

TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF TRANSLATION

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My general aim in this paper is to analyze the role translation plays in transmitting cultural information and values from one culture to another. It is clear that all contacts between different cultures involve the use of translation, but it is not always clear to what extent the translation process conditions such contacts. When two cultures come into contact, there may be a whole continuum of possible responses, ranging from a complete lack of communication (as presumably between the first white explorers and the native populations of America) to almost total understanding. From this perspective, the intent is to look at translation as an agent in intercultural dialogue and social change.

This paper first attempts to identify the possible contents of a sociology of translation, viz. a sociological approach to the study of translation as a type of social interaction. Clearly, translation is an important intellectual activity in any society, but it can take on different meanings and values depending on the specific social context. One of the most important social issues involved is the choice of texts to be translated, and from what foreign languages and cultures; this in turn is complicated by the types of relations existing between the two cultures that come into contact.

Translations may be made between languages that have equal dignity and status (French and English, for example) or between languages and cultures of very unequal status (English and Slovene, French and Xulu) on the international scene. When the two languages are of unequal status, the direction of translation changes the impact of the translation on the target culture; thus, a novel translated from Slovene into English for the U.S. market will not have the same impact in its target culture as the translation of a novel by a popular American writer into Slovene will have in the Slovene culture. Problems of cultural and linguistic dominance and hegemony need to be analyzed with some care.

Likewise, the purpose of the translation may determine both the method of translation and the potential importance for the target culture; thus, for example, a translation of the Bible from western languages into African languages is intended to serve as a vehicle for missionary activity, which may have potentially important social consequences in the African countries. On the contrary, the translation of African religious texts into western languages remains normally nothing more than a curiosity, a linguistic exhibit for

anthropologists, and has no appreciable effect on the western cultures. According to Newmark, one of the five purposes of translation is to "explain and clarify ethnic cultures and their differences" (Newmark 1993: 57).

Historically, translation has served as the vehicle for the transmission of cultural information from one society to another, and the modern world would be inconceivable without translation. The whole culture of the Renaissance was based on the translation of the Greek and Roman classics; modern western religion is entirely based on translations of the Bible.

Translation offers a good index of the degree of contact existing between different cultures, and its importance is likely to increase, rather than decrease, in the future, until and unless there is a single world language.

The sociology of translation thus should consider such issues as what is translated, between what languages (and cultures), when, and why. It is the target culture that determines the answers to these questions, and it is to the effects of translation on the target culture that one must look to realize the importance of the translating activity. As Dirk Delabastita points out, "translations turn out to be key texts allowing the scholar to detect the tensions and evolutionary tendencies *within* literatures and cultures and the mechanisms obtaining *between* different cultural systems" (Delabastita 1989: 193). They thus provide valuable insight for the sociologist and student of society in general;

the study of film translation — and of any other form of translation — is necessarily part of the analysis of the 'polysystem' of culture as a whole. [...] the study of translation contributes to an understanding of our cultures: their internal structures, their interrelations, their historical evolutions (Delabastita 1989: 210-211).

Translation does not take place in a vacuum, but is an integral part of a society's total culture, or polysystem, and both reflects and creates societal values.

A concise definition of this approach is found in the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, under the heading "Translation", where one finds the following statement:

Translating is an act (or a process) which is performed (or occurs) over and across systemic borders. In the widest of its possible senses it is a series of operations, or procedures, whereby one semiotic entity, which is a (functional) constituent (element) of a certain cultural (sub)system, is transformed into another semiotic entity, which forms at least a potential element of another cultural (sub)system, providing that some informational core is retained 'invariant under transformation', and on its basis a relationship known as 'equivalence' is established between the resultant and initial entities (Sebeok 1986: 1112-1113).

From another semiotic viewpoint, language can be considered as one type of "language-game" as defined by Wittgenstein; but, as Gorfée points out,

Though primarily language-based, language-games do not function in a social vacuum, but are inscribed in so-called 'forms of life'. A form of life is, according to Finch's definition, 'a pattern of meaningful behavior in so far as this is constituted by a group' (Gorfée 1994: 99).

Translation is thus related closely to cultural dynamics, to systems of social signification, to communication theory, and general theories of semantics and semiotics. It has clear links to sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics as well. The point has been made elsewhere that translation studies cannot help but take general cultural values and systemics into consideration; here the complementary thesis is also maintained: that no study of a cultural system can afford to ignore the phenomenon of translation.

