

An interview with Marina Manfredi on the use of systemic functional linguistics, and other ways of teaching translation studies

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Marina Manfredi is a tenured Researcher in English Language and Translation at the University of Bologna (Italy). She is a member of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) and the European Society for Translation Studies (EST), as well as of the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies (IATIS).

She has been working in Bologna since 2003 as a lecturer and researcher on theory and practice of translation, from English into Italian, of specialized and literary texts, in particular colonial and postcolonial. In her courses, she has introduced an innovative way of applying Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory to the teaching of Translation Studies. On this topic, she published the monograph “Translating Text and Context: Translation Studies and Systemic Functional Linguistics” (Vol. 1, 2008; Vol. 2, forthcoming). During her career, she has also given a number of talks and published chapter articles on the previously mentioned topics, as well as on other interests of hers such as the study of lexical and grammatical metaphors in popular science texts, and audio-visual translation.

Marina was invited to give a talk entitled “Applications of appraisal theory for the analysis of text types in translation” at the Centre for Translation Studies, University of Leeds, where this short interview took place. The interview transcript is as follows:

Marilena Di Bari: *Your talk was on applying the Appraisal Framework to translations from English into Italian in different types of texts such as literary texts, tourist guides and press magazines. Can you please summarize what are the main differences between these two languages, and how does Systemic Functional Linguistics help such analysis?*

Marina Manfredi: Of course there are differences between English and Italian, between the two language systems, which pose translation problems.

For example, the translation of the English typical long strings of nouns—due to the fact that English makes a large use of pre-modification, while Italian of post-modification. This makes the Italian target texts (TTs) usually longer than the English source texts (STs), which in turn poses problems of fluency and also of space constraints, especially in magazines, subtitles, and so on.

To offer another example, the lack of the Saxon genitive in Italian is also a problem for translators, because a direct translation would most often produce a clumsy translation.

However, in general, when dealing with translation, rather than focusing on aspects linked to contrastive inter-lingual problems, I think it is more important to focus on differences in the use of lexico-grammatical structures because of different rhetorical strategies, communicative strategies and expectations, so differences in the target and source speech communities, according to different text types.

Once again, just to offer some examples, let's think about the use of repetition, in fact a cohesive device in English, while in Italian very often considered a sort of redundancy. So, is the function of repetition to be rendered in another way? Function is important. Or, for example, some text types such as argumentative texts in the field of human sciences in Italian tend to make use of more explicit cohesive devices than English STs. There are text types—think about tourist guides—where the English reader is addressed in a more direct and informal way through different lexico-grammatical structures, while Italian texts of the same type tend to be more impersonal and more formal. Or some text types prefer hypotaxis instead of parataxis, etc.

In light of this, I think that a grammar that can be a useful tool for translators is not formal, and not even contrastive, but rather functional. That's why I claim that SFL can be a fruitful tool for translation practice, and not only for translation analysis, as I tried to show in my talk.

Once the translator has identified the function, realized by certain language structures in the ST, he or she can try to reproduce it in the target language (TL) using, of course, different language structures. What is important is the meaning, and I use this word in functional terms, not as a synonym with content. It refers, indeed, to the three kinds of meaning according to Halliday (ideational, interpersonal and textual) that any kind of text realises.

Actually, a systematic modelling of Italian grammar in an SFL framework

does not exist, as it does for example for French or for Spanish, at least to my knowledge. However, as for practical experience, many aspects of the Hallidayan model can be applied to Italian as well. For example, Halliday himself said that every language has in its grammar some systemic constructions to realise relational processes with different structures precisely.

I can offer a practical example of the usefulness of an SFL approach to translation, linked to what I was saying at the beginning. If you consider nominalisations in terms of ideational grammatical metaphors, it can be very useful, even from a practical point of view, to be able to unpack them to render their function in Italian TTs, again to avoid clumsy translations. In that case textual meanings could be lost, but sometimes a compromise is necessary while translating.

MDB: *You also have experience in teaching such interesting connections between Systemic Functional Linguistics and translation studies at the university. What would you say are the difficulties and potentialities?*

MM: As for difficulties, the main problem when adopting an SFL approach in teaching is that many students lack a background knowledge, and I'm not talking about SFL, but about linguistics in general. Like Mona Baker regretted some years ago, also in Italy there are still universities that rely on just practice when training translators, and practice is mainly based on intuition without any systematic approach.

