Article

CADERNOS de TRADUÇÃO

Literary translators' associations and the construction of translation as literature in Spain

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Abstract: In this article I approach literary translators' associations in the context of late twentieth century Spain through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's sociology of literature. I argue that one important function of the activism that these organizations promoted was the social construction of literary translation as a form of literature in its own right. In this article I present multiple instances of how translators made use of the communicative spaces that their associations created (round tables, publications, conferences, interviews, etc.) to publicly represent translation as a kind of creation which can be largely autonomous from economic as well as scholarly considerations, and which presents three traits that are specific to literature. These traits are self-referentiality, ability to create its own object, and a structure defined by a heteronomous and an autonomous pole. This sociological approach to a largely understudied dimension of translators' collective action invites us to revise the notion that literary translators' associations function as professional bodies that, for the most part, fail to protect the interests of their members.
Keywords: sociology of translation; literary translation; associations; Spain; literary translator studies.

1. Introduction

> I am a very bad negotiator. People think that I get paid more, but I get paid the same because [editors] realize that I am interested in translating what they are offering me, and they take advantage of that (Benítez et al., 1993, p. 27, my translation).

Miguel Sáenz made this statement in a round table organized by the translators' section of Asociación Colegial de Escritores (ACE), a Spanish writers' association, in 1993. By that time, Sáenz had counted as one of the country's most laureate literary translators for years. In 1991 the Spanish Ministry of Culture had awarded him the National Prize for the Work of a Translator in recognition of his career. Even earlier, already in 1985, *El País* (arguably the country's most

prominent newspaper) had presented him as the one who had introduced Thomas Bernhard and Salman Rushdie to Spain's readership, and as the translator of Günter Grass, Michael Ende, Alfred Döblin and Peter Handke among others. In that same article, *El País* informed that Sáenz "only translate[d] what he likes" (Asociación Profesional Española de Traductores e Intérpretes, 1985, my translation), and reproduced the translator's following statement, quite similar to the one quoted above:

> I very much like to translate, but that destroys me. I cannot say no when an editor comes up and starts tempting me with a book. Translation prizes have not helped me get paid more, but be able to choose. It is a very poorly paid job and one cannot translate for money. One should only translate a book because he likes it. Otherwise it is a hellish job (Asociación Profesional Española de Traductores e Intérpretes, 1985, my translation).

This *El País* piece was reproduced in full in the bulletin of Spain's most prominent translator association at the time. Through these public statements, as well as others that he made years later (e.g., Fortea, 2003), Miguel Sáenz consistently presents himself as someone driven by the desire to translate certain books, to the point of being willing to forfeit economic gain. Examined through the lens of Bourdieu's sociology of literature (Bourdieu, 1996), these utterances can be interpreted as moves with which Sáenz distances himself from the money-driven pole of the literary field. But what would the opposite pole be? If we were talking about the creation of original works, it would be easy to speak of an autonomous pole, i.e., one where literature for literature's sake alone can provide sufficient motivation to put pen to paper. Yet here we cannot ignore the fact that translations are usually commissioned by editors, not "spontaneously" produced by translators. This applies even to the case of Miguel Sáenz, for all the tempting and persuading that editors might have had to do before he agreed to translate a book. A commissioned text sounds like anything but an autonomous act of literary creation that the Flaubert of Bourdieu's foundational *The Rules of Art* could recognize as such (Bourdieu, 1996).

Taking them at face value and without further theorizing, one could interpret Sáenz's statements as a form of positioning himself close to a hedonistic pole of sorts, where translation is something that one would do for pleasure only. It is certainly not unthinkable that someone might make a profit from other activities, or live off rents, while spending his free time translating just for fun. Or that someone might be willing to live off a low income if the job is pleasurable enough. Yet an interpretation of Sáenz's consistent serf-portrayal over the years whenever asked about his translating career as a series of straightforward declarations of what he enjoys doing *and nothing more* would be, I contend, misguided.

It would require that we disregard, first and foremost, the contributions that the sociology of literature has made to our understanding of the social practices of those involved in the publishing industry (writers, publishers, critics, etc.). Second, we would have to disregard the context of the times when Sáenz's statements were made. Since the mid-1980s, Spain's literary translators had become unprecedentedly vocal about what they perceived as their economic rights (better pay, intellectual property, etc.), as well as their deserved place in society (e.g., recognition for their contribution to culture) (Ruiz Molina, 2012). Whatever Sáenz's motivations might have been for making such statements, they became part of a broader social phenomenon: the public, discursive negotiation of translation's position within society in general, and in relation to the

world of literature in particular. That social phenomenon is the object of this article; more specifically, the roles that translator associations (initially APETI, then ACEtt) played in it.

Making sense, from a sociological standpoint, of how Sáenz and other translators spoke about translation in the context of a number of activities organized by translators' associations requires that we inquire into two issues. The first one is the place that literary translation occupies within the broader literary field. The second, related to the first, is how literary translation relates to the political and economic fields, both of which can function as structural determinants of literary production. In other words, the task at hand is to reconstruct the social space in which translating for its own sake could be presented as an irresistible call, as a creative activity, etc. in terms that are analogous to the ones commonly used to speak about literature for literature's sake.

The positions of individuals within fields, but also those of fields in relation to each other vary across time and national contexts. The scope of this article is limited to a study of translation within the literary field as it was constituted in late twentieth-century Spain. I intend to drive home two theses. First, that the communicative spaces that translators created to foster their collective professional identity and articulate their demands for better pay and social recognition became discursive venues in which the literary status of translation was negotiated, i.e., interactionally produced. Second, that in addition to the nature, and value, of literary translation (i.e., its relation to literature writ large), the positions that translators occupied in relation to each other, as well as in relation to other groups (editors, authors, critics, etc.) were equally at stake. Whenever translators took the floor to discuss the issues affecting their art/profession, they also engaged in the contest for the type of capital most specific to the literary and artistic fields: recognition by peers. This contest for the individual translator's capital was, at the same time, one over translation's status as a form of literary creation in its own right. While the geographic and chronological scope of these findings is somewhat limited, their relevance lies in that they compel us to think anew about the functions that literary translators' associations can play within the broader network of social relations in which translation takes place.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical commitments informing this study, and specifically my choice of textual sources. Section 3 briefly historicizes the emergence of literary translators' associations in Spain. It explains how, in addition to advocating for economic and legal rights, these organizations opened up communicative spaces (round tables, conferences, articles, etc.) where some translators claimed for their own professional community the right to determine what counts as good literary translation. In section 4, I present examples of the discursive construction of translation as a form of literature, a construction that emerges from the interaction among translators themselves. Section 5 summarizes the conclusions of this study and points at areas for further research.

