Negotiating the Frontier
Translators and Intercultures in Hispanic History

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Contents & Arguments

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Introduction 1

Translators, Intercultures, and Hispanic Frontier Society

If we want to know how cultures interrelate, it is worth looking closely at who the intermediaries are and how they work in intercultures (overlaps of cultures, defined by criteria of professionalism and ‘secondness’). The frontier society of the Hispanic reconquista contained certain kinds of intercultural groups, the development of which can be traced through later history. The work of such groups can be analyzed in terms of the ways cultural frontiers are agreed upon, and the modes of agreement can be approached through neoclassical negotiation theory and the general concept of regimes.

1. The Abbot’s Gold 13

In 1142 the abbot of Cluny visited Hispania and sponsored a Latin translation of the Qur’an. This set the scene for later translation activities in Toledo. Formulated on the frontier between Christian and Islamic Europe, the translation project was justified in terms of providing information for a future disputation that would save souls from the ‘heresy’ of Islam. However, in calling for open debate on the basis of translation, the abbot risked exposing the sacred texts of Christianity to the same examination. In effect this meant siding with the main intercultural writers working on the project, who were more interested in science than religion. The actual translator of the Qur’an thus did a shoddy job, for which he was happy enough to take the abbot’s gold. The culture of generalized disputation, which would eventually undo the authority of the church, was then used to remarkably little avail against Islam.

2. Toledo and All That 34

Despite all the talk about a twelfth-century School of Translators in Toledo, the scientific translating that took place there remains a poorly understood phenomenon. Attention to its political dimension suggests that it should not be attached to the state-subsidized work carried out under Alfonso X after 1250 but is better explained in terms of Cluniac sponsorship of the first Latin translation of the Qur’an in 1142. This approach reveals grounds for potential conflict between the foreign scientific translators and the Toledo cathedral. Such conflict would nevertheless have been smoothed over by certain translation principles serving both scientific and religious interests. The foremost of these principles were literalism, secondary elaboration, the use of teamwork,
the inferiorization of non-Latinist intermediaries, the justification of conquest, and the accordance of authority to non-Christian texts. Thanks to this shared regime, the church helped scientific translations to enter Latin.

3. The Price of Alfonso’s Learning

The mainly protoscientific translations carried out after 1250 for Alfonso X of Castile are among the reasons why the king has been dubbed ‘the Learned’. The translations were from Arabic into Castilian, although further translations were made from Castilian into Latin and French. Some historians have willingly attached these court-organized activities to the properly twelfth-century translations carried out into Latin for the Toledo cathedral, as if there had been a merely logical transition from church to court. It can be argued, however, that the Alphonsine translations resulted from a nation-building language policy that opposed church power by avoiding the use of Latin for translations from Arabic. Coupled to this was a specific extratranslation policy designed to win the king international prestige by translating from Castilian target texts and using Latin when required. These two aspects of the general policy corresponded to two teams of professional intercultural mediators, comprising mainly Jews for the work into Castilian and Italians for translations from Castilian. The policy, and its economic results, can be compared with similarly nationalist language policies operative in Europe today.

4. The Importance of Paper

Since the introduction of paper-making coincided with the translation teams of both ninth-century Baghdad and thirteenth-century Castile, one might legitimately speculate on the consequences this material technology might have had for medieval translation processes. Attention to the translations commissioned by Alfonso X from 1250 suggests that the use of paper would have allowed intermediary versions to be written out in full and corrected, thus promoting increased bureaucratization and state control of translation activities. Comparison with print culture also suggests that the initial use of paper extended rather than opposed oral-based translation processes, challenging the ideal of the definitive target text in much the same way as computer-based networking is doing today.

5. A Christian’s Rabbinic Bible

In the early fifteenth century the Grand Master of the Order of Calatrava commissioned rabbi Mose Arragel to translate the Old Testament into Castilian and to provide numerous rabbinical glosses, to which Christian glosses were added. The result, known as the Biblia de Alba, is an apparently hybrid document based on a complex negotiation of cultural and religious boundaries. From the rabbi’s explicit documentation of the negotiation and drafting processes, it is possible to formalize the principles used for the writing of the
glosses and, on the basis of selected passages, for the actual translation itself, where key terms are invested with double meanings. The result is a frontier where a profoundly Rabbinic bible was effectively concealed beneath a Christianized surface.

6. From traslad- to traduc-

In the course of the fifteenth century the Spanish names for translation changed from the morphology of traslad- (trasladador, trasladación, etc.) to various forms of traduc- (traductor, traducción, etc.). This transition would seem to have occurred between the time of the Biblia de Alba and 1455, when Pero Díaz de Toledo produced the first vernacular translation of Plato. The reasons for the change can be associated with the Italian Leonardo Bruni, who not only provided the Latin Plato that the Castilian translator worked from, but was also engaged in a well-known debate with Alonso Cartagena about the nature of translation. It is thus in terms of the cultural relations between Castile and Italian humanism that the change in the names for translation is to be understood. Although many of the conditions that informed Italian humanism did not obtain in Castile and the values of newness and cross-cultural prestige effectively covered over those differences, Spanish thought underwent significant sea-changes with respect to the medieval hierarchy of languages and the use of translation from Latin to develop the vernacular.

