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A Method for Microhistorical Translation/Translator Research: With a Focus on the Iranian Context[1]

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Abstract

Microhistory can serve two functions in historical translation/translator studies. One is to discover the forgotten individual translators or to address the previously neglected issues concerning translations, translators, translational events, translation institutions, etc. And the other is to provide the translation/translator studies scholar with the means to take a fresh look at previously investigated topics. The two functions can be fulfilled through conducting a microscopic investigation of a topic and in light of discovering the overlooked primary sources as well as critical re-reading of the previously used sources. The purpose of this article is to propose a practical step-by-step method for microhistorical translation/translator research in the Iranian context. The article first briefly introduces microhistory. Because archives and primary sources are of great importance in microhistorical research, different types of sources are introduced afterwards. The paper then provides an overview of some of the existing microhistorical studies in the field of translation studies. After that, primary sources for a microhistorical translation/translator research are introduced and finally, a tentative method is proposed.

Keywords: Microhistory, Translation studies, Translator studies, Method, Archives, Primary sources

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1. What is Microhistory?

Microhistory is an approach to history writing. It is not a method or a theory. In other words, there is not an orthodox course of action or a single theory that can be pinpointed as microhistory. Microhistory was developed by a group of Italian historians, namely Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi and Carlo Poni, in the 1970s as a response and in opposition to the quantitative and macroscopic methods of history writing adopted by the Annales School, a widely known school of history founded by a group of French historians in 1929. Since the primary concern of the Annales was to "understand the totality of history", they "stressed on large-scale" studies (Tendler, 2013, p. 22). For microhistorians, the Annales' large-scale studies were flawed. They believed that the macroscopic studies of the Annales distort "reality on the individual level" (Magnússon, 2003, p. 709).

Since its emergence in the 1970s, microhistory has been understood and practiced variously. Basically, what is called microhistory is "a set of somewhat similar but not identical working practices" that share certain characteristics (Szijártó, 2017, p. 10). One of the defining characteristics of microhistory that distinguishes it from other approaches – especially that of the Annales School – is "the reduction of the scale of observation" or investigation (Levi, 1992, p. 95). Microhistory lays on the assumption that "microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved" (Levi, 1992, p. 97). Besides, microhistorians believe that "altering the scale of observation" gives "completely new meanings" to the "phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described" (Levi, 1992, p. 98). Therefore, in addition to enabling us to perceive the previously neglected facts, to see the unseen individuals and to hear the voice of the unvoiced, microhistory also gives us the chance of investigating the previously investigated or the seemingly exhausted subjects.

Constructing history through the narrative mode is another characteristic of microhistory. Many believe that "the revival of narrative" in history writing was with

microhistory (Levi, 2012, p. 122). Narrative mode serves a number of functions in microhistory, some of which according to Levi (1992) are: to make the reader a participant in the construction of history, to challenge the authoritarian forms of history, to dispute the claims about the validity of objective history, and to challenge the major historical narratives of the past by unfolding untold minute facts (pp. 105–106). Microhistory does not consider reader as "a tabula rasa" or a passive recipient of the authoritarian histories, which "present reality as objective" (Levi, 1992, pp. 105–106). Instead, it involves reader "in a sort of dialogue and participation in the whole process of constructing the historical argument" (Levi, 1992, p. 106). Involvement of the reader is achieved through "incorporating into the main body of the narrative the procedures of research itself, the documentary limitations, techniques of persuasion and interpretive constructions" (Levi, 1992, p. 106). In other words, in narrating the history, microhistorians do not conceal "the rules of the game" (Levi, 2012, p. 124). Briefly, in contrast to those "historiographical frescoes that seek to communicate to the reader . . . the illusion of vanished reality", microhistorians do not hide their limitations, "doubts" and "uncertainties" (Ginzburg, 1993, p. 24).

2. Archives and Primary Sources in Historical Research

'Archive' bears two meanings in historical research: it either refers to the place or the organization that collects and preserves the documents or to the "material[s] . . . that are preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator" (Pearce-Moses, 2005, p. 28). In this article, we use the word 'archive' in its first meaning to refer to the repositories of documents and sources.