From one point of view, the sociology of translation can be related to the issue of what some scholars have called the 'McDonaldization' of society. I am here referring to the massive amount of translation that is carried out at all levels and in all fields from American English into the other languages of the world. This has gone hand in hand with the exportation of American popular culture around the globe, and in many cases has been an indispensable element in the diffusion of this culture. The McDonaldization of the world does not take place only in fast food joints, but analogously also in the invasion of foreign markets (even supermarkets) by American comic books, magazines (such as *Reader's Digest*), videocassettes, and best sellers, not to mention the American soap operas and films that are dubbed and subtitled around the world. (To limit the scope of my remarks, I shall here ignore the translation of English-language technical and scientific texts, which could be the subject of another paper.)

While serious literature remains largely a local phenomenon, and the best American poets and writers may sometimes wait years to see their works appear in foreign editions (even today, for example, fine poets such as John Berryman and Robert Lowell remain little known in Italy, and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, considered one of the best post-war novels, remains untranslated into Italian), American products dominate popular culture around the world. Moreover, the English and Americans have practically a monopoly on three very popular types of mass literature: detective stories, science fiction (including fantasy) and romantic fiction (the *romanzo rosa*). Even a brief look at a newsstand (which is where probably most people in Italy today buy their books) will show that almost all the authors of these genres bear English names (with some notable exceptions, such as Simenon). This means, then, that most Italians spend most of their reading hours reading books that have been hastily and often badly translated from English. (Frequently, also lengthy cuts are made

in the original texts; since they are said to have no literary value, the texts are not considered worthy of respect.) It may be presumed that this massive consumption of translated texts will have certain consequences at various levels: (1) on the Italian language itself, since its syntax and vocabulary are likely to be bent to the exigencies of English; (2) on the development of an indigenous popular literature, which will be hindered by the predilection of publishers for foreign texts; moreover, any native attempt in these genres will be expected to follow the patterns established by the foreign 'masters'; (3) on popular taste and culture, moving mass attention away from local or national writers to writers belonging to the globally dominant culture; (4) and lastly, on people's perceptions of themselves and their world.

This last point may need a little clarification and elaboration. Foreign books obviously present a different society and culture, different ways of behaving and thinking. If a reader reads a foreign novel, he normally allows for this foreignness, and may become accustomed to it, while never accepting it as a normal sort of behavior for his or her own society. We may feel that the characters in Russian novels behave differently from the people we know, but this neither disturbs the verisimilitude of the novel we are reading nor upsets our own beliefs about how people should normally behave. The foreignness of the text is always present in our minds.

But what happens if our consumption of such texts becomes so massive that we cease to perceive the other culture as being foreign, that we even set it up as a model to be imitated, so that the behavior patterns it depicts should ideally become our own behavior patterns? At this point the McDonaldization — or planetary standardization — of popular culture begins. People regard the foreign culture as somehow better than their own — richer, freer, fuller — and hence become increasingly dissatisfied with their own lot. It does not matter that the society depicted in the pages of a romance is not true; it is nevertheless adopted as an ideal. It is thus likely that the massive consumption of American popular culture by Italians (etc.) will result in increasing alienation of the 'culturally colonized' peoples, who will never have the riches or resources available to the heroes of the trashy novels and soap operas.

It may also be pointed out that most of the elements of the modern popular mythology derive from English and American sources. The world's collective consciousness would be considerably different without such well-known icons as Peter Pan, Dracula, Mowgli, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Tarzan, or the whole mythology of the American West, with its cowboys and Indians; not to mention such world-famous cartoon characters as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Bugs Bunny, the Flintstones, etc. The enormous cultural impact of the Disney enterprise around the world cannot be underestimated.

In this connection, a word should be said about the impact of the translation of children's books. Thousands of children's books are translated from English into other languages; the reverse is rarely true. Again, these books impose an English or (mainly) American view of the world on readers at the youngest age. For example, Richard Scary's books for children are highly amusing and often well translated, but it should always be borne in mind (1) that the pictures remain unchanged in translation, so that the people and society depicted remain those of the original text; (2) the choice of material reflects the dominant interests of the hegemonic culture, which attempts to inculcate its values and ignores all other values. Let me give one example. Some years ago we bought a book for our children called *La Scuola*. It was translated from an American edition. The book described a typical day in the life of a child in an American school. My children, who were attending an Italian school at the time, found the book puzzling, because the type of environment described was totally different from any experience they had ever had of school. The school building was a one-story structure surrounded by a playground; their school was a three-story structure without a playground. The pupils were said to have recess, and eat lunch at school, and take an afternoon nap: all of which is foreign to the Italian idea of school (except, in some cases, lunch). The environment was multiracial, with mixed age groups, whereas their own experience was that of ethnic and age-group homogeneity. In this case, I was able to explain the differences by referring to my own experience of both cultures; but the effect on an unprepared young reader must have been rather alienating.

