

Agency in translation, Hispanic literature in France, 1984–2002

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Abstract. The translation of Hispanic literature in France since 1980 provides the framework for an exploration of the mediator's agency in the French publishing field. Drawing upon Bourdieu's sociology of culture and previous research on translation by the Centre de sociologie européenne, the concept of agency is studied by retaining three dimensions: resources, performance and discourse. A preliminary analysis of translation flows and bibliographical data enables us to isolate salient phenomena and prominent mediators (translators and mediators) involved in the translation of Hispanic literature. Further data are collected through a literature overview and by interviewing mediators in order to study their practices and representations and to analyze the factors that constrain or increase their agency.

Introduction

The current multiplication of publications and conferences highlights the particular attraction currently exerted by sociocultural approaches to translation (see, among others, the 2006 Benjamins volume *Sociocultural Aspects of Translating and Interpreting*). However, as Pym (2006) remarks, the main focus of research has been on texts, rather than on mediators. There has been little systematic empirical research on institutions, agents and mediators and their respective agencies, which is what we aim to study here. Using as a framework the translation of Hispanic literature in France between 1984 and 2002, our research focuses on the mediators who are active in that area (mainly translators and publishers, but also literary agents and institutions).

The research comprises two main parts: a quantitative analysis of translation flows and bibliographical data, and a qualitative part based on interviews with some of the agents involved in the translation of Hispanic literature in France. We use Bourdieu's sociology of culture (see Bourdieu 1979, 1984, 1992), mainly the concepts of field and capitals, and we will compare our findings with Bourdieu's analysis of the French publishing field (1999).

This article briefly presents the theoretical background, the sources and the methodology used and discusses some of the initial findings and future avenues of research.

Towards a sociology of translation

One of the attractions of sociocultural approaches to translation is the emphasis they lay on social agents. As Michaela Wolf remarks:

A sociological approach to the study of translation therefore would follow the insight that translation is a socially regulated activity and consequently analyze the social agents responsible for the creation of translation. The analysis of the social implications of translation helps us to identify the translator as constructing and constructed subject in society, and to view translation as a social practice (2002: 33).

A number of translation scholars have been working in this field for some time (Simeoni, Gouanvic, Wolf, for an overview see Pym 2006). Some sociologists are also considering translation as a valuable theme of investigation. The team at the Centre de sociologie européenne in Paris, which the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu directed until his death in 2002, is conducting a research project on literary translation in France. In 2002 a special issue of their journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* was dedicated to translation.

Bourdieu's theory of culture has fared particularly well within Translation Studies (see Simeoni 1998, Wolf 2002, Hermans 1999). One of Bourdieu's more stimulating contributions to the study of translation is his article "Une Révolution conservatrice dans l'édition" (1999).

In this study of the French publishing field, Bourdieu uses his model and concepts to describe the structure of the French publishing field, its evolution, the positions of the various social agents and the correspondences between these positions and the strategies adopted by the agents. The study combines some fairly sophisticated statistical data and a qualitative part that consists mainly of the analysis of interviews. Bourdieu uses the various types of capital as variables to establish a hierarchical classification of French publishing houses, and seeks to find analogies between their position within this classification and their publishing strategies, or in Bourdieu's terms, "la correspondance entre la structure des positions et la structure des prises de position" (the correspondence between the structure of positions and the structure of position-takings) (1999: 18). Changes in the publishing strategies are thus considered to be linked to a change in the position of the publishing house within the publishing field, which contains two main poles: literary (art) and commercial (money).

Bourdieu relates this to two different production cycles, which are for him the surest indicators of the position of a given enterprise within the field. Publishers can have a short or a long production cycle. The short production cycle minimizes risk by an anticipated adjustment to demand, has distribution and marketing structures, and aims for short-term profit generated by the rapid circulation of rapidly obsolete products. The long production cycle,

based on accepting the risk inherent in cultural investment, is geared towards hypothetical future profit.

These two poles, the commercial and the literary, are for Bourdieu reflected in the publishers' uses of translation, which he considers to have two antagonistic functions. At the literary pole, publishers translate less or not at all from English, even though translated titles account for over 25 percent of their published titles. They will then act as "découvreurs", often publishing unknown authors writing in "small" languages. At the commercial end, on the other hand, publishers produce many best-sellers translated from English.

