

‘STARS’ OR ‘PROFESSIONALS’: THE IMAGINED VOCATION AND EXCLUSIVE KNOWLEDGE OF TRANSLATORS IN ISRAEL¹

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy

Unit of Culture Research, Tel Aviv University

Abstract

Inquiring into the suspended professionalization of the translation occupation in Israel, this article examines two types of self-presentational discourses and status strategies – that of top literary translators, on the one hand, and that of technical translators, subtitlers and non-elite literary translators, on the other. Analysis of the former is based on several hundreds of profile articles and other reports in the media, which foreground 23 acclaimed translators, while that of the latter is based on interim findings from open-ended interviews with 22 non-elite translation workers (selected from a larger sample accumulated in an ongoing research project; Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger 2008). Whereas the former show unambiguous use of a *vocational* rhetoric, which includes denial of economic considerations, artistic-like occupational competence and a claim for the role of culture custodians, the latter betray an ambivalent use of this elitist discourse, wavering between embracing and rejecting it. This complex discursive dynamics suggests an artization process which, so I hypothesize, serves as a buffer to professionalization in the field.

Resum

Amb l'examen de la professionalització suspesa de l'ocupació traductora a Israel, aquest article estudia dos tipus de discursos d'autopresentació i estratègies d'estatus:

1. The paper reports interim findings of research sponsored by the Israel Science Foundation (ISF 619/06), “Strategies of Image-Making and Status Advancement of a Marginal Occupational Group: Translators and Interpreters in Israel as a Case in Point” by Rakefet Sela-Sheffy and Miriam Shlesinger. I thank Michal Abramovich, Tanya Voinova and Netta Kaminsky for their valuable assistance.

d'una banda, els dels traductors literaris, i de l'altra, els dels traductors tècnics, subtituladors i traductors literaris que no pertanyen a l'elit. L'anàlisi del primer grup es fonamenta en diversos centenars d'articles retrat i altres reportatges en els mitjans de comunicació, que situen en primer pla 23 traductors reconeguts, mentre que la del segon grup es basa en resultats provisionals d'entrevistes obertes amb 22 treballadors de la traducció no pertanyents a l'elit (seleccionats a partir d'una mostra més àmplia reunida en un projecte de recerca en curs; Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger 2008). Mentre que el primer grup fa palès un ús inequívoc d'una retòrica *vocacional*, que inclou la negació de consideracions econòmiques, competències laborals amb valors artístics i la reivindicació d'una funció de guardians culturals, el segon revela un ús ambivalent d'aquest discurs elitista, que oscil·la entre l'assimilació i el rebuig. Aquesta complexa dinàmica discursiva és indicativa d'un procés d'artització que, d'acord amb la hipòtesi que plantejo, serveix per amortir la professionalització del camp.

Keywords

Professionalization. Artization. Professional identity discourse. Vocation rhetoric. Elite literary translators. Non-elite translators.

Paraules clau

Professionalització. Artització. Discurs identitari professional. Retòrica de vocació. Traductors literaris d'elit. Traductors aliens a l'elit.

1. Introduction

The status of translators as invisible, submissive and underrated manpower in the production of imported texts has long been discussed and lamented (Venuti 1995, Simeoni 1998). Obviously, translators' alleged invisibility has to do with the weakness of their status as a profession (Chan 2005, Chriss 2000, Dam & Zethsen 2008, Fraser & Gold 2001, Gouadec 2007, Hammond 1994, Monzó [forthcoming], Robinson 1997). In this respect, the situation in Israel is an illustrative example: there, translation is not even officially recognized as a profession by state authorities (for example, for calculating income tax), nor is it effectively organized by professional associations². This means that translators have neither compulsory licensing, nor a monopoly over their work, their knowledge base and the entry of new members to their field. Anyone is allowed to translate. There is no obligatory formal training, nor regulation of conditions of work and fees. Translators' careers are fragmentary and informal, and often remain a part-time, secondary occupational path.

This state of affairs seems puzzling in view of the potential power of translators as culture mediators, especially in multicultural or peripheral social settings, such as the Israeli society. There, bi-nationalism, coupled with an influx of immigrants and guest workers, on the one hand, and a rapid development based in international exchange, on the other, create an ever-growing demand for translators and interpreters. Given these market prospects, the question arises why professionalization in the field of translation is suspended. In the sociological literature, professionalization is usually seen as a mechanism of gaining status, by systematizing and monopolizing exclusive expert knowledge, skills and procedures, and creating boundaries so as to guarantee closure and control (Abott 1988, Freidson 1994, Lardon 1977,

2. For the situation in Israel see Harel 2003, Yariv 2003, Translation fees 2003 (<http://planet.nana.co.il/managers/meravz/article73.html>;15.9.2003), Kermit 2004 (the only items available with regards to fees and rates are internet sources and journalistic reports). The only Israeli Translators Association (ITA) is a voluntary body and its members are less than half the estimated number of practitioners. For basic information, see the Association's website (<http://www.ita.org.il>).

