

# Translation and Identity in the Americas

New Directions in Translation Theory

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# 1 Introduction

## New Definitions

In *Translation, History and Culture*, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere officially announced the “cultural turn” in translation studies, suggesting that the translation studies scholar investigate what “the exercise of power means in terms of the production of culture, of which the production of translations is a part” (1990: 5). While this was a provocative thesis at the time, numerous scholars from around the world were approaching similar views; the 1990s resulted in a decade of new investigations that extended beyond the range of linguistic and literary translation and into issues of translation and cultural formation. In particular, translation studies scholars focused on how textual practices were used by governments, publishers, universities, and other institutions of power to manipulate culture, generally in support of, or occasionally in resistance to, the status quo. Translation, often considered a marginal practice, was increasingly shown to be instrumental in the process of developing and maintaining power: which international texts were selected for translation, where those texts were made available—in the marketplace, schools, churches, and government circles—the affordability of said texts, and how those foreign texts were translated or adapted to the receiving culture became fundamental questions for both translation and cultural studies. The mini-boom in translation studies involved increased conference activity, new journals publishing firms, as well as new MA and PhD programs in translation studies.

In 1998, Bassnett and Lefevere published another book, this time called *Constructing Cultures*, in which they argued for cultural studies to take “the translation turn” (1998: 123), moving translation to center stage in cultural studies. Though this argument was provocative and seemingly unrealistic at the time, once cultural studies began studying concepts of linguistic and cultural pluralism, the fragmentation of the literary or cultural artifact, and the multiple histories behind the emergence of artistic objects, the turn to language and translation trajectories was inevitable. Cultural studies has now moved from the national to the international, or, better said, the transnational, and thus translation scholars are well positioned for future investigations. Indeed, those scholars working in only one language and culture, even when positioned in English, French, or Spanish departments,

are being left behind. With the immigration and importation of multiple groups speaking different languages from a range of social and economic backgrounds, the Americas have proven a fruitful terrain for studying such polylingual voices and transnational discourses. Indeed, translated texts are already referring to at least two different sign systems and cultural traditions; a comparison of source and target texts reveals how meaning travels, making translation an ideal starting point for such a study. Moreover, translations are never perfect; something is always left out, hidden, covered up, well illustrating their fragmentary nature, their failure to travel intact, and, thus, their suitability for cultural manipulation.

In this study, I discuss several new insights and ideas that translation studies scholars in the Americas are pursuing, remaining especially open to sociological and cultural factors. This study builds on research from a variety of scholars in several disciplines—linguistics, philosophy, literary theory, feminism, ethnic studies, and cultural studies—produced in the 1990s and early 2000s, research based on the assumption that translation constitutes one of the primary means by which culture is constructed and is therefore important to any study of cultural evolution and identity formation. One such group especially informs this study: the descriptive translation studies (DTS) scholars, or, more colloquially, the “manipulation school,” including scholars such as André Lefevere, Susan Bassnett, Maria Tymoczko, Itamar Even-Zohar, and Gideon Toury. What these researchers are finding is that the definition of translation is a relative term. Perhaps the most revolutionary move in post-Jakobson translation studies has been made by Gideon Toury, who in *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (1980) called for a temporary suspension of more definitions of translation until more data could be collected. He suggested that scholars define translation as any text “regarded as a translation from the intrinsic point of view of the target system” (ibid.: 73), despite preconceived criteria or nonconformity with the original. If any finding is characteristic of research in translation studies in the post-Toury age, it is an overwhelming lack of conformity in translation—mistranslations, pseudotranslations, gaps, contradictions, accidents, numerous shifts both conscious and unconscious, ideological constraints, economic constraints, all seem to be part of the process. This study builds on the post-Toury scholarship and proposes to take it one step further. In addition to studying any text called a translation by given culture, it also considers translation phenomena that occur but may not be defined as such. I suggest that such elements, often covered up, suppressed, or marginalized by that same culture, reveal just as much about translation phenomena as “proper” translation. In her book *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (2006), Canadian translation theorist Sherry Simon questions the limits of earlier definitions of translation and focuses instead on the conditions conducive to translation, such as the multicultural life in the city of Montreal and the hybrid forms of communication there, many of which take place *after* translation. Indicative of the new directions

translation theory is taking in the Americas, she offers a new definition: “I give translation an expanded definition in this book: writing that is inspired by the encounter with other tongues, including the effects of creative interference” (ibid.: 17).

