
The Sociology of Translation: A New Research Domain

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Introduction

The sociology of translation has been a domain of study since the 1990s. Sociology approaches translation as a social activity involving agents (such as authors, translators, editors, critics, literary agents, and government officials) and institutions (such as translation schools, literary and academic journals, publishing houses, translation prizes, and professional associations). It is practiced by agents – translators – endowed with some specific skills (linguistic, literary, academic, technical), under various material conditions (for profit or not) and status (from scholastic practice to profession). The sociology of translation addresses questions such as: Who are the translators? How is their practice shaped by cultural norms? Beyond the act of translating itself, how is translation organized as a profession? Under what conditions does the cultural transfer operate? As a social practice and a cultural product, translation can be more or less recognized and valued, from either a symbolic or an economic standpoint. Like other cultural products, it can be appropriated in different ways and fulfill different social functions. From the reception standpoint, the specificity of translation is that the translated text undergoes a double appropriation, first through the translating act, second through the act of reading (or listening).

As a social activity,¹ translation can be approached from diverse perspectives, and it raises interesting questions for different sociological domains: the sociology of professions; the sociology of culture; the study of international cultural exchanges;

social functions and fields – namely, the political field, the economic field (publishing) and the literary field; the social conditions of circulation of ideas; and the epistemology of the human and social sciences. Though these different aspects are sometimes related in practice, they will be presented separately for the sake of clarity.

Translation as a Profession

Like literature and other creative activities, translation offers a challenge to the sociology of professions (Freidson 1986). It is not a fully professionalized activity. For centuries, it was an intellectual activity, like commentary or criticism, and it is still often performed for free, as a calling or as a “hobby.” This may explain why the translator’s status has long been marginal, to the point of being “invisible” (Venuti 1995), while translation as an activity was often valued (Prunč 2007).

However, like other activities, translation has undergone a professionalization process in many places: as some translators began specializing in translation and making a living at it, they began to claim rights and decent wages; professional associations were created (for instance, the American Translators Association was founded in 1959), and professional schools of translation and interpretation were developed.

This process was neither linear nor irreversible, and it did not apply equally in different segments of the translation profession: interpreters and technical translators are much more professionalized than literary translators, not to mention translators of scholarly works, who are often academics translating occasionally, or even students. Professional recruitment and working conditions vary greatly: whereas professional training is required for interpreters and technical translators, there is no such requirement for literary or scholarly translators. Significantly, literary translators tend to gather in separate associations or to join societies of authors: in France, the Société des traducteurs (Society of Translators) was founded in 1947, and the Association des traducteurs littéraires (Association of Literary Translators) in 1973 (Heinich 1984). As remarked by some sociologists, the concept of professionalization has a teleological connotation and could appropriately be replaced by that of “professional development” (Abbott 1988).

The study of translators and interpreters as an occupational group is thus an emerging research domain which opens up to comparative approaches between countries and between different translational activities. It includes the study of translators’ social backgrounds, their struggles for professional status, their professional identity and self-image as translators (Sela-Sheffy 2010; Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger 2011). As Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger put it:

It is the contradiction between the potential power of translators and interpreters as cultural mediators, on the one hand, and their obscure professional status and alleged sense of submissiveness, on the other, that makes them such an intriguing occupational group. Their insecure status as a profession is especially paradoxical today, as so much

attention is being devoted to cross-cultural processes such as globalization, migration and trans-nationalism. (2011, 2–3)

Translation as a Cultural Practice: Interactionism vs. Field Theory

The working conditions of literary translators depend on the publishing industry, just as those of translators of movie subtitles depend on the film industry. The translator thus participates in the “chain of production” of works of art or cultural products, in Howard Becker’s terms (Becker 1982). Becker’s interactionist approach underscores the division of labor and collaboration in collective production of a work. The structural approach developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1993) with his field theory focuses on cultural hierarchies. In this regard, it is closer to the polysystem theory developed by Itamar Even-Zohar (1990).

In contradistinction to symbolic interactionism, methodological individualism, or network theory, which assume that social life emerges from interactions between individuals, both polysystem theory and field theory defend a holistic and relational approach to cultural and social phenomena, along the lines of Durkheimian sociology and cultural as well as structural anthropology: individual agents operate within a preexisting system of relations which determines and constrains their action, framing and limiting their possibilities and room for maneuver.² However, their common interests and similarities should not mask the differences between the two theories. First, the underlying paradigm of the systemic approach is functionalism, whereas that of Bourdieu’s social theory is sometimes described as genetic structuralism. Functionalism, in its biological inspiration, tends to consider systems as closed and relatively stable and equilibrated,³ whereas Bourdieu’s genetic structuralism lays stress on power relations and the constant struggles to destabilize them. This difference in paradigms, added to the different disciplinary origins of the two theories, has methodological consequences: born in literary studies, and inspired by the Russian formalists, the polysystem approach mainly focused on text analysis prior to the new orientation adopted with the integration of Bourdieu’s field theory. Rooted in sociology, the latter deals with the individual agents, groups, and institutions that compete for symbolic capital.

