**Power and translation**

**Anna Strowe**

The relationships between translation and power structures of all kinds have attracted significant scholarship in the past several decades. The “power turn” in [Translation Studies](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/tra8.html) connects with wider studies of politics, culture, and society as well as with discussions of translation and gender, post-colonial theory, and translation ethics (see [Turns of Translation Studies](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/tur1.html)). This article situates research on power and translation with regard to wider discourses in Translation Studies and beyond.

The methodological foundations of studying the intersections of power and translation lie in the field of [Descriptive Translation Studies](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/des1.html) although early scholars were criticized for ignoring issues of power. Over the past half century, scholars looking at the way translations are conceived, created, published, marketed, and distributed have observed that the processes and products of translation have important connections to existing power structures, such as governmental initiatives, social dynamics including those related to immigration and language use, international politics, and many others. The power dynamics that are connected to translation affect not only individual translation choices but also larger trends in book publishing, intercultural relations, and international politics. Furthermore, notions of power can also be applied to the way translation is discussed; that is, to Translation Studies itself.

**[1. Translation and power in Translation Studies](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html" \l "top" \o "back to top)**

In their introduction to the book *Translation and Power*, a collection of essays by scholars from around the world, Maria [Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler (2002](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB14): xii) describe how the study of power and translation evolved from early work by scholars such as James Holmes and Anton Popovič, who begin theorizing on how normative translation choices represent an ideological choice (see [Norms of translation](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/nor1.html)). They trace this interest through the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s to the anthology *The Manipulation of Literature* ([1985)](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB8), edited by Theo Hermans, which they identify as the starting point for what would become the power turn in Translation Studies. The “cultural turn” in Translation Studies, marked by the volume *Translation, History and Culture* (1990), edited by Susan Bassnett & André Lefevere (see [Cultural approaches](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/cul1.html)), reinforced the notion that scholars should look beyond questions of linguistic matching in their research on translation. This cultural approach to translation prioritized questions of cultural power and influence as well as allowing an investigation of ideology in translation. As studies of culture branched out into other, intersectional areas, such as post-colonial and feminist theory, Translation Studies grew as well.

With this history as a background, it seems difficult to separate discourses on translation and power from discourses simply on translation. Seen from this perspective, any translation has implications for power and ideology, and even a discussion that explicitly excludes power as a framework is making an ideological decision by doing so (see [Translation and ideology](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/ide1.html)). This article aims to investigate some of the ways that discourses about power appear in Translation Studies rather than trying to outline a particular area of Translation Studies that is dedicated to power and ideology.

Two main distinctions are relevant to this attempt. The first is that translation can act either as a tool or a manifestation of power by those who already have other kinds of power, or it can be used by those without other types of power as a means of resistance. The second distinction is that power can be discussed as intersecting with translation at several levels. Translation as a practice and translations as products can affect cultural, social, and political power structures at a macro-level. On a micro-level, individual translations or relationships between individual translators, authors, audiences, and texts can produce ideological effects and highlight power dynamics. Finally, in Translation Studies there is a meta-level at which discourses about translation and power themselves constitute the exercise of power and imply ideological frameworks. These levels are neither entirely well-defined nor mutually exclusive, but it is possible to think about the ways in which power operates differently and the different approaches that translation theorists can take at each of these levels.

**[2. Translation and power at the macro-level](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html" \l "top" \o "back to top)**

Discourse on the macro-level of translation and power has taken many forms. The foundation of such discussions is the acceptance that translation intersects with wider cultural forces in ways that often have significant consequences for culture, society, and politics. Many of the connections between Translation Studies and other areas of inquiry can be viewed on this level. Translation as a tool for colonial and post-colonial power relations has been taken as a premise by many scholars (see [Post-colonial literatures and translation](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/pos1.html)). In many of these cases, the discussion of translation draws on individual case studies but focuses on the wider implications of translation as a practice or of translations considered as a group. Translation in a broad sense affects the formation and perception of national and cultural identities (see [Migration and translation](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/mig1.html), [National and cultural images](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/nat2.html)). Broadly considered, that is, the choices of what to translate and what not to translate in a situation of power imbalance are loaded decisions that can come to represent an entire culture, ideology, or power dynamic. In addition, translation can facilitate or impede international communication in political, social, and economic spheres, and as such is of great significance in discourses about [globalization](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/glo1.html) (see [Baker 2009](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB3): 1.Part 4).

The notion of systems as explored by Itamar Even-Zohar is relevant to these macro-level views of translation and power (see [Polysystem theory and translation](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/pol2.html)). Translation as a system interlocks with systems of political, cultural, economic, and social power as well as linking literary systems across languages. From a systems perspective, many of the power relationships related to translation can be theorized as marking intersections between literary or textual systems and other social, cultural, and governmental systems. Because of the constant potential for such connections, translation is always implicated in negotiations of power between these different areas.

