

Cultural perspectives on translation

Annie Brisset

The following study aims to show how the relationship to otherness and cultural diversity is manifested in discussions accompanying the evolution of translation practices since the 1950s, in other words since the point when, on the one hand, translation became globalised and thus industrialised and, on the other, the crisis of representations emerging in the humanities as a result of independence and postcolonialism, gave rise a little later to what came to be known as translation's "cultural turn".

An initial ethnolinguistic approach.

It is hard to locate precisely when culture entered contemporary thinking on translation, in relation to either the process or its result. In the decade 1950–1960, when translatology was starting to form into an independent discipline, there was a strong ethnocultural dimension, but this concerned language rather than the human groups that translation seeks to bring together, no doubt because linguistics was the pilot discipline and the period was dominated by structuralism. During the period following the Second World War, the creation of major international bodies and developing exchanges led to the industrialisation of translation. Suddenly it became necessary to translate documents relating to every field of human activity, in exponentially

increasing volumes, into one or several languages very quickly. Translation became part of a productivity-based system requiring the optimisation of its procedures. In the field of specialised communications in which translation operates, the most urgent need was for the labelling of realities. Linguistics was called on to identify the real or supposed problems presented to translation by particular and diverse cultures. Representative studies include Roman

Jakobson's (1959) article "On linguistic aspects of translation" and Georges Mounin's (1963) *Problèmes théoriques de la traduction*. These two linguists sought to circumscribe the untranslatability emanating from the diversity of languages and cultures. How is it possible to establish equivalences of meaning between languages when they represent reality

differently and, furthermore, express anthropological and cosmological realities that are often irreducible to each other? Let us recall how Jakobson explains the principle of translatability. The meaning of a sign, he says, is its definition. A sign is thus translatable into any language because it can also be expressed in the same language in another way. If there is no corresponding sign in the foreign language, the sign of the original language can be simply borrowed, calqued or paraphrased. In other words, Jakobson concludes, languages can express everything, but using different

Annie Brisset is Professor at the School of Translation and Interpretation in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ottawa and the author of *A sociocritique of translation* (Ann Saddlemeyer Prize) and many articles on translation theory and criticism. Founder member and current President of (International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies, she is also a consultant to UNESCO on translation-related projects and a member of the Royal Society of Canada.
Email: abrisset@uottawa.ca

means. Translatability is “equivalence in difference” (1959, p.80). The attention paid to cultural diversity was primarily lexical in aim: the sign reigned over translation as it did over linguistics.

However, in the same period Eugene Nida (1959, pp.14, 16) published a manual for translating the Bible in which he set out his “ethnolinguistic model” of communication and translation. A semantician of the generative school and a specialist in Amerindian languages, Nida proposed a method for the translation of the sacred texts undertaken by the Universal Biblical Alliance, from an evangelist perspective. The criticisms of this approach by Meschonnic (1973) and then by the theorists of postcolonialism are well known, but they have overshadowed the contribution of Nida’s ethnocultural thinking, which was new for the time.

Nida proposes an approach to equivalence based on a pragmatics of communication. His work takes Jakobson’s principle of “equivalence in difference” out of the narrow field of naming reality and into that of social practices and visions of the world. Nida understands translation as “communicative equivalence”, in other words, that it must function in the target culture. To render the Bible text intelligible and, most importantly, pertinent in cultures very distant from the Judeo-Christian world, the translation must incorporate the symbolic representations and usages of the group for which it is intended. However this model has its limitations, relating in the first place to the proselytic approach and secondly to the behaviourist framework surrounding the pragmatics of communication. This said, at the height of the structuralist period Nida’s ethnocultural concerns stand out as an exception. At this time the thinking on translation that was developing primarily in the field of literary studies was subordinated to what Derrida (1985) calls the “Babelian model”. Inherited from German Romanticism and revisited by Walter Benjamin, this model was reinforced by the formalisms that developed in the early twentieth century. It is centred on the letter and literary aesthetics. Unlike Nida’s functionalist model which, in the Lutheran spirit of the Reform, emphasises the users of translation, the Babelian model emphasises the singularity of the original work, its author’s creativity and the act of interpretation through which it is expressed.

Translation: a socially governed action

With the decline of structuralism in the late 1970s the socio-historical context moved to the centre of thinking about translation. We owe this new approach to the descriptive model of Gideon Toury (1995), which was seen as a paradigm shift. Centred on the product of translation, this model was developed by literary theorists from small countries where there was a lot of translation (such as Belgium, Israel and The Netherlands). These founders of translation studies (Holmes *et al.* 1978; Toury 1980) established the journal *Target*. The title evokes the translation’s target audience and refers to the cultural, and more still, literary context in which foreign works are selected and integrated through translation. The particular – and at that time new – characteristic of the descriptive model is that it understands translation as a behaviour, in other words, as a social act and, as such, governed by norms. It is derived from Itamar Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory (1978), a cybernetic model that extends the principle of self-regulating systems to the description and explanation of literary exchanges and, more broadly, intercultural transfer. The idea of the polysystem also draws on Russian formalism. This heritage almost certainly explains why the descriptive approach to which it gave rise stops on the threshold of a sociology of translation since, while it is indeed concerned to identify the norms that govern the behaviour of literary translators in any given society, this is not yet to shed light on the question of the translating subject nor on the social status of the translator, nor to reveal the economic and political forms of logic underlying international literary exchanges. Starting from the principle that the target literature interacts with the translated literature, the aim is to understand the function of these exchanges in a particular literature and the resulting textual transformations. The study of the role of translation in shaping or restructuring a national literature or a literary genre at a particular moment in its history is based on the description of the writing practices at work in translation strategies. Ultimately the analogy between translation and social practice that characterises this model makes it possible to analyse the literary dynamic engendered or undergone by translation (Lambert and Lefevere 1993). Translation norms act to reveal this

dynamic. They can be seen in the regularity of translation behaviour observed in large corpora translations are initially compared to the original works to which they correspond, then linked to works in the same genre produced at the same time in the same society. In total, if the norm is social, this is primarily because it is statistical.

