

## **Chapter 6. The translator as producer**

### **Abstract**

This chapter starts by critically examining debates about the politics of translation within translation studies around the key notions of domestication and foreignisation. It then focuses on approaches to translation developed in various social scientific disciplines, including international relations, human rights studies and critical policy studies, which have foregrounded an understanding of translation as transformation. The chapter argues for an alternative conceptualisation of the politics of translation that can accommodate insights from these different research domains, while contributing to a greater visibility of the significance of translation within the social sciences more widely. This requires directing attention not just to texts, but especially to the positioning and intervention of translating agents. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's approach to the politicisation of art, the chapter develops a reconceptualisation of the politics of translation around the notions of assimilatory and reflexive translation.

### **Introduction**

Since the so-called cultural turn in translation studies, the politics of translation has been a persistent theme of reflection and theoretical elaboration because it identifies the significance of translation in contexts marked by structural inequality and cultural asymmetry. However, contemporary processes of globalisation and cosmopolitanisation of reality increasingly challenge some of the assumptions on which existing conceptualisations are based. There is also a need to reexamine current disciplinary orientations in light of a more general interest in translation within the humanities and the social sciences as a basic social relation across linguistic difference in a highly interconnected world. This chapter seeks to contribute to this task by rethinking the politics of translation from an essentially interdisciplinary perspective. It first examines existing critiques to Lawrence Venuti's famous formulation of the politics of translation in terms of domesticating and foreignising translation. Second, interdisciplinary approaches to a notion of translation as transformation are discussed. These challenge not only a still widespread understanding of translation as transfer, but also views of the politics of translation as primarily a process of textual transformation. A third section

theorises the politicisation of translation by developing an account of the translator as producer that is inspired by Walter Benjamin's approach to the politicisation of art. A fourth section outlines an alternative conceptualisation of the politics of translation that derives from this approach. It is envisaged that such a reconceptualisation, which directly engages with wide-ranging social scientific concerns, can make the theoretical and methodological perspectives of translation studies more relevant for current interdisciplinary debates on translation.

### **Moving authors and readers, home and abroad**

The most influential contemporary formulation of the politics of translation refers to, but also significantly alters, Schleiermacher's classical account of the two choices facing the translator. For Lawrence Venuti, if 'the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him' (Schleiermacher, quoted in Venuti, 2008, p. 15) he is 'sending the reader abroad', whereas if 'he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him' (*ibid.*) he is 'bringing the author back home'. Home and abroad thus become the determining categories of what is conceptualised as domesticating and foreignising translation. Domesticating translation is based upon 'an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values', whereas foreignising translation puts 'an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text' (*ibid.*). Significantly, rather than attributing the value of a foreignising practice to a transparent representation of a 'foreign' essence, Venuti conceives it as a 'strategic construction' which 'signifies the differences of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the translating language' (*ibid.*). Foreignising practices deviate from native norms to stage an alien reading experience, thus drawing attention to the constructedness of any text and the partiality of any interpretation, a fact which domesticating practice seeks to hide under the appearance of fluency.

Venuti's advocacy of foreignising translation is explicitly formulated in the context of the global hegemony of English and the unequal cultural exchanges that English-language nations establish with more peripheral ones. This has tended to drive attention away from its universalist claims and implications, which are more readily acknowledged in Berman's account of the ethical objective of translation against the ethnocentric trends

that are present in any culture (1992), or in Sakai's call for forms of heterolingual address that do not presuppose linguistically homogeneous communities (1997). In particular, Venuti's defense of foreignising translation has attracted criticism from those who put forward the danger that minority languages or subaltern traditions incur in opening themselves to influences from more prestigious, dominant ones (Cronin 1998, 147–48; Hatim 1999, 219; Tymoczko 2007, 211–12; Bennett 2013, 171) or portray foreignising translation into a major language as potentially ethnocentric and exoticising (Shamma, 2009). Nevertheless, a strategic closure for the preservation of what is by definition impure and can only constitute itself through cross-breeding and contamination, could also easily deprive more marginal languages and traditions from the very flexibility that can perhaps better contribute to their survival.<sup>1</sup> Critics also readily forget that it is extra-linguistic political structures (particularly states) that, by protecting and enforcing the use of certain languages and not others in education and in ordinary social exchange, help to secure their preservation.

Another source of criticism has been directed at Venuti's 'sweeping dichotomies' for being overly theoretical constructs which fail to acknowledge the rich positionality that translators adopt in relation to their texts, authors and societies, and obscure their shifting positions within the same text (Baker, 2007, p. 152). Again, this is a criticism mainly addressed to Venuti's formulation, not to alternative but similarly dichotomical categorisations, from Schleiermacher to Berman. It is undeniable that, from a practical standpoint, thoroughly and exclusively foreignising or domesticating strategies seem difficult to sustain, so that it would perhaps be more appropriate to conceive of Venuti's concepts as two ends of a continuous scale, rather than as binary opposites, and approach degrees of foreignisation and domestication, particularly in the empirical analysis of texts (Pedersen, 2005; Scammell, 2018). Yet, alternative conceptualisations of the politics of translation, such as that suggested from a narrative theory approach, in focusing on the multiple positionings that condition translators' agency and textual choices, run the risk of failing to acknowledge the specifically translational nature of the politics involved. If translation establishes a social relation with otherness through language, then this politics primarily refers to how this very relationship is approached, either from a standpoint that foregrounds the translational process or from one which seeks to hide it. This is why Schleiermacher asserted that 'there are only two' paths open to the translator and considered it necessary to insist on this very dichotomical fact: 'I wish to assert that there

could be, besides these two methods, no third one that would have a definite goal in mind. Actually, no other methods are possible.’ (Schulte and Biguenet, 1992, pp. 42–43).

