

Venuti, L. (2019) *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic*. University of Nebraska Press. 219 pp.
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Review

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Lawrence Venuti (2010) compared instrumentalism and hermeneutic model, the dichotomy between the correct standard and manifold interpretations with the genealogical method. Almost a decade later, he furthers his critical reflection in *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic*, which is, as the subtitle suggests, a monograph of argument against the pervasiveness of instrumentalism in translation theory, commentary and practices. The book, as one of the Provocations series, is designed to offer “a forum for the kind of cross-disciplinary theoretical experimentation that is the very essence of cutting-edge work in the humanities” (2016). In keeping with this motivation, Venuti initiates a critical reflection on the deeply-entrenched thinking of instrumentalism, appealing for an embrace of the postmodern counterpart in translation studies.

The book consists of three parts, each headed by a predicament posed by instrumentalism in translation studies, the first being translation obliterated and employed abusively in academia, the second, the oversimplification and mechanism in three formulaic proverbs of translation studies, and the third, the invisible translators in the popular culture of subtitle translation. By illustrating the problematic status quo in translation studies, Venuti promotes the shift from instrumentalism to a more productive model.

To highlight the purpose of the book, Venuti opens with a foreword entitled *Provocations*, sketching out the problem-oriented argument against

instrumentalism which leads to the marginalised and abused circumstance of translation, therefore, he calls for a departure from the oversimplified assumptions to a more interpretive episteme.

The introduction of the book, *Start/Stop* differentiates the two models, with a special focus on the archaeological and the epistemological study of instrumentalism. At the outset Venuti targets instrumentalism, enumerating the problems of marginality of translation and stagnation in knowledge communication, since the thinking oversimplifies translation as the reproduction of the invariant such as form, meaning or effect. By contrast, the hermeneutic model, which draws inspiration from semiotics, regards translation as an interpretive act supportive of various interpretations. Venuti adopts the methodology of the Foucauldian archaeology, investigating the epistemes of the two models fundamentally and historically. On the one hand, the same episteme may generate internal contradiction; on the other hand, different epistemes may produce external inconsistency at the various levels. Instrumentalism has been prevailing in translation theories and practices to such an extent that it has been applied to consciously or unconsciously. In tracing the trajectory of development, Venuti observes the standard or notion particular to a certain historical period, from the resemblance in Chapman's metaphor of clothes in Renaissance episteme, to Tytler's style of source text in classical episteme, and to Benjamin's "pour language" in modern episteme. He continues the investigation of instrumentalism in translation academia, which is aimed at preserving "the essence", the "semantic invariant" and intention of the commissioner as the invariant in translation. Finally, by employing the concept of desiring-machine proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Venuti aspires that the book functions as an end of the prevailing yet detrimental instrumentalism and a start of a diversified and productive interpretation in translation.

Chapter 1, *Hijacking translation*, initiates the argument against instrumentalism in academia by presenting the plight of translation overshadowed by comparative literature, the abused translation and the possible hindrance to the political revolution with a case study of a philosophical dictionary. Starting with "the old hostilities toward translation" recorded in the 1993 Bernheimer report, Venuti traces the depreciation which is further exemplified in the ACLA report in 2004, implying translation as a "thematic reading", and the inappropriately meagre proportion of translation in literature in 2017 report (2019, p. 43). Despite the significant progress driven by world literature emphasising border crossing, translation is slighted in Occidentalism which

hierarchises literature and translation worldwide and prioritises Eurocentrism in comparative literature.

To further illustrate the marginality of translation in academia, Venuti adopts the case of the “dictionary of untranslatables” by Barbara Cassin. Notwithstanding its preservation of philosophical tradition, the notion of «untranslatability” is reiterated in both the French version (2004) and the English version (2014). The neglect of the temporal, spatial and historical background, exemplified by overlooking the Arabic source text, the context and the medieval code and themes, leads to instrumentalism which stems exchanges and multiculturalism. Moreover, the English version of the philosophic work by Emily Apter reinforces the “Anglocentric spin” by discarding the other interpretations and complying with the orthodoxy of the US (p. 61). Worse still, the mindset of untranslatability results in the methodological principle and word-surfing translation practice. Finally, Venuti illustrates the influence of translation in the provocation of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), which would otherwise be discouraged by the notion of untranslatability rooted in academia.

Chapter 2, *Proverbs of untranslatability*, with the archaeological analysis, explores deeper into three prevailing proverbs in translation studies by clarifying the genealogy, original contexts and the instrumentalism in nature. Starting with the Italian proverb “*traduttore traditore*” [Eng., translators, traitors], Venuti identifies its origin as an irony of the translators’ incompetence in reproducing the semantic invariant in the 16th century. However, it was applied to illustrate the philosophical analysis of untranslatability in translation proper in later generations. Likewise, Robert Frost claims that “poetry is what is lost in translation. It is also what is lost in interpretation” (p. 111), viewing untranslatability as the invariant of poem translation because of “the sound of sense”, or the phonological features of the language. However, Frost’s requirement on poetics further hinders the rendering of poems to any other interpretations. In the same way, Venuti traces Derrida’s paradox, “In a sense, nothing is untranslatable; but in another sense everything is untranslatable” in the original exposition. Initially, Derrida proposes the conflict between paratext, such as annotation and interpretation, and “the principle of economy” (p. 121). On the one hand, Derrida classifies paratext into the concept of “the loose sense” of translation (p. 122); on the other hand, it is a violation of the principle of economy. For Derrida, the “irreducible body” of the words is the invariant untranslatable feature of the source text. Simply put, all the three formulaic proverbs are historicised in different contexts and

historical periods, whereas they have been gradually reduced to instrumentalism which produces the misinterpretation of untranslatability and further causes the marginalization of translation theoretically.