Shuval & Mizrachi 2002, Torstendahl & Burrage 1990). This process can be seen as a type of autonomization process, as described by Bourdieu (1986): championed by small-scale occupational elites, it involves both an accelerating dynamics of closure and exclusivity vis-à-vis other occupations, as well as distinction and hierarchy between different groups and actors inside the field.

In fact, nascent attempts at professionalization have continuously been advocated by small groups of Israeli 'commercial' translators and TV and film subtitlers, as well as conference interpreters. These attempts include establishing professional organizations, diploma programs and academic training, as well as courses and workshops, developing working tools, and even proposing accreditation exams and a unified ethical code. Yet, except for the case of conference interpreters, all these initiatives have never gained momentum (cf. Elsaka 2005). Most of the practitioners remain indifferent or unaware of, if not hostile to them. In the absence of serious objective obstacles to explain the suspension of this process, I look for answers on the level of their professional *ethos and self-images* that generate status relations in this field.

1.1. Status relations in the field of translation in Israel

Clearly, rejection of trends of professionalization is not equally spread among the different translatorial sectors. A most revealing fact is that, unlike the case of highly professionalized occupations (notably medicine), in the field of translation it is the *elite* group that expresses the strongest objection. Within the heterogeneous and stratified translator community, a small group of *literary* translators create the most overtly distinguished and elitist group, who enjoy privileges and leadership position and are recognized as the spokespersons of the field.

In this article I will examine parameters of the construction and diffusion of an anti-professionalizing ethos, as emerging from the image-making discourses of translators³. My analysis is based on two different sources. The first one includes several hundred profile articles, newspaper interviews, surveys and other reports of and about translators published in journals and daily newspaper supplements (including internet magazines) from the early 1980's to the present. All this material foregrounds a small group of 23 *acclaimed*

3. My analysis in this paper is confined to practitioners who translate into Hebrew, since, in spite of the fact that Hebrew and Arabic have equal status as official languages of the state, and the fact that Arabic is quite widely spoken in Israel today, in practice Hebrew is the major domestic target language of the various branches of translation activities in Israel.

literary translators, 13 men and 10 women, who have led a lively self-presentational discourse during the last decades⁴. Findings from this source will be compared with findings from my second source, a sample of 22 interviews with anonymous technical translators, subtitlers and non-elite literary translators, which is part of an interim output of a research project in progress (Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger 2008)⁵. Since my aim is to compare findings from these two sources, I include in this sample only those of our interviewees who perform, if sometimes only occasionally, literary translation in addition to technical translation and/or subtitling or interpreting.

My purpose in analyzing these materials is to trace tendencies in the two groups regarding their self-imaging strategies and the value categories they mobilize to make sense of their job and create their occupational dignity. I ask how all this helps maintain status structures in this field. While the theory of occupational prestige focuses on objectively measurable factors such as income or formal education (Treiman 1977, Kraus & Hartman 1994, Semyonov *et al.* 2000), I am interested in what the practitioners themselves identify as their cultural resources, or *symbolic capital* to use Bourdieu's terminology (1985), which is believed to often have stronger impact on creating status boundaries than purely material or economic interests (see also Lamont 1992, 2000).

While professionalization processes entail imposing standardized formal criteria and impersonal expertise, the status dynamics of elite literary translators centers on personal charisma of select individuals. In spite of the alleged humbleness of translators as an occupation, these people enjoy the visibility of public celebrities. They create a system of stardom, based on various parameters of fame, which include, first and foremost, exposure to the media, winning prizes, and access to exclusive networks in the literary and intellectual fields. An important component of their fame is also the fact that they all have additional respectable careers related directly to these fields, mainly as poets and authors, literary editors and critics, or university professors⁶. As

4. Four of these translators died during the last decade. The 23 translators in the sample are the most heard or mentioned (most frequently and in diverse channels) among some dozens of literary translators that have occasionally been given exposure in the media over the given period of time. Interestingly, whereas the overall population of translators in Israel shows a female majority (see note #9), the majority at the top circle is still masculine

5. See note #1; 78 interviews with people working in different branches of translation have been accumulated so far.

6. Out of these 23 translators, 4 are known as authors and 9 are poets (5 of whom are known as both); 11 of them work or worked as literary editors (8 in publishing houses;

such, their opinion is often also sought by the media in connection to general high-culture matters, beyond translation.

