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## Charting the Future of Translation History

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# The Impact of Postmodern Discourse on the History of Translation

## Introduction

It can be safely argued that over the last couple of decades the discipline of translation history has broadened its horizon beyond mainly Western traditions to include other histories and historical perspectives, thus ensuring pluralism as a basis for constituting a truly comprehensive history of translation. This has generally been a healthy response to Berman's (1984) assertion that there can be no truly comprehensive theory of translation without a preliminary study of the many and varied histories of translating languages and cultures. It is therefore interesting to look at some of the ways in which translation history has managed to keep up with the times, especially with respect to the developments of ontological concepts or research paradigms such as postcolonialism, cultural studies, and postmodernism. In spite of the progress made so far, particularly in keeping with current trends in the humanities and the social sciences, the history of translation is still largely viewed essentially as the straightforward documenting of past translating practices and theories, how these relate to the present, and how they can help us

chart the course to the future. In this regard, translation history is often appraised as a subdiscipline of translation studies, mainly secondary in nature, and translation historians as mere archivists whose main task is to record and document the various trends and discourses that hold sway within the ever-expanding discipline of translation studies. In other words, translation studies has turned to its history to give it depth, recognition, and authenticity. Translation historians, therefore, are made to shoulder a great responsibility since the ultimate achievement of the discipline's *lettre de noblesse* has a great deal to do with how translation historians present the events of the past, and analyze and relate them to the present, with a view to paving the way to the future.

Given the seriousness of the translation historian's task and in light of recent developments in translation studies, it is indeed within reason to seek to establish translation history as an autonomous discipline with its own objectives and methodologies. Two main points need to be explored here with respect to methodology and how it relates to current trends in historical research. First of all, a clear and rigorous methodology must be established for the history of translation if it is not to be written off as mere "journalism," a linear (or straightforward) recounting of past events within the confines of various linguistic, or cultural, traditions. A good starting point that might lead to such a methodology is for translation historians to start viewing themselves as such — that is, as historians — rather than as translation scholars or practitioners masquerading as historians. For this, the translation historian must view his or her duty as two-pronged, with one eye on the main object of study (that is, translation-related discourses) and the other on the academic discipline of history, keeping abreast with the latter's evolving theories and methodologies.

As history is mostly recounted from the vantage position of the present, there have been many theories of history and varied approaches to relating historical knowledge, all deriving from an attempt to recover and represent the past in an ever-changing present. Alun Munslow (1997) groups the various approaches under three main categories: a. RECONSTRUCTIONISM, based on the correspondence

theory of empiricism, firmly rooted in the belief that truthful meaning can be directly inferred from primary sources. It is, in other words, the belief in an “objective” recounting of historical facts; b. CONSTRUCTIONISM, essentially a subspecies of reconstructionism but with the recognition of the frailty of the correspondence theory of empiricism;<sup>1</sup> and c. DECONSTRUCTIONISM,<sup>2</sup> based on postmodernist thought; deconstructionist history is critical of traditional assumptions of empiricism couched as factual, objective and disinterested analysis, and contends that written history results from culturally determined and power-related interpretations [Munslow 1997, 20–26]). Munslow states:

Historians of the deconstructionist or linguistic turn, like others aware of the indeterminate character of postmodern society and the self-referential nature of representation, are conscious that the written historical narrative is the formal *re-presentation* of historical content. This consciousness has emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century, prompting all historians to think self-consciously about how we use language — to be particularly aware of the figurative character of our own narrative as the medium by which we relate the past and written history. This means further exploring the idea that our opaque language constitutes and represents rather than transparently corresponds to reality, that there is no ultimate knowable historical truth, that our knowledge of the past is social and perspectival, and that written history exists within culturally determined power structures. (1997, 25)

In some ways, this study highlights the relevance of the deconstructionist approach to history in accounting for the significance of postmodern discourse for translation history. Which leads to the second main point in this paper: that postmodern theories have greatly influenced contemporary developments in translation studies, calling attention to erstwhile neglected research paradigms such as power relations and ideology, sociology and transculturality, gender and postcoloniality.

These developments must be accounted for in any current and comprehensive narrative of translation history.

