

Beyond Descriptive Translation Studies

Investigations in homage to Gideon Toury

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CHAPTER 6

Strategies of image-making and status advancement of translators and interpreters as a marginal occupational group

A research project in progress

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Given the relative invisibility of translators and interpreters as an occupation, they are hardly studied as a social group, either in the field of TS or in the sociology of professions. Our research aims to analyze their construction of a sense of an occupational identity and strategies of status improvement, drawing on interviews with six subgroups in the field (literary and non-literary translators, subtitlers, conference, community, court and signed-language interpreters)

Keywords: sociology of professions, occupational identity, status, self-perception, marginality, professionalization, shared experience, translators, interpreters

Introduction: occupational identities

In this article we will outline a research project we have launched (Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger 2006)¹ on the construction and maintaining of group identity and pursuit of status, with special reference to occupational groups. Taking the profession of translation (both written and oral) as a test case, confined, at this stage, to translators and interpreters in Israel, we will analyze the self-perception of individuals as members of this group, and the ways in which they claim status by building their “occupational selves”.

We proceed from the assumption that questions of status and the accumulation of prestige are central aspects in all human action. In this regard, an occupation, namely “what one does in one’s life”, is an important resource (Nam and Powers 1983). While the extensive research and prevailing public debates of identity and cultural tensions are focused primarily on the national, ethnic, racial, class or gender components of in-group and out-group stereotypizations and hierarchy, the occupational factor — given much less attention — appears to be no less powerful in generating a collective sense of identity and status struggles. Not only does “a job or profession constitute [for some

¹ This research project is sponsored by the Israel Science Foundation (ISF), 2006–2009.

people] a major component of their understanding of their lives” (Linde 1993: 4), it often creates a distinctive field of action within which a cultural repertoire is constructed and contested, and “group identity and values [are] maintained and perpetuated”, and internalized “in the individual as personal traits” (Lubove 1965: 118).

The marginalized status of translators and interpreters

It is precisely because of their ambivalent and insecure status as a profession that translators and interpreters constitute an interesting example of an occupational group identity. Given the weak institutional boundaries and obscure role definition and criteria of this profession, they often suffer from non-standardized conditions and pay scales, as well as fragmentary career patterns (Hammond 1994; Robinson 1997; Chriss 2000; for the situation in Israel, Translation fees 2003 [<http://planet.nana.co.il/managers/meravz/article73.html>], Yariv 2003; Harel 2003; Kermit 2004; the only items available with regards to fees and rates are internet sources and journalistic reports).² All of these factors render them a rather “invisible” occupational group and their trade a marginal professional option. It stands to reason that this state of affairs may also be linked to the fact that translation/interpreting is largely a pink-collar profession. In spite of nascent attempts at institutional organization and academization of training in these domains, which point towards a move away from *ad hoc* practitioners, their recognition as full-fledged professionals has not yet been achieved. It is therefore a quintessential case for examining how an occupational group deals with its own indeterminacy and marginality.

The marginality of translators and interpreters alike is especially paradoxical, in view of the enormous potential power encapsulated in their work as culture mediators *par excellence*, namely as those who have held the key to all cultural contacts and linguistic exchange, either by importing innovations, hence furthering the evolution of cultures ever since antiquity (Delisle and Woodworth 1995), or by exerting gatekeeping functions, thus controlling the dynamics of day-to-day interlingual interactions (Wadensjö 1998). This exceptional power seems all the more relevant today, when so much attention is being devoted to processes of globalization, migration and transnationalism. While the marginalization of translators may perhaps be less surprising in cultural contexts with highly established socio-cultural cores and strong hegemonic traditions, such as the Anglo-American ones (Gentzler 2002), its pervasiveness in multicultural, and less-established, emerging or peripheral social settings is puzzling. One such example is Israeli society. There, bi-nationalism, coupled with an influx of

2 Since translators and interpreters in Israel are not officially accredited or otherwise recognized (in contrast to many other countries [e.g., Nadiani 1998]), the Israel Bureau of Statistics does not provide data about them.

immigrants and a growing population of guest workers, create an ever-growing need for translators and interpreters. In addition, being an ambitious peripheral culture, the market of translated cultural production is noticeably large and prosperous, and cultural importation plays a most significant role in shaping dominant popular discourses and practices.

