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Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic. By Lawrence Venuti. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 211 pages. ISBN 9781496205131

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Book Reviews

Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic. By Lawrence Venuti. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 211 pages. ISBN 9781496205131.

In his most recent book, *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (2019), Lawrence Venuti censures instrumentalism in translation practice and calls for hermeneutic translation. Venuti continues his polemic writing style by presenting a dichotomy. That is, from advocacy of minor translation in opposition to major translation and foreignization in contrast to domestication, he champions hermeneutic against instrumental translation. Nevertheless, different from the previous dualities, hermeneutic and instrumental translations are not mutually exclusive. Instead, the former should include the latter.

According to Venuti, instrumentalism is the mode of translation that has dominated the West for more than two millennia. It is problematic because it “grossly oversimplifies translation practice, fostering an illusionism of immediate access to the source text” (5). A key word that Venuti applies to this model is “invariant.” Venuti states that instrumentalism “conceives of translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text, and invariant form, meaning, or effect” (1). This results in a hierarchical status between the source and the target texts. Thus, it is easy to see that the model of instrumentalism is source-oriented because the invariances establish the authorial status of the source text. In a certain way, instrumentalism reminds us of the domestic model of translation, which also stresses the privileged status of the source text and the inferiority of translation and the invisibility of translators. The difference is that the domesticating model of translation focuses more on the rendering of linguistic features of the translation, whereas the instrumentalism model is concerned more with the interpretation of the source text.

By contrast, a hermeneutic model is target-oriented. It “conceives of translation as an interpretive act that inevitably varies source-text form, meaning, and effect according to intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture” (1). In the first half of the book, Venuti does not give examples of hermeneutic translation but mainly focuses on the dominance

of instrumentalism in the history of translation. He starts with the metaphor of language functioning as clothing, which, according to him, “recurs in instrumentalist translation across millennia” (20). This thinking of treating language as an invariance has a long history in the West; it was famously taken by George Chapman in his translation of *The Iliad*, Alexander Fraser Tytler in his treatment of style as a formal invariant during the Renaissance, and Eugene Nida in his translation of *The Bible* in modern times. Furthermore, Venuti finds instrumentalism in Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Translator’s Task” in the clothing analogy of pure language as an invariance and mystical transcendence of language as a material medium. The prevalence of this model can also be seen in the practices and comments of the professional translators and in the academic research and training environment. It is against this background that Venuti considers his work a “desiring machine” to call for a change in the conventional thinking of translation.

From the secondary status of the translator in *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Venuti turns his focus to the marginal status of translation as a discipline in *Contra Instrumentalism*. Venuti believes that translation is hijacked in terms of assigning it a peripheral status in relation to comparative literature or the world literature. Researchers are generally reluctant to take translated works into account in their projects, viewing translation as unreliable. French philosopher Barbara Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, published in French in 2004, and its English translation published in America in 2014, can serve as two interesting examples. By exploring “a cartography of philosophical differences” in multiple languages, Cassin claims in her French version that “[the philosophical term] sets out from a node of untranslatability and proceeds to the comparison of terminological networks, the distortion of which comprises the history and geography of languages and cultures” (34). That clearly shows the author’s distrust of translation based on her instrumentalist mindset. According to Venuti, the case is even worse with the English version, as editors impugn the translations harshly based on the essential meanings of the terms. While the English version shares the issues of instrumentalism with the French version, Venuti believes that it is under stronger attack due to the fact that the editors strive to “assimilate the French text to the current critical orthodoxy in comparative literature as it is institutionalized in the United States” (61). In other words, the English translation is under the influence of two powers: the power of cultural hegemony on top of the power of the source text.

“Untranslatability” is a major, recurring term in the book. Venuti cites Shaden Tageldin, whom he says is arguing “paradoxically that any ‘untranslatable’ language use ‘is at once relative and absolute, human and divine,’ and suggesting that comparative literature abandon ‘the tautology of translatability/untranslatability’ for Lu Xun’s ‘hard translation’” (47). Venuti uses two rhetorical questions to refute this argument. One is that the emphasis on one strategy can “skew any historical narrative and textual analysis” (ibid.). The other is that Lu Xun is not the first one to come up with this strategy because its history can be traced back to antiquity. It is interesting to note that Lu Xun’s “hard translation” is similar to the foreignizing translation that Venuti highly advocates in his *The Translator’s Invisibility* (1995). Thus, the same critique can be applied to his foreignizing translation strategy. For the second comment, Venuti refers to Friedrich Schleiermacher, who raised a thought similar to that of Lu Xun over a hundred years ago.

Venuti views Schleiermacher as the major proponent of a foreignizing strategy. In his book, *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Venuti cites him several times in prominent places and asserts that “Schleiermacher made clear that his choice was foreignizing translation” (Venuti 1995, 20). A similar citation appears in Venuti’s new book.