All the same, it would be inaccurate to regard the descriptive model as purely textual. While it is true that the core of the analyses remains the texts rather than agents and socioeconomic constraints, the search for preliminary norms that govern the selection of foreign texts (preferred countries, languages, genres, authors and translators) is, as their designation suggests, a vital precondition for understanding the value given to them in a particular state of a literature and a society. We should, however, recall that the descriptive model suspends value judgements, starting with those that essentialise the act of translation and its result. Translation is now seen as encompassing everything that a society delegates to this use at a particular moment.

Translating cultures or the question of context

Although the focus on translation behaviour already touched on the ethos of translation, study of its human effects was still some way off. This was left to the postcolonial approaches, feminism and civil rights movements. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, translation studies which had until then been caught on questions of language and literature, set off on a new path. It is this that Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (1990) called “the cultural turn”. Following the logic set in motion by the descriptive approach, the new critique anchored translations more deeply in the source and target cultures by looking at the manipulations (Hermans 1985) involved in the transfer from one to the other. Here translation studies fell in step with its fellow expanding interdisciplinary field of cultural studies.

The new critical current emerged in translation studies through the work of researchers such as Vicente Rafael (1988), who studied translation practices linked to the evangelisation of the Philippines, Eric Cheyfitz (1991), who

investigated western representations of the otherness of indigenous peoples in the Americas and, most importantly, Tejaswini Niranjana (1992), who examined the British colonisation of India and the role played in this process by translation. All three are theorists of postcolonialism who took translation as their object of study. The cultural turn that revolutionised translation studies occurred in the wake of the important historical period of decolonisation. A little later, translation studies adopted the epistemological and critical ideas of the anthropologists, who had earlier questioned their practices and resulting effects. How can the meanings of Others be translated? The anthropologists were concerned to know what happened to the translation of otherness when that otherness was little understood. Talal Asad, Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, George Marcus and Mary Pratt questioned what the German cultural theorist Doris Bachmann-Medick calls “the interpretative power of western anthropology” and the representations it has produced. This anthropological critique undermined the authority of the anthropologist as translator (Bachmann-Medick 2006, p.34).

Considering the development of the discipline since the 1950s, Bachmann-Medick shed useful light on the anthropological basis of the cultural turn that translation studies was to make a little later. The problem for anthropology is that the translation of other cultures is always beset by the danger of distortion posed by interpreting indigenous concepts in a conceptual system that is foreign to them, then re-expressing the modes of thought of other cultures in the languages, categories and conceptual system of a western audience (Bachmann-Medick 2006, p.35). The need to problematise the cultural context of translation had come from anthropology as far back as the work of Malinowski. In the attention the latter explicitly paid to context we can see the idea of an interpretative practice that Ryle (1971) later called a “thick description”, in other words, one that is contextualised. Following Ryle, Appiah (2004) proposed the concept of “thick translation”, the most immediate example of which is provided by the anthology of translation theories in China edited by Martha Cheung (2006, 2008) and, more precisely, by the strategy used to highlight the specificity of notions such as *xin*, *da* and *ya*, which are deeply rooted in Chinese

thought and can be approximately rendered as *fidelity*, *intelligibility* and *elegance*. To bring out the defining features that distinguish Chinese concepts from their western “equivalents”, the texts on translation are accompanied by other texts from the same period but different genres, such as philosophy, in which the same concepts appear. Each concept is illustrated by a dozen contextualising texts, juxtaposed with the translational text from the period in question. As the historical periods unfold, the Chinese concept, transcribed and graphically highlighted, is rendered in several different ways. Each new translation of the term is accompanied by an explanatory note to enable the reader to understand the development of the concept and how it differs from its western “equivalent”.

To explain how much translation’s cultural turn owes to ethnography, Wolf (2002) and Bachmann-Medick (2006) recall that the analogy between the two practices dates back to the 1950s. Lienhardt (1954) was almost certainly the first to use the term “translation” to describe the work of the ethnographer, while Evans-Pritchard (1957) launched a debate on the “linguistic translatability” of cultures with his study of the Nuer religion. Thirty or so years later the critique of representation crystallised around the debate set in motion by Clifford and Marcus (1986) in their book *Writing culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography*. In addition to questions of interpretation, the ethnographer faces the problem of translating actions and spoken words into a fixed written form. At the very least, writing, says Clifford, implies the translation of experience into textual form. The “translation turn” of anthropology is linked to this realisation. All these ideas lead to the view that, while anthropological translation is itself a cultural practice, it is dependent on a particular epistemological and discursive environment (for example, orientalism or colonialism). Above all, it became apparent that the translation of cultures is bound up with power relations that are asymmetrical by definition. Thus the crisis of representation, which, alongside anthropology, had affected disciplines including literary theory and historiography, now extended to translation studies. It also triggered a symmetrical critique of the eurocentric authority of translation, as reflected in the first postcolonialist studies (Rafael, Cheyfitz, Niranjana) on translation itself.

