

Portrayals of Translators and Interpreters in Contemporary Fiction and Motion Pictures: An Agency Perspective¹

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Abstract

Considering the popularity of works of fiction and their impact on the public's perception of groups and entities, this research focuses on portrayals of translators and interpreters in contemporary English fiction and motion pictures, from the perspective of agency. The study adopts the theoretical model proposed by Poupaud (2009) to operationalize agency. The three aspects of agency delineated by Poupaud, namely resource, performance, and discourse, were explored using thematic analysis in a corpus of 15 novels and 5 motion pictures featuring a translator or interpreter as a central character whose work is in the focus of the narrative and relevant to the plot. The findings of the study suggest that the resource aspect is mostly concerned with linguistic competence, while the aspect of performance focuses on the process of translation and the way these characters put their expertise and resources into use. Finally, in the discourse aspect the attitudes and perceptions surrounding agency of some characters are positive and agent-aware, while other characters face negative, distrustful attitudes and ideas of invisibility. To conclude, the findings suggest that the performance of translators and interpreters is the most visible aspect of their agency, while the discourse aspects points at the influence of the other agents and their expectations.

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Introduction

Works of fiction, by virtue of their popularity, can exert a wide influence on the way the public sees and understands phenomena. They shape people's conceptions and enable them to make judgements about entities that they may not have experienced first-hand. Following the rise of globalization and the increasing need for linguistic mediators, translators and interpreters have been increasingly featured in fictional works. Kripper (2023) points out that "translation narratives offer the unique possibility of exploring the role of translators, understanding them as intermediaries, with their own agency, motivations, and cultural and historical contexts" (p. 2).

Being featured in popular works of fiction as main characters can help bring translators out of the shadows and increase their visibility (Kaindl, 2016). On the other hand, these portrayals reach a large audience and impact their perception on a subconscious level, while remaining as a historical document possibly passed on to future generations. Therefore, inaccurate portrayals in such works can do more to damage the image of a profession than actual incompetence of individuals practicing it.

By studying such portrayals in various works of fiction with a focus on agency, the present study tries to gain insights into how translators are viewed within society and how their roles are constructed and interpreted. The reason for the present study to focus on agency is that it is an important yet obscure aspect of the profession outside of its academic sphere and one that might not be explicitly dealt with in fiction. Perhaps for this reason, it has been largely neglected in studies dealing with fictional accounts involving translators and interpreters. The present study is an attempt at closing this gap by exploring the following research questions:

RQ1: How are translators and interpreters portrayed in contemporary works of fiction in terms of the resources and abilities that enable agency?

RQ2: How are translators and interpreters portrayed in contemporary works of fiction in terms of performance and successful use of resources that enable agency?

RQ3: How are translators and interpreters portrayed in contemporary works of fiction in terms of discourse and the way agents represent agency?

Review of Related Literature

As Kaindl (2016) points out, translators and interpreters have appeared in works of fiction throughout history, and creators of fiction have employed the concept of translation and persona of translators and interpreters to highlight cultural or social issues, represent the link between reality and fiction, or draw attention to questions concerned with literature. Portrayals of translators in works of fiction have attracted so much attention in the scholarly world of translation that the term ‘fictional turn’ was introduced by the Brazilian scholar Else Vieira (1995, as cited in Ma, 2018) to account for ‘incorporation of fictional-theoretical parameters as a source of theorization on translation’ (Ma, 2018, p.188).

Ma (2018) distinguishes two directions within the fictional turn in TS. One is concerned with fictionalization of translation in novels and includes works by Jorge Luis Borges, Jose Saramago, and other renowned writers. The other direction involves theorizing about translation on the basis of fiction and has seen theoretical works by TS scholars such as Arrojo and Pagano. Kaindl (2016) distinguishes a third direction in this line of research which is concerned with the way theories of translation are incorporated into works of fiction.

Different aspects and issues involved in the task of translation and interpreting can serve and have served as plot devices in the past decades. One of the concepts that has received less attention in this area has been the agency of translators.

