



NEW ACCENTS

third edition

Translation Studies

Susan Bassnett

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Translation Studies

In the late 1970s a new academic discipline was born: Translation Studies. We could not read literature in translation, it was argued, without asking ourselves if linguistics and cultural phenomena really were ‘translatable’ and exploring in some depth the concept of ‘equivalence’.

When Susan Bassnett’s *Translation Studies* appeared in the New Accents series, it quickly became the one introduction every student and interested reader had to own. Professor Bassnett tackles the crucial problems of translation and offers a history of translation theory, beginning with the ancient Romans and encompassing key twentieth-century work. She then explores specific problems of literary translation through a close, practical analysis of texts, and completes her book with extensive suggestion for further reading.

Twenty years after publication, the field of translation studies continues to grow, but one thing has not changed: updated for the second time, Susan Bassnett’s *Translation Studies* remains essential reading.

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For my father, who made it all possible.

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

No doubt a third General Editor's Preface to *New Accents* seems hard to justify. What is there left to say? Twenty-five years ago, the series began with a very clear purpose. Its major concern was the newly perplexed world of academic literary studies, where hectic monsters called 'Theory', 'Linguistics' and 'Politics' ranged. In particular, it aimed itself at those undergraduates or beginning postgraduate students who were either learning to come to terms with the new developments or were being sternly warned against them.

New Accents deliberately took sides. Thus the first Preface spoke darkly, in 1977, of 'a time of rapid and radical social change', of the 'erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions' central to the study of literature. 'Modes and categories inherited from the past' it announced, 'no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation'. The aim of each volume would be to 'encourage rather than resist the process of change' by combining nuts-and-bolts exposition of new ideas with clear and detailed explanation of related conceptual developments. If mystification (or downright demonisation) was the enemy, lucidity (with a nod to the compromises inevitably at stake there) became a friend. If a 'distinctive discourse of the future' beckoned, we wanted at least to be able to understand it.

With the apocalypse duly noted, the second Preface proceeded piously to fret over the nature of whatever rough beast might stagger portentously from the rubble. 'How can we recognise or deal with the new?', it complained, reporting nevertheless the dismaying advance of 'a host of barely respectable activities for

which we have no reassuring names' and promising a programme of wary surveillance at 'the boundaries of the precedented and at the limit of the thinkable'. Its conclusion, 'the unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts' may rank as a truism. But in so far as it offered some sort of useable purchase on a world of crumbling certainties, it is not to be blushed for.

In the circumstances, any subsequent, and surely final, effort can only modestly look back, marvelling that the series is still here, and not unreasonably congratulating itself on having provided an initial outlet for what turned, over the years, into some of the distinctive voices and topics in literary studies. But the volumes now represented have more than a mere historical interest. As their authors indicate, the issues they raised are still potent, the arguments with which they engaged are still disturbing. In short, we weren't wrong. Academic study did change rapidly and radically to match, even to help to generate, wide reaching social changes. A new set of discourses was developed to negotiate those upheavals. Nor has the process ceased. In our deliquescent world, what was unthinkable inside and outside the academy all those years ago now seems regularly to come to pass.

Whether the *New Accents* volumes provided adequate warning of, maps for, guides to, or nudges in the direction of this new terrain is scarcely for me to say. Perhaps our best achievement lay in cultivating the sense that it was there. The only justification for a reluctant third attempt at a Preface is the belief that it still is.

TERENCE HAWKES

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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

The 1980s was a decade of consolidation for the fledgling discipline known as Translation Studies. Having emerged onto the world stage in the late 1970s, the subject began to be taken seriously, and was no longer seen as an unscientific field of enquiry of secondary importance. Throughout the 1980s interest in the theory and practice of translation grew steadily. Then, in the 1990s, Translation Studies finally came into its own, for this proved to be the decade of its global expansion. Once perceived as a marginal activity, translation began to be seen as a fundamental act of human exchange. Today, interest in the field has never been stronger and the study of translation is taking place alongside an increase in its practice all over the world.

