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The Suspended Potential of Culture Research in TS ■

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy
Unit for Culture Research, Tel Aviv University ■

In memory of Rina Drory, friend and colleague,
whose work in culture research has left indelible mark

In their attempt at "Shared Ground in Translation Studies" Andrew Chesterman and Rosemary Arrojo cover a large range of themes, problems and tasks, trying to do justice not only to the current work in the field, but also to its history. In today's spirit of postmodernism they endeavor to keep a relativist and pluralistic view, which is in line with the general trend (at least as an aspiration) to move gradually towards culture-oriented approach in Translation Studies. Neverthe-

less, one wonders to what extent all this goes beyond a conglomeration of hints at elegant ideas, to create a coherent and productive advanced agenda. Let me say from the outset that, coming from the field of culture research, I look at translation as basically a manifestation of cultural processes, and therefore expect TS to be productive in this way. But even considering my biased perspective, I still think that the document at hand is rather evasive about what it sees as the center of gravity of Translation Studies and the outlook of the field. Although it offers many leads to important discussions, these leads just do not seem to add up to a useful conceptual and methodological framework.

For one thing, it seems to be going in circles, reflecting too seriously on some elementary postulates which appear no longer immediately relevant to the development of TS. At the same time, it tends to avoid consequential distinctions and seeks to reconcile irreconcilable approaches. Between the lines, however, one still detects a rather commonplace approach to translation, with a very strong imprint of *literary* thinking. Whether this is a faithful reflection of the state of the art in the field or the authors' hesitation to draw further conclusions and come up with constructive proposals, the bottom line is that their document still seems to perpetuate the restricted *text-centered* perspective which prevails in the field at large, without taking any further steps towards a comprehensive culture-centered approach to translation, as seems to be called for by various fruitful hypotheses suggested in the document itself.

1

The problem seems to begin right at the outset, with the proposed point of departure, namely, the debate between essentialism and non-essentialism, and the question of "how far these two approaches to translation studies can be reconciled" [#0]. Raising these issues today seems to be somewhat anachronistic and futile. It is anachronistic in the sense that relativity, multiplicity and dependency of 'meaning' seem to have long become a common creed in the humanities. In light of current knowledge in pragmatics, cognitive science and sociolinguistics, which necessarily have strong bearings on the study of everything connected with meaning-producing human behavior, and with the impact of culture studies on every branch of the humanities in the last decades, no field of human science can seriously ignore, let alone reject, these pre-

mises. In this respect, both the deconstructionist approach argued by RA and the empirical one defended by AC are non-essentialist, in that they both proceed from the assumption — either explicitly or implicitly — that what a text ‘means’ depends on various factors other than the text itself. Therefore, discussing ‘essentialism’ here is futile, as is the worn-out question of ‘definitions’. Since theoretical pluralism is a widely accepted stand, it seems trivial to restate that the status of definitions is nothing more than a *working hypothesis* which serves in each particular case as a point of departure for research.

In light of this, the ‘essentialist’ bent in the study of translation to which the authors refer seems to be less a matter of actual theoretical consideration than a relic of the once dominant *ideology* in the field of *literary criticism*. It is the ideology which has established the cult of the Text as a unique, semi-divine, complex-meaning entity that is usually beyond the comprehension of the average, non professional reader. This is certainly not acceptable as a solid basis for TS, although evoking this Text-ideology here gives away a reluctance — however covert — to get away once and for all from the outworn constraints of literary criticism. Indeed, this notion of the Text is deeply implanted in modern ‘cultured’ consciousness of literary professionals and laymen alike, so that the main concern, whenever ‘translation’ is considered, is often still that of the ‘damage’ it may inflict on the Text, or the ‘loss’ of its ‘original meaning’. This is very clearly observed in popular responses to translation by members of the intelligentsia. Such an attitude and use of vocabulary has been recently attested, for instance, by replies to a questionnaire dealing with translation as product, activity, and profession, which I distributed in two university classes (and which will be discussed in Sela-Sheffy forthcoming).

