

Translation in History: Some Comments

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Despite the trend towards the globalization of culture of which we are hearing so much, ideas and intellectual practices still do not travel very rapidly between continents or even between disciplines. For example, most professional historians of my acquaintance are hardly aware, if at all, of the discipline – or interdisciplinary crossroads – of Translation Studies, still less of its possible relevance to their own work. For this reason I was especially pleased to have the opportunity to read Georges Bastin's article on the need, as he puts it, to rewrite the history of Spanish America from the point of view of translators and to examine the role of translation in history.

Remembering Michel de Certeau's famous question, Where are you speaking from?, let me warn readers in advance that I am an Englishman; a historian by training and career; and a specialist on Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries – though I am currently employing my retirement from teaching to transgress these boundaries and cultivate new patches of learning, if not whole fields. Like some other general historians, still a small minority in the profession, I have published studies of translation.¹

I am totally in agreement with Bastin's argument that translators and translation have played an important role in the history of Spanish America. I was not aware of many of his examples and was particularly interested to learn about the circulation in the Spanish-speaking world of the ideas of Anglophone writers such as Adam Ferguson, Thomas Paine, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, thanks to translators and plagiarists – or shall we say mediators? – such as my namesake William Burke. Comparisons and contrasts between Spanish and Portuguese America might be illuminating.

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For example, in his periodical *O Carapuceiro*, devoted to the cause of moral reform, an early 19th-century priest from the Northeast of Brazil, Miguel do Sacramento Lopes Gama, plagiarized or at any rate borrowed heavily without acknowledgement from an English periodical, the early 18th-century *Spectator*, adding tropical details to the passages he appropriated to make them more relevant to his Pernambucan readers. Again, an early 19th-century Brazilian feminist, Nísia Floresta, supported the cause by producing what she claimed to be a translation of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), although recent research proved that Nísia had not translated that book but another one, an earlier, anonymous and more radical one, originally entitled *Woman not Inferior to Man*.²

Again, in the Americas, Africa, Asia and elsewhere, the translation by missionaries into local vernaculars of Christian texts such as catechisms, the Bible or devotional writings obviously influenced the course of the history of these regions, even if the law of unintended consequences was as powerful in this domain as it is elsewhere in history. The uses of the literacy that the missionaries taught for religious reasons often turned out to be more diverse than they imagined – from book-keeping to encouraging revolt against colonial rule, for example. More than eighty translations into African languages have been made of one English devotional classic, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, translations that helped some African writers to find their own voice.³

As Bastin emphasizes, a key question for historians to ask is about the norms of translation – and, I would add, about the changes in these norms over time. In Europe, for instance, a medieval regime of translation word for word was followed in the period 1450-1750 or later by a regime that emphasized domestication, allowing additions to or subtractions from the original text to adapt it to the 'target culture'. From the early 19th century, by contrast, we see the rise of a regime that stresses what Laurence Venuti terms 'foreignization', making it obvious that the translated text originated in an alien culture.⁴

The strategies differ but they all raise the problem of the best means of 'transculturation', as the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz used to call it, or in English, 'cultural translation', a term that was originally coined by social anthropologists but has spread in literary and historical circles as well. As recent studies emphasize, a successful translation requires a kind of negotiation between two cultures.⁵

Bastin's reference to Campomanes, for instance, offers a vivid example of the strategy of domestication by addition. Other examples are less obvious and they require explanation, not so much by the conscious strategy of a translator as by the state of the language into which the translation is being made. Let us return for a moment to the Scottish social theorist Adam Ferguson. An exemplary study

of translations of Ferguson into German – made by an Israeli historian, Fania Oz-Salzberger – has noted that the author’s key concept of ‘civil society’ was rendered in German by the phrase *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. The problem with this rendering is that it assimilated Ferguson to the German legal tradition at the expense of the original associations of the term ‘civil’ – more activist, democratic and in the German context in the late eighteenth century, possibly subversive.⁶

The greater the cultural distance between the place in which a text was originally written and the place in which it is translated, the greater will be both the need and the visibility of cultural translation. For this reason I should like to take an example from the history of Japan, making use of another exemplary study by a historian.⁷

The author of this study, Douglas Howland, treats meaning in terms of use and concentrates on the way in which new concepts, borrowed from Western culture, were deployed in argument in Japanese contexts. After 1868, the year of the imperial restoration, the rulers of Japan set out to modernize the country by westernizing it, partly in order to protect themselves from the West. There was a new constitution that included a place for a parliament, although the emperor now exercised considerable power. Scholars lent a hand in the process of modernization, translating certain books from English into Japanese.

Early choices, revealing something of the cultural climate of the time, were the books by Samuel Smiles on self-help as a means to success and by John Stuart Mill on liberty. The two books were translated by the same individual, Nakamura Keiu, and published in 1870 and 1871. The translation of the keyword or *Grundbegriff* ‘liberty’ makes a particularly interesting story. Some Japanese decided to borrow the foreign word. In Japanese mouths and texts the word turned into *riberuchi*, ‘liberty’, or *furidomo*, ‘freedom’.

Other writers, including Nakamura, preferred to search for equivalents in Japanese tradition, such as the term *jiyu*. *Jiyu* had already been used in early modern times to translate the Latin *libertas* and the Dutch *vrijheid*. However, the term had become associated with selfishness, *wagamama*. Whether for linguistic or for wider cultural reasons, *jiyu* did not completely escape from the negative idea of willfulness. In short, new words imported from the West did not always fit in easily with existing Japanese concepts or indeed with the socio-political environment in which they were employed. On the other hand, over time the new word may have helped to modify the system into which it had been introduced, providing a dramatic illustration of the power of translations to make history.

NOTES

- 1 Peter Burke and R. Po-chia Hsia (eds.), *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- 2 Maria Lúcia G. Pallares-Burke, *Nisia Floresta, O Carapuceiro e outros ensaios de tradução cultural*. São Paulo, Ed. Hucitec, 1996.
- 3 Derek R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya*. Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 2004; Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.
- 4 Peter Burke, 'Cultures of Translation in Early Modern Europe', in Burke and Hsia, 7-38; Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*. London, Routledge, 1994.
- 5 Anthony Pym, 'Negotiation Theory as an Approach to Translation History: an Inductive Lesson from 15th-Century Castille', in Yves Gambier and Jorma Tammola (eds.) *Translation and Knowledge*, Turku, University Centre for Translation, 1993, 27-39; Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*. London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003.
- 6 Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-century Germany*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.
- 7 Douglas Howland, *Translating the West: Language and Political Reason in 19th-century Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001.