

## ■ What We Talk about When We Talk about Translation

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When reading Susan Bassnett's introduction to her most recent edited collection *Translation and World Literature*, published in 2019, some find it striking that Bassnett, a preeminent scholar in the field of translation studies, when invited to participate in the 2014 World Literature Institute Summer School program at Harvard, suddenly realized the distance between the study of world literature and that of translation studies seems like "an abyss" (1). Translation studies was considered a subfield of applied linguistics in the 1970s, and before the rise of the prevailing trend of the "cultural turn," the issue of translation caught only sporadic attention in general literary studies and comparative literature. Translation back then was commonly coupled with literature in the sense of both literary translation and literary criticism. Marilyn Gaddis Rose, for example, in her monograph *Translation and Literary Criticism* argues that "literary translation is a transfer of distinctive features of a literary work into a language. . . . But literary translation is also a form of literary criticism" (13). Nevertheless, given that scholars of translation studies are mostly trained in the discipline of literature, it is still hard to believe that there is such a disjunction and lack of communication between translation studies and the study of literature.

Perhaps this can be partly explained by André Lefevere's manifesto presented in the Leuven seminar of 1976, "Translation Studies: The Goal of the Discipline." Lefevere proposes that translation studies as a discipline aims at developing a

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theory for the analysis of translation production so that translation studies henceforth “occup[ies] a new space of its own” (Bassnett, “The Translation Turn” 125). Lefevere’s vision eventually evolves into the cultural turn in translation studies in the 90s; its most visible feature is the shift in emphasis from the textual analysis of a given literary work to the extratextual processes of translation, processes which always involve the risk of manipulation. Ever since the process of translation production was set as the focus of translation studies, its engagement with literature has been lessening. Moreover, if manipulation is inevitable in the production of translation, the exercising of power and the asymmetrical power relation between nations and languages are, not surprisingly, highlighted. “The key topic that has provided the impetus for the new directions that translation studies have taken since the cultural turn,” Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko claim, is precisely “power” (xvi). The cultural turn can even be so radicalized as to be the “*power turn*” (xvi). The entanglement of translation and power is too complicated to be fully clarified and analyzed, but for Gentzler and Tymoczko, the most thorny yet fundamental problem is that “[t]ranslation is inevitably partial; meaning in a text is always overdetermined” (xviii). Translators must make choices of words (equivalents or corresponding analogies), strategies (domesticating or foreignizing translation), and interpretations (sometimes conforming to the social agenda or political correctness). However ambiguous it may sound, this partiality “is not to be considered a defect, a lack, or an absence in a translation; it is a necessary condition of the act” (xviii). In a word, translation as well as translator, consciously or unconsciously, is fundamentally partisan, and each act of selection, for whatever goal, with whatever motivation, signifies the exercise of power. The partial nature of translation renders it a political and performative act.

If, as Gentzler and Tymoczko claim, the cultural turn seems parallel to the power turn, it sharpens the fact that to a great extent culture is involved with the political. In this sense, any form of intercultural communication is by no means innocent; more often than not, intercultural communication represents battlefields of power struggle, and this struggle may not be caused simply by an individual’s (the translator, for example) voluntary choices or manipulation. Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny probably provide the most astute, most insightful observations on how “cultural translation” should be understood in the present world. They demonstrate how thoroughly political culture is when they assert, “Culture has become this political stage itself, the very condition of the possibility of society and of our perception of what political reality is today” (197-98). If culture constitutes how people perceive the political reality, it also constructs the role of translation. For Buden and Nowotny, the term “cultural translation” refers to translation as a cultural and political phenomenon. The German Romantic theory of translation has

served as the most powerful support to Buden and Nowotny's definition of cultural translation. In the Romanticists' view, translation bears a cultural task, that is, to cultivate, extend, deepen, and revive one's own culture by translating (in this sense, appropriating) foreign languages from another culture. But Buden and Nowotny propose a still bolder contention: translation, even when analyzed from the angle of what seems independent from culture, for example, linguistics, is not fully detached from its role as a cultural and political agent.

