# History of Translation

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## The Object of Inquiry

Translation historiography explores changes in the practice and conceptualization of translation over time and space, as well as the causes of these changes. It helps contextualize the practices and ideas of the past, relativize those of the present, and identify regularities, interconnections, turning points, and advances. Studies of translation history are not a new phenomenon. Yet only recently has this emerged as a subdiscipline that draws on insights and methodologies from both translation studies and historiography but that has an "awareness that translation history might actually have a method, with its own concepts, procedures and results" (Pym, 1998, p. 13). Translations and translators are influenced by and can influence their communicative context, and they have had an important impact in the following main areas of cultural history suggested by Delisle and Woodsworth (1995): the invention of alphabets, the development of languages, and the writing of dictionaries; the emergence of national literatures and the shaping of their form and content; the creation and dissemination of knowledge; the power relations between different regions and countries; the practice and spread of religions; and the transmission of cultural goods and values, a category that "permeates and is permeated by" all the other domains (Neubert, 2001, p. 188).

This has led to two complementary approaches to the relationship between translation and history: (a) "what can translation mean for the understanding of history, in particular of cultural practices" and (b) "what can history mean for the understanding of the multifarious forms of translation (a process, a product, a trope, an institution, a theory, etc.)" (D'hulst, 2010, p. 397). Historians such as Rafael (1988) and Howland (2002) have focused on the former approach (translation *in* history or history *through* or from the perspective of translation), but most translation scholars focus on the history *of* translation. Virtually any aspect of translation—for example, its processes and products and their relationship with the sociocultural context, the lives and work of translators, translation theories, translator training, workplace structures, the impact of institutions and technology—can be examined from a historical perspective. Yet the focus has long been on the textual level at the expense of processes (e.g., canonization, the use of translations), the discourses surrounding translation, or the human, professional, and cross-cultural (rather than nation-based) aspects. Within this focus on textual aspects there has also been a privileging of canonical literary and religious works, to the neglect of other genres (e.g., popular literature and official or commercial texts) and translations that did not identify themselves as such.

## Research Questions and Source Collection, Evaluation, and Interpretation

The approach to "doing" translation history depends on the subject matter and research question. Broadly, however, Lambert (1993, pp. 13–14) advocates combining a focus on

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*internal* questions about how particular translators proceed with a focus on *external* questions about the context in which these translators work. The hypotheses guiding the research need to be examined on the basis of the data so as to corroborate, refine, or refute them.

Both in relation to historical theories and practices, the data search—what Pym (1992, p. 3) calls translation archeology—can usefully focus around the questions of "who," "where," "what," and "when" (and the reverse questions of "who *not*," etc.), alongside translation criticism ("how" and "how *not*"). Thought-provoking sample questions can be found, for instance, in Delabastita (2005, pp. 35–8), D'hulst (2010, pp. 399–403), Lambert (1993, pp. 11–12), St-Pierre (1993, pp. 66–8), and Woodsworth (1998, p. 101). Relevant primary sources (those originating in the period under study) range well beyond source texts and translations (including successive drafts and re-editions with textual variants) to include, for example, comments by translators, patrons, and critics; publishers' documents; documentary evidence of reader reactions; manuals for training translators; contracts and court records; business records and statistics about the language industry; client-generated instructions; personnel records; eyewitness accounts; paratextual and visual sources such as book covers and paintings of translators; and comparable original texts in the target language. Secondary sources (whose distinction from primary sources is not always clear) include, for example, bibliographies of translated works (and analogous bibliographies of nontranslated works), biographies of translators, descriptions of past translation theories, reviews of past translations, and accounts of translator-training institutions of the past.

Critical evaluation of sources involves considering their authenticity, scope, and quality; the sociocultural and mental context of their production; the audience; the intended and actual purpose; the author's credibility and stake in controlling the narrative; any biases, assumptions, omissions, and internal or external contradictions; the surface and deeper meanings; the use of language to lead readers to a particular conclusion; whether terms used have a different meaning from today and from the apparent equivalent in the historian's language; and any subsequent intervention by editors or compilers.

