Translation and the Cultural Dimension
A Postcolonial–Poststructuralist Approach

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Writing in the early twentieth century the American linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir put forward what has come to be known as the " Relativity Hypothesis" , which postulates that every language imposes on its speakers a different world view. What follows from this hypothesis is that intercultural communication is hard if not impossible. As Sapir puts it:

> No two languages are sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The world in which different societies live are distinct worlds not merely the same world with different labels attached.(Sapir 1956: 69)

Likewise, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1940) asserted that his experience of American and Hopi culture suggested to him that the cultures and thought processes were markedly different because their languages were so different. This led him to establish what he called the "linguistic relativity principle" , which states that

> users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world. (p. 221)

In other words, language was viewed as having a direct influence on thougnt; thought is in the grip of language.

However, Sapir's and Whorf's strong views have been met with great reservations especially by the proponents of the "cultural model" in translation who define meaning in terms of its cultural fields and contexts. For them language is culture and translation is the interpretation and rendering of the worldview of one people or nation to another. Even more, advocates of the transformational-generative grammar, as Traugott and Pratt Observe, stress language as a "psychological entity with universal characteristics", rather than as a "culture-specific entity" (1980: 109).

Recognizing the radical differences among languages and cultures, Eugene Nida (1964) put forward the view that despite all the differences that may hinder one to communicate adequately in one language what has been said originally in another, "that which unites mankind is much greater than which divides" (p. 2). Accordingly, there is a basis for communication even among disparate cultures (ibid.). Before Nida made this often quoted pronouncement, Roman Jakobson had argued that all human experience is linguistically conveyable across cultures (1959, 232).

Translators have always been aware of the various problems posed by linguistic and cultural differences among languages and peoples. Nevertheless, they have been from times immemorial doing all types of translation against all the odds. For example, when early Arab translators were faced with great difficulties emanating from wide linguistic and cultural gaps, they either borrowed many words from foreign languages or provided extensive notes to the translated texts to explain any problems arising from cultural differences. Moreover, instead of following a word-for-word translation, they often opted for rendering the spirit rather than the letter of the text, which helped them overcome obstacles resulting from widely separate cultures (Shomali, 1996:7-9; 157-158). It is also noticeable that in the interest of cultural or national identity, most languages tend to prefer coining to foreign borrowings or transfers.

Modern translation theorists such as Catford (1965), Nida (1964), Savory (1958), Newmark (1988), Wills (1982) and Lefévere (1992) have underscored the fact that translators need not only language competence in two languages but also a good knowledge of the cultures of the languages concerned. For them, cultural gaps should not hinder the attempts to translate across languages for these gaps can be narrowed and

cultural objects or concepts can he matched in one way or another. To facilitate the translation process, they have suggested various solutions such as using componential analysis, applying case grammar to translation, using the most appropriate method of cultural transposition such as literal translation, transference, cultural borrowing, claque, communicative translation and cultural transplantation as well as utilizing the techniques of semiotics, pragmatics and other relevant neighbouring disciplines (Hervey and Higgins, 1992: 28-40).

The objective of this review paper is to investigate the problem of translating across cultural boundaries from a predominantly postcolonial/ poststructuralist perspective. Drawing upon the two approaches identified above, this paper purports to critically review recent developments in translation across-culturally over the last two decades or so.

Since the 1980s a kind of postcolonial/poststructuralist approach to translation studies has emerged. This approach seeks to focus attention on the question of "ideology" and the role it plays in shaping the translation activity worldwide. One of the main questions raised by the proponents of this approach is: Who controls translation? This question has been answered differently by two opposing groups of theorists, even though some of them, like André Lefevere, has contributed to both sides of the argument as we shall see later. The first group, which is best represented by Susan Bassnett (1991), Gideon Toury, (1995) and Adnré Lefévere (1992), have been exploring the impact of the target-language system on what gets translated. The second group, best represented by Lawrence Venuti (1995), Richard Jacquemond (1992), Douglas Robinson (1997) and partially by André Lefévere, have been dealing with the impact of colonization and Western hegemony on cultural transfers across cultural barriers. While the first group believes that translation is largely controlled by the target culture (mostly third-world countries), the second group views translation as being dominated by first-world countries, particularly Britain and America.

