

Geographical Dimension and Translation: A Conceptual Inquiry¹

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Abstract

Translation has always been shaped and reshaped by a geographical dimension since our contemporary world is marked above all by movement and connection. Against this background the current paper aimed at unfolding the relationship between geography and translation conceptualization in the discipline of Translation Studies. First the terms related to geography were defined and then the conceptualization process was investigated. Among space-related concepts, it became apparent that 'territory' and 'nation', in modern sense, have been used more than others to conceptualize and theorize translation. Then, the relationship between territory and nation in Translation Studies was studied, explicating the manifestations of these two notions in concepts and theories of the field. Upon critical analysis, it was discerned that translation is mostly defined as a linguistic movement between two distinct geographical territories, and the modern conception of 'one nation-one language' has been the underlying assumption of translation research. Such a positioning is problematic since fixity and stability assigned to 'territory' is contested in today's world and there are also instances of translation that fall outside the realm of this positioning and are generally neglected.

Keywords: Modernism, nation and translation, territory, Translation Studies

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Introduction

The significance of space in any study of translation is to such an extent that Bassnett (2011) states that “any study of translation necessarily involves a geographical dimension” (p. 67). One of the major shared assumptions among various views on translation is regarding translation as movement between two language communities (Chesterman, 1997; Halverson, 1999). There are two underlying assumptions in this proposition. One is the undeniable movement, and the other is the emphasis on language communities, which is the focus of the current paper. The idea of language communities seemingly has territorial implications. The purpose of the current study was to critically investigate the current positioning of the geographical dimension in the field and to investigate the claim, rooted in modern era, that translation is mostly envisioned and theorized to be practiced between distinct territories, assuming that geographical territories are marked above all by one language.

Translation and Geographical Dimension

There are innumerable studies that foregrounded the geographical dimension as either their presumptions or bases for analysis, yet the very study of geographical space in *Translation Studies* has received very little attention. The geographical dimension has been approached from a viewpoint of culture and identity, taking the concept of geography for granted and considering it as peripheral. Yet it seems this is the shaping ground for all those other concepts in the field.

There are instances that include the term “space” but their use of the term is metaphoric. For instance, the *Journal Translation Spaces* is described as “envision[ing] translation as multi-dimensional phenomena productively studied (from) within complex spaces of encounter between knowledge, values, beliefs, and

practices"¹. These "multidisciplinary, multimedia, and multilingual" spaces are translational and include "virtual and physical" spaces. Space here refers to the domains of different disciplines. Papers on the link between architecture and translation or geography and translation have been published in the journal, not because they encompass spatial understanding, but because these are inter- or multidisciplinary studies.

The metaphoric use of the word space can also be traced in papers that study the space of translation in different disciplines, namely comparative literature, anthropology and philosophy. Hanks (2014), for instance, in the article entitled "*The Space of Translation*" explains the space of translation in anthropology. Space here solely refers to the domain of translation and does not relate to its epistemological or ontological basis.

It could be said that most of the works on the relation between geographical space and translation have focused on nation. For instance, Wafa Abu Hatab (2017), the editor of the book "*Translation across Time and Space*", has collected papers on the activity of translation in different countries and time zones across the world. Hatab (2017, p. vii) describes the volume as "cross[ing] various spaces including Jordan, Greece, Egypt, Malaysia, Romania, the United Arab Emirates and Algeria" including studies in many languages like Arabic, Greek and French. Space, in her view, is equated with geo-political boundaries of nation-states and countries. Far from being a unified study, Hatab's (2017) attempt is significant in giving voice to less-studied countries. Her collection is similar to Benjamins' volumes on national traditions of translation in different countries of the world.

Kershaw and Saldanha (2013) in their paper "*Introduction: Global Landscapes of Translation*", acknowledge that there is a new interest in studying space in the field, yet resist the urge to call it a "turn", since in Translation Studies,

1. <https://www.jbe-platform.com/content/journals/2211372x>

they maintain, space is an omnipresent notion. Starting from the space, their main focus in the article moves to reception and so the bulk of the paper is advocated to studying creation, performance and reception.

