

Translation and Geopolitical Relations

SECTION I: VENUTI

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Venuti is concerned that translation is a means by which Anglo-American society (a) imposes its cultural values on a vast foreign readership, and (b) ensures that its culture at home remains aggressively monolingual.

■ **First**, an analysis of translation patterns, he claims, points to a serious trade (and therefore cultural) imbalance: since the second world war, English has been the most translated language but the traffic of translation **into** English remains relatively very small. This means that Anglo-American culture invades (and shapes) the world but remains resistant to influences from other cultures. Relevant figures for comparison: translations represent on average 2.4% of British book production, 2.96% of American book production, 8-12% of French book production, 25.4% of Italian book production, 14.4% of German book production. This, Venuti claims, points to a substantial trade imbalance with serious cultural ramifications: it means that Anglo-American culture invades (and shapes) the world but remains resistant to influences from other cultures.

Pym (1996) has highlighted some fundamental flaws in Venuti's argument, or rather his selective use of statistics. For example:

(1) Venuti says "British and American book production increased fourfold since the 1950s, but the number of translations remained roughly between 2 and 4 percent of the total" (1995a:12). Pym points out that the figures quoted in Venuti's own graphs show that the number of translations increased almost threefold, so: "book production increased *and* translation production increased. "And", not "but"" (Pym 1996:168).

(2) By focusing on percentages only, Venuti masks the real figures involved. For his chosen period of analysis, "the *Index Translationum* lists more than 2.5 times as many translations in Britain and the

United States (1,640,930) than in France (624,830) or Italy (577,950)”, which means that there are far *more* translations done into English than into French or Italian, and therefore “Despite having much lower ratios of translations to nontranslations, English readers can still have many more translations available to them than do French or Italian readers” (Pym 1996:168).

■ **Second**, the choice of what does get translated reflects a desire to either stereotype other cultures or to allow in only those works which fit in with models that already exist in the target culture. But Venuti does not offer any quantitative analysis of data. He simply uses a few examples to support his argument. The examples are well chosen, but in the absence of comparative data we cannot be sure that they are ‘representative’ of a general trend.

■ **Third**, what reinforces this trend (to stereotype and control other cultures) even further is that the Anglo-American readership is used to *fluent translations*, translations which do violence to the source text (and therefore to the source culture) by erasing its difference (Venuti claims that fluency is an ‘English’ strategy of translation; this is highly questionable).

Domesticating/ethnocentric vs. foreignizing/ethnodeviant translation

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1813) ‘On the Different Methods of Translation’ (source of distinction).

“Foreignizing translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language. In its effort to do right abroad, this translation method must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience – choosing to translate a foreign text excluded by domestic literary canons, for instance, or using a marginal discourse to translate it.” (Venuti 1995a:20).

“I want to suggest that insofar as foreignizing translation seeks to restrain the ethnocentric violence of translation, it is highly desirable today, a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of world affairs, pitched against the hegemonic English-language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others. Foreignizing translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations.” (Venuti 1995a:20)

By foregrounding the foreign, Venuti seeks to disrupt existing canons in the target culture, whatever they may be. He wants translation to be a site of resistance: “the translator is an agent of linguistic and cultural alienation” (1995a:307).

Minoritizing vs. Majoritizing Translations

“In language use minor variables destabilize constants of expression and content and expose the political interests served by linguistic standards, revealing the social hierarchies that exist between different languages and cultures, but also within them. Minor languages and literatures consist of what normally undergoes regulation and repression: certain dialects and styles, genres and discourses that are linked to different periods and different social positions within a dominant culture, a canonical literature, a major language” (Venuti 1998c:139).

“Minor translation strategies evoke not an authorial personality or psychology but a linguistic community, an ethnicity, a gender, or sexuality. Minor language use evokes the history of its domination” (Venuti 1998c:137).

“... translating in any cultural and political location can be majoritarian, a rewriting of the foreign text so as to support dominant values in the translating culture” (Venuti 1998c:139).

Venuti suggests that:

(1) Translations, whether literary or non-literary, should bear prefaces that announce the translator’s strategy and alert the reader to the peculiarities of the translation: “Such prefaces will ultimately force translators and their readers to reflect on the ethnocentric violence of translation and possibly to write and read translated texts in ways that seek to recognize the linguistic and cultural difference of foreign texts” (1993:221).

(2) Translators can adopt a strategy of resistance towards the canons and values of the target culture.

(3) Translators “must force a revision of the codes – cultural, economic, legal – that marginalize and

exploit them” (1995a:311). They can revise the individualistic concept of authorship that has banished translation to the fringes of Anglo-American culture – resist notions of originality, etc.

