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# On the Status and Professional Self-Perception of Translators in Israel[1]

What I would like to present here is part of my work in progress on the social status and the construction of occupational identities of translators, with reference to the situation in Israel as a case in point. I proceed from the assumption that Translation Studies still focus too much on translation performances, without enough attention to the motivations and constraints of the human agents behind them. The study of norms has shown that performing translation is determined by a whole set of cultural factors. One of these factors is clearly the way translators perceive their occupation and their role as cultural agents, which is determined by their status as a professional group and as individuals.

This occupational factor is hardly considered a central factor in Translation Studies. Moreover, in fact, it is not treated like one in the sociological identity research either. In this brand of research, discussions of group stereotypes and conflicts usually revolve around the national, ethnic, racial, class or gender axes. However, one cannot fail to notice that an occupation, namely 'what one does in one's life', is an important resource for identity and prestige. As biographical research often shows, 'a job or profession [often] constitute a major component of [people's] understanding of their lives' (Linde 1993: 4), and creates a significant context within which 'group identity and values [are] maintained and perpetuated' (Lubove 1965: 118).

In this respect, the case of translators is especially intriguing. On the one hand, there is a great potential power encapsulated in their work as culture mediators, particularly today, when so much attention is being devoted to globalization, migration and transnationalism. This is all the more true in multicultural social settings, where inter-lingual exchange is inevitable. Such one example is the Israeli society. A small society of 7 million people, it continuously undergoes, ever since the early 20th century, massive processes of culture formation and transformation. It is basically composed of a bi-national, divided population of Jews and Arabs, coupled with an influx of immigrants and guest workers, all of which create an ever-growing need for translators and interpreters. In addition, being a peripheral culture in the so-called world-system, yet highly ambitious and rapidly modernizing, the market of translation is large and prosperous, and cultural importation in general plays a central role in shaping dominant popular practices. In fact, as Even-Zohar and Toury have shown, mainly in reference to literature, this has been the case with the construction of modern Hebrew culture ever since its birth in late 19th and early 20th century. Unfortunately, we do not have research on the role of translators in the formation of other textual practices throughout the formative stages of pre-State Hebrew culture before 1948, but we can safely conclude that their role has been crucial.

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Despite these facts, the status of translators (in Israel and elsewhere) is quite obscure, and that is perhaps why they seldom receive attention, either from scholars of translation, or from sociologists of professions. Although translators are not at the bottom of the 'occupational prestige' ladder, all evidence shows that they are usually regarded as minor, auxiliary manpower in the production of translated-texts and other inter-lingual practices. Whereas some of them are perceived as virtuosos, most practitioners, usually untrained and underpaid, are still viewed as 'invisible servants' of a higher authority, as those who belong 'behind the scenes'. From the viewpoint of the sociology of professions, translators thus constitute a typical example of a *semi-professional* group, that is, an occupation whose status as an authorized profession is still quite ambivalent and insecure.

Moreover, relying on linguistic skills, translators are often associated with other belated-professionalizing or lesser-ranked occupations in the humanities, such as copy-editors and journalists, or teachers and librarians. As such, their starting point in the competition for professional prestige is inevitably weaker than that of professions with highly scientific authority, like, notably, medicine, law, or engineering. Such a status problem not only bears directly on their job performance, but also makes their image-making work a pressing issue on which they actually depend for recognition and livelihood. In fact, this is precisely what makes translators a paradigmatic case for examining how an occupational group negotiate their identity and make sense of their job.

While the sociology of professions mostly deals with institutional measurable parameters on the prestige scale, such as income or education, I focus in my research on what the practitioners themselves identify as the *spiritual* surplus value of their occupation, or what Pierre Bourdieu (1985) called *symbolic capital*, namely, the properties and attitudes that endow them with dignity, independently of material achievements. As Bourdieu has shown, in certain cultural domains – notably in the intellectual fields and the arts – this symbolic capital is seen as outweighing 'external' economic interests and actually clashing with them, to the extent that the pursuit of these interests must be camouflaged and often even condemned.

In light of this, I ask how translators do accumulate symbolic capital and what properties they value as their assets. Concentrating on their *discursive* strategies, I follow Goffman (1959, 1963) and other works in cultural sociology, as well as studies in social linguistics, in assuming that the ways in which people organize their talk serve them as a means of self-assertion and claiming status. Certainly, in line with the vast literature on identity, I also assume that 'occupational selves' are far from coherent and fixed, but are constantly constructed by active agents who mobilize desired images drawing on 'common pools of cultural resources' (to use Ann Swidler terminology, 2001). Regardless of how close these images are to reality, they are highly instrumental in shaping social groups.

