

Transmission and appropriation of economic knowledge: an institutional approach to translations

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Summary

The paper deals, in general, with the role of institutions in shaping the processes of diffusion and circulation of economic thought. The concepts of place, transmission and appropriation have been currently used by historians of science and intellectual historians alike. Though less explicitly used by historians of economics, they are nevertheless present in the literature devoted to the spread and dissemination of economic thought. The novelty here consists of giving new focus to the point of reception and to the historical and institutional circumstances explaining the motives for both the adoption and the adaptation of economic ideas and theories. The relevance of the institutional milieu will be emphasized, in order to explain the conditions under which new forms of economic knowledge emerge and develop, well fitted to particular places and contexts of appropriation.

Special attention will be devoted to the role of translations, a form of language appropriation that provides basic evidence of the willingness to receive and use ideas adapted into a national idiom.

Introduction: the EE-T project

This paper is a preliminary contribution to an ongoing research project on “*Economics translations into and from European Languages*” (EE-T project) coordinated by Marco Guidi at the University of Pisa.

The main goal of the EE-T project, funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme – Erasmus Sub-programme, is to assess the impact of translations of economic texts on the historical development of economic thought in Europe.

The specific objectives of the EE-T project are:

- To develop an online platform containing a systematic and classified database of digital published translations of economic texts in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries into and from various European languages (English, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, French, Turkish, etc), in order to make available a systematic and classified collection of all economic translations and of their e-texts, including all editions of each translation.
- To establish an interdisciplinary collaboration between history of economic thought scholars and linguistics and foreign language scholars, especially experts in languages for specific purposes, aiming at producing interpretations of the phenomenon of economic translations in the framework of the processes of a transnational circulation of economic ideas.
- To develop multilingualism and inter-culturalism at the European level, as a basis for a more conscious European citizenship.

Further information and list of participant institutions is available at:

<http://eet.pixel-online.org/index.php>

The study and analysis of historical texts in economics allows for a useful learning from the past so as to avoid delusions deriving from a blind application of economic models. Since its origins, economic science has been a subject of public discussion. The international circulation of economic ideas was fostered by translations of economic texts. These were performed both as individual initiatives and as part of more systematic publishing initiatives such as specialized series of economic texts, digests, handbooks, etc.

In order to fully understand the richness of economic literature produced and spread in different countries it is very important to underline both the contents of the message transmitted and its linguistic aspects, taking into account the historical and political context of the period when the translation occurred. The institutional framework is therefore a basic element featuring the nature of this subject of study.

This paper briefly considers some relevant points that must be taken into account when dealing with translations as an example of institutional contexts associated to the transmission and appropriation of economic knowledge.

1. Insights from the historiography of science and ideas

The following remarks, presented in a telegraphic way, attempt to provide some useful paths of research to be followed in the process of dealing with translations of economic texts as a means to foster diffusion and dissemination of economic knowledge. These are topics that have received substantial attention from scholarly research in history of science, history of ideas and other related subjects.

Place

History and social studies of science have given great prominence to the problem of place, which is equivalent to stress the relevance of the local context of the fabrication of knowledge. The vision of an universal science for which national and regional features are totally irrelevant has been gradually replaced by a new approach in cultural and intellectual history of science that takes into account in a vigorous manner the “local manifestations of universal science” (Ophir and Shapin 1991, 5).

This means that science is generated and assessed according to the exigencies of specific geographic, historical and institutional contexts. Science is locally shaped and its impact and domain of application has also a local dimension. This also implies that knowledge creation is embedded in streams of practical life and occurs in spatial arrangements where social

interaction takes place. This is a further element that emphasizes the role of social institutions in shaping cognition processes.

The importance granted to place in history of science studies also explains the attention paid to the circulation and diffusion of knowledge, as well as to the process of local, in site, development of science (cf. Livingstone 2003).

Travel

How, why, where, when, for whom does knowledge circulate? This series of interconnected questions serves to set up the broad picture of the studies on diffusion of science and ideas.

We may take for granted that science is always marked by the local and the spatial circumstances that assist to its making. However, there are similar patterns of production in other places that make it possible for scientific discourse to travel from place to place. One of the main conditions for efficient travelling is the degree of trust gained by scientific, unmodified knowledge when it reaches similar contexts where it may be applied. As Shapin puts it:

“The wide distribution of scientific knowledge flows from the success of certain cultures in creating and spreading standardized contexts for making and applying that knowledge” (Shapin 1998, 7).

The travel of scientific knowledge is not only an issue of power and domination, but rather an issue of trust and appropriation. Therefore, as regards the particular case of the translation of scientific texts, they should be viewed as instruments of the travel of knowledge that gains further meaning when it serves communities of different places.

The same considerations apply to the travelling of ideas from place to place and to the study of the conditions that make some ideas flourish in some places more vigorously than in others. And also to explain why some ideas simply do not match with the intellectual context where they are imported to. As far as economic science and ideas are concerned, this issue has motivated previous studies and the relevance of the subject, whenever methodological debates on national styles and traditions are under scrutiny, is broadly acknowledged (see Cardoso 2003 for an overall presentation of these topics and related bibliography).

Appropriation

The notion of *appropriation* of knowledge (or of scientific ideas, practices and techniques) overcomes the less suitable notion of transmission or diffusion.

Appropriation implies to underline the active role, the strategy and plan of those directly engaged in the process of import and assimilation of ideas. It also obliges to analyze the institutional conditions that render possible the process of legitimization of the appropriated message or object, as well as the overcoming of constraints and resistances it may have suffered before becoming accepted. Briefly:

“Thus our context is that of the active receiver, which entails a shift from the point of view of what has been transmitted to the view of how, what was received has been appropriated” (Gavroglu et. al. 2008, 154).

