The symbolic power of academic translator training institutions: The case of the Translation Studies Department at Istanbul University

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ABSTRACT

Translation teaching, which is supposed to bridge "the theory" and "the profession", is often attacked by practitioners for its passivity and inertia. This critical attitude is seen in Turkey too, within the scope of various arguments. Yet, those who criticise academia seem to forget that translator training as an institutionalised academic activity has the power to change certain "malpractices" in the translation marketplace. In this study, we focused on the problems of the Turkish translation market and the symbolic power of the Translation Studies Department at Istanbul University in struggle with them. We used examples from our contribution to several initiatives on institutionalism and professionalism in literary and technical fields of translation/interpreting. Our contribution is primarily based on a descriptive approach aiming to collect the empirical data on the subjects to bring the related parties together in order to be able to discuss the issues from all points of view. We hope to have created a positive interaction as such, which has improved the translation practice and led to some changes in our country's translation market place for the better.

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation Studies (TS) as an independent academic discipline has made much progress in conceptualising its "subject-matter" (i.e. translation in all its components) with insightful studies and papers by pioneering TS scholars. The direc-

tion in translation research today seems to move towards interdisciplinarity and various emerging types of translation. This approach provided us with a wider theoretical framework and a large pool of concepts borrowed from neighbouring disciplines. But as we all know, borrowing concepts from other disciplines requires a comprehensive knowledge of the theoretical frameworks and the historical contexts behind the theories in question. If we fail to understand the concepts which seem to be useful in defining our cases adequately, the arguments to be based on them may also fail.

In this paper, we aim to discuss the role of academic translator training institutions in making the profession more visible and contributing to the resolution of some of the fundamental problems related to translation in society at large. To be able to describe our case, we borrowed some concepts from the field of sociology, namely the concepts of "symbolic power", "action network" and "symbolic interactionalism". Our discussion is based on our own experience as scholars of Istanbul University's Translation Studies Department actively collaborating with certain actors in the Turkish translation marketplace who are facing the following problems:

– the problematic status of the translation profession;
– the devaluing misperception of translation as an activity which can be exercised by anyone who knows a source language on top of his/her mother tongue;
– the lack of a professional organisation which represents translators and seeks to safeguard their intellectual property;
– the gap between TS scholars and practitioners;
– unfavourable working conditions (working hours, low rates) and the lack of standardised working agreements;
– the financial crisis in the publishing industry;
– the exploitation of student translators in the translation marketplace;
– translation plagiarism, which turned out to be a "tradition" in our country especially in the translation of classical works.

While some of the above problems, such as the problematic status of the profession, poor working conditions, the lack of legal regulations and the gap between TS scholars and practitioners, can be defined as common issues all over the world, others, such as plagiarism, the special status of the publishing industry and the exploitation of student translators in the translation marketplace, can be listed as local, i.e. national, problems.

In the process of defining our approach, we decided to take up translation sociology as a sub-research area of TS and made extensive use of Andrew Chesterman's works on the issue. Chesterman (2006: 11) discusses translation sociology from various conceptual points of view and maps out the main regions of trans-

1 Chesterman does not explicitly mention the role of translator training institutions in the sociological context in the process of professionalization probably because of the problematic status of the "profession" itself and the lack of concrete relations and cases. He mentions the "pedagogical assessment" of translations in Memes of Translation though, under the title of "Translation as Theory" (2000: pp. 138-142).

lational spatial contexts in addition to textual context as follows:[1]
– cultural context: focus on values, ideas, ideologies, traditions etc.
– sociological context: focus on people (especially translators), their observable group behaviour, their institutions etc.
– cognitive context: focus on mental processes, decision-making etc.

In an insightful paper titled "Bridge concepts in translation sociology", Chesterman states that "sociological research includes such topics as the translation market, the role played by the publishing industry and other patrons or agents, the social status and roles of translators and the translator's profession, translation as a social practice, and what Toury called the translation event" (Chesterman 2007: 173). This line of research focuses mainly on people and their observable actions, based on the idea that "if translation sociology places people centre-stage, and uses a causal model, it can also highlight genuine human agency and give space to the translator's subjectivity". Chesterman (2007: 175) further states that the "social level of translation" can be linked to "the Aristotelian concept of the final cause", i.e. "the skopos (translator's aim to earn a living; client's requirements)". He discusses similar translational problems from the point of view of translation ethics in another work titled *Memes of Translation*
– even if he does not explicitly mention the role of academic translator training institutions in the process of making the profession visible (Chesterman 2000: 169-170).

If we accept translation sociology as a sub-field of TS research, then we, as staff members of an academic institution, might contribute to existing research by describing our experiences with concepts borrowed from sociology and reaching certain conclusions about the role of translator training institutions in the process of professionalism. Since academic institutions create the opportunity – via their staff members and relations with the outside world of professional practice – to collaborate as "action networks", they might exercise a symbolic power in improving the existing situation.