Arguing that translation studies have shifted attention from the study of translatability and rule-giving translation theory to a more descriptive approach to translation, Susan Bassnett (1991) points out that the concentration now is on intercultural communication, acculturation and history of translation (xii-xiii). For her, the "old hackneyed evaluative approach" has given much ground to what she calls the "manipulation approach" focusing on the fortunes of the text in the target culture (ibid.).

In this way, much attention has shifted from the linguistic elements of the target text to the reception of the source text in the target culture. Bassnett concludes that translation has begun to lose its overly European focus . Instead of being Euro-centric, translation studies have been developing rapidly in third–world countries, including, of course, the Arab world. It is this rapid development and all-inclusive expansion of translation outside Europe that apparently has prompted Bassnett to maintain that the target–language culture has now greater leverage in determining the activity of translation around the world. As a consequence to this trend translators are expected to take into their consideration the cultural environment of the target language before embarking on their translations. It is also necessary to look differently at the world and to reconsider the ideals and the value systems of the source language and their acceptability in the target-language culture. In short, the whole theory of translation studies has been revised in the light of the principles and techniques of post-colonialism which, among other things, calls for a reappraisal of the relationship between the colonizing powers and their former colonies.

Postcolonialists believe that Western imperialism has left its indelible imprint on the life of the East, which has been marginalized through the power of discourse, to use the words of the French philosopher Michel Focault (1972). Inspired by Focault's (1972) conception of how discourse constitutes power, postcolonial theorists have begun to see the translation scene as being dominated by the concepts and control of a more powerful culture over a less powerful one. According to Focault, certain discourses have shaped different forms of knowledge to the extent that they are passed as the "truth". In this way, the dominant discourse has succeeded in subjugating, marginalizing and even silencing the "Other".(ibid:133)

Focault's *The Archeology of Knowledge*, (1972) Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) constitute the groundwork for all anti-colonial studies. The general belief among postcolonialist theorists is that as colonization encompasses the transformation of the social consciousness, decolonolization must involve not only the liberation of the land but also the liberation of the mind. By working through some ingrained sets of so-called "facts", the dominant force controls the cultural system, the ideology of a dominated force. The only solution for this problem is that the dominated power must pull itself up and assert its

own identity. In other words, third-world countries are seen as trying to preserve their indigenous cultures and to put up tough resistance to any form of cultural invasion. This is why such cultures have been looked at as controlling intercultural translations the world over, assuming that a marginalized culture tends to translate more works than a more central, more influential one.

In his book *Translating Literature* (1992) André Lefevere explores, among other things, the reception and integration of a source language text in a target–language text. Arguing that translation is a kind of "acculturation", Lefévere asserts:

> Translation can teach us about the wider problem of acculturation, the relation among different cultures that is becoming increasingly important for the survival of our planet, and former attempts at acculturation-translation can teach us about translation. (12).

In his study, Lefevere investigates the relations among different cultures over the ages including the purposes of translations, the readership and the way translation affects the people of the target culture. He argues that ideology determines what can be translated: "Whether an audience is reading the Bible or other works of literature, it often wants to see its own ideology and its own universe of discourse mirrored in the translation." (118). In other words, the target–language readership tries to create the world in its own image, translating only what fits in with its own ideology and cultural system. Lefevere goes on to say that throughout different periods of human history, different cultures have been trying the necessary amendments to the translated texts, omitting, adding or adapting to their needs what they deem necessary (118-120). In other words, the target–language audience, whether it belongs to a "superior" or to an "inferior" culture, imposes its will on what can or should be translated (ibid. 116) and consequently controls the translation practice.

Actually, Leféver makes other insightful remarks about how a target culture receives new translations from a source culture. In his opinion, though the target culture may at first resist translations from a dominant source culture, it eventually accepts into its ideological system foreign elements from a different culture. Citing Victor Hugo's ideas about a culture's initial negative reaction to translation, Lefévere argues that cultures try to protect their own world against images or notions that are

radically different "either by adaptations or by screening them out" (125). Indeed, all cultures exercise a great deal of censorship when translating from other cultures, adding, inserting or omitting material that would make the text conform to the norms of acceptability, comprehensibility, suitability and even the prejudices of the target-language culture.

