History of translation

Interest in the history of translation has grown in recent years: conferences have focused on the subject, numerous books have appeared, and ambitious group projects have been launched. Perhaps more significant, scholars have repeatedly called for even more work to be done, emphasizing the urgency of constructing a new sub-discipline with appropriate methods and theoretical models. Studying the history of translation is not a new endeavour. Just as translators have frequently reflected on their art, so have they often cast a glance at the history of their profession. In his 1661 work, ‘On the Best Way of Translating’, Huet discusses the translators of Antiquity, such as Quintilian and Cicero, and compares their ideas on translation with those of St JEROME (see LATIN TRADITION) ERASMUS (see DUTCH TRADITION) and others (Lefevere 1992b). Huet’s aim in presenting the views and achievements of the past, as his title suggests, is to determine how to translate. Similarly, Samuel Johnson, writing in The Idler in 1759, traces the history of translation from ancient Greece to seventeenth-century England, to illustrate the triumph of non-literal translation (Johnson 1963:211–17).

While historical fragments such as these are worthy of consideration—a ‘history of histories’ has yet to be written—this entry will focus on the efforts of contemporary scholars. What distinguishes the more recent historical studies from previous ones is an attempt to present a more disinterested, structured or systematic view of the past. History is on the curriculum in many disciplines; there is a history of music, medicine, science, even a history of accounting, sometimes constituting entire university departments or academic programmes. Translation schools are no exception: in Canada, for example, the first course on the history of translation was created by Paul Horguelin at the Université de Montréal in the early 1970s; at the University of Ottawa School of Translators and Interpreters, Jean Delisle and Louis Kelly have been teaching history since the mid-1970s. Other schools have followed suit, and even when history is not specifically taught as a separate subject, historical material is usually included in translation studies courses (Woodsworth 1996).

History is not simply a necessary ingredient in the education of future translators; a historical perspective is necessary and has been incorporated into translation scholarship in general. Writing the history of translation is both possible and timely because of the developments within the discipline of translation studies. As strictly linguistic theories of translation have been superseded, translation has come to be considered in its cultural, historical and sociological context. New conceptual tools provided by scholars working from a variety of theoretical perspectives have made it possible, and even imperative, to write the history of translation. Since the mid-twentieth century, and more particularly since the 1980s, translation scholars have been concerned with writing the history of their own discipline. Antoine Berman (see FRENCH TRADITION) called the construction of a history of translation the most pressing task of a truly modern theory of translation (1984:12). This and similar pronouncements are becoming more common: ‘It is time to give the history of translation the place it deserves’ (D’hulst 1991:61; translated). It is not sufficient to recognize the importance of history, however; it is also essential to formulate the task of the translation historian in a more explicit and systematic manner (D’hulst 1991; Lambert 1993c; Pym 1992b).

Constructing the history of translation: definitions, models and methods

The word history has two current meanings: the enquiry conducted by the historian and the series of actual events in the past which are the subject of his/her enquiry (Carr 1961:23). The relationship between past events and the historian recording them has been the subject of considerable debate. Attitudes have changed radically in the past century: the nineteenth-century belief in a hard core of facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian was challenged and gave way to another extreme, according to which
history is ‘the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind’ (Collingwood 1962:215). Some thinkers have come to look upon historiography as a literary artefact requiring creativity on the part of the historian (White 1973). While the ‘objectivity question’ remains unresolved (Novick 1988), fruitful historical enquiry seems possible none the less: it depends not only on a balanced interaction between historians and their facts, but also on an awareness of the complex nature of the ‘facts’ themselves, hybrids belonging to both the ‘world of things and the world of words’ (Stanford 1987:73).

A further distinction can be made between history, understood as the events of the past recounted in narrative form, and historiography, which is the discourse upon historical data, organized and analysed along certain principles. The term historiography refers to the methodology of writing history; however, it is more frequently replaced by the term historiography, which can thus have a double meaning.

