

# Agents and their network in a publishing house in Iran

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*This case study presents the fieldwork carried out in a publishing house in Iran. It is a micro-ethnographic analysis that uses three sets of data (interviews, written materials, and participant observation) to investigate the multiple agents involved in the production of translations, the constraints they face, the way translations and non-translations are handled, and the ways the agents build and maintain their network. The approach combines Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and publishing field, and two principles of Latour's actor-network theory, i.e. following the actors and examining inscriptions. In addition to translator-led and publisher-led networks, the case study shows the existence of an understudied network of academics and publishers working hand in hand.*

*Keywords: agency, translation agents, sociological approaches to translation, Iran*

## Introduction

The publisher chosen for this case study, Behnashr Publishing Company ("Behnashr" hereafter), was established in 1986 in Mashhad, Iran, and produces on average 100 titles every year, with a considerable number of translations. I selected this publisher for three reasons. First, I had already published some of my early translations from English with them and knew some people working there. Second, I was curious to understand better the nature of interactions between various agents coming between the translator and the final production, including the arguments offered for the acceptance or rejection of translation projects. Third, access to publishing houses in Tehran proved challenging and close to impossible.

The publisher is affiliated with Astane Quds Razavi ("Astane" hereafter), a powerful religious and financial organization in Iran. Astane is responsible for the custodianship of the holy shrine of Imam Reza. Because

of the publisher's partial financial dependence on Astane, it has published books in line with latter's general purpose of spreading "Islamic doctrine" and the general cultural values of post-Revolution Iran (see Astane 2011). For example, the publisher sells around 50,000 copies of the prayer books to Astane each year (personal contact with the manager of the Production Department, October 2009).

My role as a researcher was mainly as an observer-as-participant (Gold 1958, cited in Bryman 2008: 410). I noted some degree of initial reservation and curiosity by those who were not among my informants for the research. The situation became easier when they realized that I was there for academic purposes and only for a short time.

The theoretical framework in this case study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and publishing field (for an overview, see Wolf 2010, and Bourdieu 1993, 1999) and on two principles of Latour's actor-network theory, i.e. following the actors and examining inscriptions, which can be "texts, but also images of many sorts, databases, and the like" (Van House 2000: unpaginated). My interest in a combined theoretical approach is to find out more about the selection of texts, the arguments of the agents, and their interaction in the network (see Buzelin 2005).

## **Participant observations and interviews**

The purpose of my first meeting with the acquisition editorial assistant was to get a general feeling for the publishing house. Translations form a large part of Behnashr's annual publications: the assistant believed that "more than 50% of the publication list is translations" and that many of the translations are done by university professors to "enhance their promotion in the university".

There are a number of ways in which the acquisition editors acquire manuscripts for publication (see Greco 2005: 150-157). The assistant had been in contact with university professors across the country to "encourage them to submit their manuscripts for possible publication", but he added that "the call has not been well received." Some professors may avoid Behnashr because of its strong ties with a major religious organization. Historically, the assistant regarded Behnashr as one of the top five publishers in Iran and highlighted that "Behnashr has the highest number of exclusive bookshops across the country". A look at Behnashr's catalog shows that very few popular or well-known contemporary Iranian thinkers or authors have been published by them. The assistant refers to Astane's cultural policies as "red-line", prohibiting the publishing of novels and certain historical and geographical works that specifically highlight the ancient history of pre-Revolution Iran.

To what extent does the assistant have the power to exert agency with respect to the manuscripts the publisher receives? After the author or translator fills out the Reception of Manuscript Form, the assistant attaches another form called the Evaluation Form. This is then sent to a “book evaluator”, whose views on the submitted work lead to the final decision. There are two different forms: one for original works and another for translations. These evaluators are usually experts in their own field or published authors. Behnashr makes use of the one set of evaluators. The assistant told me of many cases where “Behnashr has returned submitted manuscripts to authors and translators without having them evaluated by any evaluator”. When I asked the assistant how he could be certain about whether a work was worth publishing or not, he told me “[...] the work per se attests this to us. Behnashr’s publishing policies inform all our decisions. We live in an Islamic society with certain regularities that must be considered” (Interview, April 2009).

