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ON DEFINING NORMS AND LAWS:  
A WESTERN DISCOURSE ON TRANSLATION PRODUCTION?

One can hardly question the impact of the notion of culture on the vocabulary of contemporary translation research. This is not merely manifested in a wide-ranged consensus with respect to the understanding of translation as a *cultural* phenomenon. It is further articulated in reflexive accounts of research methods and hypotheses, in which culture is used as part of a meta-theoretical and self-critical thought, aiming to account for the historicity and relativity of the language by which translation is described.

This impact is evident throughout the development of contemporary Translation Studies. In 1987, Gideon Toury introduced a collection of essays entitled “Translation Across Cultures”, by stressing that the title

should be taken to imply much more than the uncontending claim that translation as an *event* inevitably involves inter-cultural and cross-cultural factors. It is first and foremost intended as a reflection of the attempt to integrate the cultural dimension into translation *studies*, which is a major characteristic of a great deal of what has been going on in the discipline in the last few years (1998[1987]: 1).

It thus expresses, in Toury’s view, “a tentative agreement on the *theoretical* level” (ibid.: 1). During the next decade, this theoretical discussion turned towards its own foundations and defined as cultural translation the hermeneutic act of understanding and describing translation practice: “When we engage in historical and cross-cultural studies on translation”, as Theo Hermans pointed out, “we translate other people’s concepts and practices of translation on the basis of our own, historical, concept of translation, including its normative aspect and the values it secures. We have no other choice” (1999: 68-69).

I have no quarrel with either of the above propositions: that is, the definition of translation as a cultural phenomenon, stressed by Toury, and the description of our own interpretive discourse as culture-bound, suggested by Hermans. Yet I also realise that my spontaneous agreement does not stem from a careful examination of the hypotheses in question, but from the fact that the notion of culture, as is used in the context of contemporary translation research, is largely underdefined. Hence, it is capable of accommodating various theoretical stances and commitments, at the cost of blurring their theoretical edges and often concealing oppositions and disagreements.

My initial concern lies therefore with the obligation to understand (before I become able to agree) what we mean by the assertions that translation and translation discourse are cultural issues. The history of a concept can be proved a useful guide in an attempt to articulate this concept’s latent meanings. So, when we turn to the history of ‘culture’, we encounter two mutually antithetical definitions: The first, as Raymond Williams points out, derived from the original meaning of culture as the tending of natural growth, which was extended to a process of human development. In this sense, ‘culture’ and ‘cultivation’ denoted a universal ideal, that was taken to demarcate the end of human progress and coincide with modern European intellectual, moral and aesthetic values. The second definition was developed by Herder and the German Romantics as a rejection of the idea that the entire humankind has long been engaged in a unilinear mode of development leading to modern Europe. In contrast to this assumption, Herder, as Williams explains, spoke of “cultures in plural”: “the specific

and variable cultures of different nations and periods, but also the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation” (1988 [1976]: 89). There is no such thing, Herder asserted, as a people devoid of culture (1969: 382).

It is important to remember that both of these meanings, that is, culture as an ideal of universal validity, and culture as the particularised and irreducible spirit of a social group, share their historical origin in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century northwestern Europe. The former materialised an imperialist European identity. It voiced a society which projected onto others an idealised image of itself, and thus acted, by the same move, to marginalise and discredit the real others that stood outside its limits. The latter appeared as the negation of this act of complacency. It not only described the Western tradition as merely one mode of human development among various, equally valuable alternatives. It further suggested that each of these alternatives constitutes a unique mode of understanding and experiencing reality. It thus offers a discourse of knowledge that is both irreducible (i.e. it cannot be evaluated by reference to a universal, acultural model) and essentially untranslatable (i.e. it cannot be fully reproduced in the context of different cultural frameworks).

It is this second meaning, which has been maintained as much in the discourses of modern anthropology as in the intrinsic relativism of the act of ‘*hermeneuein*’, interpreting history, that has formed the basis for a critique of ‘culture’ as the end of progress and history. This critique has been at once epistemological and political. Depending on the writer’s theoretical commitments and ideological affiliations, it stressed either the philosophical impossibility of seeing and speaking outside cultural boundaries or the imperialist violence lurking in any assertion of scientific (in the sense of neutral and disinterested) accuracy.

