

# Cultural approaches

Cristina Marinetti  
University of Warwick

The cultural approach or ‘cultural turn’ (see *The turns of Translation Studies\**), as it is commonly known, is a theoretical and methodological shift in Translation Studies that gained recognition in the early nineties and is primarily associated with the work of Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere and, later, Lawrence Venuti. While drawing on Descriptive Translation Studies\*, especially the work of the so called ‘Manipulation School’ (Hermans 1985), and sharing in the target-orientedness of polysystems theory\* and Gideon Toury’s work on norms of translation\*, the cultural approach also reflects a more general shift in epistemological stance in the humanities and beyond, from ‘positivism’ to ‘relativity’, from a belief in finding universal standards for phenomena to a belief that phenomena are influenced (if not determined) by the observer. Although primarily developed from the study of literature, the cultural approach has been seen to cut across the literature v. non-literature divide as it ‘implicitly embraces all kinds of translation’ (Snell-Hornby 1990: 84).

One of the cornerstones of the cultural approach in Translation Studies\* is criticism of the linguistic approach (see *Linguistics and translation\*\**) and of the notion of equivalence as the starting point for a theorization of translation. For Bassnett & Lefevere, translation is primarily contextual. It is a fact of history and a product of the target culture, and as such it cannot be explained through the mapping of linguistic correspondence between languages, or judged with respect to universal standards of quality and accuracy (1990: 3). By shifting the focus from language to culture, it was possible to draw on important theoretical developments, such as the Foucauldian notions of ‘power’ and ‘discourse’, and use them to redefine the contexts and conditions of translation (1990: 6). In Bassnett & Lefevere’s *Translation, History and Culture*, various contributions demonstrate the cultural power of translation, whereby translators can deliberately manipulate the texts to advance their own ideology (1990: 88) or mimic dominant discourses to guarantee acceptance in the target culture (1990: 57). Translation is shown to be a powerful mode of cultural construction, a means by which new nations can establish their identity amongst neighbouring countries (1990: 65), but also a way of constructing fictitious ‘images’ of foreign authors, texts and entire cultures. And this is where ‘the cultural approach’ becomes a methodological as well as theoretical shift, moving Translation Studies onto new ground:

Now the questions have changed, the object of study has been redefined, what is studied is the text, embedded within its network of both source and target

cultural signs and in this way Translation Studies has been able to utilize the linguistic approach and move out beyond it. (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990: 12)

Another redefinition articulated for the first time by the cultural approach is that of translation as a form of re-writing. Alongside anthologies, histories, criticism and adaptation\*, translation is one of the ways in which works of literature are 're-written', and these re-writings are the primary way in which cultures construct 'images' and 'representations' of authors, texts and entire periods of history. In one of his many detailed case studies, Lefevere shows how the choices made by the French, English and German translators of *The Diary of Anne Frank* were a result of ideological manipulation. Especially poignant is the analysis of the German translation, which tones down or eliminates Anne's account of the violent treatment of the Jews and her harsh words against the Germans, thus rewriting Anne Frank's diary to fit in with the public discourse of the mid-fifties when Germany was struggling to escape its Nazi past (Lefevere 1992: 71–75). For Lefevere, in particular, the notion of rewriting is very important and he argues very forcefully that the study of literature should be the study of rewritings because these and not the original, classical, canonical texts are the primary mode of consumption and appreciation of literature in modern times (1992: 7). The focus on rewriting serves not only to broaden the horizon of Translation Studies beyond linguistics and text analysis but also aims at contributing to the study of literature and culture by showing the value of studying translations as elements that 'play an analysable part in the manipulation of words and concepts which, among other things, constitute power in a culture' (Lefevere 1985: 241)

The concept of 'manipulation' goes hand in hand with the notion of rewriting in helping to redefine translation after the cultural turn. Translation is rewriting and 'rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power' (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990: vii). The contexts and modes of these manipulations are many and varied and in *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of the Literary Fame* Lefevere offers a model or rather 'a system'<sup>1</sup> to analyse translations and other forms of rewriting by studying the 'control factors' that are behind the manipulation of literature and which he articulates through the concept of 'patronage'.

Patronage is 'any power (person, institution) that can further or hinder the reading, writing and rewriting of literature' (1992: 15). Power and therefore 'patronage' here is understood in the Foucauldian sense not as a primarily repressive force but as the main producer of knowledge and discourse. As a control factor, patronage works, for

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1. In actual fact, Lefevere here draws on the concept of systems introduced by the Russian formalists but plays down structuralist terminology, and, distancing himself from Even-Zohar's polysystems, does not claim to offer a system or a theory but a 'heuristic construct' that will help him introduce the main concepts of systems thinking and show how they can be applied to the study of rewritings in a productive manner' (1992: 12).