In Turkey, translator training dates back to the beginning of the 1980s. Currently, translator training programs are available at 12 state and 14 private universities. Our Department was established in 1993 on the initiative of the German Division. In 2000, English and French Divisions were added to the Department. Our Department has always been open to developing relations with the professional organisations and the academic staff acted as the founding members of almost all of the associations that will be exemplified here. This is mainly because our staff members are basically practicing translators themselves who are aware of the importance of establishing links with the translation marketplace through traineeships and developing the standards and working conditions of the profession both for their own benefit as practitioners as well as for their students', i.e. the future translators. This point seems to be in accord with the study carried out by the prominent TS scholar David Katan on "translator/interpreter profiles as subjective models of reality" and its impact on "teaching for the profession" (Katan 2010).

2. Our situation

2.1 Relations with professional organisations

Professional organisations of translators started to appear in Turkey quite late, i.e. at the end of the 1990s. This seems natural, though, when we think of the problematic status of the profession and the delay in the establishment of the academic translator training institutions as late as the 1980s. The professional associations of translation that we will mention to describe our current situation are the Translation Association (founded 1999), the (Literary) Translators' Society (2006) and the Association of Translation Companies (2008).

2.1.1 The Translation Association (CEVIRI DERNEGI)

The Translation Association was founded in 1999 with the purpose of bringing together all the parties in the world of translation in Turkey as a result of a series of meetings held on the initiative of a group of TS scholars and translation company owners. The Translation Association is a member of FIT (International Federation of Translators). Our relations with the Translation Association include many activities, ranging from workshops and seminars to civil society initiatives such as running and contributing to national and international campaigns against violations of translators' rights and the celebration of the International Translation Day each year (Sep. 30th) by honouring a Turkish translator with membership in gratitude for his/her services in the field (see www.ceviridernegi.org for more about the Association).

The series of academic activities held in cooperation with the Translation Association started with the meeting titled "Being a Translator in Turkey" (2001).[2] The international colloquium[3] organised by Istanbul University in cooperation with the Translation Association and FIT, which accompanied the FIT Annual Board Meeting prior to it, was a good example of the cooperation between academia and civil society serving the ends of promoting both the profession itself and its academic training.

One of the rare examples of the cooperation between the state, civil society and the university is the Voluntary Relief Interpreting project (Afette Rehber Çevirmenlik/ARC) which was also started at the end of 1999 following the devastating earthquake in the Marmara Region in Turkey. The group was initially

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[2] See Eruz (2003: pp. 134-144) for a list of academic activities held by our Department along with a discussion of the importance of cooperation with the sector and the civil society in academic translator training.

[3] International Colloquium of Translation: Translation in all its Aspects with Focus on International Dialogue, Oct. 19-21, 2009.

formed by the students and scholars of Istanbul University, who were also active in the foundation of Translation Association. The ARC Commission was formed within the Association in order to be able to sign a protocol with the Governorate of Istanbul, Directorate of Civil Defence. The protocol was signed in April 2001 to facilitate the mobilisation of voluntary interpreters to be embedded with the foreign search-rescue and relief teams at times of disasters such as earthquakes.

In this triangular model of cooperation, the university represented the aspect of training in keeping with its universal role of serving the public through informing and raising awareness.

Articles and academic publications by ARC members on the theoretical background and the practices of the group represented still another social contribution by academia in terms of observing, describing and explaining the phenomena for public service and use in community interpreting settings.[4]

2.1.2 The (Literary) Translators' Society (CEVBIR)

The foundation of CEVBIR is a good example of an academic contribution to "professionalization". The initiative of literary translators began in 2004 with the creation of a virtual community through an e-mail group which was formed with the aim of discussing the problems of literary translators and finding solutions through group synergies. The initiators of the group were professional literary translators who compiled the e-mail addresses of translators through several electronic sources in the publishing industry. When we received invitations to join the group, those who invited us probably did not know that we were also working as TS academics in the field of translator training, i.e. a group they had some negative opinions on. These opinions were eventually revealed in the e-mail group on several occasions.

The e-mail discussion group finally decided to found an association of translators to protect the literary translators' property rights. At that point, in 2005, we organised a *Forum* at our university to discuss the "professional problems" of translators who worked in all domains of translation: from literary translation, interpreting and subtitling to technical translation. *The Translators' Forum* created a forum for discussion for people that until then did not even want to know of each other. We can say that we played a key role in bringing together all the parties which were trying to solve translators' professional problems on their own.

