Sociology

In brief

SPA *Sociología* **RUS** *Социология перевода*

⏮ origins

The beginnings of <u>sociology</u> as a distinct scholarly discipline may be traced to the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1794–1859) who coined the hybrid term from the Latin *socius* meaning 'companion' and the Greek *logos* meaning 'word' or 'science'. Together with Comte, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Georg Simmel, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber are usually honoured as founders of modern sociology.

☰ abstract

Sociology studies human interactions in groups. Translation is a means of human interactions. Therefore, it is only logical that translation activities have always been discussed as part of social interactions. This entry overviews socially informed discussions of

translation before the discipline of Translation Studies was established, then within its linguistic and cultural turns. Finally, the three major models of sociologically informed translation research are shown – the macrosociological, the microsociological and the approach bridging the two.

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Entry

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📖 Introduction

In his now classical article "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" (1972/1988), James S. Holmes was the first to write about translation sociology or socio-translation studies. This branch of translation studies, according to Holmes, was about the socio-cultural setting of translation with the focus not on texts but on contexts. It would take Translation Studies (TS) some time before the importance of studying social aspects of translation would be appreciated to the extent that a sociological turn would be introduced in the late 1990s (Wolf & Fukari 2007: 42)

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¶⏎ Pre-TS ideas

It would be misleading to think that never before Holmes was translation viewed as a social activity. On the contrary, from the earliest known discussions as well as practices of translation, it was seen as part of social processes and was nearly always understood as a meeting point of not only languages but also cultures and societies. Let us look briefly at a few examples of such socially-informed discussions and practices of translation. Marcus Tullius Cicero, a Roman rhetorician, described the way he considered the best to appropriate the Greek rhetoric model speeches via translation. When writing about the best way to translate, he drew on his own translation method: he translated them not word for word but rather sense for sense, the reason being that by his renditions of the best Greek orators he intended to contribute to the development of the art of rhetoric in his own language and culture which would be impossible to do by translating literally, that is, awkwardly and slavishly.

Cicero's De oratore, 15th century, [First page of a miniature of Northern Italy]. [Source]

His effort was part of the process in which one culture not only learned from another but also emulated it. This emulation was far from humble in the mature Roman culture: the Romans considered translation little short of conquering other cultures' achievements. The best translation was appropriating other cultures on the Roman terms: "Latin was not violated in any form, not even when the original text violated the

structure of its own language by deviating from normally accepted conventions" (Friedrich 1992: 12).

Later, in his discussion of his translation policy, another Roman translator Saint Jerome, who rendered the Bible into Latin, profusely cited examples of Roman translators, ending the list with Hilary of Poitiers (the Confessor) who translated Greek commentaries on the Bible into Latin "by right of victory carried the meaning as if captive into his own language" (Jerome 2012: 25). Hugo Friedrich compared this statement with "a declaration of power by a Roman emperor" (Friedrich 1992: 12). The metaphor used by Jerome speaks volumes in terms of the Roman view of translation as a mechanism of negotiating intersocietal relations – translation was for the Romans a way of appropriating cultural values by means of their own language.

A 14th century representation of Xuanzang carrying

In ancient China (in the third century BCE) translation was practiced as part of state functions, that is, as a social practice. There were special, interpreting, functionaries, 'tongue-men' (*xiangxu*), who were trained both in foreign languages and "in the proper use of diplomatic languages" and with their help the King "ensure[d] that the princes and other states remain[ed] content with his rule" (Cheung 2006: 43). Thus, translation was seen as vital for running the empire.

Social aspects of translation loom large in documented discussions related to the spread of religions, notably Buddhism and Christianity.

In the spread of Buddhism, translation was seen as part of the Buddhist mission. In *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng*

scrolls of sutras from India to China. [Source].

zhuan), completed around 530 by Huijiao, an entire opening series of biographies is a collection of life-stories of translators (Huijian 1971). Buddhism was shown to be introduced through the work of monks-translators. A typical example is Dharmaratna (Zhu Falan) who was a native of Central India. He was invited by Emperor Ming's envoy to travel to China to convert the Chinese people. Dharmaratna learned Chinese and translated five Buddhist sutras. Dharmaratna is portrayed as a Buddhist monk who translated and thereby contributed to China's conversion to Buddhism. The same view of translation as a powerful means of furthering and deepening the reception of Buddhism in China governed Xuanzang, a Chinese native Buddhist who undertook an arduous journey to the West, that is, to India, to bring new Buddhist sutras.

