

Preface

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Identity and Status in the Translational Professions

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Preface

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy and Miriam Shlesinger

This volume is a hardback edition of the two back-to-back special issues of *Translation and Interpreting Studies* (TIS issue 4(2), 2009 and issue 5(1), 2010) which we had the privilege of co-editing. The articles assembled here are revised versions of papers presented at the international workshop organized by the editors, and held in Tel Aviv in March 2009 under the auspices of the Israel Science Foundation (ISF). The workshop was planned as a brainstorming encounter between people working in different disciplines, who share a scholarly interest in exploring the identity and status of the professions. While our focal case was that of translators and interpreters, our goal with this workshop was to contribute to the study of identity in the framework of occupational fields in general. We aimed at deepening and expanding our theoretical and empirical understanding of identity and status processes in *semi-professional settings* in different parts of the world, with special reference to the field of *translators and interpreters*, based on a variety of studies, and the examination of research methodologies, within the broader context of the interface between TS and Culture Research. The workshop papers explored parallel and differentiating dynamics between the various translatorial professions, as well as other semi-professional occupations, in different cultural and national settings.

This workshop took place within the framework of a research project we directed between 2006 and 2009 dedicated to this topic (ISF 619/06; see Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger 2008, Sela-Sheffy 2010, Shlesinger & Voinova [forthcoming]),¹ a qualitative, interview-based study, aiming at a comparative analysis of identity and status among six sectors of translators, interpreters and subtitlers in Israel today. Since there is no systematic listing or other documentation of this voiceless working community, in-depth interviews have been our only resource. Locating the candidates and going out on interviews all over the country has been an exciting

1. "Strategies of image making and status advancement of a marginal occupational group: translators and interpreters in Israel as a case in point," (Israel Science Foundation grant no. 619/06, 2006-2009). We are indebted to Michal Abramovich, Tanya Voinova, Netta Kaminsky and Tamar Priel who have assisted us with this research.

experience. Our heartfelt thanks go to all our ninety-five interviewees, who were willing to open up and share with us their stories, their views and their aspirations and from whom we learned so much. All ninety-five interviews have been painstakingly transcribed and documented. Since these are unstructured interviews, each lasting around two hours, they have yielded a huge amount of complex material. We are currently in the process of analyzing this rich corpus of fascinating personal accounts, aiming to produce a first comprehensive picture of Israeli translators' identity and professional attitudes based on their own testimonies.

The volume is divided into two parts, comprising fourteen articles – a structure that reflects our idea of the interrelatedness between structural aspects of the field and macro-level question of professional status, on the one hand, and micro-level aspects of the professional identity, on the other. These articles cut across varied translatorial and geographical arenas, from community interpreters to top literary translators, from Japan to North America. Reporting on empirical studies, they bring to the fore central theoretical issues related to translators' occupational position, as well as methodological questions, such as the use of oral history or cultural biographies, on the one hand, or the use of qualitative measures like questionnaires, on the other.

1. Questions of Status and Field

The first part comprises six articles, all dealing with large-scale processes and group tendencies and attitudes towards the professional status of translators and/or interpreters. **Esther Monzó-Nebot** offers a study of status struggles between occupational groups investing in different types of symbolic capital, using an example from professionalization processes of translators and interpreters in Spain. Starting with a theoretical synthesis of concepts from both the sociology of professions and Bourdieu's economy of practice, her article "Legal and Translational Occupations in Spain: Regulation and Specialization in Jurisdictional Struggles" highlights two major status strategies – distinction and legitimation – as employed by occupational groups to advance their interests in the market. Using this framework she discusses two particular conflicts of Spanish certified ('sworn') translators and interpreters – their struggles against public notaries and against court translators and interpreters, who claim jurisdiction. Her analysis traces the strategies used by the certified translators to reclaim their status.

Andy Chan addresses the interrelatedness between status and professionalization in the emerging sector of in-house translators. His study of the “Effectiveness of Translator Certification as a Signaling Device: Views from the Translator Recruiters” brings insights on the problem of translator certification in Hong Kong, which has recently attracted much attention in both professional and academic circles, with a view to examining its symbolic power in creating occupational opportunities for translators. Building on the economic theory of signaling, and using an experiment based on fictitious translators’ resumés, as well as interviews with translator recruiters, he examines the importance of formal educational qualifications in the recruiters’ decisions to hire translators. His findings point to the relatively minor role of certification in producing the desired image, by contrast to the role of an academic degree.