[Translation] seeks to impart to the reader the same image [Bild], the same impression [Eindruck] that he himself received thanks to his knowledge of the original language of the work as it was written, thus moving the reader to his own position, one in fact foreign [fremde] to him. (9)

However, the citation from Schleiermacher functions differently now. His words become the support for Venuti’s hermeneutic translation. Does that mean Schleiermacher can be interpreted so differently as to fit his two theories, or that Venuti’s two theories are identical?

“Incommensurability” or “untranslatable” is the term used by Emily Apter in her work, *Against World Literature* (2013), as a remedy for “the facile form of translation driving the field of comparative literature” to question “a critical praxis enabling communication across languages, cultures, time periods and disciplines” (53). Nevertheless, rather than doing a service, it does a disservice to translation. Venuti sees that it eventually becomes a tool for comparative literature to repress translation and becomes an accomplice in the situation of the uneven development between the two disciplines/fields.

With the subtitle, “Untranslatability as word-surfing,” Venuti suggests that it is convenient for researchers and translators to use untranslatability as a pretext for their assessment of translation. Ultimately, Venuti thinks that untranslatability indicates a political naivete, an ineptitude, an abdication to the current status quo, and a reactionary move that hold the hierarchy in academic institutions and ideology and politics in the world intact.

Venuti particularly addresses the issue of untranslatability in proverbs, which he asserts constitute the dominating understanding of translation by becoming unexamined words, phrases, or clichés over the years. Proverbs are notorious for being untranslatable, a characteristic that mainly lies in the contradiction between their form and content. The form has the illusory appearance of truth, which is considered invariant, whereas the content has potentially unlimited applications in heterogeneous situations and is thus characterized as variant. This contradiction is called *retrait* by Derrida. It refers to the metaphoricity of language. That is, a proverb, as a form of language, withdraws from the worldwide scene, and at the same time it overflows and supplements. In the words of Derrida, “The trait is withdrawn/re-drawn; the trait is re-trait” (86). However, this characteristic of proverbs has been disregarded by instrumentalism in translation throughout history. Venuti traces the genealogy of the translation of the Italian catchphrase, “Traduttore Traditore.” He categorizes the dissatisfaction with translation into two categories: one is satirical, reflecting the incompetence of translators, and the other is philosophical, reflecting the metaphysical sense of untranslatability. In either case, the translation is considered less or worse than the “original.”

The famous saying, allegedly coined by Robert Frost, that “poetry is what is lost in translation,” or the more colloquial one, “poetry is what gets lost in translation,” resembles and functions as a proverb in poetry translation. It takes the formal, stylistic, and effective features of the source text as inherent of poetry, which the readers can only perceive but not interpret. As a result, all translations are insufficient or inadequate. Venuti thinks Derrida’s paradox, “Rein n’est intraduisible en un sens, mais *en un autre* sens tout est intraduisible” (In a sense, nothing is untranslatable; but in another sense everything is untranslatable) is also metaphoric in embodying three tenors: a translation strategy and a paratext, a concept of equivalence, and a notion of untranslatability. Essentially, the paradox still assumes an instrumental mode of translation because it takes “the remainder” of the source text in its differential,

plural, and different forms in language as invariant and thus renders translation unsuccessful or impossible.

The instrumental mode of translation is also a convention assumed by both subtitlers and viewers in the movie industry. Luis Pérez-González calls it the “representational convention” of the medium. As components of a representational industry, the continuity editing, spatiotemporal coherence, narrative, and synchronous sound together construct a diegetic reality. Although subtitles are nondiegetic elements, they are taken as a part of the diegesis because they reproduce the characters’ dialogues. With this assumption and expectation, subtitling not only colludes with the filmic diegesis but also renders subtitlers invisible. Nevertheless, despite the dominance of instrumentalism in the research, teaching, and practice of subtitling, Venuti finds new practices that highlight a hermeneutic model in feature-length films in the periphery. They mainly involve using nonstandard linguistic features, which not only make the subtitlers visible but also require the viewers to adopt a hermeneutic model in their viewing the movie. Two successful examples cited by Venuti are Henri Béhar’s French subtitling of Alian Cavalier’s English film, *Thérèse* (1986) and Lenny Borger’s English subtitles of Jules Dassin’s French film, *Du rififi chez les hommes* (1955), or *Rififi*. In his subtitling, Béhar addresses Christ with nonstandard English, including references to Christ in the lower case and using colloquialisms. Borger uses nonstandard English to follow French colloquialism and slang. By doing this, he not only connects the movie to US crime fiction and Hollywood noir but also French realism, and creates a synthesis of the two. Venuti sees the result of such subtitling as “worlding a film by enabling it to cross national boundaries and circulate in other linguistic and cultural communities” (160). In due course, Venuti thinks that this should not be the job of subtitlers only, as their translations can still be incorporated into the illusion of diegetic reality. Rather, the viewers should involve themselves in the hermeneutic interpretation as well.

