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AUTO-TRANSLATION

'AUTO-TRANSLATION' and 'self-translation' refer to the act of translating one's own writings or the result of such an undertaking. A fairly common practice in scholarly publishing, auto-translation is frowned upon in literary studies. Translation scholars themselves have paid little attention to the phenomenon, perhaps because they thought it to be more akin to bilingualism than to translation proper. Indeed, historically speaking, auto-translators have often been writers who did not just master, but chose to create in more than one language. Their conscious awareness of this option cannot be overstated — contrary to the Middle Ages, where language choice was first and foremost a matter of genre, romantic thinking has favored self-expression along linguistic and national lines. Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour rightly states that while 'bilinguals frequently shift languages without making a conscious decision to do so, polyglot and bilingual writers must deliberately decide which language to use in a given instance.' (1989: 38) Self-translation involves an equally important decision, which is why it proves useful to consider, in addition to the actual use authors make of their languages, the attitudes and feelings they develop towards them.

1. Language use and attitude

As far as the distribution of the respective languages is concerned, a few questions may help to flesh out the portrait of a particular self-translator or group of self-translators. Is the practice systematic or limited to a single experience? Are the authors constant in their choice of source and target languages (as with 'regional' writers who translate their work in order to reach a larger audience), or do they freely switch directions? Is the native tongue used for translations (in compliance with international regulations for the training of translators)? Or is it, rather, restricted to the writing of original texts (as required by romantic ideology)? Does there appear to be a division of labour between languages, one predominantly being used for 'high literature', the other for popular genres? At which point in their careers do writers turn to the process of auto-translation? Are second versions produced (a long time) after the first versions have been published or are they on equal footing from a chronological point of view, i.e. is their development more or less simultaneous?

Having determined 'how' two or more languages relate to each other, the trickiest question remains to be tackled: 'why' do some writers repeat in a second language what has already been said in their previous work? Dissatisfaction alone with existing translations hardly explains a choice that, to some at least, seems as

absurd as 'redoing a painting in a different shade' (Devarrieux 1993: 15). Apart from material conditions (exile, marriage, financial gain) there must be some ulterior motive that helps writers to overcome their initial reluctance. For neither Vladimir Nabokov nor Samuel Beckett looked forward to what the former described as 'sorting through one's own innards, and then trying them on for size like a pair of gloves' (Beaujour 1989: 90), the latter as the 'wastes and wilds of self-translation.' (Cohn 1961: 617) Bilingual writers engaged in this process are dealing with more than abstract linguistic systems; often they are trying to juggle two traditions, which is precisely why they offer such a felicitous source for the discovery of literary norms. In Menakhem Perry's words (drawing on Toury 1978):

> Since the writer himself is the translator, he can allow himself bold shifts from the source text which, had it been done by another translator, probably would not have passed as an adequate translation. Such bold shifts, if they are systematic, serve as powerful indicators of the activity of norms.
>
> (Perry 1981: 181)

Indeed, while it is hard to single out a particular factor, some pattern usually emerges from the consideration of a group of writers whose bilingualism can be related to socio-cultural circumstances.

In sixteenth-century Europe, it was not uncommon for poets to translate their own Latin musings as finger exercises. Trained exclusively in Latin, they had reached a level of competence unequalled even in their native language, and needed 'to form their poetic diction in the vernacular' (Forster 1970: 30). The best-known renaissance author to indulge in auto-translation was Joachim du Bellay (Demerson 1984), a founding member of the French Pléiade school. Forster (1970: 30-35) mentions the interesting case of Antwerp-born Jan van der Noot, whose Olympia (1579) appeared in a bilingual edition, with French and Dutch texts side-by-side, the latter a free rendering of what was already an 'imitation' of Pierre de Ronsard. The fact that these poems were invariably translated into the mother tongue from models directly composed in an acquired language shows how much language attitudes have changed over the centuries. In more recent times, despite the paradigma shift caused by romanticism, Flemish writers have continued to belie many assumptions about the impossibility of translating and creating in a 'foreign' language. A traditionally fertile ground for Dutch-French language contact/conflict, Belgium has produced its lot of bilingual authors though they are rarely acknowledged as such in (needless to say, monolingual) literary histories. Now, in this particular example, the vogue of self-translation can be quite rigorously dated, since texts translated by the very authors of the originals appear between 1924 and 1969 (with an increase between 1935 and 1960). The phenomenon mainly involves five Flemish writers spanning two generations. Whereas the members of the elder group (Jean Ray/John Flanders, Roger Avermaete, Camille Melloy) tend to publish a regionally marked Flemish-

Dutch text after having written its original in the acquired yet fully mastered French language, the younger self-translators (Marnix Gijsen, Johan Daisne) start out writing in standard Dutch and subsequently market a French version, sometimes years later. The switch in direction between source and target languages can be linked to major socio-political changes. In the 1930s, Flemings for the first time had access to a university education in their mother tongue, their linguistic rights having been enshrined in a new constitution recognizing regional unilingualism (Grutman 1991). From a descriptive perspective, one notices that these auto-translations not so much belong to a different system than the original versions, i.e. they do not imply any real change in audience, as highlight existing 'intra-systemical' relations (Lambert 1985). It is thus possible to extrapolate from Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour's view of self-translation as

