Introduction

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This theoretical landscape seems to have developed as a natural trajectory of TS. On the one hand, the bulk of writing on translation norms in recent decades has already established the importance of cultural factors and systemic relations in constraining the performance of translators and interpreters (Toury 1995a, 1999, Lambert 2006, Schäffner 1998, Shlesinger 1989, 1991, 1999, Hermans 1999, Meylaerts 2008, Sapiro 2008, Yannakopoulou 2008). On the other hand, critical writings have offered assessment and judgment of the alleged invisibility and submissiveness of translators (Venuti 1995, 1998). A common denominator of all these theoretical discussions has been the (implicit or explicit) assumption that the majority of translators, in many different social settings, suffer from an inferior status, manifested in their translation output by a tendency to conform to prevailing domestic cultural norms and in their reluctance to claim active agency in cultural change (exceptions that problematize this assumption are periods of concentrated efforts of culture planning with translators serving as important agents of change; see, e.g., Even-Zohar 1990, Toury 2002 – on the case of modern
Hebrew; Ayluçtarhan 2007 and Tahir-Gürçağlar 2008 – on the case of modern Turkish). However, having emerged historically from the tradition of philology, linguistics and literary studies, the leading paradigms of TS have been focused, as a rule, on the practices of translation and their communicative contexts. A comprehensive research project that centers on the complex factors concerning the agency of the practitioners themselves, as those who perform these practices in their immediate social surroundings, still awaits its turn.

The collection of articles in this volume is an attempt to contribute to this emerging research, which stands at the crossroad of Translation Studies and Culture Research. It aims to zoom in on translators’ and interpreters’ own understanding of their role and status, to tracing their attitudes and shedding light on the background of those individuals who create and shape the translating professions, and the way they locate themselves as professionals and maintain a specific identity and dignity.

Identity is now a buzzword in the humanities and the social sciences. Conceived not as a fixed entity, but rather as a dynamic and multi-layered cultural construct, collectively produced and re-produced through social struggles, and in transforming cultural settings, it has everything to do with status and self-esteem. Surprisingly, however, it has scarcely been discussed with reference to the occupational context as such. While academic studies and public debates over identity focus primarily on typically political categories of stereotypization and hierarchy, such as ethnicity, race, gender or religion, the occupational dimension is given scant attention. However, the role of occupations or professions in shaping identities can hardly be overstated; work, after all, is what many people do during large parts of their lives (Linde 1993). Not only do occupations constitute major components of people’s self-perception, but they often create fields of action in which cultural repertoires are constantly being constructed and negotiated, and group identity and values maintained and perpetuated or transformed, thereby building people’s perception of themselves and their world (Davis 1994). Thinking about occupations in this way opens many fascinating directions for the study of human agency in creating, maintaining and changing their immediate and broader social spaces, and the way the individuals themselves are created and transformed while moving in these spaces.

Translation is a fruitful field for the study of precisely such social creativity. It is the contradiction between the potential power of translators and interpreters as cultural mediators, on the one hand, and their obscure professional status and alleged sense of submissiveness, on the other, that makes them such an intriguing occupational group. Their insecure status as a profession is especially paradoxical today, as so much attention is being devoted to cross-cultural processes such as
globalization, migration and trans-nationalism. While the social agency of translators may seem less pivotal in settled cultural contexts with highly established, self-assured cores and strong, hegemonic cultural traditions (such as the Anglo-American ones; e.g., Gentzler 2002), it is clearly evident in multicultural, peripheral or emerging social settings (e.g., in the rise of modern Turkey; Ayluçtarhan 2007, Tahir-Gürçağlar 2008, Demircioğlu 2009). Even in the former environments, with their overpowering mechanism of naturalization and anti-foreignization, knowledge of (certain) foreign languages and borrowing from (certain) foreign cultures are warmly welcome and are valued as important symbolic resources. In the latter environments, however, which depend more acutely on procedures of translation for their maintainability, translators’ position as professionals would have been expected to be much stronger and more visible (Even-Zohar 1990).

Nevertheless, all the available evidence indicates that the professional status of translators and interpreters is, by and large, ambivalent and insecure. Complaints are rife about their being seen as ‘servants’ of a higher authority, and as those who belong ‘behind the scenes’ (Jänis 1996), “not as aware as they might be of their own power” (Chesterman & Wagner 2002). This does not mean that they are actually submissive and lacking in occupational pride, or that they are at the bottom of the occupational prestige ladder. Nonetheless, their self-perception and dignity as an occupation are still vague and are constantly questioned, negotiated or fought for. This identity problem is the underlying theme of the articles in this collection. Not only does it bear directly on translators’ and interpreters’ job performance, it also lends urgency to their self-imaging, on which they depend for recognition (Sela-Sheffy 2008). From the perspective of the sociology of professions, translators and interpreters are thus an extreme example of an understudied semiprofessional occupation.

