

What has translation theory got to learn from contemporary practice?¹

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Abstract

There has long been a traditional animosity between practising translators and the theoreticians residing in the ‘Ivory Tower’ of the University. In the past, this was due to the judgmental attitude that theory would assume in relation to the translation product; the source-text-oriented discourse of *traduttore traditore* and *les belles infidèles* meant that the whole translation process was essentially doomed from the outset, with practitioners thrust into a thankless No-Win situation that was as humiliating as it was gruelling. Modern theory, on the other hand, whilst being much more sympathetic to the undeniably important role that translation plays in the target culture, tends to get sidetracked into ideologically irreprehensible but entirely unfeasible missions to change the world, as can be seen from the discourses surrounding the concepts of ‘visibility’ and ‘transparency’, not to mention those that mobilise more obvious feminist and post-colonialist issues.

This paper suggests that translation theory might have something to learn from the experience of real practitioners, who operate within the market and are subject to its forces. To what extent can translation be mobilised for ideological purposes? Does it really have the subversive potential that some theorists have claimed or is it in fact a lot more limited in scope? And how can the poor underpaid translator, whose main aim often goes no further than to satisfy her customers and earn a decent living, contribute to these lofty ideals?

Within the complex many-faceted world of contemporary translation, theory and practice tend to keep themselves rigorously apart. In fact, there has long been a traditional hostility between the two camps. Practitioners often view theorists as, at best, detached from the real world in their ivory tower, making pompous pronouncements on issues they know nothing about, and at worst, highly judgmental and critical about the product of their labour, often been achieved at great cost, and with a great deal of commitment. Theorists, on the other hand, feel entitled to make such pronouncements on the grounds that they have a broader

¹ Published in the Proceedings of the *7th Seminar on Scientific and Technical Translation in Portuguese “Translation and Interculturalism”*, União Latina, Lisbon (November 2004)

perspective on the whole activity, one that goes far beyond immediate issues of the here and now. Consequently, when these two camps come into contact, it often leads to highly-charged situations.

Traditional theory was particularly harsh on practising translators, dominated as this was by a source-text-oriented approach that would compare the translation to its original and inevitably find it wanting. Indeed, for many years, the whole activity of translation was perceived as a thankless task that was doomed from the outset, in the sense that something always had to be lost; if the translator were faithful to the original, then the text would sound stilted and unnatural in the target language, while if priority were given to fluency, then the translation would inevitably be less accurate. The result was the development of a whole discourse around the subject of translation that was peppered with all sorts of pejorative metaphors: the ‘belles infidèles’, which likened translations to wives that, if beautiful, are necessarily unfaithful; the Italian pun on ‘traduttore traditore’; Dryden’s image of the translator as a slave forced to labour on another man’s plantation, to name but a few. All of these have been amply studied and documented elsewhere, of course.²

Contemporary theory, on the other hand, in the wake of Even-Zohar’s Polysystems Theory of the 1970s, eventually came to recognise the immense ideological power wielded by translators, and consequently the fidelity/fluency issue has been rewritten in terms that are much more favourable. Theorists such as Bassnett, Lefevere, Venuti etc have pointed out the role played by translation in the formation of literary systems and in the development of canons of taste, and have highlighted its potential as a means of intervention in the world. Venuti especially has gained fame as a crusader against the hegemony of Anglo-American culture, urging a deliberate policy of foreignization in translation, while various other subaltern groups (such as feminists, post-colonialists, certain minority dialects, etc) are engaged in similar missions.

So, if in the past, translators were seen as powerless hacks, subordinated to the original author, now they have been elevated into prophets and missionaries, zealously trying to change the world and ready to be burned at the stake for their ideals.

² For example, Bassnett, 1996

While I have nothing against these entirely irreprehensible attempts to make the world a better place, it does strike me that, once more, these are activities that are carried out from the shelter of the ivory tower by people who receive a comfortable salary merely to *think*. For academics have nothing much to lose if their radical translation is rejected by the publisher or doesn't sell, since they have tenure anyway. This is quite a different situation from that of the person who is dependent upon translation for a living and who is therefore subject to the constraints of the market. My thesis, therefore, is that translation theory has indeed got something to learn from the experience of the practitioners, and can gain by perceiving translation as a *market-driven* activity, in which translators are neither *slaves* nor *prophets* but rather elements in a supply chain and subject to the same kinds of market forces as operate upon all other goods and services.

