

MEKHITARIST TRANSLATION TRADITION AND SOVIET LINGUISTIC THEORY: A RETROSPECTIVE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

ASHOT MKRYAN*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8881-1818>

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract: This article is an attempt at a comparative examination of the translation tradition of the Mekhitarist Congregation and Soviet linguistic translation studies. The aim of the research is to analyze the principles of Armenian philological translation thought from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century in light of theoretical approaches developed in the mid-twentieth century. Drawing on primary texts, the author demonstrates that the observations of the Mekhitarists exhibit functional parallels with theoretical models of linguistic translation studies. The article emphasizes that the proposed comparison is retrospective in nature and does not imply direct historical continuity or identification between different epistemological frameworks. Linguistic translation studies are regarded as one of the possible analytical perspectives through which the classical Armenian translation experience may be examined in a systematic manner while preserving its historical and cultural distinctiveness. This approach may contribute to a more multilayered understanding of the history of translation thought.

Keywords: Mekhitarist translational approach; Soviet translation theory; comparative analysis; linguistic paradigm; philological tradition

1. Introduction

Questions concerning fidelity, linguistic precision, and the relationship between the source text and its translation have occupied translation thinkers for centuries. Although systematic translation theory emerged only in the twentieth century, many of its central concerns had already been articulated within earlier translation traditions. Comparable issues concerning translation began to be discussed in a systematic manner particularly in the Soviet Union from the mid-twentieth century onward. The Soviet school of translation studies — through the foundational works of Andrei Fedorov (1953), Yakov Retsker (1974), Leonid Barkhudarov (1975), Viktor Vinogradov (1978), Alexandr Shveitser (1988), Vilen Komissarov (1990), and others — formed a theoretical framework that sought a systematic and structural description of the translation process. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this school operated within a

* ashot.mkryan@ysu.am



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specific ideological and institutional context, in which positivism at times led to excessive schematism and, under the conditions of a dominant ideology, the aesthetic and contemplative dimensions of translation were subordinated to the analysis of linguistic structures.

However, the formation of this paradigm did not proceed smoothly and encountered serious resistance (Garbovskiy 2022; Garbovskiy 2023). In particular, the Soviet linguist Alexander Reformatskiy, in his article *Linguistic Questions of Translation* (1952), denied the possibility of translation theory as a separate discipline, arguing that the various genres and types of translation could not share a unified theoretical core (Reformatskiy 1952). Responding to this position, Fedorov, in his *Introduction to Translation Theory* (1953), substantiated the objective nature of translation theory:

“Other fields of practical activity and scholarly knowledge present no fewer difficulties in generalizing their governing principles. To deny translation theory as a scientific philological discipline, even one limited by narrow special boundaries, would first of all mean denying the existence of regularities in the relationship between two languages — understood, of course, broadly (that is, including the correlation between their stylistic systems)” (Fedorov 1953: 15).

At the same time, another fundamental debate was unfolding within translation theory. From the standpoint of “realist translation,” Ivan Kashkin criticized Evgeny Lann and other literalist translators, characterizing their translations as “technologically precise” and “formally precise,” which, in his view, failed to convey the artistic spirit of the original (Kashkin 1977 [1952]: 22–41). This criticism reflected the Soviet literary demand to adapt translation to the aesthetics of socialist realism while also making it more vivid and readable. Literalists, by contrast, sought to preserve the linguistic and structural distinctiveness of the source text as an inseparable component of its artistic value.

This debate extended beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. The linguistic approach was also affirmed in the West, particularly by the French linguist Georges Mounin. In his 1963 book *Theoretical Problems of Translation* (1963), he defended linguistic theory as the principal foundation for the study of translation. In his view, “translation is a contact between languages and at the same time a phenomenon of bilingualism” (Mounin 1963: 4). He regarded translation simultaneously as a creative and critical activity, without separating the two. Mounin emphasized that translation theory makes it possible to draw broader conclusions from translation practice and to overcome “craft-based methods,” thereby uncovering regularities and ensuring their theoretical generalization (Mounin 1963: 16).

