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Unspoken Power: Sidestepping Bourdieu's 'Symbolic Power' in Translation Studies

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Abstract

Although the issue of translation as power has been the central topic of many pieces of research over the past years, some of which being based on Bourdieu's work on 'symbolic power' and its underlying principles, theorists in translation studies have failed so far to adequately integrate this key concept into the new theoretical framework generated by this sociological perspective. In this article, I will argue that since linguistics has already integrated the concept of 'symbolic power' successfully, thereby marking the emergence of a new perspective on language as a symbolic system, translation studies, as an interdisciplinary field, should follow suit and benefit from the advantages that such an approach may offer both on a theoretical as well as on a practical level.

Keywords: power, symbolic power, symbolic capital, authority, habitus, translation studies.

Translation as Power

The issue of the relationship between 'power' – commonly defined in general language in relation to the ability of affecting individuals,

objects, and processes by means of authority or command over the immediate reality and its actors – on the one hand, and translation – as a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural process carried out in an ever-changing global space – on the other hand, has opened a window to multiple debates in translation studies over the past several decades. As Stefan Baumgarten and Jordan Cornella-Detrell argue, the ways in which the practice of translation is impacted by global spaces of power are complex and manifold, involving “a large array of contextual and textual factors, ranging from regional, global and institutional power relations to the linguistic, stylistic and rhetorical implications of translation decisions” (2). So much so, that translation is often shaped by social context and carried out within shifting and conflict-dominated power networks (2).

Historically, the concept of ‘power’ in relation to translation studies starts gaining popularity with the downfall of linguistics-focused translation theories defining translation as a meaning transfer process aiming to achieve linguistic equivalence between source and target language, and the rise of functionalist approaches inspired by Eugen Coşeriu’s perspective on language as a manifestation of the cultural space and nurtured by the Skopos theory developed by Christiane Nord and H. J. Vermeer in the late 1990’s (Schaffner 146). The immediate effect of these functionalist models on the science of translation is that they

place the translator as a professional expert on a par with other actors involved in the trans-cultural interaction, such as clients, commissioners and subject specialists. In these approaches, translators are empowered to act professionally due to their expertise as translators and their competence to produce texts which are appropriate for the specified purpose and the target audience. (146)

Later, the cultural turn in translation studies, however, brings about a shift in perspective on the role of the translator, from a professional expert to a member in a society in which relationships are often established and negotiated among actors, with translation

and interpreting often being subject to issues such as hierarchy, authority, and domination. As Christina Schaffner points out:

If we understand translation and interpreting as social activities which take place in social contexts and which involve at least two languages and cultures, then we will have to take into account that these social contexts are marked by power relations between dominant and dominated languages, and dominant and dominated cultures. (147)

In this social landscape, it is often more than languages and cultures that find themselves dominated as part of the translation process. Jeremy Munday identifies an entire “power network” associated with the translation industry. Economically, for example, it has been common practice for a long time, especially in the case of literary translators, to work for less than satisfactory fees for publishers whose main aim is often to minimize costs, including the practice of not granting copyright and bypassing directing a fair share of the royalties towards the translator (Venuti qtd. in Munday 239). It follows that all the agents or rather “gate-keepers” (Bourdieu qtd. in Munday 240), including commissioners, mediators, literary agents, text producers, translators, revisers, editors, etc. play vital roles in the industry (Munday 240), all of whom are links – strong or weak – in a chain upon which the very translation process depends.

Yet, nowhere is the exercise of power directed at translation and translators more evident than in the case of political interference. Whether it takes the form of censorship by an institutional authority to conceal sensitive foreign policy intelligence from the wide public, to protect interpreters in conflict areas from life-threatening repercussions (Schaffner 148-149), or for any other reason, politics has always interfered in the translation process and will continue to do so for a long time to come.