In a research project I initiated recently with Professor Miriam Shlesinger of Bar-Ilan University (funded by the Israel Science Foundation), we interview individuals working in the different branches of written and oral translation, such as text (commercial and literary) translators, film subtitlers, conference, court or community interpreters, etc. Our aim is to identify the social profiles of these groups and their shared – or differentiated – ways of building their occupational selves. Although individuals often perform more than one job type (e.g., conference interpreters often also work as text translators, as do subtitlers), there are some crucial differences between the various jobs in terms of their role definition, conditions and prices of work, qualifications, training, recruitment and career patterns, organizational

frameworks, and other factors that create occupational hierarchies. At present the project concentrates on people who translate into Hebrew, which is the common spoken and written language in the country, leaving aside translators into other languages. So far we have accumulated some 50 interviews, which are fully recorded and transcribed.

Since this current project has developed as an extension of my own ongoing research (Sela-Sheffy 2005, 2006, forthcoming), which focuses on *texts* – and specifically *literary* – translators, in what follows I will briefly discuss some of my findings in that research with regard to this sub-group, which is actually the largest identifiable branch of translators in Israel. Roughly, the volume of (non-casual) manpower in this field is currently (2008) estimated to comprise over 1,000 people.[2] My analysis is based on several hundreds of profile articles, magazine interviews, translators surveys and other reports in the printed media, from the early 1980's to the present. For corroboration I also rely on responses by students of Translation and of Culture Research to questionnaires dealing with translators' professional image which I conducted several years ago (1999-2004, 2005), as well as on insights that already emerge from our sample of interviews.

Let me now introduce briefly my interim findings in relation to the following two main issues:

(a) **Two different strategies of status claim**

An examination of the field in Israel suggests a scale ranging from a lack of occupational identity to a high-status one. In many cases translation is practiced by *ad hoc* practitioners, who neither see themselves nor are seen by others as professional translators, and who actually have no claim to status as such. This is often the case in the field of commercial translation and in community interpretation (for instance in health institutions, social care or absorption services), where translation is randomly performed by firm-employees who happen to know the relevant language or by relatives of the patients. On the other hand, those who do have professional aspirations tend to complain about being unrecognized and undervalued – and talk about the lack of appreciation of their expertise and investment by the clients and the public at large.

To judge by institutional parameters, they certainly suffer from (or enjoy) weak professional boundaries and obscure role definition.[3] They have no unified ethics, neither formal obligatory training nor jurisdiction. Anyone is allowed to translate,[4] and it is often believed that anyone is *able* to do so (a most common complaint is voiced against the popular assumption that knowledge of the source language is enough for doing the job). Translators are hardly organized. The only active Israeli

[2] The other branches are estimated to comprise 250 in subtitling, 40 in conference interpreting, 80 in Israeli sign-language interpreting, and an unknown number in community interpreting (currently the most *ad hoc* form of interlingual, intercultural mediation).

[3] Hammond 1994, Robinson 1997, Chriss 2000. For the situation in Israel: Yariv 2003, Harel 2003, Translation fees [website] 2003, Kermit 2004; the only items available with regards to fees and rates are Internet sources and journalistic reports).

[4] Translation is not officially recognized as a profession by Israeli Income Tax authorities. For this purpose it is often classified under a bizarre miscellaneous category together with "Services or Assets", "Construction and Transportation Work", "Agricultural Work", "Diamond Cutting", and "Apartment Rent".

Translators Association (ITA)[5] is a voluntary body without power to regulate the conditions and price of work and its members are less than half the estimated number of practitioners (notably, famous literary translators are hardly represented). Their career patterns are fragmentary (translating often comes as a second or part time job) and entry to this profession is possible at any age. Learning mostly occurs through experience – which is usually the only condition for getting a job – while a diploma is never required by clients.

Given this situation, my findings show that Israeli translators use two different strategies of status advancement and autonomization of their trade: aspirations to sound *professionalism,* on the one hand, or seeking recognition as *'artists',* on the other. These differentiated strategies mark a distinction between literary and 'commercial' translators so as to create a structural distance between elite and common translators.

In the realm of non-literary translation some attempt has been made at accelerating professionalization. This trend is currently led by the Translators Association, which aspires at standardization and self-management. The rising educational frameworks and diploma programs, or the various conferences and Internet forums, are also signs of this process. True, most translators still prefer working as freelancers and reject far-reaching initiatives such as academization and admission exams or establishing an ethical code; yet at the same time many of them express their concern about the lack of explicit standards and professional closure. Nevertheless, on the whole, this trend has not yet gained impetus so as to create structural change.