Perhaps the most succinct and at the same time inclusive definition of agency in TS is the one offered by Kinnunen and Koskinen (2010): “willingness and ability to act” (p.6). This definition entails choice and intentionality (willingness), power relations and limitations imposed by the field (ability), and also the use of one’s ability to make a change (to act). As Tymoczko (2014) notes, choices and decisions of

translators were among the first issues explored in considering the translator's agency. These choices can involve the meanings and information that are conveyed, but they also involve the values and ideas that are supported or undermined.

Research on agency, as Buzelin (2011) observes, can be concerned with translation history or the sociology and anthropology of contemporary practice. Buzelin (2011) asserts that empirical research in this area can take the form of surveys on the status of translators and interpreters, or involve interviews with practitioners, or ethnographic studies of translation organizations.

Another approach can be identified in Paloposki's (2007) study, where she sets out to explore "the choices, decisions and arguments of individual translators" through documents that "help us study the extent to which a translator is able to negotiate the conditions of his work" (p. 335). In her view, translator's agency becomes manifest in "his/her textual and stylistic presence [...], in book selection or the adoption of certain strategies, and in the impact of the translator on the literary or linguistic scene" (p. 337).

It can be concluded that, while Buzelin's (2011) view adopts a more direct approach that involves interviews and field work, Paloposki's (2007) approach is more indirect and focuses on textual evidence. While equally valid, each approach looks at the issue of agency through a different lens. The theoretical framework adopted in this study (Poupaud, 2008) is more aligned with the latter approach, which relies on indirect evidence of agency, since the objects of the study are fictional characters rather than real people.

Empirical Studies

Previous studies have investigated portrayals of translators in fiction with regard to different aspects of their practice. For example, Wilson (2007) studies works of fiction in which translators are placed in the limelight and is interested in emotive and personal aspects of translation. Using concepts from post-colonial and gender studies, as well as narrative theory, she explores themes of love, being lost and found through translation, making connections, loss of self, and translating the self. She

concludes that portrayals of translators in the novels and stories she investigated highlight presence and visibility of translators rather than absence or invisibility.

Al-Mahadin (2014) studies the role of translators in *The Promise* (2001 series), which is set in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, using a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on psychoanalysis, semiotics, discourse analysis, applied linguistics, as well as Heideggerian philosophy. The writer observes that the series highlights the complexities and challenges faced by the translators, such as navigating power dynamics, dealing with conflicting loyalties, and grappling with the ethical dilemmas of their work.

Wakabayashi (2021) studies 40 works of Japanese fiction that feature translators to see the way they use translation as a metafictional device, their representation or misrepresentation of reality, and how positive or negative the portrayals are. In her corpus, translation is mostly portrayed as mechanically decoding and encoding texts between two languages, although at times with the intention of invalidating such a view. She concludes that metaphors of translation are of little interest in the corpus of her study and that interpreters receive less attention than translators.

Kripper's (2023) study dives into the Latin American tradition with a focus on the issue of mistranslation. Drawing on post-colonial and narrative theories, she asserts that the translators in the corpus of her study all intentionally deviate from the source to disrupt the power dynamics inherent in translation and do not lament the losses traditionally associated with translation, nor do they see themselves as subservient to the original text; instead, they challenge the notion that translation is inherently subordinate to the original.

While these studies explore interesting themes in fiction, none of them deal with agency of these characters and their abilities and working processes. The present study has tried to deal with this aspect of the issue.

Methodology

The Corpus

The corpus of the study consists of 15 novels, three movies, and two miniseries, all originally written or produced in English between 2000 and 2024. They were selected through purposive sampling with the aim of selecting works in which the profession and practices of translators and interpreters are in the focus of the narrative. The corpus includes the following works:

Table 1. Books

Title	Author	Publication year
Bel Canto	Ann Patchet	2001
Everything is Illuminated	Johnathan Safran Foer	2002
The Translator	John Crowley	2002
The Interpreter	Suki Kim	2004
Lost in Translation	Edward Willet	2005
The Mission Song	John le Carre	2007
Translator Translated	Anita Desai	2011
I am China	Xiaolu Guo	2014
Good on Paper	Rachel Cantor	2016
The Translation of Love	Lynne Kutsukake	2016
Forever Betrayed	Kathleen Brooks	2016
Intimacies	Katie Kitamura	2021
The Silent Suspect	Nell Pattison	2021
Drunk on All Your Strange New Words	Eddie Robson	2022
The Translator	Harriet Crawley	2023