To a certain extent this cult of the Text is still there even in seemingly more sophisticated up-to-date approaches to text analysis, such as are echoed intensively in the document at hand, which believe that meanings are “inherently non-stable” [#0] and proffer multiple and dynamic text-interpretations. Eventually they, too, promote Text interpretation as an end in itself, which is a central procedure in the cult of the Text, and hence they keep imposing a rather restricted agenda on TS. By and large, the interpretative approach seems to be so overwhelming in this document that it overshadows even the progress made in the empirical study of translation, such as research into the process of translation. In this respect the outline offered here is not only insufficient, it even takes TS a step backwards.

2

Nevertheless, as narrow as it may be, an interpretative approach at least allows for theoretical consideration of the conditions of text understanding, whereas the 'autonomy of the text' ideology imposes a priori restrictions on any prospects of theoretical research into socio-historical factors of translation, and leaves TS entirely within the limits of normative literary criticism. Therefore, if this methodological debate is to serve as a point of departure at all, I suggest that it should not rehash the obsolete problem of essentialism but should instead bring more clearly to the fore the distinction between two major relevant alternatives: the *interpretative, text-oriented* approach, and the one directed toward explaining translation as a *social activity*. The latter approach differs from the former not just in "the meaning of the concept of translation" [#0], but mainly in introducing into TS methods of research other than text analysis, drawing mainly on sociology and anthropology. Consequently, it expands the focus of interest of TS from the products (the translated texts) as such, to the interdependencies and exchange relations between products, persons (producers and consumers), institutions, and the translation market.

It is high time, in my view, that the focus of TS be reversed. Instead of viewing information about translators and translation institutions as marginal facts subjugated to explaining phenomena in translated texts, indications of translatorial decisions in end-products should be used as data for exploring cultural processes. The study of translation can serve, from this perspective, as *a perfect laboratory for the study of cultural dynamics (and not just linguistic behavior) in general*. This was suggested as long as twenty years ago by Even-Zohar and Toury in their introduction to *Theory of Translation and Intercultural Relations* (1981a). The important work already done which uses translated texts as raw material for studying cultural contacts (e.g. Yahalom 1981; Lambert 1978; Drory 1991) has long established TS as the framework *par excellence* for research into the formation, transfer and change of cultural (and not just textual or linguistic) repertoires.

Although most of the cases studied by the scholars mentioned above were centered in literature, their import goes much farther. They show that even when translation is dealt with as a set of textual-transformation procedures proper, it is still highly revealing with regard to the sources, availability, status and durability of cultural models. Beyond this, however, as put forward especially by Even-Zohar (1997), the study of translation and transfer, as

indispensable generative processes of the cultural repertoire, may apply to any kind of cultural production whatsoever, material and abstract alike. The application of this kind of study to material culture makes it even likelier to deal with broader issues involving *cultural importation* in general. One such important issue, for instance, concerns the relations between the import of *products* (be they texts, appliances, or food products) and of *models*, and how the two engender or transform one another (ibid.)

But the study of translation is instructive not only from inter-cultural, but also from *intra-cultural* perspective. As is convincingly stressed by the target-oriented approach to studying translation norms (Toury 1981, 1999), factors in the receiving cultural arena are the critical ones in determining the nature, status and tempo of the work of translation. Being basically a practice of importing, manipulating and transforming cultural goods and models, *the business of translation constitutes in itself an extremely interesting field of cultural production*. It is therefore time to take on the new directions recently proposed for TS (Toury 1995; Simeoni 1998; Venuti 1995; Hermans 1999) and give a better chance to the study of the peculiarities of this domain as a vital field of production in a certain socio-cultural space. This includes the way the field is organized, the profile of its agents, the distribution and availability of its repertoire, its sources of authorization, its relations with other fields of production, and more.

3

The distinction between these approaches can also rescue the argument from the tedious debate of defining 'the concept of translation' (e.g., "there is no such thing as a totally objective definition of 'translation'" [#2], etc.) This is a recurrent and well-known pitfall all over the humanities. In the case in point, this debate seems to be reduced to an attempt at a comparative *lexical* definition (e.g., "The English word 'translation' might not necessarily denote exactly the same thing as some other word that approximately means 'translation' in another language... . A valid research goal is to examine the extent to which these various *conceptions* of translation overlap", etc. [#5; my emphasis]). Obviously, AC & RA aspire for more than this. Some points in their document (#4, #8, #9, #10) disclose that their proposal is not necessarily restricted to philosophical speculations on 'meanings' and 'concepts', at least

potentially. For instance, suggesting to trace the logic according to which certain “kinds of texts ... have been labelled ‘translation’ as compared with texts that are not called translations” [#4], is not merely about classifying corpora or types of translations (as also emerges in points #12 and #13). Far beyond labels and definitions, the question of what counts at a certain historical point as translation is actually about what kind of *activity* takes place, how it operates, and what its functions are.

