STUDYING THE RECEPTION OF TRANSLATED TEXTS: THE ROLE OF THE READER

Brian James Baer / Kent State University

Outline

- Explore various aspects of the reader's role in the circulation of translated texts

- To map new directions in reception studies research on translated texts that fully integrate readers

- To offer some examples of research in these new directions

Death of the Author / Birth of the Reader

- Barthes' readerly vs. writerly texts (1960s)
- Heidegger and Gadamer's concept of readers' 'predjudice' or 'bias'
- Wolfgang Iser's Reception Theory
  - *Der implizite Leser. Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett* (1972)
  - *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (1976)
  - *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1989)
- Stanley Fish, "interpretive communities"

Death of the Author/
Birth of the Reader

Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of Americna Fiction, 1790-1860 (1985)*

"In this provocative book, Jane Tompkins seeks to move the study of literature away from the small group of critically approved *texts* that have dominated literary discussion over the decades, to allow inclusion of *texts* ignored or denigrated by the literary academy." (Official blurb on book's cover)

The Translator as Reader

- Translation as the "most intimate act of reading" (Spivak 2004, 372)
- *Lire pour traduire* [Reading for translating] (Plassard 2007)
- Antoine Berman's appropriation of Gadamer's concept of "horizon" to describe the task of the translator
- "all acts of reading or acts of translation are collaborative acts of writing, are versionings" (Littau 2010, 447)

The Translator as Reader

"The prerequisite skills for translation are reading in the source language and writing in the target language" (Interagency Language Roundtable)

Ignoring the End Reader

- In John Milton and Paul Bandia's excellent collection *Agents of Translation* (2009), for example, the subject of investigation is expanded to include not only translators, but a wide variety of players, or agents, involved in any act of translation, such as editors, publishers, and patrons. The reader, however, is not among them.

Ignoring the End Reader

Leads to ungrounded assumptions about end readers:

- Venuti assumes "foreignization" will necessarily have a politically salutary effect on readers

- Publishers, on the other hand, often assume "resistance among the prospective readership of [translated texts] to the particularly foreign and to foreign particularity" (Watts 2005, 171)

- Proponents of World Literature may assume that the translation of a text across cultures means that the text is read the same in these new contexts: Everyone loves Shakespeare!

Ignoring the Reader

- The failure to incorporate the historical end reader as a re-interpreter of the translator's interpretations of a work has not only hampered the study of reader response in translation studies but also risks placing the Translator on the evacuated pedestal of the Author as the ultimate controller of textual meaning (at least for the target culture audience) and reinforces the transmissionist model by assuming that the translator's interpretation reaches the reader intact.

Ignoring the End Reader

- Translation is still often not included as an index term

- Diaries, letters

- Semi-public salon culture of the early 19th century society
  - Albums
  - Performances

Translation and Reading

- Marilyn Gaddis Rose's concept of "stereoscopic reading" (1997)

- "the special nature of translated fiction as text" (Chan 2010, 2)

- Focus on the double-voicedness of translated texts (Hermans 1996; Schiavi 1996).

- David Damrosch has advocated for seeing translations not as a collection of classic texts but rather as a "mode of reading" (2003, 281)

Reception of Translations

- Mark Gamsa, *The Reading of Russian Literature in China* (2010)

- Leo Tak-hung Chan, *Readers, Reading and Reception of Translated Fiction in China* (2010)

- Heekyoung Cho, *Translation's Forgotten History. Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature* (2016)

Conceptualizing the Reading of Translated Texts

□ In ways that move us beyond a simple, linear, transmissionist model of reading

□ Expands and complicates our understanding of how translated texts are woven into the fabric ('context') of the target culture

□ Ultimately, it is the end reader(s) who will decide whether a text has an afterlife in the target culture

Conceptualizing the Reading of Translated Texts

- Reading within
- Reading across
- Reading between
- Reading against
- Reading among
- Reading beyond

Reading within

Reading within

As Susan Rubin Suleiman remarks, "political effects reside not in texts but in the way they are read – not in what a work 'is' but what it does *for a given reader or community of readers in a particular place and time*" (1997, 53, 51–64; emphasis added).