2. Theory and method

Translation's position in relation to literature writ large has been one important object of inquiry for sociologists of translation. The influence of Bourdieu's sociology of literature, but also of the sociology of professions and of publishing is noticeable in the work of a number of scholars

that have theorized on the issue of literary translation's autonomy vis-à-vis other creative and professional activities. The breadth of the intellectual agenda that opens up with Bourdieu's conceptualization of society as a complex of relatively distinct fields of social action goes well beyond the confines of translation studies, and even of the sociology of cultural goods for that matter. For this reason, a brief explanation of some of its main tenets is warranted before I address the question of translation's position within the literary field.

The Bourdieusian notion of field constitutes an attempt to solve the dichotomy between structure and agency by bringing into the picture both the norms and interactions that shape social action while also allowing room for individual agency. Each field (economic, political, educational, artistic and so on) has its own laws of functioning that are different from those of other fields, even though there might be a hierarchical relationship between one field and another. Such relationship is characterized by different degrees of autonomy depending on the historical context (Johnson, 1993). Within a field, agents compete for the resources and interests that are specific to that field. An artist, for instance, might prioritize boosting his own status among fellow artists and critics (symbolic capital) over financial gain (economic capital) (Bourdieu, 1983; Johnson, 1993). The artistic field is not completely autonomous from the economic field (artists need money to live) or the political field (states might subsidize artistic production and fund fine arts academies, for instance). However, the influence that such higher-order fields exert over an artist's social action is mediated by the inner logics of the artistic field. The more autonomous a field is in relation to another one, the more indirect the influence. In the case of the fields of cultural production, social action would include the production of artistic and literary works (Johnson, 1993).

Bourdieu characterizes the vying for resources within a field as inherently competitive, and proposes that we view the trajectories of actors within a field as a series of moves aimed at occupying positions vis-à-vis other actors in the context of such competition. Because positions are defined in relation to the other positions in the field, it is the social scientist's task to reconstruct the structure of the whole field if the meaning and effects of any given actor is to be fully grasped (Johnson, 1993). One implication of this theoretical proposition, as far as the study of literary translation and translators is concerned, is that they need to be studied in relation with other actors generally regarded as part of the literary field, such as critics, authors of original works, readers, publishers, scholars, etc. Even more importantly, the extent to which translators operate according to a logic specific to a putative translation field or some other field becomes a relevant object of study. A number of translation scholars have in fact addressed the topic.

Some translation scholars have postulated the existence of a (sub)field of literary translation whose boundaries are more or less defined, and which presents varying degrees of autonomy from literature depending on the particular linguistic context (e.g. Ibarluzea & Olaziregi, 2016; Lindqvist, 2006, 2021; Sela-Sheffy, 2005) and/or literary genre (e.g. Bergua, 2002; Zhang, 2023). In contrast, other scholars conceive of translation as a set of positions (i.e., those of translators, publishers of translations, and so on) as well as an action that transfers and/or enhances the symbolic capital of original works and authors (Casanova, 2002, 2004; Gouanvic, 2005; Sapiro, 2008). From the latter perspective, the positions and practices of those involved in literary translation do not constitute a terrain that might be somewhat distinct within the literary

field, let alone autonomous from it. An intermediate stance between the proposition that literary translation constitutes a somewhat discrete field (or subfield) and the view that we can only speak of specific acts of translation is that of Wolf (2007). She argues that there are temporary "spaces of mediation" where the social interactions that result in a translation take place, without ever creating a self-reproducing pattern of social positions that may last in time.

At least in modern contexts there are, I believe, good reasons to think of literary translation as a set of practices and positions within the literary field, rather than as a somewhat distinct field or subfield. First, because translators operate within the same networks as the most important actors within the literary field: authors, editors, critics, literary scholars, etc. In fact, individuals often take up more than one of these roles along their socio-professional trajectories, including that of the translator. Examples of renowned authors that have also been translators are abundant enough. How much capital (if any) and of what kind (economic, symbolic, social) an actor derives from translating is a question that demands empirically informed, context-dependent answers. The translator may be credited with reinvigorating his national literature in some contexts, while in others he may be perceived as an unglamourous journeyman of the publishing industry. Yet the fact remains that the social interactions that assign such status, however high or low, take place within the very same circles that make up the literary field.

Another reason not to conceive of literary translation as a (sub)field has to do with the consecrating mechanisms that are translation-specific, such as translation awards, public subsidies for translators, or becoming an object of study at translation departments. These consecrating mechanisms say more about translation's heteronomous position vis-à-vis the political and academic fields than about its purported autonomy from the literary (cf. Ibarluzea & Olaziregi, 2016; Lindqvist 2006, 2021). Furthermore, these institutions specific to translation mirror the ones dedicated to literature writ large quite closely (Bergua, 2002). In fact, in some countries (e.g., Greece) literary translation features as a category in state-granted literary awards along the novel, the theater play, the essay, poetry, etc. (Greek Ministry of Culture, 2024).

Conceptualizing translation as a constitutive part of the literary field allows us to make sense of what Spanish translators have said, and written, about translation. It becomes possible to examine their utterances as attempts to acquire symbolic capital for themselves as individuals, and for translation more generally. Out of such examination, the results of which I discuss in sections 3 and 4 of this article, emerges the conclusion that the type of symbolic capital at play is of the kind that is specific to the literary field more generally. Before turning to a discussion of the method of examination, a brief reflection on the question of whether translation proper (i.e., not what people say, write or think about it, but translation as a process and a product) actually is a form of literature will be of use.

