



Translating the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish: A case study of the translation of sacred texts

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Abstract: The translation of sacred texts is one of the oldest forms of translation, one which has helped develop our understanding of what translation is. Even so, the question arises as to whether there is anything particularly distinctive about translating sacrality. On the one hand, it can be argued that translating sacred texts is just like translating any other historical or cultural texts (Naudé, 2010). On the other hand, it can be argued that the translation of sacred texts deserves its own category because, for some members of the population, these texts play a special role (Long, 2013). This study seeks to address this question of whether the translation of sacred texts presents a unique case. The study will focus on one aspect of this question, specifically, is there anything distinctive about the process of translating sacred texts? To do this, the study will present the translation of the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish as a case study. Methodologically, the case study will rely on Actor-Network Theory to describe the translation process in terms of its actors, transfers, and manipulations (see Gonne, 2018). This exploration will allow for some helpful conclusions to the question at hand.

Keywords: sacrality; translation of sacred texts; *Book of Mormon*; Melitón González Trejo; Actor-Network Theory.

1. Introduction

The translation of sacred texts is one of the oldest forms of translation, dating back to at least the hymns to Sin/Nanna, the moon god, in the 7th century BCE or even further back in Ancient Mesopotamia (Robison, 2000). As a form of translation, it has remained an ongoing human activity throughout history, and it has been instrumental in the development, maintenance, and expansion of the world's major religious traditions. This is true of traditions where evangelizing has been a distinguishing characteristic, such as Christianity (Naudé & Miller-Naudé, 2018), but also in traditions



where proselytizing is not a tenant, such as Buddhism, Judaism, and Hinduism (Naudé & Miller-Naudé, 2018). Translation of sacred texts has even played an important role in traditions with sacred languages, e.g., Arabic in Islam, where the tradition's holiest texts, e.g. the *Quran*, are deemed to be untranslatable (Barnes, 2011; Naudé & Miller-Naudé, 2018). Inasmuch as these religious traditions generated organizations, beliefs, and practices that were influential in shaping the world, translation within these traditions can also be understood to have played an important historical role.

Within Translation Studies, the translation of sacred texts helped develop our understanding of what translation is. In the West, early theorizing on translation often took place within the context of different *Bible* translation projects, with writings by Jerome / Eusebius Hieronymus (Robinson, 2002) and Martin Luther (Robinson, 2002) as salient examples. More recently, the theories proposed by Eugene Nida (e.g., Nida & Taber, 1979) helped move translation theory forward through a more rigorous approach to translation, influenced in part by Noam Chomsky (Barnes, 2011). In the half a century that followed Nida, “translation studies has tried to shake off the baggage of its long association with Bible translation in particular and religion(s) in general” (Israel, 2023, p. 3). Even so, the apparently never-ceasing practice of translating religious texts, combined with religion's “perceived function and significance in changing political, historical, social and philosophical contexts” (Israel, 2023, p. 3), means that Translation Studies cannot fully divest itself of interest in the translation of sacred texts. This ongoing relevance is evidenced, e.g., in the existence of entries regarding the translation of the sacred in scholarly translation handbooks (Long, 2013; Naudé, 2010) and the publication of edited volumes dedicated to the translation of sacred texts (Israel, 2023; Boulogne *et al.*, 2024).

Despite the translation of sacred texts being a distinct area within Translation Studies, the question arises as to whether there is anything particularly distinctive about translating sacrality (Long, 2013). This study seeks to help answer that question. Naturally, it is a very broad question, so this study will focus on one aspect of it, that is, on whether the process of translating sacred texts is unique in any distinctive way. To do this, the paper will first review the literature on the subject in section 2. Then in section 3, it will argue that Actor Network Theory can provide an adequate method for exploring the process of translating sacred texts. Section 4 will apply this method to a case study of the translation of a sacred text, namely, the *Book of Mormon* from English into Spanish. The closing portion of the paper, section 5, will return to the initial question and conclude that the translation of sacred texts is unique in distinctive ways.

2. Background

Scholarship on translating sacrality has provided insights that inform this study. A starting point becomes terminological. What is the most appropriate way to refer to the activity in question? Douglas Robinson (2000) recognizes the problems in defining such malleable terms as translation, sacred, and text, but seems to settle on “translation of sacred texts”. Lynne Long initially refers to the activity as “translating holy texts” (2005) but eventually also moves to “translation of sacred texts” (2013). The adjectives holy and sacred may be too difficult to differentiate when modifying the word text, and thus the two terms could justifiably be used interchangeably. In turn, Jacobus Naudé (2010) rather pragmatically employs the following terms interchangeably: “religious



translation”, “translation of religious texts”, and “translation of sacred texts”. While defining the sacred is fraught with difficulty, it seems not all religious texts are necessarily sacred. A Handbook of Instructions for administering Latter-day Saint congregations may be about religious matters, but hardly anyone would seriously consider it sacred. Therefore, of those three terms, the third may be more precise when dealing with texts which are set apart by the community as having particular significance (e.g., the *New Testament* for Christians). More recently, Hephzibah Israel (2023) has referred to the activity in question as “translation of sacred texts” also. The key part of this definition seems to be the prepositional object “sacred texts”. Israel (2023, p. 6) defines “sacred texts” as “any written text, oral narrative, object, artwork, image, ritual, action or sound perceived as sacred or holy or used for any purpose considered sacred by a community”. An example of a sacred text under this definition would be the *Avesta* for Zoroastrians. This study will employ the term translation of sacred texts and rely on Israel’s understanding of what a sacred text is. For purposes of this study, the translation of the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish, in whole or in part, constitutes the translation of a sacred text.

