

## THE TRANSLATOR AS NON-AUTHOR, AND I AM SORRY ABOUT THAT

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“Übersetzung ist eine Form”  
(Walter Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”)

I have been asked to write about translation and authorship, and I am happy to oblige.

Some translation theorists claim that the translator’s authorship deserves recognition, or better recognition. The claim is made with respect to literary translation (cf. Zeller 2000), political metaphors of translator-author relationships (cf. Chamberlain 1988/2000), copyright regimes (cf. Venuti 1995: 12), and more recently a “cultural turn” in Translation Studies, associated with postmodern theory that works to blur all boundaries, to recognize the translator’s subjectivity, and above all to keep turning (cf. Perteghella and Loffredo eds 2006). Lawrence Venuti has probably been the most consistent and vociferous proponent of the translator’s authorship. He initially opposed the idea to a “Romantic conception of authorship” that would accord all creativity to the author of the source text, thereby relegating the translator’s work to “derivative” status (cf. Venuti 1992). This critique is largely in tune with mainstream literary ideology: the “death of the author” was identified by Foucault and Barthes a long time ago; theories of intertextuality took off from Kristeva’s reading of Bakhtin; the idea that all creativity is translational is now a keystone of postmodern thought. From this perspective, to say that the translator has authorship is also to say that all authors work translationally. And if that means that translators, like all authors, transform texts, bring newness into the world, have complex productive cognition processes churning within them as they work, and are all different, then I have no qualms about the proposition at all: translators are indeed subjective in their minds and creative in their writing, as any piece of empirical research should be able to show.

“Authorship”, however, can be understood in several senses. It concerns not just creativity or individuality, but also ethical responsibility, a point that has been overlooked by many of the literary ideologies. Here I want to focus on authorship precisely and exclusively in the sense of responsibility within communication acts, that is, from the perspective of formal pragmatics. This is not to suggest that the other senses of authorship are somehow wrong. They merely sidestep an entire domain that is nevertheless crucial not only for contemporary social understandings of what translators do, but also, through Habermas, for an ethics of liberal humanism. Bear with me—this might be more important than translation and literature combined.

The Canadian microsociologist Erving Goffman provided one of the clearest and most provocative analyses of authorship, although his universalist categories are certainly not beyond dispute; his terms will here provide no more than convenient hooks on which to hang my arguments. Goffman most interestingly uses the term “author” to denote the role of the “principal”, the person who takes responsibility for an utterance: “someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say” (1981: 146). We will soon attempt to unpack each of those three descriptors. Goffman thus distinguishes the role of “author” from the actual creation of a text, which is the point where he diverges from the literary ideologies. Smart politicians, for instance, do not write their own speeches: they merely “authorize” them and thereby take moral responsibility for them. This

distinction dispatches with the whole question of Romantic authorship and “creative turns”—creativity is not the issue, ethical responsibility is. Goffman also usefully distinguishes authorship from the role of the “animator”, a person who says the words but might be doing so on behalf of someone else, perhaps by citing, using indirect reported speech, parodying, acting, or indeed translating. From this perspective, to say that a translator has authorship is to posit that the translator is more than an animator: the translator would somehow have their position established by the words, or be someone whose beliefs have been told, or even be someone committed to what the words say. Such is the proposition at stake.

Seen from this perspective, translators are not usually authors (despite many possible nuances—see Torikai 2009 for an analysis of interpreters’ interview data in precisely these terms). To state bluntly that translators have (or should have) authorship is thus to overlook quite an important dimension.

Here I will try to produce evidence of why translators are not authors. This is in the spirit of testing what seems obvious, in the same way as first-year science classes ask students to demonstrate that the earth is a sphere (if I remember correctly, you are supposed to make hypotheses about ships disappearing over the horizon, and things like that). Culture is not physics, and the Flat Earth Society still exists (“Deprogramming the masses since 1547”, says their website), but the search for empirical proof might yet be instructive. So where shall we look?

