Where translation studies and the social meet

Setting the scene for 'Translation in Society'

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This article outlines some main developments that have led to the recent emergence of research on the 'sociology of translation.' Such research adopts approaches from the broader social sciences, particularly sociology, but is also directly related to the so-called 'cultural turn' within translation studies. The scope of translation research has subsequently expanded to include cultural and power-related issues, creating common ground with the social sciences both in terms of how translation is conceptualized and the methods used to study it. Translation has come to be understood as a socially situated relation with difference, just as translation practitioners and researchers have been understood as complex, situated agents acting within and across the social spheres that condition cross-cultural, multilingual exchange. This orientation opens the way for new discoveries at the intersection of translation studies and the social sciences – work *Translation in Society* seeks to advance.

Journals emerge when there is a shared but unmet need to explore new ground in or across disciplines. This article is a first expression of an ongoing process to give shape to a new journal that consolidates interdisciplinary discourses between translation studies (TS) scholars and social scientists. Over the past decades, exchanges at this intersection have been varied and rich, but have also been spread over very different publication outlets and scholarly communities and have been marked by conceptual and methodological variation – as is usually the case when different research traditions begin to engage and converge. However, one clear outcome these exchanges *have* produced is a shared awareness of the importance of translation to social practice. Although the interdisciplinary dialogue has thus

far been most intensive between TS and sociology, the scholars that have pioneered it often also operate between and beyond these disciplines, be it in other areas of the humanities or in other social sciences. This shows that the study of translation in society need not be limited to what has come to be known as 'the sociology of translation,' but can be productively enriched through interdisciplinary engagement with disciplines such as political science, policy studies and anthropology.

Over the past decades, expanded notions of translation – as a concept, as an object of study, as a practice – have had a considerable impact on the scope, methodologies and epistemes of TS. Many of these widening views have their corollaries in the so-called cultural turn of the 1980s, "without a doubt the most decisive turning point the discipline has taken" (Wolf 2014, 9). This paradigm shift redirected scholarly attention from source-oriented to target-oriented translation phenomena, recognizing that translations are "facts of the target culture" (Toury 1995, 23) and that texts travel without their contexts (Bourdieu 2002). The so-called Low Countries and Tel Aviv Schools, out of which Descriptive Translation Studies developed, and the functionalist approach initiated by Hans J. Vermeer in Germany are described by Snell-Hornby (2010, 367) as the main groups of scholars promoting this prospective view on translation. Decoupling translation from its 'original' source (con)text inevitably requires researchers to account for social, political and cultural aspects of the translating culture, where the contexts of production and reception in which a translation must come into being and meaningfully function are radically different from those of the source text. It also necessitates an awareness of the relations between source and target and their respective relations to other, co-implicated spheres. The introduction of concepts such as 'polysystem' and 'norms' in the 1970s and 80s by Itamar Even-Zohar (1979) and Gideon Toury (1980, 1995) – the first explicit social science concepts to enter TS (Buzelin 2018, 340) – can be seen in this light. Related modes of thinking translation as a system would also be taken up by others, notably Theo Hermans (1999), Johan Heilbron (2000) and Abram de Swaan (2001).

Although the 'sociological turn' has been used prominently as a label by several authors over the past two decades (among others Bachleitner and Wolf 2004; Merkle 2008; Angelelli 2012; Jiang et al. 2014), the autonomy of this type of research has also been relativized, confirming as such a more or less direct connection with the cultural turn that preceded it.[1] "The sociological approach fol-

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1. Several scholars have followed Mary Snell-Hornby's example of using the 'turn' metaphor to describe TS developments. Her use of the term 'cultural turn' was carefully considered; in the same breath she warns against the overuse of the metaphor, which she says should be used only to describe "a paradigmatic change" that can only "be assessed as such in retrospect" (2010,

lows naturally from the expansion of the (inter)discipline into its neighbouring areas and overlaps with many issues," Snell-Hornby noted (2010, 369). Wolf pointed not only to the interconnection between the social and the cultural, but also reflected on its methodological and disciplinary consequences:

> The often posed question of whether Translation Studies is presently working within a "social turn" or whether this is part of the "umbrella" paradigm of the "cultural turn" seems less relevant if we follow the perspective on translation elaborated during the last few decades. We then see that cultural and social practices – and consequently their theoretical and methodological conceptualization – cannot be regarded as detached from one another. If we focus on "the social" but neglect the conditions that shape translation as a cultural practice in terms of power, ideology and similar issues, the creation of a new sub-discipline within Translation Studies called "sociology of translation" will simply outsource the problem of methodology. It is therefore important that the questions pertinent to translation viewed as a social practice be placed at the core of the discipline.
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> (Wolf 2010, 341–342)

Despite such sometimes hesitant assessments of the place of social or sociological approaches in TS, it is undeniable that research in this area has grown rapidly over the past decades, and that its "theoretical groundwork is deeply rooted in contemporary sociological theory" (Schögler 2017, 402). To give a quantitative indication: the online *Translation Studies Bibliography* (Gambier and van Doorslaer 2004–ongoing) lists 207 TS publications mentioning Bourdieu in the abstract, 22 for Goffman, 21 for Luhmann and 16 for Latour. While these figures affirm the increasing influence of sociology in TS, they also suggest that TS scholars have largely drawn from and improved upon sociological frameworks developed in the last century. The time is ripe for a conceptual, methodological and epistemological renewal of thinking related to the complex relationship between translation and society.

It is not our goal to provide a comprehensive overview of sociological perspectives in TS here. However, a brief recapitulation of the intellectual and personal ties linking Bourdieu to TS is instructive for understanding the importance, even dominance, of his work to the sociology of translation. Bourdieu's field-theoretical paradigm has proven itself a major source of inspiration for sociological approaches in TS because it is uniquely equipped to probe the relationship between 'agent' and 'structure', which he posits as mutually constituting. Bourdieu's approach initially resonated with TS scholars because it offered a way to

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366). This has not deterred other TS scholars from announcing a new idea or research focus as the latest 'turn' in the discipline. The proliferation of turns in TS says less about genuine developments than it does about researchers' rhetorical choices.

overcome limitations in polysystem theory, which lacked "a social explanation of the role of institutions and practices in the emergence and reproduction of symbolic goods," including translations (Gouanvic 1997, 126). The cross-pollination of the two perspectives was facilitated by strong ties between their two respective main proponents, Pierre Bourdieu and Gideon Toury; later in his career Toury would establish links with Bourdieu's *Centre de sociologie européenne.* Another important scholar working at this intellectual and personal intersection was Gisèle Sapiro. Her academic training as a graduate student in Tel Aviv under Even-Zohar and Toury and as a doctoral candidate under Bourdieu positioned her well to advance this line of inquiry. Building on Bourdieu's (2008) work on the French publishing field, Heilbron and Sapiro (2007, 2016) analyze translation flows between languages to reveal the highly asymmetrical structure of the world translation system. Since the Second World War, English has captured a hyperdominant position in this system, exporting far more books into other languages than it imports in translation, while peripheral languages, which import far more books than they export, are at a significant structural disadvantage. Although this perspective acknowledges a more or less explicit role for agents, it primarily emphasizes power structures and systemic dynamics.

Other social perspectives in TS have focused on the agents of translation, training special attention on translators as cross-cultural mediators and as members of a professionalizing group. This line of inquiry has tapped into Bourdieu's understanding of life events as a trajectory of successive placements and displacements through a constantly changing social space made up of one or more fields of social relations, each with its own practices, networks of relationships and power structures. To understand an individual's trajectory in these terms, one thus also needs to understand the evolving shape of the fields individuals move through and account for those personal attributes which enable and constrain action. Among these attributes are capital, or accumulated social, economic, cultural or symbolic (prestige-based) power. Although he has not particularly specialized in sociological approaches himself, Chesterman's (2009) meanwhile well-heeded suggestion to introduce the term 'translator studies' was made in an article elaborating on the different strands of translation sociology. Kaindl described it as "a basis for deriving the theoretical and methodological prerequisites for a kind of Translation Studies that is not primarily concerned with texts but with people" (2021, 2). This development went hand in hand with growing attention within TS for translators' agency, first conceptualized by Simeoni (1998), following Bourdieu, as the translator's 'pivotal habitus.' The importance of the habitus concept in TS, which Simeoni defines as "the elaborate result of a personalized social and cultural history and [...] the main locus precipitating mental, bodily, social and cultural forces" (32), has been illustrated in different ways by