The cultural turn of translation: towards an ethics of difference

Without leaving the field of language (in fact the development of information technologies and language engineering bolstered the field of translation and terminology) or abandoning the text, translation studies introduced *anthropos* as an area for study, paying new attention to the human, social and geopolitical dimensions of translation. At the same time it undertook a critical re-examination of the history of translation practices, the representations resulting from them, the powers they serve or have served, the hierarchies they construct, the marginalisations they give rise to and the inequalities they consolidate. At the core of the new cultural questioning of translation lay the asymmetry in the weight given to languages and cultures and in the relations of force and power between human and social groups. This asymmetry is based on an identical power relationship to that denounced by the ethnographers, noting that they had claimed the right to “translate” the rituals, myths and customs of the primitive world into the rational schemas of the civilized world, to represent this world and to speak for it. The culturalist approach to translation was manifested in studies of different forms of manipulation and appropriation in historical contexts where translation has served in the conquest of peoples and the constitution of empires (Robinson 1997). The Americas, Africa and, most importantly, India were the preferred fields of study (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999; Dingwaney and Maier 1995; Ramakrishna 1997; Simon and St-Pierre 2000; Venuti 1992).

Reclaiming the right to speech gives rise to translation practices that sometimes express resistance, sometimes reparation. For example, they may serve to construct identities of a national (Bandia 2008 for Africa; Fenton 2003 for the countries of the South Pacific; Tymoczko 1999 for Ireland) or socio-sexual (Godard 1990; Harvey 2003; Santaemilia 2005) nature. Against the background of an approach that focuses on the power relations between languages and cultures, the work of Lawrence Venuti (1998) deserves mention, as it involves subverting the hegemony of English from the inside, using a strategy of “minoritising”. This initially involves selecting literary texts that have a minor status in their social context of origin, then translating them and inserting into

them socio-ecetal elements or fragments of discourses from the margins of the receiving culture, in this case that of the USA. The aim is to destabilise, “deterritorialise” (Deleuze and Guattari) or “provincialise” (Homi Bhabha) readers by presenting them with a hybrid language intended to decentre their identity. These few examples show that the anthropological and postcolonialist critique has led to an interventionist, not to say militant conception of translation (Gentzler and Tymoczko 2008, Munday 2008).

The ethics of translators and translation has never been so present in critical commentaries on the subversive practices of hybridising identities. The focus on ethics reveals the role played by the translating subject. In this debate the translator is however understood as an individual subject who can choose to escape institutional and discursive constraints. The “ethics of difference” (Venuti 1998) arising out of the recognition of otherness was based on a binary and highly loaded opposition between translation practices: source/target-based, foreignising/domesticating, domination/resistance, etc. Questions were asked about the position of translators in the (political, ideological, moral, etc.) place from which they interpreted the otherness of the foreign text. Subversive practices such as those just mentioned, involving, for example, defamiliarisation or polyphony, were part of the postcolonialist thinking that had produced this ethics of difference for which translating subjects were said to be alone responsible, independently of the political, economic, institutional and discursive circumstances weighing down on them. Discussion of the ethics of translators and translation thus remained speculative as long as these constraints were not systematically studied. This would be the function of the “sociological turn” which began during the 1990s.

Sociological approaches to translation

The new context of globalisation and the liberalisation of cultural exchange by the GATT agreements of 1986 (Uruguay Round) intensified the flow of translation, simultaneously expanding the field of investigation for translation studies. It became apparent that translation was subject to

a plurality of agents and state or commercial bodies – for mediation, funding, publishing, promotion, marketing – which intervene in the circuits of production and distribution for translated books. Postcolonial culturalism was taken up by sociology (Simeoni 2002). This trend can be seen in the sudden proliferation of studies drawing on ethnohistory, socioeconomics and the sociology of communication or of institutions. These studies seek to change the vision of ordinary criticism” by crossing the boundaries between the disciplines. In relation to literature and literary translation, the aim was to

dissolve the antinomy . . . between internal criticism, which finds the main meaning of texts only within the texts themselves, and external criticism, which describes the historical conditions in which texts were produced, but is always denounced by literary critics as incapable of recognising their literary qualities and singularity. (Casanova 1999, p.15)

The new sociological thinking approaches translation and literature through the overall context in which they occur (currents of ideas, political movements, world literature, commercial circuits, publishing mechanisms and so on), enabling them to be understood in a new way. Monographs and collective works have proliferated, with case studies in this vein from a wide range of historical and, most importantly, geographical (world, regional and national) perspectives. The sociological orientation is also apparent in the journals. In France two consecutive issues of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (a journal founded by Bourdieu) appeared in 2002, the first on translation and international exchange, the second on the international circulation of ideas. In 2005, the British journal *The translator* published a special issue on Bourdieu and the sociology of translating and interpreting while, in 2007, *Social semiotics* published a special issue on translation and conflict. The following year saw the creation of the journal *Translation studies*, mainly focusing on the sociology of translation. The same interest in the sociological aspects of translation can be seen to varying degrees in groups working on interculturality (Hermans 2002, 2006; Kenny 2008; Wolf and Fukari 2007) or, more diffusely, in journals on sociology, pragmatics, literary criticism and philosophy, not forgetting the

many doctoral theses exploring the flow of translation and its function in particular periods and societies. Europe has returned to the foreground with a marked interest in the eastern Europe (Popa 2004; Skibińska 2006).