In general, in writing history, historians have two types of sources at their disposal: primary sources and secondary sources. A primary source is an original "material that contains firsthand accounts of events and that was created contemporaneous to those events or later recalled by an eyewitness" (Pearce-Moses,

2005, p. 309). Unlike primary sources, secondary sources are not original since they are "not based on direct observation of or evidence directly associated with the subject" (Pearce-Moses, 2005, p. 355). Secondary sources are other historians' interpretation, explanation or analysis of the original primary sources. The most common forms of secondary sources include "monographs, journal articles, popular histories and textbooks" (Donnelly & Norton, 2011, p. 65). Historians are constantly warned against placing the foundation of their research on secondary sources. Based on Donnelly and Norton (2011), "secondary sources" are not reliable "because they are interpretative – and thus likely to be challenged or superseded by later accounts" (p. 67). Normally, "with the exception of a few classic texts", many of the secondary sources have "a limited shelf life" as they "eventually pass from being the latest version of some subject to becoming out of date" (Donnelly & Norton, 2011, p. 67).

3. Microhistory in Translation Studies

In recent years, translation history has experienced a gradual shift towards more microscopic histories and a number of translation studies scholars have advocated for the application of microhistory in writing history of translations/translators (see Adamo 2006; Bandia 2014, Munday 2014). Microhistory can serve two functions in translation/translator studies. One is to address the previously neglected issues concerning translations, translators, translational events, translation institutions, etc. With this function, microhistory offers an alternative to product/process-oriented research in translation studies. It provides scholars with the means to distance themselves from texts and to move on to the unseen or unheard individuals, untold or previously unobserved events, untold geographies and the individuals that are ignored in official discourses as well as those who worked out of or against the official discourses. The second function of microhistory is to provide the translation/translator studies scholar with the means to take a fresh look at previously investigated subjects. The revisionist nature of

microhistory gives the researchers the power to challenge the dominant discourses, to uncover the hidden facts and to reveal the gaps in our historical knowledge.

Along with other historians, the historians within the field of translation studies have repeatedly highlighted the significance of archives and primary sources in conducting microhistorical research. Some believe that it was with Munday that the use of primary sources in microhistorical translation/translator studies came to the fore. Paloposki (2016) believes "prior to Munday's two articles" (2013 and 2014), archival documents "have not been discussed methodologically to any substantial degree in translation studies . . .; nor have archives usually been foregrounded in research reports" (p. 3). Munday (2013) first used the "overlooked" primary sources including translators' "paper, manuscripts and archives" to study the "decision-making" processes of literary translators (p. 125). Later, in 2014, he introduced "archives, manuscripts and, especially, translator papers, post-hoc accounts and interviews" as valuable primary sources for "investigating the conditions, working practices and identity of translators and for the study of their interaction with other participants in the translation process" (p. 64). In another microhistorical research, Paloposki (2016) used two archives – "an individual translator's collection of documents and a publishing house archive" – to find the forgotten translators and to investigate the life and working conditions of translators in Finland (p. 1). Gomez (2017) used "obituaries as unconventional primary source[s]" in a microhistorical translator research (p. 77).

Primary sources for a microhistorical research within the field of translation studies include documents that provide original first-hand information about translators, agents of translation or various aspects of the translation profession. Some of these primary sources are: personal letters, correspondence between translators and commissioners/patrons (e.g. a translation bureau, a royal court, a king, a minister, an ambassador), any correspondence concerning translators or various

aspects of the translation profession between the individuals who held official positions, audio files or interviews, memoirs, diaries, autobiographies, travelogues, pre/postfaces to translations, and photographs. The financial documents such as translators' pay cheques, documents of salary, contracts or translation briefs can also be considered as primary sources. Legal documents such as decrees of the kings and rulers, government guidelines, legislations about different aspects of translation activity or even the censorship guidelines are among other primary sources that may provide researchers with valuable information. Moreover, the translators' drafts of their translations in the form of manuscript can be useful as they might contain translator's notes, the exchanged notes between translators and publishers or the publishers' comments.

4. Purpose of the Study

Despite the growing interest of translation studies scholars in microhistory, the area still lacks a well-established method. This does not mean that the existing microhistorical studies within the field of translation studies are unmethodical. Undoubtedly, some kind of method has been followed by the researchers; but it has never been clearly explained. The present study is an attempt to deal with this lack. The purpose of this article is to propose a practical step-by-step method that can guide the Iranian translation studies scholars in conducting a microhistorical translation/translator research.

