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Paola Tosi

University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy

University of Insubria, Italy

paola.tosi1@unimib.it

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-7198-0693

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Reflexivity in Translation: A Multi-layered, Dialogic, and Self-reflexive Process

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Abstract: Translation theory and practice cannot be separated since the selection process implemented while translating implies a certain level of reflexivity that reflects the translator's approach to practice.

This article aims at investigating the different types of reflexivities categorised by Lynch and their application to translation practice. In particular, the English into Italian translation of the report on theatre From Live to Digital performed by the writer will be analysed, and examples of the translation process will be presented in light of the many layers of reflexivities involved.

Specifically, hermeneutic and standpoint reflexivities will be explored considering the issue of ethnocentric violence and the quest for foreignization. Furthermore, conceiving reflexivity as an inward turn and a dialogic process, translators come to know their "Self" and the "Other," which results in the creation of something creative. Translation being a form of creative writing resulting from a dialog is referred to as responsive translation, implying the translator's unique sensitivity and interpretation.

In conclusion, a reflexive approach in translation practice generates an ethical response to the source text because of a thorough self-investigation of the translator's stance, differently from translations performed by software that don't undergo a reflexive process at the time being.

Introduction

The practise of translating dates to ancient times but only in the 21st century scholars rejected the idea of translation being a mere act of transferring words from the source to the target language, which had caused distress on translators who have always been well-aware of the untranslatability of the verbal meaning of some culture-specific phrases and words (Del Carmen África Vidal Claramonte & Gómez, 2009; Osimo, 2010). In the last decades, translation scholars have delved into the concepts of intersemiotic translation and creative writing, which in turn have raised issues such as creativity, visibility, and ethics (Kadiu, 2019).

Even though reflexivity is not commonly debated in the translation field, translation practice itself is a reflexive act (Meschonnic, 2007, p. 43).

Translators are called to overcome the signifier-signified binary opposition of language (Caputo, 1997) undergoing a process of performative reflexivity (Meschonnic, 2007, p. 43).

It should not be forgotten that translators are themselves readers of the source text. As such, they interpret the source text applying their own background knowledge and experience. Therefore, based on Michael Lynch's classification of reflexivity (Lynch, 2000), the very first category applying to translation is hermeneutic reflexivity, which is an active interpretation of the source text.

Moving further from the reading step, a reflexive process is also the mean translators can use to reduce the influence of their own culture and the systems of values and beliefs they have grown in while interpreting the text. Indeed, in *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti (1995) argues that translation implies a certain degree of ethnocentric violence, unless the translator is aware of this and embarks on a journey of self-exploration. This allows translators to get a thorough understanding of their own stance through the process defined as standpoint reflexivity by Lynch (2000).

Finally, arriving at the actual writing stage into the target language, Susan Bassnett (2008) explores the reflexive process as a dialog between the Self and the Other, whose result is a responsive translation that creates something new, confirming the idea of creative writing also in translation practice. The translator's Self is evident in Hermans' (1996) theory according to which translators co-produce the final text, acknowledging them the right to be co-authors and have their own authorial voice.

Lately, machine translation and artificial intelligence have posed new challenges to the profession and simultaneously raised concern about the possible implications in terms of reflexivity and ethics (ANITI, 2019; Galati & Riediger, 2023; Kadiu, 2019; Karpińska, 2017). It is understood that machines are still subject to the signifier-signified binary opposition and don't go through any process of reflexivity nor undecidability, which is the condition of possibility of acting and deciding, as theorised by Derrida (1982).

In the following sections, the author will analyse the different levels of reflexivity in the translation practice also by presenting her translation

from English into Italian of a report about the state of live and digital theatre entitled *From Live to Digital* (AEA Consulting, 2016). AEA Consulting is a global firm that helps cultural and creative industries to improve their performances through market analyses and studies. The report was written in 2016 as a result of a research study commissioned and funded by Arts Council England (ACE), UK Theatre, and the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) to investigate Live-to-Digital and online options for theatre and cinemas. In 2021, a renowned theatre foundation in Milan – whose name I am not allowed to report here since I am bound to our professional code of ethics – assigned me the translation into Italian of this report. The Italian translation was needed for internal use by the foundation that was probably assessing the viability of holding remote shows given the strict anti-Covid restrictions existing at the time.

For the purposes of this paper, I will analyse this translation assignment focusing on the decision-making process and the reasons for the choices made in the light of the forms of reflexivity mentioned. This report was assessed as an appropriate text for this analysis considering its marketing nature mixed with some technicalities, thus combining the features of semi-literary and technical translations. Indeed, the report presents an informative style – alternating descriptive and technical parts, cases of *realia*, technical terms from the entertainment industry and economics, and interviewees' quotations, resulting in many linguistic variations. These factors raised an interesting challenge while translating, thus calling for a multi-layered reflexive approach that will be examined below.

Performative Reflexivity in Translation Practice

In the early 20th century, translator scholars described translation as an impossible task, focusing on the limits and challenges of this practice and arguing that no translation could be "faithful" enough to the source text. This intra-semiotic approach only focused on the verbal meaning of words, which could indeed be untranslatable in another language (Eco, 2003; Osimo, 2010).

As Eco (2003) explained in his *Dire quasi la stessa cosa*, the actual act of translation doesn't focus on words only. It is indeed an intersemiotic approach

that embeds different levels: musicality and rhythm, cultural references, and creative writing.

Nowadays, the intersemiotic approach is widely accepted and taught in translation and interpretation courses. This implies that translators are trained to apply a reflexive approach to their practice, even if the concept of reflexivity is not often mentioned in translation courses.