This situation notwithstanding, all evidence shows that translators are usually regarded as minor, auxiliary manpower in the industry of translated-text production and other interlingual communication practices, as “servants” of a higher authority, and as those who belong “behind the scenes” (Jänis 1996; Simeoni 1998; Venuti 1998), “not as aware as they might be of their own power” (Chesterman and Wagner 2002). Although they are not at the bottom of the “occupational prestige” ladder (Treiman 1977, also Seymonov et al. 2000), their situation is ambivalent and unstable. Whereas certain literary translators and conference interpreters, for instance, are often perceived as virtuosos, most practitioners (and those in the public service in particular), usually untrained, are still seen in terms of the proverbial conduit role (Roy 2002). Moreover, relying on linguistic and textual skills, they belong, with other professions — such as librarians, teachers or journalists — to the applied professions in the Humanities. As such, their starting point in the competition for professional prestige is inevitably weaker than that of professions with highly scientific authority and codified procedures, such as, notably, medicine, law, or engineering. Such a status problem, we hypothesize, not only bears on their job performance, but also makes their image-making work a pressing issue on which they actually depend for recognition.

The study of translators and interpreters as an occupational group: the state of the art

Our study lies at the crossroad between culture research and Translation Studies. In contemporary Translation Studies, questions pertaining to the social formation of translators as an occupational group are not central topics. True, the bulk of writing on translation *norms* in recent decades (Toury 1978, 1995, 1999; Ben-Ari 1988; Venuti 1995; Schäffner 1998; Shlesinger 1989, 1999; Weissbrod 1991) has established the importance of cultural factors and the systemic position of translation in constraining the performance of translators. A common denominator of these studies has been the implicit assumption that translators suffer from an inferior status, manifested in their tendency to conform to domestic norms. However, this assumption has seldom been seriously examined. Being traditionally affiliated with disciplines such as literature and linguistics, Translation Studies tends, by and large, to focus on the communicative and linguistic contexts of translation performance, and to treat the translators themselves as a more or less transparent medium of textual procedures. Even recent attempts at “a sociology of translation”, which brought to the fore issues such as the translation market, training, ethics and ideology (Pym 1992, 2002; Gouanvic 1995; Hermans 1995;

Heilbron 1999; Heilbron and Sapiro 2002; Grbic 2001; Tate and Turner 2002; Wallmach 2002; Wolf 2002; Calzada-Perez 2003; Inghilleri 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Diriker 2004) seldom dealt with the translators and interpreters as a cultural group with its own interests and aspirations, constraints and access to resources (see, however, Henderson 1987; Robinson 1997; Delisle 2002; Choi and Lim 2002; Sapiro 2004; Limon 2005).

From a different perspective, translators are but an extreme example of an understudied occupational group. The sociological literature on professions offers a body of theory and history of the formation of modern professions, their institutions, forms of knowledge, career patterns, education and jurisdiction (e.g. Larson 1977; Torstendahl and Burrage 1990; Abbott 1988; Freidson 1994; Macdonald 1995). Yet these studies remain largely embedded in the context of the more traditionally institutionalized and prestigious liberal professions known as the “success stories” of professionalism (Elsaka 2005), such as, first and foremost, medicine, as well as law, accountancy, and the like. While they do not entirely ignore semi-institutionalized (or “failed professionalizing”; Elsaka 2005) occupations — among them, notably, journalism, or less prestigious ones, such as school teaching or nursing — most studies touch on these pursuits only fleetingly, if at all.

Whereas most of these mainstream studies are usually concerned with exclusive expert knowledge, authority and control, others focus on image-making and on building and defending a “professional self”. Drawing primarily on interviews, these studies often deal with members of occupational groups who face status problems, such as invisibility (e.g., Nilsen and McKechnie 2002 on librarians), undefined relations with their clients (e.g., Erman et al. 2004 on architects in Turkey), lower prestige (e.g., Mishler 1999 on crafts-artists), or impaired status (Gordon 1997 on black teachers in the USA). Using discourse analytical methods, they pay closer attention to the verbal and narrative specificities of their informants’ art of self-representation as a social performance in its own right. Given its low visibility as a recognized occupation, however, translation does not figure in these discussions either.

