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How books travel: Translation flows and practices of Dutch acquiring editors and New York literary scouts, 1980-2009

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Introduction

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Selling 376.775 copies, Dan Brown's *Inferno* was the bestselling book of 2013 in the Netherlands. Together with, amongst others, novels by Afghan-born American novelist Khaled Hosseini, a classic work of the late John Williams, British author Rosamund Lupton, the American E.L. James and Dutch author Tommy Wieringa, it appeared in the top 10 of best sold books in 2013 (CPNB, 2014). A trip to a nearby Dutch bookstore will tell you the same: books written by authors from all over the world are being sold in Dutch just as easily as books written by Dutch writers. Looking further down the list of bestselling books of 2013 one finds Swedish authors Jonas Jonasson and Karl Ove Knausgard, Danish Jussi Adler-Olson and more American authors, such as Donna Tartt, Karin Slaughter, David Baldacci and John Grisham. There is also an Italian author, Paolo Giordano—who had hit it big a few years earlier with *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*—and the Spanish Carlos Ruiz Zafón, one of the most successful contemporary Spanish authors. Of course, more Dutch authors appear as well; for instance, A.F.th. Van der Heijden, Herman Koch, Saskia Noort and Arthur Japin have done well in 2013.

While a bestseller list is not representative of all books that are translated into Dutch, it does give rise to a number of striking observations. For one, it shows that many of the biggest books of the year are translated. It also shows that writers from quite a few places are being translated, but probably not from all places. For instance, it is striking that there were no African writers on the bestseller list, and neither any from Asia. And, one could ask if Hosseini's book would have been translated into Dutch if he had stayed in Afghanistan where he was born? The best-seller list also suggests that American and British writers are very popular, maybe even more popular than Dutch authors. Browsing through the bookstore, one will find roughly the same pattern. Many books are translated from many places but some places are better represented than others. Sociologically, this begs the question: how do books travel across the globe?

To answer this question, in this dissertation I analyze how translation flows of fiction and poetry books in the Dutch literary field develop. To do so, I construct a dataset of all fiction and poetry books published in the Netherlands between 1980 and 2009 to analyze translation flows within the context of the entire book production in fiction and poetry. In addition, I study the practices of New York literary scouts that work for Dutch (and other) publishers to help them select the most interesting manuscripts from the Anglo-American literary field. Furthermore, I analyze the practices of Dutch acquiring editors who are responsible for deciding which books to publish. As such, in combining large-scale quantitative data with

in-depth qualitative data, I attempt to examine the whole of the translation processes, not only the translation flows on an aggregate level, but also the micro-sociological and meso-sociological processes that underlie these translation flows.

Translations have a rich history in the book industry. Especially after the development of printing, a sizeable transnational book market emerged in which publishers and booksellers were actively engaged with publishing in other languages on foreign markets and translating books for their local market (e.g. Franssen, 1986; Gibbs, 1971; Behiels et al., 2014; see especially Casanova, 2004). Translations were crucial in the development of the novel in the Netherlands and made up the largest part of fiction publications throughout the 19th century (Oosterholt, 2012; Streng, 2011). Moreover, the language from which a book is translated is used as a genre and explicitly noted in the title of the book (Streng, 2014). In the 20th century, the development of the book industry increased in a rapid pace (e.g. Kuitert, 2008 for an overview) and translations increased as well. Heilbron (1995) shows that, after the Second World War, translations from English made up an increasingly large portion of books published.

The development of translation flows have been described as part of a process of cultural globalization, which is defined as ‘the growing international diffusion, exchange, and intermingling of cultural goods and media products’ (Janssen, Kuipers and Verboord, 2008: 720). It is especially since the end of the Second World War (Heilbron, 1995; Trumpbour, 2007)—in books and movies, and even later, in the 1980s, in fields such as television (Hesmondhalgh, 2007)—that cultural globalization increased and transnational cultural fields and transnational media conglomerates developed to an unprecedented scale (Kuipers, 2011). In the book industry as well, which already had a long history of transnational circulation, the extent to which publishers became part of transnational media conglomerates (e.g. Greco, 1989; 1999) and the scale on which books travelled around the world was unparalleled.

The development of the transnational circulation of cultural goods has, in sociology, predominantly been studied in terms of cultural imperialism. This term was used to describe the increasingly dominant position of American culture across the globe. An example of this was the American foreign policy that was developed after the Second World War, which focused on cultural goods (filling libraries, holding art exhibitions and so on, see Stephan, 2006) and on intellectual and academic exchange (e.g. Frankel, 1965). Moreover, it was used to describe the ‘imperialistic’ position of American media conglomerates in fields such as television, film and communication industries (e.g. Tracey, 1985; Tomlinson, 1991; Petras, 1993; Beck et al., 2003; see Hesmondhalgh, 2007 for an overview).

