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10 Profession, identity, and status

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Overview

With increasing academic interest in sociological perspectives on translation and interpreting, questions of identity and status have begun attracting attention in Translation Studies. The new sociological perspectives in TS have brought to the fore issues of power and ideology, role and ethics (e.g., Pym 2002; Calzada-Perez 2003; Angelelli 2004; Diriker 2004; Inghilleri 2005; Wolf 2006; Pym et al. 2006; Wolf and Fukari 2007; Bandia and Milton 2009; Diaz Fouces and Monzó 2010), as well as problems of translation fields and markets (e.g., Heilbron 1999; Fleilbron and Sapiro 2002; Buzelin 2007, 2014; Amit 2008). They also include the emerging discussion of translators' habitus (Simeoni 1998; Inghilleri 2003; Sapiro 2004b; Gouanvic 2005; Sela-Sheffy 2005; Torikai 2009; Buzelin 2011; Meylaerts 2011; Vorderobermeier 2014), and that of translators' agency and networks (e.g., Bogie 2010; Kinunnen and Koskinen 2010; Buzelin 2011; Abdallah 2014). Notwithstanding earlier attempts (Schwarz 1975; Henderson 1987; Tseng 1992; Hammond 1994; Archibald 1997; Robinson 1997), it is only recently that research has been consistently devoted to the social formations of translators and interpreters as specific professional groups subject to their own social constraints, with their particular access to resources, their status struggles, and sense of professional selves (Choi and Lim 2002; Sapiro 2004a; Sela-Sheffy 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2014; Gouadec 2007; Wadensjö et al. 2007; Dam and Zethsen 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012; Salaets and Van Gucht 2008; Chan 2009; Pan et al. 2009; Monzó 2011; Setton and Lianglang 2011; Grbić 2011; Ferreira-Alves 2011; Katan 2011b; Arocha and Joyce 2013; Volland 2014). In such studies, professional identities and status refer to the experience of the people who work in the different translatorial jobs and the ways they understand their occupation and make sense of it as part of their social world so as to locate themselves and maintain dignity as professionals in specific social spaces.

Theoretical foundations

Identity has become a buzzword in the humanities and the social sciences. Conceived not as a given entity but rather as a dynamic and multilayered

cultural construct, collectively produced and reproduced through social struggles in transforming cultural settings, it has everything to do with status and self-esteem (Stryker et al. 2000; Sela-Sheffy 2014). Surprisingly, however, this important aspect of social life has been as yet relatively little discussed with reference to the occupational context. While academic studies and public debates over identity focus primarily on typically political categories of stereotypization and hierarchy, such as ethnicity, race, gender, or religion, the occupational dimension is given scant attention. However, the role of occupations or professions in shaping identities can hardly be overstated – work, after all, is what many people do during large parts of their lives. Not only do occupations constitute major components of people's understanding of their lives, but they often create fields of action in which cultural repertoires are constantly constructed and negotiated (Davis 1994). That is, they serve as important social spaces where group identity, patterns of action, and values are maintained and perpetuated or transformed, thereby building people's perception of themselves and their world (Stryker et al. 2000). Thinking about occupations in this way opens many fascinating directions for the study of human agency in creating, maintaining, and changing immediate and broader social environments, and the ways in which the individuals themselves are created and transformed while moving in these spaces.

The sociological literature on professions offers a body of theoretical and historical research on the formation of modern professions, their institutions, forms of knowledge, career patterns, education and jurisdiction (e.g., Larson 1977; Abbott 1988; Torstendahl and Burrage 1990; Freidson 1994; Macdonald 1995; Evetts 2003). Concentrating on institutional and formal factors, these studies are largely embedded in the context of the more traditionally institutionalized and prestigious liberal professions known as the "success stories" of professionalism, notably medicine, law, and accounting (see, however, Noordegraaf 2007; Muzio 2011). However, from a culture-oriented viewpoint, precisely the "failed professionalizing" occupations (Elsaka 2005) or the underrated ones offer exciting cases in that they reveal more acutely strategies of coping with threatened status (Sela-Sheffy 2010, 2014). Among other occupational groups that are to varying extents underprofessionalized or marginalized, such as journalists, school teachers, craft-artists, or therapists, translators and interpreters serve as a quintessential case for examining how an occupational group deals with its own indeterminacy and marginality.