A more compelling criticism of Venuti’s dichotomy can be formulated if the very nature of the domestic and the foreign is interrogated anew in the light of thoroughgoing processes of globalisation and cosmopolitanisation of reality. Whereas globalisation refers to increased interconnectedness at all levels of social life, by emphasising the degree of ‘*internal* globalization’ or ‘globalization *from within* the national societies’ (Beck, 2002: 17), cosmopolitanisation calls attention to the fact that globalisation does not only involve interconnections across borders, but also causes fundamental transformations inside national societies. Thus, the notion of cosmopolitanisation reveals the extent to which globalisation has created a new reality of cultural mixing and contradiction in heterogeneous and diverse societies in which ‘local, national, ethnic, religious *and* cosmopolitan cultures and traditions interpenetrate, interconnect and intermingle’ (Beck, 2006: 7). In this context, the boundaries between home and abroad that Venuti still takes for granted are increasingly confused and the very position of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ is changed (Beck and Grande, 2010, pp. 417–418). It is precisely this that Mattea Cussel alludes to when she argues that ‘Lawrence Venuti’s ethical strategy of foreignization succumbs to methodological nationalism and is inapplicable in contexts of multiple subject positionings where the domestic/foreign binary does not hold’ (2021, p. 113). In her study of translations of US Latino/a migrant stories into Spanish, Cussel describes one of such contexts with reference to hybrid texts where categories of domestic and foreign are inextricably entangled, analysing their reception by translocal networks of readers that do not belong to homogeneously conceived cultural groups.

The blurring of traditional distinctions between the domestic and the foreign is not limited to hybrid genres of literature, which arguably reach a relatively small number of readers, but is also widely perceivable in the mass media, which increasingly cater for transnational audiences of various kinds that do not clearly belong to fixed territories and national structures. Of particular interest in this context are what Adrian Athique theorises as ‘non-resident’ audiences, to designate audiences that ‘engage with a media artefact in a context where the diegetic world cannot reasonably be claimed to be ‘about here and about us’’ (2014, p. 10). Certainly, the unequal character of contemporary globalisation

is echoed in the rising global awareness of the cultural specificity of certain countries and not others through the news. This is the case, for instance, of international coverage of US domestic politics, which increasingly defies the assumed need for domesticating translations that privilege fluency and the expectations of the target reader (after all, international news readers in many different languages have become aware of the specific realities of US political life through the use of very foreign English terms such as ‘impeachment’, ‘battleground states’ or even ‘Rust Belt states’).<sup>2</sup> However, the destabilisation of previously taken for granted categories of domestic and foreign is also more generally observed, at least with respect to what can be approached through notions of ‘global domestic politics’ (Beck, 2012), from financial crises to climate change. Moreover, changing conditions of production and reception are also widely perceivable in film, video and television, where the multiplication of networks of voluntary and fan translators has generated new forms of cultural and political activism that question traditional distinctions between producers and consumers of texts. In the third section of this chapter, Walter Benjamin’s early theorisation of the type of phenomenon that is today approached through the notion of the ‘prosumer’ will be addressed in order to formulate a contemporary approach to the politicisation of translation that is inspired by his account of the politicisation of art.

Before that, it is necessary to widen the scope of current debates on the politics of translation within translation studies, which have tended to remain limited by a privileged focus on textual strategies, traditional notions of author and text which no longer correspond to the extensive variety of translation forms in the real world, and a static approach to the distinction between text and context. This means challenging the dominance of accounts that are primarily centred on textuality and going beyond the notion of texts and textual effects, on the one hand, and current conceptions of the agency of translators in terms of individual textual choices, on the other. To this end, three strategic changes are proposed. First, the notion that translation is not primarily about texts, not even about texts in their contexts, but about social relations. Consequently, a politics of translation is not just about the deployment of textual strategies, but about social positioning with respect to difference and strangeness, an important issue which is empirically explored in relation to different types of translating strangers in chapter 8. Second, the principle that translation is not about the transfer of meaning, but about transformation. As I have already argued in chapter 2, the ideological primacy of

translation as transfer, based upon the central concept of equivalence, has been convincingly challenged within translation studies. However, the great scope and potential of a notion of translation as transformation, as opposed to transfer, is more radically advanced in recent scholarship developed in other disciplines, such as policy studies, international relations or human rights studies. The next section discusses these perspectives and identifies their value for translation studies. Third, structural factors and unequal power relations significantly condition the agency of translators. Challenging the invisibility of translation requires reconceptualising the structural positioning of translators, their productive role and their stakes, so as to question still widely held individualistic views of translator's choice and/or neutrality. An approach that articulates translator's agency in this way is developed in section three.