5. A Tentative Method for Microhistorical Translation/Translator Research

The core of the methodology developed here is the 'method of clue', originally proposed by Ginzburg in the late 1970s. For Ginzburg (1980), "tiny details provide the key to a deeper reality" (p. 11). Based on the 'method of clue', microhistorians "leap from apparently insignificant facts, which could be observed, to a complex reality which – directly at least – could not" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 13). In other words, the "minute examination of the real, however trivial" leads to "uncover[ing] the traces

of events which the observer cannot directly experience" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 13). For Ginzburg (1980), the insignificant facts for a microhistorian are analogous to previously "unnoticed" clues for a "detective" from which s/he discovers the truth behind a crime or to "the animals' tracks" for a "hunter" from which s/he constructs the identity of a "quarry" or to "symptoms" for a "psychoanalyst" from which s/he diagnoses the disease (pp. 8–13). In all the mentioned examples, "knowledge of the whole" is acquired "from the parts" by "using the *conjectural paradigm*", also known as the "semiotic paradigm" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 15). In sum, in the 'method of clue', "the historian's knowledge", just like the detective's, the hunter's or the psychoanalyst's knowledge, "is indirect, based on signs and scraps of evidence" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 16).

The method proposed in this article is developed by combining Ginzburg's 'method of clue' and the archival method, which involves close examination and "study of historical documents" (Ventresca & Mohr, 2002, p. 805). Based on the developed method, a microhistorical translation/translator research involves three steps: 1) Selecting the topic of interest; 2) Conducting an archival search; 3) Establishing a micro-macro relationship and writing a narrative.

In the first step, researchers must decide on what they are eager to find out. Microhistorical approach can be employed for two purposes: to know more about a previously investigated topic or to discover the unknown individuals, events, institutions or etc.

To know more about a known or a previously investigated topic such as an individual translator, a translation institution or a translational event, microhistorians need to conduct a thorough search through the archives to discover the neglected documents and primary sources or the pieces of evidence that have been left out of the historical narratives. Moreover, they ought to examine the previously used documents and sources with a critical eye. Here, researchers move from known to the hidden facts

(see Figure 1). In light of the newly discovered primary sources and through critical re-reading of the already available documents, translation/ translator microhistorians can discover the previously unseen facts, can enrich the existing body of historical knowledge and even they can challenge the conventional discourses or narratives of the past.

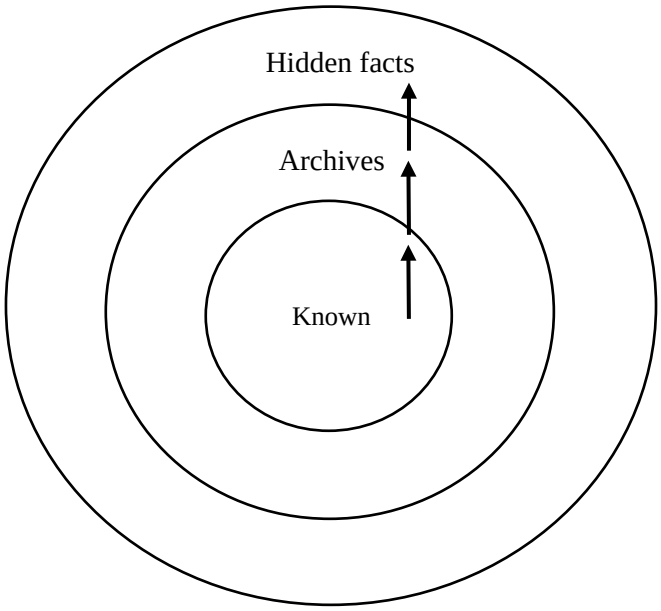

Figure 1. Moving from known to the hidden facts

As mentioned, microhistory can also be used to discover the unknowns. To see the unknowns, we need to "magnify" a "small known" (Cohen, 2017, p. 55). Here, the researcher zooms in on a known event, time period, cultural or translational movement or the like to find the unknown translators, institutions, translational networks or translational events. In other words, the known leads us to the unknown (see Figure 2). The more we magnify the small known, the more the chance of discovering the unknowns.