The concept of field implies that some activities are relatively autonomous, since they have their own rules, institutions, and specific capital, for which agents belonging to the field compete (Bourdieu 1993). These agents’ beliefs and practices, as well as their strategies, are informed, first, by their habitus, i.e. their cultural and ethical disposition and the kind of resources they possess (economic, cultural, and social capital) according to their family background, education, and social trajectory, and, secondly, by the position they occupy in the field according to their specific capital, newcomers being dominated by the established agents who control the field and define the orthodoxy (Bourdieu 1979, 1993).

Like polysystem theory in translation studies, Bourdieu's theory has inspired a whole current of research in the sociology of translation, and has also been combined with polysystem theory by Even-Zohar himself (1990, 3, 37) and by other scholars. Some scholars regard translation as a field in itself, in which agents compete for the symbolic capital (Gouanvic 2005; Sela-Sheffy 2005). Others consider this activity as not autonomous enough and more dependent on the field of publishing (Heilbron and Sapiro 2007; Sapiro 2008a; on the field of publishing, see Bourdieu 1977, 1999) and on the literary academic fields, since the very practice of translation borrows its values, norms, and rules from these fields. The translator is sometimes torn between fields, for instance between academic norms and publishing norms regarding translation, and this situation can engender conflicts within the chain of cooperation.

Using field theory makes it possible to understand not only how literary or academic translators accumulate symbolic capital, but also, conversely, what role translation (and some translators) play in the process by which literary works achieve international recognition: for an author, to be translated into another language is an important step in her career and a sign of consecration (Casanova 2002). The same phenomenon occurs in the human and social sciences, where translation still plays a major role in national and international academic recognition. Consequently, the number of translations of an author in different languages can be taken as an indicator of recognition (Sapiro and Bustamante 2009), and the most translated works constitute a world canon in literature or in philosophy (Milo 1984). However, the significance of translation is not the same in different languages, especially in English compared to the other languages, not only because of the wider audience for books originally written in English, but also because of the unequal power relations between cultures. These asymmetries are best described by the center-periphery model.

Center and Periphery: Asymmetrical Flows of Translation

The center-periphery model has proved powerful for describing the flow of translations among languages. The position of a language in the world system of translations can be defined according to the proportion of books translated from it, using the UNESCO *Index Translationum* database (Heilbron 1999). From this perspective, the system appears to be highly concentrated around the English language, which thus occupies a hypercentral position: in the 1980s, 45 percent of the translated books in the world were originally written in English. Translations from French, German, and Russian each represented 10 to 12 percent of this system until 1989; these languages could therefore be defined as central. With a share that varied from 1 to 3 percent of the system, a few languages occupied a semi-peripheral position (Italian, Spanish, Polish, Danish, Swedish, and Czech). All the other languages had a share of less than 1 percent of the system, and may thus be considered peripheral (on less translated languages, see Pym and Chrupala 2005). After 1989, Russian fell to 2.5 percent, while English reinforced its hypercentral position, its share having grown to 59 percent in

the 1990s. Thus, although globalization has increased intercultural exchanges in general and the number of translations in particular (+50 percent between 1980 and 2000), this intensification is not an expression of the diversification of exchanges, but of the higher concentration of translations around the English language (Sapiro 2008c). Another indicator of the unequal position of languages in the world system of translations can be found in circulation patterns: the chance for a work published in a peripheral language to be translated in another peripheral language depends greatly on its being first translated into a central language.

This asymmetry is in large part the expression of the concentration of the publishing industry in a few cities like New York, London, and Paris (Sapiro 2009a). However, it is not a mechanical reflection of the volume of book production in each country. It also depends on cultural and political factors, as illustrated by the decline of the share of translations from Russian after 1989. Furthermore, the variations one can observe between different categories of books reflect the relative autonomy of cultural fields: some languages, such as French, have long been endowed with a high literary capital in the World Republic of Letters (Casanova 1999). The symbolic capital accumulated by a culture in a discipline produces similar variations: German is overrepresented compared to English in philosophical translations, for instance (Sapiro and Popa 2008). To understand these variations, we need to consider the social functions of translation in different fields.

