# Making the 'Invisible' Visible? Reviewing Translated Works – Martyn Gray

Reviewed by SANJANA RAJAN

## Introduction

Lawrence Venuti defines 'invisibility' as a "term to describe the translator's situation and activity in contemporary Anglo-American culture. It refers to two manually determining phenomena; one is an illusionistic effect of discourse, of the translator's own manipulation of English; the other is the practice of reading and evaluating translations that has long prevailed in the United Kingdom and the United States, among other cultures, both English and foreign language" (Venuti, 1995, p. 1). Martyn Gray's '*Making the 'Invisible' Visible? Reviewing Translated Works'* is based on this very concept introduced by Venuti in 1995.

According to Venuti, "the more 'successful' the translation, the more invisible the translator" (Venuti, 1986, p. 179). Gray's book is an attempt to analyse whether this holds true even in the twenty-first century. He examines how reviewers treated translated texts since Venuti's work, to start his research. Gray, through his book, analyses various scholars' views on the review processes of translation so that the readers get an introduction to the study. He chooses three countries: Britain, France and Germany and finds suitable platforms and reviews. Gray provides a redefinition of the notion of translator's invisibility and points out the need to separate the translator's activity and situation. Through the book, Gray examines how visible translators are in British, French and German contexts during 2022. He also provides a theoretical framework with which the review processes of translated texts can be analysed.

The foundation for Gray's *Making the 'Invisible' Visible? Reviewing Translated Works* was laid during his PhD studies, from 2015 to 2021. Published by Peter Lang Publishing in 2024, this book is the 39th Volume of New Trends in Translation Studies. The book

consists of 228 pages, divided into six chapters. This study is a large-scale, systematic analysis of reviews extended in well-researched chapters.

## Chapter Overview

*Making the 'Invisible' Visible? Reviewing Translated Works* is divided into six chapters, along with an introduction and a conclusion.

The *Introduction* provides a look into Venuti's work, *The Translator's Invisibility*, and his notion of invisibility. It analyses various examples given by Venuti to understand how translation and translators were marginalised. The role of reviewers, which makes the invisibility of the translator apparent, according to Venuti, is also discussed. Gray also criticises Venuti's investigation in its inability to provide concrete insights into reviewing practices, at the same time acknowledging Venuti's role in bringing forth the issue of translators' invisibility in the field of translation studies. The chapter also explains the aims and structure of the book. The book attempts to thoroughly analyse the reviews of translated works to date, building upon Venuti's survey and subsequent investigations on the same. The three main aims of the book, as explained by Gray, are "to assess the evolution of reviewing process in the UK since *The Translator's Invisibility*, to provide a cross-cultural comparison of reviewing practises in the UK, France and Germany, and to offer a cross-platform insight into reviewing practises" (Gray, 2024, p. 8).

**Chapter 1,** titled *What purpose(s) does a review serve?*, attempts to introduce the purpose of review and analyse why and how they are written in the way they are by outlining the views of various scholars. Gray is of the opinion that there is no single ultimate purpose for review; it differs from person to person. He states that most of the views speak about what a book review should not be, rather than guidelines or frameworks on what it should be. One of the most widespread views, according to him, is that book reviews are not for selling books. Gray critically analyses the opinion of scholars who believe the same and also of others who believe it can depend on the reviewer's consideration to use the review as a recommendation to readers. The chapter also talks about the

problematic assignment of space to the reviewers. The lack of space is becoming more and more common and is forcing the reviewer to adopt "the much-criticised 'single adverb approach' to provide their overall evaluation of a work" (Gray, 2024, p. 18). Another problem suggested, as analysed in the chapter, is assigning non-reviewers with poor wages to write reviews on books outside of their interests. At times, novelists are asked to review novels for the purpose of 'self-promotion' or 'self-preservation'. The chapter then analyses differing views of translators on what review of translated works should or should not aim, as directed in the Words Without Borders series, *On Reviewing Translations*. He also talks about various issues proposed by different scholars, translators, editors, etc. The conclusion of the chapter verifies the controversial nature of reviewing. Gray says that the question posed by the title of the chapter does not have a set answer; rather, it depends on various factors that affect the reviewer. Thus, Chapter 1 examines what editors, authors, poets, academics, and translators believe a review is.

