

CRISTINA VEZZARO

Being Creative in Literary Translation: A Practical Experience

This contribution focuses on the implications of creative processes with respect to translation. Translation offers, indeed, a great ambiguity as far as creativity is concerned. This paper explores by means of practical examples and professional experiences how translators relate to the creative act that comes with translating. Being in touch with one's inner self, recognizing that the translation process cannot be left untouched by one's own imagery and being aware of the act of choice that comes with every written sentence can help translators find their own creative voices. The combination of an awareness that allows translators to listen and be respectful of the author's style and a deep sense of one's creative possibilities can lead to a comprehensive creative act that includes the author, the translator and the readers.

The Ambiguity of the Translation Process

As a longtime translator, a recent literary translator and an even more recent writer, I am quite puzzled by the nature of creativity. For many years, I thought that I was doing a wonderful job as a translator but would never have considered myself an author. And when I finally started writing, I had to relate my role as translator and writer. Writing was definitely a creative act but what about translating? If literature is usually considered a result of creativity, is only writing a creative act or can translation be considered a creative act, too? These considerations led me to explore the origins of ideas (Johnson), and the nature of creativity (Tan), and eventually to study the relationship between choice and translation (Iyengar).

As literary translators, we are aware of our role as cultural interpreters. Yet we often tend to consider writing as noble creation and translating as mere interpretation. Respectful of the author's intent, we try to provide excellent quality and in doing so are somehow happy that we can hide behind this professional attitude.

The process of translating offers, indeed, a great ambiguity as far as creativity is concerned. Where is the creative act if all the content is already written and we

‘simply’ need to rewrite it in our language? Just like myself, not all translators consider themselves authors.

Last summer I was visiting the Museum of Modern Art in New York when I saw a painting by Henri Matisse after Jan Davidsz. de Heem’s ‘La Desserte’. I was intrigued by the painting because I understood that Matisse did not need to ‘copy’ any painting, but he was clearly taking something he thought was inspiring and reinterpreting it. The analogy with the translation process appeared evident. When we translate a novel, words are already there, of course, but translating them means reinterpreting them, just like Matisse did and many other painters or writers have done.

Of course this fact raises a few intriguing questions: if they are not a hundred percent ours, where do ideas come from? How do we know that we are being creative? How can we find our creative voices?

In his book *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Steve Johnson points out that we often take ideas from other people and combine them together in a different form and this is how new ideas are born. He also says that an idea is a network of neurons in our mind, and a lot of important ideas have a very long incubation period.

Now, in translation, just like in writing, the ideas we come up with are often unsuspected, they are often the result of our living experience. They sometimes come from the past in form of a memory, sometimes become known in form of words we did not even know we had in our minds. Sometimes what we need is simply the time and space for us to feel.

So if companies based on innovation as Google give their people some so-called ‘innovation time off’, translators should also find the time to invest in their potential of ideas, which in their case is often reading or living, simply.

When you collect experiences, it is easier to see connections, or, as Steven Johnson puts it, chance will then favor the connected mind. So if our living experience allows us to deeply relate to the situation described in the book we are translating, we will make a connection with the author through languages and lives and we will be able to reproduce the author's words. This connection with the author often emerges as a connection with other people's minds. So it is probably worth spending time not only protecting and nurturing our own ideas, but also sharing them with others.

Now, in one sense, protecting ideas has become more and more difficult and sharing them has become easier than ever, due to a rising globalization and to the power of the Internet. Another important result of the Internet generation is, as Ben Cameron recently pointed out, that anyone is now a potential author. And a potential translator, we might add. As an example, Google Translator offers the chance to have a first draft in almost every language, and many people naively believe that they do not need professional translators anymore. Now, as Cameron says, the number of so-called 'proams' (professional amateur artists) is increasing, but the real differentiator will depend more and more on emotional intelligence, i.e. the ability to listen deeply, to have empathy. And that is something that Google Translator won't offer, which is the reason why machine translation will not be able to substitute human translators.