Translation's sociological turn draws extensively on the work of Bourdieu. Among the seminal studies of this current, Pascale Casanova's (1999, p.15) *La république mondiale des lettres* stands out for the scale of its subject, which is world literature. This proves to be unequal in nature and hence "subject to invisible violence". Translation appears as one of the dominant phenomena acting on the international market in literature. It is described as the "great consecrating authority ... the major issue and weapon in the universal rivalry between players, a specific form of struggle within the international literary space" due to the unequal credit given to the languages and the literatures dependent on them (pp.188–189). In relation to languages themselves, study of the flow of translation leads to the same observation (Calvet and Osêki-Depré 2002; Heilbron 1999). Globalisation increases the volume of translation, but paradoxically hinders cultural diversity due to the hierarchy of languages to which attention is paid. According to the study for UNESCO's global report on cultural diversity (2009), 75 per cent of all books registered in the *Index translationum* (1979–2007) have been translated from only three languages (English, French and German). As a source language English alone covers 55 per cent of translated books across all genres. Another revealing statistic in relation to the asymmetry of exchanges is that of some 800 languages identified in the *Index*, 20 – including 16 European languages – are the source of 96 per cent of translated books. The same imbalance can be seen in relation to the target languages: half of the books identified were translated into only five languages (German, Spanish, French, English and Japanese).

Sociological approaches to translation generally consider large sets of phenomena. On the one hand, they are seeking to break with a critical approach confined to the relationships between an original text and its translation seen in isolation, without considering the institutional conditions (apparatus, agents, discourse) that shed the most light on the nature and function of these relationships. On the other hand, they differ from the economic approach

to international transactions, which tends to reduce the translated work to a product like any other, with no concern for the asymmetry of languages and the hierarchisation of symbolic goods. Sociology has been brought in to explore the external conditions of production and circulation of translations and their function in the cultural field of which they are a part. It reveals the role of the agents who act throughout the process of their production and distribution, the places in which they operate (publishing houses, funding bodies, book fairs, cultural broadcasts, literary prizes and so on) and, above all, the power relations and agendas underlying exchanges. It shows that the globalised space works according to different and sometimes competing kinds of logic, notably internal political interests and relationships between the countries involved, which determine the way that translations are disseminated.

The situations analysed from this point of view vary over time and space. We can cite as an example the role of translations combining Greek and Latin classics with founding myths in the Nahuatl language in the emergence of the Mexican identity under colonisation (Payas 2005) or, in the early nineteenth century, the role of the press in the adaptation and diffusion in Spanish of ideas imported from France and the USA, which fostered the Latin American revolutionary movements (Bastin 2004). In our contemporary societies translation serves a range of aims. For example, the translation of foreign articles acts to regulate access to information in the Arabic press of some countries where there is restrictive and active censorship. Another example is the subtle function of political opposition in the rise of translations into Farsi of works celebrating the grandeur of ancient Persia, which act as a counterweight to the Islamic identity of Iran. Alongside the role of translation in the creation and renewal of a literature, culture or national identity, many sociological studies reveal that the status of translators and translation varies from one cultural space or historical moment to the next. They highlight both the agonistic conditions structuring cultural fields or affecting societies and the complexity of the networks underlying the production of translations and their distribution on a national or international scale. Translation is shown to be a very sensitive

index of current or past situations of conflict. Alongside economic issues (such as the presence in a publisher's catalogue of Nobel prizewinners or successful authors) these studies reveal how far translation activities are determined by political and ideological conditions. This can be seen in the case of the countries of central and eastern Europe before and during the communist period, but we could also mention the very different case of several Arab countries, such as Egypt or Lebanon, in which there have been translation programmes run by foreign countries concerned to consolidate their position in the aftermath of decolonisation.

One sociological current, as yet representing a minority in translatology, draws on Bruno Latour's theory of the actor-network. Unlike Bourdieu, who analyses social practices from the point of view of agents and their positions within a field, Latour examines the modes of (human and non-human) interaction that enter into the production of objects circulating in society. Latour adopts an ethnographic approach to analyse the production of scientific knowledge (1989) and the development of law (2002). With its emphasis on interaction, actor-network theory makes it possible to study the agents active in production processes from an angle that is different from that of Bourdieu. Transposed to the domain of translation studies, the method of participatory observation enables the direct monitoring of, for example, a chain of individual and collective decisions made by a publishing house in relation to the production of a translation and its arrival on the book market (Buzelin 2005). This sociological approach modifies responsibility for translation choices, which were until recently attributed to the translator. It obliges us to reframe the debate on the ethics of translation.

Translation as social discourse

Sociological studies generally confine themselves to the conditions that govern the production and circulation of translations, leaving aside discursive components, although these are subject to the same conditions. This is done in the name of a bipolar and somewhat reductive representation of translation criticism: on the one part, the objectivist approach centred

on the interpretation of meanings and the relationship between the original and its translation and, on the other, the subjectivist, relativist approach introduced by postcolonialist thought derived from anthropology, which concentrates on the modes of appropriation of texts, their permeability and hybridisation. To escape this alternative, say the sociologists, we must abandon the intertextual problematics of a decontextualised relationship between source text and target text (Sapiro 2007). Seen in this light the argument has validity, but it has a blind spot, since it fails to recognise the intense and fertile research that, for a good quarter century now, has incorporated human and social factors into the study of translations. Moreover the contextualisation proposed by sociology is too often confined to apparatus and their agents (literary movements and institutions, publishing, trade and so on). Pierre Lassave asks

Is there no place for a sociology of translation that is not only a sociography of translators . . . or a mere functional annex of the theory of cultural fields and the inequality of their exchanges? (2006, p. 137)

Limiting attention to agents and institutions tends to mean leaving out any analysis of the discursive context, in other words the interdiscourse at work in the translated texts. Translation, rooted in the *logos* in whatever medium, surely cannot confine itself to the external kinds of logic that influence cultural exchanges, those of publishing, trade or politics, without concerning itself with the logic of discourse. In other words, the analysis of translation (and retranslation) phenomena surely cannot do without a socio critique that considers the relationships between translation and the surrounding social discourse.