Increasingly, translation scholars have felt the need to reflect on how to write history. One of the first questions that arises concerns the object of the historical inquiry. How is ‘translation’ itself defined? Does the term include both written and oral forms, subdisciplines such as terminology and lexicography, and related activities such as adaptation and pseudotranslation? Would a history of ‘translation’ as commonly understood in the twentieth century include Chaucer, for example, whose works are somewhere in between original authorship, translation and adaptation?

The history of translation can focus on practice or theory, or both. A history of the practice of translation deals with such questions as what has been translated, by whom, under what circumstances, and in what social or political context. History of theory, or discourse on translation, deals with the following kinds of questions: what translators have had to say about their art/craft/science; how translations have been evaluated at different periods; what kinds of recommendations translators have made, or how translation has been taught; and how this discourse is related to other discourses of the same period. Or, both theory and practice can be investigated at once: how can the reliability or relevance of texts on translation be determined? What is the relation between practice and reflection on translation?

Much work remains to be done in order to formulate adequate models. Other disciplines, such as the philosophy of science, can provide guidance (D’Hulst 1991). Models can be borrowed from other specialized histories, depending on whether we are seeking to construct the historiography of a discipline or the historiography of a practice or performance. The history of linguistics would be appropriate in the first case, and the history of literature or music in the second.

One of the major concerns in writing the history of translation, as in any history, is how to structure the events of the past. Among the more conventional dividing lines are those offered by the categories of space and time: the history of translation in a given geographical area such as Europe; the history of translation during a given period such as the Middle Ages. These divisions give rise to a number of questions. How broad, how narrow are they? What is the relevance and validity of the categories? How does our own point of view influence the way in which we attempt to structure history?

What are the goals of a history of translation? What does it set out to show or prove? Can one history paint an ‘objective’ picture of changing ideas about translation and translatability? Or, in documenting the contribution made by translators/translation to intellectual history, are historians motivated by a concern for improving the image of translators and translation in the eyes of other members of society? It could be, as José Lambert (1993b) has suggested, that the writing of history stems from a need to legitimize a new discipline. Introducing a historical perspective into translation studies can also bring about greater tolerance of the different approaches to translation and can provide unity to the discipline (D’Hulst 1994).

**Writing the history of translation: the texts**

With the emergence of an increasingly self-conscious discipline, works on translation
began to include historical information as part of a comprehensive treatment of the subject. Early examples include Edmond Cary's *La traduction dans le monde moderne* (1956) and Theodore Savory’s *The Art of Translation* (1957), which present facts about the translators and translations of the past, along with translation principles. The now classic works by George Steiner (*After Babel*, 1975), Louis Kelly (*The True Interpreter*, 1979) and Susan Bassnett (*Translation Studies*, 1980) make use of history in laying the foundations for a theoretical study of translation. Of the three, Kelly’s comes closest to a general history of translation; whereas Steiner and Bassnett deal primarily with theories of translation, Kelly, as his subtitle indicates, sets out to cover the history of translation theory and practice in the West. Since the appearance of these pioneering works, there has been a proliferation of articles, monographs and collective research projects, each drawing the boundaries of history in a different way and looking at the past through different lenses. Although the dividing lines are not always clear and the categories often overlap, the survey that follows will attempt to review scholarship in the field of the history of translation from a methodological perspective.

**Space and time**

In keeping with the European preoccupation with the nation-state, traditional historiography has tended to divide the historical field up into nations or their cultural groupings (Stanford 1987:21). Translation history, too, has paid attention to country, region, or linguistic or cultural community. Jean Delisle, for example, has written the history of translation in Canada (1987) while Sherry Simon (1989) limits the field further by studying translation in Quebec, a Canadian province that is linguistically and culturally distinct from the rest of the country. There are other examples of national histories of translation, often in the form of articles, for example translation in Cameroon (Nama 1991) and in Cuba (Arecibia 1992), and sometimes in the form of books, as in Cronin’s overview of a thousand years of translating in Ireland (Cronin 1996).