The sociological literature on professions offers a body of theory and history of the formation of modern professions, their institutions, forms of knowledge, career patterns, education and jurisdiction (e.g., Larson 1977, Abbott 1988, Torstendahl and Burrage 1990, Freidson 1994, Macdonald 1995). Concentrating on institutional and formal factors, these studies are largely embedded in the context of the more traditionally institutionalized and prestigious liberal professions known as the ‘success stories’ of professionalism, notably medicine, law and accounting. However, from our point of view, precisely the ‘failed professionalizing’ occupations (Elsaka 2005), or the underrated ones, offer exciting case studies, in that they reveal more acutely the strategies of coping with threatened status. Among other occupational groups that are to varying extents under-professionalized or marginalized – such as journalists, school teachers, nurses or craft-artists – translators and interpreters serve a quintessential case for examining how an occupational group deals with its own indeterminacy and marginality.
Unlike sociologists of the professions, who assign much weight to formal, institutional and economic factors of the professions, our aim with the present volume has been to shed more light on the symbolically functional codes, attitudes and strategies of action shared by the practitioners themselves, as a social figuration, so as to maintain their status as an occupational group. This aspect stands at the heart of the theory of human figurations (Elias 1993, 1996) or that of cultural fields (Bourdieu 1980, 1986), theories designed to deal especially with those socio-cultural formations that lack clear, institutionalized boundaries. Rather than through formal procedures and means of control, the dynamics of a group develops, in Elias’s and Bourdieu’s view, through a set of distinguishing mental dispositions (a habitus) that are internalized and exercised by its members (Bourdieu 1986; also Jenkins 1992, Lahire 2003, Sapiro 2004b, Sheffy 1997, Sela-Sheffy 2005). Typically, Bourdieu’s theoretical framework has drawn its examples from fields that defy professionalization, or are hardly defined as occupations at all, such as the intellectual field, or the arts. To a great extent, such fields serve as models for status dynamics in the field of translation (Sela-Sheffy 2006, 2008, 2010).

Consequently, while the sociological theory of occupational prestige highlights economic achievements as parameters of prestige evaluation (Treiman 1977, Nam & Powers 1983), our present approach draws attention to the cultural resources that endow an occupation with symbolic values, beyond material and economic constraints, assuming that these values are defined by the groups of actors competing with each other in each and every field (Bourdieu 1985). Understanding translation as a site of social action in this sense thus emphasizes the personal dispositions of its practitioners and their group relations. How these individuals perceive themselves, what kind of capital they pursue, how they struggle to achieve it and what their cultural resources are, all these questions are at the core of the articles in this volume.

All this naturally raises important methodological questions. While several works in this collection apply qualitative methods, such as text analysis, biographical studies or interviews, others report on primarily quantitative (survey) studies. It emerges from these articles that quite an impressive body of knowledge has already been gathered by surveys on translators in different parts of the world. Serving still as a major tool of sociological research, this quantitative method poses intriguing challenges to culture analysis; e.g., a well-known problem in analyzing surveys is that respondents’ answers cannot be taken at face value, as if they were reporting the unmediated reality of their life and attitudes. The fact is often disguised that, like any other communicative practice, responding to questionnaires is motivated by the need to maintain dignity. As Bourdieu (1983) has argued, people will only provide what they assume to be the ‘right’ and respectable answer,
according to their own cultural repertoire. However, since the questionnaires reflect the researchers’ model of the world, respondents are often requested to address questions to which they do not have ready-made answers as part of their own cultural toolkit (to use Ann Swidler’s concept; 1986), therefore the results may often remain enigmatic, if not misleading. Bearing all this in mind, however, surveys are still an important tool for collecting large-scale rich evidence, which can reveal certain patterns in the practitioners’ commonly accepted attitudes towards their professions. Thus, in defining the aims and focus of the present volume in this way, three basic assumptions must be emphasized:

1. This endeavor is not meant as a call for yet another shift of paradigms in TS, as it were, towards purely sociological research. Rather, it is an attempt to look at translators from a different, external angle, as a field of cultural production. This attempt can also contribute to furthering a systematic integration of socio-cultural insights and working tools into the currently accepted frameworks of studying translation within complex cultural contexts. By analogy to other fruitful interdisciplinary research frameworks, such as socio-linguistics, cultural sociology or sociological history, such integration is also expected to be productive for our understanding of translation activities. That is, concentrating attention on the practitioners themselves should also give rise to valuable insights into the ways these individuals may act and perform as translators (Toury 1995a).

2. Consequently, this volume is not intended as a call for a new theory of translation; it is, however, intended to advance access to and better use of existing Culture Research theoretical frameworks. Following previous studies, as well as our own and the studies reported in the present collection of articles, we suggest that these theoretical frameworks consist mainly of two major directions, namely: (1) that of the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1985, 1986) for examining the dispositions and value scales of the different groups of translators and interpreters; and (2) that of the *repertoire* (Swidler 1986, Even-Zohar 1997) for accounting for the multilayered and diversified stocks of working patterns available in specific fields, constraining the action of those who enter them.

3. Finally, an underlying assumption of this collection of articles is also that a Culture Research approach contributes to the critical discourse on translators’ ethics and ideology and to the activist demand on interfering with and reformulating translators’ social role. We need, so we believe, to have a better idea about the people who do translation – their background, aspirations and sentiments, as well as about their social spaces and specific constraints – in order to take an effective stand on questions of translators’ agency and empowerment.
References


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