Although these twentieth-century discussions are generally regarded as the point at which translation theory acquired systematic academic foundations, many of the questions they addressed had already been anticipated in earlier translation traditions. Armenian translation thought from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, most clearly represented by the scholarly and cultural activity of the Mekhitarist Congregation, developed within a philological-humanistic framework that likewise emphasized fidelity to the source text, linguistic precision, and literary quality. While formulated in a different intellectual and historical context, many of its principles

reveal striking points of convergence with issues that later occupied Soviet translation theorists.

The present study is based on a close reading of two key Mekhitarist texts: the preface to Arsen Bagratuni's *Mshakakank'* (Vergilius Maro 1847: 7–32) and Arsen Ghazikyan's letter addressed to Hrand Nazariantz (Nazariantz 1912: 7–68). An examination of these primary sources demonstrates that the Mekhitarists' translation practice possesses a coherent internal methodology grounded in philological precision, fidelity to the source text, and careful literary judgement.

Thus, the juxtaposition of the Mekhitarists' humanistic-philological paradigm and the Soviet systemic-linguistic paradigm may at first glance appear problematic, given the chronological and methodological distance between them. In the present article, however, Soviet linguistic theory is not employed to 'validate' or 'modernize' the Mekhitarists' experience but rather as an analytical framework through which earlier Armenian translation thought may be re-examined. The aim of this article is to investigate the Mekhitarist translation tradition and Soviet linguistic translation theory as two autonomous yet, at the analytical level, functionally comparable manifestations of translation thought. Rather than equating historically distinct epistemological systems, the study adopts a retrospective methodological perspective that makes it possible to trace how similar translation problems have been conceptualized across different historical periods and intellectual traditions.

2. The Mekhitarists' Experience as a Humanistic-Philological Paradigm

In the history of translation studies, the period up to the twentieth century is often characterized as a stage of theorizing by practitioners. During this time, theoretical reflection had not yet emerged as an independent discipline; rather, it appeared in the form of master translators' analyses of their own work and their formulation of methodological principles. In the Armenian context, this phenomenon found its most vivid expression in the Mekhitarist translation school, where practical skill and philological inquiry served as the basis for developing stable translation principles.

The founder of Soviet translation studies, Fedorov, was among the first to argue that theorizing about translation must be grounded in linguistics, since language is the common point of intersection for all translations (Fedorov 1953). From another perspective, the Armenian translation tradition shows that Mekhitarist figures in certain respects aspired to the same kind of objectivity: they acted as highly trained philologists with deep linguistic competence who, alongside their translations, conducted comprehensive literary and linguistic research.

The artistic principles of the Mekhitarists were first systematically formulated by Bagratuni in the extensive preface to his translation of Virgil's *Georgics* (*Mshakakank'*). This preface is a key primary source for understanding the internal logic of the Mekhitarist translation school and its significance in the history of Armenian translation. There, translation is viewed above all as a means of expanding and enriching the functional capacities of the native language. Bagratuni's approach is grounded in classicist aesthetics, in which the semantic and formal components of a

text must stand in functional harmony. He defines a complex set of criteria for fidelity, including not only semantic accuracy (metaphrase) but also the reproduction of the stylistic and emotional layers of the original (Vergilius Maro 1847: 7–32).

Bagratuni considers fidelity the primary condition and fundamental principle of the translation process. In his view, fidelity to the original encompasses both semantic and emotional-stylistic dimensions. The former involves the accurate rendering of ideas without unnecessary additions or reductions; the latter requires the transmission of affective force and stylistic nuance. He also stresses the importance of preserving the arrangement of ideas. At the same time, recognizing that additions and omissions cannot be entirely excluded due to differences between languages, he urges that they be minimized and insists that any additions must serve the development of qualities already present in the original (Vergilius Maro 1847: 9–10).