### **1. An author is someone whose position is established by the words**

In all languages that have personal pronouns, linguistic subjects are positioned in relation to the I-here-now of an utterance (that is a matter of definition; it requires no proof). The linguistic subject that is translating, however, cannot occupy an I-here-now while they are actually translating: whenever they say “I”, that position is ostensibly occupied by someone else, the author of a previous text. This is an essential feature of what I call the “translation form” operative in our immediate cultures (see Pym 2004). It is something that children have to learn when they start to experiment with interlingual communication—the move is mostly from reported speech (“Mummy says that...”) to translation (what I am saying is an un-annotated report of what Mummy said...). I currently have a five-year old son who makes occasional experiments with that transition, but only when no personal pronouns are involved; it is a hard trick to learn, as indeed are personal pronouns themselves at a younger age. Now, the upshot of these lessons that we all had to learn (then we forgot, apparently) is that translating translators have no “I”, or are condemned to use what is called “the alien I”. That could perhaps be a universal feature of what we would want to call translations, but I have no proof of any such universality and I have not tested the cultural or historical frontiers involved. This is just what I see in the languages around me, and I warmly recommend that you have some children in order to see how hard and complex the use of such linguistic features can be. So here is an adaptation of Goffman’s first descriptor of authorship: Translators, when translating, are not authors because their pronominal position is not established by the words said. Or more exactly, their position in the discourse is only established as a non-author. You can say as much as you like on covers and titles and introductions about the identity and creativity of the translator, you can gather reams of process analysis and post-hoc interview data, but while they are translating, beyond the paratexts and processes, translators do not have authorship in this pronominal sense.

Is that a necessary distinction? It is quite possible to imagine a community in which the interdicted first person is not needed. All translated utterances would be marked at all times as reported speech; interpreters in court would be sworn in as witnesses rather than operate as officers of the court; there would be no use of the alien “I”; imperial laws would carry the signatures of those who redacted each linguistic form, and each language version would be a different law; translators might even get a meatier deal out of copyright conventions, albeit not as translators. When we try to

imagine a community without the “alien I” translation form, however, we quickly come across a prime reason for the very existence of such a form: simple efficiency. If we had to note explicit discursive positioning for each utterance rendered from another language, or even rewritten within the one language, communication would become even more unwieldy and more prone to doubt than it already is. In the interests of efficiency, in the first place, translators seem excluded from the positions established by the words they produce.

Efficiency, however, merely explains the conditions for the development of a translation form. It says very little about the way the form is actually used. Once the translator’s non-manifest “I” is understood, is the rest just a case of convenient forgetting?

## **2. An author is someone whose beliefs have been told**

In Habermas’s formal pragmatics (for example, Habermas 1990) we find three “universal validity claims” that are supposed to be made as a part of communicative competence:

1. a claim to the truth of what is said or presupposed
2. a claim to the normative rightness
3. a claim to the truthfulness or sincerity of the speaker.

These map with some difficulty onto Goffman’s three conditions of authorship, constituting a problem that I do not wish to pursue here (although “truthfulness” comes close to “commitment”, and Habermas simply assumes authorship and therefore positioning). The three claims are also quite timorous whistlings when it comes to cross-cultural communication, since there is considerable empirical evidence of non-shared competencies. That too will be left for another day. More interesting in the present context, I suggest, is the task of identifying which of these claims are inherent in translatorship.

It seems to me that the translator is not normally required to claim anything about the truth, rightness or truthfulness of the source text. Translators are, however, regularly required to make such claims about the way the translation *represents* a source text—we claim the translation is a true representation, that it is appropriate to the communicative norms of the (translation) situation, and that the translator believes in the truth of the representational act. Such claims are thus rather like the person who certifies that a photocopy is a true representation of a document, even though the document photocopied may be an outright forgery. Further, all users of the translation will understand and share in these implicit claims. From this perspective, the communicative competence of the translator would be based on no more than that mimetic or representational function. It would not encroach on the specific claims of authorship.