Federico Italiano (2012, 2016) is one of the few scholars who has studied geographical space in translation from a social-spatial perspective, focusing on imaginative and literary geographies in translation. Italiano (2016), in his seminal book *"Translation and Geography"*, refers to some of the space-bound theories in Translation Studies but he does not study them in detail.

Remarks on Terminology

Although *common* in most discussions in the field, terms related to the geographical dimension of translation are used ambiguously and inconsistently. The terms "space" and "territory" are used both literally and metaphorically in the field, adding to the confusion. For this reason, it is critical to define these terms before we proceed any further.

Defining space is more challenging than it seems as it has been studied and theorized in pre-modern, modern and postmodern eras. In the pre-modern era space was not differentiated from "matter, nor from force or power, human or otherwise" (Smith, 2008, p. 96). Looking at early Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato and even Pythagoras, it becomes apparent that there were numerous conceptions on space (Smith, 2008), viewing it in abstract terms, as force or in a geometrical sense. However, those early theories on space were inconsistent and somehow conflicting. In the modern era, "the prominence of time over space in time-space binary, along with the dichotomous-driven critical thinking, has seemingly promoted the formation of positivist approach to space" (Farahzad & Ehteshami, 2018, p. 72). Modern space and quantitative approaches to space were questioned in the 1960s and 1970s (Johnstone, 2010) and postmodern views on space began to be shaped both inside and outside the discipline of geography.

Postmodern space as defined by Foucault (1986) is heterogeneous. He adds, “we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not super imposable on one another” (p. 23). So when it comes to space, one should at least specify whether modern or post-modern space is meant.

The term territory has been treated as an already-defined notion in most of the literature. A territory generally means a delimited space, characterized by “stable borders and fixed confines” (Elden, 2005, p.10). Territory “distinguishes an inside from an outside” (Aurora, 2014, p. 2). What remains outside makes another territory. According to Harvey (1990) much of the readings on geography, viewed space as a mere container, having an inside and an outside. Historically, natural boundaries namely “the geographical obstacles, the sea coasts together with any mountain ranges or great rivers” (Joseph, 2004, p. 109), marked the boundaries of a territory. This view somehow changed in the modern era, since non-geographical boundaries like language was employed for border-making. Interestingly, the territory or nation is not to be perceived only physically. Apart from the control apparatus, territories imply borders and so nations in this sense are characterized, as mentioned by Rao (2017), by their “unity, shared commonness is favored against diversity” (p. 234).

The sections that follow will first deal with the impact of modernism on theories of language and communities and then such an impact is studied in theories and concepts of Translation Studies.

Language and Nation

Modernism, as a philosophy, movement and a historical period, has influenced various areas such as art, economy, politics and societies to name a few. In the modern era, language is seen as the marker of territory and so the primary line of theorization on languages and communities views language in a bounded area and explores how language is representative of that area. Therefore,

languages are viewed to be attached to specific territories. This view enforces nationalism, as nationalism views people “divided into nations” (Joseph, 2004, p. 96). Nations in this sense, have specific characteristics that could be maintained for an area.

As mentioned by Joseph (2004), one of the major obstacles in establishing a nation was “the non-existence of a national language” (p. 97). Once overcome, the nation-state would come into existence on the basis of the idea that “national languages are a primordial reality” (Joseph, 2004, p. 97), the idea that has been much contested in the years that followed. Based on this view, when someone speaks French, it implies that the speaker is from France. However, among innumerable scenarios, that person might be a Canadian or an Algerian or S/he might be a member of a diaspora community in a French-speaking country.

As reported by Cronin (2003), “a classic consequence of nineteenth-century cultural nationalism is the equation of linguistic with national identity” but such a linear relation between language and identity was “in favour of more powerful groups” (p. 162). Therefore, “Belgian Walloons are taken to be French and the Austrians to be Germans” to mention just a few (Cronin, 2003, p. 162). The role of translation in this identification is yet to be studied.

National communities, in the sense of physical borders or imagined territories, are mostly known “in language, not in blood” (Anderson, 2006, p. 145). Speakers of specific languages are considered as “authentic members of nations by virtue of their linguistic competence” (Gal, 2010, p. 33). The idea of ‘one nation, one country, one language’ was established in modern era and promoted and maintained by many factors, among which the role played by print-languages should not be ignored as they laid the basis for national consciousness and promoted nationality through different generations. Print-languages enabled millions of people to feel connected and ‘belonged’.