On the other hand, literature on the subject matter also includes examples in which the translator – not any other authority – becomes, arguably, the abuser, in the sense that they violate the integrity of the original text:

In some cases, the power play may result in the ST author's omission from the translation process altogether: Kuhiwczak (1990) reports the dramatic fate of Milan Kundera's *The Joke*, whose first English translator and editor, working jointly, decided to unravel the ST's intentionally distorted chronology in an attempt to clarify the story for the readers. Kundera was sufficiently shocked and used his dominant position to demand a new translation. Venuti (1998:6) questions Kundera's role, including the use of the previous translator's work without acknowledgement, claiming that 'Kundera doesn't want to recognize the linguistic and cultural differences that a translation must negotiate.' (Munday 239-240)

Whether or not the translator and the editor in question intended to abuse the original text may be the topic of a long and unsettling debate among the parties involved. What is certain though is that, although they may not admit it, the translator and the editor did use their power as agents in the industry to rewrite the entire text, and that Kundera, in his turn, in his capacity as author of the literary work, exerted his power in order to invalidate the translation and request another. Furthermore, Venuti himself used his authority as a long-acclaimed specialist in translation studies to exert power over Kundera in putting forward his opinion on the matter.

At this point, three distinct problems may be identified in relation to the issue of power in translation. Firstly, the concept of 'power' itself as a general term defined by English dictionaries is far too ambiguous and far too comprehensive to accommodate a theoretical framework on translation. Secondly, the array of issues described here in relation to the multiple facets of power manifesting itself in the industry, as well as their subtleties, cannot possibly be covered by one concept only, which triggers further investigation in the subject matter. Thirdly, research carried out on the topic of power in other adjacent fields, which are typically considered informant of translation studies, such as sociology, cultural studies, and linguistics, may once again prove useful in devising a new conceptual framework on translation that

adequately accommodates the concept of ‘power’ and its implications on a practical level.

In what follows, I will look into Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical approach on symbolic power as a concept applying to society, as well as into Claire Kramsch’s perspective on language as symbolic power and its implications in the field of linguistics. Eventually, I will argue in favour of a new theoretical framework in translation studies revolving around the concept of ‘symbolic power’ and the implications – positive and, possibly, less so – that such an approach could have on the theory and practice of translation in the present global context and on a long-term basis.

Symbolic Power

So far, the concept of power in relation to translation has been used to refer broadly to any influence exercised by people, context and/or resources to impact the finished product. Thus, for example, political power may be exerted via law and law enforcement; a publisher’s influence is used by means of their financial resources and control over what and who gets published, whereas a translator’s power is employed via the decisions they make in the process and are likely to impact the finished product, one way or another. What all these agents have in common is the power of authority: political, economic, financial, and professional, respectively, but what distinguishes them is, firstly, the type of power that is employed, secondly, the level at which it is applied. Whereas political and economic agents employ power as a means of coercion, which in the economy of the translation process is perceived as an external factor, the translator exerts an internal authority, deriving from professional ethics, professional recognition by other members of the translators’ community and decision-making – an essential ingredient in the translation process which may impact the finished product in countless ways.

In order to describe a type of power that does not use physical coercion but is likely to obtain the same results as this, Bourdieu coined the concept of ‘symbolic power’ describing it as:

a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization – is a power that can be exercised only if it is *recognized*, that is misrecognized as arbitrary. This means that symbolic power does not reside in ‘symbolic systems’ in the form of an ‘illocutionary force’ but that it is defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it, i.e. in the very structure of the field in which belief is produced and reproduced. What creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the social order, is the *belief* in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them. And words alone cannot create this belief. (170)

This perspective on the use of language, or, in Bourdieu’s words, ‘utterances’ working their “magical power” allows one to draw a clearcut distinction between political, economic, financial, institutional, etc. power as such, understood as force or as a means of coercion on the one hand, and symbolic power, on the other hand. Although fundamentally distinct from illocutionary force in the sense in which David Austin defined it in *How to Do Things with Words*, symbolic power is the driving force that transforms one’s perception of the world by virtue of the authority of the individual who exercises symbolic power over other individuals who recognize this authority. Furthermore, once the various types of power – some of which have been enumerated above – are exercised via utterances, they become symbolic power. As Kramsch explains in her book *Language as Symbolic Power*, utterances have power “through their mobilizing effects, that is, through their ability to affect, move and motivate people. But this can work only if people acknowledge (recognize) that these words are justified (legitimate) and believe that the speaker is naturally (arbitrarily) entitled to utter those words” because they are a

credible authority in terms of “institutional affiliation, seniority, expertise, social rank, experience and so on” (6). Hence, the three main instruments through which symbolic power operates are recognition, legitimacy, and prestige.

While drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power in language, Kramsch identifies three distinct types of power associated with language use: the power of symbolic representation, the power of symbolic action and the power to create symbolic reality. The power of symbolic representation, she argues, is “the quintessential tool of symbolic power” (74). To demonstrate this, she uses representative pieces of the narrative genre in children’s literature, such as La Fontaine’s *Le loup et l’agneau* (*The Wolf and the Lamb*) (38-40), a classic in German literature *Der Struwwelpeter* (the story of *Disheveled Peter*) (60-61), as well as a number of other narratives used as educational stories meant to discourage child mischief:

What we see at work here is a symbolic power that strives to create in the minds of children a representation of the social reality they will grow up into. This reality is inculcated through do’s and don’ts that children have to internalize if they want to become legitimate members of a cultural community and representatives of this community’s values. (67)

However, as part of the same framework, political narratives are also included here as instruments in mass manipulation as they often use similar systems of symbolic representation. Examples of such narratives include the multicultural America narrative, in which America is represented as a melting pot of various racial, ethnic, gendered groups making up one national identity. At the opposite end of the political discourse, there is Donald Trump’s America First narrative that fights “contamination” by immigrants, and generally any racial, religious and gender group that is perceived to be outside the norm (Kramsch 75-76).

If we think of language as symbolic action in the sense that John Austin and John Searle envisaged it, as performatives which do what they announce they do via the use of certain words with

performative value ('order,' 'command,' 'apologise,' etc.), the issue of language as symbolic action will have already been analysed and settled for good in linguistics. However, the perspective suggested by Bourdieu, and later supported and further developed by Kramsch, focuses on instances of symbolic action such as Henry II's infamous words uttered in the presence of his knights: "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" (83), which ultimately led to the murder of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The utterance in this case is infelicitous in the sense that it does not address a specific interlocutor (83), nor does it use any of the performatives normally signaling an order or command from the king to his subjects, in which case the knights may have been left unsure of how to react, turning this particular act of speech into a misfire. Except that, as it were, they did act, which turned Henry II's utterance into an abuse exerted by an authority (83).

Closely related to the concept of symbolic power, which crucially depends on the addressee's belief "in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it" (Thompson qtd. in Kramsch 99), is the term symbolic violence, which is "the power not only to construct reality, but to impose on others a definition of the social world that is best suited to one's interests" (Bourdieu qtd. in Kramsch 99). This re-creation of the vision of the world is supported, according to Bourdieu, by two essential pillars: capital and habitus. The former may be understood as anything and everything that may act at some point as a marker of prestige: to some it may be social capital, to others academic capital or linguistic capital (being multilingual), and yet, to others financial or economic capital (qtd. in Kramsch 99). All of the above, depending on the larger context, may constitute at some point, under certain social circumstances, an advantage in allowing one individual or another to impose their side of reality on others and reap the benefits.

Habitus, on the other hand, is defined by Bourdieu in relation to "the socially constructed dispositions . . . , which imply a certain propensity to speak and to say determinate things (the

expressive interest) and a certain capacity to generate an infinite number of grammatically correct discourses, and the social capacity to use this competence adequately in a determinate situation” (37). In other words, it is a certain competence of the individual acquired during their lifetime, to operate linguistically in a social environment dominated by a set of norms, which, if observed, turn into individual or institutional symbolic power, as Kramsch explains:

A habitus is an intuitive feel for the social game, that includes the exercise of both individual symbolic power (e.g. when and how to return a gift, how to save face, how to make yourself believed, respected, legitimate), and institutional power (e.g. how to enforce family rules at home, how to impose disciplinary mechanisms in school or how to manipulate the educational system to serve your interests). Both forms of power may include various degrees of symbolic violence. (100)

Finally, the use of symbolic systems, such as the Internet or any other form of mass media, has significantly contributed to the shaping of a symbolic reality that is often in conflict with the reality upon which our entire existence as individuals is constructed. In other words, by using such symbolic systems, the individual has surrendered their moral compass, their ability to distinguish between objective truth and subjective opinion and has endangered their “capacity to exercise free will and agency” (Kramsch 200).

