

Introduction

Inequalities and Power Relationships in the Global Translation Market

In memory of André Schiffrin

Translation, long neglected by the history of publishing, has nonetheless been the primary vehicle for the international circulation of books since the second half of the 19th century. Flows of published translations gathered momentum throughout the 20th century, with periods of regression—during wartime, in particular. This was accompanied by a steady process of professionalisation, contributing to the gradual unification of a global market of translations governed by the rhythm of the major international book fairs. In this market—reconfigured, in the era of globalisation, as a result of increased economic pressures driven by concentration and rationalisation throughout the book industry (Bourdieu, 1999; Thompson, 2010)—, the exchanges are asymmetrical. This asymmetry reflects the inequality between languages but also the power relationships between the central countries that dominate the book market and those located on its periphery. It can be measured by translation flows, the dominant countries “exporting” the most and “importing” the least (Heilbron, 1999). Yet this overall structure needs to be refined and nuanced through in-depth case studies dedicated to specific languages, countries and sectors. Such is the purpose of the current issue.

This issue reflects and participates in the recent upsurge in sociological and historical translation research, in which the contributors have played an active part. These studies address the social issues at stake in the international circulation of books, issues that are simultaneously cultural, economic and political in nature (Bourdieu, 2002; Heilbron and Sapiro, 2007). Starting from the observation that books do not circulate by themselves, they focus on the actors (translators, editors, literary agents, state representatives, critics, etc.) and the authorities (publishing houses, associations, fairs, prizes, etc.) involved in the work of mediation on the international market of translations. In methodological terms, they combine quantitative analysis of translation flows with qualitative analysis based on interviews, observations, documents and in some cases archives. This approach has helped to revitalise translation studies (Even-Zohar, 1990; Pym, 1992; Venuti, 1992; Toury, 1995), previously focused on a text-based methodology, and research on cultural transfers (Espagne and Werner, 1988, 1991), which had previously paid relatively little attention to publishing-related issues. It also makes a contribution to the history and sociology of publishing, a research area which has long remained confined within national boundaries. It has given rise to a broad range of studies adopting diverse perspectives and addressing a variety of issues.

Some pioneering inquiries have focused on the flows between particular languages and countries. In his work on the exchanges between French and Arabic, of which he presents a synthetic view in this issue, Richard Jacquemond (1992, 2008, 2009) uses this perspective to analyse the unequal relationship between the global north and the global south. This work also reveals obstacles specific to the countries concerned, where publishing, which has a long history behind it, is still subject to close state and political control and where, until recent times, the book was a cultural product reserved for the multilingual elites—who did not need translations into Arabic. Gustavo Sorá’s research (2002, 2003) on the exchanges between Argentina and Brazil throughout the 20th century has shown the central role of translations in the construction of national identities. Research on exchanges between small countries (such as the Netherlands and Israel) and France has revealed the relative decline of the latter nation’s position in a global market of translations increasingly dominated by the United States (Heilbron, 2008; Sapiro, 2008c). Another study on the literary exchanges between Paris and New York in the era of globalisation (Sapiro, 2010a) very clearly delineates the shifting balance of power between Paris, the historic capital of the “World Republic of Letters” (Casanova, 1999), and the new centre of cultural life that New York has become since the 1970s—yet also shows how these exchanges have been maintained at the pole of small-scale circulation of the publishing market (Sapiro 2010b; on the distinction between the poles of large-scale and small-scale circulation, see Bourdieu, 1999).

The political challenges of these transfers have been addressed via in-depth studies of translations under Fascism (Rundle, 2010) and imports of Eastern European literature in France during the Communist era (Popa, 2002, 2010). The latter reveals the progressive diversification of licit and illicit channels and the growing importance of the latter.

The issues at stake in the importation of foreign literature have been explored in relation to various periods and historical contexts. Here, too, the act of importing literature is closely bound up with the process of nationalisation, reflecting the competitive relations between literatures (Wilfert, 2002, 2003). A collective research project examining the situation of translations in France in the era of globalisation (Sapiro ed., 2008) has highlighted the distinction between two translation channels: one, at the pole of large-scale circulation, is dominated by translations from English; the other, at the pole of small-scale circulation, maintains a high level of linguistic and cultural diversity, via “foreign literature” series and publishers like Actes Sud which have invested heavily in translation since the 1970s, along with a number of small publishers specialising in particular languages (like Picquier for the Asian languages). Research focused on particular publishers that play a central role in the market—such as Le Seuil (Serry, 2002) and Gallimard (Sapiro, 2010)—shows how their catalogues have evolved over time, providing a diachronic perspective that underscores the challenges of this investment, from the accumulation of symbolic capital through to the diversification of the list. The vast collective project examining the history of translation into French, gathering together research undertaken to date in isolation, will contribute a diachronic overview spanning a long time period (Chevrel, D’Hulst, Lombez, 2012).

Analyses by sector highlight the characteristics specific to different categories of books. Literature, which leads the way by far among the categories of books translated worldwide (accounting for half of all books translated on average), and which is also the area with the highest proportion of translations to total editorial output (in France, for example, translations represent 35% to 40% of new fiction, twice as high as the overall percentage of books translated into French), is also still the sector given most attention by researchers. Yet studies of other sectors, such as children’s literature, are beginning to emerge. This is also the case with the humanities and social sciences: here, the close intermeshing of the publishing and academic worlds makes them a special case requiring separate consideration. Following initial research on works in human and social sciences translated into French and the obstacles encountered when importing them (Sapiro and Popa, 2008; Sapiro ed., 2012), a survey of translations from French in the United States, the United Kingdom and Argentina was commissioned by the Institut français (Sapiro ed., 2013). The hitherto unpublished findings with respect to Argentina are presented here by Alejandro Dujovne, Heber Ostroviesky and Gustavo Sorá. This research shows that this field, neglected by the conglomerates who rule the commercial publishing sector, is a “niche” for countries like Argentina, which occupies a semi-peripheral position in the Spanish-speaking world by comparison with Spain, which accounts for the lion’s share of translations in this linguistic arena. Due to the long tradition of intellectual exchange between Argentina and France and the fact that French thought has remained a constant reference point for researchers in this country, translations of humanities and social sciences remain a dynamic segment of the Argentine market despite the economic obstacles with which importers have to contend.

Although the humanities and social sciences have been paid relatively little attention as a sector in their own right, they have been considered in a number of studies focused on the reception processes by which an author or a theory is imported from one country to another: notable works in this area include the exemplary studies on the French reception of Norbert Elias (Joly, 2012) and John Rawls (Hauchecorne, 2009, 2010), or those dedicated to French Theory (Cusset, 2003) and Russian Formalism (Matonti, 2009). Although this field of investigation is not a new one, it has been greatly enriched by taking account of the editorial challenges that have been accorded little attention in the past. At the intersection of the history and sociology of publishing, of the study of cultural transfers and of translation studies, the sociology and history of translation therefore open up vast new fields of research on issues of contemporary concern such as the question of cultural diversity in the era of globalisation (addressed in my article), relations between the global North and South (discussed in the two other articles and mentioned in two personal testimonies), competition between nations for cultural hegemony and the social conditions for the circulation of cultural goods at a time when the creative industries are undergoing concentration and rationalisation.

Gisèle Sapiro

We learned of the death of André Schiffrin as this issue was being finalised. On behalf of all the contributors to the present volume and the entire Bibliodiversity publication team (André was a member of the Scientific Committee) we would like to pay tribute to a great independent publisher who was also an outstanding cultural mediator and a public intellectual. We dedicate this issue to him.



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