

## The Social Nature of Translation: The Shift from Textual to Contextual

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**ABSTRACT:** *Adopting Latour's 'Actor Network Theory', This paper aims to highlight the Sociological Turn of translation studies and approach translation practice as a social action. Accordingly, the process of translating is tackled from a creative perspective. We attempt to illustrate that translation is no longer a word for word substitution; however, it is a cultural product that aims at reproduction of meaning. Furthermore, translation is more than a matter of linguistic realization and language comparison, and is incorporated in the social and cultural context. The present paper explores not only the influence of the individual translation agent, but also the impact of these agents working together as a network in translation production with a particular insight into the huge movement of translation which had been funded and supported during the Abbasid Era(Golden Age), we attempt to explore how translators interact with other actors and actants to produce knowledge. It has been concluded that translation actors and their individual social impact can be influential upon the ultimate translation product. Consequently, the translator is not merely a technician who automatically transfers the meaning of a text from one language into another one. Instead, he is an agent of change and transformation.*

**KEYWORDS:** agent, creativity, network, sociology, translation

## **Introduction**

Sociological approaches to translation have been proliferated on the basis of the insight that translation is an activity deeply affected by social configurations. The attempts for understanding the mechanism underlying translation viewed as a social practice have promoted the development of a number of analytical tools which have elucidated the various constituents accounting for the intervention of translation in larger social contexts in general and the social nature of translation in particular. It has become obvious that the translator is no longer merely a technician who automatically transfers the meaning of a text from one language into another one. Instead, he is an agent of change and transformation. The aim of this paper is to highlight the Sociological Turn of translation studies and to investigate its creative aspect. we attempt to study the translation activity as an agent-based social phenomenon and demonstrate how Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) can be adopted as a conceptual framework in translation studies with a particular insight into the huge movement of translation which had been funded and supported during the Abbasid Era(Golden Age).This scrutiny explores not only the influence of the individual translation agent, but also the impact of these agents working together as a network in translation production.

### **1.The Social Nature of Translation**

The achievements witnessed in the development of a translation sociology draws on various approaches within translation studies. Most of these approaches were awakened by the 'cultural turn' which contemplated many of the issues developed later in more explicitly social contexts and foregrounded concerns with regard to power, politics, ideology, ethics, or individual agency.

Throughout the history of translation studies, different definitions have been given to the field subject. Broadly speaking, three main turns of translation studies can be distinguished including the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, and the sociological turn. Munday argues that translation "has moved from the study of words to text to sociocultural context to the working practices of the translators themselves" (Munday: 2016:27). This study directs a limelight on the sociology of translation so that we will examine translation as a social action. By this token, the sociology of

translation “centers on the social nature of translation, aiming at promoting reciprocity between translation and society”. (Qingguang Wei :2014 :88).

It is worth mentioning that the social nature of translation has long been disregarded in light of the linguistic approaches which focus on text, treating translation as a linear operation and interested in finding regularities to put the meaning in the source language into target language. Traditionally, it has been assumed that translation is a lingual task which neglects any social or cultural perspectives. Along this line of thought, the attitude which can be traced through Catford’s (1965) definition of translation is that translation is deemed as the replacement of textual materials in one language for equivalent materials in another language. According to Gutt (2002), translation has been traditionally viewed as an interpretive activity: the relevance of translation dwells in informing addressees of what someone else has said, written or thought.(Gutt : 2000 : 166)

From a sociological perspective, it is widely argued that translation is a social activity which can never be separable from our society provided that the objective of translation is to communicate knowledge and culture. As Gutt (2000 ) observes, the term translation at present is increasingly employed for communication that constitutes a descriptive use of language. Besides, translation activities are performed by human beings who constantly embody some social relations.