The Preparation Department is where the technical steps for the production of manuscripts are carried out. The manager of the department determines the visual appearance of the work. According to him, “the manuscripts come in bulk and are passed to the Production Department without any creative ideas behind them. In the absence of any policy, Behnashr is publishing many low-quality works.” This view is in line with what the senior copy editor said about Behnashr in general.

The senior copy editor argued that Behnashr had published many books “just for the sake of publishing”, and this had increased the total number of books yearly, “but the quality has decreased compared to the past”. He also saw inconsistency in the total number of titles: “The total number of titles has been on the rise, but the real number of titles is different.” For example, a book called *Mafatih al jenan* (the doors to heaven), a very popular prayer book in Iran, has been published in different formats.

Does the publisher handle translation projects differently from non-translation projects when it comes to editing? For the senior copy editor, the difference lay in the way they approach the text: “Scientific and content editing are done on non-translations to remove major flaws and inconsistencies, whereas in translation projects, the translation editor enjoys far less leeway in changing the content of the works” (Interview, April 2009).

To what extent does the editing department influence the decision-making process? The senior copy editor stated that “the managing director has the final say in the process”. He referred to cases in which a work submitted with positive reviews had ended up being rejected by the board of directors due to “the way the managing director approached it based on certain interests of either the manager or Astane”.

The manager of the publishing department maintained that “in principle, Behnashr favors non-translations, but there is no option but to resort to

translation in the fields of science, psychology, management, the arts, and sometimes physical education". This supports another finding, namely that Behnashr favors the translation of scientific works for children and young adults rather than the translation of novels. In a follow-up telephone conversation in August 2009, the manager of the publishing department said there was no "underlying logic" regarding this preference. This absence of policy is reflected in the publisher's catalogs, thereby influencing the overall presentation of Behnashr in the publishing field in Iran.

The manager of the publishing department shared the view of the senior copy editor that the managing director "has the highest degree of power in the decision-making process regarding projects under consideration". Prior to this stage, however, the translator's recognition and prestige and the views of the evaluators are important in "directing the process in certain directions". The manager of the publishing department acknowledged the influence of Astane on Behnashr and viewed it as "a great advantage in that the fixed capital of Behnashr belongs to Astane in helping the publisher to enlarge on the one hand, and to create a set of limitations in the production process of certain works on the other".

The managing director of Behnashr admitted that "Behnashr favors non-translations over translations, but the latter are necessary as there is a serious shortage of knowledge and expertise in certain scientific fields, and that requires translation to be done". He subscribed to the idea that "the readership shapes Behnashr's overall publishing policy". For him, "the sale of books in the bookshops is a major indicator of such demand". When asked about the final publication decision, he highlighted the role of the evaluators. However, he saw the overall policies of Astane as being of greater weight: "Our publications should not be inconsistent with the Islamic and cultural policies of Astane, which is itself a reflection of the larger cultural policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (Interview, April 2009). Nonetheless, other sources indicated that the managing director exercises power over projects in contradictory ways.

### **Analysis of written materials**

The written materials here are of two types: the publisher's catalogs of books, and two translation projects that were under production at Behnashr. First I examine the publisher's catalogs to see how they reflect the publisher's view of translations and how translators are presented in them. Then, in the analysis of two translation projects, I aim to trace the ways translators and other agents interact in the network.

### *Analysis of Behnashr's catalogs*

A publisher's catalog of books is an important item for the publisher's marketing (see Chapter 7 in Greco 2005). Here I have chosen two catalogs: the catalog of books for general readers (Catalog 1), and the catalog of books for children (Catalog 2).

Catalog 1 (16 pages) can be divided roughly into ten subcategories according to the Dewey Decimal Classification (see DLC 2011). The pages are in black and white print, and the catalog uses no images of book covers to promote the books. No distinction is made between non-translations and translations. A Persian speaker may differentiate between translations and non-translations by looking at each entry, which consists of the title of the book, its author, its edition and the cover price. The name of the translator, with no reference to the word translator, follows the name of the original author. If the book has two translators, the second translator is not mentioned, possibly to save space. Except for the Dewey system, there appears to be no other logic in listing the books.