History can also be divided using chronological conventions such as centuries, reigns and dynasties. Work on translation history has generally followed the periodization of cultural history (Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, etc.). A number of works have dealt with translation in the Middle Ages and Renaissance (Chavy 1988; Copeland 1991; Ellis et al. 1989; Ellis 1991a, 1991b; Ellis and Evans 1994). In addition, there are numerous combinations of time and space: for example, the study of translation during the Romantic period in Germany (Berman 1984).

**Types of translation**

Translation history, like translation theory, has tended to place particular emphasis on literary translation, at times highlighting specific genres in combination with spatial and temporal restrictions. In his study of English versions of the Brigittine *Revelations*, Domenico Pezzini (1991) investigates devotional writing, a very specific genre at the crossroads of literature and sacred writing in the Middle Ages. Annie Brisset (1990, 1996) examines the translation of theatre in Quebec during a particularly significant 20-year period. Research carried out in Göttingen initially concentrated on drama and theatre translation in German-speaking countries, from the late eighteenth century on.

Another way of looking at the history of literary translation is to study the successive translations and reception of great authors, such as Homer or SHAKESPEARE, or central texts such as *The Arabian Nights*.

One example of this approach is the collection of essays on European translations of Shakespeare by Delabastita and D’hulst (1993). The BIBLE is another of these significant works, although it is in a class of its own. Its importance is based on a paradox: it is a central text in Western culture, yet it is written in a language that few people can understand. The story of its translation, therefore, from the Greco-Roman period through the Reformation and up to the modern era, has been told in many ways. Bible translation is covered in most general works of history, as well as in some specific ones (Bruce 1970; Stine 1990). The history of the translation of other sacred texts, such as the TORAH, QUR’ÂN (or Koran)
and Bhagavad Gita, has also been documented, although to a lesser extent, but religious translation in general has rarely been considered from a comparative perspective. Chapter 6 of Delisle and Woodsworth (1995a, pp. 159–87) attempts to fill this gap through an examination of the role of translators in the spread of the major world religions.

Other types of translation have not received as much attention as literary and religious translation. Scientific and technical translation has been referred to by some historians (Kelly 1979), and recently examined from specific perspectives, for example, in a history of the translation of scientific documents in China (Li 1993; Delisle and Woodsworth 1995a: 104–8). This is an area, however, which requires further work. Interpreting, too, has played a crucial role in the history of international relations but has not received the thorough treatment it deserves, despite some interesting material (van Hoof 1962; Roditi 1982; Kurz 1985). Each of these two categories of translation are subjects of chapters in the FIT history of translation (Delisle and Woodsworth 1995).

**Great moments in the history of translation**

The history of translation has been marked by moments of particular productivity, ‘schools’ of translation that have coalesced through a concurrence of political, cultural and linguistic circumstances, usually under the patronage of a particular individual. The Baghdad School, which grouped together translators of the Abbasid period around the person of Hunayn IBN ISHĀQ, is the subject of a book by Myriam Salama-Carr (1990; see ARABIC TRADITION). The Toledo School, which operated in twelfth-and thirteenth-century Spain, has been the subject of a number of articles (Dunlop 1960; Foz 1988, 1991; Jacquart 1991; Pym 1994; see also SPANISH TRADITION). Lars Wollin (1991c) has revealed the contribution of the Vadstena monastery, lesser known perhaps than the other two schools, but no less important for the development of vernacular language and literature in medieval Scandinavia (see SWEDISH TRADITION).

**Other divisions**

New perspectives in the humanities and social sciences, along with social change itself, have influenced scholarly research in general. Gender, for instance, has become an important parameter in current scholarship. Hanay (1985) discusses women writers/translators of religious works; Krontiris (1992) and Robinson (1995) study them at a particular period, the Renaissance and the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, respectively. Sherry Simon (1996) and von Flotow (1997) each present an overview of the whole question of gender and translation. There is room for more work on the history of women in translation, along the lines of other disciplines (literature, art, music) in which the role played by women throughout history has recently come to light.