other TS scholars as well: Sela-Sheffy (2005), Inghilleri (2003, 2005), Meylaerts (2008, 2011), and Vorderobermeier (2014) to name a few. The focus on agency (see for instance Kinnunen and Koskinen 2010) also led to interest in other cross-cultural mediators that regularly deal with translation: publishers, literary agents, reviewers, academics, journalists, etc. Work in this vein has generated knowledge on the agents that shape the production and circulation of book translations, interactions between state and market agents in translation publishing, strategies of transnational symbolic capital accumulation and consecration, and detailed accounts of "the various intra- and inter-field influences that shape the transnational career of a single widely translated book" (McMartin and Gentile 2020, 273). Related applications can be found in research on translation as a form of image projection deployed by state actors through translation export policies that "would help improve the image of the country" (Sapiro 2016, 84). For instance, Bielsa (2013) has illustrated how the boom of the Latin American novel in the 1970s was particularly linked to the image of an exotic Latin America. Wu has shown how translation export policy is part of a soft power strategy in China where a national image and associated cultural values are promoted to curry international influence, "all of which demonstrates the constructive aspect of translation" (Wu 2017, 482). Such studies demonstrate the fertile ground to be explored between TS and political science, particularly in the domain of cultural diplomacy (see von Flotow 2018; Carbó Catalan and Roig-Sanz, forthcoming).

While the above examples focus primarily on the literary sphere, they also point to the potential of social science approaches for studying translation in broad social contexts, such as news translation (see van Doorslaer 2022) and translation policy (see González Núñez and Meylaerts 2017). Translation is a necessary social process underpinning meaningful exchange between (cultural, linguistic, political, legal, economic) groupings that would otherwise remain unintelligible to one another. In a recent intervention arguing for 'a translational sociology,' Bielsa (2021, 7), evoking Sakai (1997), calls on TS scholars and sociologists alike to "attend to translation not just as a form of communication but primarily as a social relation at the site of incommensurability," a perspective that understands translation, and the labor of the translator, not as a process of establishing equivalence according to the model of communication but as an encounter whereby "the initial discontinuity between the addresser and the addressee is made continuous and recognizable. In this respect, translation is just like other social practices that render the points of discontinuity in social formation continuous" (Sakai 1997, 14). As de Swaan (2001) has argued, it is translation that determines the very possibility of interlingual and intersocial intelligibility, as the social is mediated through language, and languages are first and foremost connected through their multilingual speakers. These connections exhibit a strongly

hierarchical structure: peripheral languages are connected through their multilingual speakers to central languages, but tend to be less connected to other peripheral languages for lack of multilingual speakers connecting peripheral languages to each other.[2] English, as the first truly global lingua franca, has become the hypercentral language and connects all languages by virtue of the many people who acquire it and use it as an additional language alongside their mother tongue. Similarly, Casanova and Jones (2013, 380) take a language's appeal to non-native speakers as the primary measure determining a language's relative dominance over others:

> A language is dominant if (and only if) it is a second language used by bilinguals or polyglots around the world. It is not the number of speakers that determines whether it is dominant or not (otherwise, Mandarin would be the dominant language). The criterion is, rather, the number of plurilingual speakers who 'choose' it.

