

## Agents of Power and Power Relations in Translation

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**Abstract:** Do you remember the last time you went to a bookshop and had a glance at the shelves labeled foreign books? Do you remember what kinds of books did you see there? Of which genre were they? What types of authors had written them? What was their typical subject matter? Did not you notice that you can see only special and predetermined types of foreign books there? Did not you feel some hands behind those shelves who act as the determiners of what you should and what you should not read? Mighty hands dictating whose works and whose ideas you must know by heart and whose notions and beliefs you are entitled to get aware of? The present study considers the issue of agents of power in translation, the powers who determine what books whose books and by whom a given book is to be read. The powers who are capable of including a minority of readers and excluding others, the powers which do not let you know whose words you are reading and the powers which do not let a translator's work be published as it was originally created.

**Key words:** Domestication, foreigniation, omission, power relations, reader exclusion, translation, translation norms, writer exclusion

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### INTRODUCTION

What do we exactly mean by the word power in the context of translation? Power in this context refers to using language to include or exclude a particular kind of reader, a certain system of values, a set of beliefs or an entire culture! If you try to have a profound insight into the bulk of foreign literature translated into Persian, you will sooner or later notice that those works tend to sound the same almost as if they were written by one writer and translated by one translator. Therefore, we can divide the influence of such powers into three major categories:

- Powers excluding the reader
- Powers excluding the author
- Powers excluding the translator

### POWERS EXCLUDING THE READER

This sort power refers to the cases in which the readers are compelled to read in a particular way and particular types of texts. The use of language to exclude some and include others is not new in translation. One of the proponents of such power play is Niclas von Wyle who confesses that in some of his translations he has not attempted to be comprehensible to the common man, writing instead for the high-born. It is in fact in this domain, namely the use of language (not necessarily foreign) angled towards certain kind of reader and away from others that translators themselves are sometimes directly and consciously responsible for exercising

absolute power to exclude the reader, especially when they are academically inclined. You may have had the experience of feeling excluded when reading an article written in some Iranian journals, especially those which are claimed to be written for the educated class of the society. An obvious example of such exclusions by translators is when they resort to literal translation in rendering the texts which have allusions. For example, when somebody wants to translate the works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, one of the prominent figures of Romantic Era in English literature which are mostly replete with allusions, he has to avoid simply clinging to literal translation and try to provide some paratexts including glosses and footnotes of course if his purpose is trying to be understood by his readership rather than posing himself as a sophisticated translator! By paratext here, we mean those elements in addition to the main body of text such as titles, heading and footnotes. However, this attitude fails to take into consideration some crucial consequences of avoiding using paratexts:

- The vast majority of Persian speakers do not understand those allusions
- It is not obvious where such readers should go for an explanation
- It is not clear how much effort they have to expend in figuring those allusions out

In such cases, the readers are excluded in the name of some ideology of textual purity. This question of translating to exclude or include readership has always

been a driving force in translation and it is this power struggle which lies at the heart of literal versus free translation.

**Translator's voice:** Another factor resulting in the exclusion or at least marginalizing the readership is what which is referred to as the translators voice (Baker, 2001). Voice refers the narrative style and rhythm of the ST researcher. Hermans refers to the voice as the underlying and potentially distorting presence of the translator's choice in TL. It is believed by some great translators like Vladimir Nabakov that it must be grasped in order to produce a successful target language text:

I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like sky scrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity. I want such footnotes and the absolutely literal sense with no emasculation and no padding

As it is clear, Nabakov's translation approach is an example of his favored poetics and a demonstration of his power as an researcher-translator. By Translator's poetics we are referring to favored genres, popular motifs and canonized texts making up the literary repertoire of a language and a culture. Such translations deliberately marginalize the readers who do not share the translator's view of language.

### **POWERS EXCLUDING THE AUTHOR**

When such powers are exerted, the researcher becomes the victim of the power play in translation. In such cases, the researcher is condemned to oblivion. The effect of such powers can be categorized in three groups:

- Normalization and domestication
- Real or imagined target norms
- Omission

Consider the following example:

**Example (Back translation from Arabic):** What take root deep down are melancholy feelings which appear unobtrusive at first only to become aggressive with no hinges. At those moments of anger which recur so frequently and which take innumerable forms.