We should recall that the term "socio-critique" was devised in 1971 by Claude Duchet in the first issue of the French journal *Littérature*, which also introduced the principles of this socio-historical approach to texts. Coming out of the work of Lukács and then Goldmann, it developed into a social semantics of texts based on the philosophy of the Frankfurt School and the dialogism of Bakhtin, later updated in the notion of intertextuality and extended more widely to that of interdiscourse. In the 1980s work on social discourse around Marc Angenot (1989) did much to release socio-critical studies (initially orientated

towards genetic criticism) from the concentration on the textual for which sociology today so criticises translation studies. The socio-discursive current considers the text – be it literary, scientific, legal, journalistic, political or other – in relation to the rest of the social discourse, comparing it to other discursive formations (Foucault) that are produced and circulate in the same state of a society. This comparison is based on two postulates: the first is a general interaction between discourses, the second a hegemony governing what can be opined, said or written in a given society at a particular point in its history.

The aim of this socio-critical movement is to identify the ideological configurations or *ideologies* which, like rhizomes, link and unite the very different discourses circulating in society in equally recurrent and socially regulated forms (objects of discourse, narratives, arguments, concepts, models and paradigms). Translation enters this analytical framework as discourse (Brisset 1996). Hence, the importance of comparing texts that have been translated or retranslated – whether as a corpus or individually – with the discourse of the target society and above all with the discourse predominating in an institutional subset (for example literature, law or science) in order to uncover these transverse elements of discourse, be they aesthetic, doxological (related to public opinion), axiological or ideological.

An excellent example is provided by the translations of Nietzsche and their function in structuring philosophical and political thought in the USA (Giroux 2003). To reveal the discursive correspondences linking a translation or retranslation to all the other intellectual or public productions of its environment, including those of the (philosophical, literary, legal etc.) social system in which it appears, is to highlight the necessary “perspective of historical simultaneity” (Gumbrecht 1997, p.427) that permits its internal logic to be understood. This *sociogrammatical* (Duchet) or *ideosemic*¹ (Cros 2003) contextualisation ties in with translatology’s current interest in pragmatics and the revival of narratology in the Anglo-American world, as shown by Mona Baker’s study (2006) on the circulation of narratives and their reinforcement, reframing or subversion by translators and interpreters (here in the context of war or conflict).

Niklas Luhmann’s (1984) sociology of communication certainly offers the most fertile

model for developing a socio-critical approach that will free the study of translations from the agonistic position in which the sociology of domination seems to hold it. Derived from Talcott Parsons’ theory of social systems and George Spencer Brown’s logic of distinction (law of form), Luhmann’s model seeks to understand the complexity of human institutions. It borrows the principle of *autopoiesis* or self-reproduction from Maturana and Varela’s cognitive biology (Luhmann 1986). Every social system (literature, science, law, economics, media and so on) functions like a cell, whose survival and evolution depend on its selective interaction with a complex environment. Like a cell, every social system is a system of meaning, functionally closed but structurally open to its environment, with which it constantly interacts through recursive retroaction loops. Agents are assumed, but are absent from the model on the principle that “only communication communicates”.

Here the question is not so much whether translation constitutes a system of communication in itself, but a matter of observing, from this heuristic position, the unnoticed socio-semantic dimensions of translation in the communication that is its very essence. Notably, how does it contribute to the self-reproduction and transformation of any social system that draws on it at a given moment in its history and in what form and for what use? Of the studies explicitly based on this model we can cite that of Sergey Tyulenev (2009) on the place given to translation by Peter the Great and then Catherine the Great in modernising Russia in the eighteenth century. Other studies indirectly related to the model include the analysis of the reception of semiotic and structuralist theories in Turkish literary criticism, or that of the importation of feminist theories to the USA in the 1960s (Susam-Sarajeva 2005). These studies remain isolated (Hermans 2007); but then, Luhmann’s many complex studies have been comparatively little translated and distributed.

Translation’s new cultural objects

The sociology of translation that dominates today focuses largely on a sociology of the

agents of translation and their fields of operation. It proclaims loud and clear that we must turn away from the text, which was formerly the object of all attention. Clearly this perspective sheds new and necessary light. But it is slightly out of phase with current thinking, which has already broadened to include intralinguistic and intersemiotic forms of translation – among which we must include those introduced by the new media and technological formats – and, most importantly, highlighting the space of these practices and the many issues arising out of them. If we observe the wide range of practices with which translation studies is concerned today, it would seem that the accusations levelled against it by sociography, itself moreover largely fixated on literature (with a timid incursion into the social sciences), are something of an optical illusion. While multimedia technologies have undermined the notion of “text”, we should recall that the analysis of textuality, or what is today called discourse, has been largely absent from thinking on non-literary translation practices. Yet these are far greater in volume, and are continually expanding as a result of the globalisation of exchanges and information and communications technologies.