The electronic media explosion of the 1990s and its implications for the processes of globalization highlighted issues of intercultural communication. Not only has it become important to access more of the world through the information revolution, but it has become urgently important to understand more about one's own point of departure. For globalization has its antithesis, as has been demonstrated by the world-wide renewal of interest in cultural origins and in exploring questions of identity. Translation has a crucial role to play in aiding understanding of an increasingly fragmentary world. The translator, as the Irish scholar Michael Cronin has pointed out, is also a traveller, someone engaged in a journey from one source to another. The twenty-first century surely promises to be the great age of travel, not only across space but also across time.¹ Significantly, a major development in translation studies since the 1970s has been research into the history of

translation, for an examination of how translation has helped shape our knowledge of the world in the past better equips us to shape our own futures.

Evidence of the interest in translation is everywhere. A great many books on translation have appeared steadily throughout the past two decades, new journals of translation studies have been established, international professional bodies such as the European Society for Translation have come into being and at least half a dozen translation encyclopaedias have appeared in print, with more to follow. New courses on translation in universities from Hong Kong to Brazil, and from Montreal to Vienna offer further evidence of extensive international interest in translation studies. It shows no sign of slowing down in the twenty-first century.

With so much energy directed at further investigation of the phenomenon of translation, it is obvious that any such development will not be homogeneous and that different trends and tendencies are bound to develop. We should not be surprised, therefore, that consensus in translation studies disappeared in the 1990s. However, that has been followed by lively diversification that continues today around the world. During the 1980s, Ernst-August Gutt's relevance theory, the *skopos* theory of Katharina Reiss and Hans Vermeer, and Gideon Toury's research into pseudotranslation all offered new methods for approaching translation, while in the 1990s the enormous interest generated by corpus-based translation enquiry as articulated by Mona Baker opened distinct lines of enquiry that continue to flourish. Indeed, after a period in which research in computer translation seemed to have foundered, the importance of the relationship between translation and the new technology has risen to prominence and shows every sign of becoming even more important in the future. Nevertheless, despite the diversity of methods and approaches, one common feature of much of the research in Translation Studies is an emphasis on cultural aspects of translation, on the contexts within which translation occurs. Once seen as a sub-branch of linguistics, translation today is perceived as an inter-disciplinary field of study and the indissoluble connection between language and way of life has become a focal point of scholarly attention.

The apparent division between cultural and linguistic approaches to translation that characterized much translation research until the 1980s is disappearing, partly because of shifts in linguistics that have seen that discipline take a more overtly cultural turn, partly because those who advocated an approach to translation rooted in cultural history have become less defensive about their position. In the early years when Translation Studies was establishing itself, its advocates positioned themselves against both linguists and literary scholars, arguing that linguists failed to take into account broader contextual dimensions and that literary scholars were obsessed with making pointless evaluative judgements. It was held to be important to move the study of translation out from under the umbrella of either comparative literature or applied linguistics, and fierce polemics arguing for the autonomy of Translation Studies were common. Today, such an evangelical position seems quaintly outdated, and Translation Studies is more comfortable with itself, better able to engage in borrowing from and lending techniques and methods to other disciplines. The important work of translation scholars based in linguistics, such figures as Mona Baker, Roger Bell, Basil Hatim, Ian Mason, Kirsten Malmkjaer, Katharina Reiss, Hans Vermeer and Wolfram Wilss, to name but some of the better-known, has done a great deal to break down the boundaries between disciplines and to move translation studies on from a position of possible confrontation. Nor should we forget the enormous importance of such figures as J.C.Catford, Michael Halliday, Peter Newmark and Eugene Nida whose research into translation before Translation Studies started to evolve as a discipline in its own right laid the foundations for what was to follow.

