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Progress in Translation Studies

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Across Interview

Progress in translation studies

Andrew Chesterman interviewed by Pál Heltai

Andrew Chesterman has been Professor of Multilingual Communication at the University of Helsinki, has served as a member of the Executive Board of EST and has done important research on a wide range of topics in TS. The topics that he has dealt with include contrastive analysis of definiteness in English and Finnish, research methodology in TS, TS as an academic discipline, descriptive, explanatory and causal theories in TS, translator training, the use of theory in the practice of translation, translation strategies, TS terminology, and most importantly, memes of translation. He himself is responsible for several TS memes, such as S/T universals, and expectancy and professional norms. It may safely be said that he is one of the clearest minds in TS, always trying to understand what's going on in TS, trying to make sense of vague ideas raised in various quarters of TS and to put them into perspective. The following interview was made after a lecture (Progress in Translation Studies) given by Andrew Chesterman to doctoral students in Translation Studies at the Department of Translation and Interpretation Studies in ELTE University, Budapest.

HELTAI: Well, let us start with what seems to be an obligatory question, one that anyone might ask you, knowing that you're based in Finland: how did you get there? Why Finland?

CHESTERMAN: When I left university after my first degree at Cambridge (I had a BA in languages), I wanted to see some of the world, and at that time the British Council ran a scheme of jobs for teachers of English in different places around the world. I got in touch with them and they said yes, we have two vacancies; there is a vacancy in Finland, in a little town called Savonlinna, and there is a vacancy in Columbia, in Bogotá. – Would you like one of these? – I thought the weather in Bogotá would be too hot, so I chose Finland. I ended up on a boat with about 25 other young people who were going out to Finland to teach English in local schools and English clubs. It was a Russian boat going from London to Leningrad, as it was then called, and the route went via Helsinki. If you come to Finland by

boat, you come through the lovely long archipelago. In the morning when we were going past the islands off the south- west coast of Finland, I came up on deck and saw the August sun on the islands and the rocks and trees and the little cottages dotted along the shores, and I thought: this is going to be my place!

HELTAI: It enchanted you?

CHESTERMAN: It enchanted me completely. I had met one Finn before then. Only one, who became a very good friend of mine and of my father's, but he turned out to be a delightfully untypical Finn... So I arrived in Helsinki, where we were given a lecture by an Englishman who had been living in Helsinki for some time: be prepared for a culture shock, he warned us. In those days – 1968 – life in Finland was rather different from what it is now. So I was duly prepared for a culture shock... but I never experienced one. I took the train to this little town of Savonlinna where I was going to teach. It was a beautiful place, and I soon thought I would like to make a life in Finland. I got a temporary job at Helsinki University the next year, substituting for a lecturer who was on leave. I got married. Life has been partly Finnish ever since, and I am very pleased to have stayed.

HELTAI: Now, talking of Finland, how do you find Finnish Translation Studies? Are there many ties between the different institutions, I mean Helsinki, Savonlinna, Tampere, Joensuu, and so on?

CHESTERMAN: I think Finland is unusual, in that there is a very strong sense of a TS community. There are five or six universities with sections or departments of TS. There are a number of institutions which have been set up to bring people together for a joint seminar or conference once or twice a year. These events bring together researchers, teachers and students as well as working translators and interpreters. Altogether, there is a very strong sense of community, a community of translation research and practice: a superb group of people to belong to. People turn up to listen to doctoral examinations in other universities, and they referee and comment on each other's work to some extent. Many warm friendships are formed.

HELTAI: I also have the impression that professionally Finnish TS is very good.

CHESTERMAN: We have had some very good people at the top. We've had Yves Gambier, the French scholar, who's been in Turku for longer than I can remember.

Then there've been scholars like Sonja Tirkkonen-Condit, who's been a leading promoter of empirical research in TS. Sonja had a very good contact network. She organized a big conference in Savonlinna many years ago, about translation universals, with Gideon Toury as the main guest speaker. It was great to get to know him better, on a personal level. Then there was Riitta Jääskeläinen, who was getting involved in cognitive process studies. And Justa Holz-Mänttari in Tampere... And so many others. I think we've been very lucky in many of the leading figures that have been inspirational for the next generation of scholars, like Outi Paloposki in translation history and so on. And Kaisa Koskinen, who has become a well-known scholar in the sociology of translation. I myself have tried to promote links with CETRA and Anthony Pym's Tarragona group.

