

Translation:

The misleading keyword

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When discussing particularly tricky and misleading concepts that are used as keywords, *translation* is certainly one that comes to mind. This seemingly clear and universal term has been, and continues to be, widely used. Furthermore, in the past 50 years or so its use has expanded from its traditional areas of study in linguistics, philosophy and literature to the fields of social sciences, cultural studies, and even Artificial Intelligence.

To simply define the term translation within one area of knowledge is no easy task and that is one major difficulty I face in my research when studying and writing about *translation*. Piotr Blumczynski describes this difficulty in the introduction to his book *Ubiquitous Translation* (2016) when he is theorizing about translation:

we inescapably reflect on much larger issues, such as meaning, sense and purpose; identity, sameness, and similarity; the relationship between part and whole; between the message and its medium; between ideas; between texts; between individuals; between individuals and texts; between communities; between texts and communities; between times and places; between what is fixed and what is dynamic; between exercising force and experiencing influence, and so on (ix).

Beyond the multiple issues considered by Blumczynski that arise when translating all types of texts, the translation of poetry, which is my main research interest, poses yet another level of complexity that is both theoretical and practical. I will develop these aspects further on.

In order to approach the problem at hand, namely the enigmatic nature of the concept translation when applied to studying the *translation* of poetry, I shall begin by

providing a definition of what I mean by poetry. As we may intuitively conceive of the term, poetry uses language in particular ways that lend aesthetical and expressive values in addition to the communicative value of non-artistic texts, such as legal documents and instruction manuals. These aesthetic and expressive values are built from an interweaving of semantics, phonetics, tropes, themes and structure, which are, for the most part, irrelevant when one is considering the difficulties of translating the average instruction manual. However, this conception of the distinctiveness of poetry comes from a time where poetry followed strict rules not only in terms of meter and rhyme but also in terms of its subject matter and even who could write it (see García Yebra 2010; Plato 2016; Aristóteles & Horacio 1988). Even though these traditional forms are still used, it is worth noting that at the turn of the twentieth century, poetry has often completely rejected the strictness of its traditional definition and its boundaries with other literary genres, yet its translation and the problems around the process and the product remain. I will not dwell too much upon this distinction. Instead, here I will consider the intricacies of poetic language, as my interest is the difficulty of doing research with the umbrella keyword *translation*.

From a theoretical perspective, there are two main issues I face. The first and most important one is that the theory of poetry translation is mainly case-based. While the case-based approach has use and reach, it only showcases one methodology to approach a poem or a poet's work. It is rare to identify methodologies that focus on more than one or two elements of poetry and explore it as an intricate system (Bassnett 2002:86-7). In my

research, I also work on specific cases but try to go beyond the decisions each poet makes. Instead, I try to find a poetics behind their poems by linking their decisions to the historical moment in which the translations were made; or to the aesthetical affiliations the translator-poets share. As Bassnett warns "[r]arely do studies of poetry and translation try to discuss methodological problems from a non-empirical position, and yet it is precisely that type of study that is most valuable and most needed" (2002:86). Therefore, my aim is to contribute to the ways scholars approach the study of the translation of poetry and how, through the comparative study of poetry translators, it is possible to extract poetics or tools for translation of poetry beyond stylistics.

The second theoretical issue I encounter is one derived from the individual practice discussed earlier. To use the term *translation* for processes that are not universal – for lack of a better word – carries an underlying assumption that everybody understands the term similarly. However, *translation* may signify very different and, more often than not, contradictory methodologies or conceptions.

Given these issues that surround the term *translation* in my research, there does not seem to be any solid ground to stand on for practical and theoretical reasons. The practical problem concerns the function of language in poetry. The theoretical problem is the instability of the term *translation*. However, in the following paragraphs I will show an example of how the difficulties of providing a definition to the translation of poetry can be productive, and how it opens paths in my research.

One of the poet-translators I work with in my dissertation is José Manuel Arango

(Carmen de Viboral, Colombia 1937–2002). He refers to his translations of the poetry of Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), Walt Whitman (1819–1892) and William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) as *versions*. Arango, nevertheless offers no definition as to how he understands the term, but when delving into the brief introductions to his *versions* of the poems of the American authors in his compilation of translated work *Tres poetas norteamericanos* (1991), it seems that the characteristics that make each of these poets unique is that they have a deep interest in the local. This sense of local is two-fold, encapsulating both their interest in the sound of the local English language and how it can be recreated in the lines of a poem, as well as the interest in highlighting events and objects of everyday life. To achieve this, Dickinson, Whitman and Williams make use of particular punctuation and semantics as well as themes and structures. According to Arango's introduction to his translations, these features proved to be highly challenging to replicate in his local Spanish.