Until now, numerous historical studies have been conducted on the influence of certain translation institutions/offices on various social and cultural issues. Likewise,

there exists a considerable body of research on certain translation movements, time periods, translational events or on the great prolific translators who lived in an era or worked for a translation office. The fact is that, there are still "vast unknown territories" (Santoyo, 2006, p. 13) in history of translation and there are many translators who are still forgotten and underrepresented. To put it differently, "there are still many small pieces or tesserae missing" in the "mosaic" of translation history and there are "large empty spaces yet to be filled in" (Santoyo, 2006, p. 13). Magnifying what is known unfolds the missing pieces, the forgotten individuals and the overlooked events, eras, etc.

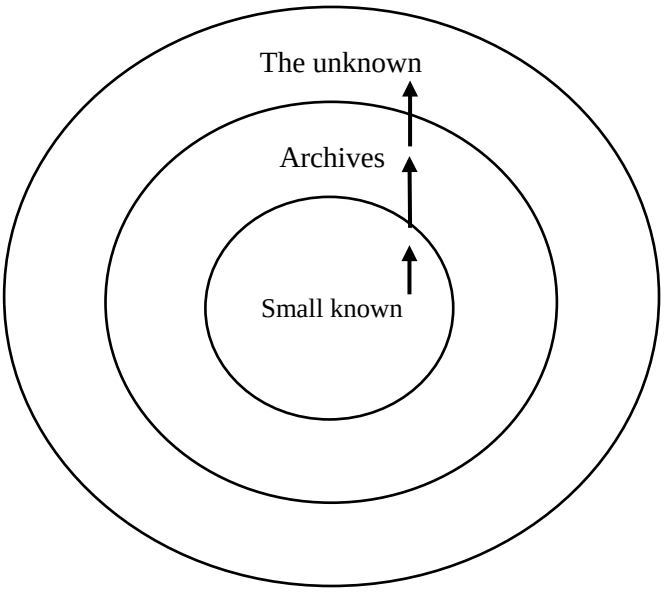

Figure 2. Moving from small known to the unknown

In addition to the abovementioned paths, the researchers believe that there exists a third path for those who strive for conducting a comprehensive study on the translators of an era, institution or else. In this case, not only the researcher desires to take a fresh look at the existing narratives about the already known translators, but

also s/he aims at discovering the unknown translators[1] (see Figure 3). Take the example of a researcher who wants to conduct an extensive study on the translators who worked for Dār al-Funūn in the Naseri era. Undoubtedly, some of the translators of Dār al-Funūn in the Naseri era are known. But definitely there are some who are unknown because of many reasons. In many cases, interpreters, non-prolific translators or the translators with manuscript works are the forgotten ones. To find the unknown translators researchers need to zoom in on the known entities – the Naseri era and Dār al-Funūn in our hypothetical example – and conduct a thorough search through the archives. Researchers must be mindful of the fact that searching the archives solely by keywords such as 'translator' or 'translation' does not suffice to find the unknown translators. The only way is to locate and examine 'all' the available and accessible documents related to the known era, institution, etc. to make sure no evidence is overlooked. There is no doubt that it is an arduous time-consuming work.

After finding some traces of the hidden translators, then we can move to the next step, which is finding primary sources for the newly discovered translators. With respect to the already known translators, the first step is to make a list of these translators – in our example a list of translators who worked for Dār al-Funūn in the Naseri era – and then go to the archives to find as many primary sources as possible about them. To make a list of known translators, researchers have two types of sources at their disposal: 1) Bibliographies; 2) Secondary sources such as historical books and journal articles. Bibliographies are the books that contain detailed list of the books, printed or manuscripts, of a specific time period. Some of the bibliographies that can be of great help for the researchers who work on translators in the contemporary Iran, especially the Qajar and Pahlavi era, include: A catalogue of the

[1] For the application of this method see Atefmehr, Z. & Farahzad, F. (2021). A microhistorical study of the first translators of Dār al-Funūn. *Translation Studies Quarterly*, 19(73), pp. 81–95.