CEVBIR[5] was founded in 2006 and is a member of CEALT (European Council of Literary Translators' Associations). As soon as the Society was founded we started to organise activities together with the professional translators in

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[4] See Bulut & Kurultay (2001) for the status and the role of Translation Association in the process of the foundation of Disaster and Emergency Interpreting Volunteers as an example of the collaboration between the academy and the State; also see Doğan, Bulut, Kahraman (2005) for the sociological aspects of disaster interpreting as a type of Community Interpreting.

[5] For more information see www.cevbir.org.

CEVBIR in order to discuss the problems of translation and translators, which gave us a chance to get to know one another better. The prejudices began to disappear. In those years, the biggest issue in the sector was translation plagiarism, which was seen as an editorial practice in the translation of the classical canon. A group composed of TS scholars and professional translators worked together to report on this malpractice in all its components and published papers on some of the cases that were taken to tribunals.

We organised a major meeting in 2006 to discuss translation ethics. We invited academics, professional literary translators and representatives of professional organisations. This created a new occasion for us to take the issue of translation plagiarism to newspaper columns and literary magazines. A volume of *Proceedings* (Parlak 2008) was produced so as to serve as an academic guide for future research on the subject.

CEVBIR has working committees for different issues, as is the case in all professional organisations. We have taken part in these committees and organised further meetings, seminars and colloquiums which gave us the chance to break the ice and bridge the gap between academia and the profession.[6] The gap had already been bridged from our point of view, but we needed to know what the practitioners thought about the situation. That is why we sent a questionnaire to the members of CEVBIR in preparation for the present paper.[7]

The answers to the questionnaire revealed that the gap was now narrower and the professional translators appreciated our participation in the group. They seemed to draw a sharp distinction between our group and other academics, though. They were waiting for an initiative on our part to bridge the gap with them and other translator training institutions. Our initiatives seem to have helped change their minds about academia. They began to see our students as their "future colleagues" and decided to change the charter of the Society to include student translators and others who work in translation fields subject to property rights, such as subtitle writers and drama translators. They still think, though, that they do not need to be acquainted with translation theories in order to translate and that academic training is not necessary for literary translators.

[6] To bridge this gap, CEVBIR (The (Literary) Translators' Society/ Kitap Cevirmenleri Meslek Birligi) held a series of meetings on the status and the improvement of the interaction between academics and practitioners. The first meeting of the series was initiated by Turgay Kurultay (January 2008), followed by a forum with the participation of Alev Bulut and Bilal Colgecen based on an internet dialogue between the two upon the introductory review of Emma Wagner and Andrew Chesterman's *Can Theory Help Translators?* (a dialogue between a practitioner and a theoretician) on the Forum page of CEVBIR by Alev Bulut.

[7] The following are the questions included in the questionnaire: 1. Do you think that academic translator training is necessary for literary translators? 2. Do you think that academic translation training is necessary for literary translators? 3. Do you think that translation theories are useful to translate? 4. Do you think that academics have played an active role in the founding of translator organisations? 5. Do you think that academics have had an active role in the visibility of CEVBIR? 6. What do you think about their interventions in the e-mail group? 7. What do you think about their contribution to organisational activities? Do they play a passive or active role? Can they be more effective?

Under the heading of the relations with the State, we will refer to the commission reports of the 5th Publishing Congress.[8] This was a good example of the interaction between the university, the civil society/NGOs, the State and the publishing sector hosted by the State. We were invited to a Congress organised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Ankara in December 4-5, 2009 as representatives of TS scholars and literary translators. We discussed the problems of the publishing sector in sub-commissions. In the closing session reports by the commissions were read and voted on. As expected, the discussions were heated since there were different parties whose interests were conflicting on certain issues. It is in this context that we could find a chance to use our "symbolic power". At crucial moments, we intervened in the discussion and our intervention changed the final voting in some cases. Some of the decisions that we contributed to under the titles of "expanding the publishing sector", "plagiarism" and "academic publishing" are as follows:

1. Promoting the recognition of the publishing industry by means of raising the quality of the translating and editing processes.
2. Underlining the importance of editing courses in the translation curriculum at universities.
3. Prevention of illegal photocopying and illegal/pirate publications.
4. Promoting the publication of original works and text books for university education as well as quality translations of international works.
5. Establishing a permanent committee, with the cooperation of the Ministries of Education and Culture and TS Departments of universities, to work on cases of "translation plagiarism".

3. Conceptualising the case: The role of academic translator training in constructing the "profession"

Based on the above experiences, we can evaluate the role of academic institutions in making the profession more visible. Universities have a respected status in Turkish society just as they do in the rest of the world. Yet, the university is no longer the ivory tower of knowledge that it used to be in the positivistic era of scientific research, due to new hierarchies. In the social constructivist era of education, a university is supposed to play a role in the improvement of social and professional standards. When it comes to the TS Departments, the role and responsibility of universities are even more important and indispensable in the struggle with poor working conditions and the lack of standardised working agreements.