At this point there should be cries of protest from translators and theorists alike. No, a translation is not a photocopy! Heaven forbid! Of course, the complaint is entirely correct—translators can only claim to represent some aspects of their sources, and considerable creative transformation is often required to achieve the illusory representation of those aspects. Along with the claim to representation there must also be implicit claims to transformational work, perhaps in the name of “rightness” to the new communicative situation (Habermas’s second claim). So let us politely withdraw the photocopy simile for a while. The main point is not the extent of what translatorship entails here, but what it does *not* comprise. Whatever their truth claims with respect to representation, translators are usually *not* required to attest to the truth of their source texts. It is this limitation that distinguishes translatorship from authorship, rather than the problematics of representation as such. How can this limitation be tested?

The fundamental restriction of validity claims can be seen at work in pseudotranslations, understood as texts presented as translations but which have no corresponding source text—there are indeed

authors who choose to write as translators. Pseudotranslations abound in periods where new knowledge is institutionally repressed, since translational representation becomes a way of getting around the censor. Referring to Latin proto-science of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Thorndike argues that many of the texts presented as translations may well have been pseudotranslations: “The number is suspiciously large of works of which the lost originals were supposedly by Greek or Arabian authors but which are extant only in later Latin ‘translations’” (1923: 2.26-27). Adelardus de Bada, for instance, claimed to have disguised many of his personal opinions in a way quite compatible with pseudotranslation: “For I am aware what misfortunes pursue the professors of truth among the common crowd. Therefore it is the cause of the Arabs that I plead, not my own” (cit. Thorndike 1923: 2.25). By presenting knowledge as translational, authors could 1) limit their own public responsibility and thus liability to persecution, 2) present the knowledge as being operational in another culture, and thus of a threatening or rival status (“we need this knowledge because our competitors already have it”), and 3) give the knowledge the authority of age, if not of associated auctorial prestige (in cases where the author was supposed to be Aristotle, for example). None of this would be possible in the absence of a translation form based on a distinction between authorship and translatorship. In other words, if translators were authors in this sense of making truth claims about the original, there would be no pseudotranslations.

Goffman’s general descriptor of this point might thus be crudely adapted as follows: “Don’t shoot me – I’m only the translator!” And yet many translators have indeed been persecuted because of their assumed authorship: translators of the Bible (William Tyndale, Jan Hus), of oppositional philosophy (Étienne Dolet) or of more contemporary heresies (Hitoshi Igarashi, Ettore Capriolo, Aziz Nesin, all translators of Rushdie). And a very long etcetera. The translation form is obviously not always a successful defence. Yet it is there.

The real problem is that our contemporary theorists, who would make translators into authors in the name of recognizing creativity, would perhaps thereby be according translators rather more validity claims than is their due. Would the theorists wilfully ratify the burnings and shootings and stabbings to which translators have been subject in the name of validity claims?

No, this is not a question of mere efficiency.

### **3. An author is someone committed to what the words say**

Translators may be sincere in their belief that they are representing a source text, but should that commitment be extended to belief in the validity of the source text itself? In some cases, such extensions are quite normal. Translators of the Bible, for example, traditionally express their collective belief that the text is the Word of God, and that commitment somehow remains unshaken by all the ensuing debates over how to render the text. More normally, though, the professionalism of the translator requires detachment rather than commitment. The translator of pharmaceutical instructions, for example, would certainly have to trust in the validity claims of the source text, but that trust would be essentially the same as any user of the actual pharmaceutical products. If the translation misrepresents the source, the translator is responsible; if the source instructions are badly written or the drug has unforeseen side-effects, the translator is not responsible. There are institutional authors that are legally liable in such cases.

An interesting test case of commitment is a speech delivered in English on November 10 1991 in Weinheim, Germany, by the American Fred Leuchter. In this speech Leuchter argued, among other things, that it was impossible that so many people could have been killed at Auschwitz. Such questioning is illegal in Germany. The real problem, however, is that the speech was rendered into German by a translator named Günter Deckert, and it was the German translation that became the object of a series of court cases (there were two retrials). Could the translator be condemned for the validity claims of a discourse he merely translated? The question in this case concerned not the

position of the translator as non-author, not the exclusive ownership of the beliefs recounted, but the translator's commitment to those beliefs and to their effects (see the discussion in Pym 1997). Indeed, at the 1995 retrial Deckert was found guilty of *gefährliche politische Brandstiftung* (literally "dangerous political arson"), since he had lit the fire that enabled Leuchter's speech to burn in German. Now, a professional translator would not normally be expected to share that guilt, and as such should have a reasonable defence. Deckert, however, was head of a neo-Nazi party and it seems he had invited the American to deliver the speech in the first place. Just as pseudotranslations can be used to import incendiary ideas, here a kind of pseudo-original was being used to evade German law.