The Social Functions of Translation: Political, Economic, and Literary Fields

Translation is a social activity, the functions of which cannot be reduced to mediation or communication. Using Robert K. Merton's distinction between "manifest" and "latent" functions (1957), the latter referring to unrecognized or unintended consequences, one can regard mediation as the "manifest" function of translation, whereas its "latent" functions can ideally (in Max Weber's sense) be classified in three categories: political (or ideological), economic, and cultural. The relation between translation and these functions is not a necessary one. It depends on the categories of agents and institutions involved in the translation process: political organizations, government representatives, publishers, editors, persons in charge of foreign rights in publishing houses, literary agents, translators, authors, critics, commentators, and so on. These agents and institutions themselves belong to different fields (political, economic, or literary), some of them serving as intermediaries between these fields, for example publishers, literary agents, or government representatives of cultural policy.

Translation may serve political or ideological objectives; it can be a means to disseminate a doctrine or a vision of the world. The diffusion of propaganda material in translation by the occupying forces in an occupied country is an extreme example. Parties and political organizations have also contributed to the international circulation of works like those of Marx and Engels. The place and role of translation in

authoritarian contexts, namely in fascist and communist regimes, is a very active new area of research (Billiani 2007; on the German Democratic Republic, see Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2009; on fascist Italy, see Rundle 2010). The translation policies implemented by nation-states are usually part of a broader policy aiming at the promotion of their national culture abroad and, for the dominant ones, at strengthening their hegemony or influence (“soft power”). For instance, the United States State Department funded translations of major neoliberal thinkers in communist countries and, beginning in the 1990s, in Arab countries. In some countries, such as France, the Netherlands, or Israel, support for translation is bestowed on literary works as well, with no specific ideological objective except the promotion of the national culture abroad. Conversely, state translation policies regarding foreign works into local languages can serve educational or scientific objectives in order to maintain a certain level in international competition, or to fill a gap in a “developmental” perspective (sustained by the notion of “backwardness”), as exemplified by the case of Arab countries (Jacquemond 2009). The ideological issues at stake have effects on the translations themselves and on the practice of translating and interpreting, through censorship, self-censorship, or ideological orientation (see, for instance, Stahuljak 2010 on interpreting during the war in Yugoslavia). They have effects on circulation channels (illegal vs. legal) and on reception as well, as illustrated by the case of the importation and reception in France of literary works from eastern European countries during the communist period (Popa 2002, 2010).

Translation may also serve economic objectives, in the book market in particular. Although economic profit is not the only motivation of publishers, it underlies the very conditions of existence of trade publishing. Moreover, certain translations are undertaken only for the economic profit they are expected to provide. This is typically the case for best-sellers. Copyright law was initially intended to protect the economic interests of publishers by ensuring they had exclusive rights to the work during a period of time which has been progressively extended since the eighteenth century to today’s seventy-year span, after which the work falls into the public domain, meaning that new editions or translations of a work can be published and can coexist in the same market. The rise of agents who more or less specialized in international cultural exchanges can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century: news agencies played a role in these exchanges until the rise of literary agents, especially in the United States. They contributed to the progressive unification of a world market of translation, embodied by the multiplication of international book fairs during the globalization era (Sapiro 2009b).

Literary agents classify the lists of books they propose to publishers as “commercial” (or “very commercial”) as opposed to “upmarket.” The “upmarket” category refers to another kind of function, which is more cultural. Translation of “upmarket” literary or scholarly works is not always profitable, economically speaking, but it is invested with cultural, esthetic, or intellectual values. For a publisher, translating can be a way to accumulate symbolic capital (Serry 2002). Thus the study of translation can enrich the domain of the sociology of publishing, as well as the more established history of

publishing, which has long neglected translation. In his analysis of the “field of publishing,” Bourdieu (1977, 1999) distinguishes the pole of large-scale production, ruled by the law of the market and by the search for short-run profit (“shortsellers”), from the pole of small-scale production, where cultural, intellectual, or esthetic criteria prevail over economic considerations, and where investment in great works with the potential to become “classics” is conceived in terms of the long run. In the first case, translation fulfills above all an economic function for the mediators, while in the second, the importation process is determined by cultural motives, even though it can involve economic criteria.