Let me say my argument in advance: Top literary translators promote an anti-professionalizing ethos, which makes recourse to models borrowed from the fields of art and serious leisure (Sela-Sheffy 2005, 2006a). Their strategy, so I suggest, creates an alternative autonomization dynamics in this field, that of ‘artization’, which not only secures their own privileged position but also serves as a point of reference for larger translation sectors, and hence works as a serious alternative strategy and a buffer to institutional professionalization in the field at large.

In what follows I will first describe briefly the occupational discourse of elite literary translators (for an in-depth discussion see Sela-Sheffy 2008), and then look for comparables or differences in the discourse of the non-elite translators in my sample. Let me begin by outlining what I see as the main elements of this occupational discourse, namely, *the way elite literary translators define their occupational role, and the types of expert knowledge they promote.*

2. The canonical discourse of elite literary translators: Vocation vs. a paid profession

As emerges from the bulk of published material at hand, top literary translators (both male and female) have established a highbrow rhetoric through which they construct their self-image as ‘genuine translators’ to distinguish themselves from all other translators, whom they call ‘mere technicians’, namely those “who [merely] transfer words from one language to another” (Litvin in Karpel 1994: 29). This rhetoric is dominated by the tendency to glorify their trade as a *vocation* rather than just as a means of earning a living, which entails a declared hostility for, and avoidance of material and economic considerations. While, as a rule, translators’ fees in the literary publishing industry are generally at the bottom of the pay scale (e.g., Harel 2003, Lev-Ari 2002, Translation fees 2003), top literary translators are known to be disproportionately better paid, enjoying individual contracts according to their personal reputation (e.g., Wollman 1987). Nevertheless, almost none of them (except one) would admit that they do translation for money (the exception actually reflects the rule; e.g., Neuman 1987, Wollman 1987). Down-to-earth discussions of mundane technicalities, such as conditions of work or wages,

the others are editors of literary periodicals); 10 have or had an academic career; 6 are or were literary critics; 2 are members of the Academy of The Hebrew Language, and another one serves as an advisor to the Academy.

are inconceivable in their discourse, which dwells, instead, on questions of Culture and Art. If they complain that their job is tough, demanding and underpaid (e.g., Mirsky 1986), it is by way of asserting their unconditional commitment. One of these senior prominent translators voices this conviction most clearly upon receiving the Ministry of Education and Culture Prize for translators (1988), as follows:

[I] translate neither for livelihood nor for prizes. When I identify with a writer and [...] admire him, I want to translate him, whether they pay me or not. I should add, that fees are low, which fact discourages young talents from making translation their profession. (Kaspi in Zeidman 1988, 21)⁷

Idealizing a job as a vocation is observed in many professions (Estola *et al.* 2003). This rhetoric implies a sense of personal excellence and social commitment, both deriving from inborn exceptional talent and sensibilities as well as moral and ethical virtues, such as a sense of perfection and ideals, integrity, devotion, and even self-sacrifice for the benefit of the community. In cases of an impaired occupational status, this rhetoric serves as a neutralization strategy (Hunt & Miller 1994) by evoking a higher *value* code, to compensate for prestige-threatening material components such as lower income, or lack of standardized professional rules and measurable parameters of achievements and lack of closure. This rhetoric is therefore also very common among artists, as well as other semi-professional or underrated occupations such as teachers (Estola *et al.* 2003, Gordon 1997), midwives (Foley 2005), craft-artists (Mishler 1999), or popular musicians (Groce 1989), among many others.

The vocation discourse of Israeli elite literary translators includes the following two main elements:

2.1. *A pre-destined story of becoming*

Although all of these translators are well educated, usually college and university graduates, and often with exposure to foreign languages from an early age, they tend to present their becoming translators not as a rational decision, fitting their education and social status, but rather as determined by their inborn inclination and compelling drive from childhood, which have inevitably (albeit unplanned) been realized in their choice of work. Their prototypical narrative is that of a coherent natural growth from early age, which includes a latent incubation phase, followed by a moment of revelation, culminating in a

7. This and all subsequent quotations of translators' texts are translated from the Hebrew by me.

life-long commitment. Here is a typical story of such a moment of revelation, by one of Israel's highest-ranked translators:

[...] when I was a little girl, I came across the problem of transferring from one language to another. There were two translations of Oscar Wilde's fairy-tales in the house, [...] one enchanted me, and the other lacked anything that could deeply penetrate, that moved me. [...] and I remember that I told myself I wanted to discover where this magic lies, how the musicality of language is created. (Mirsky in Melamed 1989: 32)

Once she started, she says,

[...] I simply became addicted to it. [...] It is such addictive work, that I absolutely can't detach myself from it. [...] And like all addictions, I guess, it starts completely by chance. (ibid.)