### Reflections on methodology

#### *Deconstructionism and translation history*

Deconstructionist history was born in the late twentieth century out of a general dissatisfaction with the traditionalist view of history as an objectivized empiricist enterprise, in which the historian is an impartial observer who merely conveys "facts" grounded in the belief in some reasonably accurate correspondence between these "facts" and the events of the past. For deconstructionist historians, "facts" presented as simple evidential statements are meaningless. Historical evidence is turned into "facts" through the narrative interpretations of historians.

History is indeed a process of translating evidence into facts. As such, "facts" are never innocent, as they are invested with meaning in the process of contextualization undertaken by the historian within the larger process of interpretation. Historians generally construe meaning and impose their views on the past as informed by their own cultural situation. Deconstructionist historians therefore argue for a clear "interventionist" approach in analyzing the traces of the past. In their view, history is a narrative interpretation informed partly by the social theories or ideological positions adopted or invented by the historian. This view is in sharp contrast to that of the modernist empiricist historian.

The debate between the modernist empiricists and the postmodernist deconstructionists can constitute a basis for discussing some fundamental questions of methodology in translation history: what is the role of the translation historian in documenting or recreating the past? Is translation history, as a discipline, a mere recounting of past events, a deciphering of the traces of the past, so to speak? Or should the discipline be construed as serious historiography, with a decidedly interventionist role for the translation historian?

*History as deconstruction*<sup>3</sup>

Michel Foucault (1966, 1972, 1977) has contributed a great deal to the deconstructionist approach to history. In his work he generates some questions about the true nature of history by replacing the empiricist approach with a method of narrative interpretation, by denying a linear historical causality between events and epochs (*épistémès*), and by doubting the historian's capacity to represent knowledge of the past accurately. Following a Nietzschean and post-structuralist line of thought, Foucault discusses what he views as history's dubious quest for the origin of truth, which he considers to be part of the great myth of Western culture. History, as an interpretative process, is subject to the creation and policing of knowledge, an endless process that can never scratch back far enough to find the original truth. History is also subject to our culturally determined discursive practices through which our linguistically based knowledge is produced. These discursive practices are shaped by what historians can say or do within the confines of what society allows or rationalizes to be true or false, right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate. Hence, history is a social construction of reality, described by Foucault as the power/knowledge equation. The disciplines of knowledge are therefore entities of control that suppress or allow, exclude or include, that which may be deemed permissible or not. It follows from this that there cannot be only one history, but rather several histories of exclusion (that is, of the marginalized or "other"), of inclusion (the accepted as normal) and of transgression (the normal becoming abnormal). History is therefore viewed as a literary and ideologically self-conscious process of thought. It can never be objective because it is subject to the historian's world view (that is, the time and cultural context of production) and to the power of language to create meaning.<sup>4</sup>

Building on Saussure's distinction of *langue* and *parole*, and the arbitrary connection between *signifier* and *signified*, Foucault highlights the importance of language in shaping or determining the expression of our life experiences. And since we live in a social world of language,

language is always loaded with social meaning in much the same way that social structure is created by power relationships. As a medium for describing experience, language is unavoidably ideological, tied to relations of power and therefore never innocent.<sup>5</sup> We must therefore seek to understand historical evidence not only in terms of its referents in the past but also in terms of the linguistic mechanisms underpinning the creation and constitution of historical knowledge. The implication of this structuralist understanding of language for historians is the arbitrary nature of signs, which casts further doubt as to the accuracy of written historical accounts.

Foucault therefore raises the issue of socially constructed power relationships and their representation in language, and, in historical terms, “the connection between the will to truth and the will to power” (Munslow 1997, 128). The reality of the past is viewed as textually generated and ideologically tainted. This postmodernist conception of history translates into Foucault’s practical conception of an epistemic imposition on the past, an imposition based on an intellectual culture in which society, ideology, technology and all human behaviour exist (Munslow 1997, 125). The IMPOSITIONALISM of the historian thus celebrated by Foucault calls for an interventionist writing of history, which should be “explicit in its perspective” and should acknowledge that its “perception is slanted, being a deliberate appraisal, affirmation, or negation” (Foucault 1977, 157) of past events. This postmodern approach rejects the modernist perception of history as brute factualism, disinterested and objective representation devoid of ideological input.