In the field of translation, such a critique was initially directed against the first assumptions of historical translation research, dating back in the seventies: against James Holmes’ description of translation “as a field of *pure* research – that is to say, research pursued for its own sake” (1988: 71), and Toury’s emphasis on the status of Descriptive Translation Studies as an empirical science, which aims to discover and describe what translation proves to be *in reality*, and therefore what it may be expected to be in specifiable historical conditions” (1995: 32). These propositions were assessed and criticised from various theoretical perspectives.

Hermans’ work employed the hermeneutic supposition that understanding is only possible through a certain conceptual framework into which we ‘translate’ other cultural conceptions, in order to argue that this process is not simply a matter of fidelity or infidelity, but a predominantly cultural and social issue. For these conceptions, he maintained, articulate historically conditioned beliefs, which are imposed on the object-culture, in the sense that the language of this culture is made comprehensible for us only when it is transcribed into our own language; when it is made commensurable to our own definitions of translation, and therefore the beliefs and values that are inscribed in them. This process is therefore entangled in a network of power relations between the ‘culture-object’ and the ‘researcher’s culture’, as well as a network of social conditions, structures, institutions and interests, which frame and determine historical translation research (1999: 68; 1996: 48). From a perspective that is largely informed by deconstruction and postmodern criticism, Lawrence Venuti expressed a similar discontent with the idea of scientificity: “the claim of science, he argued, has come to seem theoretically naïve or perhaps disingenuous”. Instead of providing the only means for accessing reality, the emphasis on ‘descriptive’, objective and verifiable empirical research represses, in Venuti’s view, personal

interests, insofar as one expects his theory “to prevail over others that are not scientific” (1998: 27-28). Likewise, Niranjana stressed that the “empirical science” of translation comes into being through the repression of the asymmetrical relations of power that inform the relations between languages” (1992: 60).

I have no disagreement with a critique either of empiricism or of epistemological realism (the belief that our propositions about the world are true or false independently of the means by which these propositions are reached and articulated). Yet I also think that what unites the above critics is a *formal* consensus; that is to say, a consensus which is established not despite of, but on the basis of different points of departure, whose mutual distance becomes disguised, if we read them against an imagined common opponent, the objectivity of ‘universal culture’. But more than this, I think that this apparent consensus is enabled by the fact that any critique of epistemological objectivity, or more broadly, any critique of a Western, Eurocentric, and univocal ideal of culture, made in the name of cultural plurality remains, necessarily, within the symbolic limits of what it seeks to reject. That is to say, the notion of cultures in plural does not break, and it actually never broke with a Western tradition which identified civilisation, science and truth with its own state of being. To argue that it did is to fail to grasp how this notion, which appears to be a radical alternative to civilisation, is already mediated by its ‘Other’, precisely as civilisation developed as an ideal through its opposition to, and hence mediation by ‘cultures’.

Let me clarify these points. I suggested, on the one hand, that the notion of civilisation was mediated by the notion of cultures. This can become evident if we briefly consider the history of a major connotation of this notion: the ideal of science. Scientific objectivity was engendered by a radical break with religious authority and hence founded itself on self-doubt. From its very beginning, modern knowledge acknowledged its partiality; and hence incorporated the pluralised ‘discourse of cultures’ by the very move that enabled its establishment *qua* science: secularisation. On the other hand, the concept of culture was also mediated by the notion of ‘(Western) civilisation’, by developing dimensions that acted to reconstitute and cover the historical cost for this civilisation: the alienation of life in the modern cities, the commodification of truth and beauty, the substitution of joy for utility, of morality for practical cynicism. In this sense, the idea of culture, as it materialised in the writings of Herder and Schleiermacher, among others, developed as a complement of and a means of supporting civilisation, precisely by embodying its other: culture as an alternative to the city and the modern market, an alternative to alienating labour, culture unaffected by commerce, politics, colonialism and economic imperialism – that is to say, culture as the other of modern man and modernity.

