

LSP Translation and Creativity¹

Margaret Rogers

University of Surrey, UK

Summary

Specialised or LSP translation is often compared unfavourably with literary translation in terms of the creative input required from the translator to produce a ‘good’ translation. The supposed formulaic nature of LSP texts is contrasted with the creative nature of literary texts. The authors of LSP texts are often anonymous, possibly working in a team, and not necessarily native speakers of the language used. By contrast, literary translators – notably of the canon – derive their higher status from that of the authors they translate, and nowadays are usually acknowledged by name. This paper explores the relationship between creativity and translation, considering in particular the intertextual relations enjoyed by all kinds of text, including translations.

1 Introduction

This paper has its origins in practice. A creative writing module – taught by my former colleague Dr Fiona Doloughan – was introduced in 2003 to the Surrey undergraduate pathway in translation as part of the BA programme in French, German or Spanish, as we believed that connecting translation with close reading and productive writing skills, including textual awareness, would enrich novice translators’ textual experience and hence further inform and sensitise their decision-making. This module was extended to Masters level as an option for audiovisual translation students in 2005. The introduction of a technical writing module in 2006, also offered at Masters level, prompted further thoughts about synergies between all types of close reading and productive writing.

2 Dichotomy or cline?

Over the last decade, an increasing interest in the relationship between writing and translation has been evident in the scholarly literature and in related academic activities. Whilst the focus of this attention has been on literary translation, through, for example, the growing number of international conferences on writers and translation (including bilingual writers and self-translation) and the publication of journal papers, monographs and edited collections, work has also been emerging on the relationship between writing and specialist translation. This work often shows a practice-oriented approach, e.g. in the form of discussions on LSP (Language for Special Purposes) translator training curricula, the interrelationship between professional communication and specialist translation, and the impact of English as a *lingua franca* and the supposedly homogenising effect of ‘internationalisation’. Two important and related factors suggest a more synergistic relationship between literary and LSP translation. Firstly, it is now widely acknowledged that no writing occurs in a socio-cultural or linguistic vacuum, i.e. all writing is intertextually related, genres of creative writing being no exception. The commonly claimed dichotomy between literary and the sometimes pejoratively named

¹ I would like to thank my colleague Dr Fiona Doloughan (until April 2011 Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Surrey, subsequently at the Open University) for the many discussions we have had on the topic of ‘original’ writing and translation. I am grateful for her insights and her considerable knowledge of writers and her expertise in creative writing, from which I have undoubtedly benefited. Many of the ideas in this paper result from our discussions.

‘commercial’ translation thus becomes more of a cline, even shared with so-called ‘original’ writing. Secondly, if we regard translation of any kind as the creation of an act of communication rather than as an act of transfer, then the translator is acknowledged to operate in a decision-making space related to both the construction of meaning in the Source Text (ST) and the creation of meaning in the Target Text (TT). In this paper, competing notions of creativity will be explored and related to LSP writing and LSP translation, including recent developments in the professional world of LSP translation – such as the ubiquitous use of translation technology – which may, however, speak against the overall thesis presented here.

3 Creativity

Any attempt to arrive at a consensual definition of ‘creativity’ is fraught with difficulty, as Perteghella & Loffredo remind us in their volume on literary translation and creative writing: “Theorizing creativity has always been a daunting task, as the variability of this concept seems to exert a certain resistance to theoretical efforts” (2006: 8). Writing on legal translation and creativity, Pommer even attributes “mystical connotations” to the term ‘creativity’ (Pommer 2008: 355). In fact, the very vagueness of the concept, i.e. its lack of consensual precision, is characteristic of scholarly attempts to capture other socially rooted concepts such as ‘culture’, and forms an important disciplinary component of discourse in the arts and humanities where key notions are constantly re-examined, reshaped and re-conceptualised. Whilst natural scientists may join in the debate about the nature of creativity, they are unlikely to treat definitions of the atom, the molecule or the cell in the same way. Precision seems to be a goal of natural scientists whereas vagueness provides a creative space for understanding social phenomena.

In this context, I have chosen to focus on attempts to understand creativity in the specific context of translation. A number of authors such as Kussmaul (2000), Šarčević (2000), Byrne (2006), Kenny (2006) and Pommer (2008) have dealt with the subject, including from a non-literary perspective. Characteristic features of creativity – clearly not discrete – are said to be: variation, novelty, filling in gaps, divergence, problem-solving and problem-finding, lateral thinking, making links between apparently unconnected items. The attempt to identify rather specific features of a creative profile, a number of which we assume are teachable, contrasts with the more popular understanding of creativity as the innate ability of a particularly gifted individual. In itself, of course, this popular understanding actually belies the focused reading and writing work which authors of literary texts undertake, and denies the intertextuality of ‘original’ work.