Reading within

"… writing has no life separate from the particularized mechanisms that bring it to public life. But these instruments do not work on their own. Each of these schemes of literary production is bound up with a distinct social audience; in its production each addresses and helps call together some particular social grouping, a portion of the whole potential public identified by its readerly interests but by other unifying social interests as well." (Brodhead 1993, 5)

Reading within

- Modes of reading translations are shaped by specific socially constructed readers in specific historical contexts, which are themselves shaped by a host of shifting material and social realities

Reading within

- The translation of the Hebrew *ha-goyim* and the Greek *hoi ethnoi* as 'nations' in the King James version of the Bible reveals the translation to be thoroughly intertwined with the rise of English nationalism (Damrosch 2003, 283).

Reading within:
The Cold War Context

- "Мы Вас похороним!"

- "We will bury you!"

Reading within:
Elizabeth I as Richard II

- The role of timing, or "the importance of an exact chronology to determine what any given text was likely to mean to its audience at the time of its appearance" (1984, 55).

- Elizabeth I's reaction to Shakespeare's *Richard II* is illustrative of this. Drawing a connection between events in the play and those of her reign, Elizabeth purportedly exclaimed: "I am Richard II, know ye not that?"

Reading within: Wilde in Russia

- Wilde continues to be presented in Russia in deeply spiritual terms as a sensualist who is punished for his sins and repents, or in the words of one Russian reviewer, "as a tortured artist who finds his way to God" (Lavut 1997, 5).

- As Evgenii Bershtein puts it, "Wilde the dandy, Wilde the fashion plate, Wilde the queen – those very aspects of the British writer's persona that became central to his reputation in the Western world remained marginal in Russia. The Russian picture of Wilde was drawn in the tragic colors of rebellion, suffering, and saintliness" (2000, 169).

Reading within: Wilde in Russian

- This framing of Wilde in turn serves to justify his incarceration as redemptive: it makes him a great writer, as the argument goes, just as Dostoevsky's incarceration and exile turned him into the great writer we know today

- Hence the Russian critics describe Wilde's prison writings as his greatest works, works which in the West are considered marginal if not anomalous

- Re-ordering the Wildean canon

Reading across

Reading across

- Translation constructs lines of inheritance

- In the Romantic age, for example, high-profile translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, among others, functioned not only to "enrich" the linguistic repertoire of the target language but also to construct the target culture as a worthy inheritor of the cultural capital of ancient Greece and Rome.

Reading across

- Translation creates bonds of solidarity

- Russian translations of American abolitionist literature not only allowed Russians to discuss semi-publicly the problem of serfdom, it also created bonds of solidarity

Reading across

- "The shifting significations of the translated book … also constitute a *liberation* from the restrictions imposed on it by the literary institution of the original context of publication" (Watts 2004, 162).

Reading across: Pavic

- Serbian writer Milan Pavic's novel *The Dictionary of the Khazars* and its translation into English

- Western critics embraced the novel in translation as "a work of international postmodernism"

- Damrosch points out that, "the book's international success involved the neglect or outright misreading of its political content" (2005, 380, 381).

Reading across: Pavic

- "[Pavic's novel] contains a political polemic that had been hidden in plain sight from international audiences who had welcomed the novel as 'an Arabian Nights romance,' 'a wickedly teasing intellectual game,' and an opportunity 'to lose themselves in a novel of love and death,' as the flyleaf of the American edition describes the book" (Damrosch 2005, 381).