Translation: from Technique to Creativity

Not everyone can be a translator. In order to be a translator, you must not only have an excellent knowledge of the source language and master the target language and the rules of translation. You must also have a great ear for music and a love for literature. Compared to other arts, translation is more challenging as you have to comply to several restrictions, just like in jazz, as Wynton Marsalis recently pointed out in Sheena Iyengar's *The Art of Choosing*: 'Anyone can improvise with no restrictions, but that's not jazz. Jazz always has some restrictions. Otherwise it might sound like noise.'

The ability to improvise, in jazz just like in translation, comes from fundamental knowledge, and this knowledge ‘limits the choices you can make and will make. Knowledge is always important where there’s a choice.’ (Iyengar) Translation is all about choice. Any word can be translated in a variety of synonyms, any sentence can be written with different rhythms, any paragraph can be interpreted in different ways and this is where your knowledge, or the acknowledgement of your lack of knowledge, is fundamental in determining the translation. In order to choose you must know your boundaries and restrictions and be able to explore the possibilities you have to express yourself. Distinguishing restrictions from creativity is an art.

There is a fine line between translating and respecting the professional restrictions and creativity. I was editing a French book that had been translated into Italian and where the French verb ‘*auréoler*’ appeared several times, not only in the first chapter, but also in a few others. Now, ‘*auréole*’ is the French word for ‘aura’, ‘nimbus’, but the translator decided to choose a word that suggested the idea of a *hero* in a sentence that actually contained the concept of *saint*, so he actually changed imagery altogether. This word was clearly a stylistic choice by the author, and changing it into something else is not a sign of creativity but rather a lack of knowledge and experience. Furthermore, as Sheena Iyengar points out, ‘when there is a choice, insisting on more when one already has a lot is a sign of the failure of imagination.’

But if there is a fine line between restrictions and creativity, how do we choose when to be creative or not? In her book, Sheena Iyengar relates choice to different behaviors in life. If you ask people how much choice they have in their jobs, i.e. ‘the way they resolve problems at work’ or ‘the overall amount of freedom they have to make decisions entirely on their own during a typical day at work’, translators will show a great amount of choice possibilities. Thus, we can say that translation is one of the tasks which implies most freedom and choice.

Now, we can have different attitudes when translating. We can experience the so-called ‘copycat impulse’: when the solution is difficult to find, it is easier to say that this is how everybody translates it and conform to the common use instead of going

into a deeper analysis. Or we can feel the need to be absolutely unique in our choices, especially if they are supported by our experience or are the result of a choosing process. In this case, we are ready to defend them because we were personally involved in their creation. But if there is a previous translator or previous translations of the work we are translating, it is often more difficult because we feel the urge to distinguish ourselves and we are influenced.

On the other hand, when we focus on one thing we can hardly notice other aspects or the whole, and this can also happen when we translate, for instance if we focus on false friends or other particular grammar difficulties. In this case, we will have a hard time exploring our creative choices, which is the reason why you cannot translate if you do not master the fine art between technique and creativity.

When writer Amy Tan points out that ‘with everything in life there is a place and balance’ and that ‘out of nothing comes something’, she is saying that there is uncertainty in everything, and that is actually good, because it will give you the frame to find and create something new. So all the doubts and problems we can find in a translation, in entering the uncertainties of an author’s style, are actually an opportunity for us to create something new. What Amy Tan is talking about is *natural creativity*, i.e. the associations that we make in everyday life and that allow us to imagine, to come closer to feeling *compassion*, which is what writing and translating is ultimately all about.

Awareness in Translation: Translation in Practice

My awakening and awareness happened when I started working on the translation of a great novel by Ulrich Peltzer, which in English is called *Part of the solution*. In the time frame I worked on this, which was long and intense, I realized that I was doing more than simply a good translation job in the traditional sense of the word. And it was the first time I got close to the creative act that comes with translation. As naïve as it may seem, it was like an epiphany to me when I realized that my own personal contribution in terms of experience, knowledge and emotional insight – and not only as a language expert – were shaping my writing.