On the other side of the controversy with regard to who controls translation, there is a group of translation theorists who maintain that it is the hegemony of some powerful countries that determines and shapes translation work. As pointed out above, Lefevere seems to be subscribing to this view as is obvious in his survey of translation practices over a long spectrum of intercultural communication. As he puts it: "Members of 'superior' cultures tend to look down on members of 'inferior' cultures and to treat cavalierly the literature of those cultures" (119). Thus, as any foreign culture imposes its own restrictions on transcultural transfers, so does a superior" culture impose its constraints on what can be translated from what it sees as an "inferior" culture, thus adding yet another type of constraints to those imposed initially by the target-language culture qua culture. Indeed, one of the most important issues raised by Lefevere is the impact that the norms of the target culture have on the attempts to translate from another culture, especially when the source culture happens to see itself as a "superior" culture. As he puts it:

> The attitude that uses one's own culture as the yardstick by which to measure all other cultures is known as ethnocentricity ... All cultures have it but that only those who achieve some kind of superiority flaunt it. An ethnocentric attitude allows members of a culture to remake the world in their own image, without first having to realize how different the reality of that world is. It produces translations that are tailored to the foreign culture exclusively and that screen out whatever does not fit in with it. (120)

Leféver cites the case of translating Arabic texts into English as a telling example of Western cultural ethnocentricity. He argues that translation from Arabic into Western languages have not been so widespread simply because in Arabic there is no epic tradition and the lyric is predominant, contrary to the situation in Western culture where the epic has always been accorded the highest status among Western literary traditions which rank the lyric on a lower scale. Lefevere explains this phenomenon by asserting that it is a matter of poetics in the sense that the qasida, the classical genre of Arabic poetry, looks totally out of place in Western poetics as it is measured by the yardstick of the Western literary tradition

from which it is different (129-130). One may add that it is a poetics embedded in ethnocentricity.

Like Lefévere, Douglas Robinson (1997) and Richard Jacquemond (1992) have dealt with the question of translatability from a more powerful source culture into a less powerful target culture. Robinson rightly points that a dominated culture will invariably translate far more of a hegemonic culture than the latter from the former (234). Both Robinson and Jacquemond are interested in the power differentials between cultures, that is the hegemonic or the dominant versus the less powerful or the dominated cultures. As Robinson explains, Jacquemond maintains that the translator from a hegemonic culture into a dominated one actually "serves the hegemonic culture in its desire to integrate its cultural products into the dominated culture." (234). Obviously, this phenomenon serves as a good example of how the source hegemonic culture controls translation. Even more, wherever a target culture desires to translate from the source culture, that desire is shaped and controlled by the source culture itself. By the same token, the translator from a dominated culture into a hegemonic one serves the objectives of the hegemonic culture by complying with its dictates and norms of translatability. The fact is, as Jacquemond asserts, "a hegemonic culture will only translate those works by authors in a dominated culture that fit the former's preconceived notions of the latter" (qtd. in Robinson 1997: 235). A good case in point is the translation of Nawal Sa'dawi's novels from Arabic into English. It is true to say that Sa'dawi comes first among all modern Arab writers, including Najib Mahfouz, in being the most translated Arab writer. Whether this popularity among Western readership is based on literary merits or some other factors is, of course, a controversial matter. Nevertheless, one can safely say that part of her novels' popularity in their feminist orientation, their overtly sexual overtones and their treatment of some themes in Arab culture that are appealing to Western readers.

One of the most succinct introductions to postcolonial translation studies has been offered by Lawrence Venuti (1995). Basing his argument on recent statistical figures, Venuti argues that "translation patterns point to a trade imbalance with serious cultural ramifications" (14). He further explains that the ratio of British and American book production to the number of translations is in direct apposition to the publishing and translation practices in other countries. British and American book production, he maintains, "increased fourfold since the 1950s, but the

number of translations remained roughly between 2 and 4 percent of the total" (12). In Ventui's view hardly do Anglo-American publishers publish English-language translations of foreign books (14). This imbalance, he adds, has diverse and far-reaching consequences on what gets translated. Venuti attributes this situation to the publishers who have been exploiting Anglo-American hegemony over international translations. "Foreign publishers," he maintains, "have exploited the global drift toward American political and economic hegemony in the postwar period, actively supporting the international expansion of Anglo-American culture" (15). As a consequence, many less privileged cultures have been suffering from cultural marginality and hardly anything has been translated from them into Anglo-American culture.