The question of whether translation is a form of literature or something else and, if so, what relationship it bears to literature cannot be answered conclusively from a sociological standpoint any more than the question of what a makes a good author or a good poem. Granted, it is a question in which translators and authors, not only scholars of translation, have shown remarkable interest. Yet here I abide by Bourdieu's programmatic proposition that the task of a scholar of cultural production is not to establish what is true with regard to what is struggled over within a field, but rather "to try to establish the truth of these struggles over truth" (Bourdieu,

1996, p. 298). In other words, I do not claim, as Robinson (2017) does, that literary translation is a literary genre in its own right. Nor do I claim, or deny as Gouanvic (2005) does, the translator's status as an author. I am interested in how notions that are central to the literary field, such as authorship, originality, the relationship between literary form and extra-textual reality, etc. are socially produced through concrete interactions among actors. What grants this focus on the social is the theoretical premise that literary value, and artistic value more generally, are themselves the product of social relations. If context-specific social relations which lend themselves to historical interrogation determine whether translations are a form of literature, then the formulation of a general transhistorical model of the relationship between translation and literature writ large is unnecessary, if not outright misguided (cf. Hermans, 2007; Wolf, 2007).

Accepting Bourdieu's (1996) view that literary value is the same as the *shared belief in* literary value does not equate to proposing a purely externalist approach—one that only looks at what lies outside the literary work—to the study of literature and translation. By no means does Bourdieu's sociology of art and literature disregard literary works themselves. Instead, it approaches them as structurally determined components of the field, which in turn become part of the structures that then determine future action. Bourdieu's suggestion that we look at both the works themselves and the broader interactions that they are part of (with other works, other authors, broader social realities, etc.) is in fact driven by the explicit aim to enable a fuller understanding of individual works and authors. The literary work becomes the object of analysis *together with* other forms of interaction that become observable through what actors (writers, editors, translators, readers, critics) write and say to each other (letters, opinion pieces, etc.). In this regard, Bourdieu calls attention upon the methodological challenge that the researcher faces when trying to reconstruct an author's motivations along the process of literary creation. In the absence of explanatory prefaces or answers to questionnaires, "we have to rely on spontaneous declarations, hence often partial and imprecise ones, or on indirect clues in order to try to reconstitute both the conscious and unconscious parts of the way the writer's choices were shaped" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 89).

The methodological constraint that Bourdieu points at is even more salient in the case of translated literature, as the requirement to mirror the original work can make the translator's motivations and strategies particularly obscure within the text. For all its achievements in terms of facilitating close, educated readings of translated texts, the research that has analyzed literary translations and related paratexts in search for the translator's *ethos* (a concept with some commonalities with Bourdieu's symbolic capital) exemplifies some of these limitations. It is not by chance that the empirical base of Spoturno's (2017, 2019) studies on the translatorial *ethos* consists of translations where the translator is vividly present through prefaces, notes, additions to the original text, etc.

Furthermore, as Spoturno (2017, 2022) herself acknowledges, the researcher can at most attempt to reconstruct the moves of an implied translator, not of the translator understood as an empirical subject (i.e., a person that exists). The implied translator of a literary work, and by extension also his/her *ethos*, operate mainly within the confines of the communicative exchange

with an implied reader (also not an empirical subject)[1]. Unlike discourse studies, sociology is committed to the study empirical subjects as actors in society.

By pointing at the limitations of what one could call an internalist analysis of translations I am not denying that it is possible to identify signs of the translator's agency in translated texts. In fact, a number of case studies have been able to link concrete translatorial decisions to the translator's motivations and perceptions, as well as the broader social structures that shape them (Hourmouziadis, 2022; Simeoni, 2007; Yannakopoulou, 2008). In that body of scholarship, which aims to explain concrete decisions made by translators, the notion of *habitus* features prominently. The *habitus* allows the researcher to bridge the conceptual gap between the social structures that can shape behavior (class, upbringing, symbolic status, etc.) and individual creativity.[2] Another strand of research is made up of works that apply the concept of *habitus* to study how translators publicly present themselves and their own translating activity (Meylaerts, 2010; Sela-Sheffy, 2005; Voinova & Schlesinger, 2016). That body of work has recently been referred to as a constitutive element of *literary translator studies* (Kaindl, 2021). This article belongs to this latter strand of research, which relies heavily on translators' utterances outside of the translated literary text in an attempt to limit the extent of the speculation inherent to the study of works which, by their very nature, allow for multiple interpretations (Lévy & Quemin, 2022).

In this article I abstain from making any claims about the type of *habitus* that might have guided individual choices by translators, or about some sort of professional *habitus* that translators might share to some degree. My purpose is to describe what some translators did to claim symbolic capital for themselves and their occupation, and to drive home the argument that the symbolic capital at stake was of the kind that is specific to the literary field. In addition to enriching the existing scholarship on translators' associations (Dwyer, 2010; Griffin-Mason, 2018; Pym, 2014), the study presented here might be of use to those interested in the translator's *habitus*, as it points at an underexplored field of social action where the concept might have some explanatory power: the collective action that takes place within translators' organizations.

The textual sources that I have examined for this study on Spanish translators consist mainly of periodicals published by translator associations Asociación Profesional Española de Traductores e Intérpretes (APETI), and Asociación Colegial de Escritores – Sección Autónoma de Traductores de Libros (later renamed as *ACE traductores*). The publications of these organizations are particularly valuable in that, unlike the answers of translators to questionnaires, interviews or emails, they were not originally prompted by the inquiry of a researcher (cf. Lindqvist, 2021; Sela-Sheffy, 2005). Instead, these texts are driven by the explicit purpose of making the voices of translators part of the public discourse regarding translation without any mediation by non-translators.

I have selected the textual evidence discussed in this article with the purpose of illustrating points of contention about translation's nature, as well as its relationship to both the literary and

[1] Spoturno's notions of implied translator and translator's *ethos* are elaborations of the concept of the implied author, originally formulated by Booth and later developed by Chatman, Amossy and others, as well as the related concepts of authorial *ethos* and implied reader. For a thorough critique of these concepts coming from within the discipline of literary studies, see Herman and Vervaeck (2011).