Referring to sociology of translation, any translation is bound up within social contexts because the act of translating is carried out by individuals in a social system and the translation phenomenon is implicated in social institutions, which greatly determine the selection, production, and distribution of translation, and, as a result, the strategies adopted in the translation itself. Bassnett and Lefevere state that “there is always a context in which the translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed”. (1990:11)

By the same token, the trajectory and condition of translation activities are determined by the interests of communities, cultural choice, value orientation and power pattern. For this very reason, a translation product, from the choice of the original and translation strategy to the production and release of translation products, is the result of social negotiation and construction. It goes without saying that translation activities play a bridging and bounding role in promoting social progress,

economic growth and cultural communication. In this sense, the social nature is one of the fundamental natures of translation.

## **2. Translation and Ideology**

The above-mentioned shift in focus from textual to contextual in translation studies highlights the imperative role played by agents of translation in either shaping ideologies or introducing new perspectives through translation. In support of this, agents of translation are perceived as social actors who are heavily involved in the dynamics of translation production. As translators belong to a social and culture-bound environment, translation should be the result of multiple processes of mediation and negotiation of cultural differences.

It is argued that during the whole process of translation, the translator has a multitude of options available for translation, for he finds himself in conflict and decision marked situations during which he constantly makes choices between alternatives. But any choice involves the translator as an agent of change and transformation (Ayachi :1987:76). Therefore, ideology dictates translation choices and is highly influential in both translators' decision-making process and reception of the target texts.

Overall, ideology, often in its manifestation as power, has become increasingly substantial in translation studies. The concept of ideology is per se debated as it is revealed with different nuances and investigated from diverse theoretical perspectives, mirroring the individual authors' interests. In a similar vein, ideology is seen to "establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical" (Thompson: 1990: 7) and as the knowledge, beliefs and value systems of the individuals and the society in which the individual plays a part. (Van Dijk: 1998).

Translated texts are deemed to be as symbolic forms, set in particular social, temporal and geographic policies (re) construct meaning. This meaning can potentially fluctuate between either underpinning existing ideologies or resist them. Many scholars underline that there are multifarious relationships between translation and ideology. Fawcett, for instance, demonstrates, "translation, simply because of its existence, have always been ideological" (1998:107). In a sense, it can be said that any translation is ideological since the choice of a source text and the use of the translated text are both determined by the interest and objectives of social groups. According to Lefevere (2004), both translators' selection of

source texts and translation strategies are at the same time manipulated and controlled by three elements within the literary system. The first element could be called professionals including critics, reviewers, teachers and translators. The second one is patrons outside the literary system like the powers (person and institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature. The third element is the dominant poetics which balance the relationship between literary devices and other social systems. Ideology tangles with all these elements and plays a crucial role in literary and even social-historical life. (2004:15).

It is argued that we should reject universalist assumptions and focus instead on the social embedding of texts if the concepts of norms and polysystems developed by Toury (1995) are to be usefully applied to understanding translation in relation to ideology. Rather than looking for laws of translation, the idea is to show how ‘adequacy’ and ‘acceptability’ can combine in a translation to offer a critique of the dominant ideology. Toury’s notion of norms is understood as a key concept in the study of translation as ideology since the translation is imbued with agency in the decision-making process, from the selection of texts to be translated to the strategies employed. Thus, a translation is a part of a complex network of relations established with texts in the source text culture, as well as all other texts, originals and translation, in the target culture.

Overall, ideology plays a pivotal role in the translation practice, and it can be traced in different levels and in different ways like text selection, translation strategy, topic of the text, etc. There are various ways of determining ideologies in translation. For Hatim and Mason, ideology encompasses “the tacit assumptions, beliefs and value systems which are shared collectively by a social group”(cited in Hatim& Munday: 2004:102). They make a distinction between what they call ‘the ideology of translation’ and ‘the translation of ideology’. Whereas the former refers to the basic orientation chosen by the translator operating within a social and cultural context, in the translation of ideology, they explore the extent of mediation supplied by a translator of sensitive texts. ‘Mediation’ is defined as “*the extent to which translators intervene in the transfer process, feeding their own knowledge and beliefs into processing the text*” (103).

