

Scandalous Statistics? A Note on the Percentages of Translations in English

Anthony Pym

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One must accept that translations account for only 2 to 4 percent of books published in the United States, and that the figure is similar for the United Kingdom. This general rate is much lower than the percentages for other countries: 15 to 18 percent for France, 11 to 14 for Germany, some 25 for Italy, 25 to 26 for Spain, to bring together reports on statistics for years between 1985 and 1992 (Ganne and Minon 1992; Venuti 1995: 12-14). Further, translations from English account for a good deal of those high rates into other languages: if UNESCO figures for 1987 are to be believed, some 49% of all translations in the world are from English (Venuti 1998: 160). Let's accept these rough numbers. Now, what do they mean?

On the surface, the disparity between what is translated into English (not much) and what is rendered from it (a lot) is great enough for Lawrence Venuti to talk about "a trade imbalance with serious cultural ramifications" (1992: 14). It also prompts him to complain about the commercialism of American and British publishers: "Quite simply, a lot of money is made from translating English, but little is invested in translating into it" (1998: 160-1). And this is just part of an unhealthy world situation where American and British publishers have "reaped the financial benefits of successfully imposing Anglo-American cultural values on a vast foreign readership, while producing cultures in the United Kingdom and the United States that are

aggressively monolingual” (1992: 15). The result, says Venuti, is symptomatic of “a complacency in Anglo-American relations with cultural others, a complacency that can be described--without too much exaggeration--as imperialistic abroad and xenophobic at home” (1995: 17).

Do the figures really mean all that? I suspect not. Or better, some pernicious exploitation may exist, but I don't quite see how the statistics can support the scandal. I'll try to explain my doubts as non-mathematically as possible.

Let me suggest, as a general idea, that a culture that publishes a lot of books will have a lower translation rate than a culture that publishes less books. Here I'm talking about any culture whatsoever. All we have to imagine is that Culture A, with a lot of books, has more things that could be translated than does Culture B, which has less books.

For example, Culture A has 100 books, and Culture B has 10.

Now, let's impose an ideal world--a Venutian paradise?--where translation rates apply to all books independently of their origin. Let's say 10% of all books in this imaginary world are worth translating and are translated. That means 10% of all A's books are translated into B, and 10% of all B's books are translated into A. What a nice little egalitarian world! But look what happens: Culture A gets just one book from B and finishes up with a translation rate of 0.99% (one translation for the 101 books published). And B receives 10 translations from A, so its translation rate is actually 50% (translations now account for half of all books published).

From this simple mind game I conclude that a low translation rate in a culture may be due to no more than a high number of books published in that culture. I also suggest that any analysis that does not compare the numbers of books published is manipulating a pretty poor version of materialism.

Is something wrong here? Let me address two possible objections.

First, you might say, my mind game is deceptive because there are many cultures involved, so we have to picture an extended-play scenario. Okay, now imagine five cultures that have 100, 80, 50, 30 and 10 books respectively. If our 10% rule is applied we get translation rates of 14.5%, 19.2%, 30.5%, 44.4% and 72.2% respectively (take a few minutes to work it out for yourself). So the differences become even more pronounced!

Second, some might object, the ideal world should have a 10% rate or whatever for each *individual* culture, such that Culture A with 100 books would be obliged to translate all the 10 books from Culture B, and Culture B with just 10 books would be obliged to translate just one book from Culture A. Okay, that's a possible scenario. But, in our extended-play model, if each culture takes its translations in accordance with the distribution of books to be translated, the biggest one will still have the most books translated from it (take a few more minutes to work it out). So even this does not entirely solve the problem of a general "trade imbalance." Further, I wonder if our imaginary Venutians would be happy with a command economy that were so indifferent to the relative qualities of books. Would they really want to judge and translate texts solely in terms of their origin?

No, I am not arguing that there is no such thing as cultural hegemony, nor that translation rates into English are entirely healthy. Then again, if we attempt a slightly different kind of calculation, translations into English are numerous enough to have considerable historical weight: for the period 1960-1986 the *Index Translationum* lists more than 2.5 times as many translations in Britain and the United States (1,872,050) than in France (688,720) or Italy (577,950). And these figures are more or less compatible with the deceptive percentages! More important, since literatures in

English constitute a vast and diverse phenomenon, many of the non-translated English texts are in fact from non-central cultures, potentially fulfilling much of the diversifying role that translations play in less extensive languages (cf. Constantin 1992: 126).

I just wanted to raise a finger at this minor point. We should look very closely at the statistics before making scandalous usage of them.

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