The question arises here as how conscious we are of the choices we make when we translate. Now, Iyengar indicates that 95 percent of mental behavior is subconscious and automatic, so if our brain is a web of associations, this process is mostly unconscious. What activates these automatic associations is known as a *prime*, and its effect on our mental status and subsequent choices is known as ‘priming’. For example, when we are reading a word or set of phrases in some book by an author we particularly like and then try to squeeze them in whenever we can, or when we associate a word or a sound to a past experience and we reproduce it, we are priming.

Now, in my case, the book I was translating was full of priming. It expressed in words that could have been mine (and not only in translation), images that could have been mine, describing memories of a city (Berlin) where I had just spent some time, telling a love story that was not very different from the one I was living, and talking of political events in Italian history that I could recall from my childhood.

Through an emotional closeness to the author’s perspective, I felt my imagery merge towards his. The two worlds I had experienced as a child, the one of the language I was translating from and the one of the language I was translating into, were overlapping and allowing me to find a style that I could finally recognize as my own, and this is something that the author perceived.

Now, we can say with Iyengar that studies have shown that when they follow their doctor's orders, patients believe they will get better so they do get better, suffering less and recovering more quickly.

This placebo effect also occurs in translation. When we are connected with the author, when a lot of priming and associations happen in our minds, we believe that we can find the right choices. So we do find them. And the final result is a book that is not only translated, but rewritten by the translator. Let's not forget that every reading implies an interpretation and that the translator is probably the first and most reflective reader of any writer.

When this happens, the literary relationship between the author and the translator is not one of predominance. It becomes a collaborative act: the author implicitly gives the translator freedom of choice, he recognizes the translator's independence as an 'author'. We could say that the author acknowledges the translator's creativity and creative process. So if the translator manages to create that relationship of trust with the author, the latter feels that he/she can delegate his/her decisions to the author, and this will affect the choosing process positively.

The celebrated French mathematician and philosopher of science Henri Poincaré said that 'Invention consists in avoiding constructing the useless combinations and in constructing the useful combinations which are in infinite minority. To invent is to discern, to choose.' We can also say with Iyengar that to choose is to invent. Choosing is a creative process, one through which we construct our environment, our lives, our selves and thus also the book that comes out in a different language.

Conclusions

Going back to the painting by Henri Matisse after Jan Davidsz. de Heem's 'La Desserte': not every book we translate can be just as inspiring to us, but when it

happens, we take it and make it our own book just like Matisse took that painting and made it his own. In order to do so, we must feel like we want to do it and we are confident that we can do it. Once we are aware of our possibilities and we feel the urge to make our choices, everything we will be working on will be our own interpretation, because we will be expressing ourselves through it. Every book we translate is a series of choices we make, and this is how we are expressing ourselves, i.e. we are expressing our creativity.

As Nobel Prize Daniel Kahneman says, it is different to think about life and to live. And this is all that translation, just like writing, is about: living and getting involved, feeling and putting your hands in the dirt and coming out with something that can make sense to you and thus will probably make sense to others, too.

List of works cited

Cameron, Ben 2010 'The true power of the performing arts', TED Ideas worth spreading, at http://www.ted.com/talks/ben_cameron_tedxyc.html (accessed 26 September 2010)

Ghata, Yasmine 2010 *Muettes*, Paris: Fayard

Iyengar, Sheena 2010 *The Art of Choosing*, New York: Twelve

Johnson, Steven 2010 *Where Good Ideas Come From – The Natural History of Innovation*, New York: Riverhead

Kahneman, Daniel 2010 'The riddle of experience vs. memory', TED Ideas worth spreading, at http://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_kahneman_the_riddle_of_experience_vs_memory.html (accessed 9 October 2010)

Peltzer, Ulrich 2007 *Teil der Lösung*, Zürich: Amman

Tan, Amy 2008 'On Creativity', TED Ideas worth spreading, at http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_tan_on_creativity.html (accessed 9 October 2010)

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Professor Andrea Basso for introducing her to creativity and research and for his precious comments; Marina Gellona and Eric Minetto for showing her the way through creative writing; author, translator and Professor Maureen Freely for confirming that her intuitions were significant.