[2] For an overview of different ways in which the concept of *habitus* can be operationalized in translation studies, see Wolf (2007, 2011, 2012).

the non-literary. I do not claim that the words cited here have been representative of the consensus among translators at any point in time. Neither do I aspire to reconstruct any debates in full, or do justice to all relevant opinions on, say, whether translation is a form of literary writing, or whether a translator is born or made. It is not possible to do so within the space constraints of an article. Rather, I point at the existence of those debates in order to drive the argument that literary translators' public conversations about translation were ultimately part of the struggles to define the very structure of the literary field, and to acquire symbolic capital within it. The fact that many translators would disagree with the ones that I am citing here does not weaken my argument. Much the opposite, it confirms the existence, and salience, of the debates.

3. "Breaking the Wall of Silence": Translators' *prises de position*

Established in the 1950s, although not very active until the 1970s, APETI was the first association to make a sustained effort to improve the status of translation professionals in Spain (Ruiz Molina, 2012). Its emergence was part of a broader transnational phenomenon: the proliferation of national translators' associations under the aegis of the Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (Pym, 2014). APETI aspired to represent the interests of all translators and interpreters in Spain, irrespective of their area of specialization. Among the organization's main activities were the publication of a bulletin (*Boletín informativo de la Asociación Profesional Española de Traductores e Intérpretes*), keeping a specialized library for translators, facilitating members' visibility to potential clients, and managing the Fray Luis de León translation prize. In the 1980s, the dominant position that interpreters' interests occupied within this (at least nominally) catch-all organization led a number of translators of books to establish a separate one. The new organization took the form of a translators-specific chapter within the existing writers' association *Asociación Colegial de Escritores* (Ruiz Molina, 2012).

The newly organized collective, which today is known as *ACE traductores* (ACEtt), placed the focus of its activities on helping translators secure more favorable contracts with publishers and enforce their intellectual property rights. The intellectual property law of 1987, in which translators gained the legal status of writers (Benítez et al., 1993), created a framework conducive to this kind of activism. The law would soon prove ineffective in guaranteeing better terms of work for translators ("Entrevista a Catalina Martínez Muñoz", 2021). It did, however, heighten expectations, and make the state the self-evident addressee of translators' legal and policy-related demands. On the bread-and-butter front, the effectiveness of this organization is far from impressive, at least if we are to judge it based on the economic compensation that Spanish literary translators receive for their work today. Julia Osuna, a prolific literary translator who received one of the country's most prestigious awards in 2023, took advantage of the limelight that the award earned her to bring attention to her inability to secure an income above the minimum monthly salary by working as a self-employed translator (Osuna, 2024). Economic incentives, however, are not the only ones that matter in the world of cultural production. From the point of view of the sociology of translation and literature, the importance of ACEtt goes beyond what might be regarded as purely practical matters.

ACEtt created spaces for the production of literary value (i.e., of the belief in literary value) and the assignment of such value to translation. It also functioned as a mechanism for translators to collectively vie for symbolic capital within the broader literary field. This is best exemplified by the content of the association's journal *Vasos Comunicantes*. The journal began publication in 1993. Already in the first pages of its inaugural issue, the editors state their aim to provide literary translators with an outlet from which to speak about translation:

> We translators have good reasons to complain about the scarce, very deficient opportunities that we are offered to communicate to society, even literary society, which we aspire to take part in, about the conditions and principles central to our work; to break the wall of silence of literary supplements and journals; to reply to some critique that we consider unfair or disproportionate […] ("Revista de traducción", 1993, p. 8, my translation).

The editors end their introduction by presenting the newly born journal as a counterpoint to academic discourse on translation, which was developing rapidly at the time. These were the years when Translation and Interpreting departments proliferated in the country's public university system.

> For some time now, multiple periodicals have appeared that address different aspects of translation, for the most part in academia … We salute this development without any sense of rivalry. Each one has his precise purpose and his place, and all of us together will contribute from our own spaces to elevate the social status of our indispensable activity. *Vasos Comunicantes* will make an effort to contribute with the professional literary translator's vision and experience ("Revista de traducción", 1993, p. 8, my translation).

One defining feature of an autonomous field of cultural production is that creators claim for themselves the ultimate say in determining the criteria for assessing the value of a work (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 60–63). In the same inaugural issue of *Vasos Comunicantes*, Esther Benítez, winner of the National Prize for Best Translation the previous year and by then a well-known organizer for translators' economic rights (Ruiz Molina, 2012), says the following about literary critics: "First of all, the critic does not know the language, and does not have the original text to make a comparison. All he has is the Spanish text, and if it sounds right to him, then it's all good". (Benítez et al., 1993, p. 22, my translation). We should interpret statements of this kind, and at least some of ACEtt's activities more generally (e.g., organizing conferences or publishing members' pieces) as moves aimed at positioning translators as legitimizers of their own work. These *prises de position*, to use Bourdieu's terminology (Bourdieu, 1983), take the form of distancing oneself from, and sometimes even confronting, other possible legitimizers. In this case, other potential legitimizers could be academics, critics, or editors. Such moves go a step further than simply demanding that others (e.g. the Ministry of Culture, scholars or the general reader) recognize the status of translation as a valuable activity which deserves economic support, or simply recognition in a general sense.

In addition to presenting translators as the most qualified judges of what a good translation is, in the pages of *Vasos Comunicantes* one finds instances of translators performing a disregard for the economic incentive. This is another type of move that is typical of writers and artists more

generally in social contexts where the field of cultural production has become relatively autonomous from economic and political imperatives. In the journal one encounters multiple statements of this kind. Just to add one example to Miguel Sáenz's self-depiction as a bad negotiator, which I have already discussed, let us consider an article by Esther Benítez on intellectual property. The main purpose of that text was to explain how a recently passed intellectual property law affected translators. The text is peppered with references to the purported "ugliness" of the topic:

> It is unclear to me whether I should consider it an honor to address such a dry a topic as copyright […] or whether I should think of it as punishment by the journal, which has made me dance with the ugliest among our areas of interest (Benítez, 1994, p. 23, my translation).