In order to better understand such new trends, this study frequently focuses on minority and oppressed groups within cultures and highlights the cultural role translation policies play in that discriminatory process. Indeed, in the studies of translation phenomena in the Americas, translation studies scholars with critical theory, cultural studies, and feminist backgrounds—including Lawrence Venuti, Carol Maier, Sherry Simon, Barbara Godard, Else Vieira, and Rosemary Arrojo—have proven instrumental in the analysis that follows. As Lawrence Venuti wrote in the introduction to his pioneering anthology *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, translated texts need to be “submitted to the same rigorous interrogation that other cultural forms and practices have recently undergone with the emergence of poststructuralism” (1992b: 6). This interrogation process is well under way, often led in the Americas by scholars in Quebec and Brazil. In addition, this book considers the use of translation to resist particular social constructions, introduce new ideas, and question the status quo. Aimé Césaire translated and adapted Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* into French to combat negative images of Caribbean indigenous peoples; Haroldo de Campos translated Goethe’s *Faust* into Portuguese in order to challenge the Christian interpretations of the ending. Such examples suggest that translation is not a neutral site in the Americas; rather, it is a highly contested one where different groups, often with competing literary or political interests, vie for space and approval. Those who win such contests generally find themselves liberated and empowered; those who lose suffer many consequences, including social marginalization, loss of identity, and psychological trauma.

In *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2006), Emily Apter uses the word “zone” to refer to a theoretical space, one that is not defined by language, politics, or nation, but is broad enough to include the aftershocks of translation. She worries that those who decide language and cultural policy also decide translation policy, which in turn affects textual heritage, preservation, and dissemination. Translation policy is also a part of the foreign policies exercised by the powerful economies and larger nation-states for hemispheric goals. Thus, she wants to expand the boundaries of translation studies and to recognize new sites of language contact as battlegrounds on which the survival of languages, and the ethnic and cultural memories embedded within, depend. Her concept of “zone” is conceived as threefold. First, it is a geographical space, similar to a space that a city planner designates a park for multiple uses. Here Apter looks at translation sites: diasporic language communities, border cultures, pockets of print and media spheres, and department and programs in university institutions. She asks what gets translated and, especially, what does not,

focusing on caesuras, omissions, transmission failures, and that which is deemed untranslatable. Second, she suggests that the translation zone is a political zone, a medium for social and political formation and reformulation. She looks at governmental involvement in domestic policies such as whether a culture will be monolingual or multilingual, or use of standard or nonstandard language. She also looks at international policies, such as translation use in military engagements and foreign policy. Indeed, one of the strengths of the book is the way translation and military policies are intertwined, suggesting the political urgency for more and better translation in the precarious post-9/11 world. Apter's third conception of zone is even more striking, as it focuses on the psychological repercussions of such translational policies. Drawing an analogy to Guillaume Apollinaire's poem "Zone" (1912), which describes a place on the Paris outskirts where bohemians and migrants gathered, Apter discusses this peripheral territory as a psychological space. Here she focuses on the position of the subject within a culture and how one's own self-knowledge, language, and cultural heritage become identified with or foreign to oneself. Adding another new definition to the mix, Apter conceives of translation as a "means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history," and a "significant medium for subject re-formation and political change" (2006: 6).

