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How to be a (recognized) translator

Rethinking habitus, norms, and the field of translation

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Focusing on translators as a cultural-professional group, this article mobilizes the Bourdieusian concepts of field and habitus for explaining the tension between the constrained and the versatile nature of translators' action, as determined by their cultural group-identification and by their position in their specific field of action. Emphasizing the basic parameter of status contests and struggle for symbolic capital, it elaborates on three important aspects of translators' differentiating self-images and strategies of action, using examples from the field of Hebrew translation in contemporary Israel: (1) the variability of strategies translators employ while playing either conservative or innovative roles, as cultural custodians or cultural importers, in specific historical contexts; (2) the dynamic construction and stratification of the field of translation, which results from the endeavor to establish its autonomous source of prestige, oscillating between impersonal professional status and an artistic-like personal "stardom"; and (3) translators' preferred models of self-fashioning, according to which they select and signify the facts of their life-conditions and use them for improving their status and terms of work.

Keywords: translators, field, habitus, norms, cultural-professional groups, translation as an occupation, Israeli translators

o. Introduction

Recently, attempts have been made to introduce the Bourdieusian concepts of field and habitus into Translation Studies (e.g., Gouanvic 1995, Simeoni 1998, Inghilleri 2003). From the standpoint of culture research, which is where I am coming from, the strongest point of these attempts lies in approaching the practice of translation as a *social activity*, which, like any other human activity,

is organized and regulated through social forces (Sela-Sheffy 2000). An immediate implication of this approach is that translators can no longer be dispensed with as a transparent medium of textual procedures. Instead, their formation as a cultural group, with its own interests and aspirations, constraints and access to resources, becomes an important object of study. However, this is apparently not the main direction where the mentioned attempts are leading. On the whole, the framework they suggest remains focused on the communicative and linguistic contexts of translation performance *per se*, rather than on the dynamics of translators as a cultural group. I therefore find it worthwhile to revisit the use of field and habitus analysis in translation research and take it a step further. Since Simeoni's 1998 contribution in *Target* presents the most detailed discussion of the subject, I would like to take up in this paper some threads offered by him with respect to the following three main intertwined issues: (a) the relations between translation norms and the habitus of translators; (b) the nature of "the field of translation", and the question of its autonomy; and (c) the question of the translator's "personality". To illustrate my argument I shall use examples from the field of literary translation in contemporary Israel.¹

1. Translators' habitus, norms, and the question of submissiveness

An obvious merit of the concept of habitus lies in the integration it suggests between the two conventionally separate perspectives on human action — the cognitive and the sociological. This integration is in line with the view inherited from anthropological thinkers such as Durkheim and Mauss (1963), or Sapir (1949), to mention but the most prominent names, according to which human cognitive patterns are socially acquired. Defined as a transformation mechanism that mediates between social structures and individual perception and action, the concept of habitus suggests that performances carried out by individuals are regulated through shared schemes, which are not "simply there" in their minds but rather internalized under similar and shared historical conditions. Obviously, this concept corresponds to and reinforces the notion of norms of translation (Toury 1995a, 1999, Hermans 1995, Schäffner 1998 and others). Relying mainly on Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu, Simeoni uses the term "habitus" in his dialogue with Toury's pioneering discussion of how "a bilingual speaker becomes a translator" (Toury 1995b). There, Toury undertakes to explain the acquisition of translating skills and preferences — even by bilinguals, whose translatorial faculties are seemingly inherent — and the individual's gaining of recognition as a competent translator, through "native-like"

self-learning (rather than formal training) and sanctions imposed by the societal environment. In this context, Simeoni finds the idea of the habitus useful in that it emphasizes the unconscious nature of this learning process (Bourdieu 1990), and the factor of “self-pressure” which turns acquired tendencies into second nature (Elias 1982).

However, as critics have already indicated,² the notion of the habitus is an inspiring general idea more than a concrete workable hypothesis. Evidently, the attempt to use it in the context of translation calls for re-examining some of its vague points, and at the same time also those of the notion of norms. A major weakness associated with the notion of the habitus is the deterministic view of human action it may convey. This problem seems to present itself in Simeoni’s discussion (1998) through the exaggerated weight it puts on “submissiveness” as a supposedly invariable, universal component of translators’ habitus, which allows almost no room for understanding *choice* and *variability* in their action. Although aiming to explore the historical process of formation of translators’ habitus, this argument still seems to be caught in a rather rigid, non-dynamic conception of patterns of action, taking at face value the idea of “the tyranny of norms” in translation.

Simeoni’s argument is that the tendency to conform to — rather than revolutionize — domestic literary dictates (e.g. Toury 1978, Ben-Ari 1988, Venuti 1995) results from the conditions under which translators have for centuries exercised their trade. The reason is, so the argument goes, their alleged long-lasting inferior status “among the dominant professions of the cultural sphere” (Simeoni 1998: 7). Not unlike scribes of ancient or modern civilizations, they have always had to perform under severe constraints as “servants” of another authority, the authority usually being the client. As such, their freedom of creativity was nil, since disobeying norms was subject to penalties such as disqualification, humiliation, ostracization or even incarceration. Simeoni also mentions additional reasons, such as the multiplicity of constraints usually imposed on translators by a differentiated clientele and heterogeneous tasks, which supposedly encourage an extreme tendency of compliance (ibid.: 11–12). This situation, it is claimed, has persisted for hundreds of years throughout Western cultural history, and — unlike in the case of other professions (notably authors!) — still prevailed as late as the end of the twentieth century. It consequently pertains to the habitus of translators, in this view, that they are never in a position to play the role of inventors and revolutionaries.