As regards translation, Robinson (2000, p. 103) argues that sacred texts can be positioned within a “historical course” characterized by four stages. Early on, the translation of sacred texts is unregulated, in great measure because the religion is not yet institutionalized (Robinson, 2000). Eventually, as the religion becomes regulated, so does the translation of texts, through “the imposition of increasingly strict controls on who translates what, how, and especially for whom, and whether and how and with whom the resulting translations are shared and discussed” (Robinson, 2000, p. 103). This regulated stage is followed by a transitional stage somewhere between the preceding “rigidly enforced ban on vernacular translation” and the forthcoming “open translation for all” models (Robinson, 2000, p. 105). The last stage, therefore, is one of open translation, where control over the translation of the texts is exercised indirectly through control of the methods of interpretation of the text (Robinson, 2000). In this last stage, people “are more or less free to make translations of their own if they can find a publisher, [but] the official translations recommended for use by religious authorities are fairly closely controlled” (Long, 2013, p. 467).

As will be described below, the translation of the *Book of Mormon* never really enjoyed unregulated translation, perhaps because the book is inextricably tied to the founding of its religion. The publication of the *Book of Mormon* only predates the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ (as the Church was originally called) by two weeks. The book went on sale for the first time on March 26, 1830, and the Church was officially organized on April 6, 1830. Thus, activities relating to producing the *Book of Mormon* and organizing the Church of Jesus Christ occurred simultaneously and cannot be disentangled (see Faulring, 1998). True to Robinson’s model, the translation of the *Book of Mormon* seems to be carried out under “strict controls” by the institution that has sponsored much, if not all, of its translations out of English.

However, its translation does not seem to move beyond that second stage. This is perhaps to be expected. As Long (2005, p. 5) convincingly argues: “Holy texts have the complication of institutional claims: the hierarchical structure supporting each religion expects to control the translation of its central text(s), at least in relation to their distribution among the faithful” (see also Stine, 2004). In the present case, the hierarchical structure of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints views the *Book of Mormon* as a central text, even the religion’s “keystone” (see Benson,



1986), and thus expects to control the book's translation and distribution. Long (2005, p. 7) has also argued that the translation of such central texts "is of serious consequence" because of the role sacred texts play "as behaviour models for individuals, communities or whole cultures". As regards the *Book of Mormon*, it is deemed not only as a model for the faithful but also as a key tool in the Church's evangelizing efforts (see Benson, 1988). As will be seen below, the perceived role of the *Book of Mormon* in gaining proselytes became the key motivator for its translation out of English and into Spanish.

Notwithstanding the level of control exercised over the translating, an issue that arises in the scholarship surrounding the translation of sacred texts is whether such translation represents a unique case. On the one hand, Naudé (2010, p. 285) argues that translating sacred texts "is an activity not substantially different from the translation of other texts belonging to a culture remote from the target readers in time and space". Thus, what matters is that translators be qualified to engage in such translation (Naudé & Miller-Naudé, 2018). On the other hand, Long (2013) argues that the translation of sacred texts is a special category that deserves special status within Translation Studies. She reasons that on one level sacred texts are "historical, narrative, philosophical, literary and poetic material", but on another level, "they function for certain sections of the community [...] as Holy Scripture, a message from the deity, divine instructions for living" (Long, 2013, p. 464). She concludes that "their dual status means that their translation has implications beyond cultural and linguistic transfer from one language to another", and therefore they constitute "as a special case when looking at the process of their translation" (Long, 2013, p. 464). As will be seen below, the translation of the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish offers backing to the notion that there is something about sacrality that makes its translating different than that of a strictly historical, narrative, philosophical, literary, or poetic text.

3. Methodology

One of the challenges in studying the translation of sacred texts is that "no one coherent research methodology encompassing all sacred texts has yet emerged" (Long, 2013, p. 464). This is not surprising given that a wide variety of sacred texts exist, written in many languages and translated into many more, which take on different forms, both oral and written, including a range of genres from poetry to prose. These texts have emerged in all time periods, from the very ancient to the rather modern. They are present in many cultures and contexts. Thus it would be difficult to settle on one method to study all of them. In addition, Translations Studies as a field of scholarly pursuit has a historied tradition of borrowing methods from a range of disciplines, including linguistics, literary studies, and sociology (see Flynn & Gambier, 2011). Thus, an object of study as broad as sacred texts in a field with such wide methodology as Translation Studies is bound to be approached with different methods. In Translation Studies, the translation of sacred texts has been approached with methods that involve textual analysis (e.g., Long, 2007), philosophy (e.g., Hauron, 2021), and even machine translation (e.g., Beal, 2023).

Following in line with the interest of Translation Studies in the social (see Wolf & Fukari, 2007), this paper will adapt a method developed in the field of Sociology. More specifically, it will rely on methods derived from Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a social theory developed in the



1980s by scholars in Paris, including Madeleine Akrich, Michel Callon, Antoine Hennion, Bruno Latour, and John Law (Muniesa, 2015). The approach was originally established as a way to understand how science is made (Buzelin, 2007). A key proponent of ANT was Latour, who believed “that to understand a society one must, above all, analyze the way humans and non-humans interact, i.e., how the artefacts that circulate in this society (starting with scientific and technological ones) are produced” (Buzelin, 2005, p. 194). Latour thus rejected simple dichotomies in favor of complex systems of connections, processes, and actors (Buzelin, 2007), an insight that, as will be seen below, has proven methodologically fruitful in Translations Studies.