An overview on survey research in the field of interpreting is provided by **Franz Pöchhacker**, who introduces “Conference Interpreting: Surveying the Profession,” with a corpus of 40 survey-based studies among conference interpreters as a way of gaining knowledge about the profession, including the role perception of individual practitioners. Touching on qualitative research design issues such as sampling and question types, he shows that the *role* of conference interpreters emerges as one of their dominant concerns as far as their occupational status is concerned.

The subsequent three articles in this section are all survey-based. **David Katan**, in his “Occupation or Profession: A Survey of the Translators’ World,” analyzes the results of several hundred replies to a widely circulated online questionnaire, focusing on translators’ and interpreters’ mindset and their perception of their working world, inquiring specifically about the impact of translation theory and university training on their self-perception as professionals. Katan’s questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, giving rise to intriguing discrepancies between responses of one and the same respondent. His results point to a non-significant influence of theory and training on the occupational self-image of the respondents, most of whom engage in intricate identity work and declare, on the one hand, that they feel themselves to be ‘professionals,’ due to their specialized knowledge and abilities, and on the other hand, that they are acutely aware of their lower social status. Notwithstanding, most of them are reluctant to change their occupational status quo.

Similarly, in their “Attitudes to Role, Status and Professional Identity in Interpreters and Translators with Chinese in Shanghai and Taipei,” **Robin Setton** and **Alice Guo Liangliang** report on a survey, the first of its kind in mainland China and Taiwan, on patterns of professional practice, self-perceptions and aspirations of translators and interpreters, given the rising demand for their work in the wake of China’s emergence as a major player in the global economy. All in all, their

findings point to a burgeoning professionalization process, with most respondents expressing a pragmatic attitude to their role and their contribution to society while downplaying 'cultural mediation.'

In her "Conference Interpreters and their Self-representation: A Worldwide Web-based Survey," **Cornelia Zwischenberger** analyzes findings from a recent World Wide Web-based survey (limited, in this case, to members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters [AIIC]), outlining the methodological potential and pitfalls of *Web-based* surveys, which have gradually penetrated Translation Studies. Comparing existing meta-texts and newly collected evidence, she traces the ways respondents describe their role and claim key-role in guaranteeing successful communications.

2. Questions of Role and Identity

The second part of this volume comprises eight articles, all based on qualitative studies which deal with various aspects of translators' and interpreters' habitus, and sense of identity, focusing on defined groups or individual perspectives. In her "Habitus and Self-Image of Native Literary Author-Translators in Diglossic Societies," **Reine Meylaerts** defends the need to study translators' socio-biographies as part of the discussion of the complexity and dynamism of translators' habitus, especially given this field's weak professional differentiation. This, according to Meylaerts, is all the more applicable for literary author-translators in societies with fundamental socio-linguistic conflicts and hierarchies, such as those characterizing the Belgian cultural sphere. Starting with a typology of a Belgian author-translator habitus, she illustrates her argument through a socio-biographical analysis of Camille Melloy, a native translator in the culturally conflicted context of early twentieth century Belgium.

Another historical study on translators' habitus is offered by **Hannah Amit-Kochavi**, in her "Professional Profiles and Activity Patterns of Translators of Arabic Literature into Hebrew." She introduces a (historical as well as questionnaire-based) study of a group of literary translators from Arabic into Hebrew in British-ruled Palestine and later in Israel, the first attempt at mapping this still understudied, complex cultural territory. Elaborating on ethnic, educational, professional and ideological characteristics of these translators, her analysis also reveals patterns of cooperation between these individuals as a self-aware group that attempts to preserve a peripheral translation field within an indifferent, sometimes hostile target culture. She shows that for these people – native Arabs, Druze or Jewish immigrants from Arab territories, often having other 'Arabic-dependent'

occupations – literary translation from Arabic into Hebrew has served both a venue for anti-consensual attitudes as well as a legitimating channel for engaging in their own literary writing.

