Strategies of translation

Strategies of translation involve the basic tasks of choosing the foreign text to be translated and developing a method to translate it. Both of these tasks are determined by various factors: cultural, economic, political. Yet the many different strategies that have emerged since antiquity can perhaps be divided into two large categories. A translation project may conform to values currently dominating the target-language culture, taking a conservative and openly assimilationist approach to the foreign text, appropriating it to support domestic canons, publishing trends, political alignments. Alternatively, a translation project may resist and aim to revise the dominant by drawing on the marginal, restoring foreign texts excluded by domestic canons, recovering residual values such as archaic texts and translation methods, and cultivating emergent ones (for example, new cultural forms). Strategies in producing translations inevitably emerge in response to domestic cultural situations. But some are deliberately domesticking in their handling of the foreign text, while others can be described as foreignizing, motivated by an impulse to preserve linguistic and cultural differences by deviating from prevailing domestic values.

Domesticating strategies

Domesticating strategies have been implemented at least since ancient Rome, when, as...
Nietzsche remarked, ‘translation was a form of conquest’ and Latin poets like Horace and Propertius translated Greek texts ‘into the Roman present’: ‘they had no time for all those very personal things and names and whatever might be considered the costume and mask of a city, a coast, or a century’ (Nietzsche 1974: 137). As a result, Latin translators not only deleted culturally specific markers but also added allusions to Roman culture and replaced the name of the Greek poet with their own, passing the translation off as a text originally written in Latin.

Such strategies find their strongest and most influential advocates in the French and English translation traditions, particularly during the early modern period. Here it is evident that domestication involves an adherence to domestic literary canons both in choosing a foreign text and in developing a translation method. Nicolas Perrot D’Ablancourt (see FRENCH TRADITION), a prolific French translator of Greek and Latin, argued that the elliptical brevity of Tacitus’ prose must be rendered freely, with the insertion of explanatory phrases and the deletion of digressions, so as ‘to avoid offending the delicacy of our language and the correctness of reason’ (1640: preface; translated). The domestic values that such a strategy inscribed in the foreign text were affiliated with an aristocratic literary culture (D’Ablancourt’s translation was dedicated to his court patron, Cardinal Richelieu) but they were also distinctly nationalist. Under D’Ablancourt’s influence, the English translator Sir John Denham (see BRITISH TRADITION) rendered Book 2 of the Aeneid in heroic couplets, asserting that ‘if Virgil must needs speak English, it were fit he should speak not only as a man of this Nation, but as a man of this age’ (1656: A3r). In domesticating foreign texts D’Ablancourt and Denham did not simply modernize them; both translators were in fact maintaining the literary standards of the social élite while constructing cultural identities for their nations on the basis of archaic foreign cultures (Zuber 1968; Venuti 1993a).

Economic considerations sometimes underlie a domesticating strategy in translation, but they are always qualified by current cultural and political developments. The enormous success that greeted the English version of Italian writer Umberto Eco’s novel The Name of the Rose (1983) drove American publishers to pursue the translation rights for similar foreign texts at the international book fairs (McDowell 1983). Yet what most contributed to the success of the translation was the sheer familiarity of Eco’s narrative to American readers fond of such popular genres as historical romances and murder mysteries. By the same token, the Italian novelist Giovanni Guareschi was a best-seller in English translation during the 1950s and 1960s largely because his social satires of Italian village life championed Christian Democratic values and therefore appealed to American readers absorbing the anti-Soviet propaganda of the Cold War era. The eponymous hero of Guareschi’s first book in English, The Little World of Don Camillo (1950), is a priest who engages in amusing ideological skirmishes with a Communist mayor and always comes out the victor.

Domesticating translation has frequently been enlisted in the service of specific domestic agendas, imperialist, evangelica!, professional. Sir William Jones, president of the Asiatic Society and an administrator of the East India Company, translated the Institutes of Hindu Law (1799) into English to increase the effectiveness of British colonialism, constructing a racist image of the Hindus as unreliable interpreters of their native culture (Niranjana 1992). For Eugene Nida, domestication assists the Christian missionary: as translation consultant to organizations dedicated to the dissemination of the Bible, he has supervised numerous translations that ‘relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture’ (1964: 159; see also BIBLE TRANSLATION). The multi-volume English version of Freud’s texts known as the Standard Edition (1953–74) assimilated his ideas to the positivism dominating the human sciences in Anglo-American culture and thus facilitated the acceptance of psychoanalysis in the medical profession and in academic psychology (Bettelheim 1983; Venuti 1993b).

