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The Pursuit of Symbolic Capital by a Semi-Professional Group: The Case of Literary Translators in Israel

Abstract

Aware of the image of their trade as a second-rate auxiliary occupation, translators invest efforts in advancing their occupational prestige and improving their status as professionals. This paper outlines some aspects of this dynamics as manifested in the field of literary translation in contemporary Israel. While non-literary translators reveal aspirations at sound *professionalism*, intended to institutionalize a professional closure, literary translators depend on a machinery of "stardom" which promotes the personal fame of select individuals. Seeking recognition as *"artists"*, their strategies of status claim entail (1) a mystification of their profession's rules and requirements, and (2) the construction of an eccentric mythological "personality".

Introduction

The social status of translators as a professional group is not a central topic in translation studies. True, the study of translation norms in recent decades has established the importance of "general cultural factors" in constraining the performance of translators. But it has yet hardly accounted for the status of this occupation as part of these factors. In this paper I therefore undertake to shade some light on this question. My contention is that translators, like many other occupational groups, are very much concerned with their occupational prestige (Treiman 1977). Aware of the image of their trade as a second-rate auxiliary occupation with only a secondary function in the production of texts, translators invest considerable efforts in trying to enhance their prestige and improve their starting point as professionals (Sela-Sheffy forthcoming; see, e.g., Elsaka 2005). Their attempt is not only that of a group fighting for recognition "from the outside", but also an internal competition for better positions within their own field. This two-tier struggle forces translators to adopt different and opposing attitudes and strategies of action for establishing their own distinctive symbolic capital (for a discussion of *symbolic capital* see Bourdieu 1985).

In what follows I would like to outline some aspects of this dynamics as manifested in the field of literary translation in contemporary Israel. My question is: what properties are regarded by Israeli translators as prestige-endowing assets on which they draw for professional dignity, and around which they construct the boundaries of their occupation, and how they mobilize these properties to increase their chances of success in their specific field of action. True, the Israeli case may well serve as an example of an ambitious peripheral culture, where translation – and cultural importation in general – eventually play a more significant role than in more established cultures. It therefore would be interesting to compare the situation of Israeli translators with that of translators in other cultural settings (see, e.g., Chriss 2000).

In the present analysis I focus on literary translators, for the simple reason that these translators are normally by far more exposed to the public than all other translators, enjoying a reputation that distinguishes them from the general population of translators (although this reputation does not necessarily translate into material benefits). It is therefore worthwhile to examine how these translators in particular construct their public image so as to set themselves apart from their peers and gain extra symbolic capital as professionals.

Translators' Status as Semi-Professionals and Strategies of Status Improvement

For all their differences, literary and non-literary translators alike tend to complain about being undervalued, ignored and underpaid, and dependent on unfair market forces.[1] They often talk in interviews about the lack of public awareness and clients' low appreciation of the peculiar expertise and skills demanded by their profession and the difficulties imposed by it. In short, they resent the fact that their occupation is regarded as semi-professional, with undefined requirements and criteria and unclear boundaries, failing to gain recognition as either a formal "profession" or an individual "art" form.

As a profession, their formation is weak. They have neither monopoly on knowledge nor unified ethics, neither institutional obligatory training and em-

[1] This emerges from miscellaneous sources such as newspaper interviews and other reports on the subject (e.g., Mirsky 1986; Harel 2003; and others), translators' Internet forums and articles (e.g., Yariv 2003; Kermit 2004; and others), as well as several in-depth interviews and many personal communications with translators.

ployment frameworks, nor jurisdiction.[2] Anyone is allowed to translate,[3] and it is often believed that anyone is able to do so. Translators are hardly organized. The Israel Translators Association (ITA)[4] is a voluntary, still rather limited body without power to regulate the conditions and price of work, or to act as job coordinator. Although recently revitalized and expanded, membership in ITA is still less than half the estimated number of Israeli translators (one thousand in 2002; Lev-Ari 2002). Highly appreciated literary translators are usually not members. There is a Fee List issued by the Association, but in practice fees are never standardized, with literary translation from English into Hebrew at the bottom of the market scale.[5] Translators' career patterns are loose and informal. Often, this profession is practiced as a temporary or part-time occupation. Entering it is possible at any age, and for many it comes as a second career at a later age. Learning mostly occurs through experience. Recently we witness the proliferation of university Diploma Programs, but a diploma is never required by clients.