HELTAI: And you have good connections with all of these people?

CHESTERMAN: Yes, we do, we are good friends. Last year we had a joint celebration in Helsinki for my 70th birthday and Outi Paloposki's 60th birthday. As part of the Translators' Day in Helsinki the two of us were interviewed by Kaisa Koskinen (for whom I had been a doctoral examiner) and Kristiina Taivalkoski-Shilov (who had been my first doctoral student). So the friendships go down through the generations.

HELTAI: They know your work? They cite you?

CHESTERMAN: Oh, yes, and sometimes critically, too! I think we are a very unusual community. I have often commented that if you live in a country where translation research is done by a few people scattered across different institutions, it's really important to create a wider TS community at the national level. Finland is an excellent example of what can be achieved in this respect – I feel proud to be a part of our team.

HELTAI: That's very nice. Now let me ask you some more strictly professional questions about TS. In recent years doubts have been voiced about translation universals. Some years ago there used to be a lot of enthusiasm, now there are more doubts. What do you think of translation universals?

CHESTERMAN: I think first of all that the term is not a good term, although I've used it myself, because it suggests a hypothesis which is too general. If you suggest that something is a universal, you seem to imply (or at least hypothesize)

that it is present in every single translation that there ever has been and ever will be, and I think that's not reasonable. I think it would have been better to call them general tendencies or even probabilistic laws, as Gideon Toury refers to them. Seeing a so-called universal as a general tendency would be fine IF you then define what you mean by a tendency, which is another problem. And I think the idea of looking for these general tendencies is excellent: it's standard empirical science to look for generalizations, to look for patterns. I think this kind of research has had some very good results. It encouraged people to adopt more of a standard empirical research methodology, not just throwing ideas around but really testing a hypothesis so that you could either support it or falsify it. Another point is that we have been forced to specify the level of generality at which we make claims about tendencies. We have to realize that a given tendency may be common among translations of a certain kind, but not be literally a universal tendency. For example, something may frequently occur in published translations of a certain genre, such as literary translation; or in professional translation as opposed to amateur work; or in subtitling. There may be all kinds of conditions which affect the strength of some tendency or other. And another thing: if you assume that some features are present in any translation, you also assume by definition that they are also present in bad translations, because a bad translation is also a translation, it just happens to be a bad one. I think these factors were not adequately considered at the beginning of corpus-based research on this issue. In hindsight, I think it would have been perhaps better to say that the important point is simply to look for patterns, generalizations – and we always need to define the scope of a generalization. If you make a claim that something is a general tendency with a certain scope of applicability, i.e. that it applies to translations of a certain kind, that's OK; but saying that they are universal is a bit like jumping the gun, we are ahead of what we're entitled to say.

HELTAI: One problem I have with translation universals concerns discourse transfer, or the law of interference as Toury calls it. On the one hand we say that translation universals are independent of language pair and direction of translation, while on the other hand the law of interference says that features of the source text are always transferred to the target text. But such transfer depends on language pair, does it not?

CHESTERMAN: That's true. I think what Toury meant was when you come across a translation, regardless of the language pair, you will find evidence of interference on some level. I think when you go on then to specify the kind of

interference, that is clearly language-pair-specific and maybe genre-specific, and maybe translator-type-specific as well. I think he has pitched his law at a very general level, simply claiming that you will find evidence of some sort of interference. If you find a translation with no interference at all at any level, that would be unusual, like finding a translation with no shifts. That would be extremely unusual.

HELTAI: I think you have mentioned on several occasions that in TS there is a bias towards the study of literary texts...

CHESTERMAN: There has been. I'm not sure that there is now but I think there was a period when most translation-theoretical work dealt with literary translation. Venuti's work deals mostly with literary translation. There's a book by Schulte and Biguenet called *Theories of Translation*: it is a collection of theoretical essays, and I think every single one deals with literary texts. Literary translation has produced a huge amount of purely theoretical work. Think of Walter Benjamin, think of Antoine Berman, or Schleiermacher. Literary translation has been hugely important as a stimulus for theory-forming.

