The following interview with Lawrence Venuti took place at an international conference held on 24-26 May 2012 at the University of Tallinn in Estonia. The theme of the conference was “Translating Power, Empowering Translation: Itineraries in Translation History.” The interviewers were Katiliina Gielen, Lecturer in the Department of English of the Institute of Germanic, Romance and Slavonic Languages and Literatures at the University of Tartu and Daniele Monticelli, Head of the Department of Romance Languages and Cultures and Associate Professor of Italian Studies and Cultural Semiotics at the University of Tallinn.

**KG and DM:** Why should we consider power while discussing translations?

**LV:** Because translating is never simply about constructing a relation between a translation and the source text that it translates, nor even a relation between the translation and the translating language and culture, although both relations are essential to understanding what a translation is, what meanings, values, and functions it might support. Translation is more than these relations: it is a linguistic and cultural practice that is situated in multiple sets of hierarchies between and within languages, cultures, and institutions. These hierarchies are rankings according to value, authority, or prestige, so that translating, even picking a text to translate is implicated in division and inequality, regardless of the fact that a translation is meant to bridge linguistic and cultural differences. The hierarchies, however, are historically variable, and translating can also alter the way that they unfold. How they affect the choice of source texts for translation and the development of discursive strategies to translate them has emerged, since the 1980s, as one of the most productive areas of investigation for translation studies.

Clearly, the sort of investigation to which I am pointing is sociologically and historically oriented, leading to the study of broad translation patterns in particular social formations and historical conjunctures as well as to the critique of the ideological determinations of translations. But this orientation should not exclude or minimize the exertion of power that occurs at the most basic, textual level as well, the power involved in choosing source texts and in choosing words and phrases to translate them. Translating is an interpretive act of ethnocentric violence whereby a source text is rewritten—that is to say, its linguistic constituents are dismantled, rearranged, and ultimately displaced—according to intelligibilities and interests that are fundamentally those of the receiving culture. The producers of a translation, including the translator as well as a range of other agents (editors, publishers, promotion and marketing departments, and so forth), wield enormous power over the source text and culture as they are represented in that particular translation.

**KG and DM:** Is there a specifically fruitful theory of power to prefer in translation studies (discourse analysis, postcolonial studies)?

**LV:** Today a student of translation has many theoretical and critical discourses from which to choose in order to develop a research project. But the most important gambit is to treat the translator’s verbal choices as interpretive moves made in response to a specific cultural situation at a specific historical moment and always mediated by the institutions in which a translation is produced and circulated. Over the past decade, the most influential discourses have been sociological, the work of theorists like Pierre Bourdieu and Niklaus Luhmann. But there are also other conceptual resources that
have not been much explored within translation studies, notably the Marxist tradition and poststructuralist thinking, the work of philosophers like Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault and its impact on a wide variety of literary and cultural studies.

**KG and DM:** Are there any shortcomings in the power turn in translation studies (or is it only advantages)?

**LV:** Sociological methods do carry limitations for translation studies. Perhaps the greatest risk is that the text as a unit of analysis can vanish beneath large-scale cultural and social developments. It remains essential not to lose sight of translating as an interpretive act performed in language. We can remain mindful of this basic fact by supplementing sociological methods with discourses such as hermeneutics, semiotics, and speech act theory, as well as varieties of linguistics. Relating broad developments to textual features is important to increase the sophistication and self-consciousness of translators and readers of translators. We still do not have an adequate idea of how translation constitutes an interpretive act or of how to read translations as translations, as texts in their own right, relatively autonomous from the source texts that they translate.

**KG and DM:** Given our Soviet past, in Estonian it is quite common to suspect that political-sociological approaches to literature risk with sociological reductionism that loses the specificity of literature. Comments?

**LV:** This problem is not specific to cultures with a Soviet past. It has beset literary and cultural studies throughout the world since the 1980s, when these fields were politicized through the dissemination and synthesis of various theoretical and political discourses, mainly Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism and their development in such other discourses as postcolonial theory and sexuality studies. To be sure, cultural forms and practices are ideologically determined, they are affiliated with the interests of social groupings, but it is nonetheless possible to distinguish between culture and politics, to recognize that formal properties and textual practices have their own specificity, and therefore that translations are constituted by their own materials and their own means of deploying and transforming them. This is why the Althusserian notion of ideology as subject formation, for instance, has proven to be such a breakthrough: the subject positions created by language and discourse, through textual features like point of view and characterization, can be understood as simultaneously positions in specific ideologies. Hence the verbal choices in a translation can affect the ideological determinations of textual structures. The crucial issue is the mediation between the text and its social context: how to perform an ideological critique of a translation without reducing it to mere politics, taking into account its diverse effects--textual and aesthetic, cognitive and emotional--which always influence its social functions. Politics, moreover, can take a variety of forms. A translation can affirm or challenge institutionalized knowledge by maintaining or questioning the direction of academic research, and these too must be recognized as actions that are political.
KG and DM: You are the editor-in-chief of the last volume of the *Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*. The amount of material you had to consider was huge. How did you select the aspects that you study more closely? What do you think are the points of special importance in a translation history?

