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## Translation as a Creative and Performative Act: Some Deliberations

Monika Gaenssbauer

Have you ever seen a “translator’s thistle”?

It is a postcard that shows a thistle on its front side.

On its back you will find the following text, or a similar one:

Re. the review of novel XY in issue Z of your paper

Dear Sir or Madam,

Issue Z of your paper contains a review of novel XY, which was translated by me. I was surprised to see that the review makes no mention of my name as translator of the novel at all, not even in the section providing the bibliographical data related to the book. Obviously your editorial office failed to notice this significant omission—and a significant omission it surely was, since it goes without saying that books do not miraculously translate themselves. I am sure, however, that it was not your intention to fail to show the necessary respect for the authorship of this translation. I say “authorship” because, as you may know, the authorship of a translation is considered equivalent under the law to the authorship of an original text. I remain hopeful and confident, then, that it will soon become common practice in your editorial office to provide the name of the translators in book reviews dealing with translated works. . . . (Hagemann, 2000)

When reviewers and readers have before them a book by author XY in translation, they are often still of the opinion that they are reading a text by author XY. In fact what they have before them is a text by translator Z, or at least a text recreated in translator Z’s language and forms of expression.

Translators are authors of their translations and, as we have already seen above, the authorship of a translation is nowadays considered to be equivalent under the law to the authorship of an original text. Quite often, one will find a reviewer praising, in a newly-translated book, the language of author XY without

noticing that, in fact, the praise for the beautiful language should go at least partly to translator Z, who translated the book.

Nevertheless, I have to admit that the following remarks by Romanian translator Nora Iuga—who has translated works by such authors as Günter Grass, Elfriede Jelinek and Herta and Paul Amirault—seem to me to somewhat overstate the case: “I say this without special emphasis but also without any doubt: I am the author of *The Tin Drum*, *The Piano Teacher*, and *Nazis* in the Romanian language. . . . I cannot believe that I have won so many Nobel prizes” (Iuga 235).

But not every translator hopes that their work will be accorded some form of visibility. Some translators even seem to want to contribute to keeping their translation work invisible (cf.: Venuti 2002). Susanne Hagemann and Julia Neu have carried out research on prefaces written by translators to the works they translate. They discovered that most translators wrote about the author of a work and about the work itself but did not reflect on the process of their translation of the work in question (Hagemann and Neu 20). In the view of Robert Wechsler, it is incumbent on translators to declare that they are “performing agents” and to insist on being treated as such. They should explain that translation is an act which involves becoming intimate with a work of art, in the same way as an actor becomes intimate with a character. A translation, argues Wechsler, involves the “performance” (Wechsler 291) of a work of art in a language that it was not originally intended for.

My understanding of translation is similar to Wechsler’s. It is as follows: translations are acts embedded in language and in cultural studies; these acts are faithful to the source text and the readership, but they are at the same time also creative and performative acts.

In 1998 David Pollard edited a book entitled *Translation and Creation*. Paul Kussmaul, another expert in Translation Studies, also sees translation as a highly creative act. In former times, says Kussmaul, translation was often described as merely the copying of an original. Gradually, however, a different understanding of

the act of translation came to prevail: that of translation as text production. This text production also creates the possibility, and sometimes even the necessity, of altering the original text (Kussmaul 33).

In my view, the Chinese scholar Zheng Zhenduo found a very fitting image for translation processes: just as water can be poured from one container into another, thoughts can also be transferred from one language into another (92). Zheng Zhenduo is not the only Chinese scholar to have applied the above mentioned images. The philosopher Zhu Xi spoke about the *li* and the *qi* of human beings. In his *Zhuqi yulai* we read: “Human beings and things originally share the same nature (*li*) but they differ in their respective provisions of *qi*. This can be compared to water, which is originally transparent and clear but which can display different colours depending on whether it is poured into a white, a black or a green bowl.”

Clearly, translation is a process of change. Mirrella Agorni considers the act of translation to be something extremely culturally important. She writes that the phenomena making up translation “make things happen, create new cultural meanings and relations (both in the target and in the source system), and transform existing ones” (2). Agorni sees translation as a powerful means of inscribing difference into a homogenous dominant culture. At the same time, she says, every translation process is highly historically contingent (Agorni 35–36).

Rainer Kohlmayer once described translations as “theatre plays set on the desks of translators” (Kohlmayer, 2004). And the translator Reinhard Kaiser has identified the unique appeal of translation as he sees it through the remark: “You can play different roles in a language, you can stage these roles and allow them to resonate” (27).

In Michaela Wolf’s view, the nature of translation is essentially interdisciplinary; it is located between cultures and societies (Wolf, 2007). The subject of translation studies is located in the contact zones between cultures and is therefore exposed to different constellations of contextualisation and

structures of communication (Wolf 3). Mediating agents—translators—operate (in Clifford Geertz's sense) as a sort of web that exists between different cultures. Translation processes are always shaped by different players: the author, the translator, the publisher, the audience, etc. And there is a constant process of negotiation going on within the decision-making processes of these players (Wolf 9).