Applying this model to the world market of translations implies analyzing the flow of translations not only from the standpoint of source and target languages but also according to genres, publishers, and series. A simple comparison of the number of languages represented in different series reveals a huge difference in linguistic diversity between these two poles (Sapiro 2008b, 2010): at the pole of large-scale circulation (best-sellers, mysteries, thrillers, romance novels), books originally written in English are dominant everywhere in the world, and compete with the production in the national languages of non-anglophone countries, whereas at the pole of small-scale circulation, especially in the literary upmarket sector, linguistic diversity is very high, due to the historical implications of print and literature in the building of national identities (Anderson 1991; Thiesse 1998). This is also the reason why translations of literary works are often regarded as a relevant source for learning about the culture in which they were originally produced. In this regard, translation has also played an important role in the reciprocal construction of national identities (for the cases of Brazil and Argentina, see Sorá 2003). Similarly, importing literary works is often a means for immigrant communities to maintain their identity and links with their original culture. Though globalization has reinforced the economic constraints that the pole of large-scale production imposes upon the pole of small-scale production, nation-states still play a crucial role in the world market of translation by providing financial aid for the “exportation” of national book production in translation and, in some cases, like that of France, also for the importation of foreign literary and scholarly works (Sapiro 2009a). In this context, translation has become a cultural and political cause advocated by translators allied to small publishers, to the PEN Club, and to some nation-states, in order to combat the expanding domination of the English language in the world and to promote cultural diversity through translation (Sapiro 2010).

Literary translations may also fulfill more specific functions in the literary field. Translated works have often been a source of inspiration for the renewal of literary models (Even-Zohar 1990) or for subverting the dominant literary norms in a national space (Casanova 1999). For instance, in the 1930s Sartre borrowed some literary devices from novels by Dos Passos and Faulkner which were being translated for the French publisher Gallimard and which he reviewed in Gallimard’s prestigious literary journal *La Nouvelle Revue française*. Moreover, in his attacks against the older French generation, he cited Anglo-American writers as a counter-example. Reception is thus

a process that can be studied sociologically, by analyzing the social properties and trajectories of the group of “importers,” as well as their position in the literary field (Wilfert 2002). This is also true of the reception of intellectual works, as described in the next section.

It should be noted that, in practice, the different functions evoked are often intertwined, engendering tensions among agents and sometimes in the decision process of a single agent torn between incompatible values: for instance, when the prestigious French publisher Gaston Gallimard began translating Faulkner’s novels in the 1930s, the books did not sell very well, but he nevertheless decided to continue publishing them in French because he believed in their literary value (Sapiro 2011).

The Social Conditions of the International Circulation of Ideas

In a parallel way to its role in disseminating literary works, translation plays an important role in the international circulation of ideas. Indeed, ideas do not circulate on their own; they are conveyed by agents and institutions, and may encounter many political, economic, and/or cultural obstacles (Sapiro 2012). Censorship is the most extreme example of a political obstacle, but a publisher’s decision-making process regarding whether or not to translate a book may also include ideological considerations. Although the circulation of printed matter has been liberalized in many countries in the world, publishers’ growing concern with profit to the detriment of intellectual criteria has engendered a form of economic censorship, which is a major obstacle to the free circulation of ideas today. Because of the additional costs involved in translation, books in translation suffer much more from this kind of censorship than books in the original language: publishers, including not-for-profit publishers such as academic presses, might decide not to undertake a translation just out of economic considerations, even if the book matches a given press’s intellectual criteria (on the evolution of Anglo-American academic presses, see Thompson 2005).

Cultural obstacles occur at various levels of the importation process. At the first level, the power relations between cultures can be an obstacle to the exchange between them, inasmuch as the dominant culture is usually more interested in exporting its ideas to the dominated one in order to reinforce its hegemony than in importing ideas produced in the dominated culture. The balance of power may vary, however, among different categories of books. While both German and French philosophy are endowed with high symbolic capital, American philosophy has been long disregarded in France and this has been an obstacle to the importation of pragmatism (Pudal 2012).

Furthermore, cultural obstacles frequently arise in the importation process itself. As Bourdieu (2002) argues, after Marx, “texts circulate without their context,” and this can be a source of misunderstanding. Texts are often appropriated in the transfer process to serve the interests and purposes of the importers in their own fields, whether ideological or intellectual, as illustrated by the introduction of Russian formalists

in France (Matonti 2009) or by the importation of John Rawls and theories of justice in France (Hauchecorne 2009). In the case of major works, a competition often takes place among different groups trying to appropriate them in order to legitimize their own approach: the reception of German sociologist Max Weber in the United States and in France is one example among many.