Translation as Symbolic Power

At this point, there are several questions that come up. Firstly, can translation be symbolic power in the same sense that language is symbolic power? Secondly, if yes, why is it that translation studies theorists have been reserved in adopting the concept as such (although some of its principles have already been accepted as instrumental in the literature) and using it to develop a new perspective on translation studies in the new global reality? Finally, a question that may derive from the former two, why should

‘symbolic power’ matter in translation studies after all? In what follows, I will discuss the relevance of the concept in relation to translation studies and attempt to identify a number of advantages that would come with shaping a theory based on how symbolic power operates in translation.

Q1: Can translation be considered symbolic power in the same sense that language is symbolic power?

Since translation operates with virtually the same mechanisms that language uses in terms of meaning representation and social authority, there is no reason to rule out translation as symbolic power. Like language, translation operates at a symbolic level, in the sense that its power is not exercised through force but by meaning representation – even meaning manipulation, by introducing, projecting, and imposing interpretations, and by playing a crucial role in reflecting the dominant status – or the lack of it – of some culture over others. In other words, the act of translating is not neutral, but it reflects the translator’s habitus as a professional and a social individual. It may add to or hinder their recognition, legitimacy, and prestige, thereby impacting not only the translator but also the entire network of institutional and individual agents involved in the process. Hence, the translator is an active member in the shaping of realities and in constructing a vision of the social world by influencing perspectives and the way people understand other cultures.

Q2: Why is it that theorists in the field of translation studies have been so reserved in using the concept of ‘symbolic power’ as central in their field while consistently relying on terminology associated with it?

As mentioned above, recent literature in translation studies abounds in concepts pointing at Bourdieu’s theory on symbolic power in language. However, rather than fully embracing the concept, they normally rely on concepts such as ‘recognition,’ ‘legitimacy,’ ‘prestige,’ ‘authority,’ ‘capital,’ ‘habitus,’ and, paradoxically, ‘power,’ which indicates a certain hesitation in adopting ‘symbolic power’ as the concept at the heart of a revolutionary perspective, on the one hand, and, arguably, a

preference on the part of the specialists involved to deal with micro-aspects on the subject matter rather than the overall picture, on the other hand. The question is: where does that reluctance come from?

As Yves Gambier argues, there are two distinct aspects that may explain this. Firstly, it is Bourdieu's own research in sociology – notably *La Reproduction: Elements pour une theorie du systeme d'enseignement* (1970), co-authored with Jean-Claude Passeron, and *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (1979) – on how hierarchies between cultures, tastes, etc., help distinguish among various social groups that has transformed and “vulgarised” concepts associated with his theory, including ‘symbolic power’:

C'est dire que éducation, culture, littérature, édition, art, photographie, médias, économie (pour ne citer que des champs analysés par Bourdieu et ses collègues), ne sont pas étudiés pour la seule logique de leur fonctionnement interne ni leur simple instrumentalization au service des dominants; ils sont décrits, détaillés comme lieux et occasions de rapports de force entre agents, transfigurés en rapports de sens. Une telle entreprise a cherché à dépasser les antinomies longtemps établies entre interpretation et explication, structure et histoire, liberté et déterminisme, individu et société, subjectivisme et objectivisme. (207-208) [This means that education, culture, literature, publishing, art, photography, media, and economics (to name only a few fields analysed by Bourdieu and his colleagues) are not studied solely for the logic of their intrinsic function or for their mere instrumental role in the service of the dominant; they are described and detailed as venues and opportunities to exercise power relations between agents, turned into meaning relations. Such an undertaking has sought to transcend the long-established antinomies between interpretation and explanation, structure and history, liberty and determinism, individual and society, subjectivism and objectivism. (207, my translation)]

Thus, researchers in the field of translation studies who operate with symbolic systems in the most profound sense of the term may have been taken aback by the appropriation of ‘symbolic power’ to

the specific case of society and the system of hierarchies, for example. On the other hand, there appears to be tacit consensus on the use of other concepts like ‘authority,’ ‘prestige,’ ‘capital,’ ‘habitus,’ and all the rest, which, paradoxically, are instrumental in defining ‘symbolic power.’