Chapter 3, *The trouble with subtitles*, proceeds from analysing instrumentalism in theories to subtitle translation in practice with lucid discussion. It also starts with the prevalent instrumentalism preserving message, information or effect in subtitle translation research, training and practices. Against this background, Venuti elucidates his hermeneutic analysis of a salesman's off-screen voice in *Psycho* (1960), taking into account both intertextual and intersemiotic elements which include the formal interpretants of register, lexicon and syntax, the thematic interpretant of sexist, as well as another decisive factor of the montage. The accompanying problem, nonetheless, is whether the subtitlers' interpretive endeavour can be accepted by the audience and even the critics, as Henri Béhar's creative and hermeneutic subtitle for *Thérèse* (1986) invites the criticism of "showing disrespect" (p. 141) to religious theme and a revision by the other translators in the DVD versions. Venuti attributes the misunderstanding to the fact that subtitle is considered an integral part of "filmic diegesis" (p. 143). Moreover, he also warns against the unconventional translation in which the translators arrogate the power of producers to themselves, thereby producing subtitles with surprising, misleading and distractive effect.

In the final section of the book, *Stop/Start* echoes the first two sections, *Provocations* and *Start/Stop*, with three suggestions embracing the hermeneutic model in future translation studies: from the invariant of form, meaning and effect to manifold interpretations which usher in innovation and change in politics and culture; from nihilism of untranslatability to the open-ended signifying process; from ST-oriented translation to a more autonomous translation activity involving translators and readers. All these formidable efforts would, on the one hand, terminate the standstill in knowledge dissemination and marginality of translation resulting from instrumentalism; and on the other hand, yield academic turn which brings translation from periphery to centrality (p. 176).

Venuti continues his strong line of philosophical investigation into the plight in translation, i.e. Eurocentric assumptions, social hierarchies and cultural narcissism. By zooming in the ensuing consequences of instrumentalism in academia, translation pedagogics and practice and the social and political

influence, he endeavours to subvert the prevailing instrumentalism and kindle the desire to change in translation studies.

The book carries out the insightful philosophical reflection from two aspects. Firstly, the Foucauldian archaeology, Venuti argues, provides a historical view for instrumentalism. Alongside this line, he identifies instrumentalism latent in translation theories with a sharp eye for two millennia from Cicero, Quintilian, John Dryden, Alexander Tytler, André Lefever, Walter Benjamin to Jacques Derrida, albeit the occasional hermeneutic traits in some theorists, historicizing instrumentalism in translation theory and contextualising the original discourses. The trajectory presents the process of how the translation theories and proverbs are reduced to the marginalization of translation and translators and nihilism of untranslatability. Secondly, Venuti advocates the poststructuralism model which prioritises the target text supportive of variable and sophisticated interpretations in different historical periods. The book is a de facto application of hermeneutic model exemplified with numerous case studies on the analysis of translation theories, metaphors on translation, philosophical terms, slangs and puns in subtitle translation. In doing so, Venuti attempts to inspire the application of hermeneutic model in academia, translation practice and all the participants of translation activities, including the readers and viewers.

In terms of the implication of hermeneutic model, Venuti essentially proposes the epistemic, paradigmatic and pragmatic shift from instrumentalism to the open-ended model which yields innovation from threefold aspects. On the production side, the book promotes a model supportive of multiple interpretations for the source text. The most exciting exemplification is Venuti's suggestion of an anthology of world literature, a coalescence incorporating a variety of translation practices, for instance, translation, adaptation and editing to target various audiences. Another notable practice of subtitle translation in hermeneutic model offers more comprehensive understanding of the film from the lines and even the non-verbal images. On the research side, Venuti encourages the scholars question and identify instrumentalism in translation theories, metaphors and proverbs however formulative and influential they are. More importantly, he appeals to the recognition of translation with ingenuity and intelligent sophistication in academia. On the consumption side, hermeneutic model in subtitle translation is more demanding, as it sets a higher demand for not only the translators, but the viewing audience equipped with both rich viewing experience and an awareness of the more sensitive, attentive and sophisticated understanding and

interpretation. All these factors combined, translation will witness renovation in theoretical development and translation practice, restoring productivity and creativity in the final products, the centrality of the subject, and even political changes beyond translation.

Despite the philosophical observation and practical application of the hermeneutic model mentioned above, there might exist certain weaknesses in the application of the model in translation studies. First, formal and thematic interpretants might overlap when the interpretation of the key words is related to ideology. Second, it seems that hermeneutic model might be more applicable to literary, philosophical and historical works with variable interpretations than the genres focusing on facts such as scientific and technological texts.

To conclude, the book sparks a debate over the dualistic, namely, openness vs. exclusiveness, variant vs. invariant, standard version vs. creative interpretations, therefore calling for revolutionary changes in translation studies. It is noticeable that a counter argumentation entitled *The Invariance Effect: A Response to Lawrence Venuti* by Stefan Helgesson is to be published by the same press in the near future. The tug of war between instrumentalism and the hermeneutic model is destined to continue, inviting further discussion of the two epistemes in linguistic, cultural, social and political levels. From whichever perspective, the book marks a step forward towards the challenge of the deep-rooted model theoretically and practically.

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