Scholars have done an excellent job of synthesizing ANT (e.g., Bogic, 2010; Buzelin, 2005), so the present paper will provide only a summary of its key elements that are applicable to this study. The starting point is that Latour (2007, p. 7) understands “the social” to refer to “a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling”. In this view of the social, actors or actants create networks that are “mutually constitutive” and thus “[c]onstantly redefining each other” (Wolf, 2007, p. 23). These two terms — network and actor — warrant definitions, because they are used in a very specific sense within ANT¹. According to Latour, the term network is not to be confused with a technical, engineering network, e.g., a computer network, because an ANT network “may be local, [and] it may have no compulsory paths, no strategically positioned nodes” (Latour, 1996, p. 369). An ANT network is not to be confused with a social network either, because it is not about “the social relations of individual human actors” (Latour, 1996, p. 369). Rather, a network can be understood to be the traces created by the movement of actors/actants (Bogic, 2010). Actors, in turn, are not to be understood merely as individual humans who take action, because “[a]n actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action” (Latour, 1996, p. 373). The combination of networks and actors/actants leads to the concept of actor-network. As Anna Bogic (2010, p. 182) succinctly explains: “Together, actor and network form a unified concept that is conceived as a star-shaped web intertwined with other actor-networks”. The focus of ANT, therefore, is not on the individuals alone but rather the totality of the network (Wolf, 2007).

By tracing the movements of humans and non-humans, ANT becomes a useful tool to understand how things come to be. This approach has proven helpful in Translation Studies. ANT helps translation scholars place their focus on the way things move, including the role played by agents, rather than on the things themselves once they have moved, which can be particularly relevant when considering translations (Gonne, 2018). ANT has been successfully deployed in such a way to uncover “the individuals involved in the translation process and to reveal the extent to which they affected the target text” (Bogic, 2010, p. 180). To achieve this, “the motto is ‘follow the actors’ – which means observe the network as it builds, consolidates and transforms itself through the production process” (Buzelin, 2005, p. 198). In essence, the actants are followed through the

¹ The name Actor-Network theory is admittedly problematic and opaque. Latour comments on this in the following terms: “[T]he historical name [of the approach] is ‘actor-network-theory’, a name that is so awkward, so confusing, so meaningless that it deserves to be kept. If the author, for instance, of a travel guide is free to propose new comments on the land he has chosen to present, he is certainly not free to change its most common name since the easiest signpost is the best—after all, the origin of the word ‘America’ is even more awkward. I was ready to drop this label for more elaborate ones like ‘sociology of translation’, ‘actant-rhizome ontology’, ‘sociology of innovation’, and so on, until someone pointed out to me that the acronym A.N.T. was perfectly fit for a blind, myopic, workaholic, trail-sniffing, and collective traveler” (2007, p. 9).

process of production, which is precisely what allows for a fuller understanding of how something came to be—more so than what the thing came to be.

A helpful method to go about doing this has been employed by Maud Gonne (2018) in her study of Georges Eekhoud's role as a translator in early 20th-century Belgium. Methodologically, Gonne reconstructs Latour's ANT as a three-step process. The first step is to follow the actors (Gonne, 2018). This includes identifying "links between intercultural actors, via human networks, which are usually defined as complex sets of relations that are formed between actors, groups and institutions" (Gonne, 2018, p. 267). Of course, with ANT this requires considering more than human actors but actants generally, i.e., not just people but also things. The second step is to reconstruct the transfer chains (Gonne, 2018). The concept of transfer here includes reconstructing how a text was transformed. Transfer in this sense "is not limited to translation, but also covers associated models such as self-translation, plagiarism, adaptation, or multilingual writing" (Gonne, 2018, p. 272). The third step is to deploy controversies (Gonne, 2018), in other words, "to identify and describe the manipulations performed by mediators in the course of the transfer process" (Gonne, 2018, p. 275). The assumption in this step is that mediators transform texts, and this can "bring controversies—the staking out of opposing sides or of boundaries—to the fore" (Gonne, 2018, p. 276). This, of course, can be especially relevant in the Belgian context, where the tension between speakers of Dutch and French is ripe with controversies. In other contexts, textual transformations may not necessarily imply controversies or "staking out of opposing sides". Thus, this third step may be more controversy prone in some contexts and less so in others. Even so, identifying the manipulations in the transfer process can be methodologically useful.

In part 4, this paper will follow the aforementioned method to gain a fuller understanding of how the *Book of Mormon* came to be translated into Spanish in the 19th century. When dealing with historical matters, this method requires reliance on artifacts such as diaries, correspondence, and drafts (Buzelin, 2005). The present paper will rely mostly on correspondence, memoirs, and diaries to reconstruct how the sacred text in question came to be translated. In terms of the steps it will follow, this paper will first follow the actors by tracing the links between human actors and non-human actants that resulted in the *Book of Mormon's* translation. Then, the paper will reconstruct the transfer chains by explain how the text was transformed in moving from English into Spanish. Finally, the paper will identify the manipulations in the transfer process. The understandings gained from deploying this method will help answer the question as to whether the process of translating the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish was unique in any distinctive way.

4. Discussion

4.1 Follow the actors

To follow the many actors involved in the translation of the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish, one must understand that a distinctive characteristic of the organization that would eventually settle on the name The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is its proselytizing seal. As soon as the Church was organized, the first missionary was sent out with "several copies of the newly printed Book of Mormon" (Samuel Smith, § 2). Missionaries were gradually sent out within the United States



and to the rest of the world. In 1851, apostle Parley P. Pratt was sent on a mission to Chile in order to take the Church into South America. In 1852, Pratt returned to the United States without obtaining a single proselyte, in part due to his inability to communicate in Spanish. While in Chile, Pratt wrote a letter dated March 13, 1852, to Church President Brigham Young in which he argued that the *Book of Mormon* should be translated into Spanish: “I feel as though the Book of Mormon and some cheap publications should be translated into Spanish and printed, and then the key be turned to these nations” (Pratt, 1888, p. 448). Pratt intended to engage in the project himself. As the letter goes on to say: “It is in my heart to translate the Book of Mormon and some other works, and to print the same in Spanish as soon as I have the language sufficiently perfect” (Pratt, 1888, p. 448).