Secondly, as Gambier points out, Bourdieu was arguably in a paradoxical situation: while a full member of prestigious educational and research institutions, filling various political positions in the 1990’s, and coordinating several publications in the field of sociology – all of which constitute positions of power in his field, he carried out research in a scientific area in which he was in a dominant position. In Gambier’s words, he was both “*juge et partie*” [“judge and party”], a situation in which the line between scientific objectivity and political or institutional involvement is significantly blurred. This particular situation should also serve in reevaluating the researcher’s status in translation studies as either an informant (the practitioner following norms) or researcher (translation theorist or epistemic subject), and it is suggested that, while in the case of the reflexive sociologist two diverging roles are assumed simultaneously, in the case of the translation specialist the roles can only be assumed one at a time, depending on the type of activity carried out in each case (Gambier 208).

Bottom line, it is extremely interesting to find out that the problem of using the concept of ‘symbolic power’ sparingly and inconsistently, or eliminating it altogether from research may not lie (entirely) in the objective and theoretically founded choice of the researcher in translation studies but rather in their subjective position towards what really is the paradoxical, if not downright less-than-ethical position of a fellow researcher who just happened to provide the conceptual key to a fresh perspective in a domain that currently serves as one of the informants of translation studies. And yet, while Gambier’s arguments may stand and explain at least partially this reluctance towards the use of one specific term, other hypotheses and further questions on the issue are still worth exploring in future studies.

Q3: What is the relevance of ‘symbolic power’ as a central concept in translation studies? In other words, why should we consider the term ‘symbolic power’ instead of ‘power’ in translation studies?

The answer to this question is manifold and must address at least two perspectives: the perspective of the theorist in the field of translation studies as an interdisciplinary science and that of the practitioner.

As mentioned earlier in this article, using the term ‘power’ to address an entire range of phenomena associated with translation in the wider context of global spaces (political, economic, financial, academic, cultural, linguistic, etc.) as part of the never-ending game of dominance across these spaces, is not adequate in the sense that it is both too comprehensive and too inaccurate to describe the phenomenon. From this point of view, the use of the concept of ‘symbolic power’ as coined by Bourdieu casts legitimacy upon a theoretical framework born at the crossroads between sociology and linguistics, and which has already been appropriated by translation studies in recent years. Hence, adopting terms such as the “sociology of translation” by a number of theorists in the field in a seminal publication such as *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*, edited by Michaela Wolf and Alexandra Fukari, for example, but using the very concept that set the trend only once in English and once in French throughout the entire volume, whilst relying heavily on Bourdieu’s theory and most other concepts associated with it to serve the purpose of translation studies cannot be considered pure coincidence. The use of ‘symbolic power’ and the entire range of concepts that come with it would confer legitimacy upon a theory of translation that is anchored and informed by the sociology of language itself.

As far as the translator is concerned, the acceptance that the translator is more than just an individual exercising an activity and complying with the norms and ethical coordinates that this implies, opens the door to new perspectives on the profession itself and may be instrumental in raising and preserving the status of the translator in a world in which capital of all kinds – including academic, cultural and linguistic – is key to gaining symbolic power.

In terms of the process of translation itself, ‘symbolic power’ is closely linked to the decision-making and the re-creation process. From this perspective, just like in language, in translation, the kind of power at play at cultural, linguistic and representational level is essentially symbolic. Power in translation does not manifest through hard force, but it operates through meaning representation and legitimacy. The finished product may cast prestige upon the author or, on the contrary, end a career. It may add to the symbolic capital of the translator thereby giving him access to other, well, less symbolic but equally significant types of capital. And it may generate authority or may lose it. How much more power does a symbolic system need to be acknowledged as one?

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