

### **XIII. The Translator's Invisibility**

“Invisibility” is the term I will use to describe the translator’s situation and activity in contemporary Anglo-American culture. It refers to two mutually determining phenomena: one is an illusionistic effect of discourse, of the translator’s own manipulation of English; the other is the practice of reading and evaluating translations that has long prevailed in the United Kingdom and the United States, among other cultures, both English and foreign language. A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original.” The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator’s effort to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning. What is so remarkable here is that this illusory effect conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator’s crucial intervention in the foreign text. The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text. The dominance of fluency in English-language translation becomes apparent in a sampling of reviews from

newspapers and periodicals. On those rare occasions when reviewers address the translation at all, their brief comments usually focus on its style, neglecting such other possible questions as its accuracy, its intended audience, its economic value in the current book market, its relation to literary trends in English, its place in the translator's career. And over the past fifty years the comments are amazingly consistent in praising fluent discourse while damning deviations from it, even when the most diverse range of foreign texts is considered.

Take fiction, for instance, the most translated genre worldwide. Limit the choices to European and Latin American writers, the most translated into English, and pick examples with different kinds of narratives—novels and short stories, realistic and fantastic, lyrical and philosophical, psychological and political. Here is one possible list: Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1946), Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1955), Heinrich Böll's *Absent Without Leave* (1965), Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* (1968), Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970), Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980), Mario Vargas Llosa's *In Praise of the Stepmother* (1990), Julia Kristeva's *The Samurai* (1991), Gianni Celati's *Appearances* (1992), Adolfo Bioy Casares's *A Russian Doll* (1992). Some of these translations enjoyed considerable critical and commercial success in English; others made an initial splash, then sank into oblivion; still

others passed with little or no notice. Yet in the reviews they were all judged by the same criterion—fluency. The following selection of excerpts comes from various British and American periodicals, both literary and mass-audience; some were written by noted critics, novelists, and reviewers:

Stuart Gilbert's translation seems an absolutely splendid job. It is not easy, in translating French, to render qualities of sharpness or vividness, but the prose of Mr. Gilbert is always natural, brilliant, and crisp.

(Wilson 1946:100)

The style is elegant, the prose lovely, and the translation excellent.

(New Republic 1955:46)

Text by Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 1995.

#### Reading Guidelines:

We, students, should develop our learning process by finding appropriate methods. One such method is study groups. We should divide ourselves among groups of 4-5 students and start discussing in English and Arabic subjects we take either before or after lectures.

**Q.I** Give the exact meaning of the following words first in English and second in Arabic: invisibility, mutually,

phenomena, illusionistic, manipulation, peculiarities, transparency, readability, conceals, intervention, accuracy, consistent, diverse, splash, oblivion, periodicals, noted, crisp, elegant.

**Q.II** Derive as many words as you can from the following words: discourse, manipulation, practice, fiction, apparent, occasions, neglecting, stranger, absent, initial, notice, judge, criterion, sharpness, vividness.

**Q.III** Give the opposites of the words below and use them in good English sentences of your own: invisibility, prevailed, acceptable, fluently, absence, adhering to, illusory, numerous, rare, brief, consistent, fantastic, considerable, success, initial, mass, vivid.

**Q.IV** Answer the following questions briefly:

1. Why did Venuti introduce the term "invisibility" to translation studies?
2. What does the term refer to?
3. How a text is judged acceptable by publishers, reviewers and readers?
4. Discuss "the translation is not in fact a translation".
5. Do you agree with the statement that "the more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator"?
6. What are the other aspects neglected by reviewers?
7. Are the works mentioned for Camus, Sagan', Böll, Calvino, Márquez, Kundera, Llosa, Kristeva, Celati,

Bioy and Casares translated into Arabic? Do you know of other titles translated for them?

8. What do the two quotations by Wilson and the New Republic show?

**Q.V** Translate paragraph 2 into Arabic keeping the translations of the titles of novels consistent with existing ones.

**Research Activity:**

1. As it goes " A clean carpet often hides a dirty ground". Do you agree that by analogy fluent translations hide inaccuracies and mistranslations?
2. Do you agree with John Dryden saying that the visibility of the translator does the greatest wrong to the memory and reputation of the dead? How?
3. Did our great man of letters Manfalouti know French? How did he translate French novels into Arabic then and achieve landslide success?
4. Do you agree that fluency should not be the only judging standard? What other standards we may include?

**Quote of the Day:**

**All translating seems to me to be simply an attempt to accomplish an impossible task —**  
Wilhelm von Humboldt