Following the similar line of conceptualization, translation is also viewed to be practiced between distinct language communities and research in the field focuses mostly on translation between national languages.

Territory and Translation Studies

Territorial premise, in a modern sense, is apparent in conceptualizations and many branches and sub-branches of the field. Ulrych's (2003) definition of translation is a good example. She asserts that "translation is a real social process that takes place within well-defined cultural, spatial and temporal settings" (p. 133), maintaining that 'well-defined settings' have an inside and outside and therefore could be seen as a territory. Metaphors like translation as bridge, ensures the idea of territorial thinking in translation as well, since each language is seen as a unitary territory being connected and related by translation. Fundamentally, movement between territories is fully explicit in the word "translation" (from trans- 'across, beyond' + lātus 'borne, carried'), emphasizing the fact that translation happens between at least two distinct territories.

Translation Studies has incorporated concepts of territory and nation from its early inception. The dichotomous view on theorizing in translation, which dominates most of the theorization of the field, could be interpreted as territorial-based. Source/target, self/other and domestication/foreignization, to mention a few, all assume territorial understanding, as what is interpreted as being "self" is not within the border of the "other" or what is considered within the realm of domestication is "outside" the realm of foreignization. As maintained by Blumczynski and Hassani (2019), "a considerable part of translational thought already evokes two dimensions when it speaks of areas, fields, territories, zones, borders, and so on" (p. 338).

More importantly is the dichotomy of source/target. Discussions in Translation Studies, from the early theorization period in the 1940s up until

recently, have been centered on the source/target territory. The source/target territory might refer to its corresponding language, culture or text. It is worth noting that translation in pre-target-oriented approaches was assessed against the source territory and concepts as fidelity and faithfulness are the result of such a view. In target-oriented approaches, from polysystem approaches to function-oriented theories, the source text is dethroned and the emphasis was shifted to the target territory. In any case, the territorial view, in a modern sense, is foregrounded.

Interestingly, linguistic territory has gained prominence over geographical territory in the field, since "it has for centuries been taken for granted that translation merely takes place between languages" (Snell-Hornby, 1988, p. 39), bearing the ground of word-for-word and sense-for-sense debates and also discussions on equivalence. Even in the more recent approaches to translation (such as Manipulation School), a linear relation between geography and language is assumed and so one could detect the idea of 'one language, one territory, one nation' has informed theorization and research in the field. Text serves as the accessible dimension of a territory. Translation Studies scholars do not have access to the territory itself, and therefore, traced questions of culture, society and identity, to just name a few, in the texts, written in a language corresponding to that territory, i.e. a national language.

Ironically, translation, itself, has historically occupied a lower position as compared to authored texts, since it was not considered insider. In other words, the territory of translated text was considered outside the realm of authored text and outside the borders of 'national literature'. Therefore as Bassnett (2011, p. 72) maintains, "one of the problems of emphasizing the national basis for literary production is that translations [...] [are] not quite worthy of the status accorded to texts produced within a given literary tradition" (p. 72).

Nation and Translation Studies

Defining territory in terms of borders enables the researchers to talk about territory in various scales such as cities, neighborhoods, and even continents. In this sense, the notion of territory could be applied to any kind of bounded space and related notions such as territoriality could be explained. However, territory was chiefly interpreted as nation.

The relationship between nation and translation is manifold. As noted by Bermann and Wood (2005), "from Schleiermacher's early discussion of the role of translation in the creation of German nationhood, [...] the study of translation has raised important cultural issues of local homelands and "foreign" nations" (p. 5). Thus, translation had a role in making, reinforcing and even discrediting the nation.

Most of the volumes in the field, bearing the name of a country, like *Translation Studies in China* or *translation in Turkey*, presuppose an absolute view on space, neglecting the variations of language use and conceptualization and promoting territorial and national view.