**The source text:** Deep down, melancholy feelings take root. They may seem fairly unobtrusive at first. But people will often get angry. When this happens, these feelings burst out into the open, assertive and unruly. They can

appear in a number of guises. In reading through these texts, you may have noted a particular stability off target text meanings which cannot possibly do justice to or in any way accurately convey, the variety of voices and the multiplicity of tones characteristic of the source text in question. This usurping of source text specificity and uniqueness may be explained in terms of a complex power structure at work in doing any translation.

Particularly with prestigious translation traditions (e.g., Anglo-American), translators are known to have been able to exercise absolute power to exclude a reader directly and consciously. However, real or imagined target norms can also turn translation into an ideological weapon for excluding an researcher by resorting to such ostensibly harmless procedures as omission or normalization, often in the service of such seemingly noble goals as sustaining fluency, combating boredom (Baker, 1992).

**Norms in translation:** This term has had many uses in translation studies but its most influential has been through the descriptive translation theorists, notably Gideon Toury who views norm as translation behavior typically obtaining under specific socio-cultural or textual situations (Toury, 1998).

In the long history of translation such notions as accuracy, correctness or well-formedness have played an important role in assessing the quality of a translation. Depending on what is understood by translation, these notions have been given different significance. Despite much research over the past 50 years, translation studies have not developed into a homogeneous discipline and there is no agreement on its central concepts. Different approaches exist side by side, each of which focuses on specific aspects, looks at the product or the process of translation from a specific angle and uses or avoids specific terminology. One of the concepts that has been used differently within translation studies and whose value has been both asserted strongly and called into question is the concept of norms (Nida and Taber, 1982). Both Gideon Toury and Theo Hermans have contributed substantially to this debate and to the development of the concept of norms in and for translation studies.

They are the two main contributors to this CILS issue which is based on a seminar on Translation and Norms held at Aston University in February, 1998. Research within translation studies has been concerned with the description of actual translations with the formulation of general principles and with practical applications. Norms play a role in all these respects, since they are related to assumptions and expectations about correctness and/or appropriateness (Seguinot, 1990). Bartsch (1987) defines

norms as the social reality of correctness notions. That is in each community, there is knowledge of what counts as correct or appropriate behavior including communicative behaviour. In a society, this knowledge exists in the form of norms. Norms are developed in the process of socialisation. They are conventional, they are shared by members of a community, i.e., they function intersubjectively as models for behaviour and they also regulate expectations concerning both the behaviour itself and the products of this behavior (Venuti, 2000).

Bartsch (1987) who applied the norms concept to linguistics, differentiates between product norms and production norms which however are closely related. Product norms regulate what a product must look like in order to be regarded as correct and appropriate. They concern the correctness and the well-formedness of linguistic expressions (i.e., linguistic norms as related to the language system) as well as the correctness of their use (i.e., communicative norms as related to communicative behaviour). Production norms concern the methods and strategies by which a correct product can be achieved (cf. the operational norms in Toury (1998). Language and language use can be judged as correct from a phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic point of view.

There is also a difference between what is possible in a language, regardless of context (described by rules) and what is considered appropriate in a given context (described by conventions or norms). When conventions are enforced with normative power, they are considered to be norms. Norms are binding and their violation usually arouses disapproval of some kind among the community concerned. The force of a norm is built up in the relationships between norm authorities, norm enforcers, norm codifiers and norm subjects. For example, grammar books and lexicons provide models for correct linguistic forms, language teachers correct wrong or inappropriate communicative behaviour or teachers of translation judge a text to be a good or a bad translation (Venuti, 1998). In translation studies, the debate about norms has shifted from linguistic norms to translational norms (cf. Schaffner, in press), mainly thanks to the influential work by Toury and Hermans.

Linguistic Norms in Translation studies when a more systematic study of translation began in the second half of the 20th century, it was very much influenced by (applied) linguistics. Translation was understood as a linguistic phenomenon as an operation performed on languages. This operation was seen as a process of transcoding between Source Language (SL) and Target Language (TL) as illustrated by the following definition: Translation may be defined as follows; the replacement of

textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent material in another language (TL) (Catford, 1965). Any difference between SL and TL that became obvious in a translation was attributed to the differences in the two linguistic systems. Consequently, translation studies was conceived as a linguistic discipline.