Tracing the historical formation of an inferior status of a certain profession sounds convincing (although I seriously doubt that more prestigious professions — such as authors — have ever enjoyed greater “freedom of action” as

implied by this account). Yet it would be misleading to conclude that (a) such an inferior status is equally formed in all cultural spaces and periods; and that (b) the subservient disposition it allegedly triggers applies equally to all individuals in this profession. Such generalizations may support the popular image of translation as a secondary profession, but are not always confirmed by empirical examination. From a purely theoretical perspective, in any case, this view seems to be too monolithic and static to be effectively integrated into the dynamic, struggle-oriented idea of “fields”, which is the broad framework in which Bourdieu’s idea of the habitus is rooted.

Admittedly, to some extent, this is a pitfall that comes with the notion of the habitus as discussed in certain cases by Bourdieu himself (Sheffy 1997). In fact, reading Bourdieu, one is sometimes faced with the difficulty of reconciling the different implications of his notion of the habitus. In certain cases, this notion suggests a totally pre-programmed set of dispositions that is incorporated in an individual’s body and mindset from an early age (i.e., the “class habitus”, Bourdieu 1986). In these cases it invokes a view that surely would be untenable for Bourdieu himself of human beings as uniform “selves” (Lahire 2003), formatted and fixed under supposedly homogeneous life conditions (see also Noble and Watkins 2003, Stokmans 2003). Yet in other cases, Bourdieu seems to be aware of this trap, and avoids it by emphasizing the improvisational and differential nature of the habitus (Bourdieu 1990, 1980a). In this view, the habitus is an inertial yet versatile force, which constrains a person’s tendencies and preferences but also allows for their transformations and continuous construction in accordance with the changing fields in which one plays and with one’s changing positions in a specific cultural space (see also Smith 2003, Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder 2002).

However, whether Bourdieu’s idea of the habitus is deterministic or not, it would be a mistake to turn what is proposed as a general mechanism of human action into a property distinctive of a certain field of practice. No doubt, the notion of the habitus accounts for the tendency of people to reproduce certain shared patterns of action. Moreover, this notion suggests the persistence of tendencies through a prolonged continuation of social formations. Yet this holds for all human activities, in all fields of practices. Compliance with norms is inescapable, otherwise the idea of “cultural models”, “cognitive schemes”, or whatever terms suggesting regularities in human perception and action would be meaningless (Holland and Quinn 1987, D’Andrade 1995). It pertains to the very idea of culture that it imposes certain models on human action, however stronger or weaker this imposition may be. Yet there is always more than one option for doing things. Some options may be only marginal while others may

be dominant, but the multiplicity of options is a basic social fact (Even-Zohar 1997). It has to do with status struggles within a given social space and a given field of action.

The point is that conformity, or “obedience to norms”, does not exclude divergence. In fact, divergence and distinction are essential aspects of Bourdieu’s idea of the “field”, understood as a space of relative positions, where competition is always a factor. Both conformity and divergence — or what Bourdieu calls “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy” — are then strategies taken by actors in a certain field, and under certain circumstances. The logic of the field, according to Bourdieu, is that of people constantly striving to gain symbolic capital, through (consciously or unconsciously) appropriating prestige-endowing patterns of behavior, and the habitus is what facilitates their “instinctive” judgment and use of the available choices (Bourdieu 1980, 1980a, 1986). It follows that actors in a certain field would tend to be either conservative or revolutionary with regard to the accepted repertoire in the field, depending on their position (or aspired position) in it. According to Bourdieu, orthodoxy is likely to increase by veteran capital holders whenever there is a threat to their established status, while revolutionism is usually the strategy of the newly arrived whose chances of having shares of this capital are slim (Bourdieu 1980a, see also MacCracken 1990). However, the reverse is also possible: when the pursuit of innovations becomes the name of the game in the mainstream, overt conservatism — that is, sanctioning canonical models — can often serve as a useful strategy of gaining distinction by those in marginal positions (Bourdieu 1980a; see also Even-Zohar 1990; Drory 1993).

All this also applies to translators. It is impossible to speak about a universal disposition of translators without taking into account the situation of the specific fields in which they act. We cannot take for granted that their role in the production of culture is always secondary and their attitude always passive. It may be argued that in established cultures such as those of English- and French-speaking communities today, which Simeoni probably had in mind, translators are more inclined to comply with overpowering domestic standards. Yet in peripheral or nascent cultures submissiveness is not always a prevailing strategy. As Even-Zohar (1990, 1997a) has already put forward, translation activities may play either a conservative or an innovative role (and often they may play both parts by different agents at one and the same historical moment). For instance, using the case of the emergent modern Hebrew language and culture during the 18th and 19th centuries, Even-Zohar and Toury have shown how, in the absence of long-lasting standards in the target culture, or when a revolutionary ideology is massively promoted, translation is often a channel of

introducing new cultural models into varied areas of life, including language and literature (e.g., Even-Zohar 1990b, Toury 2002. And there are many other similar examples). In fact, the status of translations as either conservative or innovative agency in a certain social space is determined by many factors, from general political and market forces to the internal dynamics of the specific field of translation, its institutions and established repertoire, demography and personal competitions between individual agents.

Certainly, there are cases in which conformity with canonical norms guarantees maximum prestige. If this situation prevails for a long period of time, then the cultural space under discussion becomes stagnant. As a rule, however, even cases of extreme conservatism, such as that described by Elias (1982, 1983), cannot be entirely devoid of struggles and variability. In fact, Elias's view appears problematic precisely in avoiding this point. He describes the formation of a human figuration (and habitus) as a sweeping, unidirectional long-term process of the intensifying pressure of life conditions which results in a uniform group-disposition and perpetuation of manners. However, the trouble with this view is twofold. First, while aiming to explain the consolidation and persistence of large-scale cultural formations, such as "Court Society" (1983), "bourgeoisie" (1982), or the "Germans" (1996), it overlooks mutations in small-scale specific fields (including, for instance, professional ones),³ which result from competitions and a changing power balance in these fields. Second, it proposes a straightforward nexus between life conditions (at the formative stage of a certain human figuration) and forms of behavior, as if the latter is derived "naturally" from the former. According to Elias, ever-growing physical and societal interlockings between individuals in European courts resulted "naturally" in certain forms of repressed behavior. What this view lacks is an eye for the diversified and changeable *repertoires* which are constantly constructed and transformed through the games people play in a certain field. Precisely the same problem also seems to apply to the view that supposedly shared and unchanged life conditions of translators throughout history have determined their mental disposition in one direction only, that of "submissiveness".