Unlike mainstream sociology of the professions, which assigns much weight to formal, institutional, and economic factors, studies of the codes of behavior, attitudes, and values shared by members of an occupation so as to maintain it as a functioning social *figuration* (Elias 1993, 1996) are still marginal. The latter aspects stand at the heart of the culture-oriented *practice theory* developed mainly by Bourdieu (1980, 1979/1986) and followers, a theory designed to deal with all kinds of sociocultural formations, and especially those lacking clear institutionalized boundaries. According to this theory, social dynamics are governed less by formal procedures and means of control than by sets of

distinguishing mental and bodily dispositions (habituses), which are internalized and exercised by groups of individuals to the extent that they become their second nature (Bourdieu 1986; also Jenkins 1992; Sheffy 1997; Lahire 2003; Sapiro 2004a; Guanvic 2005; Buzelin 2011). While in Elias' view, these are large-scale, long-term processes that produce enduring sociocultural formations (notably, that of "Western Culture"), Bourdieu's conceptualization focuses on the mutually distinguishing peculiarities of coexisting groups that produce and reproduce persistent social tensions and splits (Sela-Sheffy 2005). Typically, Bourdieu's theoretical framework has drawn its examples from fields that defy professionalization or are hardly defined as occupations at all, such as the intellectual field or the arts. To a great extent, such fields (notably the literary field) serve as models for status dynamics in the field of translation (Sela-Sheffy 2006, 2008, 2010).

While the sociological theory of occupational prestige highlights economic achievements as parameters of prestige evaluation (Treiman 1977; Nam and Powers 1983), the practice-oriented approach draws attention to the *cultural resources* that endow an occupation with symbolic values, beyond material and economic constraints. These values, constantly negotiated and redefined, are what is at stake for any given group of actors competing with other groups in every field of action (Bourdieu 1985). Understanding translation as a site of social action in this sense emphasizes the personal dispositions of its practitioners and their group relations. How these individuals position themselves, what kind of capital they pursue, how they struggle to achieve it, and what their cultural resources are, all these questions are at the core of current research into status and the profession in TIS.

All this naturally raises important methodological questions. Often, studies into these aspects draw on quantitative, survey-based studies. The bulk of such recent studies has already produced an impressive body of knowledge on translators and interpreters as a profession in different parts of the world (see below). Serving still as a major tool of sociological research, this quantitative method poses, however, intriguing challenges for cultural analysis. A well-known problem in analyzing surveys is that the respondents' replies cannot be taken at face value, as if they were reporting the unmediated reality of their life and attitudes. The fact is often disguised that, like any other communicative practice, responding to questionnaires is motivated by the need to maintain dignity. As Bourdieu argued in his classic criticism of public opinion polls (1972/1983), people will only provide what they assume to be an expected, respectable reply in the given context, according to their own cultural models. However, since the predesigned questionnaires are inevitably structured and formulated in categories that reflect the researchers' own knowledge and values, they are liable to create alienation vis-à-vis the respondents' world. This means that respondents are very often faced with the request to address questions to which they do not have ready-made answers as part of their own symbolic maps (Lamont and Molnár 2002) or cultural toolkit (Swidler 1986). This point may be particularly tricky in the realm of Translation Studies,

where the researchers are often translators themselves and therefore have recourse to inside knowledge of the field they study. However, their sense of affinity with their subject of study may often be misleading in light of the diversity of translatorial sectors, of which only very specific factions, mainly those of literary translators, may share the same intellectual-oriented mindset and cultural baggage of the scholar-translators.

Moreover, as Bourdieu argues further, the problem with questionnaires also lies in the very procedure of using, in the name of scientific accuracy, the same template for studying dissimilar communities that differ in habitus factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, educational background and proficiencies, and many other aspects of people's life. It so happens that respondents often select what seem to them to be the least politically "harmful" pregiven replies, or refrain from replying at all. As a result of all the above, the findings of such surveys may often remain enigmatic, concealing more than revealing, and ratifying – rather than problematizing – academic presuppositions.