Reading between
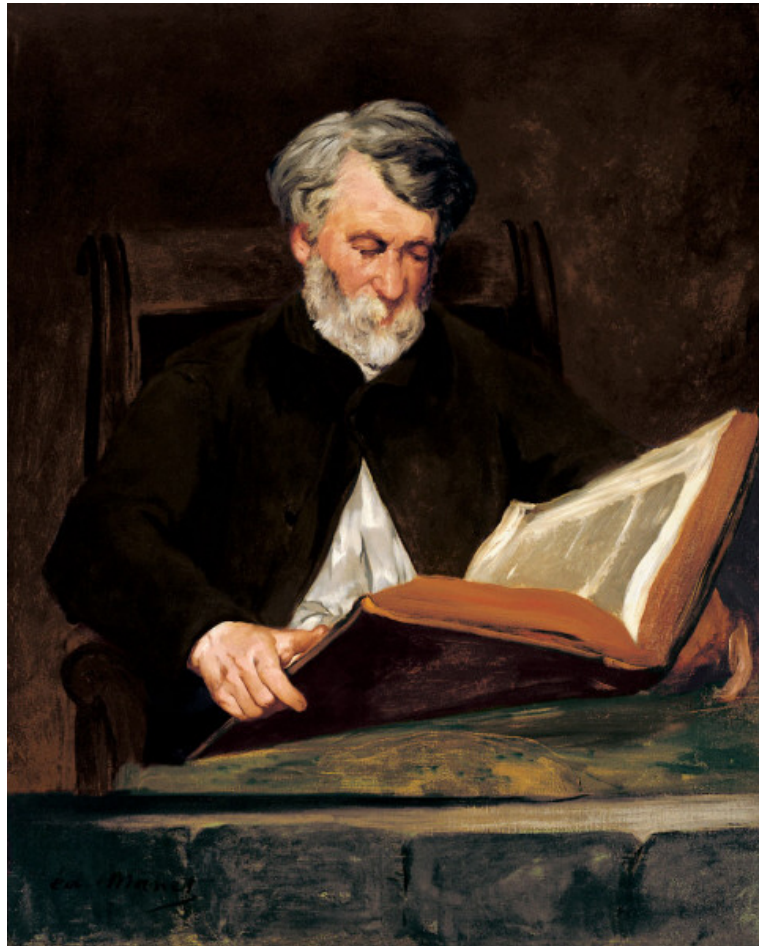
Reading between

Censorship encourages the development of a "highly sophisticated system of oblique communication, of unwritten rules whereby writers could communicate with readers or audiences (among whom were the very same authorities who were responsible for state censorship) without producing a direct confrontation" (Patterson 1984, 53).

Reading between

- Russian readers, for example, developed the ability, in Kathleen Parthée's words, "[to] recognize from 'half a hint' a politically daring subtext" (2004, 3).

- This is the "shrewd reader" described by the poet and scholar Lev Loseff in his classic study of Aesopian language in Soviet culture, *On the Beneficence of Censorship* (1984).

Reading between

- Russian translators often spoke through their government-sanctioned translations

- "During a certain period, particularly between the 19th and 20th [Party] Congresses, Russian poets were deprived of the possibility of expressing themselves to the full in original writing and spoke to the reader in the language of Goethe, Oberliani, Shakespeare, and Hugo." (Etkind 1978, 32)

Reading between

- "…provocation is given, or signification promoted, by some kind of a signal in the text itself" (1984, 55)

- "censorship confers a greater importance on prohibited views than they would otherwise have had" (1984, 56), so that the very act of censorship can itself serve, in a sense, as a signal or cue to the reader, directing them just where to look for prohibited views.

Reading between

- Finally, Patterson lists the "indeterminacy" of literary texts – the fact that "topical (and hence exciting) meaning may be present but cannot be proven to be so" (1984, 56) – as another crucial feature of reading under censorship

Reading between

- This conferred incredible prestige on translated literature

- Survey data revealed that Soviet university students expressed a marked preference for foreign literature over Soviet works (Friedberg 1977, 71)

- A copy of the first Russian volume of Kafka, published in 1965, was soon selling on the black market for more than one hundred times its official price, more than the average weekly wage of a Soviet worker (1977, 274)

Reading between

- Lev Loseff *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Soviet Literature* (1984)

- Screens and cues / the "shrewd reader"

- Longfellow's "The Dream of the Slave" becomes in M. Mikhailov's Russian translation "The Dream of the Negro"

Reading against

Reading against

- Concerns the phenomenon of competing translations

- "While Catholic translators consistently translated the Greek term 'ecclesia' as 'church, lending authority to organized religion, their Protestant counterparts insisted on translating the term with the less institutional 'congregation'" (Bobrick 2002).