In their interpretation of Roman Jakobson's celebrated 1959 essay "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation", Buden and Nowotny observe that most readers pay so much attention to his groundbreaking categorization of intralingual (rewording), interlingual (translation proper), and intersemiotic (transmutation) translation as to miss what grants "a general translatability within and between languages" (202). Translatability is sustained only when the cognitive function of language is complementary to linguistic signs. For Jakobson, to make more explicit the meaning of linguistic signs requires translation. Meaning is not assigned to the thing; meaning is assigned to the sign. Therefore, if any linguistic sign makes sense to its users, it is not through the user's actual experience with the thing, but through one's acquaintance with the word. When facing unfamiliar words (linguistic signs in a foreign tongue as well as in a native language), we rely on "translation." Translation, for Jakobson, plays a vital role in making linguistic signs cognizable because "the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign" (Jakobson 114). But translation of one sign into another sign with more explicitness cannot promise that the meaning is fully conveyed. To make sense of linguistic signs also requires the cognitive function of language. The cognitive function is especially crucial in the case where the grammatical patterns of two languages are polar opposites. For Jakobson, "languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey" (116; italics in original). To put it crudely, there is something compulsory in language for making sense for users of a specific language, for example, gender, tense, or singular/plural distinction. The cognitive function of language works by means of compulsory particularization, i.e., what we understand as the distinctive feature of a given language. This is also what makes translation in some cases a difficult task because "even though there is something like universal capacity in languages (allowing for their general translatability), the concrete expression of this universality is positively delimited by linguistic constraints" (Buden and Nowotny 203). The use of language affects the speakers' cognitive experience (for example, in languages where names of nations are attributed as feminine or masculine, the gender distinction may lead to certain stereotypes for speakers), and yet linguistic communication is only possible when linguistic expression is supplemented with cognitive experience. Clearly this cognitive func-

tion is beyond the linguistic realm, and it is precisely this metalinguistic operation that “permits revision and redefinition of the vocabulary used”; namely, it is precisely this metalinguistic operation that grounds translation (Jakobson 115). Although it may sound like a contradiction, in language there exists an extralinguistic dimension, and this leads Buden and Nowotny to bring up their most appealing argument: “the ‘cultural’ dimension has always already been included in concepts of translation that emerged from general reflections on language or linguistics” (203).

This statement appears radical in the sense that the intratextual and extratextual distinction in translation seems futile, which entails further questioning and challenging of the distinction between literary translation and cultural translation, namely, between the non-political and the political respectively. If such a distinction is invalid, the cultural turn in translation studies in effect is *not* beyond and does *not* extend the scope of translation studies by overcoming the arguably limited viewpoint of linguistic translation. The novelty of Buden and Nowotny’s argument lies not in the way it radicalizes the cultural dimension by merging linguistic assumptions into the realm of cultural translation, but rather in the way it in fact presents an intriguing unity in a translation between the inside (the literary) and the outside (the cultural) dimensions, dimensions that become separated in other approaches to translation, especially those after the cultural turn. Their argument appears even more striking if we are aware of how encompassing the influence of the cultural turn is—it has caused a paradigm shift in translation studies, leading translation studies to depart from literature, and meanwhile more “turns” have proliferated, such as the political turn, the interdisciplinary turn, the empirical turn, and the globalization turn, to name a few.<sup>1</sup> In short, with the rise of the cultural turn, discussions regarding translation have been centered on all kinds of social, economic, political, and other factors involved in producing translation (including individuals, e.g., the translator, and institutions). The importance of internal elements in literary works, such as artistic value, rhetoric, style, and the use of language, among many others, has gradually receded. Even though many discussions are centered on the issue of cultural translation in literary works, “cultural translation as the transposition of a community (or its members) has received more attention” (Conway 270). This is partly due to the fact that an immigrant community is never detached from the thorny issue of identity politics and emergence of immigrant communities is considered a prominent phenomenon in the age of globalization. On the other hand, more and more heterolingual writers use languages other than their mother

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Snell-Hornby devotes a monograph in 2006 to examining various turns of translation studies. See detailed discussions in *The Turns of Translation Studies: New Paradigms or Shifting Viewpoints?*.

tongues, write in various languages, or participate in the translation processes.<sup>2</sup> All these creative activities signify the displacement of languages as well as cultures, and the diasporic community members play the role of cultural mediators, constantly enmeshed in struggles between asymmetrical power relations.