In highlighting the changing function and status of translators, contemporary studies have recognized the importance of institutional factors: either the impact of institutions on translation (for example: the influence of the Académie française on translational norms) or the history of translation institutions themselves (Delisle 1984, 1990).

The challenge to European ideologies of nationhood and empire has also brought about new approaches to the history of translation, rewritten as a history of conquest and colonization (Cheyfitz 1991; Niranjana 1992; see METAPHOR OF TRANSLATION).

**Anthologies of statements about translation**

In addition to general works such as those by Kelly (1979), George Steiner (1975) and Bassnett (1980) that trace the history of translation theory, a number of publications have been devoted specifically to writings on translation. While some collections present a sampling of well-known writings on translation through the ages (Schulte and Biguet 1992), anthologies have generally been organized by country and/or period. André Lefevere (1977) and Paul Horguelin (1981) have compiled collections of statements on translation: Lefevere’s is restricted to texts by German theorists, in English translation, and Horguelin’s to the ‘domaine français’, apart from a few introductory statements by Latin authors. Santoyo (1987) has compiled a similar anthology of Spanish translation theory, arranged chronologically. English translation theory from 1650 to 1800 is presented in T.R.Steiner (1975) and French translation theory from
1748 to 1847 in D’Hulst (1990). Chesterman (1989) is a collection of more contemporary readings in translation theory. Some anthologies are accompanied by analysis or explanatory material; in some cases the material is presented chronologically, whereas in others it is organized according to genre or theme. D’Hulst, for example, divides his volume into discursive categories. Lefevere (1992b) is a collection of seminal texts about translation originally written in Latin, French, German and English, translated into English by the author and classified according to topic: the power of patronage, techniques of translating, and so on. Robinson’s Western Translation Theory From Herodotus to Nietzsche (1997) is perhaps the most broad-ranging in so far as it presents excerpts from over 90 authors, from the mid-fifth century BC to the end of the nineteenth century, with a useful biographical note on each author.

Towards more comprehensive histories of translation

Since the late 1980s, a number of efforts have been made to paint the history of translation with a broader brush. Frederick Rener proposes to correct the ‘narrow focus’ of previous studies concentrating on an individual language, particular century, or a specific translator and to reveal the ‘common theory of language and communication’ and ‘shared idea of translation’ underlying theory and practice in Western Europe (Rener 1989:5–7). Henri van Hoof (1991) provides a rich compilation of translators, translations and historical background, in a fairly broad history of translation in the West. Michel Ballard (1992) covers the history of translation from Cicero to Benjamin, with special emphasis on the search for a translation method. More ambitious still is the five-volume history undertaken by Hans Vermeer (1992b). By means of Skizzen, or sketches, Vermeer highlights the basic principles that have governed translation and interpretation at certain periods of history. Based in part on his own SKOPOS THEORY, Vermeer’s history seeks to determine the extent to which translators have taken account of cultural differences as well as the expectations and behavioural conventions of the target audience. After approximately the ninth century AD, special emphasis is placed on translation in German-speaking areas.

The diverse methods of writing the history of translation reflect two opposing tendencies in modern historiography: one consisting in splitting up the field into smaller and smaller plots as specialization increases, and the other in moving toward a ‘rejoining of the pieces’ in order to tackle a total or global history (Stanford 1987:41). It has been possible to reconcile these tendencies by means of team work, which has the advantage of bringing pluralism to bear on the history of translation in the world and hence of achieving some measure of breadth and objectivity. Group research projects have been made possible through the support of academic and professional institutions. Other factors, too, such as the creation of electronic networks, have facilitated the work of international research teams.