In the same line of thought, Schaffner sustains that translation is an aspect of international communication and intercultural relationship,

including ideological relationships. According to her, the translator works in specific socio-political context, producing target texts according to the specific purposes determined by their clients. She mentions that Ideological aspect can be determined within a text itself, both at the lexical level (reflected, for example, in the deliberate choice or avoidance of a particular word and the grammatical level (for example, use of passive structures to avoid an expression of agency). (2003 : 23)

According to Andre Lefevere translation is determined by the translator's ideology because it is an act of rewriting. He says, "Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and poetics, and as such manipulate literature to function in a given way in a given society". (1992: Preface)

Jacobus Marais argues that far from being automatic, translation involves a translator who has "an active hand in the intercultural process" because "language is always embedded in cultural and ideological structure." As a result, a translation cannot travel to new surroundings without adapting to its new environment, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a translation will influence its new surroundings. Translators, then, must be aware of the active role that they play in effecting change through the ideological choices made in the course of translation. (2008: 35 ). In support of this, Gentzler, E. (2008 ) believes that translation constructs us; it is translation that forms our identity. Translation, according to him, is a creative activity, not merely a linguistic operation, but one of the means by which an entire continent defines itself.(2008 :184).

### **3.The Sociology of Translation**

Approaching translation from a sociological perspective means to focus at least on one of the three sub-areas which constitute the sociology of translation including the translator as an agent, translations as a cultural products or the process of translation as a social activity. In this respect, Chesterman (2006) suggested that sociology of translation comprises three strands: the sociology of translations, as products in an international market; the sociology of translators; and the sociology of translating, which means the translating process.(Chesterman :2006: 12).

Chesterman means by the sociology of translations the reception of translations in the target socio-culture. The sociology of the translating process, on the other hand deals with the study of the phases of the

translation event: translation practices and working procedures, quality control procedures and the revision process, co-operation in team translation, multiple drafting, relations with other agents including the client. The third and most important strand according to Chesterman is the sociology of translators which covers issues such as the status of translators in different cultures, rates of pay, working conditions, role models and the translator's habitus, professional organizations, accreditation systems, translators' networks, copyright, and so on. (2009 :16 :17). In the following section of this article, the researchers the sociology of translators from the Actor-Network Theory point of view will be considered.

Considerable attention should be paid to the relationship between Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and the arising interest in the ethnographic tradition within translation and interpreting studies. In the last two decades, research in translation began to have its bedrock on Bourdieu's (1984) sociological theory. The interest in Bourdieu's work can be reflected in the shift within translation studies away from a predominant heed with translated textual products and toward a view of translating as social, cultural and political acts substantially related to local and global relations of power and control. The increased concern with Bourdieu references a paradigmatic shift within the discipline, towards more sociologically and ethnographically informed approaches to the study of translation processes and products.

#### **4. Translation and the Actor-Network Theory (ANT)**

The Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is increasingly incorporated in different fields of social sciences and most recently in Translation Studies. Actor-Network Theory is created by Bruno Latour and Michelle Callon as an attempt to grasp the processes of technological innovation and scientific knowledge-creation (Latour :1987). It is a form of constructivism that rejects the idea of a social determination of scientific knowledge. This theory represents the impossibility of existence of actors outside the net. Geels (2005) states that any actor will not be able to act if it does not take position in a bigger configuration that also acts together.

Whereas Bourdieu (1984) postulates that society can only be explained by analysing practices and relating them to their authors' positions in society as well as their own trend in the field, Latour stresses

that to understand a society one must analyze the way humans and non-humans interact. Latour holds that the substantial task of social scientists is to provide a platform for social actors to be heard. He agrees with Bourdieu in breaking up the subject/ object dualism. Yet, Latour rejects both the idea of a 'view from everywhere' as well as Bourdieu's claim that scientific objectivity can be attained by articulating social positions and positionings. For Latour, actors create particular forms of knowledge by virtue of engaging in the activities related and pertinent to their production.