Having brought them, he also translated them himself and with the help of his pupils. Moreover, Xuanzang organised translating sessions in which the translated sutras were discussed and then rendered into Chinese; noteworthy is the fact that state officials attended these sessions. This shows how translation was considered an important social practice (Wriggins 2004).

Martin Luther, the German Protestant leader and author of a translation of the Bible into German, wrote "An Open Letter on Translating" (Luther 1530). In this document, Luther presented translation as having a key role in making the Bible accessible to people because only by appreciating the text of the Holy Scriptures directly the readers could appreciate the divine blessings. Little wonder that his translation became a manifesto blazing the way for the Reformation as a religious and social movement.

To be sure, this tendency to see translation as a factor in intercultural exchange and intersocietal relations continued all the way till the second half of the twentieth century and examples like the ones adduced above can be multiplied but because of space limitations in the next sections we shall turn to a more recent tradition within the discipline of Translation and Interpreting Studies.

The above discussed examples show how translators' praxis and ideas about that praxis placed translation in a broader sociocultural context. Such ideas demonstrate not only the practical, but also proto-theoretical awareness of translation as a social phenomenon.

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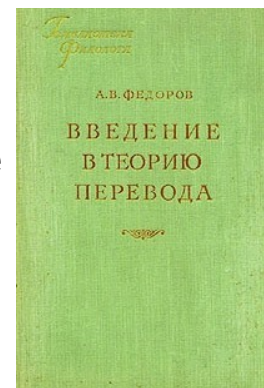# ¶ In the linguistic translation theories

It might seem that in the first turn of the emerging discipline of Translation Studies in the 1960s –1970s of the twentieth century – the linguistic turn – one should expect a neglect of social aspects of translation since the focus, as the name of the turn makes clear, was on translation as a linguistic phenomenon. Yet in early linguistic theories of translation there is always a realisation that translation should be discussed taking into account a broader, extralinguistic context because not all aspects of translation can be explained linguistically. The area in which non-linguistic factors played out especially clearly was stylistics. The theory of translation elaborated by Andrei Fedorov, a Soviet theorist of translation, was within the linguistic turn yet he wrote:

> **The semantic and stylistic function of the linguistic means arises as a result of the specific relationship between the unit of content and the linguistic means in a general context. And when transferring that relationship in a translation, what is essential is not**

the formal but the functional dimension, which may demand the selection of linguistic means that are different from those in the original, and this selection is conditioned on the overall nature of the relationship. This problem is resolved first and foremost in the realm of stylistics.

(1968: 30; translated by Brian Baer)

Georges Mounin also views translations as not reducible to linguistic aspects, although like Fedorov's, his theory is predominantly linguistic. At least occasionally, he assumed a socio-historical perspective of analysing translations (1955: 85, 98). Moreover, he suggested looking into the translator's role in the production of translation (1955: 121); in this, his theorizing translation was a harbinger of what is known as Translator Studies, a branch of Translation Studies that is being developed now when translation is studied as a social phenomenon (Kaindl, Kolb & Schlager 2021). In a later monograph on translation, he looked into translation as a means of connecting worldviews expressed by languages and civilizations and mentioned sociology among the sciences with which translation studies shares its object of study (Mounin 1963: 222–223).

First edition of Fedorov's Introduction to the Theory of Translation (1953). [Source].

Yet another example is Eugene Nida's fundamentally linguistic theory of translation (1964: ix, 2). Yet Nida talks about translation as influenced by "cultural contexts" (1964: 4). Translators are viewed as "a part of the very cultural context in which and for which [they] are translating" (1964: 29). Nida distinguishes between different roles translators may play as experts and as social actors entering different

relations with other social actors taking part in a translation project. Translators can be "pioneers" who "hammer out the basic form of a translation"; or "midwives […] as specialist[s] in exegetical and linguistic matters"; or "teammates" when they share with others "the responsibility for the form of the message in the receptor language" (1964: 153-154).

Nida's theory of equivalence, a concept characteristic of the linguistic turn in Translation Studies, is imbued with his vision of translation as a social act. Target texts are aimed at readers as the respective source texts were aimed at readers, hence, the translator should achieve a comparable target reader response. Only if a translation succeeds in inducing a comparable response in the target readership, it may be recognized as equivalent to its source text (1964: 162).