One of the big differences between the kind of translation practised by academics and that undertaken by professional translators is that the former normally limit themselves to literary translation. Indeed, they frequently gain contracts on the strength of a reputation they have built up in academia as specialists in a particular author or period. Translation is therefore undertaken as an academic exercise, comparable to attending conferences and publishing research articles; that is to say, financial remuneration is of a relatively little importance – which is just as well, since this kind of translation does not pay very much at all! Their situation is perhaps not so different from that of the nobleman of feudal times, whose basic needs were provided for by his inheritance, and who might undertake a little translation in his spare time in much the same spirit as he would paint, hunt or play music, essentially as an entertainment or pastime.

Professional translators, on the other hand, whose motive is primarily economic, find that it is not literary but technical or general translation that is more worth their while. Indeed, technical translation is not at all badly paid in relation to comparable activities. Once a translator has established a reputation for good swift work, it is possible to make quite a lot of money, especially if she is equipped with electronic tools to facilitate the process.

Why is it that technical translation is so much better paid than literary translation? The answer lies, of course, in *market forces*, in the law of *supply and demand*. There is a great need for translation in the modern world, largely as a result of the globalisation of the economy, and it is this that determines its value. In

order to illustrate this, let us briefly examine some of the main sources of translation work for professional translators.

First and foremost, in today's society, we must refer to the world of *business*. Corporations that have subsidiaries in other countries, that outsource their production or export their finished product with recourse to local distributors and marketers, are necessarily very dependent upon mediators like translators. A huge amount of documentation is generated by this commercial activity that frequently needs to be translated: management manuals, internal regulations, correspondence between subsidiaries and mother company or with suppliers and customers, websites, and advertising materials to name just some. Because their product is competing on the market, and because the quality of that product is ultimately affected by all transactions that take place during the production/commercialisation process, these companies are prepared to pay considerable sums of money for a professional job of translation.

A second important source of translation work, at least in Portugal, is likely to be the *European Union*. Once again, an immense amount of documentation is generated in this context, relating to development projects, grant proposals, exchange programmes, cultural initiatives, etc; and large sums of money change hands as a result. This too helps to raise the value of the activity that makes the transfer of information possible.

Globalisation has also had an effect on many other spheres. In *academia*, there are conference papers and research articles that need to be translated if non-anglophone academics are to have a chance to compete on the international stage; in *science, technology and medicine*, new developments are spread across the globe through translation; and in the field of *law*, there is also increased internationalisation. In each of these cases, the money that is paid to translators reflects the importance that these texts have on the market. Indeed, the market recognised long before the theoreticians that *texts are commodities*, that they have a quantifiable *value* and are subject to *market forces*, to the laws of *supply and demand*.

This has implications on many levels. Firstly there is the question of *price*. Ultimately the price established will reflect the value of the translated text to the customer, and in all the situations mentioned above (the multinational whose production or distribution abroad depends upon translation; the institution applying

for EU money; the academic or scientist who wants to publish in an international journal), the client may be unable to achieve their aim without the mediation of translation. The negotiating power, therefore, is in the hands of the supplier, that is to say, the translator. And although the process is, of course, subject to bids (many clients require estimates and will initially shop around to find the best deal), once a translator has proved her worth, then customers tend to come back – a situation that is perhaps not dissimilar to the concept of brand loyalty that exists in markets for washing powder, coffee etc, something achieved not through price so much as other factors like reliability, efficiency and even image. Also in common with other commercial activities, the translation market has many different niches; there are different types of customers that are prepared to pay different prices. As an example of this, we only have to think of conference interpreting: the prices paid for simultaneous translation at an international summit of world leaders are very different from what would be expected at a little conference at a local college with one or two guest foreign speakers.

Secondly, there is the matter of translator *status*. This has always been an immensely important issue for translation theorists, who are obsessed with the traditional subordination of translators to authors in literary translation. However, in market-driven translation, this is not really an issue. The technical translator does not really have status as such, or at least, no more or less than anyone else in the supply chain: they have no rights over their text; they don't sign them; their work is effectively invisible. But then, in many of the situations listed above, authorship is not an issue either. These are functional texts, not expressive ones, and the original document is often not signed, nor perceived as the property of any individual.