There is, in sum, no need to identify socially constrained tendencies with passivity. "Violation of norms", "variability", "creativity" or "private inventions", are all socially constrained to no less an extent than overt conformism (in fact, this is exactly what Elias shows in his analysis of Mozart's extraordinary life and career, Elias 1993). Talking about the "subservient habitus" of translators thus reveals the shortcoming of the discussion of norms in translation, which often implies a negative insinuation, as if it were a deficiency that should be overcome, namely that norms are bad and those who obey them are inept. This

idea of translation norms still seems to echo the belief, so strongly promoted by time-honored art and literary criticism, in the illusory (normative) dichotomy between fields governed by “personal creativity” and those supposedly governed by “absolute standardization” (typically, Adorno 1941).⁴ As much as this belief is instrumental for the autonomization effect of art production (Bourdieu 1985), it is not supported by research into the dynamics of cultural production in general. The fact that norms have been detected in translation is because this field of practice is more susceptible to systematic examination than other fields which enjoy the image (created by themselves) of highly subversive practices. Had we looked for “the tyranny of norms” in fields of art and literary production, we would easily have found it there, too (see Even-Zohar 1990a). Instead of a “tyranny of norms” in translation we had therefore better talk about the “sway of certain norms”, that is, of certain *models*, in the work of translators. While the former implies that compliance with the domestic repertoire is a determinant of translators’ competence, the latter raises the question of when, why and to what extent this tendency governs translators’ activity, and what other options are available for translators under different circumstances.

Now, the submissiveness hypothesis suggests that translators are forced to exhibit a perfect command of domestic models in order to be recognized and survive in this trade, and that this is a sign of their inferiority and lack of symbolic capital. However, at least with respect to the Israeli case, the picture seems to be much more complex. Not only does this picture challenge the belief that conformity with domestic models is always the prevalent tendency among translators, it also suggests that such conformity may often be a highly gratifying strategy, rather than merely the default of the humbled ones.

As my findings show (see analysis in Sela-Sheffy 2004), while for some Israeli literary translators to exhibit proficiency in normative Hebrew may seem a default requirement, others manage to use it as their selected choice. In such cases it is presented as a highly valued asset rather than a mere imposition. True, it is often veteran translators, who are better educated in the higher registers and ancient lore of Hebrew, who tend to capitalize on this knowledge as their foremost skill. This proficiency endows them with the powerful position of gate-keepers acting on behalf of the Hebrew canon, committing themselves to educating a “cultured readership”. As such, they see themselves not as servants of norm-dictating authorities, but rather as culture makers who set those norms. Taking an orthodox position therefore serves these veteran translators as means of securing their advantageous status and establishing the gap between “experts” and “non-experts”, so as to block the admission of novice translators into the sanctuary of their trade. However, this tendency is not always the privilege of veteran

translators, but is sometimes also adopted by the newly arrived. For them, however, it is no longer naïve orthodoxy, but rather a revolutionary stance. Given the situation in the field, where predilection for thin modern literary language prevails, and extensive knowledge of elaborate Hebrew styles becomes a rare expertise (even among educated people), the few emerging translators of the younger generations who possess this expertise use it as an eccentric, extremely highbrow property, to stand out from among their peers.

My point here is not only that defending the domestic canon may often be the trump card of rival translators, but, more importantly, that what may be seen as one and the same pattern of action often emanates from two different — even contradictory — cultural dispositions. The background and aspirations of these two groups of translators are different, and so are the positions they occupy in the field of translation. Consequently, so too are their motivations and constraints in appropriating this similar tendency and capitalizing on it.

Moreover, my findings suggest that observance of domestic canonized styles is not such a sweeping tendency of translators after all. To begin with, while much of the study of translatorial conservatism has been confined to literary translation, it is doubtful whether this conservatism applies equally to translations of technical material, commercials, film or TV series, and so on, where disregard for standard Hebrew and considerable receptiveness for popular American phraseology are often observed (Kuperman 1998). Since the translators of these different types of texts are usually different people, and the production institutions and clienteles are different as well, we may say that these are different activities altogether, performed in different fields, by differently disposed agents.

Yet even if we confine ourselves for the moment to literary translation, we cannot ignore the fact that against those who capitalize on their mastery of domestic canonized models, there are always those who seek to establish their acquaintance with foreign languages as the ultimate capital of the field of translation. Sometimes these are people who were raised in other cultures or had spent long periods of time abroad, whose experience with the foreign cultures endows them with the advantageous position of “people of the world”, so desired by Israeli taste-makers. Underlying this merit, these translators claim the position of ambassadors of “world cultures” rather than of gate-keepers, taking on the task of opening up the local culture and enriching its language and forms of expression, so as to rescue it from provincialism and petrification. A few translators even go so far as to take an outright revolutionary stand and claim the role of trend-setters *par excellence*. These translators challenge the prevalence of canonized domestic forms of expression, calling them outdated and fake.

Admittedly, such a radical stance is less common among Israeli translators, as it often calls for hostile criticism against an intolerable foreignization and offence of Hebrew, as it were. However, it is still an option in the field of translation, in contemporary Israel and probably elsewhere. In fact, the aggressive criticism against this stance is an indication of its potency rather than marginality.

Such multiplicity of tendencies and positions, as evidenced in one specific field of translation, evidently defies the postulation of one universal “internalized disposition” of translators. The conclusion seems inevitable, that the study of a “habitus of translators”, in the sense of shared socially acquired tendencies that constrain translators’ action, should concentrate on a particular field of translation. It should take into account the dynamic distribution of strategies by the actors in this field, and the repertoire of prestige-endowing options available to them.