Pratt never did learn enough Spanish to translate the *Book of Mormon*^{II}, but the idea lingered in Young’s mind, who no doubt understood its potential as a proselytizing tool, for roughly two decades. Then, sometime around June 1874, Young summoned Henry W. Brizzee and Daniel W. Jones to discuss the possibility of them going to Mexico as missionaries (Jones, 1890). It is unclear how Young knew that these two men spoke Spanish^{III}, but this was what made them ideal candidates for this mission. It was in this meeting that Young commissioned the two men to translate the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish. As Jones (1890, p. 220) recalls:

Brother Young said he would like to have some extracts from the Book of Mormon translated to send to the people of Mexico; advised us to get our private affairs arranged, also to study up our Spanish and prepare ourselves for translating.

Brizzee and Jones prepared for the translation assignment, but Jones (1890, p. 220) felt uneasy about it, because “to translate for publication required a more thorough scholarship than either of us possessed”. At this point, Brizzee introduced a new actor by bringing Melitón González Trejo into the yet-to-be started translation (Jones, 1890). González Trejo^{IV} was a Spanish soldier who had traveled from the Philippines to Utah and joined the Church there (López Alcalá, 2014). Even though his English was poor at the time, his native Spanish-language skills were considered invaluable, and “he commenced on the Book of Mormon at our [Jones’ and Brizzee’s] earnest solicitation” (Jones, 1890, p. 222).

For reasons that are unclear, Brizzee abandoned the project, leaving Jones and González Trejo to carry out the translation (Jones, 1890, p. 224). González Trejo assumed the role of translator after practicing by translating another book titled *The Voice of Warning*, which had been authored by Pratt (González Trejo, 1884). Jones, in turn, assumed the role of editor. Jones (1890, p. 222) describes the process in these terms: “When brother [González] Trejo came, I rented an office for him where he would be undisturbed through the day. In the evenings we would read and correct together”.

^{II} Pratt seems to have attempted (self-)translation in a bilingual track written in Valparaiso, Chile, and published later in San Francisco, California, United States (Pratt, 1852). The 18-page booklet is printed in two columns, the left one in rather poor Spanish and the right one in English.

^{III} For biographical information on Jones, see *Daniel Webster Jones* (n. d.) For biographical information on Brizzee, see *Henry Willard Brizzee* (n. d.).

^{IV} For biographical information on González Trejo, see Geilman (n. d.).

In 1875, Jones reported to Young that González Trejo had been brought into the project, which surprised Young. As Jones (1890, p. 224) recalls, “Brother Young had never heard a word about his [González Trejo’s] labors; asked if I could vouch for him. I told him I could vouch for the work he was doing, that it was good and getting to be correct”. The translation was completed in this way, but there was concern regarding its accuracy. There seemed to be no one that could independently assure quality. A back-translation method was then adopted on Jones’ urging (Jones, 1890). González Trejo was given a copy of *Letters Exhibiting the Most Prominent Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Spencer, 1848), a portion of which he translated into Spanish (Jones, 1890). Then, Jones back translated González Trejo’s text into English (Jones, 1890). The English back translation was given to apostle George A. Smith^v to evaluate. Smith found the English suitable, and with this process, González Trejo’s Spanish translation of the *Book of Mormon* was approved by the commissioning institution (Jones, 1890).

Even so, Young indicated that the Church lacked the funds to publish the book, so Jones asked for permission to take up a subscription (Jones, 1890). With Young’s approval, Jones received money from at least 230 people/organizations, each donation ranging between 10 cents and 10 dollars (Jones, 1890). At this point, Young instructed Jones to make a selection of passages from the translation to be printed. As Jones (1890, p. 230–231) describes it:

Brother Brigham, he picked up a Book of Mormon, saying: “Take this, go home and get a few days’ rest. Read the book and when you feel impressed to do so, mark the places and they will be the proper selections...” [...] After spending about three weeks I returned to Salt Lake City. The selections being approved, work on the printing was soon commenced.

The selections were published under the title *Trozos selectos del libro de Mormon* in 1875 by the Deseret News press in Salt Lake City. The title page credits “Meliton G. Trejo y Daniel W. Jones” as the translators into Spanish. Copies of *Trozos selectos* were handed to the missionaries that eventually headed down to Mexico. González Trejo himself went to Mexico on two missions, in which he labored alongside different individuals, including James Z. Stewart.^{vi}

In 1883, the second phase of translating the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish began. At that time, proselytizing efforts in Mexico continued to move forward, and apostle Moses Thatcher “was instructed to have the Book of Mormon Translated into Spanish” (Jenson, 1901, p. 417). While it is unclear who provided the commission to Thatcher, it likely came from Church president John Taylor. The book had been fully translated in 1875, so this commission to translate it again only eight years later is striking. The reason given for the need to translate the text anew was that González Trejo’s first translation was not very good, “owing to his meager knowledge of the English language, at that time” (Thatcher, 1884a).