Actor-Network Theory is distinguished from other network theories in that it contains not merely people, but objects and organizations. These are collectively referred to as actors, or sometimes actants. According to this theory, an *actor* is everything that in some causal way affects the production of scientific statements and theories: Agents of translation are any relatively autonomous entity able to trigger cultural innovation and change or modify a state of affairs by making a difference or manifesting a result (Milton and Bandia :2009: 1). In Latour's words, "anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor –or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant" (Latour :2005: 71). According to Callon and Latour 'translation' in the ANT context includes "all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence thanks to which an actor takes or causes to be conferred on itself the authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor". (1981: 279)

Believing that translation' is a continuously changing process, Callon (1986) has divided translation into four main stages:

- 1- Problematization, in which the focal actor establishes itself as an obligatory passage point between the larger network and the actors that it seeks to represent.
- 2- Interessement, in which actors' interests are aroused and in which the terms of their involvement in the actor-network are negotiated. At this point, the focal actor also strives to 'translate' the network, or, to put it differently, to convince the other actors that the roles it has defined for them are acceptable. The purpose of the interessement phase is to reinforce the links and the interests of actors in relation to the problematization.
- 3- Enrolment, in which the actors accept the roles that have been defined for them.
- 4- Mobilization of allies, in which the focal actor maintains its crucial position as well as the commitment of the actors it claims to represent.



The bottom line of ANT is that the whole world consists of networks, and that every organization, process or practice can therefore be described in network terms. (Latour: 1997) Thus, the main purpose of an ANT investigation is exploring how ‘networks’ evolve, how ‘associations’ are stabilized and how ‘connections’ dissolve. In short, ANT aims at exploring the world and how humans and non-humans work together.

Adopting Latour’s approach in translation studies, translation is a heterogeneous network in which human and non-human actors interact with each other. As to translators, they are bound up in social networks which allow them to be viewed as socially constructed and constructing subjects. That is to say, translation activities have never been performed in the “vacuum” including the determination of translation purpose, motivation of translators, launching translation task and the admittance of translation products into society.

## **5. The Impact of Translators During the Golden Age**

Adopting sociological approach, translators are viewed as socially constructed and constructing subjects. They are involved in the process of translation as an agent of change and transformation. However, translators from ANT perspective are not the only actor, they interact with other human and unhuman actors involved in the same network. And the scope of the Actor network theory is to canvass the relationships between these actors and how they interact with each other. In this section, translation activity during the Abbasid Era in network terms will be introduced. We deal with translation practice as an activity restricted and influenced by surrounding factors. Besides we explore translators’ position in society during that period and their working conditions.

Translation was the most prominent cultural activity in the Abbasid era (750-1258) as it gained great interest from the Caliphs. A huge translation movement had been funded and supported during that period from Greek and Persian, notably under the rule of three of the early Abbasid Caliphs Al Mansour, Harun Rachid and al Mamoun. This led to the creation of what became known as the House of wisdom in Baghdad in 217 AH / 832 AD to serve as a library and institute of translation. This intellectual institution attracted well known scholars who were highly engaged in the translation movement and many books from a wide array of disciplines were rendered into Arabic. Al khalili stated that « the

Abbasids initiated the world's most impressive period of scholarship and learning since ancient Greece ». (Al khalili)

The Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mansur (AD 754 - 776) was the first who encouraged those who were willing to produce Arabic translations of works in Greek, Syriac and Persian. He was particularly interested in transferring astronomy books into Arabic ; however, the reign of Al Mamoun (AD 813-833) witnessed the climax of this translation movement. He made a special effort to recruit famous scholars to come to the House of Wisdom . Besides, he invested huge amounts of money and provided incentives for translators so that they got state of the art knowledge and skilled in order to get promoted.

On the conceptual level, Translators as actors played a significant role during the Abbasid era. They actively contributed to the manifestation of this scientific revolution. But they must not be seen as the sole actor involved in the translation process. By contrast, the Abbasid Caliphs can be considered as the focal actor in the established net. There would be no translation movement without the Caliphs support. To illustrate, translation became under the rule of Abbasids the work of the nation and not an individual endeavour. For instance, it was not up to the translator to choose what to translate and what not to translate depending on his personal interest. The choice of texts to be translated was often dictated by the Caliph.