Foreignizing strategies

A foreignizing strategy in translation was first formulated in German culture during the
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classical and Romantic periods, perhaps most decisively by the philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (see German Tradition) (Berman 1992). In an 1813 lecture ‘On the Different Methods of Translating’, Schleiermacher argued that ‘there are only two. Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him. Or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him’ (quoted in Lefevere 1992b: 149). Schleiermacher acknowledged that most translation was domesticating, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home. But he much preferred a foreignizing strategy, an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad.

The French theorist Antoine Berman (see French Tradition) viewed Schleiermacher’s argument as an ethics of translation, concerned with making the translated text a site where a cultural other is not erased but manifested — even if this otherness can never be manifested in its own terms, only in those of the target language (1985: 87—91). For while foreignizing translation seeks to evoke a sense of the foreign, it necessarily answers to a domestic situation, where it may be designed to serve a cultural and political agenda. Schleiermacher himself saw this translation strategy as an important practice in the Prussian nationalist movement during the Napoleonic Wars: he felt that it could enrich the German language by developing an élite literature free of the French influence that was then dominating German culture, which would thus be able to realize its historical destiny of global domination (Venuti 1991).

Yet in so far as Schleiermacher theorized translation as the locus of cultural difference, not the homogeneity that his imperialist nationalism might imply, he was effectively recommending a translation practice that would undermine any language-based concept of a national culture, or indeed any domestic agenda. A foreignizing strategy can signify the difference of the foreign text only by assuming an oppositional stance toward the domestic, challenging literary canons, professional standards, and ethical norms in the target language. Hence, when foreignizing translation is revived by twentieth-century German theorists like Rudolf Pannwitz and Walter Benjamin, it is seen as an instrument of cultural innovation. For Pannwitz, ‘the translator makes a fundamental error when he maintains the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be strongly affected by the foreign language’ (1917: 242; translated).

From its origins in the German tradition, foreignizing translation has meant a close adherence to the foreign text, a literalism that resulted in the importation of foreign cultural forms and the development of heterogeneous dialects and discourses. Johann Heinrich Voss’s hexameter versions of the Odyssey (1781) and the Iliad (1793) introduced this prosodic form into German poetry, eliciting Goethe’s praise for putting ‘rhetorical, rhythmical, metrical advantages at the disposal of the talented and knowledgeable youngster (Lefevere 1992b: 77). Friedrich Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles’ Antigone and Oedipus Rex (1804) draw on archaic and nonstandard dialects (Old High German and Swabian) while incorporating diverse religious discourses, both dominant (Lutheran) and marginal (Pietistic) (George Steiner 1975: 323—33; Berman 1985: 93—107). Hölderlin exemplifies the risk of incomprehension that is involved in any foreignizing strategy: in the effort to stage an alien reading experience, his translations so deviated from native literary canons as to seem obscure and even unreadable to his contemporaries.

Foreignizing entails choosing a foreign text and developing a translation method along lines which are excluded by dominant cultural values in the target language. During the eighteenth century, Dr John Nott reformed the canon of foreign literatures in English by devising translation projects that focused on the love lyric instead of the epic or satire, the most widely translated genres in the period. He published versions of Johannes Secundus Nicolaius (1775), Petrarch (1777), Hafiz (1787), Bonefonius (1797), and the first book-length collections of Propertius (1782) and Catullus (1795). Nott rejected the ‘fastidious regard to delicacy’ that might have
required him to delete the explicit sexual references in Catullus’ poems, because he felt that ‘history should not be falsified’ (1795: x). His translation provoked a moral panic among reviewers, who renewed the attack decades later when expressing their preference for George Lamb’s bowdlerized Catullus (1821).