That Esther Benítez, arguably the most overtly politicized, economically-oriented activist in the ACEtt *milieu* (Ruiz Molina, 2012) would feel the need to almost excuse herself for talking about intellectual property rights is, I argue, quite telling. The gesturing of Benítez, Sáenz and others allows us to speak of literary translation, if not as a subfield with some degree of autonomy within the field of literature, certainly as a space of interaction within a literary field that does have its own degree of autonomy from economics, politics, and other fields. One might translate literature for money, but there is some kind of symbolic reward in presenting oneself as a person who does not *only* do it for money. These *prises the position*, individual in the sense that they are claims made by one translator, yet also collective because of the medium chosen for their publication, remind us of Flaubert's public self-positioning as analyzed in Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art*.

Flaubert negated the legitimacy of the economic incentive for a writer, and distanced himself from the Academy (the most prestigious legitimizing institution at the time). By challenging the validity of economic success and externally granted status as signs of literary value, he facilitated the autonomization of literature from the economic as well as the political in nineteenth-century France (Bourdieu, 1996). The acts of negation and self-distancing need not be unambiguous in order to be sociologically relevant, as exemplified by the discrete concessions that Flaubert, Baudelaire and others made sometimes to the appeal of literary salons, and even the Academy (Bourdieu, 1996). A further illustrative example is Zola's acknowledgment that money made the modern author a possibility in the first place (Bourdieu, 1996). In the case of late twentieth century Spanish translators, the ambiguity of their position towards the economic field is made obvious by presenting economic matters as non-decisive, as in the case of Miguel Sáenz, or as tedious, however unavoidable, as in the case of Esther Benítez. This ambiguity was intended for internal consumption within the professional community of translators, who were the target audience of the journal.

Ambiguity is also characteristic of interventions in *Vasos Comunicantes* that address the relationship between translation as a creative process on the one hand, and the academic field of translation studies on the other. A case in point is Miguel Ángel Vega's article "Towards a rethinking of the translator's profile" (Vega, 1993). Vega's position was itself one that straddled between translation as literary practice, and as object of academic study and formal training. At

the time when he penned the article, he was the director of Complutense University's translation institute (Vega, 1993, p. 41). He had also authored what one could call "philological translations" of texts by Friedrich Schlegel and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, published by the prestigious academic publishers Cátedra and Fundación Universitaria Española (Fundación Dialnet, 2024). He had also translated, among others, literary classics Goethe and Kästner, as well as the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (Benítez, 1992, p. 221). Vega starts his article with a tongue-in-cheek reference to the numerous works that have been written on translation, an endlessly diverse, yet hardly illuminating body of scholarship according to him:

> Is there anything left to be said about translation? […] The bibliographic entries [on translation] are counted in the tens of thousands, and in them one finds everything and its opposite: here the letter, there the meaning, yonder that it deverbalizes, that it decorticates, broadens, reduces, transforms… There is talk about situational theories, transformational theories, semantic theories, of regular correspondence, of communicative equivalence […] The day when those of us who work on the topic finally agree, we will have expanded our capacity for human understanding beyond the confines of language (Vega, 1993, p. 41, my translation).

Vega makes himself the target of his own irony by referring to "those of *us* who work" (my emphasis) in the production of theories about translation. This is a move that he would repeat in other occasions (e.g. Antolín Rato & Vega, 1994). His humor also targets the proliferation of translation programs in Spanish universities as a result of a top-down process initiated by the state:

> One day, on September 30, 1991 […] a decree appears in the government gazette that establishes a new course of study under the flashy title '*Licenciatura* in Translation and Interpreting' […] which some fifteen universities run to grab […] Some of them have the nerve to present themselves […] as prestigious centers even though they came into existence in December of 1992 (Vega, 1993, p. 43, my translation).

To be sure, Vega never goes as far as denying the value of formal training for translators. The main goal of his text is, after all, to propose a rethinking of translation studies programs. He does, however, posit limits to what can be, and cannot be, taught. In a round table reproduced in the second issue of *Vasos Comunicantes*, he stated that "the translator is both born and made" (Antolín Rato & Vega, 1994, p. 58, my translation). After a list of arguments in defense of formal training, he concludes in irredeemably ambiguous fashion: "while translation cannot be taught, to a certain degree it is teachable […]" (Antolín Rato & Vega, 1994, p. 60, my translation).

These examples of translators engaged in the discursive negotiation of literary translation's relationship to the economic and the academic fields, as well as to literary criticism, are demonstrative of an important aspect of translator's collective action that has passed unnoticed in the literature on translators' organizations (Dwyer, 2010; Griffin-Mason, 2018; Pym, 2014). These works bundle together the analysis of literary translators' associations with those of other translating professions. The result is that literary translators' associations and their activities are approached as one would approach any professional organization focused on narrowly economic goals: signaling quality to customers, establishing and defending entry barriers, improving bargaining capacity, etc. From that point of view, it is easy to interpret whatever does not fit within a business logic as merely communicative activities and even dismiss it as an exercise in victimism:

> However, if the function of [literary translators'] associations were ever to restrict membership so as to bolster translators' authority and earnings, then they would not appear to have been very successful. The function of the associations is more often to circulate information, to organize social events, and to promote public awareness of their members' work—which necessarily involves producing information on financial precariousness, seeking collective solutions, and occasionally indulging in some degree of shared commiseration (Pym, 2014).

When seen through the lens of Bourdieu's sociology of literature and art, it becomes apparent that translators stand to gain symbolic capital from their self-portrayal as economic losers. In a more general sense, it becomes possible to interpret the activities of ACEtt (and possibly other associations) as the creation of spaces where the very nature and boundaries of both translation and the translator are negotiated through interaction between translators themselves. Regardless of how one might conceptualize the position of translators within the literary field, any project aimed at reconstructing the structure and evolution of such field will have to account for translators' social practice within it.