Literary studies have also moved on from an early and more elitist view of translation. As Peter France, editor of the *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* points out:

Theorists and scholars have a far more complex agenda than deciding between the good and the bad; they are concerned, for instance, to tease out the different possibilities open to the translator, and the way these change according to the historical, social, and cultural context²

There is a growing body of research that reflects this newer, more complex agenda, for as research in Translation Studies increases and historical data become more readily available, so important questions are starting to be asked, about the role of translation in shaping a literary canon, the strategies employed by translators and the norms in operation at a given point in time, the discourse of translators, the problems of measuring the impact of translations and, most recently, the problems of determining an ethics of translation.

Perhaps the most exciting new trend of all is the expansion of the discipline of Translation Studies beyond the boundaries of Europe. In Canada, India, Hong Kong, China, Africa, Brazil and Latin America, the concerns of scholars and translators have diverged significantly from those of Europeans. More emphasis has been placed on the inequality of the translation relationship, with writers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Tejaswini Niranjana and Eric Cheyfitz arguing that translation was effectively used in the past as an instrument of colonial domination, a means of depriving the colonized peoples of a voice. For in the colonial model, one culture dominated and the others were subservient, hence translation reinforced that power hierarchy. As Anuradha Dingwaney puts it,

The processes of translation involved in making another culture comprehensible entail varying degrees of violence, especially when the culture being translated is constituted as that of the “other”.³

In the 1990s two contrasting images of the translator emerged. According to one reading of the translator’s role, the translator is a force for good, a creative artist who ensures the survival of writing across time and space, an intercultural mediator and interpreter, a figure whose importance to the continuity and diffusion of culture is immeasurable. In contrast, another interpretation sees translation as a highly suspect activity, one in which an inequality of power relations (inequalities of economics, politics, gender and geography) is reflected in the mechanics of textual production. As Mahasweta Sengupta argues, translation can become submission to the hegemonic power of images created by the target culture:

a cursory review of what sells in the West as representative of India and its culture provides ample proof of the binding power of representation; we remain trapped in the cultural stereotypes created and nurtured through translated texts.⁴

In the new millennium translation scholarship will continue to emphasize the unequal power relationships that have characterized the translation process. But whereas in earlier centuries this inequality was presented in terms of a superior original and an inferior copy, today the relationship is considered from other points of view that can best be termed post-colonial. Parallel to the exciting work of Indian, Chinese and Canadian translation scholars, writers such as Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes and Haroldo and Augusto de Campos have called for a new definition of translation. Significantly, all these writers have come from countries located in the continent of South America, from former colonies engaged in reassessing their own past. Arguing for a rethinking of the role and significance of translation, they draw parallels with the colonial experience. For just as the model of colonialism was based on the notion of a superior culture taking possession of an inferior one, so an original was always seen as superior to its 'copy'. Hence the translation was doomed to exist in a position of inferiority with regard to the source text from which it was seen to derive.

In the new, post-colonial perception of the relationship between source and target texts, that inequality of status has been rethought. Both original and translation are now viewed as equal products of the creativity of writer and translator, though as Paz pointed out, the task of these two is different. It is up to the writer to fix words in an ideal, unchangeable form and it is the task of the translator to liberate those words from the confines of their source language and allow them to live again in the language into which they are translated.⁵ In consequence, the old arguments about the need to be faithful to an original start to dissolve. In Brazil, the cannibalistic theory of textual consumption, first proposed in the 1920s, has been reworked to offer an alternative perspective on the role of the translator, one in which the act of translation is seen in terms of

physical metaphors that stress both the creativity and the independence of the translator.⁶

Today the movement of peoples around the globe can be seen to mirror the very process of translation itself, for translation is not just the transfer of texts from one language into another, it is now rightly seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator. Significantly, Homi Bhabha uses the term ‘translation’ not to describe a transaction between texts and languages but in the etymological sense of being carried across from one place to another. He uses translation metaphorically to describe the condition of the contemporary world, a world in which millions migrate and change their location every day. In such a world, translation is fundamental:

We should remember that it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the *in-between* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.⁷