Yet quantity and quality of historical data are not enough. The nub of the historiographical enterprise lies in testing hypotheses against the evidence, interpreting and explaining the facts and forces—focusing on the "why" and "with what effect" (Pym, 1992, p. 3)—and arranging the data in a systematic and meaningful narrative. It should also be noted that historiographical methods are to some extent culture-specific—for example, East Asian translation historians tend to emphasize documentary research over theoretical approaches, which Sato (2002, p. 128) notes are "a highly Western tradition."

## Writing Translation History

The writing of translation history involves arranging evidence in a form that transcends simple sequential description—that is, in a connective narrative that is composed on a thematic, concept-led, or other meaningful basis and that infers links among the facts so as to produce an explanation of the hierarchy and interaction of significant direct and indirect causes (e.g., chance; the actions of individuals; large-scale practices, processes, and structures such as colonization, migration, the introduction of printing) and the consequences. The writing process is shaped not only by the available data but also the historian's assumptions and methodology, potentially leading to differing interpretations. Translation historians can learn from the growing awareness among historiographers that the narrative is not a neutral reconstruction of reality or *the* past, but *one* possible construction (representation) filtered through the sources and the historian's present-day "situatedness," (pre)conceptions, and interpretations, even when attempts are made to perceive the past on its own terms. Postmodernism has made historians more attentive to their subjective position and the language and rhetoric in their own writing and the records, as well as voices

that have gone unheard because they are excluded from power. Constructing an ordered narrative provides explanatory coherence, but it has the potential for manipulating the facts and argument in line with a preconceived outcome or ideological position, so it is vital to interrogate our intentions, assumptions, inferences, criteria of proof, and choice of categories and narrative form and to acknowledge evidence that fails to fit the hypothesis. Master narratives (e.g., imperialism, nationalism, modernization, market forces) that attempt to integrate and give meaning to long-term events and phenomena as part of a purposeful development have attracted criticism as being artificial, antihistorical, and overreaching yet restrictive.

One counterbalance to all-encompassing grand narratives is to provide diverse and more complex perspectives through microhistory (see Adamo, 2006), which reduces the scale of observation to a close-up focus on very specific and either typical *or* atypical texts, episodes, locations, phenomena, topics, groups (e.g., diasporic language communities) or individuals so as to penetrate behind apparent uniformity. Microhistory is characterized by the detailed procedures, not the small scale, and it can be used on objects of any size, which are studied not in isolation, but in their context. This acts as a link between systems and the individual, to whom agency and the "livedness" of experience are restored. Microhistorians argue that the textured details connect the whole and that microanalyses can contain broad implications, revealing patterns that transcend the item under investigation while modifying macrohistory by highlighting apparent exceptions. Anomalies are regarded as a potentially rich "sign of a larger, but hidden or unknown, structure" (Peltonen, 2001, p. 349), and microhistories rise above anecdotal data because of the intensive examination of their verifiability and relevance. Ginzburg (1993, p. 24) argues that doubts, misrepresentations, hesitations, and silences—that is, the historian's "search for truth" and the limitations of the evidence—must become *part* of the narrative account. Microhistory helps counter excessively theoretical abstraction, and facts or phenomena are easier to prove or refute with this approach. Potential disadvantages include the lack of representativeness (although generalization is not regarded as a significant goal of microhistory) and the overlooking of larger patterns and different contexts. These drawbacks can be overcome by accumulating microhistories and regarding the micro and macro as complementary.