Table 2. Motion pictures

Title	Director/Creator	Release year
The Emperor	Peter Webber	2012
Arrival	Denis Villeneuve	2016
I know this Much is True	Derek Cianfrance	2020
The Covenant	Guy Ritchie	2022

Shogun	Rachel Kondo; Justin Marks	2024
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Data Collection

The data collection method of the study involved qualitative content analysis which involved reading the full text of novels and watching the full length of motion pictures with a focus on the role of translators and interpreters. Excerpts of the texts or scenes from the movies that were relevant to translators or interpreters and their work were highlighted or timestamped. After the whole picture is formed and the course of events and their consequences have become clear, the highlighted excerpts were referred back to, and information relevant to each aspect of agency was organized in accordance with the data analysis procedure.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in this study is the model proposed by Poupaud in 2008. Poupaud (2008) operationalizes agency along three axes: first, abilities of the translators and resources at their disposal that grant them agency; next, the performance of the translators and the effect they produce through using such resources; and finally, the relevant discourse, that is, the way the translator sees and represents his or her own or other people's agency and the way the discourse expresses agency. This model will be further operationalized below.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the corpus was analyzed according to the theoretical framework of the study which conceptualized agency in three aspects: resource, performance, and discourse. The table below presents a list of the indicators considered in analyzing each aspect of the agency of a character:

Table 3. Operationalization of the theoretical framework (Poupaud, 2008)

Indicators	Aspect of Agency
- Professional training in translation/ interpreting - Academic education (language and/or translation/interpreting) - Personal background (bilingual family, extensive travelling, etc.) - Personal traits and attitudes - Cultural knowledge	Resource

- Tools and methods of translation	
- Working conditions and processes - Decisions and choices in the process of linguistic mediation - Scope of fulfilled tasks - Stepping beyond linguistic mediation to cause/prevent an event - Degree of freedom and power over what and how they translate/interpret	Performance
- The translator/interpreter's self-perception - The translator/interpreter's perception of their task - Other characters' perception of the translator/interpreter - Other character's expectations of the translator/interpreter - Common clichés (invisibility/ translator as traitor, etc.)	Discourse

After organizing the data, an overall account of the agency of each character was developed and a thematic analysis was performed to draw some generalizations from these accounts and the trends observed regarding each aspect of agency to answer the research questions.

Results

The findings of the study were organized along the three aspects of agency to answer the research questions. The first research question was concerned with the resources and abilities that enable agency. Out of the 24 translators and interpreters in the corpus, 14 are mentioned to have received some form of relevant education. However, only one of them has a translation degree, while the others were educated in language(s). Also, only four characters receive professional training in translation.

Personal background is mentioned as a factor influencing the linguistic skills or interest in language of seven translators in the corpus. Out of this number, two are natural interpreters, which means their personal background is their sole source of knowledge. The other five show a mix of personal background and education as the source of their knowledge. The personal traits and attitudes that enable a translator to perform effectively are mentioned for 12 translators. Some of the relevant personality traits mentioned in the corpus include a talent or passion for learning languages, precision and ability to listen closely for interpreters, and also a kind of

rootlessness. Cultural knowledge was mentioned in six cases, but in one of them, the translator lacked the sort of cultural knowledge necessary for translation. The tools and methods of translation were largely disregarded and received mention only with respect to three characters.

The second research question dealt with the performance aspect of agency. The results show that the working conditions and processes received varying degrees of attention in the story of 19 out of the 24 characters. Another significant indicator of performance in the corpus has been the decisions and choices of translators and interpreters, mentioned in the story of 12 characters. Such decisions are mostly concerned with choice of words in translation and the tone of speech in interpreting.