Bearing all this in mind, however, surveys are still an important tool for collecting large-scale rich evidence, which can reveal certain patterns of the practitioners' commonly accepted attitudes toward their professions. Nevertheless, a growing awareness of the need to complement this line of study by an in-depth look at the practitioners' own viewpoint is reflected by recent studies that use a variety of qualitative methods, from biographical and text analysis through in-depth interviews to ethnographies in workplaces (see below). All these qualitative-oriented studies attempt to tackle in more detail questions related to translators' own sense of their occupational world and its role in organizing their lives. Obviously, such studies are more attentive to the nuances of how the practitioners actively shape and negotiate their identity and status in the different translatorial communities. Employing microlevel analyses, they are designed to capture the multilayered narratives people construct to give meaning to their work experience and distinguish themselves from other groups, "above" and "below" them (Lamont 2000; Grbić 2011), and the complex, often conflicting, moral contents they allocate to their job to justify their impaired status or to claim higher status. All of which inevitably escape survey-based studies.

Evolution of the topic in TIS

The professional profile(s) and status of translators and interpreters is a constant concern of people working in these fields, as is voiced by its proliferating associations and training programs. This concern "from below" is certainly an important motivation for academic research on these issues, given that many scholars in TIS are closely associated with these fields of practice. However, the major impetus to this scholarly agenda was given by the theoretical landscape that has developed as a natural trajectory of TIS. On the one hand, the bulk of writing on translation *norms* in recent decades has already established the importance of cultural factors and systemic relations in constraining the

performance of translators and interpreters (Toury 1978, 1999, 2012; Shlesinger 1989, 1999; Schäffner 1998; Hermans 1999; Lambert 2006; Meylaerts 2008; Sapiro 2008). On the other hand, critical writings have offered assessments of the alleged invisibility and submissiveness of translators (Venuti 1995, 1998). A common denominator of all these discussions has been the (implicit or explicit) assumption that the majority of translators, in many different social settings, suffer from an inferior status (Simeoni 1998). In this context, the problem is usually deduced from translation output (mostly of literary texts), which reveal a tendency to conform to *domestic* cultural norms rather than revolutionize them. This tendency is usually interpreted as resulting from the translators' reluctance to claim active agency in cultural change (exceptions are periods of concentrated efforts of culture planning where translators stand out as important agents of change: Even-Zohar 1990; Paker 2002; Toury 2002). Having emerged historically from the traditions of philology, linguistics, and literary studies, the leading paradigm of TIS that endorses this view of translation as an underrated profession has mainly focused on analysis of literary translations and their communicative contexts. Discussions of this issue thus remained, by and large, confined to the inside agendas and ideologies of the field of translation and its scholarly criticism, removed from the broader sociological context of identity and status struggles, and failing to draw inspiration from relevant theories and comparable cases in other professional settings.

Translation is, however, a most fruitful field for studying precisely the kind of social creativity that propels professional dynamics and the related processes of status and identity construction. It is the contradiction between the potential power of translators and interpreters as cultural mediators (Bandia and Milton 2009), on the one hand, and their obscure professional definition and alleged sense of submissiveness, on the other, that makes them such an intriguing occupational group. Their insecure status as a profession is especially paradoxical today when so much attention is being devoted to cross-cultural processes such as globalization, migration, and trans-nationalism, as well as "cultural translation" in general. While the agency of translators may seem less pivotal in settled cultural contexts with highly established, self-assured cores of hegemonic cultural traditions (such as the Anglo-American ones; e.g., Gentzler 2002), its consequences seem much more evident in multicultural, peripheral, or emerging social settings (e.g., their role in the making of modem Turkey is a paradigmatic example: Ayluçtarhan 2007; Tahir-Gürçağlar 2008; Demircioğlu 2009). Even in the former environments, with their overpowering mechanism of naturalization and anti-foreignization tendencies, knowledge of (certain) foreign languages and borrowing from (certain) foreign cultures are warmly welcomed and are valued as important symbolic resources. In the latter environments, however, which depend more acutely on translation work for their maintainability and prospering, translators' position as a profession would have been expected to be much stronger and more visible.