The translation and publication of foreign literature thus becomes for some publishers an economic investment, a speculative risk, while it is for others a way to constitute a catalogue at reduced cost and to resist the invasion of commercial literature, mainly written in English.

These different attitudes towards translated literature are mirrored in the strategies used. The more commercial publishers resort to scouts; the role of the translator as advisor is less important for them than for publishers located at the literary end of the publishing field.

This mapping of the French publishing field will be compared with the data collected during our interviews.

Definitions and research problem

The central concept we aim to investigate in our research is that of agency. We retain three main dimensions of the term:

- The first aspect is an understanding of agency as ability or capacity, and deals with the resources that enable agency. Drawing on Bourdieu's model, we will consider these resources to be the type and amount of capital at stake in translational practices.
- The second aspect is an understanding of agency as performance, and deals with the effect produced by a particular phenomenon or action, or in other terms, with the successful deployment of resources to reach a particular objective.
- The third aspect is an understanding of agency as discourse. This involves studying how agents conceive and represent their own agency and that of others, how agency is expressed through discourse and the values put forward in these discourses.

Our central hypothesis here is that, in their interactions with publishers, the translators' performance will be greater at the literary end of the field, while it will be reduced at the commercial end, exemplifying the antagonistic functions of translation. This constructs two different roles for the

translator, depending on the scope of their practice. At the literary end of the field, translators will be considered “passeurs de littérature”, influencing the selection of translated texts and developing a collaborative working relationship with the publishers. At the commercial end, on the other hand, their role will be more strictly focused on text production.

We also hypothesize that the translator’s lack of symbolic or social capital restrains their agency. The more prestigious translators will also be writers, publishers or academics; they will be those able to draw from other sources of social and symbolic capital. There appears to be a dichotomy between occasional translators who are able to trade off economic capital for symbolic capital, and full-time professional translators who will not be in a position to do so.

Hispanic literature in France since 1980

Brief historical overview

Malingret (2002: 42) distinguishes three broad periods in the translation of Hispanic literature in France since 1950. In the 1950s, most of the translated titles were works by classical Spanish writers and very few Latin American writers were translated. In the 1970s, the translated titles were mainly by classical Spanish writers and contemporary Latin American writers. The Latin American “boom” was in full bloom. In the 1990s, a new emphasis on contemporary Spanish writers coincided with the decline of the Latin American boom.

General evolution

The main trends and agents in the translation and publication of Hispanic literature in France have been identified using data from two different sources. The main trends highlighted here have been established thanks to data from the UNESCO *Index Translationum*. As underlined by Heilbron (1999: 433), Šajkevič (1992: 67), Pym and Chrupala (2005: 31) and Linn (2006), the *Index Translationum* is not absolutely reliable and the data it provides should be examined critically. It can however be used fruitfully to study the main trends.

Thanks to Gisèle Sapiro and Anaïs Bokobza from the Centre de Sociologie européenne, we have been able to access Electre, the professional database for booksellers, which will allow for a more detailed statistical analysis in the future, especially as regards the country of origin of the translated titles.

Figure 1 has been established with data from the *Index Translationum*.