I suggest that, maybe, an SFL approach could be a possibility, not the only one, but a meta-reflection of this kind could be particularly useful and fundamental to make students aware of language choices in STs, first of all, and of the translation choices they are asked to take. As I said, SFL is not the only solution, but it might offer benefits from a theoretical, methodological and practical point of view. For example, a text analysis based on SFL could help students get away from the surface, from the structure of the English ST and engage with a deeper reflection on wordings and meanings realised.

Theory, hopefully, might even not be perceived as a 'dirty word' if you can offer students some practical usefulness of this meta-linguistic approach, because they usually start a translation course being a bit suspicious of theory, but they can realise that it can help their performance.

Moreover, I think that SFL could even help solve the old dichotomy between culturally-oriented translation studies and linguistically-oriented translation studies, because it is based on a strict link between language and

culture, language and context of culture, and the notion of context of culture in translation is fundamental.

One might argue that this is an elaborated model and it's a problem. A possible solution could be to simplify it according to the kind of audience (or class in the case of teaching) for certain translation purposes. However, even the so-called delicacy of this model, its highly systematic structure, can be useful for a complex process like translation.

MDB: *What about time?*

MM: Yes, time is another problem. Of course, the ideal situation would be a background, at least a general one, in SFL. If this is not the case, also because I do not employ exclusively this approach in my translation courses, I illustrate how this can be more useful than other ones, but I combine different approaches, so time is actually not so much.

But something can be done, maybe without illustrating the full model in detail like in yesterday's talk, just hints. Still, something can be done, and with interesting results.

MDB: *You have also recently explored audiovisual translation. Can you tell us a bit more about your experience?*

MM: Yes. My experience, as you say, is a very recent one. After working on audiovisual translation from a didactic point of view, working on the ever-growing theory of audiovisual translation, and also guiding students through exploring audiovisual texts for their final dissertations (they enjoy audiovisual translation), I have recently engaged in a research of mine that actually allowed me to put together some of my research fields.

I decided to focus on multi-ethnic sitcoms addressed to a young audience. For this purpose, I made use of linguistic studies on language variation, theory of translating for children, and postcolonial studies, along with some specific studies focused on dubbing, which in Italy is still the main audiovisual translation form. I've just begun. I still have a lot of work to do, but this seems to be a challenging field of research to explore widely and deeply, not only in terms of translation studies and audiovisual translation studies, but also in terms of analysing cross-cultural diversity in our multi-ethnic society.

MDB: *What about the students? You said that they enjoy audiovisual translation, and maybe sitcoms are the best in this sense?*

MM: Yes, they enjoy it. As for sitcoms, there are often problems with trans-

lation. Italy has a well-known and valid tradition of dubbing as far as movies are concerned. With sitcoms of different kinds and TV in general, there are sometimes more problems in the TT, because of the lack of time and the sort of inferiority attached to the genre.

And many students, especially in Foreign Languages, are used to watching them in English and they are able, even without a theoretical framework, to make comparisons between different versions, and identify problems in rendering, especially when different cultures are involved. For these reasons, I picked this interesting topic. Yes, we have a lot of research in dubbing of movies, but this particular sub-type, in particular for a young audience, could offer interesting results.

As I learnt recently, when attending the “Media for all” conference on audiovisual translation, many scholars started to become more interested in reception, i.e. how dubbing or subtitling are received by the target audience. So, in this sense, it would be interesting to see how sitcoms (in the one I worked on, cultural references were mostly maintained by the way), are perceived by a young audience of teenagers.

MDB: *The emphasis on the use of automatic tools in translation is bigger and bigger, as you know. Do you think there is space in the theoretical teaching of linguistics for this?*

MM: Translation and technology nowadays are strictly linked. In the professional world, translators of specialized translation in particular cannot do without the use of CAT tools by now. Let’s think about translation memories that spare a lot of work and time.

From the point of view of teaching, parallel corpora, I think, can be a useful resource for both descriptive research and practical purposes. However, I consider technology to be more helpful when dealing with highly specialised texts where, apart from terminology, certain recurrent conventions are the norm, and words and meanings are sort of predictable in both languages, the ST and the TT.

If we want to focus on other texts, like the ones we have discussed so far, which in functional terms are more open—in the sense that they are not so predictable and offer translators a wide range of choices—I think that other kinds of methods can still be employed, especially for teaching purposes.