Some translation scholars even present the nature of the translation task as forcing the translator into linguistic and cultural creativity as a result of the unavoidably different linguistic “means” available in the Source Language and the Target Language on the one hand (Neubert 1997: 19), and the different “cultural frameworks” on the other hand (Pommer 2008: 358). In this view, the translator, even of the most banal text, is undertaking a creative task and cannot therefore be seen as a mere transcoder, although the nature of the ST conventionally exercises a powerful influence on the way in which the complexity of the translation task is perceived.

4 Translation and writing: the concept of the ST

The ST-TT relationship is fundamental to the concept of translation. Indeed, it is this close intertextual relationship which leads to notions of translation as derivative or dependent – and therefore as not ‘creative’. But this concept has been problematised from a number of

perspectives, not only from the point of view of creativity as in Neubert (1997) and Pommer (2008). Firstly, the concept of pseudo or fictionalised translation is well known (cf. Toury 1995; 2005), and further challenges the assumed distinction “between translations and original works, translators and authors” (Robinson 2001: 185). Secondly, referring to an LSP context, Šarčević (2000) points to the bilingual and bilingal practice in Canadian law in which bilingual drafting in English and French, involving the translator, undermines the concept of a ST which is remote from the TT in both time and space. My third example is that of the Bible, a sacred text but one which nevertheless requires specialist knowledge of various subject fields (cf. for instance, Rogers 2006: 13) and which is often adapted from earlier translations for new audiences and/or political or religious purposes. The King James Bible (1611, also known as the Authorised Version) is a case in point (cf. Bobrick 2001). And yet, this work is widely seen both as a translation (not a revision) which has but one ‘original’ ST (in itself a problematic assumption, cf. Bobrick 2001: 245-6) and as an implied original which is “arguably the greatest work of English prose ever written”² (BBC 2011).

These three examples – from the literary field, the legal field and the sacred – point to the blurring of ST-TT concepts as well as to a variety of means for text production. Taken with the established intertextuality of ‘original’ works (cf. below), a complex set of relations between texts of all kinds is indicated. To this complex mix could also be added contemporary phenomena such as relay translation, English templates for subtitles, adaptations, ‘versions’ of plays based on literal translations and translation memory, to which we return below.

5 Translation and writing: autonomy or dependency?

Translation is not an autonomous activity or product, since it enjoys various intertextual relations with prior texts, but not necessarily exclusively with a single ST. However, neither can ‘original writing’ be regarded as autonomous: it does not emerge from an intertextual vacuum. Hemingway’s transposition of a newspaper article in the *New York Times* into a short story, and Jean Rhys’s construction of a history for ‘the mad woman in the attic’ in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jayne Eyre* (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, 1966)³ are cases in point (cf. Doloughan & Rogers 2006). The ‘writer’ and the ‘translator’ are both readers (of other texts) and creators (of new texts). As Perteghella & Loffredo state:

Texts do not occur out of nothing, but recur as altered forms of pre-existing texts – as intertexts; there are no origins and there is no closure, but an ongoing textual activity consisting of a host of complex transactions, in which texts are assimilated, borrowed and rewritten. (2006: 4).

Creative writers look to previous texts (including audiovisual texts, images, paintings) for material which in some way shapes their own creation. LSP translators look not only to the ST, and to previous translations, but also to ‘original’ texts with appropriate design features (as defined by the translation brief) in the target language/culture. These ‘original’ LSP texts have, in turn, themselves been shaped by other texts in the target language/culture as well as by previous translations e.g. the introduction of new genres such as ‘popular science writing’ in Arabic (Merakchi, unpublished PhD work, University of Surrey).

The insights necessary for producing a piece of writing which is a translation are indicative of the reciprocal benefits which translation can have for future writing, and, as I have been arguing, which writing can have for future translations. Referring to his own experience as a

² BBC (2011) *When God spoke English: The Making of the King James Bible*. BBC4, broadcast 21 Feb, 2011, presented by Adam Nicolson.

³ Examples provided by Dr Fiona Doloughan.

novelist and literary translator, Tim Parks explains the value of translation to his authorial work as follows:

Writing my own novels has always required a huge effort of organisation and imagination; but sentence by sentence, translation is intellectually more taxing. On the positive side, the hands-on experience of how another writer puts together his work is worth a year's creative writing classes. (Tim Parks, *The Observer*, 25 April 2010)

Parks' preference for translating over writing classes should not necessarily be seen as a rejection of the potential value of such classes, particularly for novice writers and translators: translation forces close reading of the text, background research and a search for coherence. Anecdotally, stories are told by translators of an author's lack of insight into their own writing when questioned by the translator. But there is no reason that creative or technical writing classes cannot simulate activities such as close reading and textual analysis with an emphasis on meaning construction and on coping with the relative indeterminacy of different genres. Whilst it is certainly the case that some genres are more determinate than others, e.g. contracts, because their function is to closely regulate human behaviour in defined circumstances with enforceable sanctions for non-compliance, translation difficulties may lie elsewhere, in this case, in the handling of two legal systems for which innovative solutions are often required. In considering creativity in technical translation, Byrne (2006) even suggests that the suppression of ST creativity can in itself be creative if it improves the usability (by which I understand fitness-for-purpose) of the translation in the target culture. The example he gives is of instructional texts in which different kinds of ST variation (including synonymy, switching between 2nd and 3rd person verbs, and main/subordinate clause ordering) are removed in the translation, thereby prioritising clarity over elegance of expression.