As translation-related themes in literature often accent the role of immigrants as cultural translators, who inevitably confront the sometimes violent encounter with a foreign culture that is at least in part incompatible with their native one, and who thus face an identity crisis when they find it difficult to fit in the new social milieu, maybe it's time to refresh the relationship between translation and literature. The above-mentioned analysis is intended to show that the explicit problem of power struggle and manipulation is indeed crucial, though it does not mean that the inside (the literary dimension, such as contents and style) and the outside (the cultural dimension, for instance, production, circulation, and ideology) of any given text are mutually exclusive. Moreover, the way of relating translation to literature is not confined to the interpretation of the role of the cultural mediator or the frustrations of those in the immigrant community.

While there are certainly numerous possible approaches to translation and/ or in literature, in recent studies we find an emerging trend focusing on the fictional dimension of translation, and this sheds new light on the translation-literature relation. Published in 2014, the collection of essays titled *Transfiction: Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction*, proposes “transfiction” as a new way to analyze translation-related phenomena with special focus on fictional works. The idea of transfiction is meant to demonstrate that “the fictional view of translation and interpreting is an added opportunity for translation studies to delve deeper into the history of ideas and the relationships among translation, culture, and society” (Kaindl and Spitzl 19). In line with the idea of transfiction, *The Fictions of Translation* published four years later also gathers various points of view which deal with the metaphor of translation in fictional works. Woodsworth and Lane-Mercier in the introduction to the anthology contend that the metaphors of translation and translator in fictional works are no less real than any actual translation practice. For them, “embedding the character of the translator or the practice of translation into a fictional setting has proven to be a fruitful way of conceptualizing translation” (2) because metaphor not only is a rhetorical device, but reveals the way we understand and perceive the world.

Regarding the metaphors of translator and translation, Lori Chamberlain's widely cited 1988 essay “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation” is doubtlessly

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca L. Walkowitz provides exhaustive analysis on this issue in her book, published in 2015, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*.

a remarkable pioneering work. Although Chamberlain takes a clear feminist stance and is concerned especially with the inequality of gender roles represented in translated texts as well as translation production, this essay takes into consideration both linguistic implications and cultural agendas. Chamberlain mentions, for example, how the metaphor of *les belles infidèles*, referring to translated texts that are beautiful but unfaithful, has created a prevailing stereotype in which translation is sexualized. The sexualization of translation is made and reinforced linguistically and culturally, for this translation-related metaphor *les belles infidèles* is rooted in *transduction*, a feminine term in French, as a woman (the translation) is required to be faithful to her spouse (the original text). This instance demonstrates the use of metaphors is never innocent or insignificant, since metaphors for translation, as Maria Tymoczko maintains, “can be used as the foundation of discourses about translation in specific cultural contexts for both hegemonic and subversive purposes, driving translation practices and strategies” (110).<sup>3</sup> The use of conceptual metaphors for translation in literary works orientates our understanding of translation in a certain direction. Careful examination and interpretation of metaphors may pave a new way for elaborate exploration of translation and/in literature.

Susan Bassnett’s new publication this year, *Translation and World Literature*, can be regarded as an indication of the state of translation studies nowadays. She admits that “despite [translation studies’] global success over the last few years there has not been as much engagement with literary studies as was promised back in the 1990s in the wake of the ‘cultural turn’ in the discipline” (1). But if we are aware that the distinction between literary studies and translation studies is not a necessity, and if we are aware how great a loss it would be if scholars in the field of translation abandoned literature, we then sense it is urgent to take a new attitude towards literature as well as translation. As literature nowadays is rarely purely monolingual, and translation is omnipresent in daily life, Bassnett’s appeal to tighten the now-loosened connection between literature and translation is certainly provocative and even promising.

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<sup>3</sup> Following Tymoczko’s argument, James St. André also observes the prevailing metaphor of the translator as exclusively solitary, whereas abundant historical evidence shows translation projects are commonly collaborative. The pervasive metaphor of the translator as a single individual thus structures our understanding of translation, regardless of the facts. Detailed discussions can be found in “Metaphors of Translation and Representations of the Translational Act as Solitary versus Collaborative”.

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