

## **Structure and Dynamics of the World System of Translation**

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There are two general and widespread ways to understand translations. One is to compare the translation with the source-text and the source-language or source-culture, and to examine the creative deviations from the original. This is commonly the point of view of translators and often the method of teaching translation. The other method is to consider translations in the context where they are produced and actually functions, in other words in the target culture. This is the point of view that prevails among literary and cultural historians.

As the title of my talk indicates, I would like to propose another perspective, namely the idea that translations and the manifold activities these imply are embedded in and dependent on a world system of translation, including both the source and the target cultures. Translation occurs in a set of relations between languages and language groups, which do not cover all languages that exist, but which does have a global dimension. What happens in one part of the system is related to what happens elsewhere: so there are various forms of interdependencies warranting to speak of an international translation system. As a consequence, many aspects of the translation process are affected by the way they are embedded in the structure and the dynamics of this world system of translation.

We can get an appropriate image of what this system looks like when we consider the international flows of translated books. The statistical data about these flows are available in the database the *Index translationum*, which is produced by UNESCO. According to the *Index* every year more than 80.000 books are translated worldwide from up to about 200 languages. The distribution of these book translations by language suggests that the international translation system is a 4-level structure.

55 to 60 % of all book translations are made from a single language, and that is – obviously – English. So English strongly dominates the global market for translations. In terms of a core-periphery model, which is widely used in international relations, one can say that it occupies a sort of *hypercentral position* to borrow a term from Abram de Swaan.

After English, there are two languages that have a *central position*: German and French. Each with a share of about 10% of the global translation market. Both are far behind English, but are clearly ahead of all the other languages. Then – third level- there are 7 or 8 languages that have a *semi-central position*. These are languages that are neither very central on a global level nor very peripheral, having a share of 1 to 3 % of the world market. These are typically languages like Spanish, Italian, and Russian. And, finally – fourth level - there are all the other languages from which less than 1% of the book translations worldwide are made. These languages can be considered to be ‘peripheral’ in the international translation economy, in spite of the fact that some of these languages have a very large number of speakers -- Chinese, Japanese, Arabic. These are among the largest languages in the world, but their role in the translation economy is peripheral as compared to more central languages.

So the flow of book translations can be seen as a particular world system, with a very hierarchical structure, strongly dominated by the English language, and by the cultural goods produced in the English speaking countries, with the US at their center. This distribution resembles what one finds in other cultural world systems.

Over the past quarter of a century and contrary to a popular idea of globalization, the dominance of English has significantly increased. Around 1980, the share of translations from English was a bit over 40%. It went up to the current level of 55 to 60% after the fall of the Berlin wall and the subsequent collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, which produced an immediate fall in translations from Russian. Prior to 1989 Russian had a central position in the international translation system, comparable to German and French, with a market share of about 10 to 12 %. But after the collapse of communism, translations from Russian fell rapidly to about 2 or 3%. Today: it has a semi-central position, comparable to Italian and Spanish.

What happened after the fall of Russian is that English - not German or Japanese or Arabic - profited and continued to rise in prominence.

2) An important feature of this world system of translation is that this core-periphery structure roughly corresponds to the level of translations within each country or, more precisely, within each language group. The general principle is: the more central the international position of a language/language group is, the lower the translation rate within that language. So you have – indeed – low translation rates for the US and the UK: between 2 and 4 % of all published books are translations. The rates in France and Germany are significantly higher: fluctuating between 12 and 18% of the national book production. Higher rates

again for the semi-central languages (over 20 %), and, the highest rates are usually found in peripheral language groups (Greece and Portugal over 30 %; Scandinavian countries: similar, the Netherlands: 34%: 3 out of 4 translations are translated from English).

So there seems to be an inverse relationship between the international position of a language in the world system of translation, and the domestic translation rates. A central position in the international exchanges implies that there are many translations out of this language (by definition), but this corresponds to relatively few translations into this language. And the other way around: there are few translations from peripheral languages (again by definition), but this generally implies that: many translations into these languages. So in the international translation economy, there is no equilibrium between import and export; on the contrary, cultural exchanges seem to be very unequal, and there is a *structural imbalance* between import and export.

Over the past 25 years, furthermore, the imbalances have not diminished, but, on the contrary, seem to have increased.

- The supremacy of English is more pronounced than it ever was.
- There is a slight decline in the positions of central languages such as French and German.
- As far as I know, there are no indications that the proportion of book translations from peripheral languages has structurally changed.

In the Netherlands it is stable: about 10% of all translations are from other than the three main languages (English, German, French): but this percentage has not changed over the past four decades. What has changed is that there is an increase in the diversity of translations from 'other' languages. Books are nowadays translated from more languages than 20 and 40 years ago. So there is an increase in diversity in this sense. But the overall number of translations from peripheral languages has not clearly increased.

3) Distinguishing language groups by their degree of centrality not only implies that translations flow more from the core to the periphery than the other way around, but also that the communication between peripheral groups often passes via a more central language. What is translated from one peripheral language into the other, very often depends on what is translated from these peripheral languages into the central languages. So the more central a language is in the translation system, the more it has the capacity to function as an intermediary language or a vehicular language, that is as a means of communication between language groups which are themselves peripheral or semi-peripheral.

4) The more central a language is in the international translation system, the more types of books are translated from this language. Book statistics in the Netherlands distinguish thirty three categories of books, ranging from 'religion' and 'law' to 'prose' or 'history'. Only the translations from the most central language, English, are represented in all 33 categories. Translations from German are found in 28 categories, translations from French in 22 categories, from Italian in 10 categories, et cetera. Centrality, in other words, implies variety. Since the small number of books

translated from peripheral languages is generally concentrated in very few categories, the opposite also holds true: book translations from peripheral languages lack the variety which increases with the degree of centrality.

5) finally : the core-periphery structure of the international system of translation has implications not only for the number or the variety of translations, but also for the status of translated books, of translators and the translation strategies that are prevalent. In the most central languages, translations are few, the translator does not have a very high status, and the translation norms derive from indigenous literary standards. In more peripheral language groups, translations are more important, tend to have a higher status, and foreignizing strategies tend to be more legitimate.

So considering the translation process from a world system perspective allows the understanding of a number of phenomena which, I think, are difficult to understand from either a source- or a target culture perspective.

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