2. The field of translation and the question of its autonomy

The field of translation is then an important factor in this discussion. However, Simeoni (1998) reminds us of the ambiguity often characterizing the very idea of a “field of translation”. This ambiguity seems to be typical of the view of many other marginal and semi-professional occupations. True, it seems easier to spot the outlines of a “field” when it comes to rigidly institutionalized and codified realms of professional practices, such as law, medicine and their like. It may also seem easier to trace “a field” in established realms of art production, such as that of literature, which are organized through powerful institutions and well defined products, and are readily identifiable through celebrated cliques and spokesmen. Translators, on the other hand, are often seen as a silent, invisible and loosely defined semi-professional group, whose occupation is auxiliary, and whose field-boundaries are blurred. This situation apparently varies from culture to culture. Israeli translators, for instance, often complain that their own status as a profession is inferior to that of translators in Europe, telling about a general lack of awareness and appreciation of their expertise at home (Lev-Ari 2002, Harel 2003). Their identification as a group falls in-between “profession” on the one hand and “art” on the other.

As a profession, their formation is weak. They have no unified professional ethics, neither formal obligatory training frameworks nor jurisdiction (for parameters of professionalism see Abbott 1988. For the translation profession in the USA see Chriss 2000). Anyone is allowed to translate,⁵ and it is often believed that anyone is able to do so (clients’ statement is often “I would have

done it myself had I had the time”). Translators are hardly organized. The Israel Translators Association (ITA)⁶ is a voluntary, still rather limited body without power to regulate the conditions and price of translators’ work, or to act as job coordinator. Although recently revitalized and expanded (from about 90 members two years ago to almost 400 in 2004), membership is only half the estimated number of Israeli translators (Lev-Ari 2002). Highly appreciated literary translators are usually not members. There is a Fee List issued by ITA, but it is usually disregarded as unrealistically higher than the market prices, with literary translations from English into Hebrew at the bottom of the market scale. In practice, fees are never standardized (Harel 2003, Lev-Ari 2002, Kermit 2003, and various sources on the Internet).⁷ Translators’ career pattern is loose and informal. Often it is practiced as a temporary or part-time occupation. Entry to this profession is possible at any age, and for many it comes as a second career at a later age. Learning mostly occurs through experience. Amateur translation workshops are copious, and in recent years we have been witnessing the proliferation of university Translation Diploma programs, but a diploma is never required.

At the same time, translation is not fully recognized as an “art trade” either. As emerges from responses to the questionnaire dealing with the cultural image of Israeli translators (see note 1), it suffers from the image of “an intellectual occupation lacking glamour”, held as secondary to that of authors, a service “craftsmanship” (see also Jänis 1996). True, many respondents attribute to translators the valuable properties of having the knowledge of languages and a broad education, and being “mediators of cultural goods”. Nevertheless, most of them find this occupation equal in status to that of school teachers, school principals or vice-principals, teaching assistants, librarians, copy editors, and the like. Although these respondents draw a distinction between literary and “technical” translation, and maintain that the former entails, apart from high linguistic proficiency, also “literary sensitivity” and “creativity”, they nevertheless confirm the view of translators as “kept in the shadow” or “behind the scenes”, as one of the marginal occupations involved in the production of texts.

The ambivalent status of their occupation certainly obscures the structure of the translators’ field of action, and all the more so when it comes to literary translators. Because these translators are seen as (secondary) agents in the context of the literary field, their forming a separate, self-directed social configuration is often taken to be questionable. However, precisely in such fuzzy cultural formations the notion of the field should be especially helpful, in pointing to the less conspicuous, more flexible cultural dynamics. This dynamics of a “field”, which may have many diverse manifestations, exists insofar as it is practically

sensed and actualized by those who play “the game of translation”. It is defined by the specific capital that may be gained through playing this particular game. There is no need to try and determine to what extent literary translators operate as part of the literary field, or form a separate field of their own. Both perspectives are right. The link of these translators to the literary field is obvious. In addition to being translators, some of them also pursue literary careers, mainly as editors, critics, poets and writers, and academic scholars. In many cases, the title “translator” does not even come first in their reputation. At the same time, however, they also develop a specific “feel of the game” that qualifies them to play in the field of translation. In other words, if by a “field” we mean a stratified space of positions, with people struggling to occupy these positions, driven by a specific kind of incentives and gratifications, then translators (including literary translators) in Israel — and probably elsewhere — also form a distinctive field of action. This field is coordinated by its own internal competition and hierarchy, and regulated by its own internal repertoires, professional ethos and self-images. It is divided into different groups (e.g., of literary, subtitling, simultaneous, or other branches of translation), communities and cliques. There are seniors and juniors; veteran and new generations; conservatives and revolutionaries; the more appreciated and the less appreciated; those who translate “important” or highbrow texts and those dealing with “trivial” material; etc. (Katzenelson 2000).

As in any other field, the boundaries and internal hierarchy of the field of translation are dynamically formed by the actors’ ongoing struggles over determining their stakes. At the same time, these struggles also transform the cultural status of this field as a whole. My findings show that at least since the mid-1980s, Israeli literary translators have been striving to improve their standing and terms of work by advancing the autonomous status of their occupation as a source of symbolic capital (see analysis in Sela-Sheffy 2004). This process is most clearly evinced by the lively discourse held by translators and critics in the printed media during the last two decades. Serving as important arenas where status struggles are shaped and controlled (De Nooy 2002), these channels reveal a considerable effort by translators to promote their public image and establish translation as an autonomously gratifying career in its own right, with its own distinctive aura.

Naturally, this discourse focuses on literary translators, who are normally by far more exposed to the public than translators of non-literary texts, and are able to achieve the highest reputation as individuals. It foregrounds a restricted circle of 20–25 translators and coronates them as the “stars” of translation, whose fame goes beyond the limits of their profession, as public celebrities. As

such, these privileged agents are recognized as the translators' spokesmen and those who set the tone in the field.