Venuti's views are clearly embedded in postcolonial poststructuralist discourse. In contradistinction to the studies of Said, Fanon and Focault, Venuti draws upon the theory of deconstruction expounded by Jacques Derrida in the early 1980s. According to Derrida's deconstructive theory all discourse is subject to the play of "difference" [see Derrida, 1982 ; Selden (1989:73-93); Eagleton (1996:110-130)] and consequently meaning is deferred and indeterminate. Venuti defines translation as "a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source language is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target-language text which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation" (17). Apparently taking his cue from Derrida's idea that meaning is always differential and deferred, never present as an original unity, Venuti goes on to say that

> meaning is a plural and contingent relation, not an unchanging unified essence, and therefore a translation cannot be judged according to mathematics-based concepts of semantic equivalence or one-to-one correspondence. (18).

Accordingly, appeals to notions of "fidelity" and "freedom" or canons of accuracy in translation will not do. Relying on this argument, Venuti concludes that the "validity of a translation is established by its relationship to the cultural and social conditions under which it is produced and read" (18). Obviously, such a poststructuralist view of translation foregrounds the cultural dimension at the expense of the linguistic one.

What is more interesting in Venuti's approach is his distinction between

two different methods of translation strategies: "domestication" and 'foreignization". For him, domestication occurs when the foreign text undergoes a forcible process of modification and adaptation to meet the ideology, the canons, and the taboos and codes of the target-language culture. Accordingly, the foreign text is reconstituted "in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts" (18). It is worth mentioning here that Venuti is referring to a hegemonic target-language culture rather than to a dominated culture, more specifically the Anglo-American culture. In his opinion, when a hegemonic culture does translate works produced by a dominated culture, these works are subjected to a vigorous process of sifting and scrutiny that makes them look esoteric, mysterious and untranslatable to the target –language readership in contrast with the accessibility to the masses of the works translated by a dominated culture from a hegemonic one. This strategy is similar to what Leféver calls "ethnocentricity" (121).

Against this strategy, Venuti posits the method of foreignization according to which the values and the norms of foreign texts are kept unchanged as much as possible so that the recipient moves towards them. Contrary to the "domestication" method , which is ethnocentric, the "foreignization" method is "ethnodeviant", resisting any reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, sending the reader towards them. In this way a cultural "other" is preserved. However, for Venuti this cultural otherness of the translated text "can never be manifested in its own terms, only in those of the target language" (20) Hence, the "foreign" text's value will be contingent on its reception in the target language and in this way disrupting the values of the target culture. As Venuti puts it:

> In its effort to do right abroad, this translation method must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience –choosing to translate a foreign text axcluded by domestic literary conons, for instance, or using a marginal discourse to translate it. (20)

On the other hand, foreignizing translation can serve, as Venuti explains, as a measure to stave off the "hegemonic English-language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others" (20). It is welcomed now more than ever before in the wake of the recent

upsurge in postcolonial and poststructural developments in philosophy, literary criticism and psychoanalysis. From a postcolonial perspective, foreignizing translation is a form of resistance against imperialism, cultural hegemony and ethnocentricity.

In the light of postcolonial and poststructuralist theories it is easy to find fault with policies, procedures and practices traditionally held to be true and tenable. Postcolonial theorists assume that the world is in a process of recovering from the suppression and subjugation of the colonial period which was based on imperialism and the marginalization of the other. In the postcolonial discourse the colonized or the other strives to become the subject. By deconstructing the dominant discourse, postcolonial and poststructuralist theorists try to reconstruct the relationship between the dominant and the dominated. Here again the ideas of Jacques Derrida concerning difference become of great significance. As is well known, Derrida's deconstructive strategy is based on reversing the hierarchical order of a specific piece of discourse by discerning a chink, a weak point in the supposedly impeccable discourse. The idea is to show that these hierarchies are the products of a particular system of meaning and can therefore be easily undermined. The result is that the other side of the hierarchical pair is proven to be as essential as what is considered the origin. In Derridean terms, it is difficult to think of an origin without wanting to go back beyond it.

Deconstruction can, therefore, be used to undermine the discourse upon which ideologies are based. As Terry Eagleton(1996) points out, "ideologies like to draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity ... central and marginal, surface and depth" (115). Consequently, they become easily vulnerable to deconstructive analysis which tries to capitalize on the weak points, the impasses of meaning that texts in general are said to be replete with. Deconstruction challenges the idea of a fixed centre, a hierarchy of meanings or a solid foundation and it is these notions which are put into question by Derrida's deconstructive principles of endless differing and deferring.