manuscripts in the National Library of Iran[1], Catalogue of books translated into Persian printed from the beginning to 1370[2], A bibliography of Persian printed books from the beginning to 1345[3], Bibliography of translated novels and short stories collection from the pre-Constitutional era to 1374[4]. The entries of these bibliographies are organized according to the name of books, not the authors or the translators. Besides, in almost all the bibliographies, there is no division between translated and authored books. Therefore, the researcher must study all the entries to find the translated books and consequently to get access to the name of translators. In addition to bibliographies, researchers can use relevant secondary sources such as historical books and journal articles to find the translators. Here, secondary sources can be used to find the translators who lived in an era. When the list is compiled, researchers need to go to the archives to find the relevant sources and documents.

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2. فهرست کتابهای چاپی فارسی از آغاز تا سال 1370، ع. کیهان‌فر، م.ر باشتنی، م. فضایلی جوان و م. ناجی نصرآبادی. مشهد: آستان قدس رضوی.
3. فهرست کتابهای چاپی فارسی از آغاز تا آخر سال 1345، خان‌بابا مشار. تهران: بنگاه ترجمه و نشر کتاب.
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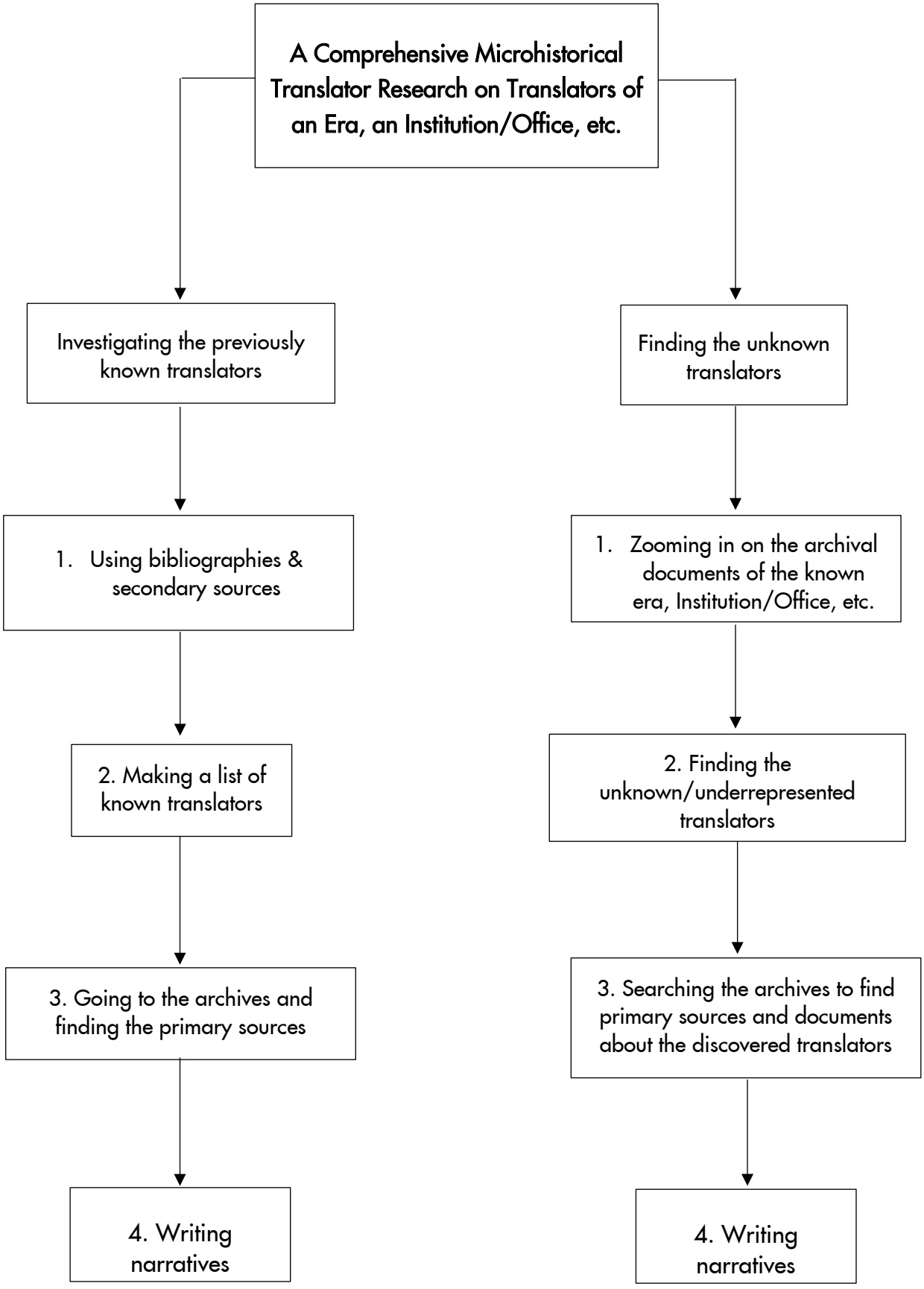

