

A Closer Look into the Life of Ordinary Translators through Unordinary Sources: The Use of Obituaries as a Microhistory Tool to Study Translators and Translation in Ohio

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ABSTRACT

While obituaries offer a fascinating glimpse into the life of ordinary citizens, they have not to my knowledge been used in historical research in the translation studies. This paper examines the validity of obituaries as potential extra-textual source of information that can provide a unique perspective not only for studying the social and cultural history of translators and translation, but also to discover public perceptions about the role of the translator and the task of translation in a given context. The use of obituaries—for translation historians whose focal point is the translator as an individual—harmonizes with the general objectives of micro-historical inquiry which “concentrates on the intensive study of particular lives to reveal the fundamental experiences and mentalities of ordinary people” (Lepore 2001: 131). The quantitative data analysis of obituaries in the case of the mid-Western American State of Ohio between 2000 and 2015 reveals personal information about translators (age, gender, place of birth), type of service and career field, source of income, languages spoken and translated, domain and membership of translation associations. Additionally, a comparative analysis of the data is performed to detect any patterns and trends such as prevalent gender of translators, most frequent language-pairs used and immigration trends. It is proposed here that the study of obituaries can contribute to the micro-analysis of the sociocultural history of translators by showing how the subjective accounts of “ordinary people” portray the task of translation and the role of “ordinary” translators in a specific community.

KEYWORDS: microhistory, obituaries, Ohio newspapers, Ohio translators and translation