In the Israeli context, Sela-Sheffy (2008) has demonstrated that translators often engage in both self-promotional discourse *and* the promotion of translation more generally as a valuable activity when interviewed. One of the strategies that Sela-Sheffy has identified in the construction of the translator's persona is the self-portrayal "as an artist in her/his own right" (Sela-Sheffy, 2008, p. 614). Those findings are in line with the evidence discussed in this section. By presenting themselves as willing economic losers and, at the same time, claiming for themselves the right to judge translations and translators, the individuals discussed here positioned themselves as artistic creators. I now turn to the question of what kind of creator emerges out of the discursive moves of the translators organized in ACEtt.

4. Positioning translation within the literary field

Thus far I have provided examples of how translators publicly positioned themselves and their occupation in relation to the extra-literary: money, the public university system, and criticism by non-translators. But what about the position of translation within literature? I insist that my aim is not to adjudicate the question of whether translation is a form of literature in its own right, or what kind of objective relationship exists between one and the other. Instead, I am pointing at communicative moves (i.e., acts of social interaction) with which translators engage the literary field in order to negotiate its very structure, as well as their own individual positions within it. In this section, I discuss how translators constructed their own work as a form of literary creation by presenting it as an activity that, in a way that is analogous to that of literature, creates its own object. Two further features of translation, or rather of the terms in which translation is discussed in *Vasos Comunicantes*, compel us to think of it as a form of literature in its own right. One is translation's competitive self-referentiality, i.e., translators making reference to other texts and authors (both of translations and originals) in the struggle for literature-specific capital. The other is translation's bipolar structure, defined by a heteronomous (i.e., commercial) and an autonomous pole.

4.1. Creation of the object

In Bourdieu's account of the autonomization of the French literary field, Flaubert's pivotal contribution was to usher in a new form of writing that itself creates reality instead of just describing or imitating it, which was the norm among the realists of his time. Flaubert overcame the contemporary debate over whether a writer should choose beautiful subjects to write about, or write beautifully about any subject, however banal or abject. He elevated his writing above the dichotomy between content and form. Flaubert claimed not to know in advance what he was going to write. In this new conceptualization of the literary, the author conceives of himself as someone who thinks the unthinkable. This is a defining characteristic which unavoidably makes him a solitary figure in society, an outsider (Bourdieu, 1996). Bourdieu tells us that literature becomes autonomous once the value of a work cannot be reduced to its social function, its beauty or its closeness to an extra-literary reality. The idea that the object of literature is nothing else than literature itself has far-reaching implications as far as translation's relationship to the literary field is concerned. Can a translation be literature if its validity is premised upon its closeness to the original work? Can translation create its own object, i.e., one distinct from that of the original work?

In *Vasos Comunicantes* one finds multiple statements where translators speak of themselves as straddling the roles of the professional and the literary creator. For instance, the editors argue that translators are "located between the Limbo of anonymity and the hell of creation" ("Presentación", 1994, my translation). Some translators deny outright translation's autonomy as a creative activity: "If translation were an art in its own right, in which whoever practiced it could establish an aesthetic of his own …" (Antolín Rato & Vega, 1994, p. 57, my translation). In some cases, it is proposed that translation does create an object of its own, distinct from that of the original work. A case in point is Mariano Antolín Rato's discussion of translation's relationship to the original, one inspired by his own experience as a translator, and by his knowledge of the theoretical work of linguists Jakobson, Peirce and others. "The demand for absolute fidelity is illusory, and leads to the misconception that meaning can exist independently from form. The act of translating is, therefore, an assumed contradiction that creates new values in language and culture" (Antolín Rato, 1994, p. 12, my translation).

Antolín, translator of Jean Ray and Tama Janowith among others, and also an award-winning novelist ("Antolín Rato, Mariano: Biografía", 2024; Ministerio de Cultura, 2024), explains that precisely because the meaning (*sentido*, as he puts it) of the original cannot be separated from form, translation's new form necessarily creates new meaning (Antolín Rato, 1994, p. 12–13). Translation therefore creates a unique fiction where the suspension of the reader's disbelief (to use Bourdieu's language) becomes necessary, just like it is necessary for any literary text to function as such. Within the fictional world that translation creates, meaning can indeed be separated from form. Moreover, according to Antolín, translation can open up expressive possibilities beyond those of other forms of literary creation. He illustrates this point with the example of 'the famous "inaccurate" versions of Shakespeare that Boris Pasternak wrote in Russian' (Antolín Rato, 1994, p. 13, my translation). Citing Proust, Antolín also questions the clear-cut distinction between author and translator: "the writer does not need […] to invent, since that

book already exists within each one of us, but to translate it" (Antolín Rato, 1994, p. 14, my translation). He also cites Edmond Gary: "Literary translation is not a linguistic operation, but a literary operation" (Antolín Rato, 1994, p. 16, my translation).

Antolín's lengthy text on the nature of translation revisits the debate over whether translation is a form of literary creation and adjudicates the question in favor of the affirmative position. It is noteworthy that he does so by first revisiting the opinions voiced by renown linguists and literary authors and then finding the decisive argument in his own creative work. He found the truth, or so it seems, in the very act of translating poetry:

> And so, [approaching translation] as literature, I tried to solve the attempt of those verses to reveal the emotion of a man in one moment, and to establish themselves […] as the fleeting image of a state of the soul. In them there was no reflection of things, just the simple vision of reality in an aesthetic moment when the total unity between the poet's perception and nature occurs. The limits between subject and object, perception and word, become blurred. *The verbal creation itself* is the apex of the experience that is also destined to release the same world of sensations in the reader (Antolín Rato, 1994, p. 16, my translation and my emphasis).