HELTAI: But can there be a theory of non-literary translation? The translation of technical, economic, legal, medical and IT texts? Can they have a theory of their own?

CHESTERMAN: It depends on what you mean by theory. I think some literary scholars marketed their theories as general theories of translation, but my problem with that has been that often these theories seem to apply only to literary translation.

HELTAI: I've looked at Jeremy Munday's *Introducing Translation Studies* of 2012 and it is mostly concerned with literary theory: post-colonial translation, deconstruction theory, translation as rewriting and so on.

CHESTERMAN: I don't think that the people who do technical translation have produced much actual theory of technical translation. There are theories of translation, of course, that are so general that they would certainly include technical translation. A good example would be relevance theory.

HELTAI: But Gutt seems to exclude technical translation.

CHESTERMAN: No, he doesn't exclude technical translation as such, he excludes

what he calls multilingual descriptions, such as versions of instructions for use in different languages. If I buy a new washing machine and the instructions are in Finnish and in English and so on and they all describe the same operations, they don't need to correspond to a source text, they just need to correspond to the way the machine works. For Gutt, this is not translation proper. I think that's a distinction I would not like to make, I would think of them as translations. But, as far as I remember, many of the examples he gives are not literary. I don't think he would claim that his theory of relevance as applied to translation would be at all specific to literary translation. But many TS scholars are humanists and they find literature interesting, they find literary translation especially rich, so it inspires theoretical thought. In contrast, theories of subtitle translation for instance are more like guidelines – here are your constraints and this is what you have to do – ways of reducing the texts and taking account of the visual aspects, and so on. You mentioned medical translation: I never met a specific theory of medical translation, but there are of course books about legal translation which appear to be theories of legal translation. Such theories may be basically prescriptive: this is the way you do it, these are the things you need to know.

HELTAI: Like the first books on audiovisual translation, which tended to be prescriptive.

CHESTERMAN: Yes.

HELTAI: You said that the study of translated language has been based on high quality translations, and the problem is that there are many bad translations, too. So the question arises whether we should study those too.

CHESTERMAN: I think we certainly should. It might teach us something about why they are bad, and what effects this might have.

HELTAI: By the way, at present, people in this Department¹ are engaged in compiling a corpus of English–Hungarian and Hungarian–English translation. It's going to be both a bilingual and a comparative corpus and they are also going to take into consideration weak translations, translations made by students for example. That is going to be a novel feature of the Pannonia Corpus.

CHESTERMAN: That's interesting. If these translations were done by students, there is a difference in the variable of professionalism certainly. But I would not say in advance that because they are done by students, they are therefore not so

good as if they were done by professionals. That's an empirical question. I don't think you can assume it.

HELTAI: Going back to your early career in TS, I suppose you started out as a contrastive linguist. What do you think of the use of contrastive linguistics in translation theory today?

CHESTERMAN: I think it's extremely important for anybody working within the linguistic paradigm of translation theory. It used to be said that the linguistic paradigm is now out of date. I've never felt that. I was trained as a linguist and I am still a linguist in a way, and I think that the linguistic paradigm will never go out of date because translators mostly deal with language. There is not only language, but it is mostly language. And if you're interested in the translator's mind, why the translator makes certain decisions for example, then one thing that you need to bear in mind is what the options are that the translator had at a given point in the text. If you have options A and B and C and the translator chooses C, then why did the translator not choose A or B? And to know what the options are, you need contrastive analysis within certain constraints. So I think anybody working within that paradigm would need contrastive analysis because it shows what is available for the translator to choose from. And translations and the study of translations can also affect contrastive analysis work, because the translator may arrive at a solution which would not be predicted as being one of the possible options by traditional contrastive analysis. If you go through the mind of a translator, a translator may see connections that a linguist doesn't see, and vice versa. So I think they could work hand in hand; I have never felt that contrastive studies would be irrelevant to translation, or vice versa.

HELTAI: On this issue you seem to be agreeing with Juliane House, who also seems to think that contrastive analysis is important for translation. And she has extended contrastive analysis to discourse features.

