

Ottoman interculture

A short interview with Saliha Paker on her studies in Ottoman translation history

Saliha Paker, professor emeritus of Translation Studies, founder of the Translation programme at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul was scheduled on the programme of the workshop Changes in the boundaries of knowledge, but finally unable to participate. The very dynamic field of translation studies is an intrinsic part of the concerns of this volume, represented in particular by the contribution by Sehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar. While focusing on texts, in particular literary texts, translation studies lead, by its very topic, into the issues of boundaries in knowledge. Professor Paker, one of the founders of this field, has developed it regarding in particular conceptual and analytical tools with a special focus on the Ottoman empire. Two of the editors of this volume, Inga Brandell and Önver A. Çetrez, met professor Paker in October 2011. The recorded conversation keeps its initial structure, but has been edited, and, in parts, reformulated and extended by professor Paker. The bibliographical references have been added.

Inga Brandell: Professor Paker, one of your central concepts in your studies on Ottoman translation history is “interculture”. Can you tell us how to understand it and expand on its use?

Saliha Paker: The term “interculture” belongs to the discourse of a founding father of modern translation studies, Gideon Toury (1995) who, in the framework of his systemic methodology, points to linguistic hybridity as a condition of what may be identified as an “interculture”. The concept was taken up critically by Anthony Pym (1998, 2000), another well-known translation scholar, and used to signify “intersections or overlaps of cultures” (such as “the 12th century Toledo of the Jewish and Mozarab intermediaries”) in which professionals like translators engaged in practices combining elements of more than one culture at the same time. Both of these sources helped me in developing the concept in terms of “Ottoman interculture” (which does *not*, by the way, stand for a specific geographical location) for an analysis of the workings of a hybrid space, an intersection of three cultures, Turkish, Persian and Arabic (Paker 2002).

IB: Interculture is in a way a parallel to international: international, interculture. Is it appropriate to what you are describing? Is it compatible with the approach of Even-Zohar? Because it makes one think, and I will give an example of that, that we have a Persian culture, a Turkish culture and an Arabic culture...

SP: The concept of interculture is supra-national. It challenges the vagueness of such broad terms as “influence” and “imitation” in cross-cultural contact – terms which belong to the discourse of early comparative studies of national literatures. In fact, the concept of interculture pointing to the tricky area of “in-betweenness” represents an important shift in paradigm from national to cultural. Early comparatist discourse often attributed dominance to a nation in producing originals while comparing it with another nation that was more involved in translation and appropriation through textual transfer and other such derivatives, which signified a subordinate position in relation to the other. Thus it ended up positing hierarchical relationships between “national” literatures of various historical periods. The European view was that such a relationship of dominance/superiority and subordination/inferiority also existed between Persian and Ottoman literatures: to put it more bluntly, the Ottoman poets were judged as imitators of the classical Persians. This view was also internalized by the nationalist pioneers of Turkish scholarship in the early 20th century and became a contentious issue. They struggled with it as a big “national” problem and set out on a critical quest into the Ottoman past, especially after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic. What was derivative what was innovative? How were they to be distinguished? Which approached originality? What was slavish translation or imitation?

However, I must also note that the discourse of most of the Ottoman poets themselves shows that they were deeply aware of the dangers of slavish imitations and keen to underscore the importance of inborn personal inventiveness and to point that out in their work.

IB: To come back to interculture....

SP: Well, basically, interculture is a hypothetical construct, which helps us analyze and theorize Ottoman practices, products and conceptions of translation for a better understanding of such phenomena in relation to one another. But, of course, we need a historical context to analyze and explain it. I'll make it brief.

As I worked my way through the modern Turkish discourse on translation in Ottoman literature, especially in poetry, I discovered some confusion over what the moderns identified as translated texts and what they seemed to consider texts more akin to “original,” that is, texts which contained one translated source or more, as well as the personal interventions of the translator.

Another perception that struck me as being very odd right from the start was that, especially in the Republican Turkish discourse of literary histories, the so-called “Age of Translation” was located in the 19th century, focusing on the textual transfer of European works. So, in what terms were we, as translation scholars, supposed to approach the transfer, in the many preceding centuries, of thousands of Persian and Arabic texts of all types into Turkish, which were actually identified as *terceme* (i.e. translation) in the titles given to them by their authors? Why did translation in the Ottoman period appear to be “concealed” in modern literary-historical studies?

Indeed, practices and conceptions of what was called *terceme* (translation) in Ottoman covered a much wider range of strategies of linguistic and cultural transfer than what our modern practice and concept of translation (*çeviri*, in

modern Turkish) allowed. Such strategies seemed to defy our modern translational norms of transfer.