Translation is related to the exercise of colonial and governmental power in a number of ways, both explicit and implicit. Explicit uses of power related to translation include both [censorship](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/cen1.html) and government programs that encourage or mandate translation in particular areas or of particular types of document (see [Translation policy](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/tra10.html)). Programs of government-mandated translation can contribute domestically to power structures connected with immigrant rights and multiculturalism. They are also able to function on the international level, both as the mechanisms through which traditional diplomacy may be carried out, and as a form of international propaganda or “cultural diplomacy” (see Luise von [Flotow 2007](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB7); Venuti in [Baker 2009](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB3): 3.66–82). Such programs, both domestically and internationally, may either be programs of translation of explicitly political documents or politically motivated translations of other types of text (see [Political translation](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/pol1.html); [Baker 2009](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB3): 3.Part 11). Translation plays a mediating role not only between nations but between national and international practices (see Inghilleri in [Baker 2009](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB3): 3.306–25). These concerns intersect with issues of globalization and migration as transnational phenomena. In addition, translation and interpreting play significant roles in conflict situations, as recent research explores (see [Conflict and translation](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/con3.html)).

Such external forces that impinge upon translation are complemented by implicit forces that can also be external, for example the unspoken norms of translation practice (see Theo [Hermans 1996)](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB9) or the economics of translation publishing. In the first chapter of *The Translator’s Invisibility* [(1995/2008),](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB16) Lawrence Venuti analyzes some of the economic and market forces behind translation, as well as some of the implications that perceptions of translation have on those same forces. André Lefevere’s analysis ([1995)](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB11) of systems of patronage in translation also approaches the question of how economic, political, and social power can shape translation and translation practices.

Power can also, however, be challenged from within translation itself, by the translator (see [Committed approaches and activism](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/comm2.html)). In this area again, post-colonial theories about translation as a form of resistance are particularly relevant (see [Tymoczko 2010](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB15): 15). Translation does not always reinforce existing power structures. As many post-colonial scholars have shown, it can also be used to subvert those structures. Román Álvarez and M. Carmen-África Vidal acknowledge this potential in their edited collection *Translation Power Subversion* in the introductory chapter: “Translating: A Political Act”. If conformity to norms indicates an acceptance of existing power narratives in a culture, then the subversion of those norms represents a resistance of power. Such resistance can in turn create its own power structures and form new systems of norms.

One example of such a core of resistant practices that has come to form a new and powerful scholarly approach is the school of feminist translation theorists that developed in Canada in the 1990s (see [Gender in translation](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/gen1.html)). The work of Sherry Simon, Luise von Flotow, Barbara Godard, Suzanne De Lotbinière-Harwood, and others begins as a challenge to existing gendered power structures that affect translation. Resistant feminist practices expose conventions of translation and attitudes toward translation linked to dominant discourses on gender. These resistant practices, however, also gained enough traction in the Translation Studies community that they acquired power in their own right.

**[3. Translation and power at the micro-level](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html" \l "top" \o "back to top)**

These large-scale power dynamics surrounding translation are made up of individual translational movements, and scholars have been actively pursuing research into translation and power at this micro-level as well. Large-scale analyses of the prevalence or economics of translation, such as that of [Venuti (1995/2008)](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB16), focus on the cumulative effects of translation, but many of the macro-level explorations discussed above make use of evidence from case studies in order to support theories about wider trends. The complicated power dynamics of colonialism can be seen not only from a broad perspective of the social and cultural implications of colonial power relations but also at the level of individual texts and their translations, that can be seen as constructing or perpetuating those power dynamics. Many post-colonial scholars organize reflections on translation and power in a broad way around particular translational events, reflecting on such cases as symptomatic of larger social, political, and economic phenomena.

There are, however, micro-level translational events that are not always as visible through large-scale narratives about translation and power. The practices of individual translators or interpreters as businesspeople or in less public forms of translation are fruitful ground for investigation about how translators and interpreters negotiate the power structures of each translational interaction (see [Agents of translation](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/age1.html), [Status of interpreters](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/sta1.html), [Status of translators](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/sta2.html)). In these interactions, the translator or interpreter has a certain amount of power by way of being the linguistic broker through whom the interaction must take place. By contrast, however, a commercial client of an interpreter or commissioner of a translation (see [Functionalist approaches](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/fun1.html)) has a different type of power in the relationship as the paying or commissioning agent. Third parties – target audiences or source authors in the case of translation, or the other interlocutor in the case of interpreting – may have varying degrees of power. Their relationships to the commissioner and translator or interpreter may have profound implications for the interaction.