This study of translation in the Americas emphasizes all three of Apter's dimensions of translation: its geographic, sociopolitical, and psychological aspects. This book is also indebted to and builds upon investigations published in anthologies edited by Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier (1995), Román Álvarez and M. Carmen-África Vidal (1996), Susan Bassnett and Harish Trevidi (1999), Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre (2000), and Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler (2001). The scholarship that informs these works derives largely from poststructuralist and postcolonial theory, including the work of scholars such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. I also speculate on the repressed nature of translation in certain regions of the Americas, turning to scholars such as Jean Laplanche, who uses the term *à traduire* to refer to unconscious, psychological traumas and failures of translation, which I find useful to discuss losses experienced by those subjected to language domination. Indeed, in the chapters that follow I often turn to postcolonial, poststructural, and psychoanalytic thought for perspectives and insight.

This book is not meant to be an overview of the translation histories of the respective regions in the Americas; rather, I focus upon the newest approaches to translation developed in different parts of the Americas over the past thirty years. Also valuable in the development of the ideas that follow has been the work on nation and identity formation, especially by those scholars investigating identity formation in Latin America, such as Fernando Ortiz, Ángel Rama, and Fernando Pérez Firmat. If Susan Bassnett is right that cultural studies has taken the "translation turn," then it should come as no surprise that concepts such "transculturation," coined by the

Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz and elaborated by Latin American literary critics such as Ángel Rama, inform the chapters that follow. Finally, my work also intersects with that of scholars of the "New American Studies," such as Marc Shell, Wai Chee Dimock, Donald Pease, John Carlos Rowe, and Winfried Siemerling, who are investigating American cultures from comparative, interdisciplinary, and "transnational" perspectives. Arguing that the boundaries of the nation-states of the Americas have little to do with linguistic and cultural origins and more to do with political and military impositions, these scholars look at literary and cultural phenomena that extend beyond national borders. Translation is critical to such investigations.

In this book, I divide translation activity in the Americas into five areas: (1) multiculturalism in the United States; (2) theater and feminism in Canada; (3) cannibalism in Brazil; (4) fiction in Latin America; and (5) border writing and the Caribbean. Although the nation-states of the Americas tend to use European languages as "official" languages, those respective languages are by no means original national languages. Rather, they are "translated" languages—that is, "carried across" from Europe to the Americas and imposed, more often than not, via force on the peoples living there. Yet "unofficial" cultures, made up of indigenous roots, repressed languages, and alternative histories unique to the New World, continue behind the scenes. Many minorities are excluded from that power sharing, often because of the very *lack* of available translations and inadequate language policies.

This study also suggests that translation in the Americas is less something that happens between separate and distinct cultures and more something that is *constitutive* of those cultures. In many of the studies of translation and culture of the past two decades, translation has served as a trope or a metaphor for a cultural condition. This study suggests that it is much more: translation is not a trope but a permanent condition in the Americas. What does the word "America" mean? To what does it refer? Its roots are certainly not located in the continents that compose the Americas; rather, "America" is a mistranslation, a word imposed from the outside that has little connection with the lands to which it refers, a word that represents its submission rather than its life. Further, internationally and in parts of North America, the term "America" is often used to refer only to the United States of America, another form of mistranslation, and a cultural imperialism of its own kind. Likewise, what does the phrase "Latin America" mean? Latin America is another mistranslation, referring to Latin languages—Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese primarily—translated to and rewritten in America. Latin America thus reflects "original" European cultures and how those displaced languages and cultures have evolved in the New World. Most of the language changes have been derived from cultural incompatibilities that give new meanings to old terms in their new context, another feat of translation. Indeed, such linguistic incompatibilities give rise