The main reason for this, I discovered, was that the Ottoman notion of translation did not fit in with the modern view of what a translated text was supposed to be. That is, one that is expected to be fully correspondent to the source text, without additions or omissions or other manipulations by the translator. But in the Ottoman cultural context, the general approach to translation allowed interventions of all sorts with a generally much looser conception of textual transfer that called for transforming, adapting source texts according to the expectations of their own times. My initial conclusion was that such practices were “Ottoman culture-bound.” But then, what kind of “culture” were we talking about? That’s where the concept of “interculture” came in.

Examining the history of Ottoman poetry in light of the work of Walter Andrews (2002), a great Ottoman scholar, I realized that what he defined as the “Perso-Ottoman epistemic domain” in the larger Eastern “polyglot empire of poetry” (in the 16th century context), could well be hypothesized as a hybrid Ottoman intercultural form from the perspective of historical translation studies. In general terms this could be conceptualized as an overlapping/intersection of Turkish, Persian and Arabic literary languages and cultures, in which Persian source texts were rendered not just by Ottoman poets but by men of science and learning who made it their business to expand on the possibilities offered by the source texts they wanted to import. This was done in a Turkish that had gradually absorbed a high percentage of Perso-Arabic vocabulary, along with some grammatical elements, especially since the 14th century. What seems to have motivated this fundamentally hybrid, discursive practice was a concern for the growth of a Turkish-Perso-Arabic episteme, that is, a distinctively Ottoman episteme.

IB: Can you explain how that came about? How did this hybridity function?

SP: I was just coming up to that. Naming a hypothetical construct as “interculture” does not amount to much unless it signifies a special way of functioning. Well, thanks to polysystemic thinking in translation studies, introduced, as you know, by Itamar Even-Zohar and pursued also by Gideon Toury, it was possible to claim that Ottoman intercultural form could also be hypothesized as a *systemic* entity functioning in its own right; more importantly, that it acquired a *central* position in the larger Ottoman cultural polysystem in the 16th century, remaining almost unchallenged right up to the end of the Ottoman Empire, producing its own dynamics of interaction with other co-systems, with their centres and peripheries. This is a point I must emphasize.

Now let me go back and try to explain a historical process to answer your question about how hybridity actually functioned in the Ottoman context.

We can trace back the beginnings of Turkish cultural contact with Persian in Anatolia to the 13th century, where the Seljuk Sultanate with its capital in Konya was a major power. It’s important to note that the initial Turkish contact with Arabic also permeated through Persian which had already absorbed a great deal of Arabic vocabulary, learning, literary models, etc. at the time when it was itself heavily under Islamic Arab “influence.”

The highly Persianized Seljuk Sultanate of Anatolia, which in fact was of Eastern Turkic origins, was already flourishing when nomadic Turkmen tribes who migrated in waves from Asia all the way to the Aegean coast began to settle down and build their small principalities in the 13th century. Let me just add that it was one of these principalities that eventually established the Ottoman state (at the end of the 13th century). In one way or another the Turkmens were in contact at the time, with the local, mixed population of Byzantine Greeks, Armenians, Arabs, Jews and Kurds but in terms of culture and education the Turkmen princes looked up to the Seljuks as their role models and their Persianized civilization as their main source of cultural refinement. Let's remember the great Sufi mystic poet Jaleddin-I Rumi writing in Persian in the Seljuk capital Konya in the 13th century.

IB: At this point I have a question for you. What kind of Turkish culture was there in Anatolia at the time? Was there a stable Turkish language?

SP: There certainly existed an oral Turkic culture that was brought over by the Turkmen tribes from Asia, which was shamanistic before conversion to Islam. The Turkmens had their songs, of course, their heroic epics that originated in Central Asia in the communities of Oghuz Turks, their ancestors. Some of these were recorded as early as the 8th century. International research on 13th century Anatolia (such as a very interesting historical project currently sponsored by the Orient Institute of Istanbul) is becoming more and more extensive and we're learning very much more about culture and way of life in that period. If a language, however unpolished, allows for some translation of even highly polished poetic works into its textual domain, we must assume that that language is pretty stable.

Let's look at books of "advice for rulers" (from the Persian classical age) set in Persian verse (in the Arabic *aruz* metre) or prose, for instance, like the famous one of animal fables (*Kelile and Dimne*) passed on from Sanskrit into Persian and Arabic, or poetic narratives of mystical love, or romances which also incorporated moral and political advice, heroic exploits and the Persian *adab*, the code of courtly behaviour and refined taste. All such books that were in demand along with a variety of texts on the practice of Islam, on medical advice, and scientific treatises in Arabic were translated into the Turkish of the Turkmen princes. The translations were done generally by poets educated in Persian and Arabic who were resident in the courts, under the patronage of the princes.

I must point out that such texts have been recognized by Turkish literary historians distinctly as translations, because the boundaries between Turkish and Persian were set so clearly between source and target. But as some of the poet-translators themselves put it bluntly at the time, Turkish was too awkward and lacking in refinement to render the *aruz* verse in Persian, the source language. Therefore these early translations must also be regarded as marking the beginnings of a process of acculturation, a gradual appropriation of Persian models, as a variety of culture repertoires were formed, setting the foundations for the gradual growth of a cultural system.