Hinging on a natural gift, translation is presented in these stories as something that can never be systematically acquired by training. Hence the ambivalence, not to say resentment, these translators often express towards formal training including academic channels, and their emphasis on never-ending autodidactic learning and traditional master-apprentice forms of acquiring their trade (ibid., also Nagid 1998: 26).

2.2. *Mystified expert knowledge and personal qualifications*

By contrast to professional discourse that accentuates an explicit body of knowledge, based on standardized methods and theories and formal unified training, the vocation discourse of top literary translators reveals a tendency to *avoid definition* of such explicit knowledge and skills. Instead, their required competence remains obscure, based entirely on intuition: "Translation is [...] a story consisting of alchemy, wonder, almost magic" says Mirsky (Melamed 1989: 33); and elsewhere:

[...] I do not believe in a theory of translation whatsoever. [...] I have certain guidelines, but the trouble is that many of them contradict each other, and since I try hard to be faithful to all these principles at once, it turns out that I look at the work of translation as a mission impossible by definition. (*Moznayim* [a literary magazine] 1983: 25)

This allegedly indefinable competence entails an unusual artistic-like personal aptitude, including, notably, creative and sensitive spirit and a passionate state of mind. These translators frequently talk about emotional identification with the translated work, excitement and a reliving of the creative experience of literary writing, for instance: "You listen to the music of the language and reconstruct the text. This is a kind of rewriting which I do through the ear" (Mirsky in Moskuna-Lerman 1990: 32); "In translation I

repeat the process of creation” (Litvin in Snir 1988; also in Karpel 1994: 29); “When you translate, you walk around the whole day with a word, a sentence, [you] wake up at night, ‘Yes, I found it!’ – and forget in the morning. Exactly like a person in love” (Ben-Ari in Katzenelson 2000: 28). This competence also entails an artistic-like ethics, such as, notably, claiming artistic license, for instance, by denying readership constraints (“How many people will read the poem I translate? In the moments in which I translate I do not think of it”; Nitzan-Keren in Cohen 2000), or by insisting on freedom in selecting the material they translate:

[...] I have never translated a book that I was not a hundred percent happy about. One way or the other, the repertoire of experiences in all the *books* I have translated have been composed of things that in certain respects are directly linked to my life. (Saari in Katzenelson 2000)

Moreover, in the absence of formal criteria and qualifications, an exceptional personality becomes an important component of these translators’ professional visiting card. “Translation is an obscure profession, and the translator is an obscure person [of whom] a special blend of qualities is required [...]” (Ron in Lanir 1987), seems to be a motto which is applicable to much of their discourse. Even if many of them lead quite a normative middle-class lifestyle⁸, they often portray themselves as unconventional individuals or as outsider intellectuals by mentality (Carey 1992). The bohemian lifestyle of Mirsky, which has been repeatedly narrated in her portrait-articles in literary supplements over the years, constitutes an important element of her public persona and cultural charisma: the articles describe her Russian-like personality, her being a divorcee, without children, living alone in an urban setting, her love for books and music, her working at home long into the nights, or her drinking and smoking habits (Mirsky in Melamed 1989; Moskuna-Lerman 1990, Kadosh 1994, Landsman 2000, Karpel 2002, and elsewhere). Even more revealing, however, are similar testimonies by those who lead more conventional lives: Litvin admits that “there is a bourgeois side” to her life, which includes a solid marriage, a well-off livelihood and a grand residence in a high-status neighborhood, but she says this side of her life “is not very deep” (Karpel 1994: 76):

For many years I have had the complex of a newcomer. But it took [me] time to understand that I am a stranger because of my personality, which is slightly different. I would feel a little bit a stranger everywhere. [...] It is a mental

8. While eleven translators have or had a conventional family life, 2 are divorced and 6 are single, 2 of whom are homosexuals.

situation which is known to many creators (Karpel 1994: 30; also Manor in Karpel 1997).

In addition, these translators propagate two alternative role-images which foreground the types of knowledge and professional ethics in which they claim primacy and on which they draw for prestige and build their public persona as *cultural custodians*, as follows:

[a] *A profound knowledge of the canonical domestic language and cultural lore.* This type of knowledge evokes the role image of translators as orthodox gatekeepers, performing a national mission as *culture guardians and educators*. Being a solid, though quite scarce, resource, a perfect command of all layers of the literary Hebrew often serves as the yardstick according to which translators are prized or condemned by the critics (e.g., Lev-Ari 2002). Naturally, this knowledge is claimed primarily by senior translators, who are better educated in the higher and ancient layers of Hebrew, and who tend to exhibit this knowledge as their exclusive expertise so as to block the admission of novice translators into their sanctuary. These translators often complain about the deterioration of the Hebrew language and culture, and express their sense of duty in preserving and spreading the legacy of Hebrew (e.g., Porat 2002 and elsewhere). However, such a conservative attitude is sometimes also adopted by translators of the younger generations, for whom demonstrating this type of knowledge and ethics indicates a radical elitist stance vis-à-vis their peers: “[...] when I read many poetry translations of recent years, I get the impression that the translator’s task is merely to entertain the reader”; one of them warns,