There is, then, a certain repetition of Eurocentricism in the notion of cultures in plural. This can be traced in various aspects of this notion, of which the most pertinent to our discussion is the emphasis on the local and the partial: the claim that both the historical gaze and history itself consist of isolated, incommensurable fragments of truth, conception and experience, none of which is communicable to or relatable to the others. Such a claim did not only produce the myth of individuated and unified cultures of traditional hermeneutics and early anthropology; it also informs contemporary evocations of cultural plurality (such as Niranjana’s description of cultural fragmentation, based on Paul de Man’s attack on totalising representations of the past, or Anthony Pym’s notion of interculturalities) insofar as these evocations present ‘cultures’ as the defining limit of human thought and action, and thus repeat the Romantic appeal to culture as an alternative to and escape from social realities.

This move has been, from its very beginning, both Eurocentric and ideological, in the sense that it strategically limits the cultural gaze within itself and hence comfortably sweeps away its involvement in and responsibility for social conditions and relations. When Niranjana, for example, criticises Toury's objectivism as apolitical, in the passage quoted above, she suggests an alternative which is no less distanced from a politicised analysis of translations: she stresses Toury's "repression of the asymmetrical relations of power that inform the relations between languages" (above). Yet there are no relations of power between *languages*. Inequality, oppression and power relations develop among social groups and people – that is to say, they are *social* and *political* relations, and languages are only the means by which these relations are articulated and sustained. To ignore their political nature, by naming them as linguistic and cultural is precisely to draw the intellectual legacy of Western imperialism into the core of one's argument: to negate a totalising understanding of history for the sake of fragmented, individualised discourses, whose very isolation prevents them both from addressing the totality of historical social relations and from translating themselves into effective political action.

A theoretical model that sought to account for this totality with respect to translation is polysystem theory, as has been developed since the seventies by Itamar Even-Zohar, and was subsequently transformed by himself and others. The main thesis of the polysystem model, which was inspired by structuralism and Russian formalism, was that the cultural production of a society can be understood as an internally structured, heterogeneous and stratified whole, (a "polysystem"), which is divided into "canonised" and "non-canonised" sub-systems. With regard to literature, the term 'canonised' was employed in order to define the systems considered as "major literature", that is, "those kinds of literary works accepted by the 'literary milieu' and usually preserved by the community as part of its cultural heritage". In contrast, non-canonised literature was taken to include "those kinds of literary works more often than not rejected by the literary milieu as lacking 'aesthetic value' and relatively quickly forgotten, e.g. detective-fiction, sentimental novels, ... etc." A polysystem (of which the translation system is a constitutive part) is then taken to be structured on the basis of "hierarchical relations" among the various (sub)systems. This means that some of these systems "maintain a more central position than others, or that some are *primary*, while others are *secondary*". What is more, the relationship between primary (or central) and secondary (or peripheral) systems is, according to Even-Zohar, an "oppositional" one, a relation of conflict and "struggle", through which the canonised systems can "succeed in gaining ground", while the non-canonised ones become marginalized (1978: 15-18).

Described in Even-Zohar's terms, a 'polysystem' is inherently multidimensional. It is able to accommodate taxonomies established in the realm of literature (the division between high and low literature), translation (the division between translation and non translation), and other modes of cultural production, as well as the realm of social relations (the division between dominant and dominated social groups). The need to account for the relations between these two realms, to describe translation not as a phenomenon existing in isolation, but as an integral part of a sociocultural totality, leads polysystem model to the supposition of norms and laws of translation production. That is to say, 'norms' and 'laws' locate translation in a unified systemic context that is multidimensional (it consists of various interrelated dimensions of human reality, i.e. the social, the cultural, the political and so on), heterogeneous (it recognises divisions in each of these dimensions) and self-

regulating. The interrelation between the different fields of the polysystem is clearly explained by Toury, when he argues that translatorship (which is a *cultural* phenomenon)

amounts first and foremost to being able to *play a social role*, i.e., to fulfil a function allotted by a community – to the activity, its practitioners and/or their products – in a way which is deemed appropriate in its own terms of reference. The acquisition of a set of norms for determining the suitability of that kind of behaviour, and for manoeuvring between all the factors which might constrain it, is therefore a prerequisite for becoming a translator within a cultural environment (1995: 53).

If translation is as much a cultural as it is a social product, and if norms act to sustain appropriateness both with respect to literary production and with respect to social organisation, we can then ask how this process is historically materialised: how the establishment of translation norms does not merely act to regulate a literary or cultural system, but to form a reality that is different to the discourse of translation, that is, the reality of social structures and relations. Or to put the same point from a different perspective, how certain social structures create the conditions for the development of certain translation norms. And how, finally, a sociocultural system as a whole produces the historical laws of translation production.