Translation movement reached its peak thanks to the Abbasid rulers' admiration and their sponsoring of the translation movement. For instance, Hunayn Ibn Ishaq, one of the most outstanding translators, was paid by Al Mamoun in gold matching the weight of the books he translated (Baker, 1998 : 320). As a matter of fact, they did not reward the translators only for their enormous work, but they also gave high ranks in the administration of the state to the polymaths .Using Bourdieu terms, translation became a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu: 81). In other words. for scholars and notable families to achieve social and political mobility, translation was one of the tools through which they could keep their privileged statuses close to the Caliphs (Al Khalili :46)

On the other hand translation helped Al Mamoun to gain legitimacy and more power in relation with the populace. He was known for his passion for learning and knowledge. His image as an intellectual, a patron of translation and the house of Wisdom, and a participant in philosophical

debate was very influential. This reflects the interactive relationship between the network entities. As it has been mentioned earlier, technologies occupy a pivotal place in the ANT. Similarly, the emergence of new technologies related to printing created a fertile space for producing knowledge through the translation of Greek, Persian and Indian heritage during the golden age. It is widely argued that the emergence of new technologies related to printing notably the paper mills was a key factor for the manifestation of a scientific revolution under the Abbasid dynasty. (Al khalili:44). Borrowing Latour's terms, printing technologies played here a mediating role. Caliphs, translators and technologies were not the only actors who built the network. Further entities (actants) can be described in the same network including the scientific body knowing that the movement stopped because simply translators didn't find important works. The absence of important books later led to the undermining of the movement where translator still existed but they didn't find interesting books.

Muslims were highly fascinated by culture and knowledge of their neighbouring nations. But they didn't translate blindly. Instead, they consciously selected their source texts (ST); they chose to translate the great works of science and philosophy. Delisle and Woodsworth said that: "there was intense translation activity in the Abbasid period (750-1250), centered on the translation into Arabic of Greek scientific and philosophical material, often with Syriac as an intermediary language" (1995 : 112). This was the fact which had been asserted by many other scholars. According to Baker (1998 :320), the Arabs translated essentially scientific and philosophical material from Greek and showed little interest in Greek drama and poetry.

What made the translation movement during the golden age significant is not just the large body of translated material, but also the quality of translation. Two main strategies have been approached during that period. The first is 'word for word' while the second is 'sense for sense'. Baker (1998) described the two translation methods: "[...] the first method, associated with Yuhanna Ibn al-Batriq and Ibn Naima al-Himsi, was highly literal and consisted of translating each Greek word with an equivalent Arabic word and, where none existed, borrowing the Greek word into Arabic" (321). She (1998) added: "the second method, associated with Ibn Ishaq and al-Jawahari, consisted of translating sense-

for-sense, creating fluent target texts which conveyed the meaning of the original without distorting the target language” (321).

Adopting the second method, Arab translators didn't only translate the great works of Greek philosophers but also reinterpreted, commented and extended them. It is true that Arabs translated the master pieces of Greek, Indian and Persian works for the sake of science and knowledge, and entered through translation into a discursive relationship with the past. But they preserved their Arabic identity and islamic character. Benisson argued that the Muslim civilization came to draw on the heritage of the other nations but exhibiting its own separate and sparkling Islamic character (Bennison :2009 : 3). Arabs sometimes played the role of the author as they moved away from the original text and started to convey their own views. (Hala Khalidi and al : 2015 : 569 – 576 ).This was seen to nourish the creative aspect of translation while transferring the other nations knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Obviously, the recent sociological turn in Translation Studies has encouraged scholars and translators to explore the relationship between the agents involved in the translation process, product and function which has the potential to influence the production and reception of translations. Furthermore, the break of the sociology of translation with exclusively text-centred approaches has encouraged scholars to shift their attention from translation as a linguistic operation, to translation as the tangible product of interactive social agents and events. It is clear that sociological approach Actor Network Theory (ANT) has been adopted to consolidate the idea that nothing exists in isolation and that the meaning of anything is always determined by its context. As to the global translation movement which had been performed by Arabs, it can be said that during the Abbassid period, Arabs developed the translation process and made an influential profession and they developed and changed it from the stage of individual translators to the institutional stage.

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