

The Power Relations Approach to Translation Studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to define power in translation studies and clarify its relevance to translation. It reviews the previous research, describes the diversity of perspectives on translation and power, and discusses the significance of the power approach to translation studies.

Keywords: Power relations, translation studies

Influenced by contrastive and applied linguistics, systematic study of translation started in the second half of the 20th century. Translation was understood as a linguistic phenomenon, a process of trans-coding between the source and target languages. Any difference between the two languages that became obvious in a translation was attributed to the differences in the two linguistic systems. Consequently, translation studies was conceived as a linguistic discipline (Schaffner 1998: 2).

The early linguistic theories of translation focused on precise description of the systematic regularities in the two languages and accurate reproduction of the source language texts. A huge number of studies into specific linguistic phenomena provided detailed explanations of regularities in the source and target languages, and tried to derive rules for translation. They largely ignored the social, cultural and political contexts in which texts are produced and re-produced.

Translation takes place in a given social context, a context of complex structures, including power structures. It involves agents who are both conditioned by these power structures or at least entangled in them, and who exploit or attempt to exploit them to serve their own ends and interests, whether individual or collective. The power structures cover political and economic power but also, in the field of cultural production, those forms which Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic power.” The agents, faced with an array of possible options, have to make choices and decisions about how to proceed. (Hermans 1996: 27-8)

Explicit interest of scholars (predominantly those from the Low Countries and Israel) in the topic of translation and power had its beginnings in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A new stage was reached in 1985 with the anthology *The Manipulation of Literature*. The authors of these essays demonstrated that translations were one of the primary literary tools that larger social institutions had at their disposal to “manipulate” a given society in order to “construct” the kind of “culture” desired. (Gentzler & Tymoczko 2002: xi-xviii)

These manipulation theses evolved into the “cultural turn” in translation studies in the 1990s. Translation came to be considered a form of re-writing and acculturation. One common feature of much of the research in translation studies was an emphasis on cultural aspects of translation, on the contexts within which translation occurs. This has brought to the fore an interest in the power relations embedded in textual practice: at one level, the translator’s power in representing the source culture, at the other, the power in influencing or manipulating the text’s reception in a particular target culture. Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere (1990: 5) wrote in the introduction to *Translation, History and Culture* that although empirical historical research can document changes in modes of translation, to explain such changes, a translation studies scholar must go into “the vagaries and vicissitudes of the exercise of power in a society, and what the exercise of power means in terms of the production of culture, of which the production of translations is a part.” “Translation is a rewriting of the original, and rewriting is

manipulation of literature in the service of power. The history of translation is the history of the shaping power of one culture upon another" (Bassnett & Lefevere 1992: xi).

Since then, significant works have been produced foregrounding issues of power and focused on questions of power and colonialism. For instance, Cheyfitz (1991)'s *The Poetics of Imperialism* views American foreign policy in terms of how Anglo-American power subjugates or "translates" other "nations" within its borders, and translates and transforms their lands and cultural identity. In *Sitting Translation*, Niranjana (1992) says that translation is at the heart of colonial exchange and postcolonial subjects are constructed through mechanisms of translation, and argues for a postcolonial translation practice that is alert to relations of power and historicity. Spivak (1992) theorizes translation as cultural practice that might bring about social change and advocates the literalism of the "in-between discourse" to disrupt the effect of English hegemony. Bhabha (1994) goes so far as to coin the term "translational culture", emphasizing its autonomy as site for cultural production and its power as the "third space": the space of hybridized and migrant identities that are typical of the contemporary, global condition.

The expansion of scholarship over the last decade is not confined to postcolonial research interests, but deals with broader issues, like the relations between translation, ideology, and international politics. Projects have focused on links between textual constructs and social power, with translation as a central site where discourses meet and compete. Historically, translation has always been a terrain for ideological clashes; it is not surprising, therefore, that in a climate of international turmoil among power blocks, recent research has produced significant works on issues of "power" (Dimitriu 2002: 1-12). Major contributions include Venuti's *Rethinking Translation* (1992); *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995); *The Scandals of Translation* (1998); Todd Burrell & Sean K. Kelly's *Translation, Religion, Ideology, Politics* (1995); Álvarez and Vidal's *Translation, Power, Subversion* (1996); Theo Hermans' *Crosscultural Transgressions* (2002); Tymoczko and Gentzler's *Translation*

and Power (2002); and Calzada-Pérez's *Apropos of Ideology* (2003).

