

LITERARY TRANSLATORS AS AN ELITE: A PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW

TRADUCĂTORII LITERARI CA O ELITĂ: O PERSPECTIVĂ PRELIMINARĂ

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Abstract: *Anecdotally, literary translators often have elite status among translation professionals. However, studies exploring the intersection between elite sociology and literary translators are not widespread. In the first instance, this preliminary contribution explores the links between sociology and translation studies. Subsequently, it adopts Khan's 2012 notion of an elite to briefly analyse literary translators through the lens of five specific resource areas (political, economic, social, cultural, and knowledge-based) and three relevant institutions (clubs, families, and educational institutions). Finally, some basic conclusions and suggestions for further research on the topic are offered.*

Keywords: *literary translators, elite sociology, translation sociology, Shamus Khan, translation profession, professional status, translation studies*

Rezumat: *Anecdotic, traducătorii literari au adesea un statut de elită în rândul traducătorilor. Cu toate acestea, studiile care explorează intersecția dintre sociologia elitelor și traducătorii literari nu sunt frecvente. În primul rând, această contribuție explorează legăturile dintre sociologia și studiile de traducere. În continuare, adoptă noțiunea de elită a lui Khan (2012) pentru a analiza traducătorii literari prin prisma a cinci domenii de resurse specifice (politic, economic, social, cultural și cunoaștere) și a trei instituții (cluburi, familii și instituții de învățământ). În final, sunt oferite câteva concluzii de bază și sugestii pentru continuarea mai multe cercetări pe această temă.*

Cuvinte cheie: *traducători literari, sociologia elitelor, sociologia traducerii, Shamus Khan, profesia de traducător, statut profesional, studiile de traducere.*

Introduction

In bringing together approaches from the humanities, social sciences, and even the sciences, Translation Studies has, at times, been described as an “interdiscipline” [1]. Over the past quarter-century, scholars have become ever more interested in sociological aspects pertaining to translation and interpreting [2-6]. This growing academic focus also mirrors the changing role and status of translators and interpreters in the modern age; for example, in response to the growth of English as an international lingua franca [7], the increasing importance of artificial intelligence and machine translation [8], as well as changing employment practices across the globe [9-10]. Accordingly, the current contribution represents an extension of the author's earlier project [11-12], which analysed the intersection between elite sociology and conference interpreting from both theoretical and applied angles. In expanding the object of study, this literature-based approach seeks to apply – in a preliminary manner – Khan's 2012 concept of an elite [13] to literary translators.

Brief notes on sociology and translation studies

Sociological aspects within translation studies were foreseen in James Holmes's 1975 article [14], widely seen as the genesis for research in the field. With the so-called sociological turn gathering ground since the turn of this century, the human aspect has come to the fore. This has been illustrated in Andrew Chesterman's key article on "Translator Studies" [15], as well as research exploring the occupational status of translators and interpreters in the historical (see, for example, [16]) and contemporary context (e.g., [17-19]). Further examples of this growing importance can be demonstrated by the very recent creation of two sociologically-oriented journals which are offered by leading academic publishers: *Translation in Society*, published by John Benjamins [20]; and *Interpreting and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, published by SAGE Publications [21]. Moving specifically to studies of literary translators, an important edited volume on Literary Translator Studies [22] has recently appeared, with several valuable contributions profiling literary translators largely from a historical perspective. With literary translators usually considered as elite members of the wider translation profession [23], there has, however, been a paucity of projects exploring translators and interpreters as an elite in sociological terms. Indeed, the author's earlier research in this regard [11-12] identified that, although the theoretical analysis outlined that conference interpreters had a strong case to be considered as an elite, feedback from the survey showed that practitioners overwhelmingly disregarded this notion. Building on this, a preliminary further application of the theoretical analysis to literary translators was undertaken.