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# ¶↳ In the cultural translation theories

In the theories of translation that are usually associated with the next, cultural turn (Snell-Hornby 2006), we find more frequent, more detailed and more explicit inroads into sociologically informed examinations of translation. An early and precocious example is the theory of translation put forward in the early 1980s by Justa Holz-Mänttäri. She based her theory of translation on the sociological notion of action. The term 'action' as used in sociology means such an action that is intended for communication. Action can be verbal or nonverbal, for instance a gesture, even a facial expression, perhaps a grimace; these kinds of action aim at communicating an idea, a feeling, an attitude and participate in the exchange of information between social agents, that is, people considered as participants in interpersonal interactions; and society is woven of such information exchanges through actions. Holz-Mänttäri's theory is a revolutionary

application of the concepts of action and social system to translation: translation is examined not so much as a linguistic or even cultural phenomenon but as a social action, hence the name of the theory 'Translatorial action' (in the original German – *Translatorisches Handeln*). The translatorial action has its unique social function within a social system which "is to produce texts in such situations when the direct communication or cooperation is impossible" (Holz-Mänttäri 1984: 6; my translation).

Another major contribution to the development of sociologically informed translation research is the Skopos theory. The Greek word 'skopos' means 'goal' or 'purpose'. By putting the word into the name of their theory, Hans J. Vermeer and Katharina Reiß emphasised that translation is practiced with the view to communicating ideas coming from the source text and the source culture to the target culture through reformulating them in the target language. Notably, the reformulation is not a direct linguistic transfer but a linguo-cultural adaptation of the source text in accordance with the conventions of the target culture, on the one hand, and in accordance with the brief of translation, on the other. A legal document in Language A is likely to be translated not literally but using respective legal formulae of Language B. If a legal document to be translated from Language A is to be rendered into Language B not as a legal document but, in accordance with some other brief and a different *skopos*, for instance, as a simplified, jargon-free version of the source document, then the transformation will be even more radical. In any case, the transformation of the source text into a target text has its linguistic and socio-cultural aspects. Translators are key participants in the transformation of textual material exchanged in intercultural and interlinguistic communicative interactions (Reiß & Vermeer 1984: 40, 60).

At the same time another school of thought within Translation Studies elaborated comparable, if not necessarily similar, ideas about translation's social functioning. Itamar Even-Zohar, the author of the polysystem theory (Even-Zohar 1990), Gideon Toury and the so-called 'Manipulation School' (see Hermans 2014) viewed translation as an act unfolding within the framework of an "overall" socio-cultural context (Toury 2012: 67). The contextually sensitive view of translation was essentially not new (cf. the above-mentioned linguistic theories, such as Fedorov's or Mounin's or Nida's) but in these theories translation is examined explicitly within a socio-cultural system, the national literary (poly)system and, to an extent, in the social system at large. The overall social system imposes constraints on translation practices and prescribes norms to translators (Toury 2012: 61-77). Thus, studying translation from the "socio-cultural prism" (Toury 2012: 67) was brought further.

André Lefevere made another step towards a sociological research into translation. Inspired by ideas of the German literary systems theorist Siegfried J. Schmidt who defined literature as "a complex *social* system of actions" (cited in Lefevere 1992: Loc 472), Lefevere applied, indirectly, Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. Literature was seen by him as "fulfil[ing] functions which no other system in the society can fulfill" (Lefevere 1992: Loc 472). Within the literary system, there is what may be described as a function subsystem, to borrow Luhmann's term, but Lefevere used another term – 'rewriting'. Rewriting is a secondary processing of primary texts – *re*writing of a writing. Translation is one type of rewriting: the translator rewrites what the author has written (Lefevere 1992: Loc. 444). Having defined translation in social-systemic terms, Lefevere
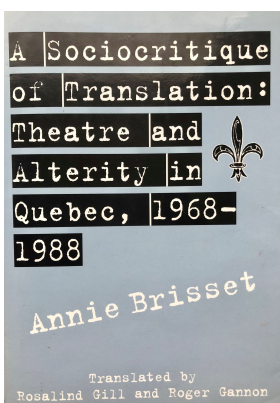
identified a mechanism of its social operation. Translation functions under two types of constraint – internal and external. Internally, translation is influenced by aesthetic constraints (a translation of a novel is likely to follow the genre rules of novel in the source or target literary systems); externally, translation is influenced by the ideology of the target social system, notably the dominant religious or political doctrines.

The 1990s is the decade in which the sociology of translation as predicted by Holmes two decades before came into a veritable blooming stage. A major gateway into the new paradigm was Annie Brisset's monograph *A Sociocritique of Translation: Theatre and Alterity in Quebec, 1968–1988* (1996, originally published in French in 1990).