> a rite of passage endured by almost all writers who ultimately work in a language other than the one in which they have first defined themselves as writers. Self-translation is the pivotal point in a trajectory shared by most bilingual writers.
>
> (Beaujour 1989: 51)

Her corpus seems somewhat exceptional in that it comprises of writers (Elsa Triolet, Vladimir Nabokov, a.o.) who changed territories, having fled the Soviet Union around 1917, and felt obliged to adopt the language of their new country. For those bilinguals who can switch languages without necessarily 'changing places' (in both a literal and a figurative sense), auto-translation need not be a point of no return.

2. Textual relations

How does a self-translation relate as a text to 'normal' translations? Can it be said to possess its own distinctive character? In an essay on Joyce's own Italianizing of two passages from his Work in Progress (the future Finnegans Wake), Jacqueline Risset answers in the affirmative. Unlike translations 'in the usual sense of the word' (1984: 3), she argues, Joyce's texts are 'no pursuit of hypothetical equivalents of the original text (as given, definitive) but as a later elaboration representing . . . a kind of extension, a new stage, a more daring variation on the text in process.' (1984: 6) This allows her to oppose Joyce's auto-translation to the 'fidelity and uninventiveness' (1984: 8) that characterized the French translation of the same passages, by a team that included no less than Philippe Soupault, Yvan Goll, Adrienne Monnier and... Samuel Beckett. What is at stake here is the old notion of authority, of which original authors traditionally have lots and translators none. Since Joyce himself wrote these second versions in idiomatic and creative Italian, they are invested with an authority that not even an 'approved' translation by diverse

hands can match. The public's preference for an author's translation is less based on a extensive study of its intrinsic qualities though Risset does conduct such an examination than on an appreciation of the process that gave birth to it. The reason for this state of affairs is quite obvious, as Brian Fitch points out: 'the writer-translator is no doubt felt to have been in a better position to recapture the intentions of the author of the original than any ordinary translator' (1988: 125). In terms of its production, an auto-translation also differs from a normal one, if only because it is more of a double writing process than a two-stage reading-writing activity. As a result, the original's precedence is no longer a matter of 'status and standing', of authority, but becomes 'purely temporal in character' (Fitch 1988: 131). The distinction between original and (self)translation therefore collapses, giving place to a more flexible terminology in which both texts are referred to as 'variants' or 'versions' of equal status (Fitch 1988: 132-133).

It should be remembered, however, that Fitch's remarks were formulated in a book-length study of Samuel Beckett's bilingual work. Though he probably is the single auto-translator that has received the most critical attention (Cohn 1961; Hanna 1972; Simpson 1978; Federman 1987; Beaujour 1989: 162-176), Beckett's case is not the rule. Having elaborated over the years twin works in two languages, he is more or less in a league of his own, even among self-translators. Clearly, Beckett's cross-linguistic creation, where French and English versions follow each other in an increasing tempo, is not the only way of translating one's own writings. There appears to be a fundamental difference between what could be labelled 'simultaneous auto-translations' (that are executed while the first version is still in process) and 'delayed auto-translations' (published after completion or even publication of the original manuscript). As a matter of fact, Beckett himself reverted to both modes of self-translation at different stages in his career. He started out by translating, with the help of his friend Alfred Péron, a finished work like Murphy, a novel that had been published in English before World War II, but whose French equivalent was to appear only a decade later. In this case, the English text already led an autonomous existence, thereby limiting the possibilities of innovation: 'By and large, the translation follows the original, of which, obviously, no one could have more intimate knowledge than its author-translator.' (Cohn 1961: 616) Soon after, Beckett would initiate the (often English) rewriting while still working on the (mostly French) version: in the process of completing Ping, for instance, he does not 'work simply from the final version of [Bing], but on occasion takes as his source the earlier drafts of the original manuscript' (Fitch 1988: 70). The latter practice can be most aptly described as a kind of bilingual creation that develops along parallel lines instead of merging into Biblical confusion or language blending. It is noteworthy in this regard that Beckett, not unlike other bilingual writers (Beaujour 1989: 56; Heinemann 1994: 154), tends to avoid textual multilingualism (see MULTILINGUALISM AND TRANSLATION). Thus, though his individual texts

are not bilingual, Beckett's work taken as a whole definitively is, for each monolingual part calls for its counterpart in the other language. 'One might say that while the first version is no more than a rehearsal for what is yet to come, the second is but a repetition of what has gone before, the two concepts coming together in the one French word répétition.' (Fitch 1988: 157)

Further reading

Brown 1992; Dadazhanova 1984; Fitch 1983, 1985; Green 1987; Grutman 1994; Kure-Jensen 1993; Lamping 1992; McGuire 1990; Palacio 1975.

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