In the context of polysystem theory, the answer to this question is provided by the supposition of the structural homology between the social and cultural dimensions of the polysystem; a supposition that is articulated in Even-Zohar's account of hierarchical and oppositional relations in a polysystem. This provides polysystem theory with a fundamental universal for the analysis of culture and society. As Even-Zohar writes,

the tensions between canonized and non-canonized culture are universal. They are present in every human culture, because a non-stratified human society simply does not exist, not even in Utopia. There is no un-stratified language upon earth, even if the dominant ideology governing the norms of the system does not allow for an explicit consideration of any other than the canonized data. The same holds true for the structure of society and everything involved in that complex phenomenon (1990: 16).

This hypothesis sustains a second universal. The assumption that, since all societies and cultures are stratified, then all (literary) “systems strive to become polysystemic”, that is to say, to develop internal hierarchies and tensions. “Even those which appear to function otherwise”, Even-Zohar suggests, “turn out in the long run to behave according to the same pattern” (1978: 43). On these grounds, Even-Zohar proposes a set of universal “laws of (cultural) interference” (1978: 39-53; 1990:58-72), which are further extended by himself and Toury to the field of translation (1995). These define the production, position and role of translation practice in terms of the necessity for all systems to be (or strive to be) polysystemic. This means that the polysystems that lack an hierarchical structure (because they have not yet been fully developed or they experience a turning point or crisis) would tend to produce and establish it, either by ‘creative work’ or by ‘importing’ cultural goods through translation. Hence Even-Zohar suggests that translation would tend to have a primary role and central position in a polysystem

a) when the polysystem has not yet been crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is “young,” in the process of being established; b) when a literature is either “peripheral” or “weak,” or both; and c) when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature” (1978: 24).

The hypothesis that sustains this argument, is, in simple terms, that all cultural systems would strive to fill gaps and become hierarchically stratified, because all societies are hierarchically stratified, and the other way round. This proposition is not only circular in its own terms; it also fails to explain the methodological need for the initial drawing of a distinction between the *social* and *cultural* dimension of a polysystem. If, in other words, each of these dimensions is identical to the other in terms of structure, behaviour, self-regulation and development, is there any use in talking about the cultural *and* social role of translation (as Toury does in the passage quoted above)? And if we abandoned this division, can we still employ the notion of the polysystem as a means for relating translation to a historical totality?

I am not making this point in order to simply say that the polysystem model is mistaken when it describes the hierarchical structure of societies and cultures. Quite the contrary; I believe that the opposite is true: A wide range of historical studies, and my own research on translation in nineteenth century Britain, show that cultures are, indeed, divided into canonised and non-canonised fields; that societies are hierarchically stratified; and that translations do act to produce and sustain this stratification. My disagreement begins when these empirical historical data are employed as the material for a naturalised image of society, when structures and relations which have been historically constituted and imposed on people are defined as unavoidable and universal. Hence while I value the taxonomic power of the polysystem model, as it enables me to discern actual historical divisions, I also find the above image of societies and cultures as misleading and uncritical; unable to problematise and reflect on its own social and ideological determination. For what else is the supposition of natural hierarchies, if not the acceptance of an existing historical reality (a reality of inequality and social opposition that was produced by and in the West) and its transformation into a universal model? -- That is to say, an act which sustains this reality by concealing its historical constitution and development?

This realisation does not lead to the negation of polysystem hypothesis, but contrariwise, to the need for its completion and rewriting by a reflexive and self-critical move. This is not, however, made when we merely assert this hypothesis' historical grounds; it is rather accomplished when we investigate how history can account for theory, how historical realities produce the limiting of one's problematic, so that certain assumptions escape criticism and pass as natural, certain concepts are constantly taken as self-evident, and certain critiques never enter this problematic. Such a process would need to distance itself both from the ideal of a univocal science and the ideal of cultures in plural. It would rather recognise that we are always *in context* with respect to history, and hence neither *we* have any neutral terms by which we can perceive and describe reality, nor this *reality* has ever existed in an immanent form, irrespective of whether we understood it as consisting of societies, cultures, individuals, nations, races, classes, or genders. Instead, it has always been formed and transformed by our concepts and divisions, at the very moment these emerged as products of history.

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