### *Interventionist writing of translation history*

From the point of view of translation history, therefore, the question is *What is the role of the historian in recreating the past?* “Interventionism” is not “revisionist” history; rather, it is an attempt to take the historical recording of translation theories and practices beyond the mere recounting of individual histories and traditions — a recounting that has been based on the modernist division of space in terms of a Eurocentric conception

of nation-states and arranged chronologically according to a mainly Greco-Roman, or Judeo-Christian, sequence of events. A rough sampling of references on translation history would reveal a deep preoccupation with Greco-Roman Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Modernism, and so on. These *époques-clés* are in themselves major historical landmarks from which the history of humanity can be traced and studied. Yet a cursory look at the literature on translation history leaves one with the impression that these landmarks were mainly great moments in European history, devoid of any significant input from other parts of the world.<sup>6</sup> To follow Anthony Appiah's line of argument,<sup>7</sup> one has the distinct impression that

[the *Geist* — the life of Reason, which is the life of the spirit] had flown from Greece to Rome and then on into the northern forests, residing eventually in what might once have been called the heartlands of the Saxon and Romance races. . . . Hebrew, Sanskrit, and Arabic might be interesting because their literary and philosophical traditions were connected in interesting ways at various points with Europe's. Something very like the *Geist* may have traveled also through the long literate history of China and its cultural heirs in Japan and the Korean peninsula, but this spirit, the shadow-*Geist* of East Asia, had its own life and one could responsibly follow the Western *Geist* without much attention to it. (1995, 52)

Appiah's statement is critical of a Eurocentric view in comparative literature which initially resisted the inclusion of cultural studies and other postmodern trends. And how is this relevant to the study of translation history? Well, we can learn from this crisis of inclusion in comparative literature by directing research in translation history towards a more broad-based and comprehensive study, which explores the interconnections between histories (between East and West, or between North and South) rather than stressing isolated national traditions centred on the obsolete notion of European nation-states. The history of humanity is expressed in interconnected bodies of writing and experiences, and



includes the longstanding role of peoples and products from outside Europe in shaping our intellectual heritage. This interconnection of histories is made evident in the following statement by Appiah.

The Greece to which the West looks back was at the crossroads of cultures of North Africa and the Near East; the Spain that began the conquest of the New World had been deeply shaped by Islam; the Renaissance rediscovery of ancient learning owed a great deal to the Arabs who had preserved that tradition through the European Dark Ages; and the economic basis of modern capitalism depended on the labor of Africans, the gold and silver of the New World Indians, and the markets of Asia. . . . The West acquired gunpowder — at the military heart of the modern European state — from China and the astronomical data on which was based the beginnings of the Scientific Revolution from the ancient Near East. (1995, 55)

Studying the interconnections of our histories is therefore relevant to grasping the big picture, as it were. This, however, does not preclude the specific study of some aspects of history such as the constant reflection on a few ancient texts — the Bible, the Torah, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* — which is central to Western civilization. Yet with respect to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it is unthinkable to study the history of Western Europe without exploring questions of empire, colony, and postcolony. At this juncture Western civilization becomes difficult to disentangle from global civilization, not because Western civilization becomes the culture of the World but rather because the West as a paradigm for cultural history begins to lose its essence as the nation-state did in the European Enlightenment (Spivak 2003).

The historical interconnectedness of the human experience involves a complex dialectic between subject matters, human interests, and professional organizations. This dialectic feeds into the historical process of the construction of a field of discourse such as translation history, which can therefore be conceived as a broad set of multilingual cultural histories of our common civilization.

