in no doubt of the author's sympathy with the pragmatic, empiricist approach, or his perception and appreciation of key issues and their interface; he does not offer pat solutions to the insoluble, he does not pretend to shed light into all the dark corners. But the emphasis on the tie-in between theory and practice and didactics, the apt exemplification, the wide range of topics on which it touches, distinguish the work: the useful subject and author registers and bibliography, the welcome freedom from the tyranny of footnotes, enhance the claims of this book to earn a place as a work of reference to be consulted again and again. It would have been even better had the complete index of section headings been listed in the Table of Contents, also, for the convenience of readers. This oversight should be remedied in future editions: the twelve chapter headings are of necessity very broad and general. To provide a more detailed indication of the focal areas of the work, the various sections are listed below.
From Wolfram Wilss I had expected to find "Kognition und Ubersetzungen" a mine of well-presented information. I had expected to find it sound and thorough. What I had not expected was to find it so enjoyable. In this respect, I was pleasantly surprised. It will certainly not be the last time I read this book.

- Highly recommended for all with an interest in translation.

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