Some of these scholars fear that globalization will lead to, or actually consists of, a process of Americanisation (see also Ritzer and Stillman, 2003) in which American (popular) culture will come to replace local (and high-brow) cultures and through which a more homogeneous world culture will emerge. As such, the field of globalization studies was long dominated by research on power relations between nation-states.

The sociology of translations developed in close relation to this approach and was initially built on the world-systems theory of Wallerstein. The sociology of translations as developed by De Swaan (1993) and Heilbron (1995; 1999) aims to understand book translations in relation to economic, political and cultural power relations between nation-states. Heilbron shows that we can understand the relative size of translation flows that are exported from the position a nation has in the cultural world-system. Powerful nations in or around the core export a large number of translations to countries in the periphery, while they import very little. In countries located in the periphery of the field, the import is very high, especially when considered as a percentage of the total book production, while the export is very small. In other words, a country such as Greece or the Netherlands might translate more than 50% of its total fiction book production, but the export of Greek and Dutch books is very small. Heilbron shows that, after the Second World War, especially the translation of English books took flight and books translated from English had a larger share in some genres than books originally written in Dutch (Heilbron, 1995). As such, this perspective understands translations in the context of political, economic and cultural power relations between nations and shows how power relations shape translation flows. However, this approach falls short in an analysis of specific translation practices and markets. As Heilbron notes:

‘[T]HERE ARE QUESTIONS TO BE RAISED ABOUT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUCH AN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF SPECIFIC TRANSLATION PRACTICES. THERE IS OBVIOUSLY NO SIMPLE AND IMMEDIATE TRANSITION FROM ANALYSING A WORLD-SYSTEM TO ANALYSING A NATIONAL PUBLISHING INDUSTRY OR PARTICULAR TRANSLATION STRATEGIES. THE WORLD-SYSTEM IS CONCERNED WITH THE MOST GENERAL SET OF CONDITION, AND FOR A MORE COMPLETE SURVEY, IT IS NECESSARY TO LINK THESE CONDITIONS TO THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF THE PUBLISHING BUSINESS AND ITS DIFFERENT SEGMENTS. (...) THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF THE MARKET IS THUS A CRUCIAL DIMENSION FOR ASSESSING THE ROLE OF TRANSLATIONS, AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF MARKETS IS VERY RELEVANT (SWEDBERG, 1994). A MORE COMPLETE SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS MAY THEREFORE SEEK TO CONNECT THE DYNAMICS OF THE INTERNATIONAL TRANSLATION SYSTEM WITH THE ACTUAL WORKING OF THE BOOK MARKET AND ITS VARIOUS SEGMENTS.’

(HEILBRON, 1999: 440-441)

While the world-systems approach has illuminated sociological research on translations, the approach suffers from drawbacks, as Heilbron notes. Most importantly, translations are not conceptualised on a micro-level but understood as part of translation flows on the macro-level of the nation-state or language group they originate out of. Indeed, literary texts are used in processes of nation-building (e.g. Rock, 2010). Moreover, they sometimes explicitly act as representations of, or having strong ties to, the nation-state, for instance in the Marshal Plan and when translations are funded by state agencies (e.g. Smith, 2004), but this is not the case for all translations. As Heilbron notes, translations are, at the same time, part of different (trans)national book markets and (trans)national literary fields (see also Heilbro and Sapiro, 2007). In this dissertation, I take up Heilbron's invitation to work towards a more complete sociological analysis of translations and understand translations as emerging from the specific transnational configuration in which they are produced.

As such, my dissertation takes a different approach to understand translations within the (trans)national literary field and (global) book market in which they are produced and sold. Understanding translations in this way requires a different analytical framework than traditional approaches to globalization. I follow the institutional approach that has been developed in the sociology of culture (e.g. Peterson and Anand, 2003). This approach is inspired by both field-theoretical understandings of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993) and neo-institutional research (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). In recent years, this approach has increasingly been utilised to analyze how cultural globalization takes place in practice (Bielby and Harrington, 2008; Kuipers, 2011; Forthcoming; Velthuis, 2013; Dowd and Janssen, 2011).

