

Translators are not alone: Contra-instrumentalism as a Sociological Paradigm to Audiovisual Translation

المترجمون لا يعملون بمفردهم: اللا-ذرائعية بوصفها نموذجاً
سوسيولوجياً للترجمة السمعية البصرية

Dr.DJEFFAL Sofiane

Mustapha Stambouli University of Mascara - Algeria

Laboratory of Translation and Types of Texts

Sofian.djefal@univ-mascara.dz

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Abstract

In 2021, the Netflix series « Squid Game » arouse controversy vis-à-vis the quality of the translation. Everyone blamed translators/subtitlers for their “unfaithful” and “misleading” translation. However, a look at Netflix’s translation requirements will provide us with an answer to this problem; translators are told what they should do. Hence, the present work aims at exploring the concept of “contra-instrumentalism” as suggested by Venuti (2019). A considerable number of translation assumptions and maxims are instrumentalized and believed to be facts. The fact that affects the way translation is received in the target culture. This paper focuses on four main points: what is meant by sociology of translation, why the need for a translation sociology, how translation sociology affects translation studies, and contra-instrumentalism as a sociological model of translation. The paper sketches out the main sociological models of translation from Bourdieu (1972), to Manttari (1984), to Toury (1995), to Chasterman (2007), etc. then; it explores the concept of contra-instrumentalism in translation, and the main challenges of investing such paradigm in the study of translation sociology. As case study, examples from associations and companies’ requirements to translators are explored. The main hypotheses of this study are: contra-instrumentalism is extremely insightful to the study of translation in the sense that it offers a wide range of methods and prospects; or it is highly complicated since it is connected to a set of concepts (hermeneutics, discourse analysis, semiotics, etc). A descriptive method is adopted regarding the research problem.

Keywords: Sociology, Contra-instrumentalism, Translation, Role, Network.

الملخص

تروم هذه الورقة البحثية استثمار مفهوم "اللا-ذرائعية" في دراسة الترجمة باعتبارها ظاهرة إجتماعية. يُعزى هذا المفهوم إلى المنظر الأمريكي لورانس فينوتي (2019) الذي صاغ افتراضه بأن جل القواعد الترجمة مبنية على اعتقادات بعيدة كل البعد عن الحقيقة الترجمة، وينبغي – في سبيل دراسة علمية للترجمة – التخلص منها على غرار مفهوم الأمانة، والجودة، وحرية المترجم وغيرها. بناء على هذا، تحاول الدراسة الحالية خوض غمار اللا-ذرائعية من وجهة نظر الترجمة السمعية البصرية، إذ تبين كيف أن الشروط التي تضعها الشركات (على غرار نتفليكس) للمترجم تجعله مقيداً، بل أن معظم الأخطاء التي يرتكبها هي نتيجة حتمية لذلك. تتطرق الدراسة في شقها النظري إلى أهم النماذج والمقاربات السوسولوجية للظاهرة الترجمة، وسبر أغوار مفهوم اللا-ذرائعية؛ أما في الشق التطبيقي، فتعالج أمثلة ونماذج من أفلام ووثائقيات مسترجة. تفترض الدراسة أن مفهوم اللا-ذرائعية قد يشكل محوراً مهماً في دراسة الترجمة، كما قد يشكل المفهوم مشكلاً آخرأ يتعلق أساساً بتعدد الإشكالات والمفاهيم الفرعية التي ينطوي عليها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم الاجتماع، اللا-ذرائعية، ترجمة، دور، شبكة.

Introduction

A considerable number of translation assumptions and maxims are instrumentalized and believed to be facts. The fact that affects the way translation is received in the target culture. The present work aims at exploring the concept of “contra-instrumentalism” as suggested by Venuti (2019). It focuses on four main points: what is meant by sociology of translation, why the need for a translation sociology, how translation sociology affects translation studies, and contra-instrumentalism as a sociological model of translation. The paper sketches out the main sociological models of translation from Bourdieu (1972), to Manttari (1984), to Toury (1995), to Chasterman (2007), etc. then; it explores the concept of contra-instrumentalism in translation, and the main challenges of investing such paradigm in the study of translation sociology. As case study, examples from associations and companies’ requirements to translators are explored. The main hypotheses of this study are: contra-instrumentalism is extremely insightful to the study of translation in the sense that it offers a wide range of methods and prospects; or it is highly complicated since it is connected to a set of concepts (hermeneutics, discourse analysis, semiotics, etc). A descriptive method is adopted regarding the research problem.