Interventionism can therefore propel the writing of translation history beyond the mechanistic juxtaposition of different national traditions in what sometimes amounts to a clustering of mutual admiration societies charged with extolling national pride. Instead of reconsolidating the boundaries of nations through the study of isolated national traditions (in an encyclopedic manner), translation history can become the place where the concept of the nation as the origin of a particular type of translation practice is put to the test. In our current world of globalization, constant displacement of peoples, and relocation of cultures, the concepts of "nationhood," "nation," and "nationalism" are shown to be products of imperialism. Reading the entry on *The Arabic Tradition* in the Encyclopedia edited by Mona Baker, for instance, it becomes clear that what is called the Arabic tradition is indeed a hodgepodge of influences from the Far East, the Near East, Persia, Greece, North Africa, and so forth, which in turn have influenced the various cultures and traditions of Europe. A certain degree of cross-fertilization, demographic shift, migration, cultural circulation, and hybridization had occurred, which makes it almost a misnomer to speak of an exclusively Arabic tradition. Given such a context, an interventionist writing of history will highlight the symbiotic relations among these cultures, reading "across the imperial divide" (Said 1993) or studying the interplay of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, or the relations between Western and non-Western cultures.

This approach calls for collaborative work.<sup>8</sup> How can translation history avoid the boundaries of national traditions? For starters, by studying major themes that cut across individual histories and developing global perspectives. In the current context of globalization, democratization, and postcolonialism, translation history has to rethink its priorities and modes of accountability. Gayatri Spivak points out that one way in which the concept of "nation"(s) is being destabilized (in comparative literature) is by introducing more broad-based concepts like Francophony, Teutophony, Lusophony, Anglophony, and Hispanophony, which unfortunately still follow the lines of the old imperialisms and compete with today's diversified metropolitan reality (Spivak 2003, 9).

However, this kind of destabilization has the merit of expanding the field of inquiry beyond strict national boundaries and effacing the North-South divide. Also, besides sharing a common international language and culture, the European nation at the centre of such a construct is forced to study its history in relation to its former colonies, thereby accounting for the histories of conquest, cultural exchange, colonialism, and imperialism.<sup>9</sup> There is also a kind of research work here that one might describe as vertical, relating the global and the local through a study of the history of multicultural empires.<sup>10</sup> This would take into account the irreducible hybridity of all languages and cultures. In our postcolonial and globalizing world, we are witnessing something along the lines of demographic — rather than territorial — frontiers, responding to large-scale migration and creating the kind of para-state collectivities that belong to the shifting multicultural empires (Spivak 2003, 15). According to Spivak, “The idea of shifting demographic frontiers caught in the virtuality of the Internet and telecommunication is generally assigned to postmodern globalization” (2003, 18). These developments call for the reconfiguration of the objectives and methodologies of the study of history. Translation history can thus become a site for intellectual renewal, providing a hospitable space for the cultivation of deep intercultural understanding and a genuinely global consciousness.

### *Postmodernity and contemporary translation studies*

In the 1990s translation studies witnessed a powerful intellectual renewal which could be recorded in historical terms as the *postmodern turn*. New approaches to studying translation phenomena revealed the limitations of previous methodologies, bringing to the forefront issues of gender, ethics, postcolonialism, globalization, and minority in translation, all related to what is generally referred to as the postmodern condition. Following the *cultural turn* (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990) in translation studies of the 1980s, these new approaches raised doubts about long-held views on matters of fidelity, sameness, and binary oppositions (such as the relationship between original and translation),

introducing other paradigms of investigation such as power relations, ideology, and identity. Translation theory began to acknowledge other definitions of translation ranging from manipulatory rewriting to transformation, subversion, cannibalism, carnivalism, hijacking, and what not (Koskinen 2000). These new definitions, as dramatic or far-fetched as some might seem, had the effect of pointing out the gender, regional, and ethnocultural, as well as the Eurocentric, bias of previous translation theories.

Postmodernity has been described as a critique of modernity which highlights the limitations of modernity — for instance, by revealing the diminishing role or significance of the modernist concept of the nation-state (mentioned earlier). It engages in historicizing or contextualizing our current human experience. Although Jacques Derrida does not use the word “postmodern” to describe his work, his theory of deconstruction is generally acknowledged to be a clear response to the postmodern condition, and so far, it seems to be postmodern thought that is most closely related to the preoccupations of contemporary translation theory. Derrida coined the term “deconstruction” to challenge the fundamental tenet of Anglo-American and European philosophy and reconstructionist history, namely, that there is a stable/knowable reality “out there” that we can access accurately (Koskinen 2000). It is upon such a belief that the basic polarities of real-unreal, fact-fiction, truth-untruth, subject-object, and mind-knowledge were established in Western culture (Munslow 1997, 25). What this implies is that written history is open rather than closed in meaning. For instance, when the history of imperialism is written from a non-European perspective and is not recognized at all as a perspective until the advent of decolonization (second half of the twentieth century), it becomes clear what postmodern history means: a recognition of the relativism of meaning, determined by where one stands historically.