Thatcher, in turn, commissioned Stewart to carry out the new translation (López Requena, 2014). On November 12 of that year, Stewart (1883, n. p.) wrote in his journal: “Bro. [González Trejo] arrived from Arizona. Commenced getting ready for translating the Book of Mormon into Spanish”. By November 15, both men had started (re)translating. This activity went on every week

^v George A. Smith was the Church’s historian and the First Counselor in the First Presidency, making him the second highest ranking elder in the Church, after Young. For a short biography, see *George Albert Smith* (n. d.).

^{vi} For biographical information on Stewart, see Jenson, 1901.

for the next six months, a few pages per day from Monday to Saturday, except for when either Stewart or González Trejo were away. This was a steady and intense translation schedule, particularly for Stewart, who was employed and had several community responsibilities. On June 21 of the following year, Stewart (1884, n. p.) notes in his journal: “Finished our translation of the Book of Mormon into Spanish”.

While not mentioned in Stewart’s journal, there is at least one more actor of note in this second translation. González Trejo (1884, § 4) identifies three actors in this latter translation: “Bro. Stewart, Bro. Aoy and I”. Thatcher’s correspondence with Taylor, which deals to a great extent with financial matters^{VII} (including the payment to González Trejo for both his first and second translations), provides some insight into the role played by this additional actor. In July, after the translation was finished, Thatcher (1884b, § 2) suggested that Taylor hire “Bro Oay” as a proofreader and typesetter because he “assisted in the final revisions of the translation”, was “thoroughly educated in his own language (the Spanish)”, and was “an editor of considerable experience and a practicable printer”. The actual name of this Aoy or Oay, once misidentified also as Joy, was likely Jaime Aoy Olivas Vila^{VIII} (Baxter, 2013). Originally from Spain, he was a teacher and newspaper editor who lived in Cuba, Yucatan, Louisiana, and New Mexico before moving to Utah (McBride, n. d.). With Olivas Vila’s work of revision, proofreading, and typesetting, the translation was published as *Libro de Mormon* in 1886 by the Deseret News company in Salt Lake City. The title page recognizes “Moisés Thatcher” as the translation’s director and “Meliton G. Trejo y Jaime Z. Stewart” as the translators.

There are several characteristics that all these human actors have in common. The most salient one is that all of them were Latter-day Saints, either by birth or conversion, and thus shared a belief in the basic tenants of Mormonism. This is important because without this shared belief system, they would have lacked interest in a project such as this. The Church itself, as a non-human actant, plays an important role in creating the circumstances and providing the material and financial backing that led to this translation. In addition, most of the human actors identified above can be characterized as intercultural. They had either migrated from one culture to another or, at the very least, spent significant periods of time living in cultures that were not their own. This is relevant because their experiences crossing cultures, including (in several cases) learning another language, made it possible for them to engage in this project.

4.2 Reconstruct the transfer chain

Understanding the above-mentioned actors and actants, as well as the role each played in the translation, is a necessary first step in order to reconstruct the transfer chains. After all, “the

^{VII} In a letter Thatcher indicates that both “Bros Trejo and Oay” had now been paid and asks that funds be released to pay “other parties to whom we are owing in the translation account” (Thatcher, 1884c, § 1). It is unclear who these “other parties” were, but it may have included individuals working on the printing and binding of the book. There is no indication anywhere in the historical sources that other translators were involved in addition to those outlined in this article.

^{VIII} He provided different names throughout his lifetime, including Jaime Aoy Olivas Vila, Jaime Vila, Olivas Villanueva, Olivas Villa Aoy, Olivas de La O., and O.V. Aoy. This paper will use his two certain surnames as his identifier. For biographical information on Olivas Vila, see Bryson (1990).

initial stage of a transfer is the creation of links between intercultural actors, via human networks” (Gonne, 2018, p. 267). The transfer chain that needs to be reconstructed in the present case is that which goes from the *Book of Mormon* to the *Libro de Mormon*, one that spans from 1852 to 1886.

The first edition of the *Book of Mormon* was published in English in 1830, and other editions followed in 1837, 1840, 1841, 1849, and 1852 (Geilman, 2011). The 1852 edition was different because versification was added “to aid in finding passages”, the first edition to include such a strategy (Skousen, 1993, p. 175). The 1875 translation was based upon this 1852 edition and thus follows its versification (Geilman, 2011). As stated above, while the whole book was translated mainly by González Trejo, only a selection was published. As also indicated above, Young tasked Jones with making the selections by physically picking up a copy of the book in English, handing it to Jones, and asking him to select the passages from it. The selected passages amount to 15% of the full *Book of Mormon* (López Alcalá, 2012). Said passages were 1) two written testimonies (signed by 3 and 8 witnesses, respectively) as to the existence of the golden plates out of which the *Book of Mormon* was translated into English by Joseph Smith, 2) the First Book of Nephi, 3) chapter XII of the Second Book of Nephi, 4) the Book of Omni; and 5) chapters V-IX of another Book of Nephi, and 6) chapter III of the Book of Mormon. These passages are preceded by a “nota” identifying González Trejo as the translator and outlining the selected passages. Finally, *Trozos selectos* concludes with some non-translated material: a) “a summation of various ordinances and procedures in the Church” and b) “a brief history of the Church” (Geilman, 2011, p. 68). As will be explored below, this selection carefully crafts a message specifically tailored to the inhabitants of Mexico (*Trozos selectos*, 1875). Thus, the transfer begins with a full translation that then becomes an abbreviated translation which includes new material created specifically to introduce Mormonism in a way that will appeal to Mexicans specifically and, by extension, Spanish-speaking Latin Americans.