Moreover, national languages are the main concern of research in the field and so translation in this sense is a perfect emblem for modernism. Transfer between other languages did not have an equal chance as national languages to be studied in Translation Studies. In other words, the field is replete with studies that analyze translation between a national language and English. For example, *Translation Studies*, the first specialized journal of Translation Studies in Iran, has published only two articles, one on Armenian and one on Azeri, over the course of its eighteen-year history, dealing with languages spoken in Iran, other than Persian.

It is noteworthy that the idea of "one nation, one language, one territory" has permeated the theories and analyses of Translation Studies. Polysystem theory, norms by Toury (1995), concepts of foreignization and domestication by Venuti (1995) and the concept of localization are all among this group of theories and

concepts.

Most of the discussion on translation and nationalism is centered on the manifestation of national identity in the selection and translation of texts, being intralingual or interlingual translation. According to Cronin (2003), one of the key functions of translation is “to promote specific regional, local or national identities”, which could be achieved by “intralingual translation, producing classics of national literatures in modern versions, or through interlingual translation, importing prestigious foreign literary works into the national canon” (p. 69). The practice of translation itself can support national identities, as certain texts get selected to be translated and some texts never get the chance to be introduced to another language. Translation is also described as an “act of violence” (Venuti, 2005, p. 177) against the nation, since it introduces difference into the homogeneity of a nation and so it is considered as a threat to the national integrity manifested in the national language. Noteworthy, Venuti contests this trend but it does not imply that such a linear relation does not exist in the field.

Postcolonial translation theory has also had its basis in national thinking. It is argued that translation and colonialism have been practiced hand in hand (see Niranjana, 1992; Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999; Gentzler, 2008). Postcolonial translation, with the goal of revitalizing the golden age prior to colonization, makes a retreat to the national pre-colonialized values of a nation.

Nationalistic views have also been applied to translators as agents, in a sense that the nationality of the translator would determine her trustworthiness. For instance, in Mexico, there are various national requirements for individuals to become a sworn translator.

Discussion

While territory in its modern sense has enabled the researchers of the field to theorize translation in an organized manner, this by no means implies that these

theories are all-encompassing. To start, it should be said that there are over six thousand languages in the world but there are only about two hundred countries. This simply implies that the idea of "one language, one nation" ignores other language varieties spoken in a territory and maintains that some languages are superior to others, namely national languages. Iran, as an example, is the host of more than eighty language varieties. Such multiplicity is not a contemporary quality and could be traced historically. Focusing solely on Persian, the national language, runs the risk of ignoring other languages spoken in the geographical territory of Iran. As for translation, this view has made research limited to examining translations that occur in national languages, and many other instances of translation (example: Studying translations between Tati and Gilaki in Iran) that do not fit into such a territorial basis have been overlooked. Translations that were published in a seemingly unrelated geographical territory (example: Persian translation of English novels in Germany) were mainly ignored. Furthermore, not every community is manifested in national languages. For example, Pakistan and Ethiopia do not declare a language as a national language.

The relationship between language, nation and translation is very complex and it cannot be reduced to a mere identification of language and boundaries. There are numerous instances of nationals who wrote in the "other" languages and now what they produced are considered as the oeuvre of that "other" language. Writers in diaspora are all among this group. There are many writers around the world that due to migration, express themselves not in their mother tongue, but in the language of migrating country. This is not a contemporary phenomenon. There are Iranian writers who wrote all their books in Arabic (Abu Bakr Razi and Farabi), those who wrote in both Persian and Arabic (Avicenna) or those who published a work both in Arabic and Persian (Abu Rayhan al-Birun), due to multiple reasons. These books are now considered as part of both Iranian and Arabic territories.

The essentialist nature of nationalism is manifested in positivistic view on national languages. But, national languages themselves are not fixed and stable, they are not essentially superior to other languages, they are simply assigned to be the emblem of a nation-state. The status of languages is nothing but discursive and relative. French is seen as a language of power in Europe but when it comes to contemporary Canada, it acquires a different status. The same argument is valid for all languages that are spoken in more than one geographical location, bearing in mind, that this location might be physical or virtual (the case of internet). For instance, Kurdish is viewed as a minor language in Turkey and a major language in Arbil. Therefore, talking about the power and hegemony of languages is not possible without taking into account the relativity of languages.