One aspect of the writing of history that distinguishes it from mere chronicles is periodization, but this is often uncritically based on homogenizing or largely arbitrary constructs such as centuries, eras (e.g., dynasties or reigns), or periods (e.g., ancient, medieval, modern). These are often related to broad cultural history (e.g., the Renaissance), major periods in national (rather than cross-cultural) history (e.g., China's Cultural Revolution), literary currents (e.g., the Romantic period), or generic categories (e.g., the novel). Although ideas and practices of translation are affected by external forces in the source and target cultures, a more appropriate periodization would be based on processes, movements, events, and texts more directly relevant to translation itself (e.g., whether verse was rendered as verse or prose). Some scholars (e.g., Steiner, 1975, pp. 248–50; Chesterman, 1997, p. 20) have proposed periodizations of translation, but it is important to note that periodizations are specific to particular translation traditions. It is also vital to recognize the coexistence and interaction of long-term, midterm and short-term periods in translation history and to consider the need for periodizations tailored to more specialized histories, such as that of women translators or translation theories.

## Sample Approaches to Translation History

Although translated works might in a sense be viewed as historical "events" (especially, for instance, when a translator adopts an innovative approach), one feature of translation history is its text-based rather than event-based nature (alongside its translator-centered,

interlinguistic, and cross-cultural aspects). Hence methodologies focusing on texts—for example, literary historiography, bibliometrics—are instructive for translation historians. Book history, with its focus on the physical object, is relevant in such areas as the impact of material causes (e.g., increasing literacy, mass production of paper, the transition from manuscripts to the print medium, the invention of computers) in allowing quicker production of translations, broader dissemination, and greater longevity and in arresting textual and linguistic drift, thereby bolstering the ideal of accuracy. Focusing on books does, however, neglect translations appearing in other influential forms such as newspaper or periodical serializations.

Lambert (1993, p. 6) regards descriptive translation studies as "one of the most explicit indications of the rediscovery of history in Translation Studies and hence of the development of a new type of historiography." Nevertheless, Pym (e.g., 2009, pp. 24, 28) has criticized the descriptive (rather than explanatory) and purportedly objective focus of descriptive translation studies, and he argues (1998, p. 115) that focusing on translation norms emphasizes stability at the expense of change or conflict. Pym (1998, p. 112) advocates focusing on debates (between people, or contradictions between actual translations and what is said about translations) as indicators of tension or conflicting norms (and hence possible change). This focus on disagreements is potentially more useful in raising questions than is Pym's own concept of regimes (1998, pp. 125–42), which focuses on shared aspects. Pym (2009, p. 35) also critiques Toury's notion (1995, p. 12) that translators operate primarily in the interests of the target culture, with the target culture governing their decisions. Instead Pym argues that translators themselves can help shape the target culture, and he proposes the notion of professional intercultures, whereby translators can work in locations influenced by more than one culture and functioning "as a cultural space with its own membership rites, norms of behavior, ideologies and ethics" (2009, p. 38). Prosopographical study of any collective characteristics (biographical and otherwise) that define translators as an occupational group, as well as their relationships and activities, might provide insights into professional intercultures, although this concept does not account for the not uncommon historical situations where translators worked in virtual or comparative isolation from each other.

One relatively neglected area is the history of the reception of translations—macroanalytical and microanalytical studies of who read what translations at different times and places and, more importantly, how and why they were read (for pleasure, curiosity, self-improvement, etc.). In the past translations were not necessarily read in the same ways as today—for example, they might have been read aloud or collectively; their scarcity might have enhanced their value; or readers might have regarded translations as a whole as harmful to the receiving culture. Readers' contacts with and responses to translation(s) are evident through text selection guides; what translated works readers owned or borrowed from libraries; their diaries, memoirs, letters to publishers or translators; marginalia written in translations as an indicator of interpretative strategies; contemporary depictions "in fiction, autobiographies, polemical writings, letters, paintings, and prints" (Darnton, 1992, p. 152); censorship records; and school curricula. Much work remains to be done on past ideals and assumptions underpinning the reading of translations. As Darnton (1992, p. 142) notes, however, "the documents rarely show readers at work, fashioning meaning from texts, and the documents are texts themselves, which also require interpretation." Historians could also usefully study how the reading of translations has affected history—Darnton (1992, p. 161) cites Mao's reading of Marx as an example.