From a different perspective, **Elena Baibikov** zooms in again on a single case, in an attempt to trace a process of professional identity formation of an individual translator. In her “Revised Translations, Revised Identities: (Auto)Biographical Contextualization of Translation,” she focuses on three Japanese versions of one collection of texts – Chekhov’s letters to his wife – all produced by the now-celebrated female Japanese translator of Russian literature, Yuasa Yoshiko. Aiming to contextualize the actual translation practices of Yoshiko, who enjoys academic attention as an intellectual figure but not as a translator, Baibikov uses knowledge of the translator’s gendered biography to discuss the ways her professional action changes at different stages of her life in relation to changing social and personal settings.

An oral history study of the Japanese cultural scene is introduced by **Torikai Kumiko**, in her “Conference Interpreters and Their Perception of Culture: From the Narratives of Japanese Pioneers.” Based on life-story interviews with five pioneering conference and diplomatic interpreters in post-WWII Japan, Kumiko explores their perceptions about culture and cultural barriers in communication – and compares them with their role perceptions and actual practice. She shows that while her interviewees were on the whole uninterested in discussing questions of cultural differences and accepted their role as invisible (a tendency that often emerges also from questionnaires, see, i.e., Setton & Guo Liangliang in this volume), what emerges from their life stories is a greater sense (albeit not necessarily entailing awareness) of cultural mediation and of their being indispensable, active participants in intercultural communication.

Along similar lines, tackling the complex issue of interpreters’ sense of agency – this time with reference to court interpreters – **Ruth Morris** provides us with further insights into “Images of the Court Interpreters; Professional Identity, Role Definition and Self-Image.” Using an example from a seventeenth-century murder trial in England, as well as several modern cases, she traces the growing tendency of court interpreters to move away from their expected role as ‘neutral’ conduits and to claim greater agency and competency in influencing the legal process.

Claudia Angelelli sheds light on the world of community interpreters. In her “A Professional Ideology in the Making: Bilingual Youngsters Interpreting for Their Communities and the Notion of (no) Choice,” she introduces a study of circumstantial bilinguals who wind up serving as interpreters for their families and communities. Aiming to expand the meager research that exists about the lived experiences of such interpreters – whose background is responsible for their

exceptional types of bilingualism – Angelelli focuses on youngsters in families of Hispanic immigrants in North America, who inevitably act as language and communication brokers. Elaborating on their developing a sense of agency in mediating between minority-language speakers and the target society, she also uses her finding to draw implications for interpreter training (e.g. calling for greater attention to differences in expectations and linguistic talents of elective and circumstantial interpreters) and for teaching bilingual youngsters.

A theoretical discussion of “Boundary work’ as a Concept for Studying Professionalization Processes in the Interpreting Field” is introduced by **Nadja Grbić**. Surveying the concept of ‘boundary work’ as applied to the classification of various scientific disciplines, Grbić focuses on the notion of ‘professional’ vs. ‘non-professional,’ in introducing an outline of her new research on the gradual emergence of sign language interpreters as a distinct occupational group in Austria. Following theoreticians such as Gieryn, Zerubavel, Lamont and others, she raises questions as to nature of differences and similarities – by whom and at what stage they are perceived, etc.

Finally, **Şebnem Bahadır** discusses questions of translator’ ethics in her “The Task of the Interpreter in the Struggle of the other for empowerment: Mythical Utopia or *Sine Qua Non* of Professionalism?” She addresses the interpreters’ dilemma in positioning themselves, given the paradox of their having to perceive and speak in the name of others while using their own voice and language. Drawing particularly on politically loaded settings, such as detention camps, asylum seekers, sanctuaries, refugee camps or occupied territories and areas of military conflict, she puts forth the moral argument that, as part of their professional responsibility as the ‘experts,’ interpreters must reflect on and take into account the dangers and opportunities of their in-between position.

All of the contributions to this volume reflect their authors’ growing interest in learning about the motivations, aspirations, social background and social constraints of translators and interpreters as real people, proceeding from the assumption that all these factors underlie translatorial performances. Altogether, this compendium of studies contributes to a shift of focus in the ongoing endeavor of Translation Studies to acquire better understanding of translation and interpreting as socially embedded practices, and to assess the power of these complex practices as agency of social intervention. We hope that this volume provides insights and lenses for further developing this direction of research within Translation Studies.

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