### **Interdisciplinary approaches to translation as transformation**

In the disciplines of policy studies, international relations and human rights studies translation is primarily approached in terms of transformation, rather than as equivalence or transfer. Moreover, the notion of translation is explicitly adopted to critique conventional views of 'policy transfer', 'policy diffusion' or 'policy learning', which assume a relatively straightforward and transparent process of linear, top-down transmission (Merry, 2006; Freeman, 2009; Stone, 2012, 2017; Clarke *et al.*, 2015; Berger, 2017; Berger and Esguerra, 2018; Destrooper and Merry, 2018). By contrast, approaches centred on translation highlight how policies acquire new meanings in different contexts, often in unanticipated ways, how human rights – which have become a social justice global lingua franca (Destrooper, 2021) – are remade in the vernacular (Merry, 2006), bringing attention to the dynamism, complexity and a priori unknowable outcomes when policies or human rights norms move from one place to another. Movement is, in addition to transformation, the other basic process associated with translation in these fields. As we have seen above, movement is also a major element in conceptions of the politics of translation within translation studies, which have directed attention to the fact that translation leaves neither its object nor its agent unchanged. However, we are dealing here with conceptualisations of movement not primarily in terms of textual strategies and effects, but in terms of emerging social relations between previously unconnected people, materials and things. Translation makes possible the establishment of new connections, often approached as networks and assemblages,

between different actors or entities, human and non-human. Although entering relations and becoming entangled in newly created networks through processes of translation, these numerous entities are and remain inextricably different. Thus, insights originally developed within the sociology of translation approach of Actor-Network theory (Callon and Latour, 1981; Callon, 1984) are extended to other fields in productive ways.

The conceptual move from transfer to translation is not a small change of emphasis, but has rather far reaching consequences for how policies and norms are conceived, the role of various types of social actors approached, the interplay between the local and the global conceptualised, and even for a reflexive reconsideration of these disciplines. First, through translation policies or norms appear as unfinished processes, rather than as finished objects, and the ambiguity that accompanies movement is highlighted. As Richard Freeman notes, ‘What is central to both theoretical and applied discussions of translation (...) is the acknowledgement of uncertainty, the centrality of practice, and the recognition of complexity’ (2009, pp. 439–440). In this way, the assumed straightforwardness of policy transfer, viewed as a mechanical, technocratic or merely rational operation of diffusion, is questioned. Discontinuities and disturbances that challenge binary assessments of the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of policy transfer (Stone, 2017) are brought into view, as is the innovation and creativity that translation implies, while translators are approached as key agents that make possible the successful adoption of policies or norms in the receiving context. Second, and closely related to the first point, a whole wealth of non-state actors at the local level suddenly gain not just visibility but also agency in determining the content of policies and norms at the local level. Translation is seen as inherently political because it opens up spaces of contestation and resistance that are downplayed in notions of policy diffusion and policy learning. For instance, in his study of the translation of ‘the rule of law’ in non-state courts in Bangladesh, Tobias Berger discovers that the work of translation undertaken by employees of local NGOs (fieldworkers and court assistants) alters established dynamics of conflict resolution; where this work is lacking and projects are implemented directly through international agencies ‘the project’s artefacts simply turn into empty ruins, devoid of meaning or impact in the landscape of local conflict resolution in rural Bangladesh’ (2017, p. 9). In this context, the task of the translator is to transform international norms, to give them new meaning in a way that resonates with the background knowledge of the locals; it is precisely this resonance that in turn promotes social and political change at the local level.

Third, in focusing on the construction of policy or norms as an unfinished business, rather than on the transfer of rules from one place to the other, analyses of policy or norm translation also question the methodological nationalism that has led social scientists to construct the sites of policy/norm making and implementation as stable bounded units and to take these units for granted, as well as the implicit historicism of notions of diffusion. Approaches to translation destabilise these units and presuppositions, referring to a two-way construction process instead of a one-way linear process of communication. Finally, translation can serve to disrupt often unquestioned disciplinary categories and make visible dynamics of change that have been ignored in policy studies, international relations or human rights scholarship, as ‘an interest in how policy moves unsettles taken-for-granted conceptions of ‘policy’ itself, rendering strange that which is generally considered to be familiar’ (Clarke *et al.*, 2015, p. 12).

These social scientific disciplines are borrowing insights on translation developed in postcolonial studies, translation studies and science and technology studies in order to develop groundbreaking approaches that destabilise central concepts referring to the transnational circulation of policies and norms, as well as their taken for granted disciplinary orientations. It is my contention that the discipline of translation studies can, in turn, learn from these borrowings and articulations to develop a new perspective on its main object of study, a perspective that, by engaging in wider social scientific concerns, provides a clearer view of translation’s key role in society at large. This is a form of interdisciplinarity that can deepen already existing calls for an enlargement of translation (Tymoczko, 2007), as well as critiques to some of the discipline’s long established conventions. Furthermore, a perspective on how norms and policies are translated when they move can help promote new approaches that are more directly relevant to other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences, thus increasing the influence and scope of the discipline in the context of a more general translational turn (Bachmann-Medick, 2009).