CHESTERMAN: Yes, especially to the way the English language has affected German discourse. There have been occasions when I have disagreed with some of Juliane House's arguments and distinctions, but in this particular case I agree absolutely. I think this project, the influence of English on German discourse, is actually very interesting.

HELTAI: But it is already leading away from TS to general linguistics.

CHESTERMAN: Yes, it is. It takes data from translations and also non-translations and shows how texts can be influenced by another language, and how translated texts from another language affect the target language development; this is one way of using translations as a research tool. If what she is really interested in is how German is changing, then translation seems to be a cause, one cause among others. Don't you find that to be a perfectly valid kind of research?

HELTAI: Yes, I do. CHESTERMAN: Translations are not just results. They are also causes.

HELTAI: You are not committed to any one theory or school within TS as far as I know?

CHESTERMAN: I feel most at home in descriptive TS. I'm not sure if that's a school, but it is a way of thinking about translation, where I was probably first of all influenced most by Gideon Toury. I still feel I'm influenced by his way of thinking and by his ideas on what TS could be about. So, if that is a school or a theory then that's where I mostly stand. But I feel free to move out of it too, depending on the topic at issue.

HELTAI: My impression is that you are rather open and ready to discuss ideas coming from other people, not just your own ideas. Like, for example relevance theory. Many translation scholars were hostile towards it initially, but you sort of recognized its advantages. Right?

CHESTERMAN: I think it has a lot to offer. It has made actually quite an important contribution to TS. Ernst-August Gutt has now retired, and actually lives in Finland, with his Finnish wife, just north of Helsinki. We have met a few times over a coffee and we have argued and talked at some length. One of his main points is that by showing all the things which translation has in common with communication in general, relevance theory can demonstrate how much you can explain of translation behaviour in terms of general communication strategies. I don't agree with all his ideas but I do think that yes, we need to look not only at what's special about translation, but we also need to look at what translation has in common with other sorts of communication, multilingual discourse and so on, as you do yourself. And I think he also argues convincingly that we should be interested not only in what a translator can do, but why. Why do translators choose certain options, why do they rephrase in certain ways? I think relevance theory offers quite cogent arguments as to possible reasons why the translator does this,

because the translator is thinking how the reader might interpret it, and therefore does this because it would be clearer and the reader would need to invest less effort. I think that all this makes quite good sense. In our recent discussions he has also argued that translation itself is not a natural category, that it is a purely culture-bound category, as the nature of what is counted as translation varies in different cultures. Now, if it's not a natural category, then we are probably misleading ourselves if we are looking for general tendencies that might be applicable to all manifestations of such a category.

HELTAI: I have been reading an article by Gutt where he says that everyone can see the sky, yet the sky as such does not exist. Like translation. The article is available on the internet but has never been published properly.

CHESTERMAN: I'm certainly interested in relevance theory. Talking years ago with Hans Vermeer, I asked him what he thought of relevance theory: it seemed to me that relevance theory was talking about the skopos but without using the term 'skopos'. He said he was critical of it for other reasons, but I still see similarities between the two theories. [See the interview in *Across Languages and Cultures* Vol. 2, No. 1, 133–138, 2001.]

HELTAI: House wasn't sympathetic to relevance theory because Gutt argued against equivalence, and Sonja Tirkkonen-Condit did not think much of it, either.

CHESTERMAN: I don't know why that should have been the case. I find that relevance theory overlaps with skopos theory, but it does one thing that skopos theory doesn't do, which is to extend into cognition, the cognitive motivations, whereas skopos theory remains on the level of the sociological relations between the different agents involved, as far as I can see. Also, I think an advantage of relevance theory is that it can make predictive hypotheses and it seems that skopos theory has not really produced many hypotheses, predictive or otherwise, that could be tested and possibly falsified. It remains very conceptual, but nevertheless pedagogically useful.

HELTAI: That leads me to cognitive translation theories and process research, which relies to a great extent on new methodologies – eye-tracking, computer-logging, psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic methodologies and so on. It is indeed being advertised as a new paradigm within TS. What do you think of this new paradigm of cognitive translatology?