This abbreviated translation underwent further transfer between 1883 and 1886. What happened at this point was a retranslation of the full, only partially published, 1875 translation. As stated above, González Trejo’s translation was deemed inadequate. Perhaps because he was one of the few, if not the only, native speaker of Spanish that the institution could rely on for this task in the United States, he was again brought on to help in retranslating. Whatever concern there was regarding his ability as a translator for the *Book of Mormon*, “there can be no doubt as to his faithful and prolonged labors thereon” (Thatcher, 1884a). The retranslators worked with the original translation but a different edition of the *Book of Mormon*. Since the publication of *Trozos selectos*, the *Book of Mormon* had now been released in an 1879 edition which had different chapter divisions and new footnotes. The 1886 Spanish translation followed the versification and chapter divisions from this 1879 English edition, but it did not include the footnotes (Geilman, 2011). Further, all the material that was specifically written for *Trozos selectos* was removed from the full 1886 translation, bringing its contents closer to the English edition (Geilman, 2011).

In short, the Spanish translation of the *Book of Mormon* started with the 1853 edition of the source text, became a full manuscript translation, which was transferred into an abbreviated translation, and this highly curated version, along with the first manuscript translation, was compared to the 1879 English edition to create the full 1853 translation that was published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In this path, several individuals were involved in crafting the

translated text. In so doing, they inevitably engaged in manipulations. These will be demonstrated next.

4.3 Identify the manipulations

Initially, the translation was carried out mainly by González Trejo with the support of Jones. As to the strategies adopted by the translators, López Alcalá (2012) carries out a detailed comparison between the *Book of Mormon* and the translation in *Trozos selectos*. He applies Van Leuven-Zwart's (1989, 1990) model of modulation, modification, and mutation to describe shifts in the translation (López Alcalá, 2012). In so doing, he finds a tendency by the translators to employ greater semantic variety than that found in the source text as well as a tendency toward explicitation (López Alcalá, 2012).

López Alcalá (2014, § 32) concludes that, just as with the *Bible*, the translators of *Trozos selectos* moved back and forth between very free and very literal translations:

Los traductores vacilaron en su labor casi a partes iguales entre los dos polos metodológicos opuestos: el apego estricto a la forma del original y una extrema licencia traductora con apartamientos, radicales en ciertos casos, de los dictados del texto de partida.

Textual modulations, modifications, and mutations aside, the more important change was found in what was actually translated. As mentioned above, Jones carried out a selective process in which passages were left out while others were left in. The process included careful consideration and official sanction. Jones made most of the selections during a period of several weeks, both at home in Sanpete County and during a trip to Castle Valley, through a process that included “reading and studying” (Jones, 1890, p. 230), as per Young's instructions. Jones then returned to Salt Lake City to receive official approval of the selections (Jones, 1890). Thus, this selection process was not a covert manipulation but rather an officially sanctioned and deliberate process. *Trozos selectos* itself addresses the selection process in an editor's note which points out that the selections were made because they would be “de gran interes [sic] para el pueblo entre el que el Editor y sus compañeros de misión intentan trabajar” (*Trozos selectos*, p. iii). Thus, the evangelizing motivation behind the selection process was signaled in the translation itself.

When considering the selections themselves, it becomes apparent that *Trozos selectos* presents the contents of the *Book of Mormon* as the story of the ancestors of Mexicans specifically and Latin Americans in general. As Geilman (2011, p. 57–58) points out, the selection “was, in essence, their [the translators'] ‘Book of Mormon message’ for Latin America”. This message emphasized the prevailing Latter-day Saint understanding at the time that the *Book of Mormon* contained a history of the ancestors of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. That was, of course, not the only message that the *Book of Mormon* was understood to have, but it was how it was recast in *Trozos selectos*.

In turn the paratextual material added in Spanish for *Trozos selectos* served a double purpose. First, it made the above message unambiguous. This is evident in language such as “Ha llegado lo hora para que los Mejicanos y los aborignas [sic] de este continente reciban, si quiren, [sic] los recuerdos de sus padres, y para que oigan la plenitud del Evangelio, en otro tiempo enseñado á sus



antecedentes” (*Trozos selectos*, 1875, p. 96). Second, as stated above, the addition of front-end and back-end peritexts served as an introduction to Mormonism and thus made transparent the proselytizing purpose behind the book’s translation.

Despite the effort and resources poured into it, the translation raised concerns. Unlike what would happen later with, for example, the translation into Portuguese of the *Book of Mormon* (see Talmage, 2024), there is no evidence that the concerns were theological or doctrinal in nature. Rather, the issue was that *Trozos selectos* was deemed to be a bad translation from a linguistic standpoint (Thatcher, 1884a). In González Trejo’s (1884, § 4) understanding, the resulting retranslation carried out by himself and Stewart constituted not a new translation but a “work of correction”. In turn, Olivas Vila believed the correction itself to be lacking, to the point that he found himself “inevitably induced to pause and to ponder upon its many ungrammatical and even doubtful and obscure sentences” (Olivas Vila, n. d.). This criticism is quickly softened by its author, who politely argues that this was no doubt the result of Stewart’s zeal in remaining faithful to the source text: “this chiefly on account of the very conscientious and scrupulous way in which said translation was conducted by its director Elder JZ. Stewart...” (Olivas Vila, n. d.). As editor for the translation, Olivas Vila was in a position to do something about this, and he made changes to the language in the target text. He is credited, for example, with replacing the word *placas* with *planchas* (for plates) and with standardizing terms such as *anales* (for records) (Bryson, 1990). Another change introduced in this translation was the standardizing of the spelling of some names according to Spanish phonetic rules, e.g., Nephi becoming Nefi.