The inverted commas enclosing 'choose' are not inconsequential. Approaching translation as a social practice reveals its imbrications with manifold and conflicting power relations and obliges us to see "that translation norms and our very definitions of translation are not given but are constructed, contingent, negotiated, imposed and, sometimes, contested" (Buzelin 2018, 339). Once a traditional view on translation as a neutral, one-to-one, automatic (and automatable) process of meaning transfer is called into question, activist and ethical standpoints gain purchase and urgency. Particularly in situations of conflict or of manifest power imbalances, the only viable option is to pay "attention to more co-operative strategies and legitimate forms of metalinguistic elaboration as part of the translator's task" (Inghilleri 2008, 221). This is especially the case for a subfield such as community or public service interpreting, a "form of oral translation" (Schögler 2017, 402) that is particularly rich in situations showcasing the imbalances of power in social-translational reality.

These developments in thinking about translation and in observing translation reality entail conceptual and definitional discussions and fuzzy borderlines. On the one hand there is a tendency to stick to the traditional and linguistic equivalence-based view on translation:

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2. Characterizing the relationship between languages in terms of a single hierarchical structure is not unproblematic. There are many different hierarchical relationships in transcultural exchanges to be discovered depending on the methodology and modelling used. Pym and Chrupała point to the risk of hierarchization and "simple comparisons […] between the world's major trade language and other languages" (2005, 36).

> Something like the concept of equivalencing needs to be defended against the now commonplace references to the old notion of equivalence as dubious or passé. [...] Under the influence of literary and cultural studies, there has been too much emphasis in recent years on the non-equivalencing work of translators.
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> (Mossop 2016, 19–20)

On the other, there are the less classical types of translation, of which Jakobson's (1959) concepts of intralingual translation (rewording) and intersemiotic translation (transmutation) are most well-represented in the TS discourse. In recent uses of these concepts, the basic assumptions of source-target correspondence and directionality are no longer taken for granted and are replaced by a more general idea of exchange or transformation. From a biosemiotics perspective, translation refers "to the process of semiosic exchange taking place in and between all organisms, even at the cellular level" (Marais and Kull 2016, 172); a recent work on journalistic translation conceives of translation "as the process of re-presenting societies and groups for foreign readers" (Riggs 2020, 6) and states that "every form of communication is translation" (155).

While conceptually refreshing, such approaches can also be criticized for overlapping with other concepts (and disciplines) and as such diluting the specificity of the object of research. Definitions of translation that implicate the social seem to meet a certain need within the social sciences, but broadness can also be perceived as overstretching and attenuating the concept's analytical power. To what extent does translation run the risk of becoming "a metonymic catchword accounting for processes of (cultural and semantic) transfer, processes of hybridization, and boundary phenomena" (Buzelin 2018, 341)? Such questions have become essential to debates that will continue to play out in *Translation in Society* in years to come. They concern not only the definition and the scope of the translation concept, but ultimately also the name, scope and inter- or transdisciplinary potential of the discipline called TS (see also van Doorslaer 2020). These debates will contribute to the quality of future intellectual interactions between sociology and TS in particular. Despite certain sociologists' manifest interest in an expanded translation concept, there also persists a narrow perception among the vast majority of mainstream sociologists that understands TS "as a discipline that is essentially aimed at designing translation methods and defining what a good/bad translation is" (Buzelin and Baraldi 2016, 126). That perception is shared by many in the social sciences.

A correction may be found in the emerging awareness of the embeddedness of translation and its users in complex networks and power relationships, as both practice and practitioner are "always a child of [their] own 'ideological' time" (Baumgarten and Cornellà-Detrell 2019, 2). This also holds true for the research activity of academics and their disciplines. Translation is necessarily situated, and

the increasing emphasis on self-reflexivity in research makes us aware of limitations, long overlooked or willfully pushed aside, involved when contributing "to the sociological understanding of cultural transfer and the transfer of ideas and social change in general" (Schögler 2017, 405). Our individual positions and epistemes as researchers cannot be assumed to be representative of a discipline, let alone universal, and are themselves the result of manifold linguistic, cultural, political, institutional and ideological influences, networks and constraints. Such a perspective makes visible the central role of translation in enabling the cross-border production and circulation of knowledges, but it also confronts the challenges – individual and systemic – of engaging in academic exchange via the scientific lingua franca of English. Bielsa's (2021, 12) insistence on acknowledging translation as central to the sociological endeavor is just as true for sociology as it is for TS, or for any other academic endeavor today:

> Translation alerts us to the particularities related to the specific places of enunciation of sociological articulations, which are not erased by self-translation into English. This is why the (unequal nature of) self-translation practices of sociologists and their contribution to global sociological debates should become the object of sociological exploration.