Somehow, however, in most discussions of topics such as this it tends to be forgotten that it is the translation process that makes all this possible. (Sometimes, the translations may even be technically very ingenious; the Disney company's dubbings in Italian, for example, are among the best ever made.) The responsibility, however, does not lie with the translator, who is nothing but a tool in the hands of the powerful, and who often has to work with few resources at his disposal, in a race against time, and for little money. (Newmark, however, does point out that a translator must assume some responsibility for the moral consequences of his work. See the exchange of letters between Sergio Viaggio and Peter Newmark in *Rivista Internazionale di Tecnica della Traduzione* n. 0 and n. 1, particularly RITT 1995: 12, 15, 19). It is the publishers and media moguls who decide what is to be translated and how, what cuts are to be made, and when and under what form the translations are to appear. These decisions are part of a general cultural policy, one which often has mere gain as its only end.

It is my proposal that such decisions — and their general social and cultural consequences — should be studied more closely. One could begin by collecting statistics regarding which types of books are translated, and from what

languages. One could then proceed to conduct in-depth surveys of who reads what, and how such reading influences self-perception. If history is any guide, what a given society chooses to translate at any given time provides a clue as to the sort of society it is about to become.

Edward Sapir makes a distinction between three different uses of the word "culture". In its first meaning, it is the received or traditional heritage of the elite class, handed down from generation to generation. It thus corresponds to "cultivation" (Sapir 1994: 25). Sapir remarks: " 'Culture', so defined, implies a standard pertaining to an individual or group. To be 'a man of culture' involves participation in special social values clustering around tradition" (Sapir 1994: 24). The second sense of the word is the German 'Kultur', which "somehow embraces the idea of the *geist* of a people, the underlying soul or spirit" (Sapir 1994: 30). The third is the anthropological idea of culture, which regards "all those aspects of human life that are socially inherited, as contrasted with those types of behavior that are biologically inherited and with those that (represent) individual reactions lacking historical continuity" (Sapir 1994: 34-35). Each of these conceptions of culture is, of course, problematical, but they provide a convenient frame of reference for some remarks on the place of translation in the formation of culture in general.

It is clear that translation is part of the anthropological conception of culture, as it is socially acquired behavior. What is more interesting, and what Sapir's distinctions enable us to see with some clarity, is that translation may be a culturally subversive activity. (1) Translation disrupts "culture" in its first sense, for translated works are not part of the culture of a gentleman and may even challenge the assumptions and behavior models inculcated by that culture. Translated works rarely become part of the tradition (in English literature, only very few translations have been accepted and assimilated; the most important, of course, is the King James Version of the Bible, followed by Pope's translations of Homer and a few others). If a translated work does become part of the tradition, i.e. part of the "culture", it will inevitably change that culture to some extent. Some foreign works may become a part of the tradition even if no specific translation of them does. One may think, for example, of Tolstoy or Ibsen, who are widely accepted and read even though no single translation remains prominent.

(2) Translation is sometimes a violation of "culture" in the second sense; that is, it may tend to undermine, or may be felt to undermine, the *Geist* or spirit or genius of the people who are supposed to receive it. Therefore, the translated work may be rejected for ideological reasons; perhaps it will not even be translated, or if it is, the reviews will be bad, etc. Victor Hugo remarked: "When you offer a translation to a nation, that nation will almost always look on the translation as an act of violence against itself" (in Lefevre 1992: 18).

Racine has always been felt to be too French to be really accepted by the English; viceversa, the French have often considered Shakespeare barbaric and uncouth. Dante's Catholicism has undoubtedly limited his popularity in England.

Lefevere comments:

Not all features of the original are, it would seem, acceptable to the receiving culture, or rather to those who decide what is, or should be acceptable to that culture: the patrons who commission a translation, publish it, or see to it that it is distributed. The patron is the link between the translator's text and the audience the translator wants to reach. If translators do not stay within the perimeters of the acceptable as defined by the patron [...], the chances are that their translation will either not reach the audience they want it to reach or that it will, at best, reach that audience in a circuitous manner (Lefevere 1992: 7).

At a political level, examples are legion. The Soviets idolized the American left-wing or Communist writers, even ones (like Sinclair Lewis or Jack London) whose literary value was scarce. By contrast, the West amplified the merits of Solzhenitsyn more for political than for literary reasons.

Likewise, the Italian translations of American authors in the first half of the 20th century were often viewed as part of the attempt at a renewal of Italian literature and society in general. Many of these translations were undertaken by writers associated with the Communist party, and their choice of authors to translate often reflected their social interests. Their particular reading of American literature and history tells us much about the political and social climate in which they worked. They exalted writers who fit into their anti-Fascist political agenda and their stereotype of the American writer as one untainted by the rhetoric and intellectual ballast of the European tradition. American writers were supposed to be 'fresh', barbaric and revolutionary. Those who, like Henry James or Ezra Pound, did not fit into this category were simply ignored. Thus more attention was paid to Edgar Lee Masters than to any other American poet of the time.