Entr'acte: Imaginary Ships

On 3 August 1492 Columbus left Spain in search of the New World. The previous day, ten ships set out from Barcelona carrying expelled Jews to a rather different kind of cultural expansion. In both cases, the frontier that had defined medieval Hispania moved outward, and various intercultures were displaced accordingly.

7. The Language of Empire

The colonial expansion of Castilian was by no means automatic. It followed significant standardization of the language and its expansion within Spain in the late fifteenth century. More important, it was only one of a number of possible solutions to the problems of colonial domination. The use of interpreters in the initial voyages of conquest gave way to the presence of missionaries, who actively learnt and described some of the Amerindian tongues. The considerable debate over the status of these languages can partly be understood in terms of the medieval hierarchy of languages, although what was at stake was more particularly the standardization of languages like Nahuatl. Attempts to develop intercultural groups using standardized Amerindian languages were associated with the use of translation, but the various groups of active and
potential translators failed to supply lasting solutions to the demands of domination. In terms of regime theory, this was largely because the missionaries who were intent on protecting languages were at the same time engaged in the ideological transformation of those same languages. This ideological contradiction became untenable, eventually giving way to the use of Castilian as the language of empire.

8. The Language of Exile

Virtually in parallel with the imposition of Castilian in the colonies, the Counter-Reformation in mainland Spain forced many members of intercultural groups to take the paths of European exile. This particularly concerned scholars influenced by Erasmus and inspired by projects such as the Complutensian Polyglot Bible; it meant that representatives of Spanish protestantism entered the mainstream of northern European learning; translating the Bible accordingly. Within Spain, the triumph of Castilian was accompanied by cultural closure and a relative distancing of humanist translation practices. The differences between translation within Spain and translation as carried out by Spanish exiles would then inform the various waves that were forced to leave as a result of subsequent expulsions, right through to the many translating exiles of the twentieth century. In effect, Spanish intercultural history over this period can be approached in terms of a profoundly divided translation culture that was nevertheless able to agree on some points.

9. A Volcano Unbaptized

Rubén Darío’s 1907 poem ‘Momotombo’ cites and translates a line from Victor Hugo that helps the Nicaraguan poet to understand his pre-Columbian homeland (‘Momotombo’ is a volcano that refused to be baptized with a Christian name). The reasons for this very marginal translation practice can be traced to the way colonial frontier society constructed cultural value in terms of passages to and from what was perceived as the centre of development, in this case Paris. In Darío, such practices allow a tragic form of mutual exoticization, in which both the centre and the periphery are denied substance. Symbolic translations, at once allowing and covering the presence of French, nevertheless permitted Darío and other Modernista writers to furnish markers of cultural distinction and upward mobility to privileged social groups in the colonies. This in turn fed into the notion of a supranational ‘Latin’ America as part of a decolonizing development ideology.

10. Authorship in Translation Anthologies

In the early twentieth century the minor intermediaries Fernando Maristany and Enrique Díez-Canedo produced Castilian anthologies of translated po-
etry. Maristany approached his anthologies as a private mode of retreat and refinement, whereas Díez-Canedo worked with other poets, using the anthology form as a mode of cultural socialization. Despite these differences, both intermediaries worked within an international network of nontranslational anthologies, based on the British publishers Gowans and Gray. The principles of the translational and nontranslational regimes may thus be compared, revealing that the use of translation paradoxically allowed the Spanish intermediaries a more authorial status than was the case for the compilers of nontranslational anthologies.

11. The Symbolic Olympics 211

The 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona had four official languages (English, French, Castilian, and Catalan), although the role of translations to and from Catalan was progressively reduced in the course of the Olympiad. In fact, the Catalan translators may have symbolically made up for the absence of a properly Catalan Olympic team. Although the use of translation for such symbolic purposes may be questioned in financial terms, it does achieve certain goals when limited by a fixed timeframe. In long-term scenarios, however, serious questions must be raised about the ideological returns on such material investments.

12. Training for Globalizing Markets 220

If globalization is understood in terms of cross-cultural distance increasingly entering the production of cultural products, many of the models we use to explain translation are of limited value. In particular, the development of professional cultures that habitually cross the boundaries of territorial cultures means that communication may take place wholly within those professional cultures, and that intermediaries may themselves become members of those same professional cultures. The resulting image is one of a very segmented labour market for translators, where much ‘pragmatic’ translating remains poorly remunerated and unprofessionalized, whereas the most globalizing sectors require and pay for skills that are in short supply. Within this context, the rapid growth of translator-training institutions in Spain since 1991 cannot be seen as a wholly positive response to market demands. That growth has instead had much to do with the internal demands of the Spanish university system. The structural interculturality of translator-training institutions may nevertheless yet allow those institutions not only to adjust to the demands of globalization but also to promote critical thought on the nature of globalization itself.

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