Certainly, this discourse is not the only channel through which attempts take place to establish translation as an independent field with an exclusive symbolic capital. In the realm of non-literary translation, these attempts seem to be the driving force behind the process of professionalization (Abbott 1988; Aldridge and Evetts 2003). The above mentioned rising educational frameworks offered by universities and other institutions, the seminars and events organized by the ITA, or the various discussion groups on the internet, are all signs of this process, intended to stimulate a professional consciousness and a group solidarity, and to raise the requirements for admission to this field as a "professional club". True, recent far-reaching initiatives by the ITA, such as admission exams, or a formulated ethical code, are still not always welcome by most of the translators, who are used to working on a freelance basis, and are suspicious of "imposed rules" which may threaten their personal authority as professionals. However, all these initiatives are indications of an attempt at an impersonal professionalism, designed to confer on translators a "group dignity" and increase their general chances of success, without foregrounding some of them as individual names.

By contrast, the above-mentioned circle of highly celebrated literary translators is a product of an emerging "star system" (Shumway 1997) in the field of translation (which is manifested through various markers of personal fame, such as winning prizes, gaining exposure in the media or connections with other celebrities). This system seems to be the privilege of literary translators. Apparently, precisely because of their relatively limited economic prospects and harsher working conditions, personal glory seems to be their only chance for improving their status.⁸ At the same time, this "star system" is structurally more available to them through their contact with the literary field. Consequently, the formation of this system relies heavily on models from the fields of literature and the arts. As similar cases of promoting the autonomy of marginal fields of artistic cultural production demonstrate (e.g., Sela-Sheffy 1999), this endeavor entails a mystification — rather than rational formalization — of the profession's rules, requirements and criteria of judgment (Bourdieu 1985). Most of these highly ranked translators tend to glorify their trade as a "vocation" rather than just a skillful means for earning a living. They make efforts to portray translatorial competence as consisting of a unique disposition, an unexplainable gift that one either does or does not have, which defies any systematic knowledge and method of learning. This "magic spell", so we learn, distinguishes "genuine" translators from mere "technicians of words".

Adopting the sectarian standpoint of those possessing an exclusive precious knowledge, and setting 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 of autonomous fields — or of fields aspiring to autonomization. Whether they take a conservative or a revolutionary position, they all insist on their artistic license and freedom in selecting their material, expressing indifference — even contempt — toward commercial interests or “popular taste”. In view of the alleged subordinate function of translators in the book industry, highlighting their personal judgments and responsibility is an unmistakable signal of their outstanding status as individuals in this field of cultural production.

All this complex art of self-presentation, implying the unique value of each translator as an irreplaceable individual master in this trade, confers upon these celebrated translators the status of individuals who are in a position to bargain for the terms and price of their work. Although they tend to accuse the publishing houses of a capitalist policy that allegedly perpetuates the humble — and deteriorating — status of translation and translators (Harel 2003), some of them nevertheless admit that their own situation is far from being bleak. They can afford to act like *prima donnas*, interfering with the publishers’ regulations and disregarding schedules, and their prices exceed the average fees several times over.

3. What it takes to be a translator

Let me now return to the idea of the habitus. If the field is constructed through constant struggles for defining its capital, the habitus is what generates people’s inclination for certain prestige-endowing forms of action (i.e. their “taste”). As such, the idea of the habitus comes as an alternative to rational explanations of human action (see also Swidler 1986, Lamont 1992, and compare with Verdaasdonk 2003). For all its vagueness, this notion highlights two aspects of people’s action: the unconscious nature of the choices they make and the correlation of these (interdependent) choices with social status. This idea brings into focus the unspoken sense of “knowing what to do” (Goffman 1959), which is the individual’s intuitive ability to participate in the ongoing collective construction of common-sense agreements on acceptable forms of behavior (Davis 1994). These are agreements that feel so real for people in any given culture, yet are so hard to trace through empirical research, precisely because they defy formal codification (Bourdieu 1990). Being such an elusive “feel”,

tracing it is easier in cases of habitus clash: when individuals fail in social functions despite their formal qualifications (e.g., Gumperz 1979), when individuals' behavior seems to run counter to their best interests (e.g., Lau 2004), or when excessive attempts to accommodate mark an individual as "not naturally belonging".

All this can also be applied to the study of the field of translation. In fact, it is perfectly in line with the idea of norms, in suggesting that not everything is explainable on the level of systematic problem solving. Translators act as they do mainly because they feel it is right to act in a certain way (often at the cost of "clumsy solutions") — and, indeed, strongly defend the mystery of their know-how. As already implied by Toury's pioneering attempt (1995a), the competence of the "Native Translator" is formed as part of a broader socialization process, of which the individual is not always aware. It is the process through which individuals construct their linguistic habits and preferences (e.g., their sense of linguistic finesse, their style of writing, their ability or inability to shift between language registers, their respect or disregard for canonical literary sources, and so on), together with many other behavioral models that shape their general attitudes as cultural "selves". In fact, it follows from this conceptualization that understanding translators' performances would be impossible without some clues to this shared common-sensical knowledge of "what suits people like us".

Simeoni (1998) is therefore right in underlining that the habitus is not merely about professional expertise, but also accounts for a whole model of a person. Again, this is an ambiguity inherited from Bourdieu's own discussion of the habitus, At some points he talks about "the habitus of a field", while in other cases he speaks about the personal habitus in the sense of a "class person". The former is composed of the shared tendencies, beliefs and skills, all of which precondition the natural operation of a specific field (e.g., the habitus of philologists, Bourdieu 1980a). The latter refers to a unifying set of mentally and physically incorporated schemes that coordinate the individual's behavior in all areas of life (e.g., Bourdieu 1986). Aware of this ambiguity, Simeoni suggests a distinction between a "social" ("generalized") habitus and a "professional" ("specialized") one, emphasizing that the correlation between these two levels of the habitus can never be taken for granted but must be examined in each particular case.