New insights for translation studies can be gained if we contemplate not just norms in translation but the translation of norms. In addition to highlighting the key notion of translation as transformation, attending to the movement of norms helps to question the self-evident nature of concepts and texts, by focusing instead on the social processes through which they are produced. On the one hand, translation is never just about texts,



but also about the social practices in which texts are embedded. This concerns, for instance in Berger's research, a translation that goes beyond the intralingual/interlingual distinction and which encompasses the following two processes: the translation of documenting practices (in which the official documents that international agencies envisage as neutral carriers of information become endowed with symbolic capital in facilitating the access of poor and marginalised people to local elected politicians), and the translation of the liberal rule of law into a normative vocabulary that is intelligible in rural Bangladesh through the language of Islamic law (2017).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, as various social actors translate in various sites and in different directions, substantially transforming what is being translated, the notions of source and target text become too narrow to capture this existing multiplicity. Thus, Freeman describes translation as 'the result of multiple iterations by multiple actors', referring to 'complex and continuing communicative relationships' in which 'the sense of 'source' or 'origin' is simply a translation we have failed to reconstruct' (2009, p. 441).

Berger approaches the translation of norms in terms of the production of new social, political and legal objects, considering it as a political task because it intervenes and disrupts existing power relations (2017, pp. 28–29). This understanding not only challenges accounts in international relations, which would see global norms as originals and local translations as mere derivatives, but also dominant conceptions about source texts and target texts in translation studies. Thus, Berger conceptualises a 'translation circle' that disrupts prevailing linear conceptions of movement in international relations to highlight how norms 'are translated in a back and forth movement between different actors located in different contexts; and none of these contexts can claim analytical primacy' (2017, p. 30). The most direct implication of this move is that claims to originality must be treated, first and foremost, as claims to authority (2017, p. 31). Indeed, as Theo Hermans has also convincingly argued, processes of authentication draw our attention to the fact that equivalence cannot be obtained from texts but is rather created by institutional contexts of intervention (2007, p. 6). In such cases, full equivalence, understood as equality in value and status between a translation and its original, is the result of endowing both with the same level of authority, which means that the translation has ceased to function as such, that it has ceased to be a translation (2007, p. 7).

More generally, studies of policy and/or norm translation reveal that it is necessary to go beyond a consideration of translation as a process of mediating linguistic and cultural differences in order to highlight how translation mobilises a whole range of socially acquired knowledge that has been internalised and become second nature (a dimension adequately captured in Bourdieu's notion of habitus), serves to create connections and establish new social relationships, and is a form of political intervention that significantly modifies existing power relations. Approaches to cultural translation, which reflect on the significance of the cultural turn and the cultural struggles brought about by the politics of identity (see, for instance, the debate in *Translation Studies*, 2:2, 2009), do not go far enough in adequately accounting for these basic social and political dimensions. If there is any added value in a so-called sociological turn in translation studies, it is precisely in arguing for a more sociologically aware conception of culture not as an essentialised, fundamentally homogeneous and clearly delimited whole, but as a set of highly diverse and unequally positioned signifying practices that are a major constitutive element of the social order, which they communicate, reproduce and explore (Williams, 1981).

### **Politicising translation**

This section develops an approach to the politicisation of translation that extends Walter Benjamin's views on the politicisation of art, most clearly articulated in his essays 'The Author as Producer' (1934) and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935). Such an extension is justified on the grounds of Benjamin's own approach to the task of the translator as creative transformation, as well as his views on the significance of technique and the masses in calling for such a functional transformation of art.<sup>4</sup> The revolutionary change that Benjamin could detect, nearly a hundred years ago, in cinema audiences which absorbed films in a state of collective distraction or in the readers who gained access to authorship in the Soviet press, is expressed today in the impatience of fans who take the translation of their favourite works into their own hands, as well as in the distracted consumers who ordinarily make use of common translating apps. As in the case of art, the functional transformation of translation emancipates translation from its ritual function (the remnants of which are still very much present in conventional views of the sacrality of the author and of the original text) and challenges, at the same time, prevalent individualistic views of the translator as expert and owner of the means of production.

In 'The Author as Producer', Benjamin examines the issue of political tendency as inseparable from literary tendency not in relation to 'rigid, isolated things as work, novel, book', but to the 'living social contexts' of which they are a part (1999, p. 769). For him, this does not refer to vague notions of general social conditions or even, in a materialist sense, to the work's attitude towards the social relations of production of its time. His 'more immediate', 'less far-reaching' question refers to the position of works within those relations: it 'directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary *technique* of works' (1999, p. 770). In this conception, technique is what 'makes literary products accessible to an immediately social, and therefore materialist, analysis', and 'literary tendency can consist either in progress or in regression of literary technique' (*ibid.*). A focus on technical factors forces a reconsideration of prevalent conceptions of literary forms and genres, as well as a historicisation of their dominance (such as in the case of the novel) or apparent marginality (such as is the case of commentary or translation). It also points in the direction of 'a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force', most notably that between author and reader (1999, pp. 771–772). It allows Benjamin to identify, even in those who have shown a revolutionary tendency in their attitudes, a counterrevolutionary function 'so long as the writer feels his solidarity with the proletariat only in his attitudes, not as a producer' (1999, p. 772), such as in the left-wing intellectual movements of Activism and New Objectivity.