IB: And what about the cultural repertoires of the Byzantines...

SP: Well, that needs to be investigated. All I can think of at the moment are the *Battal Ghazi*¹ epics, which were translated from Arabic sources and adapted into Turkish in the 13th century. These heroic exploits are set in the 8th century battles against the Byzantine Emperor and are said to have some similarities with, as well as differences from the Byzantine Greek epic of *Digenis Akritis*. Digenis is the epithet of the hero, Basil, who was of mixed Byzantine-Arab origin, who fought in the frontier battles against the Arab raiders.

IB: Can you explain what you mean by culture repertoires?

SP: The concept of “culture repertoire” is one of the fundamentals of Itamar Even-Zohar’s culture theory (2010). Theoretically all cultural systems (within the larger polysystem) are generated by repertoires involving import and transfer from another culture. So is what I call the Ottoman system of interculture, which grew because the people involved in culture at the time chose to be productive in developing and enriching their language and learning and in stretching their epistemic boundaries by appropriating Perso-Arabic vocabulary. This must have been closer to their needs as people of a growing empire.

By the way, let’s also remember that from 1930s onward, the early Turkish Republic was engaged in launching a similar culture repertoire, but in the reverse direction, by stripping the language of all Perso-Arabic accretions. They were striving for “pure” Turkish in the new nation state, hoping to end hybridity. Of course, this was ideologically motivated too, given the Republic’s westernizing agenda.

But let’s go back once more. In the 14th century, before the foundation of the Ottoman state and well before the Ottoman interculture crystallized into a system, Turkmen princes, whose main job was to fight for and administer their territories, felt also the need for education and refinement vis a vis their strengthening positions and Turkish identity in Anatolia. So they chose to have classical Persian texts translated into Turkish not only for instruction and entertainment but also to enrich the vocabulary and expressiveness of the language they spoke.

Certain historians of literary culture and of science have noted that with Sultan Mehmet II’s conquest of Constantinople in the middle of the 15th century, which led on to further territorial and cultural acquisition, there began a shift in the courtly elite’s perception of Turkish language. This called for a special kind of linguistic and cultural sophistication that would accommodate Persian and Arabic, extend the boundaries of knowledge in education and learning in science and other fields, and come closer to matching the ideals of an empire. In systemic terms, this meant the crystallization process of a variety of repertoires to form a more widely functioning of the system of interculture. It became the norm for men of learning, intellectuals, poets and bureaucrats to adopt *Türki-i fasih*, which meant “clear and correct” Turkish. This, in fact, was the Perso-Arabicized Turkish rhetoric of eloquence and fluency.

¹ Seyyid Battal Ghazi is a mythical Muslim, saintly figure and warrior based in Anatolia. The heroic tales about him are said to be based on the real-life exploits of the 8th century Umayyad military leader, Abdallah al-Battal.

Let us note that the Ottomans referred to their language as *Türki*, Turkish. The term “Ottoman” to designate high Turkish, precisely to underscore its hybridity, was introduced by the intellectuals of the second half of the 19th century.

Türki-i fasih signified the consolidation of a mixed, composite language of the kind signified by Gideon Toury’s “interculture,” – removed from the simpler forms of earlier Turkish which came to be regarded as less amenable to express and understand complexities of thought. The hybridity of language was well established by the 16th century, the classical period, in which the literary historian Selim S. Kuru locates the “grand transformation of Turkish literature in Anatolia.” Such a transformation was not limited to literary production and scholarship; it was also brought about by the multiplying of repertoires of historiographical and scientific investigation, all of which accumulated to expand the system of interculture, pushing it to assume a central position in the larger polysystem.

IB: And how did this process affect translations and their perception by modern scholars?

SP: If we think in terms of a binary opposition between “original” and “translated” texts the borderlines between the source language (e.g. original Persian) and Ottoman, the language of the translated texts became fluid, destabilized by hybridity, and intertextuality of course. The fact is that Ottoman translation practices took many forms that defied neat oppositions such as original and translated in the way they are identified in our times. The linguistically and culturally transferred textual products were generally versions of source texts – significantly, *not* just of the original Persian ones but also of previously Ottomanized texts, all of which, in one way or another had been or were subject to authorial intervention such as interpolations, additions and omissions. The translators appear to have acted as agents of linguistic and cultural mediation for the purpose of meeting the needs and expectations of their readers. In short, the Persian and Arabic sources were transformed and appropriated for the use of Ottomans and the best kind of mediation involved the translator-author’s creativity or inventiveness in the transmission of well-known, previously-worked texts.

In conclusion, it would not be wrong to describe such distinctive features of Ottoman culture in general in terms of translation. I have discussed further reasons behind this kind of transmission in some recent articles (2011, 2015), which also take up Foucault’s theory of pre-modern order of “resemblance” and the Islamic notion of the “original.”

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