Brisset broadened theorising translation as a function (sub)system primarily within literature as a (poly)system. She asked a broader question: How does translation transfer a text which existed in the discourse (a body of rules that determines the enunciative function of a given society) of the source society into the discourse of the target society? Brisset studied theatrical translations in Quebec, Canada, between 1968 and 1988, the period in which Québécois society was forging their linguo-socio-cultural identity both within predominantly anglophone Canada and, globally, in the francophone world community. Brisset showed translation as it appealed to society as a collectivity (therefore translation in theatre as a social art was of special interest to the researcher), and the translator, either a collective being or an individual, acting in close contact with society, playing the role of a spokesperson for the society in which he or she operates.

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¶ Drawing lines between the turns

Usually, there is a line drawn between the cultural and sociological turns in Translation Studies. The introduction to the edited collection Bassnett & Lefevere (1990) was presented as a manifesto of the cultural turn (pp. 4, 81-82). André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett took pains to explain that theirs was a collection opening a new way to look and study (literary) translation benefitting from the previous linguistic approach but also moving beyond it (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990: 12). For them and their contributors, the operational unit of translation shifted from the word or the text to the culture (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990: 8). The shift, in fact, had happened at least a decade before, in theories such as the polysystem theory, the skopos theory or the translatorial action, all three introduced and developed in the 1970s–1980s, making Lefevere & Bassnett's Introduction a belated yet definitive manifesto of the cultural turn and an early map of an incipient sociological turn. The contributions discuss phenomena usually associated with sociology rather than cultural studies – (post)colonialism, gender and feminism, power issues. Yet as an anticipation of the coming sociological turn, the collection is rather controversial in that it reduces culture to literature which is a narrow and rather outdated understanding of the concept of culture (Tyulenev 2019: 210-213), and in that the goal of the collection seen as "rethink[ing] our notions of Comparative Literature and redefine[ing] it as a subcategory of Translation Studies" (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990: 12). The collection is a good example of a complex dynamics of the turns in Translation Studies: it claims to overcome the limitations of the linguistic turn and to introduce the cultural turn but it also contains features that would be characteristic of the sociological turn.

If the early 1990s may be considered an early bloom of the sociological turn, the late 1990s–early 2000s can be metaphorically called its heyday. The most important works include Simeoni (1998)

and Gouanvic (1999) exploring the possibility of applying Pierre
Bourdieu's sociological theory; Hermans (1999) attempted to fathom
the potential of Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory for translation
research. Wolf and Fukari (2007) was a collection broadening the
repertoire of sociologists whose theories were applied to studying
translation, to include Latour, Lahire and Giddens.

In that period, there were not only attempts to borrow from sociology
but also sociologists explored translation as a candidate for a subfield
within their discipline. In 2002, two issues of the sociological journal
Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales were devoted to
translation: the September issue (Heilbron & Sapiro 2002) was
specifically on translation as a means of circulating literary works and
the December issue (*Actes* 2002) was devoted to the international
circulation of ideas with translation featuring prominently, once again,
as a vehicle ensuring the circulation. Sapiro (2008) was a sociological
exploration of translation's functioning in the book markets negotiating
between the national and globalized social spaces.

At the same time attempts were made to combine the efforts of
translation scholars and sociologists, for instance, in the first special
issue of the then newly launched journal *Translation Studies* guest-
edited by Doris Bachmann-Medick (2009). The issue was a project of
furthering theoretical attention to translation processes in the adjacent
social sciences, notably in sociology (Bachmann-Medick 2009).

At the same time, despite clear signs of rapprochement, there was a
concern in Translation Studies expressed in the editorial introduction
of Diaz Fouces and Monzó (2010). On the one hand, in their
collection, they aimed "to highlight the interest in learning more about
what sociology can tell us", but on the other, there was a danger of
producing "a scattered collection of isolated ideas" (Diaz Fouces and
Monzó 2010: 13). This was the concern not only in that issue but in

the evolving sociological paradigm in general. There is every reason to believe, however, that TIS will stay an ever diversifying discipline, and its sociological branch will be exploring new aspects of translation by applying new sociological theories and contribute to sociology by introducing translation as a social phenomenon.

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¶⇂ The present-day sociologically informed TIS research

Defined briefly, sociology studies human collectivities. There are essentially three models of understanding society. The first model is macrosociological. It views society as a whole containing different parts, each meeting a particular need of the whole. This vision of society can be compared to a complex organism with different organs each functioning in such a way as to ensure the wellbeing of the entire organism. Theories based on this structural-functionalist model of society emphasise the suprahuman nature of the social and consider individual agency as derivative from the whole.

A prime example of this model applied to the study of translation is Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. There have been several studies applying Luhmann's theories to research into translation, the most detailed being Hermans (1999) and Tyulenev (2011).