In Israel, occupations in general and translation as a profession in particular are also surprisingly under-researched. While Israeli scholarship has long been a salient contributor to translation theory (Even-Zohar 1978, 1997; Toury 1978, 1995; Shlesinger 1989, 1995, 2000), this has not included socio-cultural research. As suggested above, the lack of interest in the social position of translators in British-ruled Palestine, and later in the State of Israel, is all the more surprising, in view of Israeli history as a society of immigrants *par excellence*, and one that has been characterized by a peripheral yet ambitious cultural setting in which contacts (whether imposed or voluntary) with other cultures have always been regarded as important. Seminal studies have been done on the prominent role of translation in building up the modern Hebrew language and culture (Even-Zohar 1990; Toury 2002). But with the exception of Shavit and Shavit’s (1977) important preliminary study on the proliferation of the Hebrew-language translation market during the 1920s and 1930s in Palestine, these studies have essentially concentrated on the formation of the new cultural *repertoire*, and have sel-

dom touched upon the *social* dynamics that kept it going. Moreover, these pioneering projects remained restricted to literary translation, leaving out other channels of translation activities that developed in the Jewish community of Palestine as far back as Ottoman and British periods, and expanded with the advent of statehood.

In view of the sparse scholarly interest in translators and interpreters as a *social group*, the purpose of the present study is to start filling this lacuna: to decipher the enigma of marginality and the dynamics of status struggles and construction of an “occupational self” in this obscure occupational terrain. Confined to examining the situation in contemporary Israel, this study sets out to determine whether and to what extent attempts are made to construct the field of translation as an autonomous source of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1985), to discover the properties that Israeli translators and interpreters value as their cultural assets, along with their tendency to mobilize them, in the various branches of this profession, thus creating distinctions and hierarchies in their own ranks.

The theoretical framework

While the sociological study of professions puts more weight on institutional and formal factors, our interest lies in the perspective of the practitioners themselves, their more implicit codes, attitudes and values shared by members of an occupation, so as to maintain it as a distinctive social figuration (Elias 1996). This latter approach stands at the heart of the theory of “cultural fields” (Bourdieu 1980, 1986), a theory which has typically drawn its examples from fields that lack institutionalized boundaries and defy professionalization, such as, notably, literature and the arts, or fields that are hardly defined as occupations at all, such as the intellectual field. Rather than through formal procedures and means of control, the dynamics of a group develop, in this view, through a set of distinguishing mental (and physical) dispositions (a “habitus”) that are internalized and exercised by its members (Bourdieu 1986; Elias 1996; also Sheffy 1997; Sela-Sheffy 2005). A similar approach is implied by the biographical method in the study of professions. As Apitzsch et al. (2004; see also Elbaz-Luwisch 2001) argue, their understanding of professions goes beyond formalized procedures and means of power, to include “contexts that are rarely predetermined or formally defined, and in which the rule of engagement may be shaped under conditions of uncertainty and challenges to established boundaries” (Apitzsch et al. 2004: 1). This view leads them to explore how “biographies [of professionals] are shaped through interactive efforts to achieve or maintain social integration against the threat of exclusion processes” (ibid.: 4).

Consequently, while the sociological theory of occupational prestige includes economic achievements as an important parameter of prestige evaluation (Treiman 1977; Nam and Powers 1983), we focus on the cultural components that endow an occupation with a “spiritual” surplus value, or symbolic capital. It is a specific value, theoretically independent of “external” economic constraints, and defined, instead, in each and

every field by its internal competing forces (Bourdieu 1985). In certain cultural domains — notably in the arts — this type of capital is regarded as outweighing sheer material success and clashing with it, to the point that the pursuit of which must be condemned and camouflaged. The volume and intensity of the pursuit of symbolic capital in a certain field is, in this view, an indication of the field's autonomous status.

Understanding translation as a field of practice and a social group in this sense, we ask how, if at all, translators and interpreters accumulate symbolic capital, what properties they value as their assets and what their resources are. Focusing on the discursive strategies of translators' and interpreters' *verbal* self-presentations, we follow works in cultural sociology which show that the way in which people describe themselves and others serves them as a means of self-assertion and coping with impaired status (Goffman 1959, 1963; Lamont 1992, 2000; Benoit 1997; Condor 2000; Dolby 2000; Campbell and McLean 2002). In line with these works and with the literature on group identity in general, we assume that "occupational selves" are far from coherent and fixed. As active social agents, people constantly construct multiple and shifting identities, by mobilizing desired images which draw upon "common pools of cultural resources" (Swidler 2001:5; also Davis 1994; Harrison 1999; Giampapa 2001; Howarth 2002). Regardless of how close they are to reality, these images are highly instrumental in regulating social relations. Repeatedly constructed and contested by translators in different verbal interactions, they are integral part of their negotiations agreements about their social world (Davis 1994; Katriel 1985, 1999) and their position within it.