As Hans Vermeer and Katharina Reiss have emphasized, there is no such thing as "translation" *per se*. A translation is rather in every case a specific and individual translation performed by a specific translator in a specific situation and with a specifically intended audience of recipients in mind.

In what follows I would like to cite two concrete examples: One is the translation of a Chinese theatre play written by He Jiping. The title of the play is *Kaishi Daji* in Chinese, in English, *The Happy Opening*. This translation was carried out by one of my former students, Teresa Eisenknapp, in the form of a master thesis and has been published in 2013 in the series *Edition Cathay* that I am co-editing (Eisenknapp, 2013).

As Rebecca Gould has pointed out, translation "requires an extreme degree of creativity, openness to difference, and engagement with the otherness of the text" (Gould 98). And Jessica Yeung writes in an article: "There is an uncontested first rule for any translation task: Know Thy Text. . . . To know a text requires not only intimate, but also extensive reading, not only of the text to be translated, but also of the web or webs of texts into which the text in question is woven. A text is never only a text, it is always at the same time an intertext" (Yeung 95).

The Jiping's theatre play is an adaptation of a short story by Lao She from the year 1933. It tells the tale of three charlatans who try to establish a hospital in a small Chinese city. As none of the three has undergone any professional medical training, they come up with incorrect diagnoses and commit acts of fraud with fake medicines and improvised plastic surgery, all with a view to extracting money from their patients.

The text is full of dialectal phrases, plays on words, and idiomatic expressions. Therefore the translation of this play was undoubtedly a great challenge. These expressions convey metaphors, and increase the expressivity of the text in which they occur, but they are very challenging for the translator because every language has its own unique treasury of metaphors. For example, in German you have the phrase "Perlen vor die Säue werfen," in English: "casting pearls before swine," which means a great waste of artistic talent. In Chinese you have quite another metaphor for expressing this idea. Here, one would rather say: "she or he is playing the zither to bovine animals" (*dui niu tan qin*).

I asked Teresa Eisenknapp if she agreed with Kohlmaier's description of translation as "a theatre play set on the desks of translators." Her answer was that she agreed very much with it. I quote from her email message:

Translations of theatre plays do require of the translator that she or he convey and bring across the atmospheres, the emotions and the different characters of the play. A theatre text should be lively and vibrant, also in its translated version. So I tried to concretely envisage every member of the *dramatis personae* and also all the different settings of the play. I often also read the translated passages aloud to myself. Sometimes I even gestured a lot in order to find the right modes of expression for every character. After reading passages aloud to myself, I would quite often change my first drafts of the translation. Every character should have his or her own unique voice and ways of expression. I wanted to do justice to all the various *dramatis personae* of the play.

Some of Teresa Eisenknapp's remarks were surprising to me. Maybe this is due to the fact that, as Robert Wechsler has remarked, there is one major difference between translation and the other performing arts: most of the time, translation cannot be seen (Wechsler 260). On the other hand, as Wechsler also points out, the performance of a translation is direct and pure. Nothing comes between the translator's performance and her/his



performative act, I also have the remembered images of these two colleagues before my eyes: Andreas Guder reading long passages from the texts, amused by the witty formulations and unable to stop himself from laughing aloud at them, and Katrin Zimmermann proudly remembering the successful translations.

Andreas Guder and Katrin Zimmermann carried out this translation jointly. This seems rather rare in the German context. In China, however, translation work has traditionally been a collective enterprise, from the very beginnings up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As Eva Hung writes: "The collaborative mode of operation was well established in Chinese translation history over many centuries" (Hung 152). Unfortunately this respect for translation as teamwork gradually declined and vanished in twentieth-century China due to Western influences and was replaced by the idea that translation should be accomplished by one person alone (Hung 157).

But there is hope that these collective practices might be revitalized in twenty first-century Western contexts. Colleagues like Howard Goldblatt, Lucas Klein and Susanne Ettl-Hornfeck have recently carried out translations in a team of two persons (see for example: Alai 2013; Bei Dao 2011; Yang Mu 2001).

As Paul Kussmaul has shown, collective translation processes can be very helpful in setting free creative impulses through dialogue situations. There arises an inspiring play with alternative wordings, along with creative breaks where one can, for example, get a glass of wine or take a look out of the window in order to get new ideas (Kussmaul 1993).

I recently took a special interest in the research concept of "localism" within translation studies. It is the goal of this concept to—so to speak—draw a map including details from the historical, social, and language-related contexts of translation processes. (Agorni 129). It is a concept which takes a closer look at the individual and collective dimensions of translation. To put it in more concrete terms: this concept raises such questions as: Why was this text—and not another text—chosen for a

translation? Who was involved in the selection process? For which audience was the translation conceived? What are the aims of authors, publishers, translators in presenting this text to a new audience? What was the impact of a given translation, etc.?

At present, the contexts of translation processes often remain invisible. They tend not to be mentioned, for strategic or political reasons (Dizdar 228). In my view, it would be good to shed some light on these different contexts. This could also lead to new research findings in Translation Studies, including China-related translation studies.