4.2. Self-referentiality

In addition to literature's *sui generis* relationship to the real, Bourdieu posits its self-referentiality as a constitutive feature of the autonomy of the literary field. Whether in the literary works themselves, in manifestos, or other forms of written communication (prefaces, personal letters, etc.), authors write about other authors and their works. References internal to the literary are often explicitly contentious. One writes in opposition to what has come before, although it is also common to reverentially refer to some even older figure in a back-to-the-roots kind of rhetorical move. Authors need to refer to the history of the field in order to revolutionize it, i.e., in order for them to be perceived as truly original in an artistic sense (Bourdieu, 1996). Translators have to abide, in one way or another, by the imperative of closeness to the original, which limits their options when it comes to inscribing references in their translation. Yet this fact does not fully prevent translators from engaging the literary field competitively.

A number of strategies are available to translators willing to compete for symbolic capital. A well-known one is the preface to the translation of a classic work, where it is common for translators to refer to previous translations, and to explain why theirs is, in one way or another, a better alternative (Bergua, 2002). Granted, such symbolic capital does not always have to be of the literary type, as translators can also present themselves as competent profesionals, knowledgeable of a foreign culture, custodians of the national language, attentive readers, etc. (Sela-Sheffy, 2008; Spoturno, 2017). It does not *have to* be, but it *can* be. In the specific context of the discursive spaces created within ACEtt, we encounter revealing examples of how translators, when writing for each other, get an opportunity to negotiate translation's place within the literary field. Their competitive intra-literary dialogs can include translations as well as original literary works.

Antolín's (1994) text "The translator as an invisible man" ("El traductor como hombre invisible") is a paradigmatic case in that he displays great command of the history of translation. He does not just talk about what linguists and writers have said about translation, but also refers to

examples of how translation has influenced the production of original works. Antolín tells us about specific translators and translations. In some cases, his stance is quite critical, for instance when he mentions Borges' translations of Faulkner, or Menéndez Pelayo's 1881 translation of *Macbeth*. Antolín ends his text with a reference to Garcilaso de la Vega, by far the oldest figure to appear in the whole essay (he died in 1536), and an undisputed member of Spain's literary pantheon. Antolín presents Garcilaso's approval of Juan Boscán's translation of Baldassare Castiglione's Il cortigiano as a judgment guided by the right criteria for appraising a translation. Garcilaso's praise might not seem particularly original to us from the standpoint of today's translation studies. It is worded in terms of balance between accuracy in relation to the meaning of the original, and style in the target language.

Be that as it may, it is telling that Antolín concludes a comprehensive overview of the debate over translation's literariness, the criteria for assessing translations, and so on with this emblematic figure, presenting his words as the closing statement of the text. This very much looks like the back-to-the-roots type of move that Bourdieu has identified in the French literary field. Examples of translators criticizing translations abound in the pages of *Vasos Comunicantes*, although more often than not the criticized person remains unnamed. Suffice it to quote Miguel Ángel Vega's complaint that "we translators decisively contribute to that lack of prestige [of translators] when we dedicate ourselves to bashing our colleagues. The beatings that Esther [Benítez] gives…" (Benítez et al., 1993, p. 21–22, my translation). The unfinished sentence lets the reader's imagination complete the picture.

Contentious references to other literary texts (translated or not) as well as authors (sometimes including translators) have been described, without necessarily being analyzed through the lens of sociology, in a number of studies on individual translations and translators (e.g. Freire, 2006; Marín Hernández, 2007; Yannakopoulou, 2008). In his study of Emilia Pardo Bazán's translation of Gouncourt's *Les frères Zemganno*, Marín Hernández (2007) describes the translation itself as a literary manifesto ("la traducción como manifiesto literario"), in the sense that it functioned as an intervention in contemporary literary debates around realism and naturalism. In this regard, it is safe to argue that ACEtt and its related activities and publications became a space in which translators could participate in literary debates.

4.3. Bipolar structure

Bourdieu tells us that, as the French literary field became increasingly autonomous from the political and economic fields during the nineteenth century, literary genres underwent a double process of internal restructuring and repositioning within the field. While the literary field can never be fully autonomous from the political and economic, it does have an autonomous and an heteronomous pole between which authors and works are located. Works produced with the purpose of maximizing profit and/or achieve a deliberate social-political goal would be near the heteronomous pole. In contrast, literature for literature's sake would be close to the autonomous pole. Genres, much like individual works or authors, are also located along the heteronomous-autonomous continuum. Poetry occupies the most autonomous position, and theater the most

heteronomous. Within each genre there are also differences in the degree of autonomy of each work or author.

With regard to translation, which Bourdieu does not discuss in his history of the French literary field, I claim that literary translation presents an internal bipolar structure similar to that of literary genres. Translations are usually commissioned by editors who expect the translator to perform a purely professional, profit-seeking operation. It is also the case, however, that translators often speak of a felt urge to translate a work, to transfer its meaning to their own mother language, and to bring a new text into being. Sela-Sheffy (2008) and Lindqvist (2006, 2021) have reported on translators making such statements in the Israeli and Swedish contexts, respectively. The distinction between what one could call bread-winning and self-inspired translations becomes salient in the discussions contained in the pages of *Vasos Comunicantes*. Clara Janés, a consecrated poet in her own right and also the translator of Vladimir Holan and Marguerite Duras among others (Benítez, 1992, p. 115), describes her early steps as a literary translator in the following terms:

> I began translating moved by an impulse, an instinct to get to know a work well, and to make it known […] Rather than a translation, [my first translation] was almost a continuous meditation about the work, but it was really worth it. The effort was so great that I almost forgot about this. But then once again the discovery and the impulse to step into a work and make it known, when I discovered the Czech poet Holan, made me start studying Czech in order to read him and translate him. And then a fierce battle started […] (Benítez et al., 1993, p. 12–13, my translation).

Janés' account of her first steps as a translator, worded in terms of instinct, impulse, continuous meditation, fierce battle, etc. very much sounds like the way in which an artist is carried by the creative process, as opposed to the intentional, calculated way in which a professional applies her know-how to getting a job done in exchange for money. Yet the latter is precisely what professional translators often do. Since its creation, one of ACEtt's goals has been to help book translation remain a viable profession. One of ACEtt's most important activities over the years has been the publication of concretely articulated policy proposals, aimed at improving the economic compensation of translators (ACE traductores, n/d). At the same time, ACEtt has also created spaces where statements like Janés', where economic motivation is nowhere to be found, are not just possible, but also accepted as the testimony of a highly prestigious translator.