Method of work and preliminary hypotheses

We identify six main sub-groups working in the different branches of translation and interpretation in Israel: [1] literary translators, [2] translators of non-literary texts, [3] subtitlers, [4] conference interpreters, [5] community and court interpreters, [6] signed-language interpreters. This classification, however rough and inadequate, suggests some crucial differences in the role definition; languages translated; conditions, volume and prices of work; qualifications; training; recruitment and career patterns; organizational frameworks; and other parameters that distinguish between the different jobs, and also translate into occupational hierarchies. While agents may perform more than one job type (e.g., conference interpreters often also work as translators, as do subtitlers), a core group is identifiable in each branch. Roughly, the volume of manpower in the different branches is estimated to comprise over 1,000 people working in textual (literary and non-literary) translation, 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).

We will conduct in-depth interviews with 20 translators and interpreters from each sub-group, and will strive for the optimal total amount of 120 interviews. Although this

is not intended as a sample corpus, the demographic data collected to date points to predominately female interviewees, with a broad and balanced age range. The interviews will be open-ended, applying a narrative approach (Mishler 1987; Gudmundsdottir 1996; Ochs and Capps 1996; Sabar and Dargish 2001), with an emphasis on life-history (Linde 1993; McAdams 1993; Lieblich et al. 1998; Mishler 1999; McAdams et al. 2001; Chamberlayne et al. 2004). Storytelling of formative phases and challenging situations (e.g., “how I started to translate”, “how I solved a critical problem”, etc.) will be encouraged, in the interest of hearing how these translators and interpreters understand their job, its merits and limits, their relations with their clientele (as defined in each case), their aspirations, commitment and ethics, the way their job fits into their personal lives, how they define their role in the community, and how they see themselves in comparison to other subgroups and to other occupations. We will also investigate agreements about a unified shared experience across the various groups, the most accepted and valued components of this experience, and the manner in which they are confirmed or contested by translators and interpreters in the various subgroups. In view of the predominance of women as translators / interpreters, we will also strive to gain a better appreciation of the extent to which the pink-collar character of their profession affects the informants’ perception of it.

Following Sela-Sheffy’s preliminary study (2005, 2006 and forthcoming), which dealt primarily with *literary* translation, drawing on their self-promotional discourse in the printed media, the present study is intended to expand our scope and concentrate more on anonymous non-literary translators and on interpreters, using in-depth interviews for first-hand, more complex and differentiated repertoires of everyday verbal techniques of self-presentation and status claim.

We will use the material we collect to test some of Sela-Sheffy’s hypotheses about general strategies of status improvement used by Israeli translators and interpreters. Our existing knowledge of this field suggests that for all their differences, all of the subgroups alike tend to express frustration at their non-standardized working conditions and at the fact that their professional authority is constantly being called into question. It also points at two main strategies of status improvement adopted by different subgroups of translators (Sela-Sheffy 2006): (1) professionalization (e.g. emphasis on expert knowledge, membership in professional associations, academization etc.) in the realms of non-literary translation, interpreting and subtitling; and (2) emphasis on the individual-centeredness, intellectual stature and creative skills, particularly in the case of their literary counterparts. The present study will examine the techniques and intensity of these two strategies as manifested by the different sub-groups in this field.

Sela-Sheffy’s previous study of translators has further identified three general images on which translators draw as resources in terms of their public role as well as personal qualifications (Sela-Sheffy, forthcoming): [1] the translator as guardian of language and culture, and as educator engaged in a national mission, implying a profound knowledge of the canonical domestic language and cultural lore. It is a safe, albeit scarce, resource, exploited primarily by senior translators to indicate an orthodox

stance of gatekeepers; [2] the translator as agency of cultural updating, implying close acquaintance with and taste for foreign languages and cultures. This is a highly valued resource on which taste-makers in Israel usually draw, which may nevertheless become risky for translators aspiring to occupy an extreme innovative position; [3] the translator as artist in their own right. This image entails the rhetoric of the enigmatic notion of “personal talent” and exhibits unconventional personal disposition, bearing heavily on personality models of people-of-arts. In the case of literary translation it stands out as a major resource for celebrated and aspiring translators.

The use of these images and their specificities will be further examined in the proposed study, while other cultural resources of translators’ and interpreters’ collective selves and their specific strategies in using them are still to be identified. We assume that the distinction between the different branches is manifest in the inventory of prestige resources (for instance, while literary translators draw heavily on the people-of-art image, and accentuate personal creativity as their capital, community interpreters tend to borrow from social workers and accentuate empathy and care, on the one hand, and to debate the ethics of advocacy, on the other; Rudvin 2002; Inghilleri 2003, 2005a; Edwards et al. 2005), and 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.

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