The precise description of the systematic regularities between signs and combinations of signs in the two languages involved was seen as a precondition for the faithful and accurate reproduction of the source-language text (Venuti, 2001). The target-language text was required to be identical to the SL-text in content style, effect and to respect the rules and norms of the TL. Linguistic translation studies thus, were basically interested in the norms of the language systems. The linguistic units of SL and TL were compared in order to set up mechanisms (in the sense of normative translation principles) for overcoming differences in the language structures encountered in the process of translation. A translation norm in this context was defined as translating a linguistic unit by its generally accepted equivalent (a position which is still held by some scholars today, as evident in the debates) (Selinker, 1972).

A huge number of studies into specific linguistic phenomena provided detailed explanations of regularities in SL and TL and tried to derive rules or norms for translation. Topics that were discussed in journal articles or in books were for example how to translate German conditionals into Russian, the substitution of word classes in translation, German pre-nominal extended attributes translated into English. The starting point was always a specific linguistic structure or phenomenon in the SL for which methods of translation were provided, as a kind of ready-made solution for the practicing translator (Baker, 2001).

Highly influential in this respect have been the seven methods of translation of the *Stylistique comparee* (Vinay and Darbelnet, 1958/2000) set up on the basis of a comparison of the lexical and syntactic structures of English and French. A similarly practical and pedagogical purpose underlies Newmark (1988) seven translation procedures and techniques of translation for the language pair English and German. All these studies are based on a contrastive analysis of linguistic units and syntactic structures which are seen as correct in the two languages (Ziahosseiny, 2006). Friederich's book *Technik des Übersetzens. Englisch und Deutsch*, first published in 1969 and reprinted several times since then (latest edition in 1995) can serve as an illustration of the studies that were conducted within this normative linguistic approach. In 25 chapters, Friederich discusses linguistic translation problems and gives techniques (practically in

the sense of rules) for dealing with them. The problems he discusses range from lexical issues to syntactic structures with a specific focus on differences in the linguistic systems of English and German. All chapters are constructed in a fairly similar way; the translation problem is given and the various possible solutions are illustrated by a large number of examples which however, do not go beyond the sentence level. There are no comments about the context or the genre.

The focus is on showing the possibilities that are allowed by the linguistic systems (Baker, 1992). The concept of norms is important in two respects in linguistic approaches to translation. On the one hand, they are concerned with the linguistic norms of the two languages, i.e., how to produce utterances and texts that are correct according to the respective rules and norms. On the other hand, the relations and regularities between the two linguistic systems that were discovered on the basis of contrastive analyses were translated into guidelines or rules for the translator mostly with prescriptive intent. Translation procedures and similar guidelines however, were formulated in a rather general way and gave the impression that they are applicable throughout.

A chosen TL-form may well be correct according to the rules of the language system but this does not necessarily mean that the text as a whole appropriately fulfils its communicative function in the TL-situation and culture. Since, we do not translate words or grammatical forms with texts with a specific communicative function, the limitations of a narrow linguistic approach soon became obvious. Thus, a logical development was that in the 1970s, the insights and approaches of textlinguistics, a new (sub-)discipline of (applied) linguistics were adopted in translation studies. Thus, regularities of the text itself of the genre and of the context were given more consideration. Textlinguistics defines the text as the basic unit of communication and therefore, as the primary object of research. For translation studies this means that the text itself is considered to be the unit of translation. Translation is no longer defined as transcoding linguistic signs but as retextualising the SL-text. The focus has changed from reproducing meanings to producing texts as illustrated in Neubert's definition of translation as source-text induced targettext production (Selinker, 1991). The basic assumption of textlinguistic approaches to translation is that SL and TL-text do not only differ in their sentence structures which are determined by the respective linguistic systems but also, in regularities beyond the sentence boundaries.

In other words, text norms need to be added to the norms of the linguistic systems. Based on identified regularities, texts can be categorised into text-types,

genres, text-classes. Text-typological or genre conventions are culture-specific and can change over time which makes genres relevant for translation studies. As a result of a systematic comparison and description of genres in SL and TL, prototypes of text types or genre profiles can be set up. Such profiles can serve as models for the retextualisation of the SL-text according to the TL conventions. In other words, knowledge of cross-cultural similarities and/or differences in genre conventions is crucial to the translator in order to produce appropriate TL-texts.

In this context, the notion of norms becomes relevant again, in the sense of knowledge of genre regularities, i.e., knowledge of how to produce a text as an exemplar of a genre (or text type) according to the norms. It also involves expectations about the structure of a particular text. With reference to texts and genres many scholars prefer to speak of conventions instead of norms with the argument that norms are usually associated with rules and non-adherence to them results in sanctions.