This may help clarify the role sometimes played by specific fields of action in the formation of a habitus of a person. While the "generalized habitus" of translators may have much in common with that of larger social sectors (including other professional groups) with similar economic, demographic and

educational structures, we should ask whether entering this particular field imposes further significant personal tendencies on them.⁹ However, the trouble with this classification seems to be, again, the narrow interpretation of the “specialized habitus of the field” it may lead to. Ideally, the “field habitus” means a range of tendencies and preferences of the agents in various aspects of their life (i.e., their “taste”), so that “being a high-tech person”, for instance, requires a lot more than just expertise in computers (Eitam 2003). In practice, however, this classification seems to lead, inadvertently, to delimiting the “habitus of the field” to the specific skills and preferences employed in performing translations (i.e., “the styles of writing translation”, Simeoni 1998: 18–19).

In the end, such an interpretation seems to be missing the point by using a complex conceptual tool such as the habitus while remaining confined to this single, most obvious level of translators’ action, by which translators are formally recognized. Not only is their acquisition of translation proficiency determined by broader social factors (their “background”), but this proficiency in itself is not the only parameter that makes up a recognized translator. It may well be argued that translators must produce translations, as much as shoemakers must make shoes and poets write poems. Yet even this seemingly safe condition for “being a translator” (or “being a poet”, etc.) is not self-evident. People may write many poems without being seriously considered “poets”, while others can feel and be acknowledged as such even if their output is meager, as long as they construct the appropriate persona for themselves and play by the right rules. And the same also holds for translators. They may be what they are by “disposition” rather than by production. There are sufficient examples of Israeli literary translators whose credit is based on their personal image and general outlooks more than on their “objective” translation output. Sometimes the translator’s persona is attractive enough to be adopted by not-so-prolific translators, who nevertheless enjoy the status of recognized translators with a sound translation philosophy (Sela-Sheffy 2004).

As emerges from what translators say about themselves and what other people say about them, to be a translator also entails certain expectations regarding one’s personality and lifestyle. Eventually, there is a (partly tacit and partly explicit) knowledge of what should or should not be done or said if one is to be recognized as a competent translator. This intuitive knowledge may not always be visible; we can hardly identify translators by their clothing or choice of boutiques or coffee shops. Yet, there are apparently certain “recommended” personal tendencies that come with their “being translators” (such as a taste for “cultural” matters, a personal temperament, attitudes towards languages and education, a sense of professional dignity, societal connections and

preferences, habits of organizing time, life-trajectories, etc.), which tendencies create their sense of group identification as well as distinction. This knowledge is internalized and reproduced by translators, and varies between their different groups.¹⁰ To some extent, it is also shared by other agents in the translation industry, or even by outsiders (such as readers, university students, and so on), who take part in reproducing images of translators (see also Eitam 2003). Regardless of how this intuitive knowledge is formed and distributed, it is what triggers or sanctions translators' actual behavior.

Optimally, an analysis of this kind requires a thorough study of lifestyle parameters and life-trajectories of the relevant groups (Sapiro 2004). As mentioned earlier, such a study, which involves this large number of variables, is not always feasible. However, more important than the hard facts of translators' lifestyles as such is their valuation by the translators themselves, that is, the ways translators signify these facts, using them for negotiating their status and self-esteem (Lamont and Fournier 1992, Peterson 1997).

Such a thorough study has not yet been attempted for translators in Israel. To begin with, since translation is not an officially recognized profession in the country, the Israel Statistics Bureau does not offer any data about translators. Still, some information emerges from the partial sources at our disposal.¹¹ These sources mainly include (incomplete) information about formal education, place of residence, gender, age and period of professional practice, languages and fields of interest, and some hints at fees and wages. This information suggests, for instance, that Israeli translators usually have academic training,¹² mostly in the Humanities (notably in English, Linguistics and Literatures) and in Social Sciences. There are many women among them (the great majority of ITA members, and 79% of the respondents to the questionnaire). This fact is often rationalized as correlated with the loose career and time-organization structures characterizing this occupation, and hence with its inferior status (and compare with Pinder 1998, Collinson 2004). However, the reasoning that this is a "housewives' occupation" because it suits mothers' need to stay at home with their children (Katzenelson 2000) is in part refuted by the fact that many translators are not very young people.¹³

To a certain extent, this information also includes some indications of these people's attitudes and aspirations. For instance, a pregnant aspect of Israeli translators' self-presentation that emerges from responses to the ITA questionnaire is their knowledge of foreign languages, or rather, their report of this knowledge. Unsurprisingly, all translators declare a knowledge of English. The pair of languages "English into Hebrew" and "Hebrew into English" absolutely predominates. This finding apparently indicates the trivial fact that

English prevails as a second language in contemporary Israel, both as part of the obligatory repertoire of educated people, and as the language most in demand in the market of translation (literary and other).¹⁴ However, the selection of other languages in which translators declare proficiency seems to be ordered more clearly by a hierarchy of prestige. It includes not just any language that is available to — and may be demanded by — the local population (certainly not the non-prestigious Diaspora languages that may still be acquired by some people “at home”), but first and foremost French (for the status of languages in Israel see Ben-Rafael 1994) and other prestigious European languages, notably Spanish and Italian.¹⁵ By contrast, Arabic and Russian, the two most largely spoken languages in Israel after Hebrew, are relatively scarcely mentioned in this list.¹⁶ Whatever the reason for speakers of these languages to avoid practicing translation (or abstain from announcing themselves as translators on the ITA list), this fact seems revealing of the importance ascribed by translators to knowledge of foreign languages as a status marker. Beyond being a working tool, this knowledge appears as a symbolic asset that translators (apparently like other sectors of educated and semi-educated Israelis) tend to capitalize on and manipulate in their routines of constructing their cultural identity.