Epistemology of the Human and Social Sciences

Contradictory interpretations of a work are made possible because of linguistic ambiguities. Translation being in itself an interpretation, the risk of misunderstandings is much higher with translations. The semantic structures of different languages do not fully overlap, and this is of course a major problem for translation: the French word *esprit* translates in English as either “mind” or “spirit,” depending on the context, but there are cases when the context does not allow for a clear-cut decision, or when the use of either option would create an ambiguity. Moreover, there are many “untranslatable” concepts (Cassin 2004); the German concept of *Bildung* (“self-cultivation”) is one of them. Sometimes, a word used as a concept in one language does not exist in another: for example, there is no word in Hebrew corresponding to “distinction,” used by Bourdieu in his theory of the social space, since Jewish society did not have an aristocracy, and a word had to be created specifically for this purpose (based on the root of difference: *hitbadlut*).

However, the gap between languages is also a source of enrichment for critical thought, since it can force us to compare not only two linguistic systems but also two cultural systems, and subsequently to relativize our own categories of thinking. This is all the more true in the human and social sciences, which developed in close relation with the development of nation-states, and which borrow many concepts from common sense. For instance, the sociology of professions that arose in the United States in the interwar period was challenged by immigrant academics from Germany, who were unable to find an equivalent for the very notion of “professions” in the American sense (the German word *Beruf* means “vocation” or “calling”). This led them to revise some of the assumptions in this domain, which took for granted the special status bestowed on the professions in the United States, in particular their autonomy, while in central and eastern Europe they developed in the nineteenth century under the control of the state.

This example demonstrates that translation is much more than a means of mediation between cultures (in this case scholarly cultures): it is an intellectual practice with epistemological benefits which needs to be kept alive in order to prevent the routinization or standardization of critical thought. Consequently, though English is commonly used as a lingua franca in the academic world, multilingualism and translation are both crucial for the human and social sciences, whereas this is not the case for the natural sciences. And training in these disciplines should definitely include some experience in translation.

Conclusion

The sociology of translation is an emerging domain that has opened up many new avenues for field work focusing on the agents and institutions involved in the translation process and on the translation market. There is still much to be done from a comparative perspective on the professional development of translation as an occupation; on the social functions of translation in different cultural and political contexts; on the sociology of translation publishing; and on the reception process, where studies up to now have focused on criticism rather than on the reading experience.

Furthermore, more research should be undertaken in order to bridge the gap between the sociology of translation and the study of the norms and practices of translation (Toury 1995; Sapiro 2008b). One of the questions under consideration could involve the way the social characteristics of these agents influence their practice of translation: these characteristics include, on the one hand, all that is summarized in Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Simeoni 1998), and, on the other, their professional status and conception of their own practice. To illustrate the second aspect, it suffices to note that academics translating scholarly works are much keener to avoid betraying the original work and to contextualize it with regard to the source culture than are professional translators of mysteries or of children's literature, for whom the principle of adapting to the editorial and more broadly cultural expectations of the target culture prevails over the principle of being faithful to the original. Consequently, the sense of what a "good translation" is varies according to the domain and the genre, as well as according to the translator's habitus. The quality of a translation also implies an ethics of translation, around notions of accuracy, fairness, and ideology (Venuti 1998).

While sociology brings a new perspective to translation studies, translation, as an object, raises questions of broader sociological interest, as we have seen: about processes of professionalization and the legitimization or hierarchization of cultural practices and cultural products (including canon-building), about the sociology of publishing and the chain of production of literary works, about intercultural exchanges and the social conditions of circulation of symbolic goods and ideas, and about the epistemology of the human and social sciences.

SEE ALSO CHAPTER 7 (SALDANHA), CHAPTER 16 (LANE-MERCIER), CHAPTER 23 (MAZZEI), CHAPTER 32 (CONNOR), CHAPTER 33 (PORTER), CHAPTER 34 (HEIM)

NOTES

- 1 Translation is considered here in its specific meaning of linguistic translation, and not in the broader metaphorical sense used by some sociologists to describe the mediation process among intermediaries involved in an innovative project (cf. Latour 1991).
- 2 Attempts to apply other sociological theories (namely Niklas Luhmann's systems and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory) to translation can be found in Wolf and Fukari (2007).
- 3 Functional analysis can induce theoretical and methodological biases, as pointed out by

the great functionalist sociologist Robert K. Merton (1957): the temptation to regard cultural beliefs and practices as functional for society as a whole and for all the individuals composing it; the assumption that all cultural elements are functional; the confusion between

cultural elements and their function. Though polysystem theory avoids these kinds of biases thanks to its historical and dynamic approach, it still tends to interpret evolutions in terms of needs and functions (or "roles") rather than power relations and struggles.

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