[...] This means, in practical terms, that whole sections of Hebrew are blocked for the translator of poetry, because they are identified by the public as ‘highbrow’, ‘archaic’ etc. [...] This absurd idea means that there does not and should not exist any classics whatsoever. [...] In such conditions of cultural amnesia, [and] lazy reading habits, I find the work of translating poetry more important and interesting than anywhere else in the world. (Dykmann 1996: 2)

[b] By contrast, a *close acquaintance with and mastery of foreign languages and cultures* is also claimed by these translators, evoking the role-image of *culture ambassadors, responsible for cultural updating*. As such, this type of knowledge implies sophistication and cosmopolitanism, which constitute highly valued resources for cultural brokers in Israel. Those who build on this kind of knowledge tend to demonstrate their experience as people of the world and to express a sense of responsibility to rescue the local culture from provincialism and stagnation. Calling their job an “enrichment authority”

(Arad in *Moznayim* 1983: 26), they claim the role of culture importers who “transfer [from other cultures] the models according to which masterpieces in Hebrew will be later created”, maintaining that “[...] Translators pave the way for what will come next” (Litvin cited in Snir 1988: 19). Beyond just knowing foreign languages, they capitalize on their familiarity with foreign *cultures*, recounting the influence of their experience of living abroad (e.g., Ron in Becker 2001) or being exposed to their foreign languages from childhood (e.g., Nitzan-Keren in Cohen 2000), on their personal disposition and professional choices. Often they say their incentive to translate is the desire to share with the local readership experiences that are inaccessible to them: “[T]he reading material I got in my hands has always been written in foreign languages” says one of them, “[...] and I remember telling friends the content of books they could not read [...]. This is how the translator in me was born” (Bronowski 2002: 13).

Evidently, the vocational discourse described above is nurtured exclusively by elite *literary* translators, who play by the rules of the literary field, where market demand and economic prospects are limited. Under such conditions in the literary market, individuals' chances of success largely depend on their self-promotional image-making abilities, and the higher one's position the stronger one's symbolic distinction tendencies. The greatest disparity is thus created between the visible minority of top literary translators and the wide periphery of minor-league fameless ones. However, commercial translators and subtitlers are not exposed to the same market structure at all. While their services are inevitable, their prospect of gaining fame as individuals is nil. And yet, they, too, hardly seek status honor and security in professionalization.

3. The occupational discourse of non-elite translators: An evasive use of the vocation discourse

Let me now sketch briefly some of the main characteristics of the discourse of non-elite translators, as emerges from the interviews in my present sample. The 22 translators I selected here are all women, between 33 and 70 years old⁹. They all do literary translation, if sometimes only occasionally, or as a side track, along with technical translation (14), subtitling (5), or both (3), or

9. Ten of them are between 33 and 55 years old, the other 12 are between 55 and 70. Although the overall collection of our research interviews is not intended as a sample corpus, the demographic data collected to date point to predominately female interviewees, with a broad and balanced age range. The interviewing method was open-ended, applying a narrative approach, with an emphasis on life history. The interviews are all recorded, lasting 90-120 minutes each, and carefully transcribed and documented. Since

with technical translation plus interpreting (4). Whereas top literary translators reject signs of professionalization and see translation as part of their general literary-intellectual activity, most of the translators in the present sample express no objection to being recognized as professionals. While the former present their translating work as a calling, innocent of economic constraints, over two-thirds of the interviewees in my sample treat translation as a major job on which they depend for a livelihood. For 13 of them translation is their main job; 14 have been working in translation between 8 and 24 years, two have been doing it for over 40 years. While, moreover, the former limit themselves to literary translation exclusively (usually specializing in specific languages and genres), the latter, as already mentioned, usually do more than one translating job.

How do these structural differences translate into differentiated image-making strategies in these two groups? Interim findings from the interviews at hand suggest that the difference is not dichotomous. These findings show that, by and large, the interviewees consent to, rather than renounce, the status hierarchy imposed by the discourse of elite translators and accept its underlying value-scale, albeit with ambivalence. Their ambivalence emerges from the complex ways they waver between embracing and rejecting elements of this elitist canonical discourse, thereby exhibiting a resourceful negotiation of their own occupational status and self-esteem (for other examples of such discursive identity and status negotiations see, e.g., Snow & Anderson 1987, Foley & Faircloth 2003, Sela-Sheffy 2006b). Let me examine a few examples of these self-imaging negotiations.