Luhmann's system-functionalist theory invites us to consider translation as a social structure within the overall social system. Among the main research questions discussed here are, what function translation fulfills in society and how it relates to other function subsystems. The application of Luhmann's theory allows seeing translation as located at the boundaries of interacting systems. Translation can be called, therefore, in Luhmannian terms, a boundary

phenomenon, comparable to eyes or ears in human body. Like eyes and ears, translation is among those social-systemic subsystems which inform the system about and facilitate the system's interaction with its social environment. Translation may also be compared to a social catalyst: without it communication between different sign systems would be less effective, if at all possible. This constitutes the social-systemic uniqueness of translation's function. In Luhmann's terms, all social subsystems are equally unequal, meaning that their only common feature in the social system is that they have nothing in common with one another – this is so because each one meets a particular need of the overall social system and each one is operationally unique, i.e. it processes the social reality in its way. For instance, politics views all social phenomena only in terms of power distribution; law sees social agents and their actions only in legal terms. This makes each one of them indispensable to the overall functioning of the system. Applied to translation, this means that no other social subsystem can replace its function and, whatever relative power of any other social subsystem, translation retains its effectiveness in various social contexts. To summarise, among the advantages of the macrosociological research into translation is that it allows us seeing the place translation occupies in society and the roles it plays in relation to the overall social system and to other social subsystems.

Microsociology turns the macrosociological paradigm inside out, so to speak. It views society as a platform of negotiations of the social order on the level of social actors, rather than on some suprahuman level. An example of a microsociological model is the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), primarily but not exclusively associated with Bruno Latour. As is typical of a microsociological theory, ANT views social interactions as fluid and dynamic. The main methodological principle of the ANT-inspired research is to follow actors (Latour 1987). The researcher does not impose any schemata on the observed phenomena. That is

why the term 'network' is preferred to 'system' which would imply a preconceived structure. Social networks depend on the relations negotiated by actors within a project.

Applied to studying translation studies, this approach has proved productive in allowing the researcher an insight into translation projects in terms of the distribution of responsibilities, influences and roles assumed by different actors, not only translators. The studies such as Buzelin (2005; 2007) and Luo (2020) show the advantages of applying the ANT to studying translation which, in the process of the production of a target text, is shown as a complex network with translators and actors who are not translators, yet who influence the final product. Moreover, the networks of translation projects cannot be reduced to human actors, there are also non-human participants in social interactions. This is one of the strengths of the ANT – it does not build an impenetrable wall between human and nonhuman agency, and thereby allows the researcher to see translation production in all its complexity not bracketing off anything.

Macrosociological and microsociological models may be considered as extremes and very often (if not always) any research into the social aspects of translation is a combination of features characteristic of both models. There are sociological theories which target specifically bridging the two extremes. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu's theory, on the one hand, considers larger social structures, termed 'fields', and on the other hand, it looks at social agents and the places they occupy in these fields. Bourdieu's theory is by far the most popular sociological theory in the sociologically informed translation studies. The history of applications of Bourdieu's theory spans more than a decade, from Simeoni (1998) to the more recent publications Wolf (2015), Vorderobermeier (2014) and Hanna (2016).

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📑 **Research potential**

As the decades of direct application of sociological ideas and theories to translation and interpreting research have shown, the sociological dimension enriches studying translation from the linguistic or cultural points of view. It shows that the linguistic or cultural aspects are not sufficient if one is to appreciate translation in its full complexity; much depends on in what society a translational act has happened, what the configuration of social agency and power relations are/were like in that society etc. In other words, translation is a multidimensional phenomenon and the social dimension is an indispensable facet of both translation process and product. The three main paradigms, each developed within what has been referred to as 'turns', must be seen as complementing one another, as concentric circles with translation as the focal point.

Already new circles are appearing, perhaps the most prominent being the research into translation/interpreting from the neurocognitive point of view and from broader semiotic positions where the *verbum* (that is, all linguistic aspects whether within one language or across several) is but one and sometimes not even the most important element. In exploring these newly discovered properties and types of translation, the sociological component has not yet always been appreciated by researchers focussing on the new methodologies, cognition or semiotics. Arguably, the cognitive and semiotic approaches will be added as new concentric circles to the existing ones, linguistic, cultural and social, and perhaps cognition in translation/interpreting will be studied taking into account social differences more

explicitly and critically. To give just one example, today the cognitive research does take into account the difference between participants who have more or less translation/interpreting experience; to be sure, this aspect, the experience in a particular activity, is social in nature. In the semiotic research into translation, taking a cue from Jakobson's intersemiotic translation but going beyond it (Marais 2018) into the social aspect, once again, should be appreciated as the semiotics of human communication varies over space and time.

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