Catalog 2 (24 pages) is divided into three categories: pre-school children, children, and the young adults. Behnashr's books for children and young adults are called *ketabhayeh parvaneh* (butterfly books). Each category is then subdivided into four genres: story, poetry, scientific, and educational books. In contrast to Catalog 1, here each entry has a cover picture, its edition, the cover price, and its ISBN number. In the case of translations, the name of the translator is mentioned after the original author, without using the word "translator". The catalog indicates whether a title has received an award or has been shortlisted for any Iranian book prizes, the list of which appears on one page, with no translations in the list. On the page preceding the list, a promotional poster with the cover pages of the prize-winning titles is shown. The names of the book illustrators are also not mentioned.

This analysis shows that Behnashr gives priority to its books for children and young adults. Indeed, the number of such books has increased from 99 titles in 2005 and 77 in 2006 to 120 in 2007 (*Karnameh nashr* 1386/2007: 11). The importance of translation for Behnashr can be seen in the number of titles published under the category of scientific and educational books for young adults: of the 86 titles, 42 are translations. However, the number of translations in the category of stories for young adults is just three titles versus 78 non-translations in total. This confirms what the informants suggested about the importance of translation for the publisher in certain fields. While translations make up a great part of the publisher's yearly output, the publisher does not show any interest in promoting them visually in its catalogs.

### *Analysis of translation projects*

The aim here is to see how all the agents leave their mark on the documents and how they show their place in the network. The first project is a co-translation of *The Emotional Intelligence Activity Book* (Lynn 2001). The second is a translation of *Last Straw Strategies. 99 Tips to Bring You back from the End of Your Rope: Sleeping* (Kennedy 2003).

The documents available for the first project include a copy of the translator's contract, a copy of the contract proposal, a copy of the review form, copies of the contacts between the translator, the editors and the publisher, and sample pages from both the original work and their corresponding translation into Persian, with the editing applying to the translation. The translator's submission letter, which here replaces Behnashr's submission form, is an official paper with the university letterhead. At the very top of the translator's letter, a quotation from the present leader of the Islamic Revolution reads: "The important issue is the presence of people in the election." The letter is addressed to the head of the publishing department, beginning with the salutation "My esteemed and dear brother". The translator states that the manuscript is a co-translation, without naming the other translators, who are only introduced as "colleagues". The translator has signed the letter using his academic affiliation. The use of such official forms is perhaps an attempt to increase the translator's non-economic capital in the eyes of the publisher. It is not clear whether the use of the quotation is a gesture of faithfulness to the regime.

The evaluator, who was external, confirmed that the translation is "an exact translation of the original work" and that there was no previous Persian translation, adding that "there are no additions or editing in the form of footnotes" and that he does not know if the translation is from the latest edition. He considers it "fairly good" and argues that the translation requires some degree of scientific and content editing, and an "average" degree of "literary editing". He names two similar titles available in Persian and sums up his overall opinion: "a practical and valuable work in general". The evaluator is a professor of psychology working at the same university as the translator.

In the contract proposal, the acquisition editor suggests that "10% of the cover price is suitable [as payment for the translator], given the novelty of the subject of the book". The manager of the publishing department agrees. However, the managing director opts for "10% to 9%", i.e. 10% for the first edition and 9% for subsequent editions. Two months later, the contract was signed by the translator and the managing director, and two months after that, the acquisition editor sent the translation for "scientific and comparative editing" by a university professor working at the translator's university. The editor emphasized that he had done his job "carefully in two steps". He views the translation as a "free translation, generally useful for the readers".

Upon receiving the manuscript from the “scientific and comparative” editor, the acquisition editor sent it to another editor for “literary and orthographical” editing. From the two available pages of the translation manuscript and the original, I can only see the work of the literary editor, in which certain words have been changed or some punctuation marks have been added in order to make the reading easier. At the technical level, the editor is concerned with Behnashr’s style sheet: correcting the spacing between the lines, the indentation of the paragraphs and using bold face, etc.