LV: Because my volume in the Oxford History addresses the twentieth century, a period when translation (in every language, not just English) underwent an exponential increase in quantity and differentiation, the term “literary” is somewhat of a misnomer: the corpus is what I would call “humanistic” translation. My volume considers 20thc. English-language translation in the full gamut of the arts and human sciences. Hence there are not only sections devoted to conventional literary genres like poetry, prose fiction, and drama, but also sections that examine children’s literature and travel writing, film and opera, life-writing and history, philosophy and theory, religious texts and ethnography. Other sections give an account of what it meant to be a translator in the 20thc., the legal and economic conditions under which translators worked, their training and professionalization, as well as the commercial aspects of publishing translations, all of which undergo significant changes in the period.

The sheer size of the project was daunting, to say the least, but the greatest challenge was presented by the rudimentary state of thinking about translation history. The history of translation has been neglected in translation studies, which has long suffered from a presentism, an inordinate focus on current trends, in some cases even a timeless, unlocalized notion of translation, so that the very idea of what constitutes a historical research project is still under construction. The essays in my volume share a certain basic approach: they assume that a translation is an interpretation productive of cultural and social effects, and they aim to give a sense of what texts were chosen for translation and what strategies were developed to interpret them while situating these two key factors in cultural and social contexts that change over the course of the century. Coverage is inevitably selective: broad trends are sketched, reference is made to a wide range of translations, and representative or influential cases are discussed. Attention is given to the impact of historical events but also to changing audiences and publishing trends. The results confirm some previous research, but there are also surprises, I think, revelations about translation practices and patterns.

KG and DM: The *Oxford History* is the history of literary translation. Given the recent trends in the humanities that have accepted new objects as the focus of their research and conceptualize these in the wider context of cultural studies why do you think we should study literature at all?

LV: We know relatively little about humanistic translation as a whole, although there is no discipline in the humanities that is not dependent on translation for research and teaching. Literary and religious texts have long received the most attention, to be sure, but translations in anthropology, history, philosophy, and sociology can reward close examination as texts, cultural objects, and historical phenomena. This is not to exclude the importance of studying the impact of technology on translation: the web has transformed translation practices as well as the translator’s agency, what with the emergence of new media like Google Translate and the collaborative forms of translating involved in crowd-sourcing. But it would be rash to discount literary translation as unproductive of new insights. Not only does the translation of prose fiction and audiovisual materials continue unabated around the world, but the very
unmarketability of a genre like poetry invites translators to devise experiments that can reveal much about the nature of translation in general (as well as the nature of poetry).

KG and DM: We have argued for minoritizing translations that can problematize the assumption of major cultures. What could be the role of translation in minor cultures whose main concern is to survive?

LV: No culture, major or minor, central or peripheral, can afford to rest complacently on the status quo without constantly interrogating it and introducing cultural innovations, especially by importing foreign cultural works. Minoritizing translation can be useful in problematizing the dominant values in any culture, but also in stimulating innovative developments. To argue that the minor status of a culture demands homogeneous translation practices for survival risks cultural stagnation and conservatism, notions of cultural purity and nationalistic ideologies which aim to exclude or repress linguistic and cultural differences. Yet it is these differences that have enabled cultures to develop in unique ways, including minor cultures. Think of how ancient Roman writers adapted Greek literature in the Republic or how the German Romantics translated canonical texts, western and eastern, to build a German language and literature or how Chinese writers in the late Qing and May Fourth eras looked abroad to address cultural political issues in China. Today minor cultures are realizing that the survival of their languages and cultural traditions depends on their own active involvement, often in the form of funding language instruction and translation.

KG and DM: Are you translating something at the moment?