to numerous difficulties in writing any text about the Americas. For example, how does one refer to the indigenous peoples of the Americas? They have suffered a near-total mistranslation by the Spanish explorers, who, searching for China and India, mistook the Americas for another continent. Still the misnaming continues, to the present. The variety of forms that I use in this text to refer to the peoples living in the Americas upon the arrival of the Europeans is indicative of the problem; I have resorted to a number of strategies, using “indigenous,” “aboriginal,” “Indian,” “Amerindian (or Amer-Indian),” and “Native American” as synonyms, yet find them all unsatisfactory. So many mistranslations of American people, landscape, culture, and artifacts have occurred in the process of the European explorers and colonizers translating and domesticating that which they encountered into their own terms, concepts, and worldviews that any accurate description becomes impossible. Such is the condition of life in the Americas, and why the focus of this study is more often than not upon the misfirings and failures of translation, what such language failure reveals about culture as a whole, and what the psychological repercussions of such misnaming imply.

Despite the fundamental nature of translation in the Americas, translation studies is still an emerging discipline. In both Brazil and Canada, strong translation studies associations exist with regular conference activities and exchanges of ideas. But in the United States, Spanish-speaking Latin America, and the Caribbean, few programs exist, or, if they do, they continue to be housed as subsidiaries of larger linguistics, language studies, or comparative literature departments. No inter-American research group exists, and contact among scholars tends to be erratic. One purpose of this study is to begin a discussion among translation scholars of America to try to discover lines for investigation and to develop a corresponding program of study to better understand the role of translation in the development of cultures in the Americas. I suggest that translation and cultural studies scholars in the United States of America have much to learn from their Canadian, Latin American, Brazilian, and Caribbean colleagues. While European cultures bear the brunt of the language and translational policies that have dominated cultural evolution in the Americas, the new superpower on the block is the United States of America, and its language and translational policies, as I hope to show in the next chapter, reverberate domestically and transnationally.

While this study is informed primarily by interdisciplinary scholarship of the past two decades, the approaches investigated in this book have distinct historical roots, many of which evolve from the most important literary and social movements in their respective countries. The Brazilian cannibalists, for example, date their work back to an avant-garde movement in Brazil in the 1920s in which Oswald de Andrade and other experimentalist writers posited several manifestos, such as *Antropofagia*, to challenge European literary models and to protest against the ongoing mental colonization in

Brazil at the time. In addition to reporting on the recent developments of the respective models, this book explores their different literary and theoretical underpinnings to show how they can contribute to ongoing discussions in linguistics, philosophy, and literary studies regarding the nature of meaning and philosophy of language.

Not only are the strategies covered in this book different from each other, but the more one looks at smaller, regional communities, the more specific the differences become. Yet they also have similarities, one of which is their emphasis on the use of translation as a tool to gain independence from or to form alliances with groups struggling with similar problems. Thus, one central aim of this book is to begin the exploration of the role translation plays in identity formation, which is perhaps the key to understanding how translation functions at the micro and the macro level in the Americas. I perceive a shift in perspective from something that takes place between cultures to something that is itself culture, which has repercussions for the very definition of translation. As postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha talk about culture as “transnational and translational” to refer to a new hybridized condition that is indicative of contemporary culture (1994: 172), so too might translation studies scholars begin to recognize the fundamental role translation plays in the construction of individual identity. I suggest that cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and translation scholars have much to learn from each other. Bhabha’s definition of contemporary culture, for example, as one to be seen less in terms of separate and unified nations and more in terms of movement and maneuver that allow new voices to be heard (ibid.: 183), can be very productive for translation studies research. These immigrants, migrants, and refugees are always in the process of translating, both as a means to conform to the ways prevalent in their new locations and as a means to resist assimilationist pressures. The Americas are primarily made up of immigrants, migrants, and refugees, and thus translation operates in the Americas not as an isolated linguistic or literary activity, nor as a postcolonial metaphor or trope, but as a concrete, historical movement with the power to include and exclude. I urge translators and translation studies scholars to participate in those very movements as they occur, producing or investigating those actual texts that create the maneuver of which Bhabha speaks. I also hope that this book in some small way contributes to that movement.