**Chapter 2,** *Building on The Translator's Invisibility*, aims to examine various studies published on the practices of reviewing translated work since *The Translator's Invisibility*. Although most of the investigation is done on the reviews from the United Kingdom, some works from France and Germany are also considered. Through these works, Gray analyses how certain reviews contribute to the translator's invisibility; i.e., whether or not the reviewer - mentions the translation/translator, refers to the style of the work without actually knowing the original, and is able to speak the language of the original text. He suggests that the practices of reviewing translated works have become a 'normative behaviour' and 'fluency and transparency' are the two main principles that guide the review and evaluation of translations (Gray, 2024, p. 41). Gray also provides limitations of the previous studies corresponding to its relatively small number. The second part of Chapter 2 provides the scope and need of the current study, outlining the framework behind the text. It also informs about the corpus compilation and analysis methods used in the subsequent chapters. Gray built a set of nine categories to classify the reviews of translated texts, which provides details on how translations and translators are treated in the review.

His categories are based on the existing models of Gullin (in Sirviö 2006) and Lanschützer (2010) (Gray, 2024, p. 46). The following are his categories and their description;

A – no reference to act of translation at all

B – no reference to translation, but comments on the style of the target text

$C_1$ – act of translation acknowledged, not within the main text

$C_2$ – act of translation acknowledged within the main text — superficial visibility

$D_1$ – translators' names in bibliographical information

$D_2$ – translator's name within the main text

E – short unjustified comment on translation

F – short justified comment on translation — embedded visibility

G – extensive engagement with translation (Gray, 2024, p. 48).

Through *Building on The Translator's Invisibility*, Gray provides the theoretical framework for his entire work.

The next three chapters, Chapters *3,4* and *5*, focus on the reviews based on British context, French context and German context, respectively. How reviewers review translated texts, in *2022,* across platforms, from general to more specialised, is analysed consecutively. Gray also examines the frequency of usage of words corresponding to the transparency of translation.

**Chapter 3,** entitled *Reviewing in the United Kingdom*, studies the norms and practices of reviewing translated texts in the United Kingdom. Gray was particular in selecting four different platforms for his analysis: Amazon.co.uk (popular platform), *Times Literary*

*Supplement* (TLS), *The Guardian* (TG) (mainstream broadsheet supplements), and *London Review of Books* (LRB) (specialised literary magazine). A total of 881 reviews were collected. The reviews from each platform are analysed one by one and divided based on the categories discussed in the previous chapter. He chose 573 reviews from amazon.co.uk. The majority of reviews selected from this platform are classified into Category A, i.e., no reference is made to the translation. There are only three reviews out of 573 that extensively engage with the translation, which are assigned to Category G. Therefore, almost 78% of reviews from British Amazon did not engage with the translation. 173 reviews were analysed from TLS. All of these reviews of translation come in the Categories $D_1$ to G. A total of 51 reviews promote superficial visibility of translation ($D_1$ and $D_2$), and 122 out of 173 promote embedded visibility of translation (E to G). TG published 102 reviews of translated works in 2022. Five non-fiction works are classified in Category A. The majority of the reviews are assigned in $D_1$ and $D_2$; 45 to $D_1$ and 15 to $D_2$. Category E has 27 reviews, F has 7 reviews, and G has none, which shows that fewer than three sentences comment on translation. Only 33 reviews were published in LRB. More than half of the reviews are assigned in Categories $D_1$ and $D_2$; 19 in $D_1$; 5 in $D_2$. Six are in Category E and Category F has another four. Four reviews are categorised into G. Thus, we can see that LRB promotes the visibility of the translator to some extent. Gray, by analysing the British platforms, concluded that *Amazon* promotes the invisibility of the translation, *TG* and *LRB* most likely promote the superficial visibility of translation, and *TLS* promotes, in most cases, embedded visibility of translation. Most of the reviews praised the translator, but the words of transparency to discuss translation were fewer. In conclusion, there is an increase in the visibility of translation compared to the 2000s.

**Chapter 4,** *Reviewing in France*, analyses the reviewing of translated texts across France. Gray selected the following platforms for the study: Amazon.fr (popular platform), *Le Monde* (LM), *Le Figaro* (LF) (mainstream broadsheet supplements), and *Actualitté* (specialised literary magazine). He analyses a total of 1058 reviews from these platforms. Gray, through this chapter, aims to determine