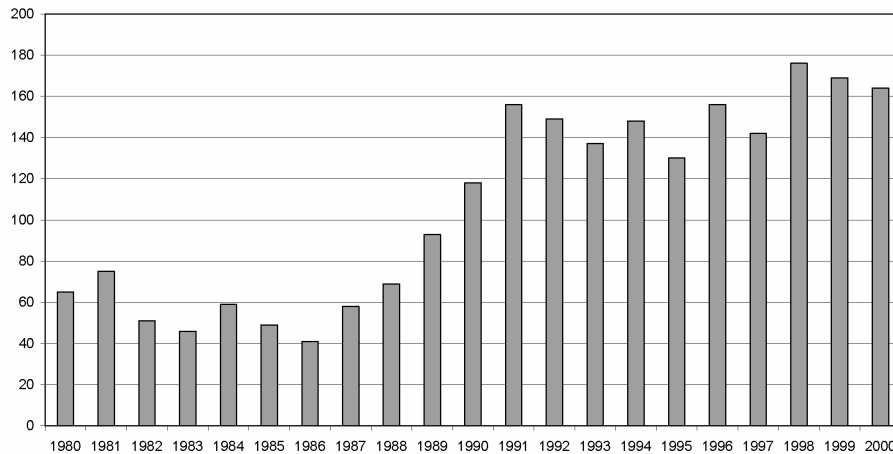


Figure 1. Literary translation from Spanish into French

The graph shows a clear increase of translations from 1986 to 1991, and a relative stability from 1991. The rise in translations can be explained by the conjunction of several factors. The general context in France was at the time favorable to the translation of foreign literature (Sapiro 2002: 88). The other factors responsible for the greater number of translated titles are the ongoing effect of the Latin American “boom”, the renewed interest in Spain after the end of the Franco dictatorship, a new generation of Spanish writers, and at the politico-economic level, Spain’s accession to the EU in 1986. Claude Bleton, in a private communication, actually saw the year 1986 as a turning point for the translation of Spanish literature. He underlined that its introduction in France at the time greatly benefited from the extremely low publication rights commanded for the works of authors who were unknown in France.

Analyzing interviews

The following analysis is based on a series of interviews with publishers and translators and on two round tables about translated literature which took place at the Institut français de Barcelone (10/02/2005 and 16/02/2005).

The main questions submitted to the publishers and translators bear on their personal professional history and how they conceive their role and interactions with the other agents working in the same field. The following is a general thematic analysis of the data collected during the interview. Our main focus here is the self-perception of translators and publishers and their perception of others.

The publisher's self-perception

The publishers we interviewed were keen to underline the degree of freedom in their choices, in a discourse which tends to remain fairly individualistic. Annie Morvan, in charge of Hispanic literature at the publishing house Le Seuil, thus explained that she was “libre de mes choix, mais qu'on me demande des comptes” (free in her choices, but she had to justify her decisions). She is thus free to choose, and also added that she liked very different writers, citing as examples Arturo Pérez-Reverte or Juan José Saer.

Despite their shared individualism, the discourses developed by the publishers seem to point to two different logics. Annie Morvan seems willing to accept the rules of the publishing game, including the importance of economic and commercial factors, while Christian Bourgois and Bertrand Fillaudeau, who are in charge of smaller publishing houses with a high level of symbolic capital, explicitly reject them and insist that they publish what they like and that commercial factors have no influence whatsoever on their choices.

The translator's self-perception

As for the translators themselves, they produce different discourses about their own agency. One translator insisted on the translator's invisibility (“il faut quand même tendre vers la disparition du traducteur en tant que personne”) in the translated text, but highlighted what she called the translators' “travail de fond”, as they can provide valuable information, recommend titles to translate, and know how to talk about the texts. Another translator seemed more willing to assert their agency in the text, stressing that all translators have a specific biography, knowledge and gaps. For him, translators are completely authors of their translations; they are not creators but are responsible for their translations. He further added that he did not like the term “translation”, since for him the reader reads a translator, not a translation.

The role of the translator as initiator of the translation seems to be perceived very differently by the various translators. Two of the translators we interviewed acknowledged that they nearly always suggest titles to translate to the publishers, but one saw this as a positive aspect of her work while the other seemed to feel it was a constraint and that it reinforced her feeling of powerlessness. The translators all underlined the power differential between them and the publishers and pointed to at times difficult relations with publishers (see below).

What publishers have to say about translators

The role of the translator was evoked differently by the different publishers. For Annie Morvan, the translator was essentially “un travailleur du texte”. She considered that the role of the translator as a “passeur” or “découvreur” started declining at the end of the 1970s. Before that, the translators brought the texts they wished to translate to the publishers. According to Annie Morvan, the translator was then all-powerful in the selection of the texts. There was also no control over the translations, which were only rarely revised. But this changed in the 1980s, when power was transferred from translators to publishers, who around 1985 started to negotiate the translation rights with literary agents and to select the translators, who for her then ceased to have a role as advisors. This evolution went hand in hand with a new reflection on the translator’s work and with the increasing professionalization of the translation sector in France. In that respect, she underlined the central role played by the ATLF (Association des traducteurs littéraires de France), ATLAS (Assises de la traduction littéraire en Arles) and a whole generation of translators (Céline Zins, Claude Murcia) in the development of translation as a full-fledged profession. Christian Bourgois and Bertrand Fillaudeau (Corti) insisted on the role of translators as advisors in the selection of texts and did not seem to consider their performance to be focused exclusively on text production. They both remarked that translators have drawn their attention to some authors, and that they trust translators as a source of information. We see that smaller publishers with a high amount of symbolic capital (Bourgois, Corti) are more willing to acknowledge the role translators play in the selection of the translated titles.