Bagratuni's views became foundational for Mekhitarist translators. In this respect, the observations of Ghazikian are particularly noteworthy. They are presented in a detailed letter addressed to the Armenian writer and futurist theorist Hrand Nazariantz, published by the latter in 1912 in the book "Tasso and His Armenian Translators". There, Ghazikian criticizes another Mekhitarist translator, Athanas Tiroyan, for his translation of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (Tasso 1912). He closely examines the translation of the first canto, analyzes individual discrepancies in comparison with the original, and at times presents his own translation (Tasso 1911), published a year earlier than Tiroyan's version, in order to highlight qualitative differences. In some cases, he even back-translates erroneous Armenian renderings into Italian and proposes alternative translations to demonstrate the resulting "absurdity" (Nazariantz 1912: 31–49; Jrbashyan and Mkryan 2025: 13–16).

Ghazikian distinguishes between "errors" and "inaccuracies" as subcategories and examines translation mismatches under these headings. Although he does not provide formal definitions, the distinction is clear from his analyses. An error denotes a gross mismatch that distorts the meaning of the original at the semantic or linguistic level, whereas an inaccuracy is a translational lapse that, despite the general comprehensibility of the translation, fails to convey important nuances of the source text. Within inaccuracies, Ghazikian identifies three subgroups. He names the first two "addition" and "omission." For the third he introduces no separate term, but his examples show that it concerns stylistic inadequacy, when certain stylistic features of the original are not preserved in translation. For example, he notes that in the translation of stanza 59 Tiroyan "spoiled Tasso's beautiful repetition (such repetitions are also found in Homer and Virgil, whose translators did not abridge them)" (Nazariantz 1912: 48; Jrbashyan and Mkryan 2025: 14–15). Notably, beyond pointing out errors and inaccuracies, Ghazikian sometimes also explains their causes, demonstrating a critical analytical approach (Nazariantz 1912: 31; Jrbashyan and Mkryan 2025: 15).

The experience-based approach developed by Mekhitarist translators reveals a consistent concern for multilayered fidelity: semantic accuracy, stylistic nuance, and emotional resonance. Bagratuni's demand to minimize unnecessary additions and omissions, together with Ghazikian's distinction between "errors" and "inaccuracies," attests to the existence of a hierarchical (if not fully formalized) system of translation

quality assessment. This system enabled structural and functional analysis of translated texts. In Mekhitarist theoretical writings, one encounters principles grounded in a rich tradition of translation practice. Soviet theory, in turn, conceptualized analogous phenomena as types of translational equivalence and transformations.

In general, the Mekhitarists' translation tradition operates on a philological level, giving priority to the direct observation of textual correspondences. The analytical precision of Mekhitarist translators — expressed through line-by-line comparisons and explanations of the causes of deviations — provides a basis for comparative analysis with linguistic theory. Thus, the Armenian tradition emerges not as a preliminary or incomplete practice, but as a historically developed and methodologically consistent approach to interlingual transfer. This makes it possible to employ selected concepts from Soviet linguistic translation theory as comparative analytical tools, while remaining attentive to historical and epistemological differences. In other words, the Mekhitarists' observations may be interpreted through later theoretical categories, allowing the process of translation to be approached from multiple perspectives, including a linguistic one.

3. Parallels between Soviet Linguistic Theory and the Mekhitarists' Experience

The formation of Soviet linguistic translation theory in the mid-twentieth century was characterized by the schematization of the analysis of the translation process. Nevertheless, the Soviet school offered concrete solutions to translational problems. Whereas for the Mekhitarists “closeness to the original” and “stylistic propriety” were understood as outcomes of the translator's talent and aesthetic sensitivity, in Soviet theory they acquire the status of translation equivalence and functional correspondence.

On the one hand, the practicism of Soviet theory allows the translational process to be viewed as a phenomenon subject to structural and analytical description. On the other hand, the Mekhitarist translational experience — with its pronounced philological and cultural dimensions — demonstrates that translation issues are not limited to mere linguistic substitutions; they are perpetually linked to the aesthetic, historical, and cognitive demands of a given culture.

