

LAWRENCE VENUTI (1953–)

“The Bestseller”

Key words:

domestication, ethics of translation, foreignisation, role of a translator, scandals of translation, stereotypes, translator’s invisibility

1. Author information

Lawrence Venuti (b.1953) is one of the most recognized contributors to the field of translation studies. As well as being a translation theorist and historian, he is a practising translator, implementing his seminal ideas of foreignisation in his translations (chiefly from Italian and French into English). In his main publications he explores the subjects of the politics of translation, its discursive strategies – domestication and foreignisation, and the unfairly marginalized role of a translator. He is also the editor of various anthologies on translation theory, a contributor to many academic publications on the subject as well as a regular reviewer in various literary journals. Currently, he works as a professor of English at Temple University, Philadelphia.

Main publications:

Venuti, L. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London. New York: Routledge.

-----, 1998. *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. London. New York: Routledge.

2. Abstract

The article aims at exposing “scandals” involved in the translation of bestsellers. Venuti wants to show how the politics enters into the process of translating a book that is to appeal to a wide readership, making the original text subservient to the ethnocentric agendas of the target culture. Due to such an abusive domestication, Venuti claims, any benefit that could be had from confronting two foreign cultures is lost. Instead of challenging, mind-broadening confrontation with “the other” readers of a domesticated translation are only reinforced in their stereotypes about the foreign culture and reaffirmed in their own ideologies. Venuti wants to convince the reader how unethical and “scandalous” such domesticating practices are and how much damage they can do, not only because they default on promoting cross-cultural understanding but also because they perpetuate the “invisible status” of a translator.

3. Terminology

Source text term	Meaning	Term in Polish
bestseller	a work of literature attracting mass readership	bestseller
domestication	a translation strategy whereby a source text is adapted to the target culture norms	udomowienie
ethnic stereotyping	a mode of thinking based on the reliance on simplifying stereotypes	myślenie stereotypowe?
foreignisation	a translation strategy whereby foreignness of the source text is deliberately emphasized	egzotyzacja
humanism	a belief that intercultural communication and translation are possible because ultimately people are the same everywhere	Humanizm
readerly text	a text that fulfils readers’ expectations, reaffirms they beliefs	tekst czytelniczy

	and does not require any suspension of disbelief (i.e. it deals only with the familiar)	
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4. Methodology

In his article, Venuti presents basic rather than applied research – he wants to elucidate the problem rather than offer any practical solutions to avoid abuses in translation. His research is qualitative rather than quantitative in that he supports his claims with one example which he deems representative (he does not demonstrate the scale of the domesticating practices, generalizing on the basis of *Don Camillo*). His research is comparative as he juxtaposes the excerpts from the American translation of *Don Camillo* with the literal translation of Italian original.

5. Links with other publications on the subject

The critique of domestication has been launched by the seminal work by F. Schleiermacher in his *On the Different Methods of Translating*.

The question of domestic ideologies being introduced to the translated text and the utilitarian uses of the latter for the local political purposes has been investigated mainly within the framework of postcolonial studies, notably by A. Lefevre, G.Spivak and T.Hermans.

The notion of the ethics of translation as well as that of translator's invisibility has been addressed by A. Pym in his many publications, some of which are direct responses to Venuti's writings.

6. Critical commentary

Personally, I find this article very useful for a budding translator like myself: it may serve as a cautionary tale demonstrating how a money-driven publishing industry can skew the ethics of translation, and sacrifice the original on the altar of profit and domestic ideologies. Although I have no way of judging how widespread such domesticating abuses are, and though Venuti himself admits that things have changed for the better, with the integrity of the original being more respected, I still feel a lesson can be learnt from the analysis presented by Venuti.

In my view, the point he makes is extremely relevant, given that bestsellers by definition reach a wide audience so if they are “domesticated” it only perpetuates cultural divisions and stereotypes. I feel it is important to be aware of that, even if the motivations of a big industry is not something that can be changed on an individual level. Venuti does admit that translators do not have much say, being forced to manipulate with the original and then not even rewarded for the high profits their work generates. But here and elsewhere in his writings there is always this underlying assumption that translation should always be a mission of bringing “the other” a bit closer.

7. Quotation to remember the text by

“The publisher’s approach to the foreign text is primarily commercial, even imperialistic, an exploitation governed by an estimate of the market at home, whereas the approach of the domestic reader is primarily self-referential, even narcissistic, insofar as the translation is expected to reinforce literary, moral, religious, or political values already held by that reader” (Venuti 1998: 156).

8. References

Venuti, L. 1998. “The Bestseller”, in: Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. London: Routledge. 124–158.

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