Whether we agree with Byrne's understanding of creativity here or not, his analysis points to a useful distinction, namely, that between process and product, in which the product may appear uncreative (i.e. repetitive, lacking in 'style', uninteresting), but the process which gives rise to it is not, in that various options are evaluated by the translator in the context of the purpose of the TT, genre conventions in the target language, audience profile and cognitive issues such as iconicity.

6 Technology and creativity

If we are considering creativity in the context of the contemporary professional translation market, then it is clear that various technology-driven developments need to be considered. The aim here is usually greater speed – leading to cost reductions – effected through degrees of automation, usually elevated by arguments about improving quality by means of greater consistency at all levels of the text. A number of trends are associated with these developments, including the 'internationalisation' of texts in preparation for localisation for particular markets. Hence, texts may be written using highly standardised syntax and consistent terminology, and are bereft of figurative language (notably metaphors) and of culturally specific items: in other words, they are the very antithesis of what is normally regarded as a creative text. English, often the language used in such internationalised texts, is also the language used to create subtitling templates which are the basis for audiovisual translation into other languages. The word 'homogenisation' comes to mind.

A further development is that of the re-use of previous translations in Translation Memory (TM) software, one of the most pervasive translation tools used in the professional market. In cases where a memory already exists for a particular client, the translator's task is reduced to that of accepting, rejecting or modifying 'proposals' for the translation of segments which fall short of a pre-defined threshold of match between the ST segment in the memory and the new

ST segment. In many cases translators do not engage with the whole text, but rather with decontextualised segments. In cases where a memory has to be created in the absence of previous translations, it could be assumed that the translation task is no different from a translation conducted without the TM software. However, there is some suggestion that in order to optimise the re-usability of the memory, cohesive ties need to be weakened in the translation so that segments (usually sentences) can be more easily re-ordered or isolated in future translations (cf. Rogers 2011). Hence, the technology may be shaping the nature of text, although it is still the translator creating the memory who has to interpret how this is to be implemented in specific cases.

7 Conclusion

The practice of translation – from the sacred to the ‘everyday’ – relies heavily on other texts, as does ‘original’ writing. So if ‘originality’ is the criterion used to distinguish translation from writing which is creative, then the distinction cannot be upheld in any simplistic way, although translations do normally enjoy a particularly close intertextual relationship with a ST produced in another language and in another socio-cultural context. And it is this bilingual aspect which problematises the notion of creativity even further. On the one hand, the ST can be regarded as a kind of ‘template’ for the translation, whilst on the other hand, the linguistic and cultural constraints of the ‘template’ present challenging problems for the creation of a new text in a different language and socio-cultural context. New trends in the professional translation market such as the use of some form of controlled language to customise STs (often in English) for translation, human or machine, attempt to tackle such challenges at source, whilst translations themselves might even be subject to textual constraints when segmented for re-use in a translation memory.

Nevertheless, all translation is creative in a weak sense as it is never entirely deterministic even at a purely linguistic level; otherwise, human translation would have ceded its position entirely to fully automatic machine translation long ago. Rather, it is a decision-making process which entails identifying problems and solving them for a particular purpose, be that for re-use by a translation memory, for a human translation of a set of safety instructions, or the translation of a sacred text. I would like to argue here that a crucial point is not the status of the text which determines the level of translation difficulty, but rather the features of the text and its commissioned translation counterpart. The possible consequences of translation decisions add a further dimension: translating the Bible could certainly endanger the life of the translator, but errors in safety instructions can endanger the lives of others.

I would like to end this paper on a pragmatic note: does it actually matter whether we can say that translation – and LSP translation in particular – is creative? My answer is ‘yes’, for the following reasons: a relegation of translators of any texts to the role of ‘servant’ or ‘interlingual ventriloquist’ (i.e. without any autonomy or agency) affects the social status of the very translators we educate and train (five years or more of Higher Education); the complexity of LSP translation is undervalued by expressions such as ‘commercial translator’ and poses a false dichotomy with literary translators; LSP translators are due respect and acknowledgment for their essential role in the globalised information and knowledge society. And last but certainly not least, LSP translators deserve appropriate remuneration for the creative job which they do.

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