Similarly, translators’ reported choices of specialized fields and desired enrichment courses reveal that broad education in the Humanities (e.g., in art, literature and poetry, law, psychology, natural and social sciences, history, and Judaic studies) is more readily reported than so-called technical fields such as software, finances, insurance, medicine, cosmetics, etc. This fact may hint at their aspiration for an intellectual image rather than that of “narrow-minded technocrats”. All these various “evaluation markers” help in inferring translators’ general cultural preferences and art of social boundary making (Lamont 1992, 2003, Lamont and Fournier 1992). However, this kind of information is better obtained through discursive evidence, such as interviews, conversations or written forms of self-presentation, than through surveys (Peterson 1997). For instance, translators speak a lot about their being belittled, ignored and underpaid. “The issue of payment for translation work is a topic of constant griping by every self-respecting translator” (Kermit 2003; my translation). Rather than just being taken at face value, however, translators’ unhappy reports on their situation give away their view of themselves as deserving higher respect and appreciation than they claim they get. These reports often indicate the translators’ sense of superiority over “ignorant clients” or “the ignorant public”.

The ways translators present themselves are therefore not only indicative of their sense of “what kind of people they are”, but in fact also constructive in creating their desired cultural identity and in drawing distinctions among

themselves. From the partial sources at my disposal it emerges that Israeli translators tend to describe themselves as curious individuals, eager and quick to learn, whose fields of interest are vast, and who value resourcefulness, high proficiency, perfectionism, dedication and responsibility, rather than careerism or material success. They tend to underline their love of their trade. Natural inclination for and enjoyment of their job is often claimed to be both a precondition for achievement in this occupation (“it cannot be done without love”) and the reason for choosing it as their career in the first place. Similarly, the fact that translation is normally performed in isolation, not as team-work, is also often mentioned by Israeli translators as a meaningful aspect of their life and personality. This fact invokes a range of stances on their part, from telling about stress and loneliness to emphasizing their being “independent spirits”. While some report they feel — or are seen as — introverts, uneasy at working with other people, preferring to work with papers instead, others speak about difficulties in accommodating to rigid frameworks and time-organizing structures, and the need to be “their own masters” (Katzenelson 2000). In spite of the uncertainty and pressure that come with these working conditions (irregular flow of jobs, changing clientele, impossible deadlines), many of them prefer being self-employed, running their own one-person business.

When it comes to literary translators, however, these aspects of solitude and independence of their working conditions are even more coherently rationalized as part of the model of eccentric personality they adopt. Their discourse suggests that they are more aware of their self-fashioning, demonstrating passion for their work, sensitivity and imagination, and highbrow taste as central components of their cultural portrait (see analysis in Sela-Sheffy 2004). As in the different fields of art and literary production, in the absence of formal professional criteria and qualifications, an extraordinary personality seems to become for these translators a most important required testimony to their aptness as agents in this field. By analogy to artists and poets, Israeli literary translators tend to accentuate their being outsiders, non-conventional individuals, living non-conventional lives, sometimes with unsociable personalities (for a description of the model of unsociable literary personalities see, e.g., Carey 1992). They often express profound emotional bonds with their work, to the point of letting their occupation intermingle with and take over their personal life. Rationalizing the loose career pattern of their occupation, they tend to construct their life stories so as to present their becoming translators not as a rational decision fitting their education and social background, but rather as an inborn drive that somehow materialized by chance.

As emerges from their discourse, literary translators in Israel differ strongly from non-literary ones in their higher aspirations and sense of cultural distinction. Whereas “ordinary translators” are willing to admit that the final decisions regarding their output are in the hands of their clients, literary translators hardly mention the part played by editors and publishers in the production of translations, or, in certain cases, openly object to the interference of others in their work. While the ethos of “ordinary translators” allows for down-to-earth open discussions of mundane technicalities, such as conditions of work and fees, and demystification of the source texts (Green 1990, Harel 2003, Kermit 2003, Yariv 2004, and Internet discussions. See also Chriss 2000), all this is absolutely absent from the discourse of literary translators, which is dedicated, instead, to philosophical and emotional deliberations. Literary translators are often at pains to demonstrate their awe and trepidation for *The Text* (with a capital T) and their capacity of an artistic self-elimination, the two highest distinguishing marks of the purest artistic mindset according to modern literary ideology (Sela-Sheffy 2004).

This kind of evidence, however partial, helps in tracing the “social constraints inscribed in individuals” which direct translators’ choices and decisions, even as professionals. The notion of the *habitus*, understood in this way, helps in thinking about the mystery of taste affinities (Bourdieu 1980), which results from adjustments and re-adjustments between pre-disposed individuals and the repertoire prevailing in the field. Since both this repertoire and the groups acting in the field may vary, the field’s *habitus* is never homogeneous and definite. While the initial affinity or distance between the field *habitus* and the *habitus* of the candidates may determine the potential success or failure of their action in that field, changing conditions or demography may also introduce changes in the *habitus* of the field.

4. Conclusion

The concepts of field and *habitus* add important sociological perspective to the study of translation as an activity, particularly to the study of norms in translation. True, being complex, loosely defined notions, they sometimes seem puzzling and obscure when applied to research, and, if simplified, may even lead to a deterministic view of human action. However, their potential for perceiving the tension between the predictability and versatility of translators’ preferences and choices, as determined by their group affiliation, is undeniable. By and large, these concepts introduce to the study of translation the basic parameter

of status contests, that is, the struggle for cultural capital, which is the inevitable driving force behind all socially organized activities. In light of this, I have tried in this paper to elaborate on three important aspects of translators' action: (1) the variability of norms of translation, which depends on the different strategies translators employ while playing either conservative or innovative roles, as cultural custodians or cultural importers, in specific historical contexts; (2) the dynamic construction of the field of translation, which results from translators' struggles for establishing their profession as an autonomous source of symbolic capital, and the ways they create their internal (individual or group) distinctions; and (3) translators' preferred models of self-fashioning, or valued personal tendencies, according to which they select and signify the facts of their life-conditions and use them for gaining prestige and improving their status and terms of work.

