

# Translators as Breakers of Norms?

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Translators have opened new visions for their receiving cultures, challenging and breaking endemic norms. They have brought change, vitality, and progress. Some have even altered endemic norms about how one should translate. Yet enthusiasm for norm-breaking does not account for everything.

Observing a French-German student group, Ladmiral has found that certain bilinguals initially offer their services as translators for the less-bilingual students. As translators, they seek a position of relative prestige, the power to control and direct exchanges. Yet this power is very temporary. The translators are so busy conveying someone else's words that they lose the power to say something themselves. They find themselves "cantonnés dans le rôle épuisant et ingrat de médiateurs linguistiques, privés de la possibilité d'intervenir à titre personnel. Certains, voire certaines, finissent par protester contre cette 'exploitation', en refusant de traduire" (1989: 63-64). Although translation might look like an act of power, the translating translator can be peculiarly powerless. One might then argue that translators generally cannot break norms and get away with it. Wherever they are merely translators, their service function has them respect the powers that be and that pay. The translator's *droit à la parole* is, after all, the right to render someone else's speech for a further person's understanding. It is moreover compounded by obligations to remain trustworthy, to keep official secrets, and to remain employable for repeat performances. In the face of all this, translating translators only have power by delegation, and only for as long as they can be trusted. There is a second-hand authority that remains remarkably conservative. In the final analysis translators are excluded from the power relationships that most actively challenge norms.

This pessimistic view finds some support in history. No trace of independent power was left by the archetypal interpreters guiding commercial expeditions to the south of sixth-dynasty Egypt. The prestigious traces and titles were those of the Princes of Elephantine, "overseers of dragomans", the norm-makers, not the translators (Kurz 1985). Similar control is found in the Spanish laws of 1583 and 1630 outlining punishments for interpreters who broke norms in the American colonies. Those accepting bribes or found guilty of unchristian behaviour "shall pay more than the damage and lose their employ"; "a fine of three pesos the first time, double this the second, double again the third and loss of their employ"; "loss of all

property and goods in our realm, and exile from our earth [y sea desterrado de la tierra]" (Gargatagli 1992). Norm-breaking by the powerless could be a rather unfortunate business. Other cases are more complex. In ninth-century Baghdad Hunain ibn Ishaq translated a book on bones for an influential client named Masawaih. The translation was carried out in the "clear speech" that the client demanded, not the literalism that the translator elsewhere believed appropriate. Why should the translator not have had the power to decide such questions? Because he was by no means on the same social level as the client. Although he was not directly castigated or exiled, his role was certainly "épuisant et ingrat". Interestingly enough this Masawaih, the client, was a physician who had earlier refused to teach Hunain medicine. He had sent the young Syrian away, saying "You would do better to carry out the trade of your people", that is, as a money-changer. This inspired the young Hunain to gain solid knowledge of Greek and Arabic and to become a translator (Badawi 1968: 34). Excluded from the receiving profession, unable to become a prince of medicine, the translator did indeed become a kind of money-changer, with his power restricted to a minor intercultural space.

Yet if all translating translators were powerless, how might one account for the impressive cases where they have indeed either brought about change or actively countered it? Some translators have more power than others; there are, happily, cases of resistance. But the power enabling such resistance rarely ensues from translation itself. Consider, as a collective example, the surprising number of Jewish translators who were physicians, particularly physicians at court, working in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Since Christians were not allowed to practice medicine the good Jewish doctors travelled with their knowledge and not much more, mediating between the centres of power, curing kings and translating. Power can use translators in more ways than one, and translators are related to power by more than their translations. The interrelationships often pass through translators' other professions, through their integration into existing power structures, and through their ability to exploit contradictions between those structures. A few famous examples are worth brief recall.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) did rather more than recommend free translation as a means of inventiveness. He also had the power to be relatively free and inventive. Consul of Rome from 63 BC, he had Catiline's accomplices executed without trial, was invited to join the first triumvirate, and developed the power of rhetoric to the point where his invective against Antony led to his own assassination. As others would later discover, free invention can bring peculiar rewards.

Hieronymous (Saint Jerome) (345-419/420) travelled widely and wandered around in the desert of Chalcis for some four years, indifferent to power. But he was then invited to Rome, became secretary to Pope Damasus, performed as a spiritual leader for cultivated ladies, and of course began translating the Bible at the invitation of the pope, from a position of extreme power. Indeed, he was tipped to succeed Damasus as pope upon the latter's death in 384. But

Hieronymous lost the election, the new pope Siricius made life difficult for him and for his translations, and the translator carried out most of his later work in the relative desert of Bethlehem, with the cultivated ladies in a nearby convent.

Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1342/43-1400), as the innovative creator of a literature in English, was of course an author as well as a translator, although a clear distinction between the two activities was not of his age. Yet he was also a court official; he carried out diplomatic missions for the Crown; his most authoritative title, highly suited to the work on intercultural frontiers, was "Comptroller of the Customs".

