Chapter 1. Locating translation sociologically

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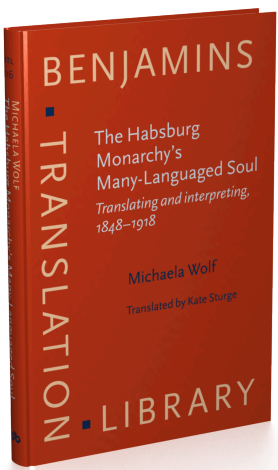

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CHAPTER 1

Locating translation sociologically

> Yet no translator or institutional initiator
> of a translation can hope to control or even be aware
> of every condition of its production.
> (Venuti 1998, 3)

In his blueprint for an "ethics of difference" to combat the "scandals" that have dogged social perceptions of translation in society past and present, Lawrence Venuti emphasizes translation's entanglement in society and queries the values and institutions that define it. This is a useful reminder of the urgent need to research the social embedment both of translation itself and of agents in the field of translation studies.

1. Scholarship and society in the context of translation

Critiquing science, Hartmut Heuermann notes that scholarly endeavour as practised today has no clearly defined image either of the human being or of society (Heuermann 2000, 12). His implication is that contemporary theories of science do justice neither to the human being as an individual or subject, nor to the category of the human within larger units such as society. Historical research on the relationship between science and society shows that scientific knowledge has always been moulded by a meta-knowledge in which cultural traditions were the instigators or custodians of higher-level "truths" and over long periods of time were the prime sources of inspiration (ibid., 61). The affirmation of faith in a higher category – whether a state, a religion or a philosophical school – was always paramount, and it provided both orientation and legitimation in the academic domain, where the entirety of cultural knowledge was considered the source of science's legitimacy. For the modern period, François Lyotard argues that centrifugal forces, such as decentralization, pluralization or particularization, contributed to a crisis of both knowledge and epistemology. As a result of the "shattering", the increasing fragmentation and pluralism of knowledge, the one-time "grand narratives" have ceased to offer individual and collective legitimation, and indeed "most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative" (Lyotard 1984, 41).

The grand narratives are replaced by the delegitimization of old values, and by the new demarcations and hybridizations arising from ever-changing constructions of identity. This "postmodern condition" is not a phenomenon only of the late twentieth century. As Lyotard stresses, its symptoms were already apparent in Viennese modernism, when starkly differentiated lifeworlds gradually undermined the power of binding interpretations.

Translation studies is not immune to these transformations. For a university discipline that has only recently been established and continues to struggle for visibility in the public sphere, there is on the one hand a danger of constantly reinventing the wheel and thinking up methodologies or models long since tried and tested in other disciplines; on the other, the discipline's battle for recognition itself offers an opportunity – in both philosophical and organizational terms – to stake out a broad experimental field, comparatively free of the constraints imposed by traditional assumptions and long-established conceptual edifices. Taking all due account of existing paradigms in the sociology of knowledge and fundamental concerns in the study of science, this innovative research domain means that new theoretical and methodological models, whether epistemological or heuristic in orientation, can be tested without having to bow to historical considerations deeply rooted in the discipline. In other words, the domain of translation studies is full of potential – but is that potential being fully exploited?

In view of all this, it is probably no coincidence that the theory of science, especially, has recently begun to pay increasing attention to translational phenomena. Philosophy has been perhaps the most important source of this trend (for example Hirsch 1997; Buden and Nowotny 2009), but significant contributions to new and sophisticated models of translation have also come from cultural studies (for example Bhabha 1994; Bronfen, Marius and Steffen 1997), anthropology (Maranhão and Streck 2003; Rubel and Rosman 2003) and feminism (Simon 1996; von Flotow 2011). These developments exemplify the extraordinary dynamism – and the rapid structural transformation of institutions – to which research and theory are exposed in the system of science today. At the same time, they offer an opportunity to resist the rationalization of the academic world, in translation research as everywhere else, that is gaining ground as scholarship becomes defined more and more as a source of economic productivity (Heuermann 2000, 69).