The controversial practice of “fansubbing” offers a paradigmatic case, where the subtitlers function both as translators and authors in combining translation and commentary in their subtitling. Esther Kwon unwarily follows this trend in her English subtitles of a Korean movie, Park Chan-wook’s horror film, *Bakjwi* (*Bat*, 2009). The unconventional subtitling jolts viewers out of their conventional way of watching movies to construct their understanding of the characters, as well as perceive the

differences between horror movies made in Hollywood and South Korea. It is because of these effects that Venuti believes that the subtitling helped the movie win the Jury Prize at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival.

Eventually, with a desire to change, Venuti calls on people, translators and readers alike to stop assuming that a source text possesses invariances, to start supporting multiple and even conflicting interpretations, and to treat a source text not as an authoritarian text in terms of translatability or untranslatability but as open to different kinds of interpretative acts.

As a translation scholar who is concerned with social and political progress, Venuti continues this thought in *Contra Instrumentalism*. Although he does not use the word “power” directly, his intention and purpose are still to change the unbalanced relationship between the source text and translation and the social, cultural, and political powers behind them. He strives to elevate translation from the shadow of the source text, or occupying a hierarchal status in regard to it, to become its equal. The hermeneutic model can help to break away from the yokes and constraints of the source text and allows for more creativity for both translator and translation. Therefore, it is liberating for translation and translator. Furthermore, compared to Venuti’s previous concepts of minor translation or foreignizing translation, which is only or a single translation strategy that is antagonistic with its traditional counterpart and leads to a dualistic contradiction, the hermeneutic mode of translation is open-ended and represents plural forms. Although as a method it is in opposition to instrumental translation, in practice it includes it. It thus departs from the dualistic mentality and practice and becomes inclusive and embracing.

Nevertheless, the gesture of opening and incorporating is not strong in the book. An important reason might be because instrumentalism represents the rule of the source text and culture as well as the order and authority of current world politics. It is against the dominance of the power in the fields of industry, academia, and politics that Venuti raises his theory. On the other hand, politics aside, instrumentalism is just one model of interpretation. It is and should be incorporated into hermeneutic translation. If we accept the premise of hermeneutic translation, that there are multiple and even conflicting interpretations of one source text, then an instrumental model of interpretation and translation should not be excluded. Actually, I find it problematic for Venuti to use just one version as an example of his hermeneutic translation. If there is one single version

that is considered the best representative of hermeneutic translation, then it ironically becomes contra-hermeneutic translation and turns into another form of instrumentalism.

In fact, it is clear that the translations favored by Venuti represent foreignizing translation. There is no doubt that foreignizing translation defies the rules and restraints of instrumentalism. However, if foreignizing becomes the new standard, it will become another form of instrumental translation. It is just a change in name but not thinking. There will be a new round of hegemony. If that is the case, then what's the meaning of hermeneutic translation?

On a different note, as a hermeneutic mode suggests an all-embracing attitude towards translation, the assessment of translation becomes vague or even impossible. In his critique of André Lefevere, Venuti quotes Lefevere's words with this comment:

[H]e states that "a writer's work gains exposure and achieves influence mainly through 'misunderstandings and misconceptions,' or, to use a more neutral term, refractions," whereby he reduces refraction to error, a failure to comprehend the textual invariant that allows error to be discerned. (14)

In other words, if the source text is treated as a variant that can be interpreted in different ways, there is no such thing as an error or mistake. Elsewhere, Venuti reiterates this point that "to identify an error in a translation, the source text and its contents must be fixed so as to exhibit a departure, and that fixing is an interpretive act, here speculation based on the author's understanding" (56). Venuti clearly states that assessment of translation belongs to an instrumentalistic mentality.

What Venuti targets here is the institutional power behind instrumentalism. There is no doubt that institutions control translations. According to Venuti, academic institutions "house procedures of reading and conventions of documentation that permit certain interpretations to the exclusion of others" (67). In other words, academic institutions are one of the main causes of the marginal status of translation. However, one cannot help asking whether translation can completely break free from the regulations of academic institutions. In fact, if we consider reading as an interpretive act, then it is a form of intralingual translation. While we

acknowledge that multiple understandings and interpretations of a text are possible, we still arrive at a common or recognized understanding of text. Then, does this apply to translation as well? Should there be an agreed upon, commonly acknowledged understanding of the source text? In their review of *Contra Instrumentalism*, Shicong Nie and Shuhuai Wang raise a similar doubt:

What are the potential traps of a hermeneutic model? Can it be totally independent of instrumentalism? ... Will some special texts, such as laws and contracts, allow or require variation across cultures and time? Can the model be introduced to machine translation and computer-aided translation where human participation is limited? (Nie and Wang 2020, 4)

I don't know how Venuti will answer these questions.

As a reader and a translator, I feel encouraged that Venuti points out a new way of thinking and a new direction for both translation research and practice. My thought is likely shared by many translation researchers and practitioners, represented by Piotr Florczyk, who offers a highly positive review of this book. However, its significance is probably greater in theory than in practice. With the intention of being liberating and progressive, hermeneutic translation carries much weight in opposing instrumentalism. However, in practice, can we translate by disregarding the meaning of the author and the source text? In other words, can we interpret the text merely at our own will? How much can we deviate from the source text and still call the translation a translation?

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