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Ideology and translation

Stefan Baumgarten
Bangor University

The workings of power and ideology are the preconditions of language use. Consequently, translation*, like any linguistic activity, shapes and is shaped by power relations and the individual and collective ideologies involved. Although ideology has been relevant to the study and practice of translation since time immemorial (cf. Fawcett's 1998 insightful historical account), its significance and pervasiveness in relation to translation has not always received its due recognition. Moreover, in Translation Studies*, theoretical reflection on ideology as a concept by itself has been somewhat neglected in contrast to other fields in the humanities and social sciences. Ideology's pervasiveness in translation relates to the recognition that the recontextualisation of linguistic material involves negotiations about values and beliefs pertaining to the linguistic communities involved.

1. Translation as ideology?

The complexity and elusiveness of the concept of ideology is widely acknowledged. Eagleton (1991: 1–2), for instance, lists 16 definitions from a variety of disciplines, some of which display large differences in meaning. Since the term ideology had first reached the public domain in the late 18th century, it has had a checkered history. The academic Antoine Destutt de Tracy, who coined the term, endeavoured to establish a science of ideas following the people's revolution in France. Napoleon dismissed de Tracy's project as merely suitable for abstract speculation about human affairs. Since then ideology tends to be associated with manipulation and deceit, and especially in the field of politics it is mainly the political opponents' views and actions which tend to be branded as ideological, often in connection with being out of touch with people's real needs and desires (Bennett et al. 2005: 175).

Apart from its pejorative connotations concerning its wider usage, there are largely two theoretical perspectives on ideology. A negative and narrow class-based conception goes back to Karl Marx and relates ideology to a distorted view of the world. Since the ideas of dominant classes are always the ruling ideas, they are internalised by subordinate classes in the form of a 'false consciousness' about their own fate and position in society. Here ideology is tied to class interests which serve to sustain political power and influence (Bennett et al. 2005: ibid.). A neutral and much

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broader conception sees ideology as a shared system of thought tied to group interests in the pursuit of individual and collective objectives. From this perspective, van Dijk (2006: (729) defines ideology as "the foundation of the social representations shared by a social group".

Ideology is rooted in individual and social consciousness. Ideology regulates how people perceive the world, what they know and believe about it. Being closely related to perception, knowledge and beliefs, ideology determines what people regard as the aesthetic or factual truth at a certain place and time. It is essential to realise, however, that people tend to be unaware about many of their taken-for-granted assumptions about reality. Some reviewers of translated literature into English, for instance, praise translators for providing a fluent writing style and thus smooth reading experience, unaware that stylistic fluency, a literary ideology in large parts of the Western world, might not have been a literary value inscribed in the source text. A prevalence of such 'domesticating' translation strategies can lead to a distorted image of entire national literatures and ethnic mentalities in the eyes of an anglophile Western readership (Venuti 1995).

From a Translation Studies perspective, Mason (2010: 86) describes ideology as follows:

> not in the commonly used sense of political doctrine but rather as the set of beliefs and values which inform an individual's or institution's view of the world and assist their interpretation of events, facts and other aspects of experience.

In the absence of a universal truth, all interpretations of reality can only be partial and thus biased. Partial views are reflected in people's attitudes about what they regard as the truth. Such attitudes are articulated in discourse. Discourse – or language as a social practice – shapes and is shaped by ideology. Conversely, ideology – or socially shared consciousness – is produced and reproduced through the medium of discourse. Althusser (1984: (44) recognises ideology's pervasiveness and social potency by claiming that "there is no practice except by and in ideology". Furthermore, he sees people as so deeply embedded within ideology that they cannot even recognise its powerful restrictions on their own practices.

Since ideology is substantially concerned with knowledge and truth it is largely a problem of epistemology: 'What can we know about the world in general and about the truth value of a given state of affairs in particular?' This epistemological question is crucial in order to approach an understanding of the knotty interface between translation and ideology. Therefore, is it reasonable at all to suggest that the theory and practice of translation as a form of (inter)disciplinary and cross-cultural communication can be seen as ideological *per se*? If any act of translation is seen as ideological, is then the translation of the French term *une baguette de pain* as *a loaf of bread* just as ideological as keeping it as a loan word (to take Fawcett's (1998: 107) seminal example)?

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Any attempt at solving this dilemma depends on the interpretation of the context and purpose of the translation. Any translation event is therefore embedded in a situational and sociocultural setting and conditioned by the *agency* (see Agents of translation**) of the individuals involved. Questions such as how these individuals are positioned within networks of power or which values and beliefs are at stake may help to form a coherent interpretation about contexts and purposes. Any interpretation, however not only depends on the purpose of the translation and thus on its situational context, but also to a large degree on the analyst's viewpoint (or ideology) of the concept of ideology itself.

