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REVIEW ESSAY:
THE SOCIOLOGY OF TRANSLATION: HANNA SAMEH'S
BOURDIEU IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

Bourdieu in Translation Studies:

The Socio-cultural Dynamics of Shakespeare Translation in Egypt

By Sameh Hanna

Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016. 232 pages.

A significant share of translation research in recent years has called attention to the failure of polysystems theory to account for the social aspect in translation and has turned instead to Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production to develop new perspectives on the practice of translation. Acknowledging that a fair number of scholars have successfully articulated the potential of Bourdieu's work to translation studies, Sameh Hanna enters the discourse on the sociological approach by putting Bourdieu's conceptual tools and methodology to the test. Hanna demonstrates the importance of an interdisciplinary, social approach to the translation practice by considering specific translation phenomena, namely drama translation into Arabic, to determine the contributions a sociology of translation might make to understanding a social history, in this case the one of the "Arabic Shakespeare" (n.p.). By considering the social struggles present at the time of translation, Hanna examines patterns of production, dissemination, and consumption and thereby not only demonstrates the merit of linking theory to real phenomena, but also successfully illustrates the potential of Bourdieu's sociology to translation studies.

The principal goal of *Bourdieu in Translation* (2016) is to approach an understanding of drama translation in Arabic by analyzing translation decisions and the social forces that influence them. The book is divided into seven chapters, a bibliography, and an index. The

first two chapters serve to contextualize the work within Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production, current intellectual discourse on translation and its relation to sociology. Chapter one focuses on the contributions of cultural studies that made translation studies interdisciplinary. Hanna delineates the gradual development of drama translation, noting that there was a "social turn" in the field of translation studies. Important Bourdieusian contexts and terms, such as *field* and *habitus*, and how they pertain to translations studies are introduced in chapter two. Hanna distinguishes between Bourdieu's concept of *field* and *structure* or *system*, by emphasizing that *field* is centered around social struggles. Viewing translation studies as a field offers scholars an avenue to observe the significance and effect of its interaction with translators, social structures, co-producers (reviewers, publisher, theater directors, historians, etc.) as well as translators' social and financial position.

Attempting a sociologic analysis of translation is impossible without taking the socio-cultural contexts and conditions into account. Hanna outlines the history of theater production, Arabic drama translation, and professional lives of Egyptian translators in chapter three, emphasizing that understanding these socio-historical elements is crucial to recognizing socio-cultural forces that affect the translation practice. Two of Bourdieu's conceptual tools that he argues to be useful in this endeavor are *trajectory* and the *power of naming*. *Trajectory*, or the working lives of translators, includes the various professions translators are involved in, including journalism or creative writing. Hanna argues that *trajectory* is significant because it prompts a consideration of the ways in which work in other areas informed drama translation. The *power of naming* concept helps to understand the significance of the two Arabic names for "drama plays", *arbab mala'ib* and *ahl al-la'ib*, and the ways in which they affect the development of drama translation in Egypt. The key difference between these terms reflects the cultural conflict between two ways of perceiving theater practice: understanding theater as pure entertainment (*arbab mala'ib*) or as intellectual art with a cultural function (*ahl al-la'ib*). These perceptions, in turn, condition the production of translation as either *heteronomous* or *autonomous* (Bourdieu). Hanna effectively illustrates these patterns of production using Tanyu Abdu's early *heteronomous* translation of *Hamlet* as an example. Seeking to appeal to a broad audience, Abdu takes numerous creative liberties, i.e. omitting passages, modifying dialogue or plot points, and adding his own writing, in order to shape the play according to the expectation and enjoyment of Egyptian theater goers.