Derrida's views form the core of poststructuralism and play a key role in postcolonialism. Some translation theorists have embraced Derrida's notions to reappraise the situation of translation studies in the postcolonial era. Susan Bassnett (1992), for example, proposes a new approach to translation markedly different from the nineteenth-century

notion of translation which was, in her view, "based on the idea of a master-servant relationship paralleled in the translation process" (xv).

As both Lefévere and Bassnett point out, this meant that translators either "improved" and "civilized" the text or approached it with humility, (see Lefévere 118-119; Bassnett xv). Bassnett proposes that the new approach should be linked to the view of translation propounded by Derrida in his article in *Difference in Translation* (translated 1985). In that article, she says, "Derrida argues that the translation process creates an 'original' text, the opposite of the traditional position whereby the 'original' is the starting point" (xv). Apparently, such a deconstructive view has signalled the appearance of what has been called the poststructuralist branch of translation studies that sees the relationship between target-language and source-language texts in terms of Derrida's notions of difference already outlined in this discussion. One of the most obvious manifestations of this new outlook can be seen in the fact that translation studies has begun to lose its overly European and Anglo-American focus. Indeed, translation studies has been developing rapidly in many parts of the world outside Europe and the USA. Moreover, postcolonial studies have contributed to the expansion of translation beyond traditional linguistic equivalence to encompass new areas connected with the recent themes of ideology, intercultural communication and their ramifications.

This poststructuralist approach to translation is clearly evident in Venuti's (1997) comprehensive study of the history of translation, especially in his introductory chapter where he attempts to deconstruct Nida's approach to translation. Drawing upon Derrida's idea of difference, Venuti argues that Nida's approach "masquerades as true semantic equivalence when it in fact inscribes the foreign text with a partial interpretation, partial to English-language values, reducing if not simply excluding the very difference that translation is called on to convey" (21). Venuti contends that Nida's. concept of "dynamic equivalence" which professedly aims at "complete naturalness of expression and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behaviour relevant within the context of his own culture" actually involves domestication translation. The fact is that relevance to the target-language culture is established in the translation process (not initially in the source-language text) by replacing source-language features which are not recognizable with target–language ones that are" (21). In other words, the aim of producing in the ultimate receptor a response similar to that of the original receptor can be achieved only by imposing the English–language

cultural values on the recipient culture. In venuti's view, this results in "masking a basic disjunction between the source- and target–language texts which puts into question the possibility of eliciting a 'similar' response" (21).

Furthermore, Venuti deconstructs the notion of "accuracy" propounded by Nida and other theorists of the Anglo–American tradition. Challenging Nida's claim that the dynamically equivalent translation "means thoroughly understanding not only the meaning of the source text but also the manner in which the intended receptors of a text are likely to understand it in the receptor language", Venuti contends that in its attempt to generate an equivalent effect in the target–language culture, dynamic equivalence translation is initiated and controlled by the target - language culture. Therefore, there is no fair exchange of information; rather, there is "an appropriation of a foreign text for domestic purposes" (22) Dynamic equivalence, Venuti concludes, is inherently affected by "ethnocentric violence" just like any other type of translation process. Thus, by this kind of Derridean deconstructive analysis we are shown how Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence is contradicted by the exclusionary values of his cultural elitism. Consequently, Venuti's approach can be utilized to analyze other approaches to translation, putting into question many notions which have been for long circulated as facts and truths, provided that it is not carried to an extreme. To give only a few examples, such concepts as equivalence, fidelity and many others have been coming under first in recent translation studies.

The conclusion that can be legitimately drawn from this review paper is that over the past twenty years or so translation studies have moved from a traditional concern with linguistic elements and language equivalence to new areas that foreground the cultural dimension in the translation process. Postcolonial and poststructuralist approaches have played a key role in bringing about these new developments. In the postcolonial era several theorists have been considering the cultural dimension in translation from different and even opposing perspectives. Basing their argument on the rapid spread of translation studies and translation activity in third-world countries, some theorists maintain that it is the target-language culture which controls intercultural translations. By contrast, a group of theorists , who argue that the translations from English into other languages far exceed the total of translations from any other language into English, maintain that it is the hegemonic powers which control translation across-culturally. Whether it is the target

culture or the hegemonic powers that have the keys to the transnational transactions on the global level the fact remains that the cultural dimension constitutes an integral and perhaps the most essential part of any translation strategy.

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