In this sense, for the Mekhitarists, translational fidelity encompasses not only lexical or semantic correspondence but also an endeavor to reproduce the stylistic, emotional, and cultural layers of the source text. Consequently, a comparative examination of these two traditions enables the synthesis of linguistic schematism with intuitive-aesthetic interpretations, viewing translation as a multi-layered process in which linguistic, cultural, and philological factors are inherently interconnected.

Representatives of linguistic translation theory define ‘translation’ in broadly similar terms, focusing on the invariance of content. According to Barkhudarov, “translation is the process of transforming a text produced in one language into a text in another language while preserving the content plan, that is, the meaning” (Barkhudarov 1975: 11). This definition treats translation as a linguistic transformation in which semantic equivalence is primary. With the same underlying logic but a broader emphasis, Retsker maintains that “the translator's task is to convey by means of one

language the complete and accurate content of the original, preserving its stylistic and expressive features” (Retsker 2007: 10). Here, aesthetic correspondence is added to semantic accuracy as a requirement.

These theoretical positions are functionally consonant with Bagratuni’s reflections on fidelity. Although he does not formulate his claims in later theoretical terminology, he proposes nearly identical criteria. In his view, translation must not be limited to the transfer of surface meanings. A complete translation should preserve the exactness and precision of the author’s ideas and convey subtle meanings and emotional nuances without unnecessary additions or omissions. For Bagratuni, the reproduction of the original’s “loftiness” and “splendor” is primary: what should be visible in the translation is the author’s work rather than the translator’s self-expression (Vergilius Maro 1847: 9–10). Thus, like Barkhudarov, Bagratuni demands strict preservation of meaning, and like Retsker, he emphasizes full content together with stylistic-expressive features.

To transmit fully the emotional layers and stylistic features of the source text, it becomes necessary to treat the word as a complex system of information. According to Vinogradov, the informative structure of the word includes two main types of information: linguistic and extralinguistic (Vinogradov 2001: 51–52). Mekhitarist translation practice shows that their aim was to reproduce not only intralinguistic content but also layers of extralinguistic information. From this perspective, Bagratuni’s requirement for “perfect precision of thoughts and flawless clarity” is comparable to the objective of conveying denotative information (Vergilius Maro 1847: 9). At the same time, he insists that translation quality also depends on preserving the connotative — emotional and expressive — layer. Bagratuni maintains that a full-fledged translation must reproduce both elevated style and emotional impact, which constitute an inseparable part of the author’s individuality. According to him, translation quality depends on precise rendering of subtle meanings and feelings, preventing the dominance of the translator’s own style. In methodological terms, this may correspond to Vinogradov’s concept of extralinguistic information (Vinogradov 2001: 25–27), which includes aesthetic and associative components. Bagratuni’s translation of Virgil suggests that he deliberately employed the resources of Classical Armenian (Grabar) to reproduce stylistic features of Latin. What the Mekhitarist theorist describes as preserving stylistic force and nuance may, in Soviet linguistic terms, be interpreted as reproducing the informational structure of the word, where stable semantic content is interwoven with emotive-expressive and pragmatic values (Vergilius Maro 1847: 9–11).

The concept of fidelity occupies a central place in Bagratuni’s exposition; within linguistic theory, this concern is elaborated through the mechanisms of equivalence and adequacy. Komissarov considers a translation adequate if it fulfills the pragmatic goals of the translation act, achieves the highest possible level of equivalence for that purpose, does not violate the norms and usage of the target language, and preserves the genre and stylistic features of the text. He considers a translation equivalent if it reproduces the content of the source-language text at any level of equivalence (Komissarov 1990: 233–234).