Moreover, the many conflicts and ensuing migrations are at least as important as globalisation in increasing the diversification of forms of interlinguistic and intercultural mediation, which break down the traditional definition of translation or at least cause it to shift (Tymoczko 2006). These require new theorisations and new teaching focusing as much on social skills (*savoir-être*) as on technical capacities (*savoir-faire*). Today’s translation scholars are interested in forms of language transaction whose importance is much wider than that usually associated with translation. Let us take, for example, the critique of postmodern productions in African countries that have undergone colonisation. Today domination is played out between governing elites and populations, so that dichotomies such as coloniser/colonised, centre/periphery, west/rest, etc. have become inadequate. Resistance strategies now seek to counter internal powers. Products of an authoritarian, repressive environment, they are embodied in processes of translation which, to return to Jakobson’s typology, move from the interlinguistic mode (or translation proper) to the intralinguistic (heteroglossic devices, linguistic

parodies, discursive subversion of traditional genres such as the panegyric and epic narrative) and intersemiotic (use of audiovisual, musical and artistic forms). Without underestimating the historical context, it remains the case that the internal dynamics of the postcolony (Mbembe 2001) are better suited to the study of translation practices seeking to subvert the discourses of authority, power and repression (Bandia 2008).

More generally, translation studies is paying new attention to public language (Pratt 2002, 2003), contact zones (Apter 2005) and bilingual aesthetics (Sommer 2004) through theories whose effect is to give translation a clearer position among cultural practices. The diverse ethno-landscape of world cities invites an examination of the language transactions underlying the everyday functioning of citizens, which belie ideological discourses of nation or do not necessarily reflect the state’s policies on identity and nationalism (Simon 2006). There are spaces within these cosmopolitan cities where linguistic, ethnic, religious and other differences are negotiated. Simon observes that thinking about cosmopolitanism, increasingly a feature of our times, necessarily involves the study of these places of cohabitation and exchange, from the most harmonious to the least. Moreover, in approaching the cosmopolitanism of the great metropolises from the point of view of translation rather than multilingualism, we are obliged to observe the dynamics of interactions between groups and their various effects.

Similarly, the role of translators and interpreters is seen in the geopolitical context and, most importantly, in the social space where mediation takes place, from the hospitals of diasporic metropolises, where translation and interpretation are sometimes a civil right, to the paralegal bodies that grant refugee status, not forgetting military units where interpreters are involved in the “interrogation” of prisoners (Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib), the post-apartheid tribunals and those set up to hear war crimes cases (Rwanda, ex-Yugoslavia, Cambodia). These translation practices are the object of socio-discursive analyses (the intermediation of refugee stories, the truths constructed by these narratives differently interpreted by the western authorities and so on). Each case study shows the inadequacy of the linguistic and cultural frameworks in which the relationship between

translation and otherness is usually placed. The spatialised study of translation radically leads to questions of an ethical, legal and political nature (Inghilleri 2003).

Versions of culture in translation studies

The overview provided above shows the evolution of the status of culture in studies on translation since these began to coalesce into an independent discipline. Initially culture was seen as an obstacle to the transfer of the meaning to be expressed. Never defined, it appeared implicitly as a monolithic whole, coextensive with the use of a language that was assumed to reflect the beliefs, world view and life style of the place where it was spoken. Translation was understood in a context at once nominalist and universalist: the principle of “equivalence in difference” permitted the permutation of signs while its primary postulate was the equality of languages and cultures. Did this mean any comparison of cultures was circumscribed within the symbolic domain and purely verbal? Not really, since the otherness that resists translation was an “exotic” otherness, notably in the Biblical domain, an important foundation for the emerging translation studies.

The superiority of the western “message” was implicit here. If translation was part of a civilizing mission, it was at the price of the acculturation of the translation users, but sometimes also a two-way acculturation. With post-structuralism and the postcolonialist critique, the linguistic approach to culture gave way to a humanist approach that destroyed the egalitarian beliefs of the preceding period: it became apparent that translation is a fiduciary operation carrying with it a danger of confiscation and instrumentalisation, particularly if, as is often the case, it takes place between partners in an asymmetrical relationship. While all languages may have the same capacity to express reality, they do not carry the same weight on the world stage, and the same is true of cultures. Translation practices were re-examined in a political and axiological framework that revealed the relations of power and domination between translated and translating cultures. The table of values according to which good translations were separated from bad has found a natural

continuation in an agent-centred sociology setting up an opposition between dominated and dominant. The durability of this dualist schema in translation criticism is doubtless related to the fact that the western tradition was already organised in terms of the double paradigm of source and target, contrasting respect for the letter with practices that are adaptive and ethnocentric – in other words, condemnable.

This said, sociology has replaced an often over-speculative discourse with models providing concrete data on the intercultural transactions of translation, notably on the agents and apparatus at the origin of imbalances that sociology would also quantify. Moreover, the sociological current has transformed the translation studies’ idea of culture. Instead of a homogeneous whole coextensive with a particular language, culture was henceforth represented as a plural entity, whose endlessly interacting components are themselves subject to interests and power relations. The notion of culture has been replaced by that of society as translation practices are now considered closer to home, either in terms of emancipation related to identity (translation being mobilised to promote repressed identities) or from the perspective of the citizen (translation as a trigger of intercultural rapprochement, interethnic reconciliation and so on.) within a society. Again thanks to sociology, and more precisely social system theory, the communication element or materiality of translation itself has been recently reasserted. At the same time the dubious opposition of centre and periphery, the latter designating a geographically distant and, crucially, minoritised other space, was strongly challenged. The internationalisation of translation was a major component of this new exploration. Based until recently on entirely eurocentric data, western conceptions of translation are now being tested against theories developed in other cultures. In a reciprocal way, there has been a recognition of the need to move away from a tendency to borrow models made in the west and superimpose them on to one’s own history, traditions and practices (Liu 2008). The increasing number of intercontinental research conferences on translation and interculturality, monographs, anthologies and journal issues on non-western traditions, particularly from Asia (Cheung 2009; Hung and Wakabashi 2005; Luo and He 2009), offer tangible signs of this new cultural expansion of translatology.