Figure 0–3. The research procedure for microhistorical translator research

In the second step, researchers go to the archives to search for the relevant documents. The best repositories of first-hand documents are the archives of libraries, museums and institutions. Some of the well-stocked archives in Iran are: The National Library and archives of Iran[1]; Library, Museum and Document Center of Iran Parliament[2]; Document and Press Center Management of Astan Quds Razavi[3]; Malek National Library and Museum Institution[4]; Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies[5]; Specialized Library of Ministry of Foreign Affairs[6]; Islamic Revolution Document Center[7]; The Central Library and Documentation Center of the University of Tehran[8]. Many of these archives provide online access to their sources.

One thing that is of the utmost importance in history writing is to make sure of validity and reliability of documents and sources. A sound history builds on the foundation of valid and reliable sources. Validity concerns the external aspects of a document with respect to its origin and validity verification involves asking questions about authenticity of the author as well as consistency between the date of the document and its material, place, author and the like. To check the validity of sources, historians ask "whether documents do in fact originate as they claim" (Howell & Prevenier, 2001, p. 59).

While validity is about the external characteristics of sources, reliability concerns the internal aspects of documents. It involves the "internal criticism of"

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1. سازمان اسناد و کتابخانه جمهوری اسلامی ایران
2. کتابخانه، موزه و مرکز اسناد مجلس شورای اسلامی
3. مرکز اسناد و مطبوعات آستان قدس رضوی
4. کتابخانه و موزه ملی ملک
5. مؤسسه مطالعات تاریخ معاصر ایران
6. کتابخانه تخصصی وزارت امور خارجه
7. مرکز اسناد انقلاب اسلامی
8. کتابخانه مرکزی و مرکز اسناد دانشگاه تهران

documents through which "researchers question the trustworthiness as a source, such as the author's biases and perceptions of the event, and if the authors are reporting from intimate knowledge or from others' descriptions of the phenomena" (Lundy, 2008, pp. 398–399).

Validity of a source does not guarantee its reliability. That means, sources can be as old as they claim, but they may contain biased, false, incomplete or exaggerated information. While checking documents for validity is the specialty of historians and archivists, the translation studies scholars must be extra cautious about reliability of the documents they use. In other words, they can trust the archives for validity of the sources and documents, but they must be skeptical about the content of documents. Critical reading of documents and challenging the purpose of their authors can help researchers to escape writing biased or inaccurate histories.

In the third step, researchers synthesize the documents and write a narrative. In the archives, researchers find nothing but "fragments of things and documents" (Ginzburg, 1993, p. 28). There is a huge gap between these fragments and the final narrative. A serious peril that lays before researchers at this step is to write a biased, inaccurate history, not because of using invalid or unreliable sources, but this time because of the researchers' own interests, biases or even mistakes. In general, narratives of the past can be biased either because of accidental "failures in historical inference, in historical description and interpretation, and in historical explanation" or because "the historian wants the outcome she [/he] has produced, normally to further certain interests that she [/he] has" (McCullagh, 2000, p. 40). It should be mentioned that the historical accounts that are flawed because of accidental unintended "mistake[s]" are not normally considered as biased, "but just wrong or unjustified" (McCullagh, 2000, p. 40). One way to ensure the fairness of history is to avoid selection of any kind and "to provide an exhaustive description" which includes even "the trivial facts" (McCullagh, 2000, p. 42). With respect to personal biases, it

is largely accepted among the historians, especially among the philosophers of history, that writing an objective and impartial history is impossible since biases are inevitable. But, this cannot absolve researchers from the responsibility of writing fair, balanced histories. In other words, it is incumbent upon the researchers to "detect and correct" their biases, to commit "to rationality" and "to check the adequacy of their preconceptions" (McCullagh, 2000, p. 65).