At the same time, translation is not fully recognized as an art trade either. This is confirmed, for instance, by responses to a questionnaire about the popular image of translators I distributed between 1999 and 2004.[6] On the whole, these responses portray a relatively inferior cultural image of translators (see also Jänis 1996), using clichés such as "kept in the shadow", "behind the scenes" or "craftsmen", and labeling their job "an intellectual occupation lacking glamour", or hard (or "dirty") and frustrating work. While many respondents attributed to translators the valuable standing of cultural mediators who have a broad education and knowledge of languages, they nevertheless tended to compare their social status to that of school teachers, teaching assistants, librarians, copy editors, and the like. Although they distinguished literary from

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[2] For the concept of professions as "distinctive occupational identities" (Freidson 1994: 16) and parameters of professionalism see ibid.; Abbott 1988; see also Chriss 2000.

[3] Translation is not officially recognized as a profession by the Israel Income Tax authorities. For this purpose it is often classified under the category of writers' honorarium.

[4] See the Association's Website (http://www.ita.org.il). Information was mainly obtained from an interview with Sarah Yarkoni, the Association's chairperson. I am indebted to her for her help.

[5] ITA's fees are usually disregarded as unrealistically higher than the market prices. Although data on fees and working terms are hardly available, some partial information may be obtained from Internet forums and discussion groups (e.g., Translation Fees 2003; Kermit 2004; and others). From these sources it emerges that technical and commercial translations are by far better paid than literary work.

[6] The respondents were 117 graduate students at the Translation Diploma Program and at the Unit of Culture Research, both at Tel Aviv University; Sela-Sheffy, forthcoming.

non-literary translations and maintained that the latter entail, apart from high linguistic proficiency, also "imagination" and "creativity", they ranked translators as secondary to authors.

In the face of this weak and unrewarding group identification, Israeli translators have been striving for at least two decades to advance the status of their occupation as an autonomous source of symbolic capital. They have been doing it by using two different strategies, wavering between aspirations to sound *professionalism* on the one hand, and seeking recognition as *"artists"* on the other.

In the realm of non-literary translation, attempts to accelerate a process of professionalization are conspicuous. Although the actual services it provides are still limited, the Translators Association aspires to promote self-management and professional closure. The seminars and events it organizes, the rising educational frameworks offered by the universities and other institutions, or the various discussion groups on the Internet, are all signs of this process. True, recent far-reaching initiatives by the Association, such as admission exams, or a formulated ethical code, are still not always welcome by many translators, who are used to working as freelance. However, these initiatives are indications of an attempt to elevate the professional standards of translators and establish their prestige.

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 acclaimed literary translators who already enjoy impressive recognition as "names that sell books" (Melamed 1989: 2) suggest that there emerges a "star system" (Shumway 1997) in the field of literary translation. This system is based on various markers of personal glory, such as winning prizes, gaining exposure in the media or access to celebrity networks. Apparently, such a system of stardom gains ground among literary translators in particular, precisely because of their relatively limited economic prospect and harsher working conditions, against which personal fame seems to be the only chance for status improvement. At the same time, this model of stardom is also more available to them through their contact with the literary field.

Literary Translators' Self-Fashioning and their Claim to "Artistic Autonomy"

One clear manifestation of this machinery of stardom is found in the lively discourse held by literary translators and critics in the printed media during the last two decades. The material I have examined covers several hundred interviews,

profile articles, translators' surveys and other reports in newspapers supplements, magazines and periodicals, from the early 1980s to 2004 (Sela-Sheffy 2005, and forthcoming). This varied material foregrounds a restricted circle of 20-25 translators whose fame sometimes goes beyond the limits of their trade and who are recognized as the translators' spokespersons and those who set the tone in the field.

While some of these acclaimed translators have pursued translation as their major career-path, others' reputation has stemmed also from other careers, mainly as poets, critics, literary editors, publishers or academics. Nevertheless, they all tend to glorify translation as a "vocation" in its own right rather than just as a skilful means of earning a living. Whereas the ethos of "ordinary translators" allows for down-to-earth discussions of mundane technicalities, such as conditions of work and fees, and demystifying linguistic consultations (Green 1990; Harel 2003; Yariv 2003; Kermit 2004; and Internet forums), such topics are absolutely absent in the discourse of literary translators, which in most cases is dedicated, instead, to deliberations on their cultural mission and spiritual experience.