The key topic that has provided the impetus for the new directions that translation studies have taken since the cultural turn is power. Questions are frequently asked as to under what circumstances translations have the most impact, what forms of translation are most successful, and how all this relates to cultural dominance, cultural assertion, and cultural resistance – in short, to power. In a sense such questions have meant that the “cultural turn” in translation studies has become the “power turn”, with questions of power brought to the fore in discussions of both translation history and strategies for translation (Gentzler & Tymoczko 2002: xi-xviii).

There is no commonly accepted definition of social power, but the essential idea is that power is the ability to affect the actions or ideas of others, despite resistance. It is thus a dynamic process, not a static possession, that pervades all areas of social life. (Olsen & Marger 1993: 1)

Power is seldom defined in translation studies literature. The only clear definition is available in *Translation and Power* by Gentzler & Tymoczko (2002: xvii). In this anthology meanings of power in relation to translation range from questions of influence and authority in the nineteenth century, bolstered by changing meanings of the word “democracy” in translation, to the legal capacity of the British and the establishment of dominion over the Maori by the Treaty of Waitangi, to the vigour and energy of translation in the transformation of cultures in China and Latin America. Translation is not simply associated with the “possession of control or command over others” and hence, with colonization or oppression, but also with the “ability to act upon” structures of command, such that translation becomes a means to resist that very colonization or exploitation. The two editors claim that translation is associated with power in all these senses.

As the discipline expands, theoretical approaches to translation and power multiply, drawing on a mix of theories and methodologies not only from within translation studies proper

(polysystem, skopos), but also from linguistics (critical discourse analysis, pragmatics, computerized corpora), and from literary and cultural theories (postcolonialism and feminism) (Dimitriu 2002:1-12). "Diversity in unity" may be a proper term for describing the paradigms of current research. The main areas of investigation cover the power relations between source and target texts, the socio-cultural constraints on translation, and how translation can be used as a cultural weapon to achieve various purposes, personal or collective.

The unequal power relationships that have characterized the translation process used to be presented in terms of a superior original and an inferior copy. In the new, post-colonial perception, both original and translation are viewed as equal products of the creativity of writer and translator, though the task of these two is different. It is up to the writer to fix words in an ideal, unchangeable form and it is the task of the translator to liberate those words from the confines of their source language and allow them to live again in the language into which they are translated (Bassnett 2002: 5).

Translators have been distrusted, even called traitors, and their work severely criticised. But their contribution to the human world is considerable. Translators have served as vital links in the vast chain through which knowledge was transmitted among groups of people separated by language barriers. They have been building bridges between nations, races, culture, and continents, and bridges between the past and present, too. They have the ability to span time and space and have enabled certain central texts – works of science, philosophy or literature – to acquire universal stature. They breach the walls created by language differences, thereby opening up new horizons and broadening our vision of reality to encompass the entire world. (Preface by Jean-Francois Joly, president of International Federation of Translators, in Delisle & Woodsworth 1995: xv) They have helped in the invention of alphabets, the development of national languages and literatures, the dissemination of knowledge, the spread of religions, the transmission of cultural values, the writing of dictionaries, etc (Delisle & Woodsworth 1995). In modern China, translation has been "a catalyst for social change"

(Lin Kenan 2002: 172), and “has served as a sort of motivating force, giving impetus to the country’s progress” (Wang Kefei & Fan Shouyi 1999).

Translation is a strong cultural tool. “[It] has always been an indispensable channel of imperial conquest and occupation. Not only must the imperial conquerors find some effective way of communicating with their new subjects; they must develop new ways of subjecting them, converting them into domicile or “cooperative” subjects” (Robinson 1997: 10). Translation can also be used by opponents of oppression as counterespionage, to conspire and rebel, for the ultimate goals of self-definition and self-determination in both the political and epistemological senses (Tymczko & Gentzler 2002: xxi).