Komissarov's five-level model of equivalence (communicative purpose, description of the situation, description of the message, the meaning of linguistic signs, and syntactic structure) (Komissarov 1990: 51-69, 70-91) makes it possible to see that the Mekhitarists on the basis of their rich experience prioritized the higher levels of equivalence. Bagratuni's requirement to preserve the "perfect accuracy of the thoughts" (Vergilius Maro 1874: 9) is comparable to the first and second levels (communicative purpose and situation). At the same time, his insistence on preserving the "arrangement of the thoughts" indicates attention to further levels as well, including syntactic structure and the level of linguistic signs.

From this point of view, Bagratuni's position is clear: his argument implies an understanding of both the concepts of "equivalence" and "adequacy," and he does not accept one without the other. Addressing the translation of verse, Bagratuni observes that the need to preserve metrical structure sometimes compels the translator to resort to additions or reductions. However, he sets an important condition: any change must arise from the logic of the original and must not contradict the accuracy and beauty of the author's thought (Vergilius Maro 1847: 9-11). From the perspective of Soviet translation theory, this can be interpreted as maintaining a balance among different levels of equivalence — situational, communicative, and syntactic. Accordingly, preservation of form (metrical pattern) should not undermine content adequacy, and added elements should be understood as a motivated development of the original thought rather than as foreign insertions (Vergilius Maro 1847: 9-32).

Unlike Bagratuni, Ghazikian avoids abstract claims and prefers to speak through examples. In addition to identifying "errors" and "inaccuracies" in Tiroyan's translation, he grounds his criticism in interlingual observations through direct comparison of the original and translation. His methodology is effectively close to what Soviet translation studies describe as contextual analysis. As noted above, his third type of inaccuracy concerns stylistic inadequacy, while the first two — addition and omission — correspond to recognized types of translation transformations. Ghazikian also identifies problems related to other transformations, such as transposition and substitution. His critical observations show that he regarded translation as a series of linguistic operations in which semantic development and structural substitution serve faithful reproduction of the spirit of the original. He emphasizes that the translator must avoid mechanical literalism and prioritize the internal patterns of the target language — a stance that aligns with and can be mapped onto Barkhudarov's transformational model. This perspective confirms that the Mekhitarists, through their observations on the "nature of language," essentially propose approaches similar to those found in the theory of interlingual transformations, where the substitution of linguistic units is performed to preserve semantic and stylistic invariance (Barkhudarov 1975: 191-231; Nazariantz 1912: 31-49).

In the Mekhitarists' translation concept, the rendering of *realia* also occupies a significant place. In Soviet translation studies, this is classified as part of extralinguistic information, whose reproduction often requires descriptive translation or transcription. The Mekhitarists, as representatives of a multilingual and multicultural environment, frequently employed domestication, using the vocabulary of Classical Armenian (Grabar) to make Greco-Roman cultural concepts accessible to the Armenian reader.

This process, which Shveitser (1988) and Komissarov (1990) describe as pragmatic adaptation, was elevated by the Mekhitarists to a high level of philological craft. The notes and commentaries they provided alongside their translations may be regarded as an additional informational layer of the translated text, compensating for linguistic non-equivalence. This again indicates that the Mekhitarist school treated translation as a systemic phenomenon in which meaning is not confined to linguistic signs alone but extends to cultural and historical contexts.

In this context, it should be emphasized that although translation studies has been enriched in recent decades by new concepts — such as the communicative approach (Nida 1964), Skopos theory (Reiss and Vermeer 1984; Nord 1988), and the hermeneutic model (Steiner 1975) — linguistic translation studies has not lost its relevance. As a schematized school of thought, it continues to serve as a foundation for subsequent theoretical developments, since any cultural or pragmatic analysis is, first and foremost, grounded in the linguistic realization of the text (Matyushin 2024).