Note

1. Cros's work around the notion of the ideoseme illustrates the coupling of literature and social discourse. It is related to that of

Kantorowicz (1984) in the field of law. In both cases we can see how the meaning of an ideoseme or a maxim (for example "To die for

one's country") is regenerated in a functional way at different moments in the history of a society or social system.

References

- ANGENOT, M., 1989. *Un état du discours social*. Montréal-Longueuil: Éditions Le Préambule.
- APPIAH, K. A., [1993] 2004. Thick translation. In: L. Venuti, ed. *The translation studies reader*. London: Routledge, 389–401.
- APTER, E., 2005. *Translation zones*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- BACHMANN-MEDICK, D., 2006. Meanings of translation in cultural anthropology. In: T. Hermans, ed. *Translating others*. Vol. I. Manchester: St Jerome, 33–42.
- BAKER, M., 2006. *Translation and conflict. A narrative account*. London: Routledge.
- BANDIA, P., 2008. *Translation as reparation. writing and translation in postcolonial Africa*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- BASTIN, G. L., 2004. *HISTAL. Histoire de la traduction en Amérique latine* [online]. Université de Montréal. Available from: <http://www.histal.umontreal.ca/> [16 August 2010].
- BASSNETT, S. AND TRIVEDI, H., eds 1999. *Postcolonial translation: theory and practice*. London: Routledge.
- BASSNETT, S. AND LEFEVERE, A., 1990. *Translation, history, culture*. London: Pinter Publishers.
- BRISSET, A., 1996. *A sociocritique of translation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- BUZELIN, H., 2005. Unexpected allies. How Latour's network theory could complement Bourdieusian analyses in translation studies. *The Translator*, 11 (2), 193–218.
- CALVET, L.-J. AND OSÉKI-DEPRÉ, I., 2002. Mondialisation et traduction: les rapports inverses entre centralité et diversité. Available from: http://sites.univ-provence.fr/francophonie/archives_calvet/textes/conferences/mondialisation_traduction/mondialisation_traduction.pdf [16 August 2010].
- CASANOVA, P., 1999. *La République mondiale des lettres*. Paris: Seuil.
- CHEUNG, M., ed. 2006. *An anthology of Chinese discourse on translation. Vol. One: from earliest times to the Buddhist project*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- CHEUNG, M., 2008. *An anthology of Chinese discourse on translation. Vol. Two: from the thirteenth century to the revolution of 1911*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- CHEUNG, M., 2009. Chinese discourse on translation. Positions and perspectives [online]. *The Translator*, 15 (2).
- CHEYFITZ, E., 1991. *The poetics of imperialism. Translation and colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*. New York and London: Oxford University Press.
- CLIFFORD, J. AND MARCUS, G., eds 1986. *Writing culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- CROS, E., 2003. *La sociocritique*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- DERRIDA, J., 1985. Des tours de Babel. In: J. F. Graham, ed. *Difference in translation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 165–248.
- DINGWANEY, A. AND MAIER, C., eds 1995. *Between languages and cultures. Translation and cross-cultural contexts*. Pittsburg, CA: Pittsburgh University Press.
- DUCHET, C., 1971. Pour une socio-critique. *Littérature*, no.1, 5–14.
- EVANS-PRITCHARD, E., 1957. *Nuer religion*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- EVEN-ZOHAR, I., 1978. The position of translated literature within the literary polysystem. In: J. Holmes, J. Lambert, and R. Van Den Broeck, eds *Literature and translation: new perspectives in literary studies*. Louvain: Acco, 117–127.
- FENTON, S., ed. 2003. *For better or for worse. Translation as a tool for change in the South Pacific*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- GENTZLER, E. AND TYMOCZKO, M., eds 2008. *Translation and resistance*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- GIROUX, D., 2003. *Fascisme et magie en Amérique. Lectures contemporaines de Nietzsche*. Thesis (PhD) Université du Québec.
- GODARD, B., 1990. Theorizing feminist discourse/translation.