The documents of the second project include a copy of the evaluation form, a form called “the publication form” with blank spaces to be filled out by the editorial department, the typesetting section and the proofreading, and the graphic section of Behnashr. I also had access to a copy of the translator’s contract with the publisher and sample pages from both the original and the corresponding translation in Persian with the editors’ comments on the translation document.

The project was initiated by the translator. After a phone conversation with the manager of publishing department, the translator sent Behnashr the sample translation of one chapter of the book. The first evaluator considered the translation “suitable for general readers”. In terms of “fluency and eloquence”, he calls the translation “good” and recommends “an average degree” of scientific and content editing and “a low” degree of literary editing. The documents show that the publisher sent the translation to a second evaluator, who happened to be the evaluator of the previous project. He says he had a “positive” view of the translation, but I did not find any document supporting his claim.

In the contract proposal, the financial department was consulted by the publishing department. The former consulted its own bookshops, reporting that there were nine positive and two negative opinions about the publication of the translation. In his report, the manager of the publishing department favors the proposal, leaving the final agreement to the managing director of Behnashr. The contract was signed on the basis of 8% of the cover price for the first edition and 10% for subsequent editions.

Like the co-translation project, the literary editing of the manuscript was at the level of words, but as the manuscript is in the translator’s handwriting, there is no mark of “technical” editing on the available sample, apparently because there is no problem with the translator’s draft. The literary editor was the same senior copy editor as in the first project above, who only suggested that “the technical format of the original title should be observed in the design, headings, and typesetting of the translation”.

What do these documents tell us about the different agents, their relationships, and the networks they belong to? The first project is a co-translation project in which the names of the co-translators are not stated in the contract. The translator has initiated the translation project by providing the original text for the co-translators (most likely each has done part of the

translation), or he has translated some part of the text and recruited the other two translators (most probably his students). Whatever the case, he appears to be the initiator of the network. The same pattern can be observed in the second project, although in that case the translator made an initial contact with the manager of the publishing department to make sure she could approach Behnashr.

In the co-translation project, the evaluator and the editor were familiar with the translators and the translation project, and this might have influenced their views both for and against the project. The evaluator appears to have been in favor of the project, as suggested by the textual documents. Such a relationship cannot be inferred from the documents available for the second project.

The agents in the first project are all external to the company. In the second project, I did not observe a similar relationship between the translator and other agents. Here the translator had no opportunity to introduce other agents into the network who might have conferred their power on the project. The only interaction between the translator and the scientific and literary editors appears to have been at a textual level, with no apparent personal interaction.

## Discussion

### *Multiple agents and their constraints*

In addition to the translator, agents of translation (Milton and Bandia 2009) can also be those who come after the translator, including evaluators, certain mediators such as comparative, scientific, or literary editors, copy editors, proofreaders who modify the text, and the publisher.

The cultural policies of the post-Revolution era have directed the policies of certain publishers towards strategies such as selective response to readers' needs (see Haddadian Moghaddam 2012). Behnashr's refusal to publish novels can be seen as one of the ways in which a general tendency with unwritten rules has become a publisher's policy. The manager of the publishing department declared that "nowhere in the cultural policies of Astane or in our policy are novels prohibited. They have chosen not to publish novels, lest they face problems that may damage Astane's prestige." This unwritten policy constrains the agency of translators, and it also affects them in terms of censorship in related issues.

The analysis of the two translation projects shows that the translators acted as the first agent in the translation process, choosing texts for translation based on certain criteria. These "criteria" can be seen as "preliminary norms", i.e. the translation policy adopted by the translators in their selection of texts (see Toury 1995). In Iran, this translation policy

pertains to both the selection of the books and the possibility of publication and censorship. For instance, in addition to those who perceive a high cultural mission for themselves and their translations (something that does not appear among Bourdieu's capitals), there are those who aim for both economic capital (full-time translators) and non-economic capital. University professors are among Behnashr's translators, as translations can enhance their rank in the university. For them, economic capital is not as important as the non-economic capital they can obtain by translating books.