Reading against

- Heated debates took place in early nineteenth-century Russia over the translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and whether to abandon the French alexandrine verse in favor of a more Russian verse form like the hexameter

- Writers and politicians took sides over which meter and style should be used to best render these classic texts into modern Russian

Reading among

Reading among

- Many people may think of reading as an essentially solitary enterprise, but the rise of book clubs and online chatrooms for readers suggests that there is a real social dimension to reading

Reading among

- Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities"

- Network theory

Reading among

"The reproduction and preservation of unofficial texts also often turned into a collective enterprise. Samizdat required lots of energy and lot of connections: tireless spouses, trustworthy friends, armies of volunteer workers, intrepid foreign co-conspirators, and hard-to-obtain supplies. It was an illegal continually risky business. Russia even has the grotesque distinction of having produced a typist-martyr, a woman who committed suicide after being interrogated by the KGB because of her connection to Solzhenitsyn" (Parthée 2004, 156).

Reading among

- The first post-Stalinist generation in Russia "had acquired a great appetite for forbidden cultural and intellectual fruits, and so they coalesced in groups of trusted friends, functioning as informal literary and musical societies" (Zubok 2009, 40).

Reading among

- These "interpretive communities" of like-minded readers arise to facilitate the unofficial production, circulation, and interpretation of censored works, and lend a degree of political agency to reading that is unavailable to the individual or solitary reader; in other words, they lend readers a social presence.

- Soviet readers, Parthée insists, "knew that they were sharing in this experience with many other people throughout the country" (2004, 156)

Reading (or Viewing) among

"The understanding in the communicative exchange is built around the need to ensure the misunderstanding of the third party – the censor as representative of the government or the system. The communication is not about getting the message across but about getting the message around (the censor)."

(Dwyer and Uricaru 2009, 56)

Reading (or Viewing) among

One way to achieve this was through "double spectatorship," that is, the simultaneous comparison of the "original" soundtrack and the subtitles, made possible by "the national bias toward subtitling" (2009, 46, 47) – dubbing would have entirely blocked access to the source language.

Reading among

The American Slavicist Sonja Franeta provided a wonderful example of the "alternative" reading practices of the minority reader and their relationship to community formation in her collection of interviews with Russian gays and lesbians in late Soviet Russia.

Franeta asks Lena from Novosibirsk how she met other people "like herself," to which Lena replied:

Reading among

I was a guest once in someone's home and saw a volume of Sappho on the shelf. I began to read it and realized that these poems were a hymn to female love [*zhenskaia liubov'*]. This, as they say, breathed life into me. I wanted to know who the owner of the book was. It belonged to the host. . . . He had a boyfriend and I could visit him with my girlfriend. . . . We were very happy that, thanks to Sappho, we had found each other. We would read her verses aloud. We looked for other books on the topic. At the time it was already possible to find some things. We had a very interesting time. (Franeta 2004, 54)

Reading among

- Lena was able to access that interpretation of Sappho through her own life experience, despite the efforts of the Russian editor who no doubt insisted in the introduction on the exclusive heterosexuality of the Greek poet.

- Her reading of Sappho's poetry against the grain of the official Soviet position on the poet led her in turn to a community of like-minded minority readers.

Reading beyond

Reading beyond

- Jean-Vincent Arnault's lyric poem "La Feuille"

- Among these bilingual Russian readers, the leaf torn from the tree had become a symbol of internal exile

- Unlike texts marked by Aesopian language, nothing in this poem or its translations offers a cue to the reader; the reader must bring outside knowledge to the text to construct this allegorical interpretation of the leaf

Reading beyond

- Background knowledge of the author's biography and/or the conditions under which a work was written informed the reading of their work

- French Revolutionary poets (Béranger, Arnault, Chénier)

Reading beyond

- Readers in specific contexts (early 19th century Russia, early 20th century China, Japan and Korea) look beyond any specific text in search of models for literature *en gros* and for the writer's role in society

- Consider the cult surrounding Tolstoy in Japan and Korea

- "Korean writers' passionate reception of Russian literature was related to their desire for an active role for literature in their specific sociopolitical situation" (Cho 2016, 31)