It is not surprising that some of the scholars pioneering just such an exploration were also responsible for bringing TS and sociology into dialogue with one another. Examples include Schögler's (2019) *Circulation of Academic Thought: Rethinking Translation in the Academic Field* and Sapiro et al.'s (2020) *Ideas on the Move in the Social Sciences and the Humanities*. Within TS, new work has examined how similar conceptualizations of translation developed independently of one another, originating "in very divergent frameworks, affected by societal and institutional circumstances, with varying degrees of (non-)interaction, at different moments, in different places" (van Doorslaer and Naaijkens 2021, 1). These questions, which combine TS, sociology and socio-historical perspectives, will doubtless continue to be addressed in *Translation in Society*. A journal with such a name aims at becoming an important outlet for the varied research output that is generally considered 'sociology of translation,' but just as well for the growing visibility of the translation concept in the social sciences. Future contributions will deal with the interdisciplinary conceptualization of translation, translation as a master concept in social and cultural thought, translation and social movements, translation as a form of knowledge-making, and more generally translation and social change. This inaugural issue is a first salvo in that direction.

All of the above informs the theme of this inaugural issue: '**Translating the extreme**.' The topic was chosen to reflect how social approaches to translation can be used to address the most pressing issues of our times – issues characterized

by extreme relations of difference between social groupings and extreme consequences when translation between them fails. Invited contributors, all eminent voices in their respective fields of TS and sociology, address the extreme from diverse angles, illustrating the conceptual, methodological and empirical richness of social approaches to translation. Inspired by the ideas of François Burgat, Jürgen Habermas and Jean-Marc Ferry, **Salah Basalamah** explores the notions of the religious, the political, the radical/extreme, the conservative, the secular and the social as objects of an extended conception of translation that defines translation as a mode of intercomprehension between competing or adversary groups. He conceives of translation as a form of active engagement in social and discursive negotiations and explores translation as it relates to change in the dynamics of intergroup and intercultural relations. **David Inglis** examines how language, translations, narratives, and plagues have been in interplay in the past, and how this is reflected in present-day narrations of the Covid-19 pandemic. He looks at two types of translational practices: (1) when people make plague-related translations of texts with religious or medical content from one language to another, and (2) when people turn plague phenomena into narratives with story arcs – narratives which can endure over time and shape subsequent understandings of later outbreaks. **Brian James Baer** addresses the ideological incommensurability of the worldviews represented by the two opposing superpowers during the Cold War, exploring the various ways in which the radical polarization of the Cold War shaped the theory and practice of translation. He presents polarization as a distinct state of semiosis, the effects of which are unpredictable, but which nonetheless produced startlingly similar approaches to the instrumentalization of translation as a vehicle for propaganda and diplomacy on both sides of the ideological divide. **Nicole Doerr** and **Beth Gharrity Gardner** investigate the translational practices of far-right activists in Germany through content analysis of storytelling about the January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol in influential German alternative news websites. Findings reveal how far-right commentators used their intermediary position to re-narrate, translate, and convert mainstream accounts of the event into stories supporting far-right-wing and extremist identities, for instance by characterizing protesters as 'victim-heroes' set against the 'villains' of the ideological left. In the final contribution, **Michael Cronin** trains his translation-conceptual sights on one of the most extreme challenges facing humanity today: the climate crisis. Arguing for the importance of minority perspectives in developing an expanded remit for TS in the context of the climate emergency, he articulates the concepts of relational and situational minority to explore how indigenous translation hermeneutics can inform climate debates, for instance by shifting focus to the outdoors. He entreats us to 'translate outdoors' as a means to resituate ourselves, physically and philosophically, towards the more-

than-human world and the languages used to describe it. In the coming age of extreme climate conditions, no socially responsible understanding of translation can afford to ignore ecological perspectives on the practice.

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