1. The Sociology of Translation?

In his thorough analysis of this discipline, Chesterman (Chesterman, 2007) reckons that translation studies went through four main turns:

- The linguistic turn (1950's) which relies on text analysis and draws on concepts and models from linguistics in the study of translation. The linguistic turn applies comparative method of research;
- The cultural turn (1980's) that perceives translation as a cross-cultural operation whose analysis must go beyond word and textual level. This trend focuses on memes and norms, cultural diversity, ideology, gender studies, postcolonialism, etc.
- The cognitive turn (1990's): represented by the shift from product-oriented research toward process-oriented one. The main purpose of this movement is to explore what happens in translators' mind when translating. A number of methods and tools of research are adopted: thinking aloud protocol, eye-tracking and key logging software, etc.
- The social turn: tackles translator's position, relationship and interaction within a network of **translation deciders** (agents, publishing companies, institutions, etc). Besides, sociological turn scrutinizes translation market, translation zones, role of translation in conflict and crisis...

Needless to say, the concept of "sociology of translation" itself is controversial. In translation literature, various terms had been employed; "sociology of translation" (Buzelin 2007, Munday 2016), translation sociology (Chesterman 2007), socio-translatology (Gambier 2007).

What does it mean to study translation from a sociological perspective? Buzelin (Buzelin, 2020) argues that:

"Considering translation as a social practice is also tantamount to recognizing, firstly, that translation norms and our very definitions of translation are not given but are constructed, contingent, negotiated, imposed and, sometimes, contested... Secondly, a sociological perspective also seeks to understand how translation relates to other social practices. It explores how translators relate to other professionals involved in making products

called “translations” and, moregenerally, how they situate themselves in society. P339

According to Pym, translation sociology focuses on:

- The refusal to recognize pre-established social and cultural boundaries
- Translation sociology forces the borders to manifest themselves, as indeed would the hybrid discourses of cultural translation.
- The emphasis on translation as the formation of power relations;
- Translation networks are multicultural and hybrid.(Pym, 2010)

In the light of the above points, instead of studying translation as a merely linguistic phenomenon, sociology tackles translation as an object in which many factors interfere in its production such as social considerations, political and ideological agenda, publishing policy, translation settings, etc. Hence, studying translation from a sociological perspective means handling it as a social practice which refers to any phenomenon that is caused by the interaction of social agents.

2. The Importance of Translation Sociology?

Translation problems and issues cannot be clarified and explained by the merely linguistic or literary analysis. The need for a new framework that may offer new horizons and explore more translation problems is primordial. Among the main reasons that led to the appearance of the sociological turn:

- The interdisciplinary nature of translation studies: since this field, from its beginnings, is situated at the crossroads of disciplines (comparative literature, hermeneutics, linguistics, computational linguistics, cultural studies, film studies, etc.), scholars have always turned their attention to other disciplines to invest models and approaches in the analysis of translation. Sociology is one of the most promising disciplines with regard to its closeness to translation as well as the number of theories that it offers;
- The cultural turn in sociology and humanities that brought a revolution in translation studies: from the first call to study translation from a cultural perspective with Basnett and Lefevere to the development of cultural models in translation (Venuti, Shaffner);
- The turn from texts-oriented analysis to translators- oriented analysis;

- The persisting sociological phenomena and problems in translation: such as identity, translator's role and position, translation and politics,
- The acknowledgement of translation as a beyond-texts phenomenon.

3. The Sociological Turn in Translation Studies?

In fact, sociology affected TS at four levels: 1) subject matter 2) paradigm 3) conception and terminology 4) modeling and theorization

- **Subject matter:** the shift from linguistic analysis to a wider world vision as well as the shift from focusing on the product (translated text) to the producer (translator).
- **Paradigm:** The shift from equivalence paradigm to contextualization one
- **Conception and terminology:** a cluster of terms and concepts: collaborative translation, crowd sourcing, rewriting, norms, patronage, decision making, translator role and positionality, ethics, power network, profession, translation industry, networking and volunteerism, etc.
- **modeling and theorization:** functionalism, polysystem, Bourdieu, actor network, symbolic interactionism, manipulation group, ecotranslatology, practice translation theory, complexity theory, etc.

4. The Main Sociological Models of Translation?

Historically, the first attempt to analyze translation with regard to “translation settings” was Evan Zohar's polysystem theory (1978). He defines polysystem as:

“a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent. (Munday, 2016)

The theory, inspired from Russian Formalism, reckons that analyzing translation cannot be done in isolation; literary, cultural, political, and contextual systems are important factors. Even Zohar (1978) argues that translated literature itself is regarded as a system in the way target culture selects works to be translated and in the way translation norms, policies and strategies are governed by other co-systems (Munday, 2016). This interest on systems that influences translations represents the first sociological-oriented study of translation.