By extension, in literary deconstruction there is no certainty of meaning in language-based texts because “out there” is always encountered as a socially constructed text. Textuality is seen as open to changing interpretations rather than as a system of fixed meanings.

The central concept of deconstruction is *différance* (with an “a”), a neologism which Derrida uses to emphasize the point that meanings are “always already” somewhere else, temporally and positionally deferred (Koskinen 2000). Texts are full of echoes and traces of earlier texts as well as laden with the yet unrealized potential future contexts they may enter (Derrida 1972). Some of the central themes of postmodern discourse recall the paradoxes and difficulties of translation. Postmodern preoccupations with issues of cultural hegemony, the unequal relationship between centres and peripheries, the entanglement of ideologies and interpretation, the arbitrary relationship between signs and significations, and so on, are now reflected in the concerns of translation scholars. Inversely, postmodern scholars are also using translation as a tool for studying or rethinking textual relations. In fact, postmodern trends in translation studies can be traced to the 1980s with the advent of the manipulation approach, which related translation practice to issues of power and ideology. Susan Bassnett had referred to this as a post-structuralist phase where translation is conceived “as one of a range of processes of textual manipulation, where the concept of plurality replaces dogmas of faithfulness to a source text, and where the idea of the original is being challenged from a variety of perspectives” (1993, 147). The postmodern tendencies in translation studies were reinforced in the 1990s with two distinctively postmodern currents, namely feminist and postcolonial translation theories. For these new trends in translation theory deconstruction has been particularly useful as it seeks to dismantle hierarchical oppositions, and has been used to rethink the roles of source and target texts/cultures as well as the relation between author and translator. The political aspects of translation have been brought to the forefront as research has centred on issues of identity and ideology. Some theorists have even talked of a “postcultural turn,” arguing that the classic notion of “culture” is in fact modernist, closely tied in with the idea of nation-states (Bannett 1993). A postcultural theory will therefore take into account the progressive blurring of boundaries between nations and cultures due to the decline of nation-states, rapid

globalization, and internationalization, as well as new forms of communication.

### Conclusion

The contribution of postmodern theories to translation studies has been quite significant and far-reaching, particularly in regard to matters related to gender, minority, and postcolonialism, as well as questions of ethics in translation theory and practice. In some ways, the significance of all this is borne out in the growing interest and prestige of translation theory and discourses within other academic disciplines. These developments must be accounted for in translation history from a proactive, interventionist perspective, in the hope that translation history will emerge as an autonomous discipline with its own methodologies capable of meeting the challenges of our multicultural future.

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### Notes

1. That is to say, reconstructionism's simple descriptive narrative of discrete and singular events (around the 1920s).
2. Fairly recent — the last quarter of the twentieth century.
3. "Events do not dictate history: history dictates events." Foucault, in Munslow (1997, 125).
4. "History is the record not of what actually happened, but of what historians tell us happened after they have organized the data according to their own version of social reality" (Munslow 1997, 127).
5. The French cultural critic Jean-François Lyotard generally agrees with Foucault that the narrative is about the exercise of power (*The Postmodern Condition* [1984]).
6. See Martin Bernal's (1991) lucid account of the deliberate whitewashing of Semitic and Negro-African influences on Greco-Roman civilization.
7. Regarding a perceived crisis in the discipline of comparative literature.
8. A step in this direction is the conference on "Translation Theory and

Practice: East and West," organized by Theo Hermans in London in 2002–2003.

9. This is not to say that the ex-colonies should sit back and let their histories be written by the former colonial masters.
10. To put some black on the Union Jack, so to speak (recalling the initial Birmingham model of Cultural Studies).

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