Central to the many theories of translation articulated by non-European writers are three recurring strategems: a redefinition of the terminology of faithfulness and equivalence, the importance of highlighting the visibility of the translator and a shift of emphasis that views translation as an act of creative rewriting. The translator is seen as a liberator, someone who frees the text from the fixed signs of its original shape making it no longer subordinate to the source text but visibly endeavouring to bridge the space between source author and text and the eventual target language readership. This revised perspective emphasizes the creativity of translation, seeing in it a more harmonious relationship than the one in previous models that described the translator in violent images of ‘appropriation’, ‘penetration’ or ‘possession’. The post-colonial approach to translation is to see linguistic exchange as essentially dialogic, as a process that happens in a space that belongs to neither source nor target absolutely. As Vanamala Viswanatha and Sherry Simon argue, ‘translations provide an especially revealing entry point into the dynamics of cultural identity-formation in the colonial and post-colonial contexts.’⁸

Until the end of the 1980s Translation Studies was dominated by the systemic approach pioneered by Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury. Polysystems theory was a radical development because it shifted the focus of attention away from arid debates about faithfulness and equivalence towards an examination of the role of the translated text in its new context. Significantly, this opened the way for further research into the history of translation, leading also to a reassessment of the importance of translation as a force for change and innovation in literary history.

In 1995, Gideon Toury published *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, a book that reassessed the polysystems approach disliked by some scholars for its over-emphasis on the target system. Toury maintains that since a translation is designed primarily to fill a need in the target culture, it is logical to make the target system the object of study. He also points out the need to establish patterns of regularity of translational behaviour, in order to study the way in which norms are formulated and how they operate. Toury explicitly rejects any idea that the object of translation theory is to improve the quality of translations: theorists have one agenda, he argues, while practitioners have different responsibilities. Although Toury's views are not universally accepted they are widely respected, and it is significant that during the 1990s there has been a great deal of work on translation norms and a call for greater scientificity in the study of translation.

Polysystems theory filled the gap that opened up in the 1970s between linguistics and literary studies and provided the base upon which the new interdisciplinary Translation Studies could build. Central to polysystems theory was an emphasis on the poetics of the target culture. It was suggested that it should be possible to predict the conditions under which translations might occur and to predict also what kind of strategies translators might employ. To ascertain whether this hypothesis was valid and to establish fundamental principles, case studies of translations across time were required, hence the emergence of what has come to be termed descriptive studies in translation. Translation Studies began to move out into a distinctive space of its own, beginning to research its own genealogy and seeking to assert its independence as an academic field.

Whereas previously the emphasis had previously been on comparing original and translation, often with a view to establishing what had been ‘lost’ or ‘betrayed’ in the translation process, the new approach took a resolutely different line, seeking not to evaluate but to understand the shifts of emphasis that had taken place during the transfer of texts from one literary system into another. Polysystems theory focused exclusively on literary translation, though it operated with an enlarged notion of the literary which included a broad range of items of literary production including dubbing and subtitling, children’s literature, popular culture and advertising.

Through a series of case studies, this broadening of the object of study led to a division within the group of translation scholars loosely associated with the polysystems approach. Some, such as Theo Hermans and Gideon Toury sought to establish theoretical and methodological parameters within which the subject might develop, and others such as André Lefevere and Lawrence Venuti began to explore the implications of translation in a much broader cultural and historical frame. Lefevere first developed his idea of translation as refraction rather than reflection, offering a more complex model than the old idea of translation as a mirror of the original. Inherent in his view of translation as refraction was a rejection of any linear notion of the translation process. Texts, he argued, have to be seen as complex signifying systems and the task of the translator is to decode and re-encode whichever of those systems is accessible.⁹ Lefevere noted that much of the theorizing about translation was based on translation practice between European languages and pointed out that problems of the accessibility of linguistic and cultural codes intensifies once we move out beyond Western boundaries. In his later work, Lefevere expanded his concern with the metaphors of translation to an enquiry into what he termed the conceptual and textual grids that constrain both writers and translators, suggesting that

Problems in translating are caused at least as much by discrepancies in conceptual and textual grids as by discrepancies in languages.¹⁰

These cultural grids determine how reality is constructed in both source and target texts, and the skill of the translator in manipulating these grids will determine the success of the outcome. Lefevere argues that these cultural grids, a notion deriving from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, highlight the creativity of the translator, for he or she is inevitably engaged in a complex creative process.

