

Exploring the implications of complexity thinking for translation studies

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Translation Theory and Development Studies. A Complexity Theory Approach (Marais 2015) was the first to introduce Complexity Theory in Translation Studies. Complexity theory is usually described as a revolutionary break from reductionism and as a way of seeing the world in terms of instability and fluctuations. Complexity theory indeed challenges the notions of disjunction, abstraction and reduction which together constitute the “paradigm of simplification” (Morin 2008, 3). Reductionism has been the dominant approach to science since the 16th century (Mitchell 2009, ix) and has been wrongly associated with the only way to do ‘good science’. In the words of Edgar Morin, one of the fathers of complexity theory, reduction means “the search for elementary, simple units, the decomposition of a system into its elements, the origination of the complex to the simple.” (Morin 2008, 33) Such a view mutilates reality, which is necessarily complex, “by imposing a simple conceptualization on a complex reality” (Marais 2015, 19). It also underlies some of the conceptualizations in Translation Studies. Although reduction will remain an important characteristic of science (Morin 2008, 33, Marais 2015, 15), we need to supplement it with an epistemology of complexity.

For complexity thinking the notions of non-linearity, emergence, up- and downward causation, paradox and non-equilibrium are key. As a result, binary thinking, linear cause and effect relationships are highly questionable. In sum, “Complexity engages with the methodological foundations of all scientific practice across all domains and fields” (Byrne and Callaghan 2014, 57) It represents “an epistemological shift from studying substance or stability to studying relationships, process, or change based on substance or the complex relationship between them.” (Marais 2015, 50)

This panel wants to explore the potential of complexity theory for translation studies. It invites for theoretical, methodological contributions or case studies. Possible topics can include but are not limited to:

- How do nonlinearity and emergence challenge translation studies to rethink its conceptualization of the relationships between structure and agency, between habitus and norms?
- How do nonlinearity and emergence challenge translation studies to rethink its conceptualization of the relationships between cause and effect?
- How does complexity thinking challenge Translation Studies’ view on translators and interpreters as agents of change? On change and evolution in general?
- How does complexity thinking challenge traditional binary oppositions which have structured Western thinking: source/target, original/translation, translation/non-translation, local/global, monolingual/multilingual, universal/particular... ?
- How does complexity thinking relate to Actor-Network-Theory? To Descriptive Translation Studies? To other paradigms?
- How does complexity thinking relate to thinking about space and time in translation studies?
- What are the implications of complexity thinking for translator training and translator practice?

References

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