In a mirror-like fashion, the Americans have given little attention to left-leaning foreign literature; for example, when Elsa Morante's *La Storia* came out in America, it was almost ignored by the press and public. But this may also have happened because of the Americans' almost total absorption with themselves and their own culture. As the absolute masters of the world's popular culture — and in their own estimation also the world's masters in every other type of culture — they feel little inclined to accept foreign elements, as their motley society is already believed to contain every possible ingredient. But some intellectuals whose program it is to pierce through this smugness propose to use subversive translation to further their political agenda. It is clear that translation

can be used for these ends; it is also clear that the subversive elements can be exalted even more by giving a certain type of translation, one which attempts to emphasize and 'forefront' the foreignness of the text. An important proponent of translation as a vehicle of cultural difference is Lawrence Venuti, who writes:

translation is a cultural practice that occupies a tactical position today, privileged by recent international developments. [...] Consequently, it becomes essential to recognize that translation in its many aspects — from the selection of foreign texts to the implementation of discursive strategies to the reviewing and teaching of translations — wields enormous power in the construction of national identities and hence can play an important geopolitical role. The most useful form this recognition can take is the elaboration of the theoretical, critical, and textual means by which translation can be studied and practiced as the locus of difference (Venuti 1992: 13).

And, whether or not translation is deliberately intended to be subversive of the receiving culture, it does contribute to the evolution and transformation of that culture, though such change may occur only very gradually. As Sapir remarks,

Culture never somersaults; the process of reinterpretation is gradual. The technique of assimilation (must require a certain) preparedness, (on the part of) the receiving culture, to accept new things; selection (of the elements to be absorbed); and integration (of the new traits) with something old and already ingrained (Sapir 1994: 98-99).

Translation, by fostering contacts between different cultures, aids in the development of new cultural processes and products, and works against cultural stagnation. If, as Toynbee asserts, the progress of civilization is due mainly to the mingling of different peoples and cultures, the role of translation in the general evolution of world culture must be important indeed.

Translation permits communication across borders, between different cultures; without translation, communication between different cultures would be seriously impeded, if not completely prevented. But translation is not a neutral process; it has certain social, psychological and even moral implications:

Translation has to do with authority and legitimacy and, ultimately, with power, which is precisely why it has been and continues to be the subject of so many acrimonious debates. Translation is not just a 'window opened on another world,' or some such pious platitude. Rather, translation is a channel opened, often not without a certain reluctance, through which foreign influences can penetrate the native culture, challenge it, and even contribute to subverting it (Lefevre 1992: 2).

Lefevre is surely right when he urges that

Translation needs to be studied in connection with power and patronage, ideology and poetics, with emphasis on the various attempts to shore up or undermine an existing ideology or an existing poetics (Lefevere 1992: 10).

It is unlikely that professional translators or translation theorists will be able to undertake such a study, however; they have not got the analytical tools available to the sociologist, who is versed in data collection and statistical analysis. Translators can, however, offer insights drawn from cultural history and cultural geography, and extend an invitation to sociologists to undertake a collaborative study of the social, cultural and political implications of translation in the modern world. It is to be hoped that sociologists will take them up on the offer.

The direction of translation is socially important, and so is the choice of texts. In the modern world, the main direction is from English into other languages, particularly in the fields of popular literature, films, television programs and cartoons. One consequence of this may be that the whole world-wide popular consciousness may be colonized by the English and American pop culture machine, leaving space for local or national cultures only at the level of serious literature. This will inevitably have certain social and linguistic consequences. In the interests of cultural pluralism, it would be advisable to encourage the development of more local or national products and also increase the number of translations from other languages into English. Every culture is worthy of respect; every society has its own tradition and its own *Geist*. It would be a pity if translators were to be seen as trampling on the spirit of any culture in the world.

In the opinion of Peter Newmark, the future of translation theory is likely to include applied studies also in the field of the sociology of translation and comparative cultural studies (Newmark 1993: 159). It is to be hoped that such studies will serve to illumine the relations between different cultures and social systems. As he remarks: "When translation is equated with enlightenment and humanity, its stature will be acknowledged" (Newmark 1993: 176).

I should like to end by quoting Goethe:

That is how we should look upon every translator: he is a man who tries to be a mediator in this general spiritual commerce and who has chosen it as his calling to advance the interchange. Whatever you may say about the deficiencies of translation, it is and remains one of the most important and dignified enterprises in the general commerce of the world. [...] Every translator is a prophet among his own people (in Lefevere 1992: 25).

A prophet bringing good tidings, let us hope, in the attempt to increase understanding and further the dialogue between different cultures.

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