For a closer look at his *versions*, I take an example of one of Emily Dickinson's poems,

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If **W**hat we could — were **w**hat we would —
 Criterion — be small —
 It is the **U**ltimate of **T**alk —
 The **I**mpotence to **T**ell —

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Si lo posible fuera lo haré,
 qué criterio menudo
 La última palabra
 Dice de la importancia de decir.

Here, I only draw attention to things that are visible to everyone, regardless

of language capacity, the first one being the use of punctuation. Dickinson uses the em dash (—) as an important resource, together with the parallel structures created between the dashes. In the Spanish version, the em dashes are replaced by commas and by a break in line 1 and 2 of the poem. In Dickinson's poem there is also a reiteration of the phonemes, as I have highlighted, /w/ in "What", "we", "were", "what", "we", "would" and the phoneme /t/ in "It", "Ultimate", "Talk", "Impotence" and "Tell". These two phonemes also emphasize the separation between line 1 and 2 with 3 and 4 which seem to be the conclusion of the poem, contrasting the softness of the vowel-sound /w/ and the hard /t/. In contrast, the phonetics of the version in Spanish do not create such separation or contrast. A repetition is seen mostly in the last line with the phonemes /d/ and /s/.

In the case of Arango then, the use of the term *version* instead of translation does not seem interchangeable. He, in a sense, sees a *version* as a way to allow a more free or creative translation. This is important because even though *version* seems to sometimes be used instead of the term translation, the understanding of it is not necessarily the same. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary's definition, *version* (Merriam-Webster 2020) is "an account or description from a particular point of view especially as contrasted with another account" or "an adaptation of a literary work". A *version*, according to these definitions, seems more like retelling a story as one remembers it. This is a concrete example of the misleading nature of using the word *translation*: sometimes some of its synonyms or the words that it

is exchanged for do not necessarily mean the same thing nor have the same outcome as a reader perhaps would expect. In my study of Arango's *versions*, I am learning much about how he understands *translation* from a practice he does not clarify or explain methodologically. Also, the eras of these poets, the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century have contrasting poetic movements. However, mentioned earlier, Dickinson, Whitman and Williams are in search of a specific cadence, the sound of what they consider their America. In turn, Arango uses his versions as a way to expand his poetical praxis by also finding his local language, or better, rendering these poets his own way. Furthermore, an inquiry into his translations reveals what he considers most important about the poem to render in Spanish. Arango's translations have not been looked at in depth, thus, the study of the poet's translations further expands understanding of his earlier and later poetic work.

In their attempt to recreate an American cadence, language, and landscape, Arango's *versions* contrast with another poet's concept of *translation*: Ezra Pound

(1885–1972). Pound's translation has been studied in depth by Andres Claro. Claro summarizes Pound's technique as:

an holistic conception of poetic meaning –plain sense charged by musical, imagistic and contextual effects (melopoeia, phanopoeia and logopoeia)–, dismantling most of the binary oppositions in which translation and literary theory had been trapped through history, beginning with the ones between sense and form, meaning and style. Finally, the cultural implications Pound devised from the translator's task, proposing a conception of culture and history as translation; the ways he thought poetic transfer, through its very technical donation of forms of meaning and representation, is able to modify language and experience: strengthening perception, expanding a world-view, reviving the voices of the past to criticise and shape the present. (2014:3)

In his translations, Pound departs from poetry's holistic meaning in an attempt to bring it to life or render it in the receiving context. As an example of this holistic understanding of how poetry works let us look at an example that Claro studied in his text "Broken Vessels" where Pound creates a melodic rendering of Provençal poetry, which is particular and the most relevant trait of Provençal poetry¹.