Taken from such a broader perspective, a study of this kind could shed light on the role of translation activities in culture building (Even-Zohar 1997; Shavit and Shavit 1977; Toury 1999a; in press) and of cultural receptivity or resistance (Even-Zohar 1997; Drory 1991). AC & RA, however, fail to touch upon any of this; these issues are only briefly implied, as no more than incidental lip service, without being fully integrated into the leading argument: “This aim includes the study of who labels the texts, and for what reason, and whether such attributions change over time” [#4]. Alternatively, its formulation is too general and vague: “TS is interested in exploring the various enabling conditions/reasons/influences/causes of translatorial behavior” [#15] (see also [#17]).

As shown for different case studies in different cultures and periods of time, neither the nature of this activity, nor its scope and accessibility, nor even its existence as a cultural fact, its prosperity or its decline, is self-evident or can be taken for granted. In certain cases, translation may be disguised and used, together with adaptations and writings of original texts, as an amplifying tool for initiating a new corpus in a so-called revived language (Toury 1999). In such cases, the act of translation is not acknowledged, and the products are not distinguished from other sorts of texts. In other cases, translation may be openly promoted as a central authorized means of cultural importation in the service of projects aimed at culture building and at constructing an educated readership (Even-Zohar 1988; Shavit and Shavit 1977), or at establishing a canon (Helgason 1999). Or it may be regarded as a valued source for legitimizing innovations (to the extent that translated texts from respected cultures may gain greater prestige than original writings, Toury 1995a). Sometimes the prosperity of translation can also be due to its serving as main solution for the livelihood of growing circles of intellectuals involved in such projects (Shavit and Shavit 1977). At the same time, it can often be (even in one and the same cultural milieu) both supported as a desired influence on, and rejected as an unjustified competition for, the production of a ‘native’ literature and culture.

In yet other cases, attempts at translation can be rather overlooked and may lose their impact since the source culture is no longer fashionable in the eyes of contemporary taste setters (Drory 1991).

4

Evidently, AC & RA are not totally unaware of this perspective for TS, but they somehow consistently fail to register its full potential. Instead, they tend to elaborate, often at disproportionate length, on relatively secondary topics, leaving some important sporadic insights in the void. One such instance of missing the point seems to be the discussion of expressing people's "concept of translation as metaphor" [#9]. Beside the fact that the question of metaphor is over-discussed (#9, #10, #11), the trouble is that, again, we see here nothing but yet another way of 'interpreting' the *word* 'translation'. But what could be gained by it? If all theoretical terms should be considered as metaphorical language (i.e., "translation is transfer" [#10], "translation is performance" [#11]), then, the most one can hope to unveil are some latent intents of a theory. Even this is often overstating the case, however. The example of the term 'transfer' best illustrates the pointlessness of this argument, since the question of whether and *how* "something is indeed transferred" [#10] is after all not just unintentionally 'implied' by this metaphorical term, as suggested, but is rather exactly what the theory of repertoire and culture contact deliberately seeks to deal with, assuming that these 'something(s)' are *models*, or elements thereof (and the question of how these are traced *ad hoc* and analyzed is the subject of the theory of repertoire; Even-Zohar 1997a; Sela-Sheffy 1997). On the other hand, exploring metaphors of translation in the less consciously codified, popular everyday language of *non-experts*, would probably be much more revealing when it comes to the status and function of translation activities in given cultural spaces. Far more compelling than the denotations of metaphors as such is information about their users and their contexts of action.