In narrating the past, microhistorians try to establish a relationship between the fragmentary documents and the whole or between what is micro and the macro. While establishing a micro-macro relationship is one of the defining features of microhistory, there has always been much controversy over the ways in which the micro can be connected to the macro or the fragments can serve the whole. The fact is that to reach generalizations from a microhistorical research, especially when the topic is an individual translator, is idealistic. For microhistorians, tiny details matter as they can shed light on "more general phenomena" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 28). Despite case studies in which researchers try to make "pieces of evidence fit together as part of a larger puzzle" (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2013, p. 228), in microhistory the small pieces do not matter "because they are small parts of a bigger picture, but because they allow us to see something of the bigger picture which we would otherwise miss" (De Vivo, 2010, p. 391). In other words, microhistory does not seek or claim generalizations or conclusions, but it can help us to develop a better understanding of a single translator, a community of translators, a translation institution, a translational event, the networks within the society of translators and the like.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the procedure of a microhistorical translation/translator research is not a linear one. In other words, while for the sake of clarity, the steps are presented in a sequential order, as there is an exact beginning and end to the research procedure, oftentimes, researchers go back and forth

between the steps. This is what Saldanha and O'Brien (2013) call "iterative" research process in which "the analysis informs subsequent data collection and may even lead to adjustments in the research design" (p. 227).

6. Conclusion

Combining Ginzburg's 'method of clue' and the archival method, the present article proposed a method for microhistorical translation/translator research in the Iranian context. Based on the developed method, a microhistorical translation/translator research starts from selecting the topic of interest; it then proceeds with conducting an archival search and finally ends with establishing a micro-macro relationship and writing a narrative. In addition to elaborating on each step, due to the central role of archives and primary sources in microhistorical research, the paper also introduced some of the well-stocked archives as well as different types of primary sources that the Iranian translation/translators studies scholars have at their disposal.

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روشی برای پژوهش‌های خُردتاریخیِ ترجمه/مترجم: با تمرکز بر بافت ایران[1]

زهرا عاطف‌مهر[2] و فرزانه فرحزاد[3]

چکیده

خُردتاریخ می‌تواند دو کارکرد در مطالعات تاریخیِ ترجمه/مترجم ایفا کند. کارکرد نخست عبارت است از یافتن مترجمان فراموش شده یا توجه به مسائل مغفول مانده در رابطه با ترجمه، مترجمان، رویدادهای ترجمه‌ای، نهادهای ترجمه و غیره. کارکرد دیگر ایجاد امکان بازنگریِ تاریخ‌های نوشته شده در حوزه مطالعات ترجمه/مترجم است. دستیابی به این دو کارکرد از طریق بررسی ریزبینانهٔ یک موضوع و بواسطهٔ کشف و استفاده از منابع دست اولِ نادیده گرفته شده و بررسی نقادانهٔ منابعی که قبلاً در نگارش تاریخ استفاده شده‌اند میسر می‌شود. هدف مقالهٔ حاضر ارائهٔ روشی عملی برای پژوهش‌های خُردتاریخیِ ترجمه/مترجم در ایران است. مقاله ابتدا به معرفی مختصر خُردتاریخ می‌پردازد. سپس، به دلیل اهمیت آرشیوها و منابع دست اول در پژوهش‌های خُردتاریخی، انواع منبع معرفی می‌شود. در ادامه، برخی از پژوهش‌های خُردتاریخیِ انجام‌شده در رشتهٔ مطالعات ترجمه مرور می‌شوند و در پایان، مقاله به معرفی منابع دست اول قابل استفاده در پژوهش‌های خُردتاریخی ترجمه/مترجم و توضیح روش می‌پردازد.

واژه‌های راهنما: خُردتاریخ، مطالعات ترجمه، مطالعات مترجم، روش، آرشیو، منابع دست اول

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