CHESTERMAN: I think the technical aspects of it are interesting, but there is still quite a wide gap between what you can really say as a result of your technical measurements or eye-movements and so on, and what might be something meaningful and new about how the brain works. The eye-tracking people have this assumption that the eye is a window on the mind and if you can see the eyes moving, there is a direct correlation between what the eyes do and what must be happening behind the eyes. But then, if you describe what's happening behind the eyes in terms of what the eyes are doing, then it's fairly reductionist: you are trying to describe something which must be hugely complicated in terms of something very simple like eye saccades and so on. If the eye fixates at certain points, you assume that there is some extra thought going on here, but you have no idea what the thought is, and it may not be anything relevant at all, it might be that the translator is thinking about his supper or that he needs a coffee or a toilet break or anything. I don't know with what degree of justifiability you can actually say something about the mind. I think there's a big gap there: perhaps the jury is still out, as it were. Sometimes, some research results in this area can look a bit trivial and the assumptions made are enormous, so that the claims made about the results are perhaps bigger than they should be. I am a bit critical about that. Do you have ideas on this yourself?

HELTAI: Well, I have read an article by Juliane House, who makes similar criticisms and I have also written something called Should TS become an experimental science? I think I agree with what you have said.

CHESTERMAN: I was going to ask you if you thought there was such a thing as a Hungarian TS school?

HELTAI: I am not quite sure. There seems to be some sort of Hungarian school initiated by Kinga Klaudy. I would say that she's linguistically oriented and many people here follow in her footsteps, so if there is a Hungarian school of translation it must be greatly influenced by her approach.

CHESTERMAN: She's also a contrastivist, isn't she? She's been doing contrastive work.

HELTAI: Yes, some years back she made an interesting comparison of thematic structure in Hungarian and Russian and found that there is a difference between original Hungarian texts and translated Hungarian texts in

this respect, which accounts for the impression of translationese they make on the reader. Actually, that was contrastive analysis on the text level, I think.

CHESTERMAN: That surely would be of relevance to people who study to become translators here.

HELTAI: Her best-known book (very popular in Hungary) provides a very detailed analysis of transfer operations, as she calls them. It is also available in English.

CHESTERMAN: Do you think these doctoral students here are all working from a linguistic angle?

HELTAI: No, many of them base their work on other theories, it's just that the linguistic approach remains a strong influence. There was a dissertation (by János Nagy) last year based on functional sentence perspective and another one on translation universals and revising (by Edina Robin). Baker claimed that translated texts are not worse than non-translated texts – they are only different. Yet, if translation universals account for the differences, and if manifestations of translation universals are undesirable (since revisers try to eliminate them), then the claim that translated texts are just different may run into some difficulties.

CHESTERMAN: That's fascinating. I think many of the so-called translation universals would be – if brought to the attention of translators – things that translators would try to avoid because they are often signs of the translation being not quite natural in some way or another, and you can see they can be markers of translationese. So the more we know about these tendencies, the more we can avoid them, and therefore make them less true as generalizations. There would be fewer and fewer people doing these things, at least if they had been trained.

HELTAI: Our time is running out, so to conclude this interview, I will come back to the talk you have just given our students on whether there has been progress in Translation Studies. Could you summarize in a few sentences for readers of Across your answer to your self-inflicted question?

CHESTERMAN: Well, I would say that there has been a great deal of institutional progress, with more journals, conferences, associations etc. than ever before, many cooperation initiatives in research training (international graduate schools and doctoral programmes), and so on. There has also been considerable

methodological progress, with an expansion in the kinds of data that are seen to be relevant to translation research, and developments in data elicitation and analysis methods. We have become an ever broader interdisciplinary, but this has also brought more fragmentation, as more and more subfields emerge, sometimes without strong links to other subfields. Conceptually too, there has been expansion: we have more and more terms, more and more distinctions... But they do not all seem to be justified in the sense of giving rise to better testable hypotheses. We are still quite a long way from a standardized terminology, and from an agreed general theory. We certainly know more about translation than we used to, but there seems to be no shortage of known unknowns – and no doubt also unknown ones!

HELTAI: Thank you for the interview.

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