Interviewed in 2003 (i.e., roughly two decades after the establishment of ACEtt) by a fellow member, Miguel Sáenz conceded that "accepting a translation for merely economic reasons [*pro pane lucrando* in the original], as Unamuno would do, seems perfectly understandable to me" (Fortea, 2003, p. 36, my translation). Sáenz made this statement in the context of a broader argument about the translator's responsibility towards the original work, regardless of the latter's literary qualities. As I have already pointed out, Sáenz had a decades-long record of presenting himself as someone who would only translate works that he liked and had spoken of translating for money as "a hellish job." He probably felt the need to justify his reflecting on a translator's responsibility towards a low-quality book by introducing it with the concession that doing such translations is "understandable." Yet Sáenz presents the undertaking of bread-winning translations as "understandable," nothing more. He thereby implies that such translations occupy, after all, a

space that is somehow less valuable than that of translations guided by an aesthetic call of some sort. To the latter he refers, in the same interview, as "a Godly pleasure" (Fortea, 2003, p. 37, my translation).

In the social space that book translators inhabit, translated texts appear to be located between a pole where literary value is the main criterion for deciding whether to translate a work, and a less valuable one (however understandable) where one translates for money. The statements by Clara Janés and Miguel Sáenz, in which economic motivations are either absent or devalued in favor of "inner" motivations, are in line with Sela-Sheffy's findings in relation to Israeli literary translators, who often "demonstrate an 'interest of disinterestednes' ... denying all forms of economic gratifications as factors in their translation careers" (Sela-Sheffy, 2016, p. 58).

5. Conclusions and areas for further inquiry

In this article I have analyzed a series of public statements by translators, all of which speak in one way or another to literary translation's position vis-à-vis academic institutions and literary critics, as well as its position within the field of literature more generally. Such statements occurred within communicative spaces created for the promotion of translators' collective interests, and for the expression of their viewpoints. I have approached these texts as forms of interaction aimed at "playing the game" of vying for symbolic capital specific to the literary field. The symbolic capital at stake was sometimes individual, for instance when someone adopted an artist-like stance (Clara Janés and Miguel Sáenz) or displayed his knowledge of the history of translation from a critical standpoint (Mariano Antolín Rato). Symbolic capital could also be claimed for translators as a *milieu*, as when Miguel Ángel Vega mocked the theories on translation coming from academia, or Esther Benítez dismissed literary critics as incapable of judging translations fairly.

ACEtt and its periodical *Vasos Comunicantes* were born at a time of growing public and academic interest in literary translation in Spain. As stated by the editors of the journal, its aim was to "break the wall of silence" that surrounded their profession. It soon became clear that translators were not only keen on discussing practical and economic matters. They also discussed topics such as what makes a translator, where the value of a translation lies, how translation relates to literature, and what relationship a translation bears to what lies outside of itself (the original text, the translator, the author of the original, literary heritage, and so on). In other words, the debates over translation were ultimately debates over literature, of which translation was presented as a constitutive component. In a number of texts, some of which I have quoted or paraphrased here, translation is discussed as an activity that constructs its own object and is organized along a heteronomous-autonomous continuum with regard to economic incentives, in a way analogous to that of literature writ large. Discussions about translation were often carried out in terms of competitive references to other texts and writers; sometimes translations and translators, sometimes not.

One implication of this study is the need to revise the view that translators' associations are organizations aimed primarily at promoting strictly economic interests, or which function as social clubs of sorts. The study also challenges the idea that translators share a subservient *habitus*

that predisposes them to comply with norms and accept a low status (cf. Simeoni, 1998). Much the opposite, many translators organized in ACEtt claimed the right to establish the criteria for what counts as a good translation for translators themselves. Some explained their motivation to translate a text in anything but a language of subservience. The findings discussed here also carry programmatic implications in terms of what a sociologically and historically informed description of the literary field and its mechanisms should look like moving forward. It will be necessary to further explore the positions that translators occupy within the literary field, beyond the functions of mediator or consecrator (Casanova, 2002, 2004; Gouanvic, 2005; Sapiro, 2008). It will also be necessary that we take into account, for analytical purposes, the claim that some translators stake to the status of literary creators, regardless of whether we ultimately agree with them or not (cf. Gouanvic, 2005). In other words, instead of treating literary translation either as a relatively distinct (sub)field of social action (Bergua, 2002; Ibarluzea & Olaziregi, 2016; Lindqvist, 2006, 2021; Sela-Sheffy, 2005; Zhang, 2023) or as a set of short-lived interactions within ephemeral contexts (Wolf, 2007), we should think of literary translation as a set of positions, strategies and cultural goods that are part and parcel of the literary field.

The body of textual sources from which I have drawn the evidence discussed in this article imposes certain limits on the extent to which my findings can be generalized. Not only is the chronological scope of the sources somewhat narrow (approximately the last two decades of the twentieth century), but the geographic dimension is also limited. Most translators organized around APETI and ACEtt during the latter's early years were based in Madrid (López Guix, 2022). I have focused on that time period because the rapid growth of translator training programs in Spanish universities roughly coincided with the adoption of a more vocal stance by these organizations. While I believe that a focus on this short period is warranted, much work remains to be done at a larger time scale. Valuable studies exist on how individual Spanish translator-authors conceived of their own translating activity in relation to the broader literary scene in earlier times (e.g. Freire, 2006; Marín Hernández, 2007), but we still lack works that systematically apply the theoretical toolkit of the sociology of literature to the study of Spanish translators in historical perspective. It is also an open question to what extent the findings discussed here in relation to Spanish translators can be generalized across Spain's institutionally and linguistically diverse geography, or to other countries. Last, but not least, it would be worthwhile to search for possible links between the strategies that translators adopt when presenting themselves and their profession on the one hand, and the concrete choices that they make in the process of actually translating on the other. But for the time being, I hope to have made a strong methodological case here that translators' associations should be part of a sociology of literature. It is now up to the reader to judge.

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