2. The ideologies of Translation Studies

It is generally acknowledged within the philosophy of science that scientific findings are subject to partial interpretations. Thomas Kuhn (1970) pointed out that scientific evolution progresses through a series of 'revolutions' in which old theories may be virtually destroyed by new ones. Kuhn's assertion stands in stark contrast to the traditional view which posits that the human intellect advances by accumulation of facts and theories. Therefore, behind any scientific 'paradigm shift' exists an ideological driving force conditioned by its historical and sociocultural environment. Theories and ideas are thus inevitably subject to different ideological interpretations of reality.

In this light, simplistic views of translation as they have prevailed (and partly still do prevail) throughout the centuries can indeed be regarded as long-standing ideologies. Translation used to be seen as a derivative and thus negligible activity. Added to this, translations have mainly been discussed in view of their perceived equivalence*** to an original text, whilst a distinction was primarily made between the polarised opposites of either free or literal translation practices. Deviations in meaning between originals and their translations were generally deemed as undesirable, as people tended to revert back to an original whose linguistic material should not be unduly changed (as is widely attested concerning the translation of religious texts* such as the Bible). In the same vein, translators only ever were ascribed a marginal status whilst the popular phrase 'traduttore traditore' condemned translation to the shadowy practices of manipulation and deceit. The low status granted translation throughout the centuries also resulted in a stubborn reflex to link responsibilities for perceived manipulative practices to translators themselves, who in many quarters are still regarded as the sole responsible agents in the translation process, rather than to link these responsibilities to the wider historical and sociocultural contexts in which these practices are embedded.

With the simplistic view of translation still predominant, which was also manifest in its fragmented treatment in diverse fields such as linguistics* or literary studies*,

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the beginning of Translation Studies as an independent field is often located around the 1970s. Since then, there have been gradual shifts in methodological focus which, importantly, need to be seen in conjunction with their respective dominant intellectual climate. It is thus not changes in methodological focus – changes which are being referred to as 'turns' in Translation Studies – but the gradual move from an essentialist to a non-essentialist *Zeitgeist* since the middle of the last century which aids our understanding of shifting ideologies within Translation Studies research.

An essentialist ideology posits that reality is 'out there' to be observed, that material phenomena have an 'essential' inner structure. Accordingly, words are seen as having an inherent 'kernel of meaning' and research can be objective and neutral. Anti-essentialism, on the other hand, posits that humans construct reality and that material phenomena can only be seen in relation to other phenomena. Accordingly, research can never be objective and neutral, and the meaning of words can only be inferred (if this is at all possible) in relation to other words (an idea which is based on Derrida's concept of Deconstruction**).

From a non-essentialist perspective, a translation is a form of meaning creation, rather than a mere imitation of an original text. Such a view rejects seeing translation as a derivative, secondary activity as manifested in the marginal and invisible status** of translators and their translations (Arrojo 1997: 21). A non-essentialist ideology of translation invalidates the age-old tradition of ascribing translators and their translations only a marginal, even immoral status, and radically revises notions such as authorial presence and neutral meaning transferral across language boundaries. Non-essentialist approaches contribute to a redefinition of the relationships between "originals and translations, between authors and translators, and between translators and their readers, which are no longer described in terms of the traditional notions of meaning recovery, fidelity or equivalence" (ibid: 30). In this context, Tymoczko (2007: 68) maintains that recurrent Western metaphors of seeing translation as bridge-building could be reconsidered in the light of quite divergent non-Western conceptualisations such as the Indian *rupantar* or *anuvad* ('change in form' or 'speaking after' respectively).

Within the current non-essentialist climate, most translation research takes translation's historical and sociocultural environments into account. Within this climate, and throughout the last 20 years or so, postmodern and cultural theories of translation have significantly advanced on questions of power, ideology and agency. Even research on translation pedagogy (see Translation didactics*) has recently drawn attention to the ideological role of the 'hidden curriculum' which determines teaching methodologies (Kearns 2008). Non-essentialist research combines close attention to questions of agency, identity and hegemony with a rejection of conceptual dualisms. Over the centuries many taken-for-granted assumptions have dominated scholarly thinking on concepts such as fidelity, faithfulness, authorship or binary oppositions

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(such as good/bad, literal/free translations, etc.), yet these conceptions are all tied to the dominant ideologies of their times.