whether the French reviewers still promote superficial visibility of translation, as revealed in previous studies, even in *2022*. 604 reviews were collected from Amazon France. The majority, 517, does not provide any reference to translation at all, hence it belongs to Category A. Twenty of them acknowledge translation in the main text, so they are assigned to category $C_2$. Nine are in $D_2$, 16 are assigned to E, and the final three are classified in category F. A total of 138 reviews are taken from LM. None among these are assigned in Categories A to $C_1$, i.e., there is a minimum engagement with the translation. About 113 of the 138 are grouped in category $D_1$. Of these, 82 are translated literature reviews; 31 are translated non-fiction. LM promotes superficial visibility of translation since 123 out of 138 belong to categories $D_1$ and $D_2$. Fifteen reviews are assigned to categories E to G; 13 in E, one each in F and G. Gray chose 172 reviews published in LF for the study. Eight of the reviews are grouped in category A, none in B and $C_1$ and one in $C_2$. Category $D_1$ had the majority of reviews, 148 of 172. A total of seven are grouped in $D_2$. Categories E to G had just eight; six in E, one each in F and G. From *Actualitté*, 144 reviews dealt with translated literature. Categories A and B both have one review each. None was grouped in categories $C_1$ and $C_2$. This means the remaining 142 are assigned in $D_1$ through G. Category $D_1$ contains a total of 101. 29 out of 144 are classified in $D_2$. Categories E has nine, F has three and none are assigned to G. From all these analyses, Gray concluded that only French Amazon contributes to the invisibility of the translator. *LM*, *LF*, and *Actualitté* have at least 90% of the reviews assigned to $D_1$ and $D_2$, which means that most of the French reviews promote the visibility of translation at the superficial level. Thus, we can say that the findings of this chapter support previous studies in the field.

**Chapter 5,** *Reviewing in Germany*, explores reviews on platforms across Germany. Amazon.de (popular platform), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SDZ), *Der Spiegel* (DS) (mainstream broadsheet supplements), and *Literaturkritik* (specialised literary magazine) are the particular platforms chosen by Gray for his study. A total of 1898 reviews were collected. Gray approached the reviews keeping in mind the 2009 examination of Lanschützer, which yielded that

most of the German reviews mention the translator in the bibliographical information or use brief comments, 'congenial' or 'bumpy', to judge a translation. A total of 1469 reviews were collected from amazon.de. Out of this, 1167 are assigned in category A. About 136 of the 1469 are assigned to Category B. A total of 65 belong to $C_2$, 36 to $D_2$. 48 of the reviews in total are assigned in category E. Category F has 16, and G has only one. Therefore, the majority of the German Amazon reviews do not provide information on the translator/translation. SDZ published a total of 233 reviews. 221 among those are assigned to categories $D_1$ and above, i.e., a minimum reference of translation in the bibliography is done. Still, categories A to $C_2$ have twelve reviews. Of the 233, the majority 148, belong to $D_1$; 59 are assigned in categories E to G, 36 in E, 18 in F and five in G. This, vast majority of the reviews in SDZ belong to categories C1 to $D_2$ with a minimum acknowledgement of translation in some regard. The number of reviews published in DS is fewer when compared to other platforms; only 43. None of these belong to categories A to $C_2$. About 38 in total are assigned in category $D_1$ and one in $D_2$. Only four belong to categories E to G. Therefore, almost all reviews in DS promote superficial visibility of translation. LK had a total of 153 reviews for analysis. Of these, 151 reviews mention translation at a bare minimum. 93 out of 151 belong to category $D_1$. Twenty-five are assigned in E, thirteen are in F, and seven belong to category G. Thus, LK has almost 70% of reviews assigned in categories $C_1$ to $D_2$. So, in conclusion, Gray found out that the 2009 conclusions hold true. The majority of reviews in *SDZ*, *DS*, and *LK* are assigned in D1 and promote the visibility of translation at a superficial level. As was the case in previous chapters, Amazon Germany also renders translations invisible.

The final chapter, Chapter 6, entitled *Reviewing the Invisible: An Entirely Anglo-American Phenomenon?*, examines the similarities and differences between the three contexts, drawing upon the findings from the previous chapters. Gray also explores whether Venuti's notion of invisibility in the Anglo-American context describes the situation in France and Germany. The extent to which translators are rendered invisible in Britain as compared to their

Western counterparts is also looked into. Gray outlines how reviews vary according to the three types of platforms: (i) popular, (ii) broadsheets/cultural supplements, and (iii) specialised literary magazines. He concluded that Amazon renders the translation invisible in all three contexts, broadsheets consistently promote at least superficial visibility of translation, specialised literary magazines most frequently encourage visibility of translation at a superficial level. The frequency of promoting embedded visibility of translation differs between platforms and countries. The present context on how translation associations and organisations are promoting visibility of translations through various activities across the three countries is explored. This led to the conclusion that British reviewers engage in translation activities at various levels compared to French and German. This is achieved through organising book fairs to promote translations, implementing prizes, developing courses and conducting conferences, etc.