One of the instruments of the strategies of appropriation is the translation into the national language of texts and books produced in a different national and linguistic setting. Translation thus reveals a heuristic capacity applied to the study of the processes of knowledge transmission and appropriation.

Translation

The theme of circulation is closely associated to the history of book production and reading and therefore to the history of translation. This opens the opportunity of thinking in terms of books as acts of communication with receivers (the audience), producers (authors and translators), modes and conventions of transmission (through rhetorical strategies) and feed-back effects, thus allowing for the use of cybernetic models and concepts.

Another possible approach is based on the notions associated to knowledge or science in context, i.e, to the notion of “science as practical activity, located in the routines of everyday life” (Secord 2004, 657). According to this line of thought it becomes apparent that a translation is an expression of knowledge in transit, an act of communicating science that allows for a better understanding of the generic regularities, as well as the local peculiarities, involved in the circulation of knowledge.

By following any of these paths of research we reach the same conclusion: circulation through translation helps to explain the processes of spread, diffusion and transmission of knowledge.

It is also advisable to move forward to new directions and point out the importance of an interdisciplinary dialogue between historians of science and ideas and philologists, in order to gain a better understanding of the activity of translation as a means of tracing the transfer of scientific knowledge and the development of scientific vocabulary in each of the national and linguistic contexts considered (Tymoczko 2002). This cooperation may bring new insights to the comprehension of the cultural contexts and language frameworks that are relevant for the analysis of the transmission and appropriation of scientific knowledge. As explained in a nutshell:

“Renditions of scientific texts into other languages can serve the historian in more significant ways, however, than as an indicator of publishing success. With respect to translation studies, historians of science could profit by turning to philologists, who have long recognized that a translation is not merely a medium of transfer, but more importantly a mental meeting point where barriers of language and culture are crossed” (Rupke 2000, 209).

2. Translations of political economy texts: the Enlightenment context

In order to show the relevance of this topic for historians of economics, one may take as an example a specific period in the history of translation of economic texts, namely the period corresponding to the emergence and development of political economy as an autonomous field of scientific inquiry. Indeed, throughout the end of the eighteenth century and early beginnings of the nineteenth century there was an explosion of translations of economic literature which corresponds both to the euphoria of translation as a rewarding and useful endeavor, and to the growing relevance of political economy as a subject that had reached and captured the public domain.

In most European countries, by mid-eighteenth century, translations into Latin were no longer needed for international readership and Latin lost its role in scholarly writing, as well as in fiction and poetry. The Enlightenment had offered the opportunity for cosmopolitan

conversation without a common or universal language, though French gained the statute of *lingua franca*. However, to be a *lingua franca* did not mean to achieve exclusivity or uniqueness and the common acceptance of French as a language of universal communication implied a wider process of translations from and into French of texts aiming at widespread diffusion.

The translation was sometimes a process of creation of new words and of a new technical language. Thus, national cultures and national languages were somehow challenged and modified by means of translations:

“These [receiving] languages were, to various degrees, affected by the translated texts and influenced by new literary standards and ideas. They also transformed the texts themselves, both through active intervention and through the subtle mechanisms of linguistic shifts. Translation, the tool of a new Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, eventually became the medium (and target) of new linguistic self-awareness and cultural nationalism” (Oz-Salzberger 2006, 396).

In late eighteenth and early nineteenth century there was no legal control over the contents of translation. There were no copyright assignments and translators could take their liberties with style and argument, without respecting the original message of the text (see Forget 2010, 655). Substantial differences may therefore be found whenever translators acknowledge the disclaimer of a “free translation”, even when they claim the attempt to be faithful to the central message of the author.

Translators tended to serve their readers and show loyalty to them, addressing their interests of comprehension, without caring too much about the authors being translated or quoted. In a certain way one can refer to this biased approach as a market oriented strategy of publishing.

Traduttore becomes *traditore*. The purpose of being faithful notwithstanding, there are difficulties of expression in a different language that originate involuntary misunderstandings. But sometimes, the translators themselves express their disagreement with ideas spelt out and thus delete full passages that sound inappropriate or insert footnotes explaining their opposition to the author’s ideas.

Original texts are transformed either to attract readers or to create an audience better prepared to be aware of the contents of the message translated. However, by introducing notes and amendments to the texts, translators produce changes of meaning to the original, for the benefit of new audiences for which the transformed message seems to fit much better.

“Translation, however, does much more than substitute words of one language for those of another. Like popularization, translation allows us to see how a scientific work is received by a particular audience and how it may be adapted for other audiences” (Forget 2010, 674)

By the end of the eighteenth-century, political economy was one of the main subjects that participated in the enlargement of the market for translations. The main purpose was to reach a broader audience interested in topics concerning the public administration, the role of government and the functioning of markets and economic life in general. This new science of the market and of the modern institutions that serve the dynamics of the emerging industrial capitalism is also a science that is placed at the service of the legislator, with added responsibility in the design and implementation of the new functions granted to the state. It was therefore crucial to spread the good news concerning the interpretation and monitoring of economic life. Translations became an important vehicle of diffusion and popularization of the new science of political economy and therefore a means for its appropriation in national contexts.

Translators of essays and tracts on political economy were also interested in keeping in conversation and critically discussing the claims and arguments put forward by the authors translated. Thus, the process of translation was also a means to increase public debate and to reveal the role of the translator as someone who is entitled with authorship attributes.

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