3.1. *A contingent story of becoming*

By contrast to the paradigmatic story of becoming narrated by elite translators, the career story of most of the interviewees in my non-elitist sample is an indecisive sequence of 'one thing has led to another'. Although many of them do mention they had natural predilection for languages and literatures from an early age, they also recount at length their hesitations and down-to-earth practical considerations, including, first and foremost, economic prospects and time investment, as well as adapting their working conditions to their needs (for instance, 13 of them are mothers who prefer working at home), or education background and qualifications (they are all university graduates). Moreover, they never hesitate to tell about their difficulties, to complain

the translators in this group are not public personae, anonymity of the interviewees is guaranteed, including concealing names and other personal details.

about clients or wages, or to express disenchantment with their job¹⁰. As a result, translation often (though not always) appears in their career narrations as a default opportunity, one among other possible occupations related to the Humanities. "M", for instance, was a journalist, "until I became a mother", she explains:

because [then] it was already impossible to meet deadlines and be available all the time [...] but during my working at [a newspaper] I became familiar with quite a lot of publishers and all this world [...] and in the first years I used to do it as a side work, I made this money in addition to... it was not my main occupation, eh... [...] because, listen, I quit the job in journalism, and still one has to make a living. Not that making a living of translating books is easy, but this is a matter of capacity, and it is a matter of whether you take yourself seriously and tell yourself "I sit 5-6 hours a day [and] translate and I meet deadlines", which is also – payment arrives quicker [if you do] – and luckily, maybe because [mine] is a language which is not widespread [in Israel, so] I'm also being relatively [better] rewarded... I'm not saying generously but fairly [...].

Although they are not entirely lacking aspirations to intellectual goals and achievements, by and large, their stories reveal a tendency to deny responsibility in selecting this occupation, and ascribe it to random circumstances and practical constraints beyond their control. This rhetoric is often used to rebut an implied negative judgment (Hunt & Miller 1994) and maintain one's dignity by drawing a distance between 'what I do for a living' and 'the real me'. The following fragmentary hesitant story by "H", for instance, is typical:

[...] and then I went again to work in another place, again as a secretary, again I did not fit there... finally I decided... that is... I realized I needed... to do something else... and.... that's it, I decided to translate... but no, not really, eh... I started subtitling but, [...] ah! I know [...] it started with the fact that I did not know what I was going to do, so I contacted [a translation company] and started typing for them... and then they started giving me translation [tasks]... [...] I don't remember... for the love for cinema, you know, often people start from the love of... cinema, they have this kind of ideal... [...] The truth is that I once applied, there was a company [...] and [the person in charge] said "come, we'll give you a test"... and I did not go...

10. The following extract from "A" interview is typical:

I'm not one of ... [those] people, there are those among my colleagues who sit from morning to night [...] and translate, and work [...]...I'm... not, not like that, I never wanted to do it, and I never meant to do it...eh... it doesn't suit me as far as... my life goes, [...] with the house, with the children and... eh... [I] work very few hours a day [...] therefore I also selected this kind of clients who do not need urgent tasks. [...] On the whole this is quite... a tough and tiring work, that is, you can't, you do need to be attentive and aware of what's happening, but it is terribly boring... eh... [...]

eh... I regret it of course because I could have translated real cinema which is... there you [can] earn a lot more money

Unlike elite literary translators, they speak readily about their academic education or other training frameworks¹¹. Furthermore, over half of them (13) in fact mention formal translation training in their record, even if they hardly explain why it was needed. Often this information is inserted in their stories to signal a turning point in their translating career; yet, again, it is rarely narrated as a goal or an important accomplishment in its own right. This fact is attested, for instance by the following story of “R”, who enrolled for translation studies almost by chance, after doing occasional translation jobs during her student days:

This was really at the end of [my] psychology schooling and somehow I was distracted, [...] I finished psychology, started eh... diploma studies in communication... simultaneously...I realized [this program] was absolutely bad, something very... not high quality...and I started looking, and I said “wait a minute!”, [it was] like [I could have] turned my side work into something more central in my life <laughs> and that’s it, that’s it [...] so it was a rather... intuitive decision, terribly spontaneous, for, I just was debating, it was on the bus [...] and I said “OK”! and I turned back, ...[...] it was the end of the year, and I wanted to find out if I was still able to enroll to translation [diploma program], and it was an idea [that struck me], and they said...”the test is next week”...[...] I found myself in translation [studies].