The *Conclusion* of the book deals with redefining the notion of 'invisibility' proposed by Venuti (1986 & 1995), building upon the findings of Gray's study. The Conclusion chapter also outlines the study's limitations and future scope of research, along with the moral and ethical ramifications of the translator's (in)visibility. Gray points out that discoveries of the current study only focused on one aspect of Venuti's definition of invisibility, i.e., 'translator's *situation*'. He also proposes that contrary to Venuti's notion of using invisibility to describe both translators' *activity* and *situation*, the terms should be evaluated separately. Through this book, he demonstrates the importance of doing so. Martyn Gray concludes the book by asking the following crucial question: 'To what extent does the translator hope to achieve 'visibility'?'

## Critical Evaluation

The book predominantly targeted European platforms, mainly Britain, France and Germany. Although Gray built his theoretical framework for *Making the 'Invisible' Visible* based on Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility*, the views and theories of many other scholars/translators like Gullin, Lanschützer, Vanderschelden, Munday, etc, were also examined. He provides comments shared by

these scholars, both supporting and opposing different reasons, throughout the book. Gray challenges Venuti's focus on the Anglo-American world, providing a cross-cultural and cross-platform comparison of reviewing practices in other Western European countries. He was successful in achieving the purpose of the book, thus redefining Venuti's definition of invisibility.

Gray adopts a comparative approach for collecting and analysing the reviews. His selection of platforms was very particular, keeping in mind the emerging trends in e-commerce as well as the increased participation of customers in popular platforms. Gray's chapterisation of the book provides a chronological approach to the data, making it easier for the readers to navigate through various platforms. Each chapter has a fixed format, analysing the reviews of each platform, dividing it based on the categories and how visible translators are. Each division also provides insights into the possible reasons for how translations are reviewed. Gray explores the time given to translators for completing a review, their word limit and space given, genre of the work, and individual preferences of the reviewers, while assigning possible reasons as to why reviews are categorised as it is. However, these are only possible reasons; there is no evidence to confirm the rationale. In most reviews, even the individual translators differ in their mentioning of the act of translation, which projects as a problem to Gray while analysing. As mentioned earlier, the book also explores lots of ideas of various scholars, which at times evokes confusion in readers. Gray also simply mentioned some of the views without properly giving an explanation for the claim. Additionally, since the study is Europe-centered, analysing reviews from Britain, France and Germany, it can limit the global relevance. However, the theoretical framework of the book definitely provides an idea on how reviews from various countries and platforms can be analysed.

This book makes a significant contribution to the field of translation studies. It addresses one of the major issues in the field and re-evaluates it based on the present situation. Gray also puts forward an important question about the translator's hope to achieve visibility. He examines the evolution of the reviewing process of translated texts and the attitude of reviewers towards translation over

about two decades. When the previous works on invisibility focused solely on broadsheets or mainstream newspapers, Gray also gave the spotlight to popular corpora open for comments from the public, and specialised literary magazines. This provided him with a vast corpus to work with, adding popularity and specialisation as an additional category for assessment. One of the ideas he developed throughout the three chapters is that most of the reviews that neglected the act of translation and the translator are those of non-fiction (Gray, 2024, p. 128). But still, this requires more analysis as a separate entity.

One of the strengths of this study is that Gray developed a cross-cultural and cross-platform comparison method. He also provides the frequency with which words such as 'fluency', 'readability', etc, appeared in the reviews. This shows how reviewers still assume fluency as the criterion for the acceptability of a translated text. Gray's study stands out for its systematic and large-scale analysis of reviews. A total of 3837 reviews were analysed. This book also lays the foundation for a successful framework that can be used effectively while analysing reviews in future research and also in studying the review process of translated texts in other countries to understand how 'invisibility' is treated across the world.

Gray himself points out the limitations of his book in the conclusion. He confirms that "the study only focused on one aspect of visibility, and more particularly of the translator's *situation*, namely how translations are reviewed by the general public and professionals" (Gray, 2024, p. 181). Gray covers a whole lot of areas, on both translator's *activity* and translator's s*ituation*, where future research and studies can be conducted for more understanding of the 'invisibility' of the translator as a whole. The study covers reviews of only one year, i.e., 2022. Another study might be required to analyse the shift in review practices in recent years. Also, Gray's study is only based on European countries. This limits the global applicability and relevance of the study.

## Conclusion

Martyn Gray's *Making the 'Invisible' Visible? Reviewing Translated Works* provides a significant addition to the theory of

translation studies. This book pushes the scholars of translation to reconsider Lawrence Venuti's notion of '*the Translator's Invisibility*' and view it from a different perspective. The book is also an easy read since the author explains every aspect and categories efficiently. Gray, with this study, made an important contribution to the framework for analysis of reviewers' take on translated texts. This book opens a wide range of areas with scope for future researchers. Scholars and students of translation interested in uncovering the notion of *visibility* and *invisibility* of the translation will find this book illuminating.

# References

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