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[8] For more information, see http://www.ulusalyayinkongresi.gov.tr/Sonuc__bildirgesi.html.

Thus, translator training in the social constructivist era needs to define itself as a process of social upbringing in the sense that the translators receiving academic education should not fall behind the practitioners who learn through "apprenticeship". In social and constructivist pedagogy, theory is not seen in separate terms from the practical field it refers to (Kiraly 2000). Academic translator training, as well as any other academic field, is a social construct in organic relation with the society it lives in. It is constructed and constructs at the same time.

 The role of academic translator training institutions in a society can be defined by the concepts of "symbolic power" and "institutional habitus". This symbolic power, in Pierre Bourdieu's (1991: 164) terms, is "that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even they themselves exercise it".[9] Institutions can use their symbolic power in bringing all interested parties together to discuss problematic issues, find solutions and act collectively.

The human model in translation used to be static and based on loyalty. We knew, though, that the "silent slaves" always had a symbolic power to manipulate and change things at the textual level. What we needed was the translators breaking their silence and acting in an organizational culture to make a profession that was ignored for ages more visible. The visibility issue, as Chesterman (2000: 169) points out, "also concerns the translator's role in society, the translator's status and power". But without an institutional "symbolic" power and collaboration with professional organizations, it is too difficult to make a contribution to issues such as the translator's role and their status and power in society. Individual visibilities of translators create their individual "symbolic powers", yet the visibility of a profession and its recognition in a society require a more extended form of power which can only be obtained by "institutional identity". The experiences above reveal quite well that the university has exercised its "symbolic power" in gathering the related parties together to be able to discuss the translational problems of the country.

We have always adopted and still adopt the descriptive approach[10] that scientific research requires us to have, but our descriptivism does not keep us from acting against some macro-level translation problems and contributing to improving the condition of professional translators. Description is not a neutral act; it contributes to see what a situation is like, what could be done about it and how positive changes can be obtained. For that reason, we claim that an academic translator training institution needs to struggle to be visible for the sake of its students and be able to change the traditional points of view about the field, in practice and theory.

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[9] See Bourdieu (1991: pp.163-171) for a detailed discussion of the concept of "symbolic power" within the frame of symbolic instruments in a society, that is: structuring structures (art, religion, language), structured structures (means of communication) and instruments of power (social classes, ideologies).

[10] See Chesterman (1993) for a discussion on the need for descriptiveness in the analysis of translational behavior.

The "symbolic power" which we claim to have is not a magic wand, of course, changing all negative aspects in a second. It is more like something of a moral, institutional and intentional nature: the key concepts here are "relation", "dialogue", "dynamic presence" and "redefining the role of the translator in a society". From this point of view, the symbolic power which we claim to have is more similar to the one in Hallett's (2003:129) objective approach which was built upon and implemented in the analysis of organisational cultures with reference to Bourdieu's "practice" and "symbolic power".[11] Hallett moves from practice into interaction, symbolic power and the emergent negotiated order, stressing the complementary contributions of theorists of practice and theorists of interaction.

4. Conclusion

As staff members of the TS Department at Istanbul University, we have tried to create an action network comprising professional translation organizations (bureaus/companies), academics and students. This network has created a "symbolic interactionism" which served to make the profession more visible.

Our relations and experiences as TS scholars allow us to state that translator trainers, in case they are active members of the professional world themselves, can contribute to the process of training the future translators in various respects:

– as translational role models with the capacity of academic guidance
– as activists trying to make visible a "profession" ignored for long
– as pioneering academics-practitioners showing the way for social responsibility, and thus contributing to the social value and the ethical sphere of the profession.

The above mentioned statements refer to both sociological and cultural contexts producing professional values and contributing to the visibility of translators in the society. The presence of TS scholars in a professional organisation might not be enough to fight the misconceptions about translation and translation theory in a society. The interaction, however, makes a meaningful contribution to the field both as a profession and a research area. One important contribution of the close ties or at least the interaction between academia and professional organisations was the fact that the meetings and workshops initiated by academics proved more fruitful in reaching common goals such as the improvement of the translation market and of translators' working conditions and professional standards, for the benefit of both practitioners and trainees.

In conclusion, we can say that our activities and actions as reported on in this paper can be seen as efforts to "bridge the gap" between translator training institutions and practitioners in the social constructivist era and from the viewpoint of translation ethics, institutionalism and professionalism.

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[11] See also Bourdieu (1988) for a detailed discussion on "Academia" as a workplace with specific roles and relations of power; Bourdieu (1989) for a discussion of the social space and symbolic power; Bulut (2002) for the discussion of the interaction of the academia and the field in the Turkish case.

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