3.2. *Ambivalent evocation of artistic-like expert knowledge and personal qualifications*

Another common discursive technique of rebutting an implied negative judgment is appealing to a higher-ranked vocation (Hunt & Miller 1994). While for most of the interviewees in this sample *literary* translation is a side job (some perform it only occasionally), they nevertheless talk about it very keenly. But at the same time they admit that this line of work is neither easily accessible nor profitable, and hard to seriously pursue and rely on as a livelihood. “M”, for instance, reports that until her child was born she translated only very few books; now the number has increased, but she says,

[...] it has evolved gradually. Now they [the publishers] approach me, but I also often find myself [trying to] interest publishers in books that appear

11. All of them are university graduates (5 have an MA degree and one a PhD), mostly in the Humanities (their main areas are Languages, Linguistics and Literature; 2 graduated in Theatre or Cinema, 5 in the Social Sciences), and 13 have translation training on their CVs, mainly as graduates of diploma programs.

[abroad]. Not that this really works, because they tend... there's a... there're very few publishers who are willing to take the risk and take a book that has not appeared in English and has not succeeded [...]

And "O" recounts:

There have been two or three books I translated, say, in the late 1980s which remain [my only literary translation experience]... romances, thrillers, things like that, I didn't... I didn't cross the line...like, eh...if I had stayed [in this business] maybe then I could have...been promoted both in the material I translated and in...the money I got, but at that time it was [easier] to make a living of subtitling, that is, until eh...

However, as much as literary translation can hardly become a major occupational option for most of these practitioners, they often echo in their talk the rhetoric of top literary translators and the mental disposition it entails; though, again, with ambivalence. Typically, they are quite evasive about their competence as translators, and maintain that it is not easily definable. They may sometimes accredit themselves (unlike top literary translators) with such professional skills as high proficiency, diligence and perfectionism. However, their talk reveals that, as a rule, they put more weight on creativity and intellectual sensibilities as their prime assets. "O", for instance, consistently expresses higher esteem for intellectual ethics rather than 'just' the technical skills of a subtitler; yet she is also mindful not to sound too presumptuous, and neutralizes such a possible impression by wavering between claiming and disavowing her artistic-like disposition:

You need eh... beside humility, also [to have] a lot of dominance, because you appropriate it to yourself, the translated output is your own creation. [...] [translation] is a kind of creation. It is a kind of creation, I explicitly... a kind of learning, also. True, I can't take this kind of... important knowledge to the supermarket, [...] but it makes my day. [...] Don't get me wrong, you can make money of these things, [but] I simply don't have the right personality for it... [...] Of course, of course it is a kind of creation, otherwise why would I have insisted that my voice will be preserved [in the translation]... in movies I can say [translating] also combines my love for cinema, that is, I am very eh... involved, [but] again, I feel I do not eh... read and experience enough because of this need... this need to produce work [...] a kind of creation, I know, I eh...I always say that if I had stayed in the film industry I would have certainly ended up being an editor, for I don't feel that I still have something... to say, and... I wrote a lot as a child, but this is finished, [...]

"G", a technical translator, embraces the artistic-like reverence for the Text with a capital T, as opposed to trivial documents, by using a bunch of appropriate phrases and metaphors that signalize her highbrow mental disposition: "[...] I'm actually *filled with satisfaction* when I see... that a text that I worked

on is now *flowing beautifully* and... [...] when I see that I've [managed to] *maintain the original mood* of the text [...]. And yet she feels she has to justify her creative aspirations in the context of technical translation: “[...] especially when this is translation of a text which is somewhat more *free*, not *soulless* documents... [...] *even the content of a Web site*, there is room in it for [some] *freedom*, that it is not, not a *soulless* text [...]”. [Emphases added]

Similarly, while most of these practitioners report quite a conventional lifestyle, which often means family life and raising children, they also tend to emphasize non-conformist aspects in their personality. These aspects include, notably, a sense of individualism and unusual temperament, to which translators often resort so as to explain such ‘oddities’ as failure to persist in other jobs or a predilection for working at home. Note, for instance, the cautious way in which “H” goes about conveying her non-conventional disposition and exceptional aptitude:

[...] I think I started completely by chance... in some computer company, where I worked... eh and I was a secretary there... and... I was *absolutely unfitting for the job* [...] on the one hand I was *over qualified*, and on the other I *could not bear being told what to do* [...] so eh... since they wanted to keep me but *did not want me to serve as a secretary*... so I think they asked me to translate. [Emphases added]

Finally, in the absence of formally defined professional knowledge, the knowledge of foreign languages – in most cases English, but sometimes also other languages – stands out as their utmost symbolic capital. As such it outweighs by far knowledge of Hebrew, the domestic language into which they translate and in which they are actually requested to exhibit proficiency. This type of knowledge is mobilized in their talk by way of enhancing their general intellectual image, but (unlike the case of top literary translators) is hardly evoked to signal cosmopolitanism and sophistication, or claim they are performing a social mission. Rather, they talk about their linguistic inclinations in terms of *personal* potential or empowerment, namely, as a unique talent or a highbrow autodidactic self-improving hobby. Here is, for instance, how “I” reflects on her passion for languages since childhood, against all odds:

[...] It comes from a natural gift for languages, from my attraction to languages, even today I have enormous interest in languages [...] I can pick up languages very easily, I can chat in... Italian, German, in... Spanish, without even having ever learned them in my life [...]. When I was a child, by the way, I learned French at one point [...] my dream was to learn French. If... if my parents had had money then I would have told them to send me also... I wanted French lessons so badly

Since all but four of the interviewees in this sample are native Israelis, without any international background, acquiring foreign languages at an early age is presented as an individual heroic accomplishment involving talent, resourcefulness, investment and determination, as is testified by "A":

From early youth, [...] I developed a special liking for the English language, for languages in general, and for the English language in particular... eh... yes... it was actually my hobby, in my spare time, eh... [...] which means I used to read, I started reading in English beyond what was [demanded] at school... I started listening to as much English as I could find...the only thing I had was the radio, there was nothing else in those days...[...] eh... I listened to records... a lot. I learned all the words by heart... I used to sit with dictionaries... and that's how I learned, both words and structures... I also appropriated a cockney accent <laughs>

However, unlike elite literary translators, they do not mobilize this type of knowledge to claim the social role of cultural custodian, and express no aspirations to the role-image of cultural ambassadors, or to that of cultural gatekeepers, as do elite literary translators. Being aware of this expected role, when approached directly with this question, "A" does not reject the idea of the translator as a cultural mediator, and yet she dissociates herself personally from it:

<sighs> ... yes and no... I don't know, that is, yes, generally... and the kind of translation I do... is not so much...eh... translation is definitely... a matter of ideology, indeed, with regards to this idea of culture transference, of the ability to... eh... that is to... to... give the wide audience who do not speak different languages the ability to get to know another culture, of course there is an enormous ideological importance to it... [but] I personally eh... do not deal with it so much, so from my point of view it is not so much eh... [...]

4. Conclusion

The above sketchy comparison between the self-presentational discourse of top literary translators and that of non-elite translators was attempted to examine status strategies in the field of translation in Israel. Top literary translators create and publicize a consistent anti-professionalizing discourse of *vocation*, the main elements of which are, (1) denial of practical and economic constraints; (2) mystification of the professional rules and foregrounding of personal traits; and (3) claiming the social role of cultural custodians by mobilizing the role-images which entail two exclusive knowledge types – that of the domestic language and that of foreign languages. This vocational discourse encourages an artization process, which, promoted by *celebrated liter-*

ary translators, enhances their distinction and supports their privileged status as an elite group in the translation industry.

The question arises as to what extent their imagined cultural mission corresponds with their actual role in society at large. It stands to reason that elite literary translators have much less influence on shaping everyday cultural practices than do the majority of fameless translators, who work for the consumer importation market, from TV and film subtitling, to translation of manuals, prescriptions, contracts, magazines or even pulp fiction, not to mention software localization. And still all these 'commercial' translators express no urge for an alternative, professionalizing, strategy of status improvement in their occupational space.

Contrary to what might have been expected, findings from the sample of 22 interviews with non-elite translators suggest that a great deal of the rhetoric of top literary translators is actually embraced by them as a point of orientation that sets their dominant categories and values. All these practitioners express ambivalence regarding their own job, and make use – though quite evasively – of the vocation discourse of literary translators, to rebut negative judgment. By and large, their status claim is largely based on mystification of their professional competence and personality, though they do not go all the way with it. While most of them speak freely about practical incentives in working as translators, such as working conditions and fees, change of career, or getting a job that suits their qualifications, they also make a point of justifying their choice in terms of intellectual challenge and self-fulfillment. While they are open about being unable to pursue literary translation as their major line of work, they consent to the hierarchy it imposes and acknowledge the alleged higher talents and ethics it requires.

In other words, although they have much more at stake in economic terms, they do not develop a serious alternative source of symbolic capital, but rather appropriate the canonical discourse as a source of prestige and adapt it to their situation. All this suggests that their lack of professionalization is not necessarily a matter of no choice. Apparently, the symbolic justification it provides to the non-standardized status of their job overshadows the promise of professionalization. In short, as much as the artistic-like vocational discourse stimulates a distinction mechanism to the benefit of *literary* translators, it also permeates the field at large. Being so widely accepted, it discourages attempts at professionalization. Apparently under conditions of weak institutional boundaries and an unprotected market the symbolic resources it provides are more available and easier to utilize for status advancement than creating a structural institutional change.

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