Moreover, each language has different manifestations. In the case of Persian, one may suggest a distinction among Persian as a vernacular or maternal language, Persian as a vehicular language used in commerce and business, as a referential language of sense and culture, and as a mythic language.

Additionally, viewing borders as fixed entities has been frowned upon in the postmodern era. Contrary to general belief, borders are not constants. Following the line of thought that views space as a social construct, borders are also constructed socially and spatially and due to socio-spatial dialectic which is historical and at the same time political, they change constantly. Therefore, even borders are instituted, negotiated and socially established. Any research on borders and boundary making should take this point into account.

There were some attempts to move away from territorial theorization and these space-driven conceptions have opened up new ways to study translation, all viewing space as relative and discursive. Pratt's (1991) account on translation space, Apter's (2006) view on conflict zones and Sherry Simon's works on translation in cities are among these limited studies. Farahzad and Ehteshami

(2018) studied these works and identified four spatial strands of conceptualization, maintaining the point that relative and multidimensional space is a developing concept in Translation Studies. Translational space in this view is relational, multiple and dynamic. Those four identified strands of conceptualization were “translation space, translation and the urban space, translation and geography and translation and ecology” (Farahzad & Ehteshami, 2018, p. 75). They further add that “these strands incorporate spatial analysis in different scales; from the abstract space of translation to the space of the city, to the territory, and to the planet earth” (Farahzad & Ehteshami, 2018, pp. 75–76). However, these studies remained scattered and dispersed. They did not refer to each other, and appeared as isolated theorizations. The potentiality of these theories was seemingly overlooked, for they have not been agglomerated under one notion.

Conclusion

Among space-related concepts, territory and territorial thinking, in modern sense, have prevailed conceptualization in the field. The modern conception of ‘one nation-one language’ has been the underlying assumption of translation research. Such a view is problematic. In our globalized world, which is characterized by temporal and spatial concerns and movement, the idea of ‘one nation- one language’, is far from reality as fixity and stability assigned to territory is contested. Communities and geographical territories are anything but monolingual and static. Therefore, there is a need to redefine the concepts and to postulate new theories to discuss the complicated relation of language with space, nation and territory.

Our views on language and territory or nation, maintained and reinforced in many disciplines (Philosophy, Geography and Urban Studies to name a few), foregrounds stability, and so dynamism and multiplicity are seen as problems that need to be solved. However, it could be said that the question of boundaries should not be formulated in an either-or type, reinforcing or fading of borders, but instead

should focus on multiple meanings of borders. Considering relative space as the basis of theorizing (instead of the modern approach), would expectantly enable us to investigate the complexity of translation. The current study reached the conclusion that the concept of space would enable us to take the multiplicity of translation into account, if viewed as a relative concept. In the light of this, space-related questions of the field would probably change and new questions could be formulated.

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مطالعه مفهومی بُعد جغرافیایی در ترجمه^۱

ثمر احتشامی^۲

چکیده

بُعد جغرافیایی همواره بر ترجمه تأثیر گذاشته است، چرا که دنیای امروز ما بیش از هر چیز به حرکت و ارتباط وابسته است. بر همین اساس، هدف از پژوهش حاضر مطالعه مفهوم‌پردازی جغرافیا و ترجمه در رشته مطالعات ترجمه است. ابتدا مفاهیم جغرافیا-محور در رشته شناسایی شدند و معنای هر یک از مفاهیم در رشته تبیین گردید. سپس مشخص شد که از میان مفاهیم جغرافیا-محور، دو مفهوم «قلمرو» و «ملت» (در معنای نوگرای آنها) بیش از سایر مفاهیم در نظریه‌پردازی و مفهوم‌پردازی‌های رشته به کار رفته است. پس از بررسی روشن گشت که ترجمه عموماً به مثابه حرکت زبانی میان دو قلمروی جغرافیایی مشخص تعریف شده است و گزاره نوگرای «یک ملت، یک زبان» پیش‌فرض غالب در اکثر نظریه‌های ترجمه بوده است. چنین نگاهی سبب شده است که بسیاری از نمونه‌ها و نمونه‌های ترجمه‌ای در جهان امروز نادیده گرفته شود.

واژه‌های راهنما: قلمرو، مطالعات ترجمه، ملت و ترجمه، نوگرایی

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