The translator or interpreter moving beyond linguistic mediation was observed in 11 characters in the corpus. They act as negotiators, advisors, and advocates of their clients, offer insider knowledge and information on proper behavior, and mediate the cultural differences between people.

The performance of translators and interpreters was also considered in terms of the degree of power and freedom they have in the communication. This indicator was observed in the story of 10 characters, but most of these characters had little power or freedom in terms of what and how they translate. However, a few of them showed a greater degree of power. For example, one translator chose the book to be translated and approached the publisher about it, introducing a new writer into the target culture. The scope of the tasks the translator/interpreter fulfills receives attention in the story of nine characters. This indicator has proven to be mostly relevant to interpreters who were needed in a variety of context, from interpreting in conferences to interpreting in one-on-one conversations.

The third research question explored the discourse aspect of agency. Consideration of this aspect in the corpus presented a more polarized image of the agency. Out of the 24 characters, 14 had some ideas about themselves as agents in a communicational exchange. Many of these ideas involved ideas of invisibility, powerlessness, or insignificance, all in contrast with agency. However, some others

saw themselves as a bridge, conduit for words, a hero saving the world, or a needed asset. The translator and interpreter's perception of their task received attention in the story of 17 characters. Some of them focused on understanding and conveying the meaning rather than focusing on surface words, while others emphasized neutrality and objectivity in their mediation.

Out of the 15 characters whose story offered some data on other characters' perception of the translators and interpreters, only four received positive comments from other characters. The other characters' expectations of translator/interpreter, although receiving less attention, is no more positive than their perceptions. Three interpreters are reminded that they are expected to only interpret when they offer opinions or advice, while two are expected to act as spies. Only one employer expresses a realistic expectation involving transfer of tone and subtleties of speech.

Finally, the most common cliché observed in the corpus was that of invisibility which was observed in the story of six characters. The ideas of invisibility were reflected in the attitude of the analyzed characters, other characters, or even the narrator.

Discussion

One of the main observations at the level of resource was that education formed an important part of the translators' and interpreters' competence in their jobs, and personal background only worked in combination with education, mostly contributing to an interest in learning and languages. However, a further observation made it clear that study of language and linguistic competence in the two languages were considered enough for a translator or interpreter. This lack of formal translation training in most characters forms an image of translators as "natural" linguists whose innate talent has priority over professional skill, potentially limiting their perceived agency.

With respect to personal traits, characters driven by a love of languages are often depicted as choosing translation as a vocation rather than just picking it up as a way of making a living. This passion reinforces their agency by making them active

seekers of intercultural connection. The general lack of attention to cultural knowledge and tools and methods of translation in the corpus implies a disregard for translators' and interpreters' expertise, presenting their work as intuitive and reducing their agency to result of talent or an unmethodical transfer of words between languages. Accordingly, the resource aspect of the data shows a main concern with linguistic knowledge.

With regard to performance, the working conditions and processes appear as the main indicator of agency, compensating the disregard for translation tools and methods in the resource aspect to some degree and contributing to a more systemic understanding of the labor of translators and interpreters. The recruitment process, negotiation of conditions and compensation, linguistic and non-linguistic challenges faced in the process, as well as the emotional burden of different contexts were among the factors observed in the corpus. These are reflections of translators' and interpreters' agency since they show how the characters put their expertise and problem-solving abilities to use and how they approach and overcome challenges. Additionally, the decisions and choices of translators and interpreters in the process of mediation include both linguistic and non-linguistic decisions. By virtue of their extensive knowledge of both source and target cultures, these characters make conscious decisions regarding what is and is not appropriate in the specific context of the communication. The decision to leave the job is also an important observation, whereby a few interpreters decide to leave their job when they feel the requirement of neutrality and emotional detachment is not possible for them to meet. This decision reflects one of the coping strategies enumerated by Abdallah (2010) as a way of asserting agency when the translators faced oppressive conditions at work. The interpreters in the corpus of the study, however, make this decision for more affective reasons.