In this context, it is worth asking exactly what translators and translation studies can contribute to the relationships between science and society. The answer might be located on two levels, the first of these being the social structure of action in which translators as subjects and their actions are embedded, and from which the translation product emerges under the influence of numerous factors. On this level, translation studies could address these complex processes through a theoretical framework capable of tracing the functional mechanisms

of social figurations – the systems of relationships and interactions within which translations become products of political relevance for culture and society – and describing them relationally, in their multiple interconnections. Here, the study of translation as a social practice cannot be separated from the study of translation as a cultural construct. On the level of the theory of science, secondly, the focus would be on the positioning of the individual social actor in a field of tension that embraces all the subjects involved in the translation process in the widest sense, and on the conditions under which the translation is produced and circulated. The complex webs of relationships in which the participants are implicated can be most effectively mapped out against a view of the translation scholar or translator as a constructing and constructed subject in society, a subject that crucially shapes the societal structures relevant to translation.

It is not obvious how far translation studies has yet satisfied the task of, on the one hand, critically examining the social dimensions of the translation phenomenon and, on the other, drawing up theories and models capable of registering the influences at work on its research object (an object, in fact, still awaiting precise definition). Despite a general acknowledgement of the need to examine translation as a social practice, and studies of some specific aspects, there have been few attempts to connect with existing theoretical models proposed in other disciplines, or to integrate research findings into a wider context of scholarship. We still lack a sociologically oriented theoretical framework that is tailored to translation and capable of addressing the full complexity of translation as a social phenomenon. One objective of the present book is to offer just such a framework, anchored in a critical approach to "translation" as a research object and from the perspective of translation's constructive role.

2. Translation studies – "going social"?

Translation's social contingency was an object of interest in translation studies long before the subdiscipline of translation sociology came into being. Looking at the literature, there appear to be four main areas of relevance (see Chesterman 2006; Wolf 2007a). Firstly, a sociology of agents in the translational system analyses the activity of translation from the perspective of its protagonists, as individual figures and as members of particular networks. Anthony Pym, for example, focuses on translators themselves, examining the field of socially conditioned subjectivity as a precondition for writing their history (Pym 1998, ix). In terms of methodology, some scholars in this category draw on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production in order to scrutinize the status and positioning of agents in the translation field and understand their interaction (examples are Gouanvic 1999; Wolf 1999,

2003a). Another broad thematic area in translation studies, one that has come to the fore with the expansion of ideas of culture as a social practice, is interested in the category of power relationships within the network of translation. A sociology of the translation process looks at the constraints inherent to translation production, applying constructivist approaches to analyse translation as a social discourse and address the institutionalizing function of the translation process (Brisset 1996). In contrast, a sociology of the cultural product prioritizes translation flows and the implications of the international and transnational transfer mechanisms that ultimately construct the translation product. Studies in this third category often work with extensive corpora from the global translation market. They detail the conditions of translation production and distribution by examining the various agencies involved and the mechanisms connecting them (Heilbron and Sapiro 2002; Bachleitner and Wolf 2010a). A fourth strand of translation sociology covers approaches that make explicitly theoretical claims. Most of these draw on the sociological models of Bourdieu (for example Simeoni 1998; Gouanvic 2002; Wolf 2007b), Bernard Lahire (Wolf 2007a), Bruno Latour (Buzelin 2005), Niklas Luhmann (Hermans 2007; Tyulenev 2012) or Anthony Giddens (Tipton 2008).

It is difficult to say whether these projects provide an adequate basis for a sociologically oriented theoretical model capable of capturing the social contingencies that drive the processes of production, distribution and reception and ultimately constitute the texture of the "field of translation" or of the translational "space of mediation". Will they do justice to the complexity of translation's embedment in society and its implications for translators' decisions? What is certain is that variables such as the media industry, the policies of major publishers, the institutional context of professional translation, or censorship – to name but a few – cannot realistically be tackled as isolated phenomena, even if each is studied on the basis of large corpora. Only by researching their interrelationships will it be possible to understand the powerful influence of such societal factors on the production and reception of texts in the narrower sense and, in turn, the repercussions of those texts on particular phases or segments of social action in the wider sense. For this reason, the questions I have outlined here are of special relevance to the discussion of how translation contributes to the construction of cultures – and, specifically, to the culture of the Habsburg Monarchy.