Conventions, however are not binding with only embody preferences. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have investigated genre conventions, both at macro and micro-level from a translational perspective. Genre profiles are useful for translation practice and translator training but also limited. On the one hand, not all genres are highly conventionalised and therefore more readily predictable as to their structure. On the other hand, a large portion of texts contain both constant and variable elements which textlinguistic translation studies must be aware of in their attempt to discover text type-specific translation regularities (Ziahosseiny, 1999).

**An example:** An example of marginalizing the author by means of imagined target norms and conventions can be seen in the translation of a novel written by Milton Kundera, called *The Joke*. The first translation of this book had been chronologically rearranged and when the film *Once Upon a Time in America* was originally released in the states, its chronology was felt to be too difficult for an American audience to understand therefore a new version was prepared in which all analepsis and prolepsis were removed! Another model of power analysis proposed by Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) approaches these relationships of power in socio-literary contexts and sees translation as a form of re-writing even manipulation, essentially driven by such all-pervasive power structures as ideology and poetics. By re-writing they referred to metalinguistic processes including translation which can be said to reinterpret, alter or generally manipulate text to serve a variety of ideological motives (Vermeer, 1989).

**Domestication vs. Foreignization:** Translation does not only involve giving the equivalent meaning in the Target Language (TL), rather it involves considering the values of the TL and the Source Language (SL) whether they are linguistic values or cultural ones. Some translators prefer changing the SL values and making them readable for the TL audience. This is termed domestication. Others on the other hand, prefer keeping the values of the SL and exposing audience to them. This is termed Foreignization. When translators use Foreignization, they keep the SL values and make them salient in the TL. Translating verses of the Quran into English shows foreign elements to the English language readership (Williams and Chesterman, 2002).

The debate on whether to use Domestication or Foreignization has attracted the attention of translation theorists for long time. Venuti discussed those two techniques in his book *The Translator Invisibility* in 1995. Venuti carried out research on translation in the Anglo-American culture. He found out that most publishers advocate Domestication as it makes the translation reader-friendly. The trend is to choose texts from other cultures that appeal to the Anglo-American values. For Venuti this method is making the translator invisible on the one hand and implies an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values on the other hand. By Domestication, the Anglo-American culture imposes its own hegemonic power upon other minor cultures.

To avoid such cultural problems, Venuti recommends applying Foreignization as a solution for cultural clashes in terms of translation. Foreignization was introduced by Schleimacher. He defined it as the translator moves the reader towards the writer (Hatim, 2001). If Foreignization is applied to a translation, the TL readers will feel that the translator is visible and they will tell they are reading a translation (Munday, 2001). This solution would recover the reputation of translators and highlight their importance according to Venuti. Venuti would have introduced a new technique that all translators prefer to adopt if Foreignization had solved their problems. In his review article (Venuti's *Visibility*, Target 8:1 165-177:1996), Pym accuses Venuti of introducing the invisibility of the translator to make himself more visible. Pym comments on four logical themes from the introduction of Venuti book then he discusses them one by one.

#### **POWERS EXCLUDING THE TRANSLATOR**

Translators who as we argued above are some times the excluding powers are not immune from being

influenced by this power play. In this instance they are often doomed to be invisible. The appearance of the words Translated by, on the title page of a book, article or a piece of writing is likely to deceive both readers and critics because most readers do not realize that the text of a translation in the case of the published books in particular is rarely all the translators own words. When the translators submit their final work to the publisher it usually undergoes the edition and in fact revision of a copy editor who most of the times exercise considerable influence in shaping the final product (Hatim and Munday, 2004).

As an example we can refer to an experience by Peter Fawcett who had delivered a translated book to an editor and she said that my way of working on this book was to think back to my student days studying linguistics textbooks and thinking I am sure this does not need to sound this complicated. However, by these statements I am not going to imply that the translated works need not to be revised by editors. For example, if Paulo Coelho's books translated by Arash Hejazi had undergone a simple edition by an experienced translator his awful works were not published so widely.

#### **CONCLUSION**

After the whole study, the research has found that:

- The use of language to exclude some parties and include others is not some thing new
- Literal translation is one way of achieving this kind of power on the part of translator
- In free translation it is likely that the author would be the real victim of translation
- The ideological weapon of exclusion in free translation is the use of TL norms
- The translators themselves are no more immune to power displays than are the reader and the researcher

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