Since translating is a social (not just textual) practice, another approach to translation history is to study changes in the relationships among social agents (e.g., translators, authors, clients), structures (e.g., political, economic, legal, religious, training, educational, and professional conditions and institutions), and processes (e.g., urbanization) and the

creation and reception of translations. Wolf (2010, p. 341) suggests a variety of sociologies —of agents (e.g., how translators are socialized by norms), of the translation process, of the cultural product, and even of translation studies itself. There is an increasing number of studies of translation sociology (e.g., Pym, Schlesinger, & Jettmarová, 2006; Wolf & Fukari, 2007), although not always from a historical perspective even though sociological issues are amenable to historical study. One approach is to focus on largely neglected groups, such as the history of nonliterary translators. In historiography as a whole, however, there has been a move away from the tendency to view individuals "as products of the systems to which they belonged" (Howell & Prevenier, 2001, p. 115), with greater emphasis being given today to cultural and intellectual history. Nevertheless, Wolf (2010, p. 342) argues that social and cultural practices are inextricably connected "in terms of power, ideology," and so on.

The intellectual history of translation examines the production, changes, and migration of discourses (theoretical, philosophical, critical, literary, academic, social, institutional, methodological, popular) on translation across time, space, and contacts with other disciplines or under the effect of external constraints. D'hulst (2010, p. 400) points out that theories are not the only mode of reflection on translation (alternatives include prefaces and criticism, for instance) and that the theory-oriented approaches dominating historical research in recent decades are underpinned by a problematic, teleological view of history "as a means to highlight the 'progresses' of translation theory." In turn Pym (1998, p. 10) warns that "The focus on theory can thus become a way of producing explanations so powerful that they effectively obscure the complexity of the past, particularly when historians overlook the strategic and frequently defensive roles played by theorization." D'hulst (1995, p. 19) argues that the primary aim of the historian of translation theories is their optimal reconstruction according to the viewpoint of those who conceived them and the viewpoint of their users. This relativistic stance should not, however, preclude the incorporation (but not imposition) of insights from a contemporary perspective, which are "complementary and not substitutive" (D'hulst, 1995, p. 33). Beyond the theories themselves, it is also important to examine their reception and impact (e.g., among translators, translator trainers, scholars of translation), that is, their relationship with translation practices and the surrounding discourses.

One key debate focuses on the respective roles in translation history of individuals (e.g., theorists) and systems or forces operating at the level of groups, societies, or even "universal laws." The latter and currently more dominant approach is associated in particular with descriptive translation studies, but has attracted criticism for treating translators as subordinate to institutions or norms (even if this subordination takes the form of resistance) and for overlooking "the agency of translators themselves who can decide to flout rules, invent translation strategies, and inject all sorts of unpredictable elements into translations" (Tymoczko, 2007, p. 183). Awareness of the role of individuals has led Pym (2009, p. 45) to propose a humanizing approach—not as a strict methodology, but as "a mode of asking questions that may lead to unforeseen answers." He argues (2009, pp. 32–6) that studying translators allows researchers to unearth the obscure, follow the multidiscursive (how translators brought together the different professional discourses in which they participate in the receiving system, such as translating, writing, editing, publishing, teaching), accept translators' multiple allegiances (not just to the target culture), and trace their movements. Pym (2009, p. 37) maintains that translatorial subjectivity can be revealed more directly "by asking biographical and sociological questions, or looking critically at the language in prefaces, correspondence and the subject's texts other than translations," without resorting to "intricate textual criticism." Crisafulli (2002, p. 40), however, advocates a composite approach of considering the translator's biography and declarations of intent and assuming that "the translator's outlook will surface at specific

sensitive points of the target text (including paratexts)" in the form of modifications or interpretations based on this outlook.