Put this way, an examination of current uses of metaphors of translation would have fit in better with the project suggested in [#8], namely, "to study the discourse on translation in a particular culture at a particular time". Such a study can evolve into a comprehensive overview of the image(s) of the profession of translation (see, e.g., Jänis 1996), and of the presence and impact

of translation activities in a given culture. This kind of research should, of course, deal not only with the choice of vocabulary, but with a whole range of features of people's talk, from the choice of topics, stances and judgments to rhetorical modes and the variety of tactics of position-taking and self-presentation (Sela-Sheffy forthcoming). Indeed, listening to "what people say" about something [#8] could serve as an excellent — although by no means exclusive — tool for tracing those hidden models that serve for classifying and evaluating certain cultural goods, be they products or actions. (Works in cognitive anthropology could serve as a source of inspiration; see, e.g., Holland and Quinn 1987; see also Hofstede 1991.) In this connection, AC & RA make a good point in suggesting that image(s) of translation (i.e., "the question 'what is translation'" in their words [#14]) are necessarily normative (i.e., are "closely linked to the question 'what is a good translation'"; *ibid.*) Unfortunately, however, this observation, like many others, does not lead anywhere.

Although what people say does not necessarily coincide with what they do, their expressed classifications can still serve as an important resource for analyzing the organization of a given cultural space and people's strategies of positioning themselves in it. For instance, as the questionnaires mentioned above also disclose, people can often declare that the quality of translation is a crucial factor in their reading enjoyment to the point of controlling their selection of reading (Sela-Sheffy forthcoming). This does not necessarily prevent them from reading what they judge to be "badly translated" texts. Nor does it always make them take an active interest in the work of different translators (most of the respondents to the questionnaires could hardly mention any translators into Hebrew, whether contemporary or past, by name, let alone manifest any knowledge of their translatorial policy). Nevertheless, their replies do reveal that judgment of translation is apparently ranked among the valued intellectual sensitivities, and that claiming to share this qualification is required for presenting oneself as a critical, tasteful educated person.

5

Indeed, point #8, somewhat exceptionally in this document, hints at the fact that the business of translation is an *entire field* of activities of *various kinds* made by *different agencies* ("by the translators themselves, by clients, by society at large, and by translation scholars"), and not just the act of writing

translation by people who are assigned the job of translating alone. However, even this leaves much to be desired. The proposed schematic translator-client relations, along with the fashionable outsider eye of the scholar, on the one hand, and the empty category of “society at large” (whatever this means), on the other, is after all too simplistic, quasi-sociological an explanatory model. It is hardly adequate for dealing with the richness and complexity of forces which keep the dynamics of translation (and of every other cultural activity) going.

To begin with, a large variety of institutions and agencies are overlooked here: editors, publishing houses or commercial companies, and their policy of encouraging or discouraging translation; translation criticism, prizes and grants; translators’ associations and clubs; as well as literary translators’ interactions with authors (including cases where translators are authors) and their aspirations and moves in the intellectual field; and so on. But what is badly missing here — beyond anything specific — is the understanding that *all this is a dynamic stratified complex*. Even if we choose to confine our discussion to translation products as such, or to the action of individual translators, we have to assume that they are performing as agents in a heterogeneous, *hierarchically* ordered field, where interactions and competitions are the order of the day. This means that there is always a choice of actions in every domain (e.g., how to write translations, what texts to translate, how to present oneself, etc.), and that adjustments of strategies of action are constantly possible, depending on the players’ positions in a given field (Simeoni 1998), on the position of the translated/imported material (Weissbrod 1992), on the status of the source culture, etc.

6

Finally, a word is in order about the *conclusion*, or the lack thereof, of this document. First, the circularity of its argumentation is especially striking in points #20 and #21. Do we really need to go through all the points in the documents only to come to the conclusion that there are regularities in human behavior and thought, and that these regularities may be systematically studied? As mentioned above with reference to the discussion of ‘essentialism’, here, too, this premise seems to be a commonplace underlying all branches of human science (but not literary criticism). No less disappointing, however, is the concluding section (points #22–#30), which seems to capture the problems

of this document in a nutshell. Under the title “What Consequences Do Translations Have”, it simply poses a handful of sporadic, partly recycled ideas, without really attempting to outline an applied research, as might have been expected from the title. Apparently, for lack of a more satisfactory organizing conceptual thread, the same old preoccupation with ‘the reader’ — again, an echo of literary discourse — comes forth, innocent of any insight regarding questions of cultural consumption and its interdependency with the field of production.

Author's address:

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy · Unit for Culture Research, Tel Aviv University · Ramat Aviv, TEL AVIV, Israel · e-mail: rakefet@post.tau.ac.il

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