German functionalism marked a turning point in translation studies. The old equivalence paradigm is no longer a criterion of “good translation”. Instead, Vermeer and Reiss (1984) suggest the purpose paradigm, or the *skopos*. Translations are only qualified as correct if they fulfill the expected function in the target culture. It goes without saying that the functionalist model “translational action” elaborated by Holz-Manttari is the most “sociological” one. Manttari relied on action theory to propose a model of translation that takes into account the translator within a network of agents: the initiator (who needs the translation), the commissioner (the one who contacts the translator), the ST producer (the one who wrote the ST, he is not forcibly involved in TT production), the TT producer (the translator), the TT user (the one who uses the TT) and the TT receiver (the final receiver of the TT). The translational action is the first model that explicitly mentions translator’s cooperants, and puts translation in its sociocultural context.

Descriptive translation studies, such as polysystem theory and the Manipulation Group, represent another insight into the study of translation from sociological perspective. Toury puts to the fore that: “the cumulative findings of descriptive studies should make it possible to formulate a series of coherent *laws* which would state the inherent relations between all the variables found to be relevant to translation” (Toury, 1995) The sociological influence is obvious in Toury’s intention to establish *laws* of translation. Hence, he suggested what will be known as translation norms:

- *Initial norms*: translation is more like the ST (adequacy) or the TT (acceptability)
- *Preliminary norms*: it includes *translation policy* (the choice of works to be translated, publishing norms and rules), and *translation directness* (the choice of directness of the ST and TT direction, the text has been translated from its original language or via intermediate language)
- *Operational norms*: mainly concerned with *matricial norms* (choice of words), and *textual-linguistic norms* (lexical and syntactic choices).

Another model, obviously influenced by Toury’s contribution, is manipulation group which stipulates that all translation imply certain degree of manipulation. Hermans, One of the manipulation group scholars, explains the concept:

“An approach to literary translation which is descriptive, target-oriented, functional and systemic; and an interest in the norms and constraints that govern

the production and reception of translations, in the relation between translation and other types of text processing, and in the place and role of translations both within a given literature and in the interaction between literatures.” (Munday, 2016, p. 189)

Lefever(Lefevere, 1992)was among the first scholars who dealt with translation within a wide network that he called “patronage”. The term patronage refers to individuals, groups and institutions that influence the translation process. He identifies three components of patronage: ideological (manifested in the choice of works to be translated), economic (writers and translators’ payment), and status (the one who is paid is generally supposed to conform the payer’s norms).

Chesterman proposes a set of norms to be respected when translating. He distinguishes between 1) *product* or *expectancy norms*: predominant norms and traditions of translation in the TL, cultural and ideological considerations; and 2) *professional norms*: related to the process of translation and implies other sub-norms: the *accountability norm* that is an ethical norm. it refers to translator’s integrity and morals, *the communication norm* which is a social norm. It reckons the translators as a broker between two parties, and *the relation norm* that is a linguistic norm. it means that there is still a relationship between the ST and TT regardless of the shifts and changes undertaken by the translator. (Munday, 2016)

Moreover, among purely sociological models that have been largely used in translation is Bourdieu’s field theory (1998). Two main concepts were adopted from this theory in translation studies: 1) *field* which is defined as the site or place of power struggle between agents. In translation, the field is translation itself and the participants are the author, publisher, reviewer, editor, etc.. 2) *habitus* refers to the participant’s cultural, social and identity nature. Other Bourdieu’s concepts that are worth studying in TS include the *capital* and the *illusio*. (Munday, 2016)

Actor network theory is another sociological model that knew significant interest in TS. It was first developed by French sociologists Latour and Callon from the “Centre de sociologie de l’innovation). The main tenet of the theory is that everything in the social and natural world is interconnected in permanent changing networks. Hence, nothing can be studied without a deep understanding of its relationship with the whole network in which it functions. (Serrano, 2020)In translation studies, for instance, Pym was the first translation

scholar who adopted ANT in his study of translation history. Buzelin, then, who not only highlighted the importance of this theory in translation analysis but also argued that ANT surpass Bourdieu's model in the sense that the latter was regarded as the main sociological contribution to translation studies. On the importance of ANT in translation studies, Buzelin Reckons that:

the observation, recording, and analyses of translational practices locally . . . combined with the study of the various drafts of a translation, will generate data that should enable us to get a better idea of who participates in the production of a translation, how they negotiate their position, and of how much and where translators . . . comply with or contest norms.