Translation is crucial in the formation of cultural identities. It can create stereotypes for foreign countries, is instrumental in shaping domestic attitudes towards foreign countries, and in the long run, figures in geopolitical relations by establishing the cultural grounds of diplomacy, reinforcing alliances, antagonisms, and hegemonies between nations (Venuti 1995:10).

Translators have become active participants in the social movements and, as their skills are increasingly needed in the expanding global village, their presence is becoming indispensable. This raises awareness of the social power translators wield as linguistic and cultural brokers, mediators and negotiators, as well as image- and decision-makers in intercultural and international affairs (Dimitriu 2002: 1-12).

Translators are never “innocent”. They have the power to create an image of the original which can be very different from the original’s intention insofar as the original textual reality can be distorted and manipulated. At times, translation may even become a means for some people to seek after personal power. Cheung Matha Pui-yiu (2000: 293-307), a translation scholar from Hong Kong, for example, discovered that between 1842 and 1900, major officials in the Hong Kong colonial government had no command of the Chinese language and were anxious for people who could communicate between the British rulers and their Chinese subjects. But they did not trust the bilinguals of the native Chinese or the Western businessmen. In consequence, a

gap of power appeared, which was soon filled by the Christian missionaries. Through their translational competence and performance, these missionary translators became power manipulators and policy makers, ideological disseminators, knowledge fighters and ideological gatekeepers.

Translation is manipulated by power relations. In translation studies, the term “manipulate” first appeared in *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*. The contributors of this anthology were convinced that “from the point of view of the target literature, all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose” (Hermans 1985:11).

Manipulation in translation is not restricted to that of the source texts or the patronage. Translation is manipulated by a variety of factors, like the authority of the source texts, the power relations between source and target languages and cultures, the prevailing poetical norms of the target culture; the expectations of the dominant institutions and ideology, the public for whom the text is intended, etc. The patrons manipulate the translators, who in turn manipulate the readers through the manipulation of the source texts. On the other hand, translators are manipulated by the source text authors as well as the target culture readers. On occasions, translators also manipulate the commissioners or patrons. Hence translators are manipulated and manipulative at once.

Translators often find themselves simultaneously caught in both camps, representing both the institutions in power and those seeking empowerment. Often with divided allegiances, representing the status quo while simultaneously introducing new forms of representation, the translator acts as a kind of double agent in the process of cultural negotiation. Translations face two ways at once, depending on the context. No single translation strategy can be associated with the exercise of oppression or the struggle for resistance; no single strategy is “the” strategy of power. (Tymczko & Gentzler 2002: xix-xx).

Translation is a double-edged sword. It can introduce new concepts and ideas, but can also repress innovation. It may strengthen the order of a society, but may challenge, threaten or

even subvert the power structure in the target culture as well. Similarly, translation is manipulated by power, but can display its power in the intercultural communication.

So long as the connection between translation and power is concerned, the contribution of translation to cultural development and intercultural communication is much more significant than the constraint of power on translation.

Investigation of the power struggles in translation enables us to have a better acquaintance with the nature of translation. It is discovered that translation is far from being a neutral activity independent of politics, ideology and interest conflicts, nor is it pure linguistic work, or transfer and substitution of discourse signs between texts. Rather, it is the alteration, distortion, and recreation of one kind of culture, thought, and ideology in another kind. Likewise, through analysis of some translation phenomena, we can get to know another culture, society or ideology (Lv Jun & Hou Xiangqun 2001: 68).

The power relations approach has enough explanatory power for certain translation phenomena in human history and represents a new angle to translation studies. It sees translation as a struggle or compromise between all sorts of power relations: source language and target language, source and target cultures, author and translator, central and peripheral texts, reader and translator, translators and patronage, and so on and so forth. Instead of focusing on how to translate or evaluate translations, it enables us to understand why certain texts are translated or forbidden being translated, why translators delete, add or change certain things in the source texts; how the patronage manipulates the translators, etc. It offers interpretations of translators' loyalty to the authors, readers, source culture or target culture in a certain culture at a certain time.

The "power turn" places translation activities in specific historical and cultural contexts and enables people to see the socio-cultural causes of translation, and in particular, the power relations behind translation. It studies translation from a macro-perspective, and makes the translation research more objective and comprehensive, constituting a great complement to other approaches to translation.

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