Leonardo Bruni, called Aretino (1374-1444), the Florentine who translated Plato and Aristotle into Latin, marked a major watershed in translation history through his disagreements with the Spaniard Alonso Cartagena. Bruni argued that good taste in Latin was more important than literalist fidelity to Greek; Cartagena defended the previous paradigm of fidelity, notwithstanding his ignorance of Greek. It was a powerful debate, heralding elegant Latin and *les belles infidèles*. The participants were also quite powerful. Bruni became Chancellor of the Republic of Florence; Cartagena was Bishop of Burgos. Their powers were moreover connected. From the mid-1430s Bruni was an interested member of the Florentine cloth importers' and wool merchants' guilds, since Florence was a city for trading and manufacturing. But where did they get their wool from? A lot of it came from Spain, where Burgos was at that time the centre for the export of wool and the bishop had important connections among the city's *converso* traders. Bruni and Cartagena certainly argued about translation. Yet power relations as trading partners eventually helped them agree to disagree, remaining on good commercial terms despite translation (Round 1993: 71-72).

William Caxton (c.1422-1491) translated from French and is of course best known as the first printer in England. Yet his real power was gained from neither translation nor printing. At Bruges he was for many years a rich and influential wool trader. Wool was important. So important, in fact, that in 1463 Caxton earned himself the wonderful title of "Governor of the English Nation of Merchant Adventurers" in the Low Countries. It was not just a title. He had real authority over his fellow merchants, a position that enabled him to become financial advisor to Margaret, duchess of Burgundy. By the time he began to translate and print literature he was already in a position of considerable intercultural power. Experience as a "Governor of Merchant Adventurers" was perhaps not bad training for a translator.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was not just a translator opposing non-translators: "Are they doctors? So am I. Are they learned? So am I. Are they preachers? So am I. Are they theologians? So am I. Are they debaters? So am I. Are they philosophers? So am I. Are they dialecticians? So am I. Are they lecturers? So am I. Do they write books? So do I." (*Sendbrief*, 1530).

Étienne Dolet (1509-1546) was of course a printer and publisher as well as a translator prepared to add three words to Plato. Further, he was a printer by royal permission, and a royal pardon had him released from a murder charge. As an enthusiastic troublemaker he

played one power off against the other, crown against church, such that his ultimate condemnation was not just for three added words.

Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt (1606-1664), firmly associated with the tradition of les belles infidèles, was such an elegant stylist that Colbert wanted him to write the chronicle of Louis XIV's reign. But the translator was perhaps not faithful enough. The king declined, preferring not to have his reign commemorated by a protestant. Yet no royal prerogative withdrew Perrot's pension of 1,500 francs, apparently allocated for a job never done. Belle infidélité!

Alexander Fraser Tytler (1747-1813) is well known for his "Essay on the Principles of Translation" (1791). But with what authority were his principles stated? Since his translations of Petrarch and Schiller were published later, Tytler could only really write as a lawyer. But he was not just any old lawyer. Tytler was Lord Woodhouselee, Judge-Advocate of Scotland in 1790, Lord of the Court of Session in 1802, Lord of the Justiciary in 1811. A fine position from which to hand down judgements about translation.

John Hookham Frere (1769-1846), as a translator of Pulci, introduced the ottava rima to English. He was also a British Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, a staunch opponent of Jacobinic ideas, and a diplomat whose career came to an ignominious end when he wrongly advised the British army against retreat from the French at La Coruña, Spain. Not all translators are intercultural experts.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972), a good counterexample in almost any context, was indeed a resistant translator. Some theorists - especially Brazilians - even believe he initiated the entire trend of resistant twentieth-century translation. Yet his extreme political position, siding with Mussolini, removed him from the power bases of post-war English letters. Although the translations are there, his influence has not been on the same level. Extracurricular activities can have both negative and positive effects on the translator's power.

The examples could be multiplied indefinitely. But the above are perhaps enough to extract a message for our current situation. We sometimes think we are training and talking about professional translators, Nurübersetzer who are supposed to do nothing but translate. Yet few graduate translators actually remain translators throughout their careers; few translating translators attain independent status or power. Hunain ibn Ishaq, once free of the client Masawaih, may well have attained status and power, attracting disciple-translators, associating with an institutionalized "House of Wisdom" and becoming the central figure of what some call the "School of Baghdad". He even retranslated the book on bones in accordance with his own criteria. But his semi-academic position was then a form of multiple employment, as is that of the translators and theorists working in our own translation institutes and Houses of Wisdom. The theorists nowadays espousing a certain breaking of norms are not just translators. People like Gideon Toury and Lawrence Venuti are university teachers. Theorists make their pronouncements from within the security of wider power structures.

Translation is not, and perhaps has never been, a wholly independent activity. If translators break norms, they do so thanks to the use of delegated power, to their insertion between contradictory forces, and through forms of multiple employment that sometimes allow more social authority than anything accorded to the merely translating translator.

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