For Benjamin, the alternative model of an artist who actively transforms the forms and instruments of production in a progressive way is found in Brecht's epic theatre and its logics of *Umfunktionierung* (functional transformation), a term originally coined by Brecht. The 'decisive difference' between Brecht's revolutionary intervention and the counterrevolutionary effects of widespread revolutionary attitudes lies in 'the mere supplying of a productive apparatus and its transformation' (1999, p. 774). Moreover, in a context in which the existing apparatus of production is capable of assimilating 'astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes', the production of such themes, however well-intentioned, can only end up having the opposite effect, namely the aestheticisation of politics, because it possesses 'no other social function than to wring from the political situation a continuous stream of novel effects for the entertainment of the public' (*ibid.*).

Benjamin seeks the politicisation of art precisely in the breaking-down of barriers that technical progress allows: barriers between different genres, between different expressive forms (such as photography and writing), and between readers and writers. This is because ‘only by transcending the specialization in the process of intellectual production – a specialization that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order – can one make this production politically useful’ (1999, p. 775). Politicisation thus implies the socialisation of the author’s means of production, because what matters is ‘to induce other producers to produce’, with ‘an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators’ (1999, p. 777). Ultimately, Benjamin ‘presents the writer with only one demand: the demand to think, to reflect on his position in the process of production’ (1999, p. 779). However, this demand implies renouncing long-held beliefs in the author as creator and advancing views for a more modest position. As Benjamin warns us,

the proletarianization of an intellectual hardly ever makes a proletarian. Why? Because the bourgeois class gave him, in the form of education, a means of production that, owing to educational privilege, makes him feel solidarity with it, and still more it with him. (1999, p. 780)

Writers cannot become proletarians. Nevertheless, the politicisation of art leads them to use their privilege – that is, their means of production – to betray their class of origin:

In the case of the writer, this betrayal consists in conduct that transforms him from a supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of the proletarian revolution. (*ibid.*)

Today, a more distant perspective on the demise of the historical avant-garde (Bürger, 1984), which failed to transform life and was successfully incorporated into the museum instead, might bring us to consider the silence of Kafka’s Josephine or the undisturbed peacefulness of ignored works of art (Bielsa, 2021) as more realistic alternatives than Benjamin’s revolutionary optimism. Nevertheless, I believe it is still possible to argue for the functional transformation not of art but of translation, precisely because it is considered in our society a more instrumental, less intrinsically valuable undertaking.

Moreover, when Benjamin's views on the author as producer are applied to the translator a whole new landscape is revealed which destabilises current approaches to the politics of translation, as well as to translation's most basic categories. In this case, the 'melting-down' of forms and genres that Benjamin identified and related to the technical developments of his present refers to long-standing distinctions such as that between source text and target text, intralingual and interlingual translation, as well as to the fundamental distinction between writers (now, specifically, translators) and readers. It thus becomes necessary to reexamine the politics of translation in this direction.

Such a reflection starts by noting the adequacy of a dichotomy (whether in Venuti's concepts or in those of Schleiermacher) which is, from the start, formulated in terms of (translating) technique, not of political tendency. This is the reason why Schleiermacher insisted that only two translating methods are possible. Because, as Benjamin asserts: 'The best political tendency is wrong if it does not demonstrate the attitude with which it is to be followed. And this attitude the writer can demonstrate only in his particular activity – that is, in writing' (1999, p. 777). However, it is also necessary to radicalise existing approaches to the politics of translation by referring the outcomes of translating technique not to textual effects but to social transformations, to 'living social contexts'. The interdisciplinary accounts of the translation of policy and human rights norms discussed in the previous section provide an appropriate conceptualisation of such transformations in relation to widely divergent local and transnational contexts.

Benjamin's materialist approach led him to consider the writer's position in the process of production as central, and such a view is also compelling with reference to translation. It implies conceiving the translator not as a mere supplier of the productive apparatus in its infinite appetite for an ever-growing amount of translations but, like an engineer, as someone who can change it in the direction of giving users of translations more means through which to engage with them, of turning consumers into producers. This is even more relevant today than in Benjamin's time, when unprecedented numbers of people are using translation to relate to others in a highly interconnected world and are demanding a more active role as producers of translations through whatever means they can find. But the demand to transcend intellectual specialisation and to approach the translator as producer also challenges long held beliefs about translation and might even be seen to counter some existing vindications of the translator's more prominent role. Calls for the

reevaluation of the position of the translator can be counterproductive if they are implicitly based on extending the sacrality of the author to the translator, because they are reminiscent of what Benjamin saw in terms of art's ritual function, to which the politicisation of art and translation is opposed. This is why a consideration of the translator as producer calls for a more modest but highly interventionist role of the translator in the direction of the overturning of the cultural privileges which translators often share with authors, and the socialisation of their means of production. Modesty is precisely what Benjamin saw in Brecht's epic theatre, which he considered as a model for the type of transformation sought:

Its means are therefore more modest than those of traditional theater; likewise its aims. It is concerned less with filling the public with feelings, even seditious ones, than with alienating it in an enduring way, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives. (1999, p. 779)

The next, final section of this chapter proposes a new conceptual framework that can more adequately capture translation's modest but far reaching transformative intervention.

