
*THE SCANDALS OF
TRANSLATION: TOWARDS AN
ETHICS OF DIFFERENCE.*

Lawrence Venuti. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, 210 pp.

Lawrence Venuti's book *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*, represents a thorough and well-investigated examination of the marginalization of translation and translation studies by the current hegemonic powers, primarily the United States and Great Britain. He acknowledges in the very first sentence that these scandals are cultural, economic, and political. Venuti's project is to expose these "scandals" of translation, locate the practices that contribute to the marginal status of translation, advance the current thinking about translation, examine ethical questions that revolve around this polemic, and basically come to understand translation not as an ethics of sameness, but one of difference.

In Venuti's introduction, he raises a very interesting point that resonates throughout the rest of his book. He writes: "The focus on

the marginality of translation is strategic. It assumes that a study of the periphery in any culture can illuminate and ultimately revise the center". In this Venuti directly refers to the relationship between hegemonic or dominant cultures over subordinate or developing cultures. Venuti situates the English language as the vehicle of marginalization, seeing as it is the most translated language and one of the least translated into. He views language as a "collective force", a "semiotic regime" of sorts which has formed a hierarchy of power relationships, with the dominant English-speaking societies at the top. Translation has become a neglected entity reinforcing the supremacy of the English language on the one hand and a subversive tool of resistance on the other. Setting the stage for the rest of the book, Venuti conveniently inserts his personal stance in the middle of this scandalous polemic by stating: "It is the evocation of the foreign that attracts me to minor literatures in my translation projects. I prefer to translate foreign texts that possess minority status in their cultures, a marginal position in their native canons – or that, in translation, can be useful in

minoritizing the standard dialect and dominant cultural forms in American English". Not only does he situate himself in this polemic but he also situates the polemic as a whole within the American academy. Translation is a purely academic venture, which traditionally has been limited to the educated elite.

He divides his book into eight sections, which form the major factors that have contributed to the marginalization of translation, and call for urgent and immediate reformation. These categories are: heterogeneity, authorship, copyright, the formation of cultural identities, the pedagogy of literature, philosophy, the bestseller, and globalization. In this first section, Venuti discusses some of the characteristics of a good translation. A good translation is one that: 1) demystifies and minoritizes; 2) adheres to the current standard dialect as to render a translation that is "readable, intelligible"; and 3) possesses the "illusory effect of transparency". Venuti also discusses the concept of the "remainder" or the "possibility for variation in any linguistic conjunction", that inevitably appears in every act of translation whether it is practically nonexistent or present to a large

degree. It is the remainder, what is left over in a sense, from the transition of the foreign language into the domestic language, that gives evidence to what degree a translated text has retained or lost its original form. When a remainder is retained, the foreign language remains intact, and a translation contributes to a heterogeneous body of translated literature, which is Venuti's ultimate goal.

His discussion of authorship reiterates many of the previous expressed theories, as to whether the translator should assume the role of the new author and make a new literary creation or whether the translator should exercise an invisible voice and try to let the original speak through the translated work. The principle problem posed is that the academic community does not want to acknowledge the transformation of the translated work and would rather continue assuming that the translated work is, in fact, the original. In this way, the scholar can reject any new interpretation of a specific work because it does not coincide with a particular translated version. Scholars commonly exert what Venuti calls a "Don't-tread-on-my-path attitude". There is a

blurred distinction between the translation and the original authorship. Venuti resumes this discussion with a call to the double allegiance of translation, both to the foreign text and to the domestic culture. Translation is scandalous then, not only because it crosses national boundaries, but also because it crosses the ever so precarious institutional boundaries, which have kept translation so tightly bound.

His discussion of copyright is especially interesting because it shows that, although the translator may have the most artistic freedom, he/she in fact has the least legal freedom and little or no economic incentive, inviting the conclusion that one translates for cultural or political reasons. Venuti explains that it is the publishers, indeed the capitalists and opportunists, who control the output of translations, which is a very limited percentage of the total number of published works. Although translations have a high cultural value they have a low profit value and therefore they hold little value to the publisher. Venuti believes that the only way the status of translation will change is if the translator and the translated text are granted an improved legal status.

In the concluding sections, the author delves into what these main issues have meant in terms of the global community. Venuti examines the enormous power translation exercises in the formation of cultural identities and the construction or representation of foreign cultures. Translation has both reinforced existing institutions and served as a form of resistance to these same institutions and their respective societies, as is readily apparent in parts of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. He shows how the colonizers' ruthless effort to force English literacy upon its conquered population actually has worked against the colonizer, and has produced a form of literary and political insurgency. The indigenous person not only mastered his culture but also the culture and language of the conqueror and proceeded to use that colonizing culture's logic and customs (mainly the practice of scientific reasoning) to his or her advantage.

Venuti uses his chapters on pedagogy of literature and philosophy to voice his disapproval of the academic community's massive contribution to the marginalization of translation. He claims that scholars knowingly

have neglected translation studies, even though a large amount of their research and classes are based on translated texts. Likewise, the study of philosophy in the first world is based, almost exclusively, on translated texts. Yet scholars have claimed that philosophy is a scientific language, based on exact logical formulations, and thus the translation of this material is accurate precisely because of its scientific nature. This attitude, leaves no room for cultural assumptions made by the original author, inherent in any work of literature. If anything, scholars have been known to blame the inability to translate this "scientific language" on the inability of the translator, rather than focus on the cultural discrepancies between past and present societies.

One's final impression of Venuti's work is that he is lecturing and criticizing an American academy well aware of these familiar polemics and its own intellectual narcissism. Ultimately, the blame is placed on American publishers and their scholarly

counterparts for their ignorance, neglect and consequent marginalization of translation studies as a whole. As this book is intended for the scholar, as evidenced by Venuti's use of specific and diversified knowledge teamed with his tremendous ability to articulate his subject matter, Venuti can only be scolding scholars, as if they were misbehaved children. The reader is given the impression that it is the hegemonic culture that lives in a certain literary and cultural fear. It suffers an inferiority complex or a blatant ignorance, which is only detrimental to that culture. Other so-called "inferior" cultures are able to benefit from this arrogance and ignorance by using the hegemonic literature to their advantage. Venuti's message, then, serves as a reprimand and a wake up call to naughty first-world scholars and publishers, letting them know that it is not too late to mend their ways, to depart from their ethics of sameness and to adopt a new ethics of difference.

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