A critical difference from the above mentioned perspectives on globalization is that this approach focuses on *how* books, and other cultural goods, travel across the globe. These scholars analyze the transnational cultural fields in which this process takes place. They show that these fields have their own logics (e.g. Kuipers, 2012; Sapiro, 2010), conventions and gatherings such the art fair art basel for visual arts (Quemin, 2013), NAPTE conferences for television (Bielby and Harrington, 2004) or MIPCOM in Cannes for all audiovisual content (Kuipers, 2012), the Frankfurter Buchmesse for books (Moeran, 2010) and their own rules and regulations (for instance regarding copyright and trade agreements). Moreover, they show how actors and their daily practices constitute the very basis that makes translations, and the phenomenon of globalization itself, possible. As such, they develop a detailed account of the cultural intermediaries that work within (trans)national cultural fields, especially of their gatekeeping and brokering practices in which they forge new transnational connections but also guard the gates of national cultural fields (e.g. Kuipers, 2012; Heinich, 2012; Velthuis, 2013; Foster et al., 2011).

Inspired by this literature, I have developed a mixed-methods approach that combines large-scale quantitative data with in-depth interviews to answer the question on how books travel. I have, first, collected data on all fiction and poetry books published in the Netherlands between 1980 and 2009 (more than 85.000 publications). This data can be used to describe the position of the Netherlands within the cultural world-system on the basis of translation flows into Dutch. This is useful as these translation flows are made up of countless individual editorial decisions to translate and publish this or that book. This type of data shows us in which directions, in aggregate, editors are looking and how this changed in the last three decades. However, with these data, the question of ‘how’ cannot be answered. To answer that question, I did in-depth interviews with New York literary scouts and Dutch acquiring editors. With this data, no aggregate view can be produced; rather, it is used to follow a book, or rather a manuscript, from the desk of a writer in New York, passing all kinds of intermediaries (such as agents and scouts), to the editor in the Netherlands who puts it onto the book market. In this process, the manuscript has been changed, edited, translated, classified and commodified and is turned into a—translated—book. Through analyzing the practices of scouts and editors, I come to understand in far more detail the complex evaluation and decision-making processes that are involved in making a book travel from one literary field to another and onto the book market than was until now possible in the sociology of translations.

This analysis of how books travel is developed in five articles that are presented as chapters in this dissertation. In chapters one and two, I engage with the opposition between large-scale and small-scale production, and re-introduce Bourdieu’s notion of genre subfields (1996: 120-121). I argue that genres are powerful structuring mechanisms (see also DiMaggio, 1987) and that, as within literary fields, a lot of practices and institutions are organized within genres, such as author unions, libraries and reading groups. Genres itself structure literary fields relatively independently of the opposition between large-scale and small-scale production. In chapter 1, I analyzed to what extent genre subfields are useful concepts to understand translation flows. I argue that the static difference in translations between genres, most notably between poetry and romance, can be understood from the large-scale/small-scale opposition. Indeed, while in poetry linguistic origins are very diverse but there are relatively little translations, this is the opposite in romance novels where the share of translations is very large and the linguistic diversity is very low (see also Sapiro, 2010). However, when the development of translation flows over time is scrutinized, the relations between genres become more complex. First of all, the development of the share of translations in different genres

do not correlate with each other: there is no field-wide development in translation flows and also no uniformity in the large-scale/small-scale subfields. Especially among literary fiction and crime fiction, the developments are oppositional: in literary fiction, the share of translations and the share of English go up, while this is the other way around in crime fiction. This chapter then argues that genre subfields are important institutional structures within which we can understand translation flows, and their development, better.

In chapter two, I develop the analysis of translations within their genres further. I ask, using the genre and original language books in publishers' lists between 2000 and 2009, how the Dutch literary space is structured by hierarchies between genres and within genres. I designed this study based on Bourdieu's seminal article (Bourdieu, 1983) on the French literary field, in which he argues that literary fields are characterized not only by the field-wide opposition between the large-scale and small-scale pole, but that this opposition is also apparent in genres themselves. While, on a field-wide level, genres stand in hierarchical relations with each other, the opposition between autonomy and commerce is also reproduced within genres themselves. The internal differences between publishers in the same genre can be so large that publishers in similar poles in different genres are more similar to each other than to publishers from the other pole of the same genre. Using genre and original language, this chapter examines the Dutch literary space through 215 publishers' lists and finds that four subfields can be distinguished. On the one hand, there is an autonomous poetry subfield in which publishers are small and publish according to radically different logics than publishers on the other side of the field (see also Dubois, 2006). In this subfield, the internal hierarchies between languages are less important. Poetry publishers publish poetry from a range of source languages. They do, however, not often publish other genres on their publishers' list. On the other side of the field, the large-scale subfield, I find three subfields of publishers. The Anglo-American-commercial subfield, the local-commercial subfield and, in the middle of the field, the large generalist publishers who publish mainly literary fiction, combined with other genres. These different subfields show that the large-scale pole is not uniform. Within this part of the literary space, there is an opposition between publishers who are focused more on popular genres from Anglo-American literary fields and those publishers in the middle that publish far more literary fiction and poetry. This opposition, however, is not only one between genres but also, importantly, one that comes out within genres. In crime fiction, there is an opposition between translations from English on the one hand, and Dutch and Scandinavian crime fiction, which holds a far better position in the literary space, on the other. Within literary fiction, there