Reading beyond

- The role of technology in the creation of new, virtual communities

- "Thanks to the cell phone, [Phillipinos] need not be present to others around them. Even when they are part of a socially defined group—say, commuters or mourners—cell phone users are always somewhere else, receiving and transmitting messages from beyond their physical location. It is in this sense that they become other than their socially delineated identity." (Rafael 2016, 76)

The Future of Reception Studies in TS

New Directions in Reception Studies: Packaging

- Separate the "packaging" of translations from the reception of translations

- Packaging involves a variety of agents (translators, authors, editors, publishers, marketers, authors of paratextual material) who often work in isolation, that is, in a non-coordinated fashion

- Reception involves a variety of readers (expert, semi-expert, and lay readers)

The Packaging of Translations

- Watts, Richard (2004). *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World*. ("Epilogue: Reading and Teaching Francophone Literatures in Translation")

The Packaging of Translations

- Bandia, Paul and John Milton (2009). *Agents of Translation.*

- Kahf, Mohja (2010). "Packaging 'Huda': 'Sha'rawi's Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment."

- Lennon, Brian (2010). In *Babel's Shadow. Multilingual Literatures, Monolingual States.*

- Mälzer, Natalie (2014). "Head or Legs? Shifts in Texts and Paratexts by Agents of the Publishing Industry."

New Directions in Reception Studies: Reception

□ Distinguish from among the various kinds of readers and the various modes of translation criticism they produce:

    ❑ Expertise: Experts (with a knowledge of the source language) / Professional critics / Lay readers or Common readers

    ❑ Authority: Strong readers, gatekeepers, tastemakers

The Reception of Translated Texts

- Virtual venues for reader response offer historically new sources of data on common readers (blogs, chat rooms, posted reviews), although posts should be treated with caution

- New corpora tools have made it easier to conduct critical discourse analysis of reviews, allowing us to pinpoint differences in the nature of translation criticism carried out by professionals and laypeople

Sample Study #1

- Where do common readers get their ideas about what translation is and what constitutes a "good" translation?

- Longitudinal corpus-based study of reviews of translated works in *The New York Times* for 1900, 1950, and 2000

- Why study translation criticism in popular venues?
  - One of the few sites where non-professionals may encounter discussion of translation (a major source of popular conceptions about translation)
  - Offers an opportunity to nuance and historicize Venuti's claims regarding the translator's invisibility

Translation Criticism

- The nature and the tenor of the translation criticism changed significantly across the three corpora
  - Relative stability of the source languages of the books reviewed (Western European prestige languages); can this be said to support Casanova's claim for the autonomy of the World Republic of Letters from politics?
  - Relative stability of gender disparity in terms of the source text authors, the translators and the critics

Translation Criticism

- The rise of literature as the most reviewed domain of translated works

- The rise of authors as reviewers (as opposed to college professors)

- The rise of pessimism over the possibility of translation, presaging the current fascination in some quarters with untranslatability

- The rise of readability as a positive criterion in translation assessment is fairly recent

Translation Criticism

- 2015 IATIS Yearbook, *Authorizing Translation,* edited by Michelle Woods

- Future plans to expand the study across the twentieth century so as to isolate broad trends in translation criticism

Sample Study #2

- The Packaging of the Chinese classic *Liao Zhai by* Song Pu Ling across three historical periods, the colonizing period, the decolonizing period, and the communist period (Pei Yongming)

- Did the changing political and economic relationship between China and the Anglophone West influence the packaging of *Liao Zhai*? If so, in what ways?

Packaging *Liao Zhai*

- Parameters of analysis:
    - Selection of stories by theme
    - Paratextual material
    - Profiles of the translators

- Expand the study
    - To include the reception of these Anglophone translations
   - To include the packaging of *Liao Zhai* in other languages/cultures

Sample Study #3

- The packaging and reception of the English translation of the novel *Shanghai Baby* by Wei Hui

- The fact that the work was banned in China made it into a success-de-scandale in the U.S.