An alternative that transcends the structure/agency debate is the study of the interaction between individuals and transindividual factors in translation history. One way of connecting individuals and systems is Pierre Bourdieu's categories of *habitus* (dispositions "acquired by individuals through experience and socialization," Wolf, 2010, p. 339), *field* (the "social positions occupied by individuals and institutions," Wolf, 2010, p. 339), and *capital* (economic capital, social capital in the form of networks, cultural capital in the form of education, knowledge, etc., and symbolic capital in the form of prestige). For instance, D'hulst (2010, p. 402) suggests that the habitus or "coming into being" of translators (and related agents) can be studied from perspectives such as "intellectual and social backgrounds (training, gender, socio-economic, ideological and cultural profile), production (translational, critical, authorial etc.), group formation and network relations" (D'hulst, 2010, p. 399).

The study of synchronic professional intercultures overcomes the monocultural tendency in Bourdieu's concepts and lends itself to actor-network theory (see Buzelin, 2005) or social network analysis. Although an offshoot of systems theory, social network analysis crosses national and other boundaries to look at:

> how relationships, especially social pressures, around a person, group, or organization affect beliefs or behaviours. . . . it sidesteps the discussion whether change was "external" or "internal". It focuses attention away from "cores" and "peripheries". . . . it accepts that actual networks overlapped, changed, and decayed. Perhaps most importantly, it puts real people back into . . . history, rather than only rises and falls, trends, movements, and developments. (Gordon, 2008)

A similar approach can be applied not only to professional networks among translators but also to intellectual networks among translation theorists, despite the greater difficulty of demonstrating intellectual contacts and influences. Gordon (2008) recognizes that social network analysis "does not handle change well unless one can do repeated iterations of the net over time," so he concludes that it needs to be undertaken in conjunction with other approaches.

Quantitative approaches help contextualize qualitative studies of translation history, providing a counterbalance to the frequent focus on canonical works or famous translators by capturing a broader picture that can include more commonplace and peripheral translations or individuals. Quantitative methods (e.g., cluster analysis, time series analysis) can handle greater masses of data and allow more rigorous testing of hypotheses, leading to more valid and precise conclusions and helping to reveal blank spaces as well as patterns, tendencies, and relationships that go beyond chance. These approaches can also raise new questions, revise traditional periodizations, and facilitate comparisons. Yet not all research questions in translation history (e.g., theories) involve quantitatively measurable or categorizable indicators, and quantitative data are not always available or of sufficient historical significance to merit study. Other problems include lack of representativeness or comparability, distortions (e.g., census figures probably do not include part-time and freelance translators), the mechanistic and impersonal focus, the reductionist nature of statistical categories, and the need for training and often collaboration on the part of researchers. As with qualitative approaches, it is essential to proceed to careful explanation and interpretation of the data. Although quantitative approaches to historiography failed to live up to initial expectations, there has been some revival recently in response to overly theoretical postmodern approaches, and translation historians could benefit from further exploration of such approaches. Ultimately, however, any method is justified only if it produces superior results, and quantitative methods might be best suited to providing

supportive evidence for qualitative approaches rather than acting as "the foundation stone of a whole argument" (Hudson, 2000, p. 20). A combination of methods can offer a more holistic perspective and help compensate for any drawbacks of individual approaches.

## Toward Integrative Translation History

Little has been written about the conceptualization and methodology of comparative translation historiography, perhaps in reaction to the dangers of sweeping comparisons or because of practical difficulties arising from the need for expert knowledge of more than one translation tradition. Nevertheless, much can be gained by tracing the (dis)continuity of translational practices and ideas across cultures. Once any parallels have been identified, the next step is to determine whether there is a causal connection and why. An even greater contribution to the field can be made by identifying practices and ideas that are *without* parallels elsewhere. Comparative studies are a step toward what Woodsworth (1998, p. 104) calls a "rejoining of the pieces"—a task that calls for collaboration.

**SEE ALSO**: Bible Translation; Commercial Translation; Cultural Approaches to Translation; Descriptive Translation Studies; History of Interpreting; History of Multilingualism; Norms of Translation; Scientific and Technical Translation; Sociological Approaches to Translation

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## Suggested Readings

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