Nevertheless, all the evidence shows that the professional status of translators and interpreters is, as a rule, ambivalent and insecure. Reports are copious about translators and interpreters being poorly treated, underpaid, and underrated manpower in the industry of text production and business firms, or in community service contexts. They are often described as a "transparent medium," "servants" of a higher authority, and as those who belong "behind the scenes" (Jänis 1996) and are unaware of their own power (Chesterman and Wagner 2002). This does not mean that all translators and interpreters in all the relevant sectors are submissive and lacking occupational pride, nor does it mean that they are always at the bottom of the occupational prestige ladder and payroll. Nonetheless, their self-perception and dignity as an occupation remain vague and constantly questioned, negotiated or fought for.

This identity problem is doubtless an important incentive for expanding the landscape of TIS to encompass broader sociocultural perspectives on the conditions and prospects of translation as a profession. Not only does this problem bear directly on translators and interpreters' job performance, it also makes their self-imaging work and their use of cultural resources a pressing issue on which they depend for recognition. Moreover, such a broader socio-cultural view on translation is also conducive to our understanding of the processes of professionalization and anti-professionalization in general, and of the formation of professions, topics which lie at the heart of the sociology of the professions. From the latter perspective, translators and interpreters are thus an extreme example of an under-studied semi-professional occupation. Given that, as mentioned above, the sociology of the professions tends to focus on highly regarded, fully institutionalized occupations at the top of the professional prestige ladder, such status problems, connected with suspended professionalization, appear as marginal. By contrast, these problems emerge as central in the context of research on lower-status occupations, such as teaching in schools, alternative therapy, nursing, childcare, and the like. In light of this, research on the status constraints and effects of status in the realm of translation and interpreting can contribute considerably to filling this lacuna in the sociological study of professions at large.

Key studies

In line with the above, it is only recently that an increasing interest has developed within TIS in the social *agents* of translation and their professional environments. The study of the professional status and identity of translators and interpreters began in earnest only in the second half of the 2000s (see, however, earlier attempts such as Karamitroglou 2000, on the status of subtitlers in Greece; and Choi and Lim 2002, addressing the status of translators and interpreters of Korean). From then on, research into these topics has expanded. Let me mention briefly some important studies.

In the vast Chinese- and Korean-speaking worlds, a lot of work is now accumulating on the professional status, work conditions, and job-related

satisfaction and expectations of practicing translators and interpreters. This is occurring against the backdrop of growing demand for their services in an era of massive globalization in these countries (Chan 2009; Pan et al. 2009; Setton and Lianglang 2011; Liu 2013; Volland 2014). All in all, these studies point to a burgeoning professionalization process with a pragmatic attitude prevalent among practitioners, as well as a downplaying of aspirations to the role of cultural mediator. In Europe, similar interest emerged in the status of translators and related questions of professionalism, roles, and identity, with the ongoing project of Dam and Zethsen (2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, and more) on status factors that vary among different classes of business translators and interpreters in Denmark leading the way. In Israel, Sela-Sheffy (2006, 2008, 2010, 2013), and Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger (2008, 2011) introduced a nationwide project of mapping the identities of translators and interpreters in different sectors as a factor of their suspended professionalization. Among other things, it reveals the role of literary translators' identity in perpetuating an inverse ratio between high status and professionalization level. Katan (2011a), drawing on hundreds of online questionnaires, offered a worldwide survey of translators and interpreters' perception of their work and occupational concerns, with special insight into the lesser impact of theory and academic training on their professional mindsets. Similar to findings of other projects, it reveals intricate identity work on the part of translators, who, despite awareness of their lower status, are reluctant to change their occupational status quo.

At the same time, Angelelli (2004) in North America, Rudvin (2007) in Italy, Wadensjö et al. in Sweden (2007), among many others, initiated investigation into the complexity of roles and identities of interpreters, and their relations with the community, in view of their acute deprofessionalization and low status. The status problems and enigmatic roles of community and court interpreters are also explored at length by other scholars around the world. Monzó's analysis on professional struggles between legal interpreters in Spain (2011) is one example, and Grbić's on boundary making by sign-language interpreters in Austria (2011) is another, to mention two studies that are profoundly informed by the theory of professionalization and symbolic capital. Whereas the latter projects are qualitatively oriented, Pöchhacker (2011) provides an overview of the ample survey research on conference interpreters as a source of knowledge about their perception of their professional role and occupational concerns.