What translators have to say about publishers

The comments made by translators about publishers ranged from very negative to good, although some negative comments appeared even when the translator expressed a rather positive opinion of publishers. Several translators underlined the power differential between them and the publishers. One translator expressed this in very strong terms (“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely”), while another referred to a publisher using the term “Terminator”.

One translator highlighted the improvement in the working conditions of translators (better contracts, payment and deadlines, and financial conditions), although some problems remain. Another translator, following a pragmatic approach, argued that it is necessary to detect bad publishers and sever all links with them. He underlined that the relations were now regulated by the “code des usages”, which was adopted in 1984 and revised in 1993.

On cultural, economic, social and symbolic capitals

The analysis of the data collected during the interviews hints at the role of the various capitals.

Cultural capital is not a decisive variable, as all the agents involved tend to have a high level of it. It only becomes decisive if we consider “academic” capital, as several of the more prestigious translators are also academics. However, academic capital can sometimes have a negative effect, as one publisher remarked that he was sometimes reticent to resort to translators who are also academics as they tend to try and please their colleagues in the choice of titles to translate.

Social capital is important in two ways. It is decisive to enter the field as it is mostly through their social capital that the translators we interviewed started their career in literary translation. It is also decisive for all agents in that it gives them better and quicker access to information, which is of paramount importance in the publishing game.

The role of economic capital was more specifically underlined by Annie Morvan, through two main aspects: the increasing commercialization of the French publishing industry, and the role of subsidies. Annie Morvan insisted that foreign literature is of good quality and sells well, but it is expensive to publish. In that respect, the subsidies given by the CNL (Centre National du Livre) are of paramount importance. She pointed out that many authors would not be published and that many small publishing houses would not survive without the support of the CNL. A publisher like Fillaudeau will deny any kind of compromise with commercial imperatives, while admitting that he can permit himself this attitude because he can resort to subsidies and his publishing house can live on its prestigious “fonds” (accumulated titles, prestige and goodwill). The attitude of the publishers towards economic capital is mirrored in their attitude towards literary agents. Publishers like Bourgois or Fillaudeau say that they only resort to agents in order to negotiate rights, and nothing more. For Annie Morvan, agents are unavoidable intermediaries in her publishing activity and play a crucial role in the dissemination of information and texts.

There does not seem to be any easy and systematic conversion between symbolic and economic capital. Annie Morvan, for instance, stressed that literary prizes, a source of symbolic capital, had limited influence on sales. Conversely, a paperback edition, while it may help increase sales, may be detrimental to the prestige of an author who would be then perceived as more commercial.

Symbolic capital is more operational in consecration mechanisms between the different agents in the field. One translator pointed out how translating for the highly prestigious house Corti had opened many doors for her.

A few words on Bourdieu

If we compare these preliminary findings with Bourdieu's analysis (1999), we find that the role of translations and translators can indeed be conceived according to the publishing structure and the positions of translators in the publishing field. As Bourdieu underlined, smaller publishing houses seem more likely to empower translators and consider them as literary advisors. This seems less likely in bigger and more hierarchical structures, possibly because editors need to justify their salaries and are consequently more reluctant to share any advisory power with translators. But we would argue that the picture is perhaps not as black and white as the French sociologist would have it. A more detailed ethnographic study seems required in order to grasp the nature and complexities of the working relationship between publishers and translators. As regards the interplay of symbolic capital, the publishers we interviewed, located at the literary end of the field, were keen to admit the importance of economic capital in their work. They also explained their reliance on subsidies and translation grants for their very survival, an aspect more or less neglected by Bourdieu.

Conclusion

Our initial findings show different views about the translator's role and their relations with publishers. For instance, while some translators seem to enjoy their activity as literary advisors, for others it seems to highlight their lack of power in their dealings with publishers. Future research should help us add further insights into the factors influencing the mediators' agency. We hope that this might contribute to a better understanding of the conditions of their practice.

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