Translation happens across power differentials. Scholars examining these power differentials tend to be affiliated to postcolonial, feminist or sociological research, which deals with the imposition of ideological values mainly to the detriment of less economically and politically powerful cultures (see Post-colonial literatures and translation*, Gender in Translation*, Sociology of Translation*). That translation frequently cannot be regarded as equal cross-cultural exchange implies that there is no straightforward 'meaning transfer' between languages. Because it is always an effect of sociocultural contingencies, meaning cannot be seen as a stable conceptual entity. It is therefore not seen within texts but rather as dynamically constructed through the process of interpretation. Thus, the production and interpretation of meaning and by extension thinking about and practising translation is to a large extent ideological.

3. Translation strategy as ideological and political practice

There is a large body of research investigating the elusiveness of meaning and the unequal power relations involved in cultural exchange. In order to draw attention to the perceived 'invisibility' of translators, a range of translational strategies to overcome unequal power relations has been proposed. Venuti (1995) advocates a 'foreignising' translation strategy in order to highlight the recurrent 'domestication' (see Domestication and foreignization**) of foreign literature in English translation which is mostly adapted to target-cultural needs in order to cater for a 'fluent' reading experience. Likewise, feminist approaches draw attention to the important historical role of women translators, attempting to expose male-dominated canons of writing in historical and contemporary literature. Pursuing a similarly committed* and activist approach, a group of Brazilian scholars argues for cultural enrichment by means of translation. In order to liberate Third World cultures from 'mental colonialism', they pursue a translation strategy which aims to inject mainly desirable foreign-cultural values into the Brazilian target culture (Vieira 1999). Translation within nationalist contexts can also be regarded as a form of cultural enrichment, yet here the focus lies largely on motivations to create literary or national identities.

Against the background of such strategies it needs to be realised that translators as social agents are positioned within fields of discursive practice. Social agents are entangled in the constraints and restrictions of discourse, whilst any discourse within a particular historical configuration (or social system) is powerful inasmuch it successfully functions as an instrument to establishing and securing prevailing power relations. This phenomenon of 'discursive entanglement' has been researched with an

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increasingly sophisticated theoretical apparatus by translation scholars working from a sociological perspective.

In this context, it should be stressed that discourse as political practice is most visibly linked to power relations, but as ideological practice it may refer to the way ideology might be hidden or naturalised (Fairclough 1992: 67). By extension, it is worthwhile to differentiate between political and ideological translation strategies. *Political translation strategies* are those which are pursued in a conscious attempt to gain influence and power (see also Political translation*). *Ideological translation strategies*, in contrast, may also result from unconscious mental dispositions. Both types of strategies can be analytically recognised on the sociocultural, situational or textual levels of any translation event.

Political translation strategies are mainly, but not exclusively, invoked with respect to the translation of texts dealing with political values, ideas or activities. Such strategies come most visibly to the fore in sociocultural contexts subjected to censorship* and political oppression. This can be illustrated by taking an example from the English translation of Adolf Hitler's notorious work *Mein Kampf*. One theme in the book repeatedly, yet implicitly, links a demand for more 'living space' for the German people in Eastern Europe to an inevitable necessity of war. In the following example, this demand is only half-heartedly concealed in the metaphorical proposition that territorial expansion can only be achieved *by a powerful sword (durch ein schlagkräftiges Schwert)*.

> It is not by flaming protests that oppressed lands are brought back into the embrace of a common Reich, but **by a power – or combination of powers**.
> (1933: 242; translator E.T.S. Dugdale)

> For oppressed territories are led back to the bosom of a common Reich, not by flaming protests, **but by a mighty sword**. (1943: 558; translator Ralph Manheim)

This example vividly illustrates the difference between a Nazi-sponsored translation from 1933 and an American translation from 1943. Without recourse to the German original, the choice *a power – or combination of powers* suggests a slightly tamed 'fanaticism' and thus a restrained 'territorial urge'.

Ideological translation strategies can often only be inferred when one accounts for dominant translation norms prevalent at certain periods in history (Toury 1995). Social norms* underlie correctness notions which have a certain regulatory function. Correctness notions are inextricably linked to specific values and ideas shared by groups and communities, which attests to their largely ideological function. One well-known example is a dominant translation style during 17th and 18th century France, when foreign-language material tended to be fit as closely as possible into the French literary system. Similarly, a recent study on the translation of Portuguese academic discourse describes how this discourse tends to be shifted from a neo-romantic non-linear style towards a linear plain-prose 'scientistic' style in English (Bennett 2007).

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The reason for this shift is mainly due to the application of (partially subconscious) self-censorship on the part of the (mostly academic) translators who attend to a rationalist ideology prevalent in academic discourse today – a discourse which is dominated by Anglo-Saxon values.

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