The acquisition editor is the second agent immediately after the translator. In my case study, the acquisition editor is a mediator between the translator and the evaluator. The acquisition editor chooses the evaluator, and this may affect the translation. The acquisition editor must be aware of possible conflicts between different translators. It can be assumed that the confidential way manuscripts are sent to evaluators is one of the strategies Behnashr has chosen in order to reduce such risks. However, as I found in the first project above, sometimes the links in a network are very close to each other. In that project, the translators, the evaluator, and even the comparative editor were affiliated with the same university, which may have increased the chances of the translation being accepted by the publisher.

The book evaluator is the third important agent involved in the publication of translations at Behnashr. These agents are either internal or mostly external, and are paid to review the manuscripts. In this study, the evaluators were mostly external and experts in their respective fields. At Behnashr certain translations require two evaluations when one is not seen as "satisfactory". Sometimes Behnashr shows interest in the publication of a translation provided that the second evaluator justifies the choice. In the first project above, the documents show that the translation was reviewed by two evaluators, and the second evaluator's opinion was generally in favor of the translation. If the evaluators have negative views about certain translations, they are required to provide an explanation for this. The evaluators sometimes inhibit the publication of translations. I learned of situations in which evaluators have expressed negative views about some translators or authors based on "non-scientific reasons". These evaluators belong to networks with long-established positions in certain universities and would not allow new translators (lecturers or professors) to challenge them through new publications.

Technical editors have no power over the evaluator and the contract because they are recruited after the contract is finalized. Their role is limited to the text and the quality of translation in making sure that all the linguistic and semantic errors are removed. The proofreaders can be viewed in the same way, with less power than the technical editors.

The agency of other agents is limited by the managing director. Once the contract is finalized, the power is redistributed among the agents. The above examples reveal that the agents face both textual and extra-textual

constraints. In the first example, the agents made sure the manuscript met the requirements of the publisher's policy and preferences. This may include the translator's strategy, the way the book evaluator views the manuscript, etc. In the second example, the agents were constrained by the cultural policies of post-Revolution Iran more than by the publisher's policies.

### *Networks and their features*

I can differentiate three networks in the publishing house under study: the translator-led network (to borrow an expression from Kung 2009), the publisher-led network, and the academic-publisher network. In the first network, the translator translates the book, forms the network, and becomes one of the nodes, not necessarily the central one—and here I borrow from Castells, who argues that “a network has no center, just nodes” (2004: 3). As my other research indicates, the tendency in Iran has been for translators to choose the books for translation (see Haddadian Moghaddam 2012). However, some publishers have been also able to offer translation projects to translators. These publishers have high levels of economic and non-economic capital. The translators in the translator-led network take part in the negotiations over the contracts, and their relative room for maneuver is a reflection of how much total capital they have accumulated.

Once the translation has been received by the publishers, the publisher-led network is activated. These networks are activated differently for each project, but they share a similar framework when compared to other kinds of networks. In the publisher-led network, the acquisitions editor usually recruits other agents into the network. In the first project, the power of the translator-led network has been conferred on the project by connecting the two co-translators directly, and the evaluator and the “scientific and comparative” editor indirectly. Once the contract is finalized and signed by the two parties, the translator-led network has transferred its power to the publisher-led network, but its mark was retained at the textual level.

In both the projects I observed, the publisher-led network could enhance its stability and functionality by the successful publication of the project. The translator-led network is capable of employing the new project in its subsequent approaches to the same or other publishers. The publisher-led network determines almost all the decisions concerning the editorial and textual (stylistic) features of the translations. The translator may be consulted at each step to make sure there is no major problem in the translation. The publisher-led network in this study is itself part of a larger religious and financial network that not only shapes its overall function, but can also direct its activities toward certain routes. I noted above that Astane is the larger network and one of the main sources of income for the publisher.