Lefevere, on three distinct levels: ideology, economics, and status. Although very difficult to distinguish neatly, especially because historically they have often been exercised by the same agents\*\* – be it institutional or individual (e.g. local kings in pre-colonial India or the Catholic Church in Renaissance Italy) – these components of patronage determine translation choices both directly, by influencing or imposing translation decisions, and indirectly by determining the parameters within which the professionals (translators, writers, rewriters, educators) work. The professionals, in turn, constitute another ‘control factor’ by determining directly, from inside the literary system, which works of literature to translate and how. Later in the book, before delving into a meticulous case study of the translation of Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*, Lefevere demonstrates the heuristic/explanatory nature of his model by backgrounding patronage and introducing ‘the dominant poetics’ as a control factor:

Two factors basically determine the image of a work of literature as projected by a translation. These two factors are, in order of importance, the translator’s ideology (whether he/she willingly embraces it, or whether it is imposed on him/her as a constraint by some form of patronage) and the poetics dominant in the receiving literature at the time of the translation. (1992: 41)

With patronage, the cultural approach moves sideways from descriptive Translation Studies and starts tracing the roots of translation phenomena not through posited ideas of systems and cultural norms but in the role played by institutions and individuals shaping those systems and cultures, thus paving the way for reflections in recent translation thinking on important questions of ‘ethics’ and ‘agency’ (see *Ethics and translation\**; *Sociology of translation\**).

The question of ethics emerges forcefully in the mid-nineties, especially in the work of Lawrence Venuti, further problematizing the application of positivistic/scientific methodologies to the study of translation. Central to a redefinition of translation for Venuti, is the Derridean concept of *différance*, which unveils the relative and relational nature of meaning. By embracing Derrida’s ultimate call for semiotic relativity, Venuti is able to look at both foreign texts and translations as derivative products, which cannot be assessed on the basis of relationships between source and target texts. Since meaning is not fixed and unchangeable but plural and contingent, the translated text and the translator’s intentions are not one and the same but generate multiple and often conflicting discourses. This conflict, what Venuti calls ‘the violence that resides in the very purpose and activity of translation’ (1995: 19), should be the central concern of Translation Studies both in terms of methodology and ethics. Methodologically because it locates translation within the asymmetrical relationships of power (economic, political, cultural) that characterize cultural production; and ethically as it allows us to denounce the ‘invisibility’ of cultural and linguistic difference and champion the cause of translators who play a vital role in the global

circulation of culture and are yet marginalized by the very systems they contribute to create. By further relativizing translation, and the methods for studying translation, Venuti also calls very forcefully for an ‘ethics’ of translation, an ‘ethics of difference... that recognizes and seeks to remedy the asymmetries in translating, a theory of good and bad methods for practising and studying translation’ (1998: iii). Through Venuti’s work, the cultural approach brings to Translation Studies not only a focus on culture, history and the translator but also the basis for a more self-reflexive practice for both translators and translation scholars.

Subsequent culturally-inflected studies have looked at translation as cultural interaction and have developed the question of translation ethics in the context of political censorship, endorsement of or resistance to a colonial power and gender politics, generating a substantial body of literature that has developed these ideas into legitimate sub-areas (see *Censorship\**; *Post-colonial literatures and translation\**; *Gender in translation\**; *Political translation\**).

Another innovative development of the cultural approach is the attempt to map translation in relation to transnational literary tendencies and – long before the publication of Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (SEE further reading section) – to the concept of ‘world literature’. Bassnett and Lefevre study this in the context of lesser known languages and postulate that these literatures ‘will only gain access to something that could be called “world literature”, if they submit to the textual system, the discursive formation (...) underlying the current concept of world literature’ (1998: 76). To give theoretical strength to the concept of world literature, Bassnett & Lefevre draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s *Theory of Practice* and see translation as primarily concerned not with the circulation of information but of cultural capital. In this sense, translation is seen as a phenomenon that is determined not only by the dominant poetics and ‘control factors’ of the target culture but by transnational forces that depend on the dominant discourses underlying the concept of ‘world literature’. Before his untimely death in 1996, Lefevre was developing the idea of ‘conceptual grids’, ‘a set of conceptual categories transcending various nations’ (Bassnett & Lefevre 1998: 77) which he was beginning to see as playing a major part in determining both translation decisions and the success and acceptance of minor literatures on the world stage.

The ‘cultural turn’ has been the subject of criticism in recent times from two opposite, and possibly self-neutralizing perspectives, as either too conservative or too radical. From within Translation Studies, some see the cultural turn’s move from text to culture as not innovative or distinctive as it ‘had long been a part of the intellectual background of the descriptive paradigm’ (Pym 2010: 149) while, from outside Translation Studies, comes a criticism of the broadening of Translation Theory (TT) beyond the linguistic operated by the cultural turn which has allegedly lead to a focus on ‘questions that TT scholars seem interested in but are perhaps not well-equipped to handle’ (Singh 2007: 80). When engaging in depth with the literature of the cultural

approach, it is impossible not to see the importance and value of such contributions not only in developing Translation Studies as a discipline but also in raising awareness of the importance of translation in other fields. The greatest achievement of the cultural approach is revealing the possibilities offered by the study of translation as a mode of representation of culture and as an active player in the dialectic of competing cultural discourses within and across languages and national cultures. The recent turn to 'cultural translation' in sociology and to 'world literature' in comparative literature are further proof that the 'cultural turn' of the nineties was indeed innovative and almost prophetic in its tireless championing of translation as a vital concept that should become central to all disciplines involved in the study of cultural interaction.

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## Further reading

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