In doing so they strive to distinguish themselves from other translators, by constructing for themselves the profile of "intellectuals" or "men of art", on which they aspire to capitalize as a privileged group in its own right, with its own artistic aura. Adopting this sectarian standpoint, their eyes on their translator-peers more than on their readerships (or so they would like us to believe), these translators create what Bourdieu (1985) calls a "small-scale field of production", so typical, in his view, to autonomous fields – or to fields aspiring to autonomy. Under conditions of an unprotected market, and by contrast to the trend of professionalism as described above, their lively discourse thus reveals that their standing and success depend on their personal self-promotional abilities, which make intensive use of the enigmatic rhetoric of exceptionality.

This process naturally bears heavily on models adopted from the fields of literature and the arts. As in other cases of this kind (Sela-Sheffy 1999), it entails two major elements: (1) a mystification of the profession's knowledge, rules and requirements, and (2) the construction of a shared mythological profile of its agents. Let me now briefly outline these two aspects that dominate the discourse of Israeli literary translators.

Mystification of the Profession's Rules

The tendency to mystify – rather than explicate – the rules and requirements of their profession is manifest by translators' efforts to portray their competence

as consisting of an almost supernatural ability: "Translation is after all [...] a story consisting of alchemy, wonder, almost magic", says one of today's most celebrated Israeli translators (Nili Mirsky in Melamed 1989: 33; all translations are mine). This "magic spell", so we learn, defies any systematic knowledge and rational method of learning. Hence the ambivalence, not to say resentment, celebrated translators often feel obliged to express towards academic training. On the other hand, they tend to elevate their trade by attributing to it the existential emotional burden and the complicated cognitive task of perfectionism: "I do not believe in a theory of translation whatsoever", Mirsky says, "I have certain guidelines, but the trouble is that many of them contradict each other, and since I try hard to be faithful to all these principles at once, it turns out that I look at the work of translation as a mission impossible by definition" (Mirsky in *Moznayim* 1983: 25).

This singular mental disposition is hence what distinguishes them, so they say, from "mere technicians of words", as it were (e.g., Rina Litvin in Karpel 1994). Usually, literary translators are at pains to remain ambiguous in classifying their trade somewhere between "humble craftsmanship" and "individual creation" (e.g., Wollman 1987; Mirsky in Melamed 1989, in Karpel 2002; Nitsa Ben-Ari in Paz 1989). They profusely use expressions such as "lack of ego" or "lack of self expression", claiming to be "boneless", a "medium" or a "'parasite" (Paz 1989; Litvin 1995). Yet this display of humbleness is actually meant as an artistic virtue. The influence of the New Criticism elitist literary creed, with its cult of the Text (with a capital T), is arresting in this philosophy of self-elimination. "In my mind", says Mirsky,

> [T]he translator must never create a personal style of his own, [...]. To the contrary, with each and every piece [...] the translator must create a new style [...] unique and special for this piece alone; whereas he himself must disappear entirely [...] without leaving traces, just to dissolve into the text [...]. (*Moznayim* 1983: 25)

In this way, many literary translators divulge their aspiration to be regarded as creative artists without explicitly admitting it. This aspiration is typically expressed by their habit to compare their own trade with that of art performers, notably musicians: "[A translator is] like a player who performs music", says another acclaimed translator, "he is an artist. He is not the composer, yet he is a musician" (Yael Renan in Wollman 1987: 20). Apparently, the Music metaphor is most appealing to translators in more than one way. It confers upon their profession the elevated status of a "sublime art", and at the same time implies their own highbrow taste and education as music lovers: "[Translation] is a little

bit like playing the piano", says Mirsky, "[...] Notes are given, this is the source text. You sit by the piano, and perform it. For me, the whole work of translation is always done through the ear [...]" (Landsman 2000: 92).

Sometimes, however, their aspirations become more explicit: "In translation I repeat the process of creation", says Rina Litvin, a prominent translator (Snir 1988: 18). "I am a writer", she says in another interview, "[...] I have arrived at literary-personal writing" (Karpel 1994: 30). Along this line, literary translators often declare their artistic license, denying any readership constraints whatsoever on their work and insisting on their creative individuality. Another renowned translator declares he never reads translation of his predecessors, in order to avoid being influenced by them, "[n]ot because I fear the risk of plagiarism", he says, "avoiding this sin is easy for me. I try to be faithful to my own voice" (Shimon Sandbank in Levtov 1993: 20). Others claim the power of omniscience: "The translation exposes the author's magnitude, as well as his shame", says yet another acclaimed translator, "In front of the translator the author is naked, like at the doctor's" (Ben-Ari in Katzenelson 2000: 27).