The academic-publisher network can be located in the space between the translator-led network and the publisher-led network. This network can be

activated by either the publisher or a member of academia. In the former case, the publisher needs academic input to support the project. In the latter, the academic may approach the publisher in order to enhance their rank in university system, among other motives. My observation and documents of the first project discussed above show that the “consecrated” members of the network can resist the “newcomers”, who may also be avant-garde academics (Bourdieu 1993: 58). One strategy for the “newcomers” to enter the network is some degree of self-effacement (e.g. names of the co-translators were not mentioned in the translator’s proposal). These newcomers either cooperate with professors in the latter’s translation projects or opt for low royalty fees. Once they are in (with no economic capital gained), they have the possibility to take a position in the network, and thus enter the field of publishing.

### *Translations vs. non-translations*

According to data on translation flows from *Khaneh ketab* (Iran Book House), on average 20% to 25% of annual publications in Iran are translations from foreign languages into Persian (see Haddadian Moghaddam 2012). The absence of copyright in Iran has contributed to the increasing importance of translations (Emami 1993). If Iran becomes a signatory to one of the copyright conventions, the balance of translations vs. non-translations might be quite different. For Behnashr, translations are a safe financial investment, similar to the situation of the large French publishers analyzed by Bourdieu (1999). However, translations have to compete with non-translation projects to secure recognition.

Behnashr does not treat translations the same way as non-translations, except in the editorial processes governing the textual features. The preparation department may also consider minor or major adaptations to the graphics of the original work, based on the publisher’s norms. In sum, the agents at Behnashr, like their counterparts elsewhere, “treat as routine what authors [and translators] regard as their crowning achievements” (Powell 1985: xxiv).

### *A combination of Bourdieu and Latour*

Theoretically, the combined approach of Bourdieusian analysis and actor-network theory is useful in two respects. First, it shows the possibility of tracing the processes that lead to a product called translation, producing data on the multiple agents involved in the production of translations. Second, it shows aspects of how the agents select a text for translation, what arguments they put forward for or against it, and how they recruit more agents into the network and negotiate room for maneuver. In our case study, we were able

to work from the inscriptions of the agents and the traces they left on the documents that moved through the network.

However, the tracing of agents becomes difficult and often impossible when data are kept secret or informants avoid giving information. This can happen when the network is part of a larger network with a highly hierarchal structure. There were some signs of this in our case study, although there may also be a rather dominant tendency among publishers to keep their data and practices confidential. Buzelin's approach (2005) to the study of multiple agents in the publishing houses should allow a wider level of determinants to address such methodological problems.

In terms of Bourdieu's study of the publishing field, it is not easy to locate Behnashr on either the literary or commercial side of the publishing field (Bourdieu 1993: 97). Behnashr is neither a literary publisher per se nor a purely commercial one, as the latter is incongruent with its professed image as the promoter of "Islamic doctrine". In the restricted field of production, Behnashr publishes books for children, general science, and certain university textbooks, all of which pose no or little threat to its objectives. However, in its large-scale production, it produces religious books that have a secured sale and readership on the one hand, and a safe economic return on the other. Behnashr is exemplary of those publishers that call for a new model of publishing. The model should be capable of encompassing the role of patrons and religious and governmental cultural policies in its structure. It should also be methodologically powerful enough to help the researcher describe complex networks that do not easily open themselves to academic scrutiny.

## **Conclusion**

This case study examined agents and their networks in an Iranian publishing house, which was by no means a full account of the complexities of the publishing industry in Iran. This was done through participant observation, the examination of written materials, and interviews. The findings have shown that in the two translation projects under study, the translators were the title selectors. The book evaluators also exercised their agency in recommending or rejecting the translators' suggestions for possible publication. I have also distinguished between three kinds of networks at work in the publishing house: the translator-led network, the publisher-led network, and an under-studied academic-publisher network. In the academic-publisher network, some degree of self-effacement by newcomers was observable. The case study also revealed how a non-private, religious-oriented publisher has refused to publish novels but has nevertheless met the religious and educational needs of its readership. The publication of non-religious books by the publisher (excluding Western philosophical books and

books of critical theory) could hardly be interpreted as paradoxical cooperation between secular academics and a religious publisher. Rather it is more plausible to view it as a coping strategy of survival, used by academics in post-Revolution Iran.

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