Presentation

Présentation

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What is the relationship between testimony, defined as a more or less ritualized first-person account of political violence, and translation? Correspondingly, how does the translator position herself towards the witness? Can the translator be, or become, a witness? How, when and why are testimonies translated? Which linguistic and discursive strategies do translators resort to when faced with ethically challenging texts? Which role do they play exactly in the transmission of the historical knowledge, cultural values or social critique conveyed by the testimony? Does translation weaken or rather reinforce the relevance and impact of the original statement? How important is translation in literary, political and institutional settings? Do these specific settings determine translation practice in significant ways? To which extent can subsequent processes of transcription, editing, translation and archiving affect the source text? And how accurate are the boundaries we draw to distinguish witnessing from translating, documentary from literary testimony, the original from its translation? These are the main questions we intend to explore in our dossier.
This dossier on "Translating Testimony" explores the ways in which translation both supplements and complicates the act of testimony. It does so by addressing a range of very diverse cultural and political settings, including Nazi Germany, postcolonial India, the former Yugoslavia, the Belgian immigration department, post-apartheid South Africa, post-genocidal Rwanda, and Egypt in the wake of the recent revolution. While this broad scope inevitably implies a certain lack of historical and/or geographical focus, its deliberate aim is to demonstrate both the relative utility and the particular relevance of the study of translation and testimony in a great variety of fields. Although it can hardly be ignored that translation studies has yet to be fully explored. In this dossier it is discussed in relation to contexts such as the Nazi camps, the Rwandan genocide, and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In the field of translation studies, it has been effectively argued that translation is never neutral nor transparent – a clean copy of the original – but rather “untidy and partial” (Hermans 2002, 11; see also Ieţcu-Fairclough 2008). Translation is not politically or ideologically innocent, whether it consolidates dominant power structures and discourses, or serves the activist resistance against them. As extensively argued by Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler in their introduction to the 2002 volume on Translation and Power, the “key term that has provided the impetus for the new directions that translation studies have taken since the cultural turn is power” to the extent that “the cultural turn” in translation studies has become the ‘power turn’, with questions of power brought to the fore in discussion of both translation history and strategies of translation (Tymoczko & Gentzler 2002, xvi). The poststructuralist and postcolonial frameworks that have informed such critical investigations of the many intersections between testimony, translation and power can also be found at work in essays in the present dossier.

The inevitable partiality of translation can be seen as an opportunity to empower translators as well as to "enlarge" the concept of translation, thus underscoring its ethical, political and cultural dimensions (Tymoczko 2007). Translation – of a specific text, in a specific time and place –, rather than being secondary and derivative, is indeed a highly efficient tool that can be used to construct, reestablish or oppose particular representations of the social and political world. Some contributions focus on the ways in which translation is easily transformed into an instrument
deployed by dominant persons and institutions (archives, war criminals, asylum officers) to exercise power over the witnesses, thereby undermining their chance to present their case in the most favourable way possible. These papers urge us to always critically evaluate the connection between the witness testimony and its institutionalized, translated and archived version. But besides being a tool to reinforce relations of dominance, translation can also be mobilized with an emancipatory and even activist view, as other articles will emphasize. Texts are translated to instigate historical or moral reflection on a subject, to circulate new forms of knowledge, promote social or political change, and establish networks of solidarity across the world. As such, both approaches of the relation between translation and power – in terms of power and resistance, domination and emancipation – provide complementary perspectives from which to analyze concrete instances of translated testimonies, whether they be literary texts, testimonial archives, statements made in a court of law, or interviews in an asylum procedure.

Both memory and translation studies thus provide a critical framework within which to analyze the translation of testimonies as a set of well-defined hierarchical positioning of languages or language varieties – but equally the processes and material conditions that can account for the detected shifts. Philosophical and ethical concerns with regard to translating accounts of political violence are indeed crucial to grasping the complex role of translation in intercultural memory work. Yet, effective strategies for “ethical” translation cannot be simply derived from fixed protocols; instead, they are always tailored to unique contexts and particular readerships.