Is it possible to condemn the translator Deckert and yet retain the professional detachment of other translators? I think so. One merely has to insist that the elements suggesting commitment (head of a political party, organizer of the speech) belong to a subject quite different from the one positioned in the translational discourse. As a politician and organizer, Deckert quite probably shared the commitment and certainly sought the incendiary effects; as a translator he had no need to do so. The translation form should thus survive this case, and Deckert's supposed innocence should not.

Some nevertheless claim that translators should indeed only translate messages to which they are committed. Baker (2009) strangely posits that you should only translate people with whom you have mutual respect, so she, for example, would never do a translation for the CIA, Walmart or the State of Israel. This position is as confused as it is honourable. It is one thing to *work with clients* with whom you have mutual trust—that would be good advice for a commercial relationship of any kind. But that relationship has nothing to do with the status of the messages involved. All clients want to know about what their rivals or enemies are saying; all translators have been called on to render words with which they do not agree, for a great many noble and ignoble reasons. Baker's position, however, starts from the assumption that narrative is a basic way we construe knowledge about the world, so the function of translation is to control the narratives that circulate in a culture. It thus makes sense to edit out the bad narratives through non-translation, and to tell stories about your enemy rather than talk with them—a point at which there is no essential difference between translatory or auctorial narration, since the fascistic binding of the culture apparently has priority over all else. This view wilfully excludes dialogue as another basic means by which we construe knowledge about the world. If you believe only in narrative, you can require commitment to all texts in a culture, and ultimately a control of that collective commitment—Baker constantly uses her own narratives to reduce the complex subjectivity of the other ("he is not the sort of person who..."). If you believe in the production of knowledge through dialogue, however, you will ultimately require mediation with your enemy, on one level or another, at which point you need someone prepared to do more than just expound their own beliefs.

Let me be careful here, before some postmodern theorist concocts a host of hasty extrapolations. To say that the current translation form does not require commitment to content does not imply, in any way, that translators are neutral, subjectless or without personal involvement in their utterances. On the contrary, countless text comparisons, process studies and psychological attention after war-crimes trials show that translators intervene in their productions, whether they want to or not, and thus that neutrality is a profoundly ideological professional construct (see Pym 1992/2010: 167ff.). It is something quite different to insist that translators do or should always believe what they write. In general, then, there is no need for translators to claim (or be attributed with) any commitment to the content of what they are translating. To that extent they are translators, not authors, and they have no need to submit to this week's good causes.

To summarize our adaptations of Goffman's descriptors: I claim that, with respect to discursive positioning, beliefs and commitment, translators are not authors. Such, at least, is the conclusion invited by the translation form in our immediate cultures.

#### 4. A suggestion from process studies

Most of the discussions about authorship and translatorship are based on products, on texts that have been authored and translated. One might nevertheless hope to find some evidence from studies of how translators actually work when translating—process studies should also have their word to say. Here we review the little evidence that has become available.

What is the difference between translating and just normal writing? A naïve answer would be that the translator has a completed text as a point of departure, whereas other forms of writing only have an incomplete text and a frightening white space to fill. That answer would be naïve because, it can be argued, all writing works from previous texts or text models, either written out or in the mind. All writing is to some extent re-writing, and translation need not be fundamentally different in this regard. But is it?

Another facile conception would be that translators just work at phrase level, replacing text fragments with text fragments, without the wider macro-textual or communicative frame deemed operative in other modes of writing. Englund Dimitrova (2005: 14) summarizes the research as follows:

In several process-oriented studies on translation, professional translators have been shown to have a high degree of consciousness regarding textual features, global strategies and the communicative purpose of the translated text. Thus, professional translators verbalize in their think-aloud protocols global strategies, translation principles and personal theories of translation to a greater extent than students and non-professionals.