Theoretical approach

Sociological approaches to studying the elite are centred on the study of power (see the recent 2020 edited collection by Denord, Palme, and Réau [24]). For the purposes of consistency with the author's aforementioned project [11-12], the current work also takes the concept of an elite as elaborated by the noted American sociologist Shamus Khan, who describes it as those having "vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource [of] transferable value" [13, p.362]. In his 2012 publication, Khan writes that elite power is concentrated through five areas, which relate to political, economic, cultural, social, and knowledge-based resources. This power is articulated through three overarching institutions: those of clubs, the family, and also educational institutions. As mentioned earlier, this framework was previously applied to the author's two publications relating to conference interpreters and elite sociology [11-12]. For consistency, it has also been adopted here in the current literature-based preliminary study which focuses on literary translators.

Some preliminary findings

In analysing the five resource areas that Khan [13] mentions, at first glance it may appear that political resources may be rather irrelevant to literary translators. However, as demonstrated by Wu [25] and Jiang [26] with particular relevance to the Chinese context, literary translation – and by extension, literary translators – can also play a role in important aspects linked to the spread of soft power and also to cultural diplomacy; i.e., through working with a specific language and culture in a given context.

Regarding economic resources, a 2020 survey report [27] by the Belgium-based *Conseil européen des associations de traducteurs littéraires* (CEATL, the European Council of Literary Translation Associations) highlighted that many literary translators did not command a financial premium for their work. Though acknowledging that professional situation varied between different national markets, the summary of the report [27] noted that those pursuing a career in literary translation increasingly required additional forms of supplementary income.

In terms of cultural resources, however, international prizes and awards for literary translation certainly bestow prestige, and in some cases (for example, by shining a spotlight on a given language or culture) can also interlink with some of the soft-power objectives outlined in the first paragraph of this section. Such awards exist in a range of permutations for many source and target languages, with varying financial rewards available for the prize-winning translator. Into English, for instance, these prizes include the International Dublin Literary Award (which can recognise either a work originally written in English or translated into it) [28], the International Booker Prize [29], as well as the EBRD Literature Prize [30-31].

Turning to social resources (and where Khan [13] underlines the importance of networking), the location of literary translators within the wider publishing industry is invaluable [32] with regard to finding work opportunities, subsidies, and other relevant possibilities for career advancement. This interlinks with the notion of knowledge-related resources, where literary translators indeed perform a key role through their abilities to transmit literature from one language to another [32]. This is embodied through the possession of the highly-honed skill of being able to perform literary translations, and the knowledge to apply this skill in the relevant vocational context. However, although literary translators have largely been unaffected by the immense technological changes that have profoundly influenced translators in other domains, it is important to bear in mind that the intersection between literary translation and artificial intelligence is deepening [33-34], and thus may impact the profession at some future time.

With reference to the three institutions that Khan [13] mentions as promoting an elite, in terms of clubs there are a mixture of organisations, including the aforementioned CEATL [35], which brings together many national literary translation associations in the European context, as well as the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) [36]. In terms of families, no dynasties of literary translators were revealed in the course of this preliminary study. However, with regard to educational institutions, it is clear that prestigious programmes in literary translation do exist – for example, the noted MA at the University of East Anglia [37] and the MFA at Iowa [38]. It is necessary to state that in terms of entry to the profession, a degree in (literary) translation is not a pre-requisite. However, as outlined in the author’s forthcoming study on literary translation prizes, many top literary translators do indeed hold advanced degrees from elite universities.

Some preliminary conclusions

In spite of the limitations of space and time, this contribution has observed that, in terms of social, cultural, and knowledge-based resources, literary translators do appear to possess certain elite attributes. The political resources of literary translators can be displayed indirectly through the role of soft power initiatives; however, economic resources are much less strong. Regarding institutional aspects, there are various associations (“clubs”) to promote interests of literary translators. While family aspects seem unimportant, the same cannot be said for educational institutions, where many literary translators have attended prestigious international institutions. As noted previously, this work is a highly exploratory study and further research is most definitely needed. It is planned, in addition to further desk-based research, to conduct surveys and interviews not only with literary translators, but also with relevant stakeholders.

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