Relying on their linguistic and cultural knowledge and their unique position in the communicational exchange, the target characters in the corpus repeatedly stepped beyond the professional requirements of their jobs and took actions to help others or catalyze events. For example, they advocate for the rights of their clients,

negotiate on their behalf, or give them advice and insider knowledge when they feel it is called for. In some cases, this form of mediation becomes a manifestation of the kind of power Kinnuen (2010) refers to when talking about the translators' and interpreters' power as opposed the institutional power of, for example a judge or a military officer. Although at the top of the power hierarchy, other agents in the communication must rely on the linguistic mediator for the interaction to work and have almost no control over what is exchanged.

With regard to the variety of tasks that translators and interpreters undertake, the interpreters offer a wider variety of services to their employers wherever needed. Such fluidity reflects the interpreters' agency by showcasing their use of their resources and skills to fulfil different purposes and their ability to adapt their craft to different contexts. However, in some cases, this leads to a situation where others take them and their abilities for granted and take advantage of them beyond reason which highlights a line between agency and submissiveness.

Consideration of the discourse aspect led to observations that can be considered as the two sides of a spectrum. While some characters had positive perceptions of themselves and their task, with cooperative relations with other agents and enjoying positive attitudes of other characters, others had very negative attitudes, seeing themselves as invisible, passive instruments and their task as a mechanical transfer of words, and mostly distrusted and disrespected by others. This observation reflects Poupaud's (2008) findings regarding translators' self-perception, where some considered themselves invisible while others believed in responsibility and authorship of the translator.

A connection is observed between the other characters' perceptions and expectations of the translators and interpreters and their self-perception. Those who had cooperative relations with other agents and were respected by them show a more positive self-perception, while those that were distrusted or disrespected by others showed a more negative self-perception. It appears that, as social beings, these characters are inevitably influenced by and seek validation of others. This, however, might deprive them of their agency and reduce their performance to a quest for

affirmation. Additionally, the tension between translators' self-perception and external expectations mirrors Bourdieu's (1991) concept of **habitus** - the internalized norms of a profession.

Ideas of invisibility were quite common among the interpreters. Such ideas were sometimes advanced by the interpreters themselves, who considered invisibility as a prerequisite for their performance or felt uncomfortable when they were placed in the center of attention. It also came from other characters on occasion, who expressed a satisfaction at invisibility of the interpreters or seemed to not even notice their presence. Invisibility becomes more of a serious issue because it is mostly presented as a virtue and necessary quality for the successful interpreter.

To sum up the findings of this study, the connection between the three aspects of agency was not a straightforward one. It appeared that the resource aspect was quite strongly connected to the performance aspect, but the discourse aspect showed a less direct relationship with the former two. While most of the characters were intelligent, educated, and skilled professionals, their self-perceptions and perceptions of their tasks were more affected by the other characters than their own abilities. This reflects Dam and Zethsen's (2008) findings in their study of high-profile translators in Danish companies who had a poor perception of their status within the company despite their education and abilities. On the other hand, the power imbalances highlighted in the performance aspect can be considered as a contributor to the negative attitudes observed in the discourse aspect and a reflection of the relations with and perceptions of other characters. The deficiency in these characters' power and authority can be traced back to the ignored indicators of agency at the level of resource, namely translation training, cultural knowledge, and tools and methods.

Conclusions

This study tried to explore the agency of translators and interpreters as portrayed in fiction and motion pictures using a three-fold framework. The findings of the study show that on the level of resource, these characters are mostly linguistically educated and competent and on the level of performance, they put these resources to use to fulfil a variety of tasks. However, on the level of discourse, they

are plagued by negative attitudes and ideas of invisibility and powerlessness, both reflected in their self-perceptions and perceptions of other characters. These findings suggest that there is a need for calls to make translatorial agency more visible in fiction and counter ideas of invisibility, submissiveness, and passive mediation prevalent in these stories. Such attempts could involve writing reviews on these works or trying to identify the root causes of such perceptions.

Nevertheless, the scope of the study has been limited by covering only contemporary English fiction. To better understand the ways translators and interpreters are portrayed in fiction, future studies can explore differences between the western and oriental perspective. Additionally, receptions studies in line with the fictional turn can investigate the impact of these stories on the audience's perception of translators and interpreters.

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