is a similar distinction between publishers' lists dominated by English literary fiction, and publishers who publish a variety of translations from more peripheral languages and literary fiction originally written in Dutch.

In the second part of this dissertation, I develop an understanding of the way books travel in practice. I start in New York, in chapter three, to discuss the practices of literary scouts. I describe how scouts evaluate manuscripts that come onto the American publishers market in which American editors select the manuscripts they want to publish. There, scouts who work for European publishing houses have three roles. First, they act as gatekeepers, filtering information for their clients on the newest, most interesting manuscripts. Second, they act as brokers, connecting their clients to manuscripts and people in the New York literary scene. Third, they act as co-producers engaged in the transformation of manuscripts into books through labeling, classifying and evaluating them. Scouts use three evaluation regimes—the aesthetic, institutional and relational—to evaluate manuscripts. It is especially the relational regime, that of following buzz, that is most noticeable in markets such as this one, where cultural objects are not yet finished and actors are in a hurry to beat the competition to buy the best manuscripts. Because there are very little judgment devices to go on, scouts and American and foreign editors have to rely on this relational evaluation regime. Moreover, I argue that, in this case, this regime also denotes a specific type of valuation process, which can be understood as a relational mode of valuation in which value emerges through the network that develops around a new manuscript rather than through institutionalized consecration mechanisms.

In chapter four, together with Giseline Kuipers, I have developed an understanding of the daily practices of acquiring editors as reactions to difficulties that they encounter in deciding what to publish. There is an overabundance of available new manuscripts to possibly publish. It is impossible to, on beforehand, know or predict the nature, quality and marketability of new manuscripts. In addition, there is a great competition for the 'best' new manuscripts. Editors cope with these issues in different ways during the decision-making process. We showed that editors spread their decision-making power across a network of people that they trust. In that way, other actors, such as literary scouts or befriended editors and translators, act as filters in the abundance of manuscripts available. Moreover, we find that editors rely on a strategy we dubbed 'identity' in selecting a possible manuscript. They relate the manuscript to their publishers' list and assess whether it 'fits' their publishing house.

The publishers' list also serves another purpose in the practices of editors: as a representation of symbolic capital. Editors build publishers' lists that show some

form of coherence and shows others who they are. It is the publishers' list that embodies the publishing house's symbolic capital. At big international events such as the Frankfurter Buchmesse, editors walk around with their publishers' lists so they can exchange them with other editors to get a sense of what the other publishes and what their position in the field is.

In chapter five, together with Olav Velthuis, I shift from editors' decisions on which translation rights to buy, to the way manuscripts are materialized and commodified by bringing them onto the Dutch book market. In this chapter, we ask how editors decide on the height of the retail price of new fiction and poetry books. We show how editors go about the process of making a retail price using a profit and loss statement in which all characteristics of a book are assembled together and have to be made to match. We found that editors aim for a price that is seen as fair by consumers; they follow the moral ruling of the market that prices should be legitimate. This legitimization is found by coupling the material of the book with its price-tag. However, there is no straight-forward pricing based on production costs. Rather, editors price books *as if* material drives the price. They magnify material difference to create a market order based on material characteristics. Again, this chapter does not only engage with the effort of editors but also shows the logic of the market, adding to our understanding of the institutionalized network in which this process of materialization and commodification takes place. We show that value, here, is an assemblage or, quite literally, an equation of the number of pages, the type of binding, the print run and whether it is a reprint or not. Genre and whether a book is a translation are also part of the assemblage but cannot do much in this setting. What creates market order here is the idea that one pays for the material one buys. As such, when it comes to translations, the act of translating can hardly be made valuable in terms of the retail price, while it does figure heavily in the cost price. The chapters in this dissertation are based upon articles that have been or will be published elsewhere. Chapter one has been accepted for publication by *Translation Studies*. Chapter two is under review with *Cultural Sociology*. Chapter three is currently under review with *Poetics*. Chapter four has been published in *Poetics*. Chapter five has been published in *Socio-Economic Review*.