
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2013v1n31p251>

Robinson, Douglas. *Translation and the Problem of Sway*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2011, p. 227.

Douglas Robinson's text, *Translation and the Problem of Sway*, introduces a new type of contribution to the translation community, one that focuses on challenging, rethinking, and critiquing the ideas of the original author in order to help the new text account for the complexity of the original text. This theory stems from and is based upon Lawrence Venuti's concept of the "interpretant," or a largely depersonalized, desocialized, and deracinated structure or pattern inside the original text. Robinson offers what he deems "friendly amendments" to Venuti's concept, one of which is that the interpretant sways, rather than biases, the individual actors in three distinct stages: emotional, or evaluative affective inclina-

tions and orientations; energetic, or kinesthetic exertions; and logical organizations. In these three stages, the distinct characteristic of "sway" becomes apparent, a concept defined by Ori and Rom Brafman as the "irresistible pull of irrational behavior". Rather than tearing down Venuti's concept of the interpretant, Robinson states that his goal is to expand on this idea in order to allow it to explain artistic phenomena such as beauty. Robinson also focuses on Mona Baker's concept of narrativity, which he argues is very similar to an interpretant because, he says, "the true radical core of the narrative is itself a pre narrative impulse to impose narrative structure on experience" (p. XI)

The first argument of his book expands on the Brafmans' concept of sway that emerges out of a completely emotional response or tiredness of the translator in respect to the arduous task of translation itself. As he states, the problem with sway is that it is often defined narrowly and negatively, mostly characterized by the notion that rational

thought and behavior are inherently products of this proposed bias. Sway, he says, is nothing more than an expansion on the concept explained by Gideon Toury's discussion of translator bias. As Toury discusses, translator biases are internalized rules that the community uses as a criteria to judge the appropriateness of a translation. These biases, as Robinson points out, are only defined by a black and white criterion, while many of the previously deemed "unbiased" and "biased" translations pertain to a grey area between the two poles. By adopting Robinson's concept of sway, the grey area becomes a more acceptable place for a translation to be categorized, as the previously polarized definition does not take into account the outside influences placed on translators and their efforts to translate a text.

Venuti's concept builds on this discussion of translator bias. Cultural sway, Venuti says, is not always bad, as it takes into account the singularities of specific texts and does not reduce them to their predetermined ide-

ological bases of gender, class, or race. Translation itself is a cultural practice through which the valuable nature of the text crosses linguistic barriers. In this discussion on the value of translations, Venuti outlines his concept of the interpretant, or a "collectively guided impulse that orients a translator or the target reader of a translator to a task" (p. 161) – it is an impersonal and uprooting influence. Following this discussion, Robinson offers his own "friendly amendments" to Venuti's concept, first stating that the interpretant operates as a habitualized channel of social sway to the actor, whether the actor is the translator or the reader. Secondly, the interpretant's sway shapes and directs the individual translator's choices rather than coopting or precluding the proposed bias entirely. Finally, as stated before, Venuti's interpretant sways the individual in three distinct stages: emotional, energetic, and logical.

His discussion then focuses on a particular case study of Alex. Matson, who has trans-

lated such seminal works from Finnish to English and vice versa such as *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, *Wild Palms* and *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner, and *Seven Brothers* by Aleksis Kivi. This case study is focused on testing Venuti's concept of a formal interpretant against historical translation practices by asking the question "how can interpretants, or the social habits that sway interpretants, be theorized so as to explain what readers phenomenologically take to be failures 'within the aesthetic'?" (p. 43). Through this study, Robinson is able to provide his own answer to this question, in which he states that there are not only formal interpretants but also *informal* ones as well, which can be subdivided even further into three categories: logical, pathetic, and ethical. Logical interpretants are the prevailing structures in a translation, pathetic interpretants are the sentimental interactions governing the text, and ethical interpretants govern the reader's own ideas of the character. Thus, the formal

and thematic interpretants, which Venuti states are the only two categories of his concept, pertain to the first concept of logical interpretants.

Next, Robinson's analysis broadens to revise the dynamic that governs Venuti's concept of foreignism as it deals with space and time, which Venuti argues is now one of two important factors in considering formal interpretants. Robinson argues that Venuti tends to place his concepts of foreignism in a unique middle ground between a formalist mode and a rhetorical mode, an action that the author deems as inappropriate and simply wrong. As he states, foreignism should never be explained through its rhetorical impact on readers, as it is far too complex than what Venuti lays out in his discussion.

Robinson then returns to an analysis of a text that appears throughout the entire discussion of sway, the translations that seem to clash with one another of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. The two translations, one by Constance Garnett

and the other by Richard Pevear and Larisa Volokhonsky, differentiate themselves most simply by the era in which they were composed. However, as Robinson states, upon a side-by-side comparison of the two texts, the translations do not in fact differ as much as is usually suggested. Due to these findings, Robinson refutes the claim that Garnett naturalizes the original text while Pevear and Volokhonsky foreignize, which leads him into a broader discussion of how the interpretant does not simply govern the methods of translation but also how translations are theorized.

The last section of Robinson's book is devoted to expanding on his concept that Mona Baker's incredibly thought provoking concept of narrativity in her book, *Translation and Conflict: a Narrative Account*. Her concept, he states, is "a guide to understanding political conflict in the world today", expanding upon and necessarily complicating the concept of the interpretant. Through this expansion and elaboration

on Venuti's interpretant using Baker's concept of narrativity, it leads Robinson to come to the conclusion that these two semiotic theories state that "every act of communication is swayed psychosocially by cultural habits not only to *impose* a collectively vetted interpretive order on texts but to perceive and portray that order is not as imposed but as *found*" (p. 193). His final statement to readers is a question, in which he lays out the four narrow and traditional definitions of translational sway – error and bias, the influence of the author, translational norms, and cultural habits – and asks what difference does it make? We are inherently complex beings; why not allow our translations to reflect this?

Douglas Robinson's text, *Translation and the Problem of Sway*, is an academic account of the competing ideas of translation theory. The book's use of abstract principles and translational jargon make it a text suited for the translation studies community, as the general public's knowledge of this terminology and

conceptualization of translational practices is not widely spread. Given the increased proliferation of information, accessibility to academic texts, and increased literacy rates throughout the world,

Robinson's discussion on sway is an important guideline for any translator.

Ren O'Connor
St. Lawrence University