Notes

1. Without dwelling on the peculiarities of modern Hebrew culture and language, the contemporary situation of Israeli translators can serve as a test case for discussing the status of translators as a cultural group. The material I have surveyed is heterogeneous in nature. One source includes hundreds of interviews, profile articles, critical reviews and other reports dedicated to translators and translations in Israeli printed media, from the early 1980s to 2004 (for an analysis of this material see Sela-Sheffy 2004). Another source consists of 117 responses to a questionnaire which deals with the translators' public image held by semi-educated Israelis such as graduate students (the responses were collected at Tel Aviv University, from 1999 through 2004). Additional sources have been translators' internet forums and websites, data collected by the Israel Translators Association, and pilot interviews and personal communications with translators.
2. E.g., DiMaggio 1979, Brubaker 1985, Harker, Mahar and Wilkes 1990, Jenkins 1992, Verdaasdonk 2003, Lahire 2003, Noble and Watkins 2003, Smith 2003, Lau 2004, see also Sheffy 1997.
3. For instance, the life model of "the Renaissance poet", as described by Kernan (1979), has apparently had an inertial impact on the formation of the "life of the modern poet" in Western culture ever since Petrarch's times. But at the same time, there have evolved various other models of "bring a poet" in the course of Western history which have prevailed alternatively in different places and different times (Tomashevskij 1971).
4. In this critical discourse of art there still prevails the unrealistic idea of "unprecedented novelty" and total subversiveness as supposedly the yardstick of an "authentic art", while research in cultural dynamics has long acknowledged that innovations are always the products of remodeling and reshuffling of existing, often marginal, options, or their importation from other territories.

5. 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”.

6. For basic information, 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.

7. Although fees and working terms are not standardized and data about them are usually unavailable, some information may be obtained, for instance, from internet forums and discussion groups (e.g., *Translation and Editing Forum*, Kermit 2003, *Translation Fees* 2003, and various other forums). From these sources it emerges that technical and commercial translations are by far better paid than literary work.

8. Within this group, a great disparity is observed between a restricted elite of well-known names and a wide circle of underprivileged anonymous agents. However, the chances of some of them to receive public attention and dramatically improve their terms of work are also greater.

9. In fact, as Toury (1999) suggests, certain preferences that can be observed in translation performances may also be exercised in other practices related to the field, such as translation criticism or training, and not be confined to the practice of translation alone.

10. And compare this with Eitam’s findings regarding the differences in the required “taste” — mental formation, physical appearance, time organization, societal preferences, etc. — between start-ups and mainstream high-tech employees in Israel; Eitam 2003.

11. In addition to the sources mentioned earlier (note 1), I rely here on 120 responses to an ITA questionnaire dealing with translators’ preferences of enrichment courses. The questionnaire was distributed during 2004 to 516 translators, mostly members of ITA. The 120 who responded must therefore be the more conscious and interested translators among ITA members and their colleagues.

12. Out of 120 respondents to the ITA questionnaire, 103 declare to have academic degrees: 59 BA, 35 MA, 3 PhD, 3 LLB and 3 MBA.

13. More than 30% of the respondents to the ITA questionnaire, for instance, report experience of between 15 and over 25 years, while for many others this is a second career which only began at a later age.

14. Further, the fact that so many respondents only mentioned these languages (over 60%) suggests that many translators are either native Hebrew or native English speakers. There are no statistics regarding the distribution of Israeli-born and non-Israeli-born translators. However, there are many Israeli translators who, having English as their mother tongue, specialize in translating into English. In fact, these translators constitute a large segment of ITA members, and probably the largest (but not exclusive) segment of Israeli translators who deal with *exportation* of texts. Their knowledge of English and background in English-speaking cultures certainly endow them with high prestige in the local cultural space. At the

same time, however, dealing mainly with “exporting” rather than “importing” texts, their voice is hardly heard in the various forums dedicated to Hebrew translation, and they are often regarded by the participants of these forums as marginal and irrelevant. I thank Sarah Yarkoni for this comment.

15. French was mentioned by 24 out of the 120 respondents to the ITA questionnaire, Italian by 11 and Spanish by 6 of them. Additional languages listed by these respondents were German (5), Portuguese (3), Romanian (3), Ukrainian (2), Yiddish (2), and Hungarian, Czech and Slovak, each mentioned once. Judging by these partial figures, it seems evident that knowledge of traditional languages such as the Jewish Diaspora languages are declared least marketable in the translation business. Interestingly, however, “exotic” languages, such as Japanese or Chinese, are not mentioned in this source at all.

16. Arabic is mentioned 4 times and Russian 10 times. In Israeli culture today, these two languages have the double status of both minority languages (that of the Arabs and that of the Russian Jewish newcomers), and as languages of high culture and academic learning. Apparently, while literary translation from these two languages is highly respectable (as emerges from many translation reviews and interviews with translators), “practical translation” from these languages is much less so.

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Résumé

Cet article a pour objet les traducteurs envisagés en tant que groupe culturel-professionnel. Il convoque les concepts d'habitus et de champ pour expliquer la tension entre la nature coercitive et flexible de l'action traductive, cette tension étant créée par l'identification des traducteurs comme groupe culturel et par leur positionnement dans leur champ d'action spécifique. En prenant comme points de référence la contestation de leur statut et leur lutte pour le capital symbolique, nous étudions trois aspects des auto-images différenciatrices et des stratégies d'action des traducteurs. Les exemples sont choisis dans le domaine des traductions en hébreu élaborées de nos jours en Israël: (1) le caractère variable des stratégies déployées par les traducteurs lorsque ceux-ci jouent, dans des contextes historiques spécifiques, des rôles tour à tour conservateurs ou novateurs, en tant que gardiens ou importateurs culturels; (2) la construction dynamique et la stratification du champ de la traduction, qui résultent de leurs efforts pour fonder un prestige propre, oscillant entre le statut professionnel impersonnel et le 'vedettariat' de type artiste; (3) l'auto-modélisation, qui consiste à élire et à douer de signification des données de la vie réelle, au service d'un relèvement du statut et des conditions de travail des traducteurs.

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