

LAWRENCE VENUTI (1953–)

“The formation of cultural identities”

Key words:

cultural identity, domestication, domestic representation, domestic subject, domestic identity, identity formation, foreign culture, authority, institution, ethics of translation, Aristotle, Bible, Japanese fiction.

### 1. Author information

Lawrence Venuti (born 1953) is an American translator from Italian, French and Catalan. Moreover, being a translation theorist and historian makes him one of the key figures in translation studies, as his contribution comprises extensive and seminal works that serve anyone planning to study the subject as a highly useful reference or starting point. In *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995) along with presenting the history of translation he voices his concern for the fact that the translator is too much invisible. *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (1998), from which the discussed article has been taken, presents Venuti's insight into the concepts of domestication and foreignisation. In addition to these publications Venuti contributed to *Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (1998) and *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (2000). He is also the editor of *The Translation Studies Reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2004), a survey of translation theories, which is a must have reference book.

## 2. Terminology

domestication of the text (udomowienie)	a translation strategy involving adaptation to the target culture
domestic representation culture in (przedstawienie w kulturze concepts docelowej) text	the foreign text as it functions in the target accordance with norms, ideologies and within the target culture, the way how the is viewed upon in the target culture
formation of (domestic) identities which (tworzenie tożsamości [w kulturze viewpoints, docelowej])	the effect of the presence of translation influences the target culture – tastes, ideologies, preferences

## 3. Contents

The text presents the issue of identity-forming power of translation. On the one hand, translation forms a certain domestic representation – a view on foreign culture, a canon of foreign literature, promotion of certain values. On the other hand, it influences the very target culture because behind some translations stands the authority of such institutions as church, government, universities and their viewpoints and ideologies. Venuti supports his observations with several examples. The translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* involved domestic representation of ancient Aristotle's concepts. It was domestic because it was interpreted in accordance with prevailing trends – firstly Romantic individualism, and then, as this view was challenged by John Jones in 1962, existentialism. The translations of Aristotle were also identity-formative as they defined academic standards in discussion on Aristotle. The second example is Japanese fiction. The stereotypical American view on Japanese literature influenced a canon created by academic translators who were shaped by the experience of the Second World War. The third example is St. Jerome's translation of the Bible from Hebrew as opposed to the Septuagint based on the Greek text. In this case the translation was of importance as regards the Christian identity, as St. Jerome's version challenged the identity already formed on the Septuagint text. In the final

section – The ethics of translation – Venuti evaluates the strategies of domestication – ethnocentric movement, and foreignisation – the ethics of difference. He warns against extremes. He suggests a balance, being however more in favour of ethics of difference – for cultural diversity's sake and for the possibility of cultural change – especially regarding stereotypes.

#### 4. Other publications on the subject

The issues of domestication and forming domestic subject and the issue of translation ethics – domestication versus foreignisation were discussed among others in the works of Berman, Laclau and Mouffe, Lefevere, Pym, whom Venuti refers to in his article.

Berman, A. (1992). *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. S. Heyvaert, Albany: State University of New York Press.

----- (1995). *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne*, Paris: Gallimard.

Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. W. Moore and P. Camrnack, London: Verso.

Lefevere, A. (ed. and trans.) (1992). *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook*, London and New York: Routledge.

Pym, A. (1993). "Why Translation Conventions Should Be Intercultural Rather Than Culture-Specific: An Alternative Basic-Link Model," *Paralleles* 15: 60-68.

#### 5. Methodology

The text is a contribution to translation theory and translation history. Venuti introduces the concept of cultural identity, shows its significance and presence in reality, supports these observations with particular examples from different periods, investigating how a given translation forms cultural identities, and then evaluates the

concept in terms of ethics. Thus we can say that the article is of descriptive and quantitative nature.

## 6. Critical commentary

Reading this article is an enriching experience as it provides an interesting insight into the concept of domestication. The concept as such is already a common term denoting a translation strategy. The article, however, presents a deeper insight, showing the socio-cultural context of translation. We can realise how influential translations are, especially if authorised by institutions. As we can see, such an authorisation can lead to the formation of canons or stereotypes and support certain ideologies. Thus, a translation is an interface through which we perceive a foreign culture but we can also use it to support our own cultural identity. A translation can, however, change the domestic identity as well.

The article proves that this identity-forming and representation-forming power of translation should not be underestimated. It also addresses the dilemma between domestication and foreignisation, reminding us that when brought into extreme the former suppresses cultural diversity, while the latter results in a strangeness making the text inaccessible. Still, Venuti speaks in favour of the ethics of difference as it brings more cultural diversity, intercultural exchange and fights the stereotypes.

These observations make this article a valuable source for any novice translator as they make us aware of the depth of the issue of forming domestic identities which goes beyond the simple term of domestication. Moreover, the article points out to the opportunities as well as potential dangers that translation gives rise to.

## 7. Quotation to remember the text by

“The aim is to consider how translation forms particular cultural identities and maintains them with a degree of coherence and homogeneity, but also how it creates possibilities for cultural resistance, innovation and change at any historical moment”

“In attempting to straddle the foreign and domestic cultures as well as domestic readership, a translation practice cannot fail to produce a text that is a potential source of cultural change.”

## 8. References

Venuti, L. 1998. “The formation of cultural identities”, in: L. Venuti, *The Scandals of translation: towards an ethics of difference*. New York: Routledge. 67-87.