In 1985, a special research centre (Sonderforschungsbereich) was set up, with funding for up to 12 years, at the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen (see GERMAN TRADITION). The Centre embarked upon a cooperative multidisciplinary programme to investigate literary translation. Tools were developed for a historical-descriptive branch of translation studies, intended to identify what translations really were, what thought went into them, and what role they played in a literature and culture.

The team set out to examine representative translations, in German-speaking countries initially, working with language, literature and culture pairs (British-German, Swedish-German, Polish—German, etc.). They dealt with the most frequently translated works by the most frequently translated authors since about the end of the eighteenth century, when translation became a mass market in German-speaking countries. In a second phase, an effort was made to develop multilateral projects. The basic premise is that historical-descriptive translation studies need a transfer-oriented approach: the historical profile of a translation can best be worked out by concentrating on the most striking differences between source and target texts.

The work of the Göttingen centre has resulted in numerous publications, principally
the series *Göttinger Beiträge zur Internationalen Übersetzungsfor-schung* (Göttingen contributions to international translation research; see for example Kittel and Frank 1991). Their work in the field of DRAMA TRANSLATION, in particular, has been ground-breaking.

The second part of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (this volume) is entirely devoted to the history of translation and provides another example of large-scale team work. The history of translation is covered in countries, such as Canada, in which there are more than one language. There are also entries on languages that exist in more than one geographical or political entity: for example English is treated separately under the AMERICAN TRADITION and the BRITISH TRADITION.

Similar projects are currently in the process of being completed. The *Sachwörterbuch der Translationswissenschaft* is an encyclopedic dictionary of translation studies, edited by Heidemarie Salevsky (Berlin) and to be published by Julius Groos Verlag. It aims to bring together translation scholarship from Eastern and Western Europe. A significant portion, approximately 100 pages, has been set aside to cover the history of translation; this section is coordinated by Hans Vermeer (Heidelberg).

The *International Encyclopedia of Transla-tion Studies*, the most ambitious to date, is to be published by Walter de Gruyter in 1999–2001. Edited by a group of seven scholars, it includes a section on Translation and Cultural History which will make up about half the total number of pages of this proposed three-volume work. It will also contain theoretical and methodological articles on the topic of historiography. The aim is to cover the history of translation comprehensively, from the earliest times to the present day, across the globe, although some areas and periods will receive a more detailed treatment than others. There are three different and complementary approaches:

(a) coverage of large geographical/cultural units (mainly Europe, but also the Middle East) with emphasis on phenomena across the region broken down into traditional periods of cultural history (Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Modern Period)

(b) coverage from regional and national perspectives, with translation in German-speaking areas treated in depth as a 'paradigmatic case'

(c) case studies of the worldwide distribution and translation of significant texts.

**The FIT Committee for the History of Translation**

The idea of a comprehensive history of translation in the world was first proposed to the FÉDÉRATION INTERNATIONALE DES TRADUCTEURS (FIT) by the late György Radó (see HUNGARIAN TRADITION) in 1963. It was not until 1990, however, that the project actually began to take shape, under the direction of a new Committee for the History of Translation (Delisle 1991). The history was to be selective and thematic, rather than comprehensive or exhaustive. Nine themes were identified and a research team headed by a ‘principal author’ was put together for each theme. The book was published in English as *Translators Through History* and in French as *Les traducteurs dans l’histoire* (Delisle and Woodsworth 1995a and 1995b).

Emphasis has been placed on the contributions made by translators to the intellectual and cultural history of the world: the invention of alphabets, the emergence of national literatures, the propagation of religious texts, etc. The vast subject matter has been treated through collaborative research, by scholars with different areas of expertise, living in various parts of the world. An effort has been made to move beyond a Eurocentric view by introducing new material from the Far East, Africa and Latin America, for example. What is unique about this project is that it was sponsored by FIT, the organization which represents translators world-wide; the international dimension of the project has been further enhanced by the fact that UNESCO is one of the book’s co-publishers.

**Further reading**


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