In addition to the corrections made by González Trejo and Stewart and the changes in the language introduced by Olivas Vila, the full translation of the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish more closely resembled the English version in its contents. The paratextual material framing the book as especially relevant for Mexicans and Latin Americans was removed. In its place, new paratextual material was added that mirrors the English 1879 edition. Thus, the English 1879 edition and Spanish 1886 translation now have the same contents presented in the same sequence. (See the Appendix for a detailed comparison of how the two Spanish versions compare to the 1879 English edition.) Other than for the noticeable absence of footnotes in the Spanish translation, the Spanish edition seems designed to be nearly identical to the English edition. It can then be concluded that the 1886 translation seeks to diminish the differences between the English and Spanish versions of the book, at least in terms of content and even the actual appearance of the text^{IX}.

In short, the manipulations to the text were different in each translation. The first translation included a number of shifts that evidenced strategies ranging from the very literal to the very free, but more importantly, it contained a large amount of omissions as well as a brand-new paratextual apparatus that reworked the *Book of Mormon* into a text designed specifically to convert the people

^{IX} As a result of his translating efforts, Olivas Vila became unsatisfied with the *Book of Mormon*’s lack of paratextual materials. He suggested creating an illustrated summary version of the book: “Having taken an earnest part in the last translation of the Book of Mormon from the English into the Spanish, I often thought, in the course of said work,—and in order to properly prepare the general reader’s mind to thoroughly understand the voluminous common edition,—of the necessity of issuing a condensed illustrated handbook, with two or three maps in which historical incidents and localities could be easily traced: and to make it still more comprehensible I mused upon the separation of its historical from its doctrinal part, the interpretation of which, not seldom embarrasses the reader” (Olivas Vila, n. d., § 1). The project does not seem to have moved beyond the proposal stage.

of Mexico and introduce them to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This first translation was deemed to be of poor quality, and a more polished translation was commissioned. The second translation removed all the peritexts that were not found in the English-language source text and introduced all the material previously left out of *Trozos selectos*. This second translation sought to more closely resemble the source text. Such an aim is not surprising due to the high esteem in which the sponsoring religious community held the *Book of Mormon*.

6. Conclusion

This paper seeks insights into the question of whether the process of translating sacred texts is unique in any distinctive way. Two differing views on the matter have been espoused by Naudé (2010) and Long (2013). According to the former, there is nothing substantially unique about translating sacred texts, but according to the latter, the role played by such texts within the community affords them a special categorization. This paper has deployed ANT to reconstruct the translation of the *Book of Mormon* into Spanish in order to understand which view is more accurate. As detailed above, the paper has observed the actor-network movements during the pertinent production process in an effort to understand how the *Book of Mormon* came to be in Spanish.

By following the actants we see the creation of the network. The institution, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commissioned the translation, exercised a measure of control over the translation process, and assured the book's distribution. Specific human actors played different roles, and even changing roles, in the translation process. Pratt, as a result of his trip to Chile, suggested the translation. It was initiated by Young, who commissioned the work to Brizzee and Jones. These two actors in turn took González Trejo into the project. The latter carried out the translation, with Jones acting as its editor. Later, when this only-published-in-part translation was found defective, Taylor initiated what amounted to a retranslation by instructing Thatcher to ensure the revision of the existing translation. Thatcher commissioned Stewart to carry out the task, and Stewart was joined by González Trejo in this. After the (re)translation was finished, Olivas Vila was brought on as a reviewer, and he played an important role in establishing some key terminology in the book.

As the text was moved through, it was transformed. Thus, a transfer chain can be followed from 1852 to 1886. The 1852 edition of the *Book of Mormon* was the source text, which was fully translated by 1875; however, only about 15% of the source text was published in translation. The title of the published material was *Trozos selectos del libro de Mormon*, and it contained paratextual materials that were created specifically for the new target audience. By 1886, a full retranslation was carried out, based on the previous translation and the 1879 edition of the *Book of Mormon*. This new translation removed all the paratextual additions in *Trozos selectos* and instead translated those of the 1879 English-language edition.

Several manipulations took place in this transfer chain. These manipulations can in part be explained by the observation that no one had prior training or experience as translators, except perhaps for Olivas Vila who had worked in the newspaper business before. This can help account for the seemingly uneven approach to the initial translation. When it came to publication, only portions of the translation were printed, and these were presented as "la historia sagrada de los



antiguos habitantes de América" (*Trozos selectos*, 1875, cover). Accordingly, the selection presented a narrative in which the ancestors of Latin America's indigenous and mestizo population were a branch of the tribes of Israel. This was stressed in the paratextual apparatus of this first published translation. The apparatus additionally served as an introduction to the sponsoring Church. When the book was retranslated for full publication, this focus on the "sacred history of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas" was greatly diluted, and the new translation mirrored the latest edition of the *Book of Mormon* in English nearly in every respect.

The translation process described in this paper—its actors, transfers, and manipulations—provides evidence against the hypothesis that there is nothing particularly unique about translating sacred texts. In this case, a noticeable characteristic of the translation project over the years was that it was pushed forward by a strong sense of purpose. This is not to say that a strong sense of purpose is exclusively a trait of religious translation but rather that such a sense is a defining characteristic in the case of the *Book of Mormon's* translation into Spanish. This sense of purpose is linked to the special place in which the source text was held by the community. Such a defining sense of purpose, linked to the sacred text's key role for the religious community, can be understood to merit considering the translation of sacred texts a particular area of study within Translation Studies.