The relevance of the linguistic paradigm is largely conditioned by its connection to long-standing translational experience. This circumstance allows the Mekhitarist heritage to be viewed not as an isolated historical phenomenon, but as a translational practice that can be integrated into contemporary theoretical discussions. From this perspective, it can be suggested that certain approaches in linguistic translatology provide an opportunity to describe and systematize, in a new light, principles that were present in various forms within the Mekhitarists' translational practice. At the same time, this does not imply that the Mekhitarists' activities were shaped within the logic of linguistic translatology or that they directly prefigured subsequent theoretical models. Rather, it concerns certain functional and methodological parallels between approaches formed under different socio-historical conditions.

In this regard, the comparative examination of Mekhitarist translational principles and the Soviet linguistic school does not aim to present them as a single unified or continuously evolving theoretical system. Instead, it is an attempt to reveal, through comparative analysis, how translational approaches formed in different historical and epistemological environments can respond to similar problems. Linguistic theory is viewed here not as the 'scientific culmination' or 'validation' of the classical philological tradition, but as one of the possible analytical tools through which the Mekhitarists' experience-based observations can be described more systematically, while preserving their historical and cultural peculiarities.

Thus, one of the primary points of comparison between the Mekhitarists and the Soviet school can be seen in the problem of functional-stylistic equivalence. While linguistic translatology offers specific tools for the analysis of textual layers, the Mekhitarist tradition provides concrete examples of interpreting these issues. This comparison allows translation to be viewed not merely as a relationship between linguistic systems, but as a process involving cultural, aesthetic, and cognitive challenges. From this viewpoint, linguistic translatology can be perceived as one of the possible modes of analyzing the classical philological tradition, without the pretension of replacing it or subsuming it into a single theoretical system.

4. Conclusion

This study makes it possible to consider the Mekhitarist translation tradition and Soviet linguistic translation studies as distinct, yet in certain respects comparable, approaches within the history of translation thought.

An examination of the tradition of Soviet translation studies alongside the Mekhitarists' translation practice, commonly characterized as humanistic-philological, reveals a number of points of intersection. The Mekhitarists' principles of "closeness to the original" and "stylistic propriety" may be interpreted not only as aesthetic preferences, but also as approaches that, on an analytical level, are comparable to the theoretical formulations of equivalence and adequacy developed within Soviet linguistic translation studies.

Bagraturi's observations concerning semantic precision and the transmission of emotional nuances may be interpreted in light of such theoretical propositions as those advanced by Barkhudarov and Retsker. Similarly, Vinogradov's concept of the informational structure of the word may serve as an analytical framework through which the Mekhitarists' approach to the semantic multilayeredness of the translated unit can be interpreted. This makes it possible to examine their consistent efforts to reproduce not only the denotative, but also the connotative and background layers of the source text, which may be viewed as conscious attempts to ensure translational equivalence.

An examination of Ghazikian's critical observations suggests that the assessment of translation quality within the Mekhitarist school was grounded in a systematic analysis of errors and inaccuracies arising from translation practice itself. His distinction between "errors" and "inaccuracies," as well as his detailed discussion of additions and omissions, is functionally comparable to the analytical approaches formulated in various branches of linguistic translation studies, including the Soviet school.

The Mekhitarists' translation experience represents material shaped by the practical resolution of translational problems, whereas linguistic translation theory provides methodological tools for the structural description of comparable material. From this perspective, the comparative examination of Soviet translation studies and the Mekhitarist translation tradition constitutes an attempt to demonstrate that the solutions proposed for translational problems may reveal certain functional and methodological similarities that make it possible to theorize translation strategies found within different historical and cultural paradigms.

Overall, this comparative perspective may contribute to the view that linguistic translation studies do not replace the classical philological tradition, but rather offer one possible means of analyzing it. Such an approach makes it possible to regard the Armenian translation tradition as a complex and intellectually grounded practice capable of entering into contemporary theoretical discussions while preserving its historical and methodological autonomy.

The observations presented here may serve as a basis for further research, suggesting possible directions for further research in the history of Armenian translation thought from new theoretical and methodological perspectives.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

Ethics Statement

The author(s) confirm that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal’s Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.