(Buzelin, *Unexpected Allies: How Latour's network theory could complement Bourdieusian analyses in translation studies*, 2005, p. 205)

The first translation publication dedicated to the sociology of translation was titled: "Constructing a Sociology of Translation" (2007) edited by Michaela Wolf and Alexandra Fukari. The volume proposes a number of contributions that put forward the importance of investing sociological insights in the study of translation. Among the main interventions: Chesterman's "Bridge Concepts in Translation Sociology". In his paper, Chesterman shows how the concepts of causality; translation practice, discourse and habitus; and translation norms, brief and strategy would establish a sociological framework of translation. Further, he argues that these concepts contribute to attend "consilience" which is defined as the idea of unifying different disciplines in the study of translation (Chesterman, 2007)

5. Contra-instrumentalism: the concept, the model

In his book "*Contra-instrumentalism: a Translation Polemic*"(2019), Venuti starts from a fact: translation had always been guided by a kind of instrumentalism (the view that theories are useful for studying and classifying but do not relate to objective truth) that negatively affect the way translations are perceived, criticized and evaluated. The set of stereotypes, clichés and proverbs that describe translation such as: traditori traduttori, les belles

infidèles, the dichotomy sense-for-sense vs word-for-word translation (inspired from St Jerome), Robert Forst's famous quotation "poetry is what gets lost in translation," Jacques Derrida's paradox: "Rien n'est intraduisible en un sens, mais en un autre sens tout est intraduisible", the concept of untranslatability, etc. all these adjectives and clichés that characterized translation for centuries developed a set of instrumentalist model that relies on prejudgments and stagnation of translation thinking. Through repetition and rote thinking, these proverbs became like rules of translation admitted by translators, scholars, academia, and the wide audience of translation. In this context, Venuti declares: "translation remains grossly misunderstood, ruthlessly exploited, and blindly stigmatized. Now is the time to abandon the simplistic, clichéd thinking that has limited our understanding of it for millennia" (Venuti, 2019, p. ix)

Instead, Venuti suggests to revisit the main rules that govern translation. In the beginning of his book, we read:

"Stop treating translation as a metaphor. Start considering it a material practice that is indivisibly linguistic and cultural.

Stop using moralistic terms like "faithful" and "unfaithful" to describe translation. Start defining it as the establishment of a variable equivalence to the source text.

Stop assuming that translation is mechanical substitution. Start conceiving of it as an interpretation that demands writerly and intellectual sophistication.

Stop evaluating translations merely by comparing them to the source text. Start examining their relations to the hierarchy of values, beliefs, and representations in the receiving culture.

Stop asserting that any text is untranslatable. Start realizing that every text is translatable because every text can be interpreted."

(Venuti, 2019, p. ix)

The first instrumentalist idea Venuti tackled was Nida's concept of "**equivalent effect**" which is defined as: "that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between

the original receptors and the message.” (Venuti 2019: P.8) The application of such effect requires the use of compensation as a technique of translation. Compensation means the addition in the target language some elements to compensate the loss engendered by language differences. Venuti postulates that compensation is an instrumentalist strategy in the sense that: “it assumes not simply that a source-text effect is an invariant, but also that its location and linguistic “means” can be changed in a translation without changing the significance or force that the effect carries in the source text.”(Venuti, 2019, p. 8)

Another important concept in Venuti’s project is **invariance**. He argues that translation models and theories are characterized by invariant features that contributed to the development of such instrumental thinking about translation. Translation is always variant, and, accordingly, the norms must also be. If we take House’s model of quality assessment which draws on concepts from systematic functional linguistics to evaluate translations. She puts forward that ST and TT must be parallelly examined to spot the mismatches and then say whether the translation was overt or covert one (House, 2015). House’s model is, from Venuti’s perspective, instrumental since it sees the ST as comprising invariant features. The concept of invariance implies that the translator receives, interprets, and translates the text in a different time, and under different circumstances. Hence, it would be irrational to give constant and absolute norms of analysis. Concerning invariance, Venuti argues that: “The negative consequences of this dominance have included the inferior ranking of translation practice in the hierarchy of scholarly and literary rewards, the relative paucity, reductiveness, and sheer naïveté of translation research, and a set of theoretical concepts and practical strategies that preempt a rather different model of translation that I shall call hermeneutic.”(Venuti, 2019, p. 8)