By contrast, in the realm of literary translation the status of the profession is maintained through promoting the *personal reputation of select individuals*. The careers of certain outstanding literary translators who already enjoy impressive recognition as public celebrities suggest that there has emerged a 'star system' in this field. This system is based on various markers of fame, such as winning prizes, gaining exposure in the media or access to exclusive networks. It foregrounds a restricted circle of 25-30 acclaimed literary translators who are recognized as the spokespersons of the field and those who set the tone. These privileged few have established a highbrow rhetoric through which they distinguish themselves from all other translators, whom they call 'mere technicians'. Along this line, they glorify translation as a 'vocation' rather than just as a means of earning a living (indeed, they all have additional careers mainly as novelists and poets, or literary critics and editors). Down-to-earth discussions of mundane technicalities, such as conditions of work or fees are absolutely unthinkable in their discourse, which emphasizes, instead, deliberations on 'culture' and 'art'.

### (b) **Translators' work of self-presentation and forms of symbolic capital**

My findings also point at specific distinctions literary translators evoke in terms of the repertoire of valued properties and images they use to gain prestige. The data I have collected from students of translation (mainly oriented towards non-literary translation) suggest that they tend to emphasize as their merit such professional qualifications as knowledge of languages (19), education (12), proficiency, diligence

[5] For basic information, see the Association's Website (http://www.ita.org.il/index.htm" http://www.ita.org.il). Information was mainly obtained from an interview with Sarah Yarkoni, the former Association's chairperson (2004). I am indebted to her for her help

and perfectionism (12) and ability to improvise (9). While they tend to justify their choice of profession and account for their expectations mainly in terms of intellectual challenge and self-fulfillment (10/12), they also mention practical considerations such as working at home, career change and getting a job that suits their qualifications. By contrast, elite literary translators tend to promote three professional images to build their personal charisma, in terms of their public role as well as personality, as follows:

[1] **The translator as a guardian of language and culture and as an educator engaged in a national mission.** This image implies a profound knowledge of the canonical domestic language and cultural lore, and hence constitutes a safe, albeit scarce, resource. Exploited primarily by senior venerable translators, it indicates an elitist, orthodox stance of gatekeepers. Those who promote this image often complain about popularizing trends in translation and demonstrate deep concern for the fate of Hebrew culture. They stress the importance of their job and their 'sense of duty' (Porath 2002).

[2] **The translator as an 'enrichment agency', responsible for cultural innovations and updating.** This image implies sophistication and close acquaintance with foreign languages and cultures, which constitute a highly valued resource for taste-makers in Israel. Assuming the position of cultural trend-setters, those who mobilize this image are at pains to demonstrate their cosmopolitan experience, and their desire to rescue the local culture from provincialism. For all the prestige it bestows, however, this stance, if pushed to the extreme, may become risky for translators, who get harshly criticized and called charlatans and ignorants.

[3] **The translator as a man-of-art**. This image stands out as the major resource evoked by literary translators in Israel. Bearing heavily on the fields of literature and the arts, it entails two main elements: (1) a mystification of their professional qualifications, and (2) the construction of translators' mythological personality (Sela-Sheffy 1999). Those who promote this image like to define their competence as a magic spell, a gift bestowed on them from childhood. They deny rational considerations in becoming translators, evoking destiny instead, and expressing scorn for systematic education, including academic training. They like to compare themselves to art performers, notably musicians, and boast of their individual creativity and artistic license, including disregard of readership constraints. Consequently, they often present themselves as non-conventional individuals, as outsiders, leading non-conventional lifestyles, with eccentric, unsociable personality.

Given the prevalence of this self-presentational discourse of literary translators, in our current research project we set out to examine the inventory of prestige resources mobilized by the other sub-groups. For instance, while literary translators are inspired by the idealized model of artists' life and invest in rituals of individual stardom, research on community interpreters suggests that they tend to borrow from social workers and accentuate empathy and care as their capital, or to debate the ethics of advocacy. We will examine how these resources are mobilized by the same agents while shifting from one domain to the other. We also expect to find a division of attitudes between veterans and the newly arrived in each subgroup. However, my findings already suggest that the professional images promoted by the 'stars' of literary translation are also quite widely accepted by 'the common' translators; so that as much as these images are instrumental in enhancing the dignity of a small-scale elite of literary translators their effect is also that of perpetuating the structure of the field and suppressing trends of professionalization in it.

Finally, while the Israeli case may well serve as an example of an unsettled peripheral culture, we propose this project with a view to developing it in a cross-cultural perspective, to compare cases from different socio-cultural settings, whether highly established, homogeneous and settled, or multicultural, emerging and unsettled ones.