(4) “Translators committed to changing their cultural marginality can do so only within the codes that are specific to the target-language culture. This means limiting discursive experiments to perceptible deviations that may risk but stop short of the parodic or the incomprehensible” (1995a:311).

(5) “A change in contemporary thinking about translation finally requires a change in the practice of reading, reviewing, and teaching translations” (1995a:312).

Reasons for emphasis on literary translation (1995a:41) – cf. charges of elitism:

- Literary translation has long set the standard applied in technical translation (viz. fluency)
- It has traditionally been the field where innovative theories and practices emerge. Decision to domesticate or foreignize allowed only to literary translators, because technical translation is fundamentally constrained by the exigencies/pressures of communication.

SECTION 2: COLONIALISM AND POST-COLONIALISM

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The main question here is translation across power differentials.

Some relevant hypotheses (Jacquemond 1992; Robinson 1997:31-32):

- A dominated culture will invariably translate far more of a hegemonic culture than the latter will of the former;
- When a hegemonic culture does translate works produced by the dominated culture, those works will be perceived and presented as difficult, mysterious, inscrutable, esoteric and in need of a small cadre of intellectuals to interpret them, while a dominated culture will translate a hegemonic culture’s works accessibly for the masses;
- A hegemonic culture will only translate those works by authors in a dominated culture that fit the former’s preconceived notions of the latter;
- Authors in a dominated culture who dream of reaching a large audience will tend to write for translation into a hegemonic language, and this will require some degree of compliance with stereotypes.

Translation as a Tool of Colonialism

See esp. Niranjana (1992), Rafael (1988) and Fenton (2004).

Question of potential variation in attitudes among both colonizing and colonized subjects.

Case of Sir John Staunton’s English translation of the Qing penal code in 1810 (Staunton worked for the East India Company in Canton). Cf. translation by James Burrow four years earlier.

... as soon as he [Staunton] points out a ‘defect’ (for example, no presumption of innocence), he immediately says there are other parts of the code that make up for it He then quotes Montesquieu’s view that laws must be suited to the country and the people (*ibid.*:xxv-xxvi) and takes umbrage at earlier misconceptions of the Chinese legal system. For example, he argues that corporal punishment is not as common as is generally believed (*ibid.*:xxvi-xxvii). Then he argues that the code is favourably viewed by the Chinese people, who only ask for “just and impartial execution” (*ibid.*:xxviii) ... (St. André 2004:4)

Barrow ... took a rather dismal view of the Chinese, and he misses no chance to emphasize that the Chinese are, among numerous other shortcomings, fundamentally unjust both in their dealings with each other and with foreigners. (St. André 2004:4)

In contrast to Barrow’s work, Staunton’s introduction reveals a basically sympathetic view of the Chinese: they are people just like us, albeit with their own peculiar customs, and any extravagant praise or blame is due to foreigners misunderstanding them, not to anything intrinsic to the Chinese. ... This attitude is also expressed in his translation, which strives to present the Chinese legal code as something comprehensible, reasonable, and just. (St. André 2004:5)

Translation as a Form of Active Resistance to Colonial Rule

See esp. Tymoczko (1999). Also issue of bilingualism as a tool of resistance and its implications in the context of translation across power differentials. See esp. Mehrez (1992), Mezei (1998) and Hedrick (1996).

Extract from D.G. Jones' English translation (1970) of *Speak White* by Mchèle Lalonde (1968).
Boldface is used by the translator to indicate English in original (French) poem:

Speak white

Speak of places, this and that
Speak to us of the Magna Carta
of the Lincoln monument
of the cloudy charm of the Thames
or blossom-time on the Potomac

Speak to us of your traditions
We are a people who are none too bright
but we are quick to sense
the great significance of crumpets
or the Boston Tea Party

But when you **really speak white**
when you **get down to brass tacks**
to speak of Better Homes and Gardens
and the high standard of living
and the Great Society
a little louder than **speak white**

Translation in the Postcolonial Experience

For example the complexities of the situation of Indian writers of English in India, who attempt to translate the Indian experience through the language of the colonizer, the language of the new global economy, and the lingua franca of India. Similar experience in Africa (e.g. Cameroon, Nigeria, Sudan, North Africa). See esp. Mehrez 1992, Adejunmobi 1998, Steiner 2009).

Translation and the Legacy of Colonialism

Continued suppression of cultures which are economically or politically less powerful, especially from the Anglo-American perspective.

Dissemination of literature from such cultures. See esp. Said (1990/1994).

Question of (negative) stereotyping. See Jacquemond (1992).

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