### **Assimilatory and reflexive translation: an outline**

Two alternative methods or translation techniques are proposed below in which a similar contrast can be observed between a translation that 'fills the public with feelings' and one that, through thinking, distances the public from the conditions in which it lives, particularly those that directly relate to linguistic difference and its mediation.

First, I propose the concept of assimilatory translation to refer to a type of translation that mainly operates by applying tried and tested solutions to linguistic difference, mostly in terms of preestablished equivalences. Assimilatory translation has the great advantage of being the most effective form of communicating ideas and of relying on preexisting routines, which enormously simplify translation work. It seeks to fit cultural and linguistic difference to available conventions in the translating culture, thus constructing an image of unmediated access to the other which obscures that translation has taken place. Similar in this aspect to Venuti's notion of domestication, assimilatory translation

has the important advantage of making visible its direct connection with extensive cultural and political practices that have been the mark of modern capitalist societies. Assimilation is a familiar term and has been widely discussed in the social sciences, particularly in relation to the process of acculturation required of immigrants in order to adapt to new societies. After its unquestioned acceptance in the 1950s and 1960s, its underlying ethnocentrism was fundamentally challenged and new multiculturalist policies pursued to foster forms of integration that are considered more just (Kymlicka, 1995). However, assimilation continues to be an important element of contemporary cultural politics in persisting debates on the presence and accommodation of Muslims in the West (Modood, 2013) or in renewed calls for policing cultural homogeneity from populism and the far right (Traverso, 2019).

On the other hand, the concept of assimilation is not essentially foreign to translation studies, and has already been employed to highlight the significance of prevailing translation strategies. Take, for instance, the following example relating to the work of academic translators:

Our job is, essentially, to present the alien knowledge *in a form that will enable it to be assimilated* into one or another of the ready-made categories existing for the purpose, which means ensuring that it is properly structured, that it makes use of the appropriate terminology and tropes – in short, couching it in the accepted discourse. (Bennett 2007, 154, emphasis added)

In this example, Karen Bennett refers to what it takes to make a text originating in countries like Portugal or Spain suitable for publication in English, which ‘often involves not only the elimination of characteristic lexical features and ornament, but also the complete destruction and reconstruction of the entire infrastructure of the text, with far-reaching consequences as regards the worldview encoded in it’ (2007, p. 155), a process of assimilation which she describes as a form of epistemicide. It is the mark of assimilatory translation that once it has taken place it cannot be reconstructed or undone, as the heterogeneity of the original has been effectively eliminated through a translating process that presents itself as both invisible and final at the same time.

A second, alternative method of translation that I will refer to as reflexive translation fundamentally calls into question both this assertion of translation as a finished and univocal process and the translators' ownership of the decisions and choices that translation entails. Reflexive translation constitutes a progressive form of translation in a postmonolingual world because it does not seek to occlude the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity that are a mark of highly diverse and interconnected societies. Moreover, by challenging the translator's ownership of his or her means of production and opening up translators' interventions to the scrutiny of users of translation, it works in the direction of a functional transformation that not only turns consumers into producers, but also serves to better equip translation for the key mediating function it plays in the contemporary world. Instead of offering a final interpretation of a complex cultural object and hiding its partiality, by making itself visible in different ways reflexive translation calls its users to reflect on the decisions facing the translator and on how translator's choices affect what is communicated and the way translations are used. Through these means, reflexive translation challenges notions of translation as a mechanical process of word substitution, which are still widely prevalent in society at large, thus contributing to the increased awareness of translation's social and political significance. As is the case of assimilation, reflexivity is already part of the basic vocabulary of sociology (Giddens, 1991a, 1991b; Beck, 1992; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Archer, 2007, 2012), so that the notion of reflexive translation directly speaks to social scientific concerns.

I am not the first to suggest the notion of reflexive translation, but rather benefit from a productive series of interdisciplinary borrowings through which it is starting to take shape. Arguably, Benjamin himself already pointed in such a direction in a mature text on translation written only a couple of years after 'The Author as Producer'. This text, entitled 'Translation – For and Against', is analysed in some detail in the next chapter. The concept of reflexive translation also appears in some of the approaches to policy translation discussed above. Thus, Freeman has referred to translation's fundamental epistemological uncertainty as a source of innovation and creativity, specifying that 'the translator's first task may be to identify not (or not only) the knowledge that is to be translated, but the uncertainty that surrounds it' and explicitly suggesting as a role for theory 'to make of translation a reflexive, conscious and critical practice' (2009, p. 440). Similarly, Clarke et al. have identified a fascinating instance of reflexive translation in an



article by Ingrid Palmary (2011) where ‘the making visible of possible translations created a reflexive moment where the very categories of her research framework were brought into focus’ (Clarke *et al.*, 2015, p. 61).