Translator or interpreter [ethics](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/eth1.html) is another area of particular concern in micro-level discourses on translation and power (see [Baker 2009](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB3): 3.Part 8). The potential for power imbalances and ethical dilemmas in a single translational exchange or interpreting event has been a subject of increased attention, particularly from scholars of interpreting. The relative autonomy of the translator or interpreter has become a key area of investigation, particularly in situations in which other power dynamics are clearly visible, such as court interpreting or language mediation in conflict zones (see [Inghilleri 2012)](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB10). Discourses about autonomy and ethics, however, often connect back to normative ideas about the role of translators or interpreters, and as observed above, conformance to normative practices can be considered an ideological stance in itself.

At the micro-level of thought on translation and power we can situate discourses on the responsibilities of the translator or interpreter, whether economic, social, political, or other. Macro-level discussions locate translation within power structures at the social, governmental, or international levels, often by drawing from the observed micro-level behaviors of individual translators or interpreters. Macro-level discussions, however, can also, in turn, inform prescriptive statements about translator and interpreter responsibilities at the individual level. Codes of professional conduct, for example apply wider norms of business ethics to the practice of professional translators and interpreters. Particular situations, such as document translation for the War Crimes Tribunal at the Hague or the system of political translation in the European Union, give rise to their own systems of norms and instructions for individual practitioners that then inform micro-level practice.

**[4. Translation and power at a meta-level](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html" \l "top" \o "back to top)**

A recent increased push for the globalization of translation studies itself is a good starting point for thinking about translation and power at a meta-level. Various critiques have been leveled against translation studies as Western-centric or Eurocentric and exclusive, and against even the impulse to expand translation studies to include “non-Western” discourse (see [Eurocentrism](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/eur1.html)). In an article from 2002, Şebnem Susam-Sarajeva makes the point that the very terms “Western” and “non-Western” reflect hegemonic and homogenizing tendencies connected to imbalances of power in academia, and that the practice of bringing examples from the periphery to support or deconstruct existing theory is in fact a way of reinforcing the primacy of existing theory and the centrality of “Western” discourse on translation. Martha [Cheung (2006)](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB6) engages in similar reflections on the topic of her *Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation* in her article “From ‘Theory’ to ‘Discourse’: the Making of a Translation Anthology”. Cheung explores the ways in which the very words used to describe the field – “theory”, “thought”, “discourse” – can reflect vectors of power in scholarship and must be carefully considered.

In a similar way, although related to gender rather than colonial power relations, Lori Chamberlain’s essay “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation” [(2004)](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB5) highlights how discourses about translation and perceptions of translation play into patriarchal norms and reinforce gendered stereotypes about cultural production and national power relationships. As a meta-theoretical article, Chamberlain’s work shows how the gendered power structures that many of the feminist scholars examined at the macro- and micro-levels of translation were also embedded in the discourse of historical and contemporary translation studies.

Other meta-level discussions include recent debates both in Translation Studies itself and in the humanities in general on the practices of world literature in the academy. Translation as a prerequisite for certain types of course content is increasingly being made the topic of discussion both in Translation Studies and in wider circles devoted to comparative or world literature. In his article in *Translation Power Subversion*, André Lefevere (1996) makes an argument for the role of translation in canon formation, noting the general conservatism of anthologization and the implications for educational situations that make use of [anthologies](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=articles/ant1.html). Mona Baker’s *Translation Studies* unites reflections by prominent scholars on the subject of canon formation, world literature, colonialism, and gender studies in a section titled “World Literature and the Making of Literary Traditions” [(2009](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html#BIB3): 2.83–219), highlighting the intersectionality of these discourses.

**[5. New directions](https://benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_hts.cgi?cmd=show_article&file=/articles/pow1.html" \l "top" \o "back to top)**

There are a number of developments in scholarly research in Translation Studies as well as wider areas of cultural studies and literature that seem directly relevant to discussions of translation and power. An increased interest in indigenous languages and literatures is a potential site for new enquiry into power relations regarding translation. Similarly, research on minority languages that are not indigenous (the products of migration or socio-cultural language shifts) promises to contribute new information to the subject. Shifts in the interests of domestic and international governmental policies may also prove to encourage research in new areas: current international interest in languages like Arabic, Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, Farsi, Russian, and the many languages of the Indian subcontinent may prompt new research not only on how those traditions intersect with Western theoretical notions of translation and power but also on how they have constructed and negotiated alternate theories of translation and power. Developments in connected areas of enquiry on questions related to race, class, gender, and other socially constructed structures of power will also have the potential to affect the directions taken by scholars researching translation and power.

On a technological level, the proliferation of translation technologies as well as the key role of social media and the internet in international communications will be able to contribute important information to our understanding of power dynamics between languages and cultures. The prominence of social media in recent events in international politics and the structures of translation that contributed to the dissemination of information about those events provide fertile ground for investigating the role of translation in political struggle, social change, and revolution.

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