- The work was packaged in translation to conform to the expectations of Anglophone "Chick-Lit"

Translating *Shanghai Baby*
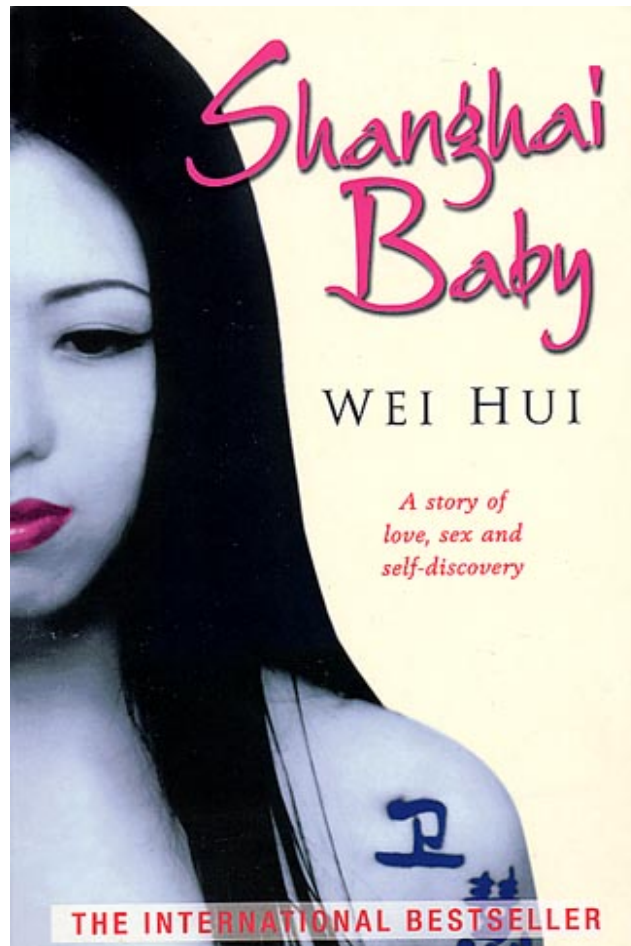
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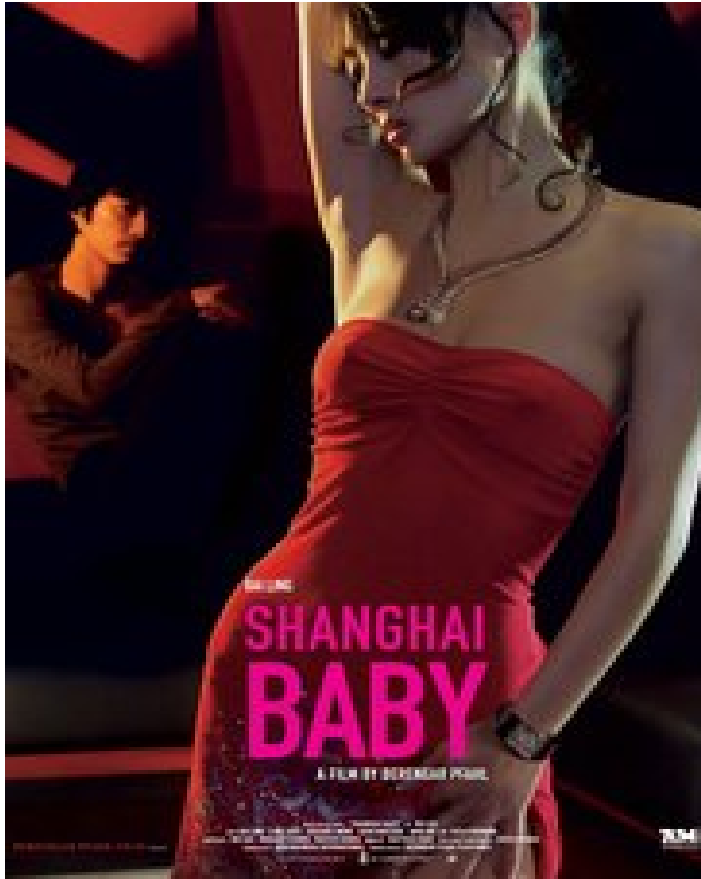
Conclusion

- The study of the packaging and reception of translated works offers a rich area of research for scholars in Translation Studies and Comparative Literature that will allow us to better understand how (and why) texts travel across languages and cultures

Questions?