Palmary’s account of how translation fundamentally shapes social research is telling and can make a significant contribution to critical approaches to translation ethics within translation studies, because it raises concerns regarding professional conventions and how these might actually clash with ethical and reflexive approaches to translation, an issue which has also been raised by Moira Inghilleri in the context of legal interpreting (2012). Two different types of interpreters contributed to Palmary’s fieldwork with migrant women in South Africa: whereas the professionally trained interpreter provided her with transparent translations that significantly limited researcher’s awareness of translator’s choices and her intervention in the negotiation of meanings that took place between participants, interpreter and researcher, another interpreter who was not formally trained in translation opened up complex words to overt negotiations over meaning. This interpreter’s more modest practice set the stage for a whole range of productive reflections that not only brought light on the actual choices and meanings discussed, but significantly impacted on the research process as a whole:

These were unusual moments in a research process where decisions taken by interpreters was [sic] typically unavailable to me – either because I did not understand the source language and so could not evaluate the interpretation offered, or because all of us in the interview took these choices for granted. The moments where translation was difficult therefore provided productive analytic starting points for this study and created new tensions in my attempts to understand how, in researching migrant narratives, place-based identity is reproduced and constructed. This functioned to highlight the inevitability of these political practices in all of the interviews I conducted in spite of them being predominantly invisible to me as the researcher. (Palmary, 2011, p. 100)

Interestingly, reflexive translation also gave Palmary a new perspective on her own unexamined assumptions stemming from a liberal humanist moment in western feminism (2011, pp. 106–107).

This is, of course, not an argument for the use of untrained translators, but one which foregrounds the need to unlearn some widespread conventional practices that are currently taken to define the profession of translators and interpreters, and which might actually be detrimental to reflexive, critical forms of translation that seek to socialise what is currently still seen as the prerogative of professionals to the users of translation at large. If, as Freeman noted, there is a role for a theory of translation beyond Steiner's notion of 'narratives of translational *praxis*' (2009, p. 440), it is precisely to reflect on the social conditions of possibility of accepted practice, as well as to alert professionals to the inequalities that this practice helps to reproduce.

## **Conclusion**

There are increasing signs of what was, perhaps a little prematurely, welcomed as a much expected translational turn (Bachmann-Medick, 2009), which would establish the centrality of translation in the humanities and social sciences. Translation studies is called to play a key role in this translational turn, but only if it can develop an enlarged conceptual apparatus that directly speaks to wider interdisciplinary concerns about the transformative role of translation in social life. In this context, it becomes necessary to rethink long-standing debates and disciplinary orientations. This chapter has engaged with views of translation as transformation developed in the disciplines of policy studies, international relations and human rights studies in order to question existing approaches to the politics of translation that are primarily conceived in terms of individual translator choice and textual effects. Through Walter Benjamin's approach to the politicisation of art, it has argued for the politicisation of translation based on an understanding of the translator as producer. A politics of translation that socialises the translator's means of production contributes to raise social awareness of the complexity of translation and makes users of translation complicit with the inevitable choices that all translations entail. It also works in the direction of turning consumers into producers in a context in which increasing numbers of people are seeking to become the authors of the translations they use. The new concepts that I propose to define a politics of translation in this direction – assimilatory translation and reflexive translation – have also been chosen to directly address major debates about the realities of contemporary societies in social scientific disciplines.

The translational turn calls for a reexamination of some of the basic concepts of the discipline of translation studies in a new light, if it is to centrally contribute to the development of the theoretical and conceptual apparatus of a sociology of translation that would otherwise be in danger of becoming a conception of translation without language, as I have argued in chapter 3. One of translation studies' key contributions is precisely in revealing the centrality of processes of linguistic transformation for any notion of translation. In so far as the translational turn also consists in a push to critique and reexamine basic disciplinary orientations and notions that have been systematically ignored or taken for granted, reflexive translation, in the way it has been approached in this chapter, can also become a key interdisciplinary practice in this direction.

## References

- Archer, M. (2007) *Making our Way through the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004.
- Archer, M. (2012) *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Athique, A. (2014) 'Transnational Audiences: Geocultural Approaches', *Continuum*, 28(1), pp. 4–17. doi:10.1080/10304312.2014.870868.
- Bachmann-Medick, D. (2009) 'Introduction: The Translational Turn', *Translation Studies*, 2(1), pp. 2–16. doi:10.1080/14781700802496118.
- Baker, M. (2007) 'Reframing Conflict in Translation', *Social Semiotics*, 17(2), pp. 151–169. doi:10.1080/10350330701311454.
- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Beck, U. (2012) *Twenty Observations on a World in Turmoil*. Translated by C. Cronin. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U., Giddens, A. and Lash, S. (1994) *Reflexive Modernization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Beck, U. and Grande, E. (2010) 'Varieties of Second Modernity: The Cosmopolitan Turn in Social and Political Theory and Research', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61(3), pp. 409–443.
- Benjamin, W. (1999) 'The Author as Producer', in Jennings, M.W., Eiland, H., and Smith, G. (eds) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Vol. 2*. Translated by R. Livingston. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, pp. 768–782.