5.1. The sociological Dimension of contra-instrumentalism paradigm

The sociological dimension of Venuti’s contra-instrumentalism lies in its claim that translation criticism and commentary should be taken in a beyond linguistic-cultural paradigm that entails the settings of translation reception, target cultural and institutional values and norms: “In my view, all translation, whether the genre of the source text is humanistic, pragmatic, or technical, is an interpretive act that necessarily entails ethical responsibilities and political commitments.”(Venuti, 2019, p. 6)

5.2. Contra-instrumentalism in Subtitling

Widely considered as the most frequent type of translation, subtitling has occupied a central place in translation studies. The instrumentalism is represented by the sum of concepts and guidelines that subtitling companies and localizers adopt. From this perspective, Venuti considers that:

“The subtitles show that every translation entails shifting between source and receiving contexts. Translating detaches the source text from a complicated originary context (intratextual, intertextual, interdiscursive, intersemiotic or intermedial) by dismantling, rearranging, and displacing features that are constitutive of that text insofar as they support meanings, values, and functions in the source culture. (Venuti, 2019, p. 135)

When the Korean Netflix series “Squid Game” raises a huge polemic about the quality of English subtitling, newspapers around the world talked about “unfaithful”, “botched”, “mistranslations” ... and all the instrumentalist concepts that we know. Just a reading in the headlines of these articles show us the instrumentalist way translation is perceived in media and by public:

1. Squid Game subtitles 'change meaning' of Netflix show (BBC)
2. “Inside the dying art of subtitling” (Cnet)
3. “Squid Game: TikTok user says Netflix’s ‘botched’ subtitles are changing meaning of the show” (the independent)
4. Pourquoi les sous-titres de Squid Game sont pointés du doigt (Konbini)
5. Squid Game and the ‘untranslatable’: the debate around subtitles explained (The Conversation)
6. 'Squid Game' is the latest example of when subtitles are a little off (NPR)
7. Koreans are furious about ‘squid game’s English subtitles that alter the show’s meaning (the wearersonate)

Nevertheless, if we check the way translations are provided in Netflix company, we will conclude that instrumentalist thought dominates translation thinking. In addition, requirements and conditions of translation are extremely complicated. There are: duration, file format, Glyph list, line treatment, positioning consistency, title cards, currency, brand names treatment, quotation, credits, and technical aspects. Let us consider the following rules set by Netflix for translators:

“Accuracy of content:

- *Include as much of the original content as possible.*
- *Do not simplify or water down the original dialogue.*
- *Where content has been dubbed into English, please refer to the dubbing script or dubbed audio as the basis for the SDH file and ensure that the two match as much as reading speed and timings allow.*
- *Truncating the original dialogue should be limited to instances where reading speed and synchronicity to the audio are an issue.*
- *When editing for reading speed, favor text reduction, deletion and condensing but do not paraphrase*
- *Transcription of the source language should follow the word choice and sentence order of the spoken dialect. Slang and other dialectal features should not be changed¹.*”

According to Netflix, the aforementioned rules aim at reaching accuracy in subtitling. However, these presumed accuracy principles do not give much interest to translators as professionals that have a marge of freedom. This fact rises the invisibility issue. Translators are told to do in their job by other professionals who are not specialists in translation. The instrumentalist thinking dominates the whole translation industry. Besides, instructions like: “Slang and other dialectal features should not be changed”, “Do not simplify or water down the original dialogue” explain how they neglect the significant norms such as conditions and context of translation, translator’s position and role, target audience considerations, and so forth.

Another instrumentalist point in the above rules is the call for text reduction and linguistic economy. Giving such instructions in an abrupt and absolute way may harm the quality of the target text, in one hand, and reduce translator’s role, from the other. Only the translator who can take such choices and decisions with regard to translatorial requirements.

¹ - <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us/articles/217350977-English-Timed-Text-Style-Guide>

Conclusion

Ultimately, contra-instrumentalism is a crucial paradigm in subtitling research in the sense that it offers new horizons to translation research and analysis, it challenges the time lasting rules that governed TS for centuries, and it tends to enhance translator's visibility and translation status in academic, cultural and institutional spheres. Nevertheless, it seems that the main drawback of this paradigm lies in its rejection of all translation theories and key-concepts, the fact that it may give the impression that Venuti was so subjective and biased. In addition, Venuti criticized linguistic approaches, discourse analysis approaches to translation (Hatim and Mason), and cultural approaches (Lefevere) for their prescriptivism, and he committed the same thing by asking translators and researchers to start thinking of translation differently through what he called "provocations".

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest

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