In the present study, this translation project was always driven by a strong sense of purpose, even a divine purpose. It is the perceived role of the *Book of Mormon* in gaining proselytes that emerges as the key motivator for its translation out of English and into Spanish. When Pratt (1888) first proposed the *Book of Mormon* be translated into Spanish, he argued that such a translation would turn the key to the work in Chile, so that:

A living Priesthood [missionaries] is accompanied by something for them [Chileans] to read [the *Book of Mormon*]—even those writings which have the promises of God, the prayers and faith of the ancients, and the power and Spirit of God to work with them in restoring the house of Israel (Pratt, 1888, p. 448).

Not as eloquently, Jones expressed a similar sense of purpose. When Brizzee and he were commissioned to translate, Young expressed that "the time had come to prepare for the introduction of the gospel into Mexico; that there were millions of the descendants of Nephi in the land, and that we were under obligations to visit them" (Jones, 1890, p. 220). This strong sense of mission is evidenced by the earnestness with which González Trejo took upon the work of translation: "While I was doing this work my mind was so taken with it that I have [sic] to drop every kind of business and everything else and devote myself entirely to this affair until it was finished" (González Trejo, 1884, § 1). This sense of zeal in translating is not unique to González Trejo—or Jones or Stewart, for that matter—as there are examples of other *Book of Mormon* translators engaging the text in highly devoted way, including in the case of the Esperanto translation (Helps, 2025).

There is evidence that this strong sense of purpose, linked to evangelizing goals, helped the translators feel entitled to spiritual guidance in the process. Specifically, Jones (1890, p. 232) recorded that as he revised González Trejo's translations, he could "discern the mistakes". As Jones (1890) explained:

I felt a sensation in the center of my forehead as though there was a fine fiber being drawn smoothly out. When a mistake occurred, the smoothness would be interrupted as though a small knot was passing out through the forehead (Jones, 1890, p. 232).

The idea that this sense of mission could provide spiritual and supernatural insights can be seen in the case of other translations of the *Book of Mormon* out of English, as was the case for the translator of the first edition in Japanese (Gessel, 2005). In the case of the Spanish translation, this belief was espoused by several actors in the translation process, including Young. He indicated that Jones was qualified to perform the task of selecting the translated text for publication because “you have the spirit of this mission and you will be directed aright” (Jones, 1890, p. 230). Of course, the specific ways in which the translators act as a reaction to a sacred text’s role may vary. In this case, the example is provided to indicate that a strong sense of purpose, and the key role that the religious community saw the *Book of Mormon* as playing, were an important part of the actual translation process. As shown above, there is evidence of a sense of purpose as the text was transformed by actor-networks in its passage through the transfer chain, from Pratt’s first statements as to the need to translate the *Book of Mormon* to the subscription taken up by Jones for the publication of *Trozos selectos* and the earnestness with which Stewart and González Trejo took on the retranslation of the book. As also shown above, the community understood this project to be crucial for its evangelizing efforts and thus played a specific role that other texts did not play. This key role is also evidenced in other early efforts to translate the *Book of Mormon* out of English, including into Welsh (Dennis, 2002), German (Scharffs, 2002), and Italian (Homer, 2002). This supports the understanding that translation of this sacred text was unlike other, non-sacred translation projects, at least for the religious community in question.

Thus, within this community, sacred texts play a central role that goes beyond the exclusively historical, cultural, or even linguistic. This is reflected in the reverence that Latter-day Saint translators feel for the sacred texts they are tasked with translating (López Alcalá, 2017, p. 435–436). It is further reflected in the way The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints currently handles its worldwide translation efforts. Specifically, it divides its translation activity into two main categories: non-sacred texts and sacred texts. The Translation and Interpreting division, sometimes known simply as General Translation, is tasked with translating a wide range of texts, including letters, manuals, sermons, etc. (J. Westfall, personal communication, February 4, 2025). At the same time, the Sacred Materials division is tasked with translating texts from three specific genres: scriptures, hymns, and temple liturgy (J. Westfall, personal communication, February 4, 2025). There is a recognition in this separation that sacred texts are a special case, different in some respects (but not all) from other types of translation. And while a religious organization and an academic discipline are different types of institutions, this paper indicates that it may be appropriate for Translation Studies to also see the translation of sacred texts as a special case.

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Appendix

1875 and 1866 Spanish translations compared to the 1879 English version

1875 <i>Trozos Selectos</i> edition*	1886 <i>Libro de Mormon</i> edition*	1879 English edition
[Cover with text]	[Cover without text]	[Cover without text]
[Title page]	[Title page]	[Title page]
Nota del editor	-	-
[Testimonies of witnesses]	[Testimonies of witnesses]	[Testimonies of witnesses]
-	Índice	Contents
Primer libro de Nephi [selected chapters]	Primer libro de Nefi	The First Book of Nephi
Segundo libro de Nephi [one chapter]	Libro segundo de Nefi	The Second Book of Nephi
-	Libro de Jacob	The Book of Jacob
-	Libro de Énos	The Book of Enos
-	Libro de Jarom	The Book of Jarom
Libro de Omni	Libro de Omni	The Book of Omni
-	Palabras de Mormon	The Words of Mormon
-	Libro de Mosíah	The Book of Mosiah
-	Libro de Alma	The Book of Alma
-	Libro de Helaman	The Book of Helaman
Libro de Nephi [selected chapters]	III Nefi	III Nephi
-	IV Nefi	IV Nephi
El libro de Mormon [one chapter]	Libro de Mormon	The Book of Mormon
-	El libro de Éther	The Book of Ether
-	El libro de Moroni	The Book of Moroni
Instrucciones para practicar las primeras ordenzas de la Iglesia	-	-
Manera de administrar los sacramentos	-	-
Organizacion y fundacion de la Iglesia	-	-

*Accent marks and spelling errors have been preserved as found in the texts

Editorial notes

Authorship contribution

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