Meanwhile, discussion of the translator's habitus gained impetus with Inghilleri's edited volume on Bourdieu's perspective (2005), as a continuation of earlier attempts, and with that of Vorderobermeier (2014) among the recent contributions. This discussion triggers and has been triggered by specific empirical case studies which proceed from two complementary perspectives. Some of these studies use the habitus concept in analyzing large samples to identify shared group dispositions and self-images characterizing and distinguishing between different translator factions (e.g., Inghilleri 2003; Sapiro

2004a; Wolf 2007; Sela-Sheffy 2008, 2010; Amit-Kochavi 2011, to mention just a few). Others, by contrast, used this concept to reveal social patterns through micro-scale analyses of individual trajectories and life-stories (e.g., Torikai 2009; Meylaerts 2011; Buzelin 2014; Vorderobermeier 2014). From yet another perspective, in other emerging centers of TIS research, notably Finland, Kinunnen and Koskinen (2010) have promoted ethnographic studies of the workplace, with the aim of identifying the networks and active agency of translators and interpreters in shaping their social environment and maintaining their professional status (e.g., Koskinen 2009; Abdallah 2012).

This rich and diverse body of work, which accelerated throughout the course of the decade, culminated in the publication of an edited volume on the topic *Identity and Status in the Translatorial Professions* (Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger 2011), containing some of the above-mentioned studies.[1] Cutting across occupational and geographical arenas, the articles in this volume report mainly empirical studies, wavering between survey-based (including online questionnaires) quantitative analyses and miscellaneous qualitative methodologies, including narrative and biographical analysis and in-depth interviews. Another milestone in the study of the status and agency of translators, mainly in the realm of the production of literary and other texts, was the collected volume *Agents of Translation* (Bandia and Milton 2009). Works in this collection expand their study beyond the translator to include, in historical perspective, the professional networks in which translators work and the various agents responsible for the selection, publication, and reception of translated texts. From a more professionalization-oriented perspective, a state-of-the-art collection of contributions on the topic of *The Translation Profession: Centers and Peripheries*, edited by Helle Dam and Kaisa Koskinen, is currently forthcoming as a special issue of *JoSTrans.*

New directions

This attempt to look at translators from a broader, external angle, as a field of cultural production, should contribute to furthering a systematic integration of sociocultural insights and working tools in the currently accepted frameworks of studying translation within complex cultural contexts. By analogy to other interdisciplinary research frameworks, such as, notably, sociolinguistics, cultural sociology, or sociological history, such integration is expected to be productive for our understanding of the *work of translating* itself. That is, concentrating attention on the practitioners as active social agents should also give rise to valuable insights into the ways these individuals *act and perform as translators* (Toury 2012).

Future research will advance access to and better use of existing culture-oriented theoretical frameworks. An integrated view on the works cited above and many others in TIS reveal two major focal points in these theoretical frameworks, namely: (1) the *agents' dispositions to action* and *value scales,*

which define and distinguish between the different groups of translators and interpreters; and (2) the *repertoire* on which these agents draw in their professional and extraprofessional activities—that is, the multilayered and diversified stocks of working patterns and everyday conduct available in specific fields, constraining the action of those who play in these fields.

Finally, a culture-oriented approach should also contribute to the critical discourse on translators' ethics and ideology and the activist demand for a reformulation of the translator's and interpreter's social role and for greater social engagement on the part of translators and interpreters. Such research is intended to provide a better idea about the *people who do* the translation and interpreting jobs, their background and cultural orientations, their hopes and feelings, as well as their social spaces and specific constraints, in order to effectively address questions of the translator's and interpreter's agency and empowerment.

Note

1 A previous version of this volume appeared as a double special issue of the journal *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, guest edited by Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger, under the title "Profession, Identity and Status: Translators and Interpreters as an Occupational Group" (2009, 2010). The individual issues were dedicated to the topics of status and the profession, and to the topic of role and identity, respectively.

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