Unconventional Personality and Lifestyle

In the absence of formal professional criteria and qualifications, personality becomes a most important admission card. Translators portray an idealized disposition of the "good translator", their background and lifestyle. A central component of this disposition is first and foremost the sense of being an outsider. By analogy to artists and poets, translators often present themselves as non-conventional individuals, living non-conventional lives, with unsociable, even eccentric personality (Carey 1992). Rina Litvin likes to think about herself as an outsider by mentality: "[I]t took [me] time to understand that I am a stranger because of my personality [...]. It is a mental situation which is known to many creators [...]" (Karpel 1994: 30). Mirsky portrays her bohemian lifestyle: She is divorced, has no children, and lives alone in an old downtown apartment, filled with European atmosphere and packed with books and a piano. She tells about her careless appearance, her love of music, smoking and drinking, and describes her performing translation as performing art, in irregular hours and irregular working habits (Melamed 1989; Kadosh 1994; and elsewhere). Another celebrated translator and poet, a declared anti-Zionist and homosexual, takes the posture of the ultimate outsider intellectual and an *enfant-terrible*. Recounting his childhood, he says:

> I was a lonely, alien child, [...]. The children bugged me because I was awkward, [for] a sense of alienation that I believe I conveyed. [...] Yes, I

> was terrible. I could never endure what seemed to me to be a stupidity and I had to react and scream [...]. (Dori Manor in Karpel 1997: 47)

Another dominant component of this idealized disposition is a rich inner world, filled with imagination and emotional bonds with the fictional worlds of the texts. "During work", says Litvin, "a tremendous identification with the characters is created, [...]." (Snir 1988: 18). Similarly, Mirsky, telling about her work on the new translation of *Anna Karenina*, recounts how the characters in the novel bewitched her: "[They] actually walked around at my place at nights, all of them. I actually heard their voices. [...] As if you had [...] another world, or another soul that takes place in Russian" (Landsman 2000: 92). Another translator compares her state of mind to that of someone tormented by passion: "When you translate, you walk around the whole day with a word, a sentence, [you] wake up at night, 'Yes, I found it!' – and forget in the morning. Exactly like a person in love" (Ben-Ari in Katzenelson 2000: 28).

Finally, this idealized portrait also entails an unpredictable life-trajectory. Most of the celebrated literary translators are well educated, usually college and university graduates. However, credentials seem to be the least valued resources for their self-image. Thus, their becoming translators is usually presented by them not as a rational decision, fitting their education and social status, but rather as a destiny that has somehow been realized by chance. Mirsky describes her moment of revelation as a little girl, when she came across two different translations of Oscar Wild's fairytales, "[A]nd I remember that I told myself", she says, "I wanted to discover where this magic lies, how the musicality of language is created" (Melamed 1989: 32). Another rising translator says he deserted a career in computer science in favor of translation. To the interviewer's suggestion that he dreamt of becoming a translator from childhood he replies: "I believe so. Language has always had a magic spell on me, but I never wrote poems or stories [...]" (Ran HaCohen in Altaras 2002).

Conclusion

The self-representation discourse described here is rather exclusive to literary translators, constructing them as extraordinary individuals distinguished from "ordinary" translators. Although they have much in common, these two groups differ mainly in their ways of claiming status. Whereas non-literary translators are at least partly mindful of advancing the impersonal professional status of their occupation, literary translators build their prestige mainly on personal artistic-like glory. Naturally, this distinction does not apply to all active Israeli translators, but to an elite group. However, the very fact that these leading liter-

ary translators bother to express their high aspirations in the media – and that the media shows increased interest in them – is evidence of their efforts to establish a distinctive symbolic capital for this occupation and use it to promote their own standing as translators as well as their prospects in other careers. As translators, these people have already established themselves as personae that have a say in literary taste, with sovereignty as producers of their own cultural goods, sometimes even as policy makers in the market of translated literature, and therefore with the power to bargain for the terms and price of their work (*Moznayim* 1983, Wollman 1987). It is these personae who seem to have gained ground in the field of literary translation, and who inspire newcomers to adopt the same disposition and strategies of action for achieving status and increasing their chances of success.

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