Similarly, Venuti insists upon the creativity of the translator and upon the his or her visible presence in a translation.¹¹ So important has research into the visibility of the translator become in the 1990s, that it can be seen as a distinct line of development within the subject as a whole. Translation according to Venuti, with its allegiance both to source and target cultures 'is a reminder that no act of interpretation can be definitive'.¹² Translation is therefore a dangerous act, potentially subversive and always significant. In the 1990s the figure of the subservient translator has been replaced with the visibly manipulative translator, a creative artist mediating between cultures and languages. In an important book that appeared in 1991, the translator of Latin American fiction, Suzanne Jill Levine playfully described herself as 'a subversive scribe', an image that prefigures Venuti's view of the translator as a powerful agent for cultural change.¹³

Levine's book is indicative of another line of enquiry within Translation Studies that focuses on the subjectivity of the translator. Translation scholars such as Venuti, Douglas Robinson, Anthony Pym and Mary Snell-Hornby, translators who have written about their own work such as Tim Parks, Peter Bush, Barbara Godard and Vanamala Viswanatha, have all stressed in different ways the importance of the translator's role. This new emphasis on subjectivity derives from two distinct influences: on the one hand, the growing importance of research into the ethics of translation, and on the other hand a much greater attention to the broader philosophical issues that underpin translation. Jacques Derrida's rereading of Walter Benjamin opened the flood-gates to a re-evaluation of the importance of translation not only as a form of communication but also as continuity.¹⁴ Translation, it is argued, ensures the survival of a text. The translation effectively becomes

the after-life of a text, a new 'original' in another language. This positive view of translation serves to reinforce the importance of translating as an act both of inter-cultural and inter-temporal communication. Who, for example, would have any access to the forgotten women poets of ancient Greece without translation, asks Josephine Balmer in her illuminating preface to her translations of classical women poets?¹⁵

The development of Translation Studies in the 1990s can best be seen as the establishment of a series of new alliances that brought together research into the history, practice and philosophy of translation with other intellectual trends. The links between Translation Studies and post-colonial theory represent one such alliance, as do the links between Translation Studies and corpus linguistics. Another significant alliance is that between Translation Studies and gender studies. For language, as Sherry Simon points out, does not simply mirror reality, but intervenes in the shaping of meaning.¹⁶ Translators are directly involved in that shaping process, whether the text they are dealing with is an instruction manual, a legal document, a novel or a classical drama. Just as Gender Studies have challenged the notion of a single unified concept of culture by asking awkward questions about the ways in which canonical traditions are formed, so Translation Studies, through its many alliances, asks questions about what happens when a text is transferred from source to target culture.

The common threads that link the many diverse ways in which translation has been studied over the past two decades are an emphasis on diversity, a rejection of the old terminology of translation as faithlessness and betrayal of an original, the foregrounding of the manipulative powers of the translator and a view of translation as bridge-building across the space between source and target. This celebration of in-betweenness, which scholars from outside the field of translation have also stressed, reflects the changing nature of the world we live in. Once upon a time, it was deemed to be unsafe and undesirable to occupy a space that was neither one thing nor the other, a no-man's-land with no precise identity. Today, in the twenty-first century, political, geographical and cultural boundaries are perceived as more fluid and less

constraining than at any time in recent history and the movement of peoples across those boundaries is increasing. In such a world, the role of the translator takes on a greater significance. This is the reason why translation is so avidly discussed and in such demand. We have barely begun to imagine the potential for translation with the expansion of the World Wide Web. As electronic translation becomes more sophisticated, so Translation Studies will need to develop. It seems set to do so for the foreseeable future.