- Bennett, K. (2007) 'Epistemicide!: The Tale of a Predatory Discourse', *Translator*, 13(2), pp. 151–169. doi:10.1080/13556509.2007.10799236.
- Bennett, K. (2013) 'English as a Lingua Franca in Academia: Combating Epistemicide through Translator Training', *Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 7(2), pp. 169–193. doi:10.1080/13556509.2013.10798850.
- Berger, T. (2017) *Global Norms and Local Courts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berger, T. and Esguerra, A. (eds) (2018) *World Politics in Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Berman, A. (1992) *The Experience of the Foreign. Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*. Translated by S. Heyvaert. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bielsa, E. (2016) *Cosmopolitanism and Translation. Investigations into the Experience of the Foreign*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bielsa, E. (2021) 'Ignored Works', *Thesis Eleven*, 166(1), pp. 40-53. doi:10.1177/07255136211043947.
- Borradori, G., Derrida, J. and Habermas, J. (2003) *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L.J.D. (1992) *An Invitation of Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press. doi:10.2307/3340841.
- Bürger, P. (1984) *Theory of the Avant-garde*. Translated by M. Shaw. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Callon, M. (1984) 'Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of Saint-Brieuc Bay', *The Sociological Review*, 32(1), pp. 196–233. doi:10.22394/0869-5377-2017-2-49-90.
- Callon, M. and Latour, B. (1981) 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-structure Reality and how Sociologists Help them to Do so', in Knorr-Cetina, K. and Cicourel, A.V. (eds) *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology*. London: Routledge, pp. 277–303.
- Clarke, J. et al. (2015) *Making Policy Move*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Cronin, M. (1998) 'The Cracked Looking Glass of Servants: Translation and Minority Languages in a Global Age', *The Translator*, 4(2), pp. 145–162. doi:10.1080/13556509.1998.10799017.
- Cussel, M. (2021) 'Transnational and Global Approaches in Translation Studies: Methodological Observations', in Bielsa, E. and Kapsaskis, D. (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Translation and Globalization*. London: Routledge, pp. 113–127.

- Destrooper, T. (2021) 'Translation of Human Rights Norms', in Bielsa, E. and Kapsaskis, D. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Globalization*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 441–454.
- Destrooper, T. and Merry, S.E. (eds) (2018) *Human Rights Transformation in Practice*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press.
- Fernández, F. (2021) *Translating the Crisis. Politics and Culture in Spain after the 15M*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Freeman, R. (2009) 'What is "Translation"?', *Evidence & Policy*, 5(4), pp. 429–447.
- Giddens, A. (1991a) *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991b) *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hatim, B. (1999) 'Implications of Research into Translator Invisibility', *Target*, 11(2), pp. 201–222. doi:10.1075/target.11.2.02hat.
- Hermans, T. (2007) *The Conference of the Tongues*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Inghilleri, M. (2012) *Interpreting Justice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kymlicka, W. (1995) *Multicultural Citizenship*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Merry, S.E. (2006) *Human Rights and Gender Violence*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. doi:10.7208/chicago/9780226520759.001.0001.
- Modood, T. (2013) *Multiculturalism*. Second edn. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Palmary, I. (2011) "'In your Experience": Research as Gendered Cultural Translation', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 18(1), pp. 99–113. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2011.535300.
- Pedersen, J. (2005) 'How is Culture Rendered in Subtitles?', *MuTra 2005 – Challenges of Multidimensional Translation: Conference Proceedings*, pp. 1–18.
- Sakai, N. (1997) *Translation and Subjectivity*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Scammell, C. (2018) *Translation Strategies in Global News*. Palgrave Pivot: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scammell, C. and Bielsa, E. (2022) 'Cross-cultural Engagement through Translated News: A Reception Analysis', *Journalism*. doi: 10.1177/14648849221074555.
- Schulte, R. and Biguenet, J. (eds) (1992) *Theories of Translation*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Shamma, T. (2009) *Translation and the Manipulation of Difference: Arabic Literature in Nineteenth-century England*. Manchester: St. Jerome.
- Stone, D. (2012) 'Transfer and Translation of Policy', *Policy Studies*, 33(6), pp. 483–499. doi:10.1080/01442872.2012.695933.

Stone, D. (2017) ‘Understanding the Transfer of Policy Failure: Bricolage, Experimentalism and Translation’, *Policy and politics*, 45(1), pp. 55–70. doi:10.1332/030557316X14748914098041.

Traverso, E. (2019) *The New Faces of Fascism*. Translated by D. Broder. London: Verso.

Tymoczko, M. (2007) *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators*. Manchester and Kinderhook: St. Jerome Publishing.

Williams, R. (1981) *Culture*. London: Fontana.

---

<sup>1</sup> Derrida approached such forms of closure as leading to a logic of autoimmunity that can only end in self-destruction (see, for instance, Borradori, Derrida, and Habermas, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> For an empirical analysis of news reception with real readers that examines their responses to domesticating and foreignising approaches see Scammell and Bielsa (2022).

<sup>3</sup> For another account beyond the intralingual/interlingual divide that not only considers translation within the same language or between different languages, but also between theoretical systems and paradigms, see Fruela Fernández’s study of translation in the 15M movement and its afterlives in Spain (2021). This approach necessarily leads its author to embrace a productive concept of ‘expanded translation’.

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed Benjamin’s approach to the politicisation of art in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in chapter 4 of my book *Cosmopolitanism and Translation* (2016). An interpretation of Benjamin’s essay ‘The Task of the Translator’ is offered in chapter 7 of the present book.