- IN: S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere, eds *Translation, history, culture*. London: Pinter, 87–96.
- GUMBRECHT, H. U., 1997. *In 1926. Living at the edge of time*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- HARVEY, K., 2003. *Intercultural movements. American gay in French translation*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- HEILBRON, J., 1999. Towards a sociology of translation. Book translations as a cultural world system. *The European journal of social theory*, 2 (4), 429–444.
- HERMANS, T., 2007. *The conference of the tongues*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- HERMANS, T., ed. 1985. *The manipulation of literature. studies in literary translation*. London: Croom Helm.
- HERMANS, T., ed. 2002. *Crosscultural transgressions. Research models in translation studies II. Historical and ideological issues*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- HERMANS, T., ed. 2006. *Translating others*. 2 vols., Manchester: St Jerome.
- HUNG, E. AND WAKABASHI, J., eds 2005. *Asian translation traditions*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- HOLMES, J., LAMBERT, J. AND LEFEVERE, A., eds 1978. *Literature and translation: new perspectives in literary studies*. Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain.
- INGHILLERI, M., 2003. Habitus, field and discourse: interpreting as a socially situated activity. *Target*, 15 (2), 243–268.
- JAKOBSON, R., 1959. On linguistic aspects of translation. In: R. Brower, ed. *On translation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 232–239.
- KANTOROWICZ, E., 1984. *Mourir pour la patrie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- KENNY, D., ed. 2008. *Crossing boundaries*. London: Continuum.
- LAMBERT, J. AND LEFEVERE, A., 1993. *La traduction dans le développement des littératures. Actes du XI^e congrès de l'Association internationale de littérature comparée*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- LASSAVE, P., 2006. Sociologie de la traduction. L'exemple de la "Bible des écrivains. *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, 120 (1), 133–154.
- LATOUR, B., 2002. *La fabrique du droit. Une ethnographie du conseil d'état*. Paris: La Découverte.
- LATOUR, B., 1989. *La science en action*. Paris: La Découverte.
- LIENHARDT, G., 1954. Modes of thought. In: E. E. Evans-Pritchard et al., eds *The Institutions of primitive society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 97–99.
- LIU, Y., 2008. Towards "representational justice" in translation practice. In: J. Munday, ed. *Translation as intervention*. London: Continuum, 102–129.
- LUHMANN, N., 1984. *Soziale Systeme: Grundrisse einer allgemeinen Theorie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. (Social systems, trans. J. Bednarz, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- LUHMANN, N., 1986. The autopoiesis of social systems. In: F. Geyer and J. Van der Zouwen, eds *Sociocybernetic paradoxes. Observation, control and evolution of self steering systems*. London: Sage, 172–192.
- LUO, X. AND HE, Y., eds 2009. *Translating China*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- MBEMBE, A., 2001. *On the postcolony. Studies on the history of society and culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- MESCHONNIC, H., 1973. *Pour la poétique II*. Paris: Gallimard.
- MOUNIN, G., 1963. *Les problèmes théoriques de la traduction*. Paris: Gallimard.
- MUNDAY, J., ed. 2008. *Translation as intervention*. London: Continuum.
- NIDA, E., 1959. Principles of translation as exemplified by Bible translating. In: R. Brower, ed. *On Translation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 11–31.
- NIRANJANA, T., 1992. *Siting translation. History, postcolonialism and the colonial context*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- PAYAS, G., 2005. Lorsque l'histoire de la traduction sert à réviser l'histoire. Available from: <http://www.histal.umontreal.ca/pdfs>
- POPA, I., 2004. *La politique extérieure de la littérature. Une sociologie de la traduction des littératures d'Europe de l'Est (1947–1989)*. Thesis (PhD). Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.
- PRATT, M. L., 2003. Building a new idea about language. *Profession 2003*, MLA, 110–119.
- PRATT, M. L., 2002. The traffic in meaning: translation, contagion, infiltration. *Profession 2002*, MLA, 25–36.
- RAFAEL, V., 1988. *Contracting colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog society under early Spanish rule*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- RAMAKRISHNA, S., ed. 1997. *Translation and multilingualism. Postcolonial contexts*. Delhi: Pencraft.
- ROBINSON, D., 1997. *Translation and empire. Postcolonial translation theories explained*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- RYLE, G., 1971. The thinking of thoughts: what is "le penseur" doing? In: G. Ryle ed. *Collected papers*. Vol. 2. London: Hutchinson, 480–496.
- SANTAEMILIA, J., ed. 2005. *Gender, sex and translation*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- SAPIRO, G., 2007. Pour une sociologie de la traduction: bilan et perspectives. Available from: <http://www.espace.org/fr/art-257.html> [17 August 2010].

- SIMEONI, D., 2002. Translation and society: the emergence of a conceptual relationship. *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 15, 5–23.
- SIMON, S., 2006. *Translating Montreal. episodes in the life of a divided city*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- SIMON, S. AND ST-PIERRE, P., eds 2000. *Changing the terms. Translation in the postcolonial era*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- SKIBIŃSKA, E., 2006. La traduction au service de l'idéologie: "Liste des lectures françaises" en polonais dans les années 1946–1960. In: M. Wolf, ed. *Übersetzen-translating-traduire: towards a "social turn"?* vol. 1 (*Representation-transformation*). Vienna and Berlin: LIT Verlag, 131–141.
- SOMMER, D., 2004. *Bilingual aesthetics. A sentimental education*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- SUSAM-SARAJEVA, S., 2005. *Theories on the move. Translation's role in the travels of literary theory*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- TOURY, G., 1995. *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- TOURY, G., 1980. *In search of a theory of translation*. Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics.
- TYMOCZKO, M., 2006. *Enlarging translation. empowering translators*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- TYMOCZKO, M., 1999. *Translation in a postcolonial context. Early Irish literature in English translation*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- TYULENEV, S., 2009. *The role of translation in the westernization of Russia in the XVIIIth century*. Thesis (PhD). University of Ottawa.
- UNESCO WORLD REPORT, 2009. *Investing in cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue*. Paris: UNESCO.
- VENUTI, L., 1998. *The scandals of translation. Towards an ethics of difference*. London: Routledge.
- VENUTI, L., ed. 1992. *Rethinking translation. Discourse, subjectivity, ideology*. London: Routledge.
- WOLF, M., 2002. Culture as translation – and beyond. Ethnographic models of representation in translation studies. In: T. Hermans, ed. *Crosscultural transgressions. Research models in translation studies. Vol. 2: Historical and ideological issues*. 180–192.
- WOLF, M. AND FUKARI, A., eds 2007. *Constructing a sociology of translation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.