In chapter four, Hanna carefully situates the translations within the dynamic socio-cultural context. He notes the ways in which public perception on the "play" genre and their Arabic translations, specifically of Shakespeare, shifted in the second decade of the twentieth

century, resulting in an *autonomization* of translations, yet another Bourdieusian concept. To understand the reason for this shift and the canonization of *autonomous* translations by Khalil Mutran, Hanna explains the changing field of theater production in Egypt in the 1920s. Newcomers to theater production, such as Jurj Abyad, who considered the purpose of plays to “elevate art above commercialization” (106), challenged the norms within the field. His serious theater contributed to a shift that redistributed cultural capital within theater production and, therefore, also drama translation, affording more cultural value to *autonomous* translations. Hanna uses Khalil Mutran’s canonized translation of *Othello* to illustrate the rise of autonomous translation and their embodied cultural capital.

In chapter five, Hanna uses Bourdieu’s concepts of *distinction* and *ageing* to challenge the dominant view of retranslation that relies on a hierarchical structuring. Aware that symbolic capital governs the production, consumption, and dissemination of translation in Arabic, Hanna goes beyond identifying the hierarchies, considering how cultural capital is accumulated and what effect the cultural capital has in Egyptian society. He offers an alternative view of retranslation by proposing that every translation may age, not because of its linguistic outdatedness, but because of the needs of society and a shift in the distribution of symbolic capital. Similarly, retranslations are marked with certain *distinctions* that signal their difference from other translations. Hanna uses Fatima Musa’s retranslation of *King Lear* as an example: Musa’s cultural capital, afforded to her by her academic title, professional networks, and familiarity with Shakespeare scholarship, distinguishes her translation from others by claiming closer access to the original, which is, in turn, to be taken as a sign of greater intellectual value.

In chapter six, Hanna successfully shows why Bourdieu’s idea of *doxa* (norms) is an effective tool for an analysis of translation practices, precisely because *doxic* practices change due to socio-cultural forces, which affect translation practices. Using Moustafa Safouan’s translation of *Othello* into colloquial Arabic as a subject of analysis, Hanna illustrates the socio-cultural forces that influence translation decisions and contextualizes the translation within the debate on language register. Since the dominant practice is to translate classic works such as Shakespeare into the prestigious register of *fusha* (classic Arabic), Hanna investigates the social factors that motivate translators to produce Shakespeare translations into the Egyptian colloquial (*‘ammiyya*).

The concluding remarks in chapter seven underline the promising potential of approaching translation analyses through a sociologic lens. In his positioning towards a “field-oriented

understanding” (n.p.) of Arabic Shakespeare translations, Hanna emphasizes the importance “to pursue a *relational* understanding of translation” (200) that focuses on the interplay of social forces and fields instead of viewing them as isolated systems with defined boundaries. Instead, the sociologic approach “makes possible the investigation of cultural products in relation to a complex network of relations that include both human agents and institutions” (5). It prompts wide-ranging conversations that demand a consideration of the history of drama translation in Egypt, including the genesis and development of the genre. Furthermore, Hanna emphasizes the importance of self-awareness of one’s own role in shaping the field of translation. This underscores the general tone of the book: Hanna deliberately pronounces no judgment on the various existing translations of Shakespearean drama in Arabic, instead, he takes a strong position against restricting discourse in the field of translation. Rather than closing the field by explaining it or defining its boundaries, he invites further discussion and articulates a number of questions raised by this approach.

Hanna’s fresh perspective on examining translation phenomena not only emphasizes the importance of translating and the study of the practice, but also illustrates the benefits of Bourdieu’s sociology of cultural production by showing its potential for tracing a social history in the process. Instead of focusing primarily on the strengths and shortcomings of translation phenomena as end products, Hanna’s analysis delivers new perspectives on the *process* of translation practice. Even though at times the book could have benefitted from more succinct writing that would have helped in the attempt to link theory and practice more closely, Hanna’s coherent and perceptive account of the multi-directionality of translation will provide great insight about translation research for cultural studies scholars across all disciplines. The clarity of his comprehensive investigation of drama translation in Arabic is helpful not only to newcomers interested in the literary history of Egypt, but also to scholars who have yet to be convinced of the great potential of sociologic translation analyses to cultural studies.