*Quan lo rossinhols escria
ab sa par la nueg e'l dia,
yey suy ab ma bell'amia
jos la flor,
tro la gaita de la tor
esvria: « Drutz, al levar!
qui'ieu vey l'alba e'l jorn clar»*

When the nightingale to his mate
Sings day long and night late
My love and I keep state
In bower
In flower
'Till the watchman on the tower
Cry:

"Up! Thou rascal, Rise
I see the white
Light
And the night
Flies"

–, Anonymous Provençal *Alba*. Trans. E. Pound, "Langue d'Oc" (1917), (E. Pound, 1990, 169).

(2010:118)

Here, Pound recreates the poem in his English and in his context while attempting to replicate the purpose behind Provençal poetry. When read out loud, it showcases a sonorous resemblance. Claro finds that Pound is "following its cadence and the modulations between open and closed vowels in the rhymes" (2010:118) but does not attempt to copy structure or form. Pound is following his conception of *translation*. Yet as we see here there are also contextual and poetic language elements in it that prompt Claro to understand that Pound "generates a movement of freedom in the native" (2010:117). In this sense, the translation is not limited to rendering one or two elements of the poem but trying to bring the poem as whole into the translator's present.

What we can take from the example of Arango's version of Dickinson's poem and Ezra Pound's translation of the Provençal poem, is that, translation is a polyvalent concept. As discussed in the introduction, I have found in the course of my research that the term translation is often used lightly, not being not clearly delimited or explained in depth. On the practical side, translation captures a vast array of practices and approaches in regards the translation of poetry. Instead of being a helpful keyword to focus a search, translation generates more work for the researcher in trying to figure out which studies are relevant.

As a final example, I will consider another possible use of the term *translation*. In my research, I have identified the act of translating an already translated text by another person, also under the keyword translation. In the case of Arango, he translated some poems from Osip Mandelstam (Poland, 1891–1938), a Russian poet, from their English translations.

Does Arango consider them a double version of the original poems or are they perhaps versions of the translations into English? As Susan Bassnett explains "the translator offers his or her own individual interpretation to the reader, through the poem recreated in another language" (2011: 65). Thus, a translation is already an interpretation, and in the example of Arango, his rendering into Spanish would be, according to Bassnett, a rendering of the English poem not of the original. This is explained by the losses that are inevitable between languages, contexts and times and the intricacy of poetic language. Every reading of a poem can be understood as unique. Thus, it follows that its translation may also be considered a unique exercise. Hence Arango's version of an already translated poem, if he is to claim that his version can be somewhat connected to the original, implies a confidence or at least some trust that the first translator has rendered a version in English that is "close" enough to the Russian original that it can be seen as a representation of it. Unfortunately, in my research I am also limited by my command of language. However, a comparison with the original to its version in English and a further comparison to a version translated directly into Spanish from Russian to Arango's translation from English would be an interesting exercise.

In the above examples, I have tried to exemplify the deceitfulness of the keyword *translation* in my research about poetry translation. The challenges faced in my research bring to the forefront interesting insights in how to overcome those theoretical and methodological hiccups. In addition, the polyvalence of the keyword *translation* opens an important perspective in the study of the work of poets

who are translators. The multiple meanings of translation offer new avenues into their reading and their work, as I mentioned in my study about Arango. Furthermore, the case of translation questions the use of concepts within academic studies, how clarity in terminology or thoroughness in my own studies are crucial and how many time terms are not interchangeable.

To conclude, I have first described that the trickiness of using the term *translation* arises not only because of the larger issues it raises as Blumczynski points out, but also because of the various uses it has within the same discipline, in my case translation of poetry. I have explored in two examples possible encounters with the word *translation* that have very different applications within the field of poetry translation but yet could fall under the same keyword, hence its misleading nature. What is relevant, nonetheless, is that the multiple portals and uses of the term *translation* offer new ways to study the poet-translator's work, poetics of translation, amongst other topics. It is an enriching encounter in my research that also keeps me alert when studying the subject.

NOTES

¹ expanded by the Troubadours in the 11th century and characterized by its depiction of courtly or chivalric love.

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SUMMARY

Translation: the misleading keyword

(Översättning: det missledande nyckelordet)

This essay comprises several reflections on the keyword translation that I have encountered in my research. The term translation not only has different meanings, resonances and uses in different languages but it has also been approached by a diverse range of academic fields in the humanities and social sciences. The elusiveness of its definition within the field of poetry translation is explored through concrete examples where translation could be used as a keyword, thereby highlighting its misleading nature.

Keywords: translation, version, poetry translation.

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