Translation Without Translators: A Social Systems Perspective

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Abstract

Among the most important roles of theory in the humanities is the creation of fresh perspectives. Probing a new angle defamiliarises the familiar and leads to novel questions. My paper explores the potential offered by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems for an understanding of translation in its social and historical context. The theory is abstract and general, and we need to begin by introducing some of its basic concepts and terms (communication; code; programme; autopoiesis; operational closure; differentiation; structural coupling; observation and second-order observation). I then go on to survey individual aspects of translation that can be redescribed in social systems terms. The paper defines translation as proxy and resemblance, addresses the internal differentiation of translation in the modern world, explains the idea of the form of translation and the significance of intertextuality in this regard, casts translation as second-order observation, and suggests ways in which social systems theory can focus attention with reference to translation history.