Domesticating vs. foreignizing strategies

Determining whether a translation project is domesticating or foreignizing clearly depends on a detailed reconstruction of the cultural formation in which the translation is produced and consumed; what is domestic or foreign can be defined only with reference to the changing hierarchy of values in the target-language culture. For example, a foreignizing translation may constitute a historical interpretation of the foreign text that is opposed to prevailing critical opinion. In the Victorian controversy that pitted Francis Newman’s \textit{Iliad} (1856) against Matthew Arnold’s Oxford lectures \textit{On Translating Homer} (1860), what was foreignizing about Newman’s translation was not only that it used archaism to indicate the historical difference of the Greek text, but that it presented Homer as a popular rather than an élite, poet. Newman cast his translation in ballad metre and constructed an archaic lexicon from widely read genres like the historical novel; he thought that Sir Walter Scott would have been the ideal translator of Homer. Arnold argued, however, that Homer should be rendered in hexameters and modern English so as to bring the translation in line with the current academic reception of the Greek text. Whereas Newman wanted to address an audience that was non-specialist and non-academic, composed of different social groups, Arnold aimed to please classical scholars, who, he felt, were the only readers qualified to judge translations from classical languages. Newman’s translation strategy was foreignizing because populist; the translation that Arnold preferred was domesticating because élitist, assimilating Homer to literary values housed in authoritative cultural institutions like the university.

Translation strategies can often be determined by comparing contemporary versions of the same foreign text. In the early 1960s, for instance, the American translators Norman Shapiro and Paul Blackburn were both translating Provençal troubadour poetry. Consider their versions of the first stanza from a poem by Gaucelm Faidit:

\begin{quote}
Us cavaliere si jazia
ab la re que plus volia;

doussa res, ieu que farai?
que-l joms ve e la nueytz vai,
ay!
qu’ieu aug que li gaita cria:
‘Via! sus! qu’ieu vey la jorn venir apres l’alba.’
\end{quote}

\textit{(Mouzat 1965: 555)}

A knight was with his lady fondly lying –
The one he cherished most – and gently sighing
As he kissed her, complained: My love, the day
Soon will arrive, chasing this night away.

\textit{Alaş!}
Already I can hear the watchman crying:
Begone!
Quickly, begone! You may no longer stay,
For it is dawn.
\textit{(Shapiro 1962: 72)}

A knight once lay beside and with
the one he most desired,
and in between their kisses said,
what shall I do, my sweet?

Day comes and the knight goes
Ai!
And I hear the watcher cry:
‘Up! On your way!
I see day
coming on, sprouting behind the dawn!’
\textit{(Blackburn 1978: 195)}

Shapiro adopts a domesticating strategy. His lexicon, while intelligible to contemporary English-language readers, makes use of archaisms that are recognizably poetical, drawn from the tradition of nineteenth-century verse: \textit{alas, begone, cherished}. Although his verse structure, both metrical and rhyming, is intended to approximate Faidit’s musical stanza, Shapiro effectively assimilates the Provençal text to the traditional forms favoured by noted American poets, such as Robert Lowell and Richard Wilbur, who had
achieved national reputations by the 1960s (Perkins 1987). Blackburn adopts a foreignizing strategy. His lexicon mixes the standard dialect of current English with archaism (*to lie with*, meaning ‘to engage in sexual intercourse’), colloquialism (*in between, coming on*), and foreign words (the Provençal *ai*). Although his verse structure, both rhythmical and intermittently rhyming, aims to approximate the musicality of Faidit’s stanza, Blackburn actually assimilates the Provençal text to the open forms favoured by experimental poets, such as Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, who at the time were on the fringes of American literary culture (von Hallberg 1985). Shapiro’s domesticating version relies on canonical values, whose authority fosters the illusion that it is an exact equivalent or a transparent window on to Faidit’s poem. Blackburn’s foreignizing version relies on marginal values, whose strangeness invites the recognition that it is a translation produced in a different culture at a different period. The distinction between their strategies is particularly evident in their additions to the Provençal text: Shapiro makes his version conform to the familiar image of the yearning courtly lover by adding *gently sighing* and *complained*; Blackburn seeks estranging effects that work only in English by adding the pun on *night* in *Day comes and the knight goes*, as well as the surreal image of the sun *sprouting*.

As this example suggests, foreignizing strategies have been implemented in literary as opposed to technical translation. Technical translation is fundamentally domesticating: intended to support scientific research, geopolitical negotiation, and economic exchange, it is constrained by the exigencies of communication and therefore renders foreign texts in standard dialects and terminologies to ensure immediate intelligibility. LITERARY TRANSLATION, in contrast, focuses on linguistic effects that exceed simple communication (tone, connotation, polysemy, intertextuality) and are measured against domestic literary values, both canonical and marginal. A literary translator can thus experiment in the choice of foreign texts and in the development of translation methods, constrained primarily by the current situation in the target-language culture.

See also:
ADAPTATION; FREE TRANSLATION; IDEOLOGY AND TRANSLATION; LITERAL TRANSLATION; PURE LANGUAGE.

Further reading

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