This degree and level of awareness is surely indicative of authorship in at least the “creativity” sense of the word, if not as an indicator of responsibility for the direction and success of the discourse. Development of consciousness on this level would also seem to be acquired as one becomes a translator, and could thus be included in catalogues of professional translational competence. Englund Dimitrova continues (2005: 14-15):

Furthermore, professional translators have, in comparison with students, a higher degree of TL [target-language] pragmatic and stylistic awareness, as well as an awareness of the purpose of the translation.

This is all grist to the mill of translatorial authorship. Working parallel to the theorists of products, the researchers of processes seek and find evidence that translators are actually thinking as authors, albeit without that term.

There could, however, be a few snakes in the woodheap, or flies in the ointment.

Immonen (2006) finds that translators produce texts quite differently from monolingual writers: they pause fewer times in the first draft; they revise for longer; their pauses are longer at clause level and below, and shorter at above-clause level. What might this mean? One can imagine the monolingual writer stopping to think about relatively large stretches of text (“Where the hell am I going? Where the hell have I come from?”). The translator, however, seems more concerned with relatively small stretches (“What the hell does this mean?”) and then compensates for that narrow vision by putting more effort into post-draft revision. So much for all writing being the same.

Second snake or fly: Astrid Jensen (2001) compared expert translators with “young professional translators” with respect to a classical psychological account of writing (from Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987). The basic opposition is between text production as “knowledge transforming”, which is when the actual writing process identifies and transforms ideas (hence we find writing harder work than speaking), and writing as “knowledge telling”, which would be more linear and

less problematic. Perhaps surprisingly, Jensen finds that the expert translators use the “knowledge telling” model more consistently, since they “engage in less problem-solving, goal-setting and re-analyzing behavior vis-à-vis young professional translators” (Jensen 2001: 177). That is, they deal with the text as it comes, with limited involvement and responsibility. Indeed we might surmise that, when becoming experts, translators learn to become rather less like authors.

Of course, these findings could be no more than small stories based on smaller experiments. Then again, these different kinds of cognitive processes regularly explain why many writers start to translate when they are psychologically blocked in their monolingual work. Translating is not just ethically different from authoring; it could be a psychologically different kind of writing.

### **Conclusion: Why I am sorry**

Following the presentation of these ideas at the conference in Siena in April 2009, there was a very intelligent question from the audience that might be paraphrased as follows: “You have defined authorship, but you haven’t defined translation. What is translation for you?”.

Good question: As soon as I answer it, as soon as I give a restrictive definition of translation, I am intellectually dead in these circles: I will have told translators what to do, legislating for all humanity, and in some way excluding creativity. So the obvious answer ran something like this: Our cultures give us a translation form, and that form sets up an operative distinction between translatorship and authorship. You are free to modify that form, or disregard it altogether, or replace it with something else you want to call translation – there are no eternal laws in cultural matters. However, I suggest that the first step, in whatever journey you want to undertake, should be to identify the current form and to test its limits empirically. If we operate without that kind of empirical knowledge, we will be doing our cultures a disservice, separating intellectual pirouettes from everyday understandings.

I am nevertheless sorry about the translator’s non-authorship. This is because, the more I work on translation, the more I see it as a repressive and misleading institution. I do not think the current translation form is a good thing, and I suspect that a good deal of our problems in literary and cultural theory stem from people wanting to see translation as a good thing – basically because it appears to break down the binary oppositions and national borders that mark the guilty past of literary and cultural studies. As far as I can see, for the reasons given above, the translation form operates on binary distinctions and sets up the borders between national cultures, and does so in a way that systematically identifies translators as non-authors. That is something we have to recognize and analyze; it is not something that we should necessarily defend.

As for the ethical dilemmas that we have left in the balance, or which seem peculiarly complicated by the translation form, my personal position is simple enough: absolute freedom of speech is the prime principle to protect. Deckert’s *Auschwitzlüge*, Baker’s narratives, Rushdie’s blasphemies, they all have every right to be voiced and circulated interlingually, and mediators in turn have every right to use non-translational forms (reported speech, commentary) to make it very clear what is theirs and what is not. Happily, translation is not the only form in town.

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