The translators Klein and Eshleton took a first step in that direction by granting their readers some insights into the process of their translation of Bei Dao's poems in the Appendix to their collection *Endure*. I would like to quote from one of their dialogues on translating Bei Dao's poem "Untitled":

"A Hundred Thousand Windows Shimmer":

LK to CE, July 29, 2009 3:35 PM:

"I like shimmer better than D.H.'s [David Hinton's], gimmer because the word uses repeated /sh/ sounds (shanshuo), but another definition for the word is to be vague or evasive, maybe like hem and haw. . . . The grammar of this poem is particularly complicated. . . ."

CE to LK, July 29, 2009, 4:02 PM:

"Yes, a complicated one. . . . Try this version and let me know where I have missed a point."

CE to LK, July 30, 2009, 2:27 PM:

"Another version, Shimmer and shuffle seem definitely off to me. . . ." (Klein and Eshleman 116-117).

In the beginning my paper dealt with the translation of theatre texts. In the end it turned to poetry. Why? As Maria Tymoczko has shown for the Celtic literatures, poetry has been traditionally spoken and performed by "poets . . . prophets, seers and visionaries" (Tymoczko 25). This also applies to traditional China where the writing and reciting of poems has formed an almost indispensable part of the identity of the intellectually trained scholar, the literatus. Literati-poets in China perceived

themselves as media for transmitting messages from Heaven (tian) to the world. In modern China, too, there is a strong tradition of performances of poetic texts (Crespi, 2009). So Tymoczko's conclusion for the Celtic context that poetry is close to dramatic literature is true for the Chinese context, too.

This text contains several correlative priorities. On the one hand, I felt it incumbent upon me to emphasize the genuine literary creativity of translators, which even today has not been duly recognized. An act of translation is often still not understood as a scientific undertaking. This is why my text incorporates the following definition of "translation": "Translations are acts embedded in language studies and in cultural studies; these acts are faithful to the source text and the readership, but they are at the same time also creative and performative acts."

Working as a Sinologist I am particularly interested in revealing varying perspectives of translation within a Chinese context. In my introduction I refer to a telling example of what a translation may mean, in this case it is Zheng Zhenduo's (158) metaphorical notion: in the same way as water can be poured from one vessel into another, a text can be conveyed from one language into another. The image of a text will inevitably undergo a metamorphosis due to the different shapes and textures of the vessel. Zhu Xi has also made use of this simile.

Starting from my definition of translation I probed the question to what extent translations constitute performative acts, singling out theatre drama translations as *pars pro toto* material. I quote four professionals in this field being interviewed or observed at work, who unanimously stress or show the significance of performative elements in their translations of theatre plays.

Many of the translators referred to in my text prefer to cooperate with a partner. My paper concludes with some remarks on the topic of a collective approach to translations, which in China was a preferred mode for long periods. My contention is that quite possibly an increasing number of translators in the

West will revert to this practice. It is in my view an outstanding desideratum of Translation Studies to make the actual processes within acts of translation transparent. The translators Klein and Eshleton have made some initial progress in this regard with their conveyance of poems by Bei Dao.

The topic of transparency of translation processes could be addressed by some deeper research from the angle of localism (Agorni, 2002). This approach is looking at the individual dimensions and the trans-individual dimensions of translation. Translation processes are contextualised through research on the idiosyncratic behaviour of human and institutional agencies. Localism could produce self-reflective but also theorizing case studies about dialogic relations and complex social structures which make up the broad scenario of translation in the contact zones of cultural encounters all over the world.

It is my hope that we can see more study work accomplished from the angle of localism in the near future.

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# Translation Studies: Exploring Identities

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## Preface

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It all began in February 2014 when I met my teacher Professor Fakrul Alam at the annual alumni reunion of the English Department, University of Dhaka. I told him about my desire of holding a seminar at Khulna University and sought his suggestion. He at once suggested that it would be a good idea to organize a seminar on translation to explore “identity” from as many perspectives as possible. Hence the two-day seminar on *Translation Studies for Exploring Identities* at Khulna University on 2-3 April that year which was organized by the Arts and Humanities School of which I was then the Dean.

The response to the two-day seminar was very gratifying for the organizers. Quite a few issues were raised by the papers read at the conference and in the discussions that ensued: the problems of translating song-lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore; the question of appropriation and demystification in postcolonial translations of Shakespeare; translation as an act of connecting cultures; transcreation of Tagore’s texts in recent cinematic adaptations; and current theories and practices of translation in literature, theater, film, and ELT. What seemed obvious at the end of these two days was that it had sparked the interest of the audience in translation studies.

The present book is a sort of a follow-up event or effort made to build on the success of the seminar. As was decided, we requested paper presenters as well as invited other scholars interested in the topic to contribute full-length essays for this special volume. I thank the paper presenters and those who responded to our call and contributed to this book. Let me add here that the essays included in the book were reviewed and recommended by the consultant readers. I would like to thank the reviewers for their wonderful work.

Let me thank Md. Firuz Mahmud Ahsan, Assistant Professor, English Discipline and Md. Abul Fazal, Lecturer, Bangla Language and Literature Discipline of Khulna University,