In the same regard, the delicate relation between translator and witness will be defined differently depending on time and place of translation. For her article on the English translations of David Rousset’s *L’univers concentrationnaire* (1946), one of the most shocking events of World War II, he was a concentration camp survivor, a camp survivor’s account, in judicial evidence or administrative procedures; the authors claim, thereby referring to its status as a site of intense power struggle over knowledge and meaning-making. It is the article’s goal to “refract the South-African archive experience through the discussion of three testimonies delivered during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s hearings in 1996. Patterns of omission and slippage of meaning are detected between the oral account and the archived version, which the authors believe mostly result from the interplay between translator and transcriber alike, to grapple with the horrific event related by the witness.”

Krog and Mpolweni’s article sets the scene for a new context in which testimonies are regularly validated and analyzed. Indeed, testimony is not only a cultural artefact – the most current form under which it is investigated in Holocaust studies – but is often used as evidence in institutional environments: commissions, courtrooms, or governmental immigration departments. Ellen Elias-Bursać, who has worked for over six years at the English Translation Unit of the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, explores the role of translation in the recent Radovan Karadžić trial. Since “translation is the central axis around which everything at this multilingual Tribunal revolves”, the view from the booth and the language-services units offers a fascinating perspective on the proceedings. Following his decision to conduct his own defence, Karadžić was able to put pressure on the witnesses who were now cross-examined in court by the alleged war criminal himself. Moreover, as a speaker of both Serbian and English, he dominated the hearings by systematically pointing to what he contended were mistranslations, and by bringing in untranslated documents that he would “perform” out loud and
that had to be interpreted on the spot. Although the Chamber refuted most of his translation-related comments and finally sentenced him to 40 years in jail on 24 March 2016, Karadžić nevertheless managed to exploit the intricacies of translation practice to contest the validity of the witness accounts, and to supplant their voices, sometimes literally, with his own.

Language policy, linguistic skills and translation are equally crucial in the multilingual context of the Belgian asylum procedure, where national authorities determine, on the basis of an interview, whether applicants fulfil the required Geneva Convention criteria of refugee status. Katrijn Maryns finds that, despite the legal obligation, in the absence of an interpreter, to complete the procedure in Dutch or French, and despite the asylum officers’ general lack of training in language and translation, these interviews are often conducted in English. Not only does the ad hoc use of English as lingua franca fail to address the communicative needs of the participants; the actual linguistic practice also produces “institutional inequality of voice”, with the host institution controlling the externalization and recontextualization of the asylum seeker’s voice in the process of translation and recordkeeping.

Finally, contributions on postcolonial India and Egypt during the revolution emphasize the emancipatory power of translation and its ability to effect social and political change. Christi Merrill discusses the book Dohara Abhishap (Doubly Cursed) by Dalit feminist Kasabaya Baisantry, a sophisticated critique of caste- and gender-based inequality in contemporary India. The author’s “life story” is traced back to the Latin-American genre of testimonio, intended to mobilize support for the cause of oppressed minorities. In the case of the Dalit autobiography, Merrill observes, testimony can equally be considered a major political strategy and an instrument for social transformation. The very texture of Baisantry’s heteroglossic prose reconfigures hierarchical relationships between English, Hindi, standard Marathi and local dialects, thereby subverting traditional processes of “cultural translation” where the ethnographer describes the (subaltern) foreign culture for an English-speaking audience. As the translator of Dohara Abhishap, Merrill mediates on the effects of rendering the complex genealogy of the testimonio, as well as the militant heteroglossia of Baisantry’s work, in the language of the former colonizer. Is it possible to transpose the original text’s subversive power into English?

We conclude the dossier with two shorter pieces relating to Mosireen, the non-profit activist collective gathering video testimonies during and after the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Activist/academic/translator Samah Selim, who became a member of the collective’s subtitling unit in 2012, and Omar Rabbet Hamilton, one of its founders, reflect on the role played by translation in the critical and often chaotic context of revolution. Together with other revolutions, conflicts and occupations in the Middle East, the Egyptian case challenges us to reconsider translation as part of a deep activist involvement in very concrete events and as a means to foster local and global solidarity and understanding. “Crisis translation produces an effect like the ripple in a pond,” Selim believes, “an event of critical mass that affects it as part and parcel of its transmission, rather than merely supplementing it as a transparent vehicle. In fact, when Hamilton indicates that “we must translate ourselves to better hear each other”, he not only underlines the role of translation in the circulation of knowledge, but also sees it as an essential tool to resist the “commodified Marathi and revolutionary language” and to invent and shape new, post-revolutionary, realities.

WORKS CITED