LV: I wish I were. I have a list of works in Italian and Catalan which I would very much like to translate. But right now I am devoting my energies to advancing translation scholarship. In addition to the Oxford History, these projects include a third, substantially revised edition of The Translation Studies Reader, which contains new pieces on “world” literature, translation in linguistically divided cities and in wartime, and translation on the web, among other topics. I am also gathering a selection of essays I wrote over the past decade under the title of Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice. The pieces in this volume trace the changes in my thinking about translation, notably the move away from a postcolonial orientation to a new conceptualization of the hermeneutic model, while intervening into the debates and trends that have characterized translation studies since 2000.

KG and DM: Your choice of what to translate has always been very conscious. You have said your translations are a sort of criticism of the target culture and that you pick authors for translation that do not reinforce the stereotypical idea of the original literature but rather the opposite--stress the socio-cultural differences. Is there a particular author/subject/approach you consider worth translating at the moment?

LV: After studying Catalan for more than a decade and traveling with some regularity to Barcelona, I have grown more interested in translating Catalan literature. The attraction here is not only the relative dearth of Catalan fiction and poetry in English, making the translation of it an act of canon reformation, but also the minor status of this
literature, especially as a tradition that remained open to foreign influences by adapting and translating them. In addition to broadening the canon of foreign literatures in English, translating Catalan literature can teach us much about how minor cultures receive the foreign so as to develop their own forms and practices. I am particularly drawn to the prose poems of the major 20thc. Catalan writer J.V. Foix, still virtually unknown in English. These texts can alter our notions of modernist experimentation, especially surrealism, while inviting the translator to experiment with different registers and styles in English, bringing a sense of foreignness to the current standard dialect and to dominant literary forms.

KG and DM: Translation for you is a unique form of writing. Translators have the right to interpret as well as the critics of that particular translation have the right to their interpretation. How important do you think is the self-positioning of the translator in the foreword or other paratexts? Does a direct manifestation of the translation strategy make a translation more valid?

LV: Paratexts like introductory essays and annotations can be extremely useful in helping to restore at least part of the manifold contexts that are lost in translation, the linguistic, literary, and cultural contexts in which the source text originated and which are replaced by counterparts in the receiving situation. But paratexts can also restrict the audiences of a translation by academicizing the text, and commercial publishers are likely to discourage them as inhibiting sales. Poetry translations, because poetry can be a specialized, relatively difficult, or even esoteric writing practice, still offer the possibility of adding annotations, regardless of the publisher, although the notes are usually readerly, not scholarly, and minimal.

The sort of texts that translators should be writing but tend to avoid, unfortunately, is commentary on translations that they themselves and other translators have produced. This commentary can occur in interviews or reviews or essays. But whatever the genre, it is urgently needed if translation is to move beyond the gross misunderstanding and unconscionable neglect that continue to greet it around the world. Who are better positioned than translators to explain and call attention to what they do in their work?

I am very much in favor of strategies that foreground the status of translations as translations, but any such moves should be made in a way that is not arbitrary, that establishes their necessity on the basis of the source text and culture as well as the translating language and culture. Choosing a source text that deviates from long-standing translation patterns or choosing to translate it by departing from current standard usage, where the departures constitute interpretations of the source text that are not simply justifiable, but that deviate from competing interpretations that have gained authority in cultural institutions—these are effective means by which readers can be made aware of the second-order creation that happens in translating. But readers are not likely to appreciate such strategies without learning first to notice them and then to understand their interpretive force and their cultural and institutional impact. Too often readers, whether professional or popular, are ready to dismiss textual effects that increase the cognitive effort required to process a translation and thereby interfere with the widespread tendency to read the translation as if it were the source text instead of an interested interpretation. The problem is that translating itself is not sufficient to change and develop ways of reading translations. Translators, once again, must take on the task of educating readers.
This is why I prefer to imagine translators not as mere linguists but as writerly intellectuals who are deeply engaged in the fields in which they translate and who should be able to talk about their work with sophistication both to the scholar-teachers and students who must use it, as well as to the general readers who represent a significant segment of the audience for translations, especially of literary texts. To view translators in a lesser role as, say, language professionals is to devalue the skills and knowledge that their work demands and to divorce it from the ethical and political considerations that bear on any cultural practice. The notion of the translator as a language professional reduces translation to yet another support for the status quo in the receiving situation whereas, because translation trades in linguistic and cultural differences, it should be constantly interrogating that situation, exposing its limitations and exclusions, suggesting new paths of inquiry and development. The translator’s task is not to disclose a communicative utopia that overcomes Babel, but rather to release the power of difference to effect change in the here and now.