The third factor (and perhaps the most important one in this context) is the question of *translation strategy*. In deciding how to translate a given text, a translator will assess the relationship between the supplier of the text (the writer) and the receiver (the reader) to determine who has the power in that particular transaction, and will translate accordingly. This gives a whole new take on the old fidelity/fluency debate, which can be illustrated with examples of different text types. For instance, in the case of a curriculum vitae, the writer is probably applying for a job or a grant, which means that the reader of the text will wield a considerable amount of power over his future. It makes sense, therefore, that the translated text should conform to the norms of the target culture, or else the

translator's client runs the risk of not getting the job. The opposite is true in the case of documentation produced by a mother company for consumption by its subsidiaries abroad (eg. manuals, instructions, regulations, etc). In this case, it is the head office that will set the tone of the communication and determine what norms are to be followed in discourse, as in other areas of operations. Publicity material, which aims of course to attract customers, will have to be reader-oriented; while letters are very variable – if the aim of the letter is to request services, apply for something, apologise, etc, then it will be reader-oriented, but if it is a complaint or a response to any of the above, then it may be more writer-oriented. Academic texts are a particularly interesting example. In most situations, these will be by foreign academics who want to publish in English, and therefore their style will necessarily need to be domesticated to suit the target publication. However, if the author is a canonical figure on the world stage, then even if s/he writes in a highly unconventional style (like Derrida or Foucault, for example) the readership will be prepared to come to them.

These are criteria which market-driven translators use intuitively all the time.³ However, sometimes practical and ethical problems do arise that challenge the most aware practitioner. This is largely due to the fact that *discourses change*. The norms governing the format and language used in particular text types are in a constant state of flux, reflecting the ever-shifting balance of power between players in the real world.

Let us take as an example the case of academic discourse. Fifteen to twenty years ago, the predominant style used in the Portuguese discourse of the humanities was somewhat baroque, heavily ornamented, opaque, with long elaborate sentences, a great deal of redundancy and figurative language. In recent years, however, presumably due to the influence of English, this kind of style has become much less common; Portuguese texts are getting clearer and more transparent. This is happening, however, just as English academic discourse is coming under pressure to change in the opposite direction. For some years now, English academic prose style has been accused (by post-structuralists, feminists, post-colonialists and ethnomethodologists, amongst others) of encoding values of positivism and empiricism, which of course have been long discredited as philosophical systems,

³ This has in fact been theorised in the work of Hans Vermeer.

and of making claims to a kind of objectivity that is untenable in the post-modern world. This has led to attempts to open it up in some areas, to make it less rigid and allow room for polysemy, paradox, subjectivity and metaphor; consequently, English academic discourse is slowly beginning to change in quite the opposite direction to Portuguese. In both cultures, it is possible today to find different styles co-existing within the same genre (sometimes even within the same text), which naturally brings a whole new set of challenges for the translator.

Another complex problem, specific to English translation, is raised by the fact that English is no longer the exclusive property of the British or Americans, but is now used all over the world as a lingua franca by people whose mother tongue is something else. The translator may sometimes find herself in the situation of having to use phrases which actually do not exist in natural English, in order to make her text transparent to readers of other tongues. This is particularly common in the E.U. context, where a whole new variety of (European) English appears to be developing designed to facilitate communication between people from the different member states.

It is the complexities of these real world situations, rather than some high-flown abstract ideals, that govern the translation strategies employed in the market. Translators have to be highly attuned to the markets in which they work. They have to understand exactly what stage of development these markets are at and be sensitive to the shifting balance of power between them. Then they translate accordingly, deciding upon their strategy on a case-by-case basis.

To my mind, therefore, the divergence that exists between theoreticians and practitioners in the field of translation is ultimately about the question of *money*, which indirectly affects the way the writing professions are perceived. Ideologically-committed theorists like Venuti are, to my mind, the direct heirs of more traditional theorists like Dryden and Schleiermacher in conceiving of the author as a superior being, living in the realm of pure spirit, unsullied by matters of economic necessity (we only have to think of all the ugly words available to describe someone who sells her services for money!). But, as culturalists have long pointed out, this conception of authorship is a luxury for those who don't need the world and who can therefore make claims to superior status. Anyone who has to make a living is heavily constrained by market forces, and for every job, has to take account of questions like: who is paying for the translation; what that customer's

aim is in the real world; how she can best help the customer achieve that aim, and how to deal with customers that have an unrealistic notion of their own status in the global economy. What the theorist can ultimately learn from the practitioner, therefore, is about the *market*, how it works and the extent to which anyone who is engaged with the world has to comply with those forces; it provides a kind of *reality check*, as it were.

This is not to say that ethical questions, such as those raised by Venuti, are entirely irrelevant – after all, we have seen other market operators forced to take account of ethical issues (such as gas emissions, waste recycling, child labour etc) to the point that these have actually become selling points for the companies concerned. That is maybe the direction of the future. Right now, though, I believe that the translation market is not yet ready for interventionism. The process of change is very slow, and it is not the professional translator with her mortgage to pay and children to raise that will be the person to implement it.

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