In his *Ethique et politique du traduire* (Meschonnic, 2007, p. 43), Meschonnic delves into his concept of translation as a reflexive act, unless it's performed by machines:

> On peut donc considérer [...] que le problème majeur de la traduction est sa théorie du langage. Ce qui est bien, d'emblée, impliquer deux choses: l'inséparabilité entre ce que l'on appelle une théorie et ce qu'on appelle une pratique, c'est-à-dire qu'une pratique n'est pas une pratique si elle n'est pas réflexive ou réfléchie, ce n'est qu'un ânonnement de recettes apprises, et si elle est cette réflexivité, cette pratique implique nécessairement une théorie d'ensemble du langage ; et réciproquement une théorie de la traduction qui ne serait pas la réflexion d'une pratique ne serait que de la linguistique de la langue appliquée sur du discours, c'est-à-dire de la non-pensée.

> We can therefore consider that the main problem of translation is its theory of language. From the outset, this implies two things: the inseparability of what is known as theory and what is called practice, that is to say that a practice is not a practice if it is not reflective or thoughtful, it is just a hesitant repetition of pre – existing codes [un ânonnement de recettes apprises]; but if it is reflective, such practice necessarily involves a comprehensive theory of language; and conversely, a translation theory that is not also a reflection on a particular practice would just be linguistics applied to discourse, that is to say non-thinking (Kadiu, 2019, p. 72).

Meschonnic concept could be defined as performative reflexivity (Kadiu, 2019): the act of translating leads any translator to start a reflexive process in order to choose the words in the target language. The decision-making process is inevitable in translation practice, thus confirming the performative character of reflexivity theorised by the scholar.

Moreover, from this extract it is understood that Meschonnic conceives translation theory as part and parcel of translation practice as the first couldn't exist without the latter. This idea of theory and practice being interwoven is echoed by Osimo (2010) and Kadiu (2019).

In his *Exploring Translation Theory*, Anthony Pym (2023) explains the interdependency between theory and practice in translation, analysing the Greek etymology of the term "theory" which is very close to the term "theatre." According to this similar etymology, Pym defines translation theory as the scene where the generation and selection processes take place. The simple fact of generating a translation by formulating various alternatives and then choosing the final version is itself the process through which translators define their approach and view of the practice.

In accordance with these principles of interdependency between theory and practice, I will present an example of performative reflexivity applied during the translation of the report *From Live to Digital* by AEA Consulting. The source text presented the following sentence:

Exhibitors surveyed are keen to continue to present both Live-to-Digital and live performances […].

According to Cambridge Dictionary, an exhibitor is "a person who provides an exhibit for a display," for which the equivalent Italian word would be *espositore*. However, this Italian word is not commonly associated with cinemas and theatres, as it's usually used in the context of art exhibitions and trade fairs; the word *espositore* was therefore excluded.

In this specific case, context dependency played a major role in the choice of the final translation. Later in the report, theatre companies, art venues, cinema owners and creators are all mentioned, and it was clear that, by using

the word exhibitors, the authors meant to group all these categories. Finally, the translated sentence was:

> Gli esercenti intervistati sono desiderosi di continuare
> a proporre sia spettacoli dal vivo sia Live-to-Digital […].

The word chosen was *esercenti*, which, according to Cambridge Dictionary, is the equivalent of shopkeeper. In this specific case, performative reflexivity led to this translation that is not "correct" if we merely consider the verbal meaning of the source text. However, the solution chosen encompasses the comprehensive meaning of the English word conveying the idea of "anyone running a business/any operator in the entertainment industry."

This is a clear case of performative reflexivity because, as Meschonnic explains, while translating, the translator is forced to make a reasoned choice going through the process of undecidability, which is the condition of possibility of acting and deciding, as theorised by Derrida (1982).

From Hermeneutic to Standpoint Reflexivity

As theorised by Lynch (2000), hermeneutic reflexivity is one of the two subcategories of interpretative reflexivity, and is based on the reader's active interpretation of the text. Can translators be considered readers? They are, both because they do read the source text before translating, and, more importantly, because they interpret it as any other reader would do. According to Lynch, this type of reflexivity is an active interpretation, but I argue that most of the times we, as humans, give our first interpretation of the texts we read almost unconsciously while reading.

Undoubtedly, translators are trained to analyse the text and search for possible interpretations and different layers of meaning. However much one might endeavour, each translator will always give their personal interpretation that depends on the translator's stance.

For this reason, hermeneutic reflexivity, which is the mere act of interpreting the text, is not sufficiently reflexive since it doesn't guarantee an unbiased interpretation.

Before even starting to translate, each translator should start a process of standpoint reflexivity, defined by Lynch (2000) as a reflexive critique of dominant discourse. According to the definition of dominant discourse as the way of perceiving, framing and viewing the world, it is evident that, in the case of translators, this implies not only being aware of their stance inside their own society, but also being aware of their culture's perspective on the source language culture. It is understood that each person's standpoint is a set of elements influenced by the society and times they live in, as well as their origins, upbringing and their own personal experiences and values.

Why is it important for translators to undergo a process of standpoint reflexivity? According to the author, this process could go beyond the limits of hermeneutic reflexivity and avoid the risk of an unconscious, biased interpretation of the text. Being aware of their own standpoint, translators would have a clear understanding of the position of themselves, and their culture compared to the source culture. This is essential to avoid the implementation of the so-called ethnocentric violence (Venuti, 1995), creating a translation to please the target audience, adapting it to its values yet mortifying the source text.

According to Venuti, translating always implies a certain degree of ethnocentric violence, being itself an act of displacement from one language to another. However, domestication, which is the strategy for which a translation is closer to and more comprehensible for the target audience, has been replaced by foreignization, which is exactly the opposite. For instance, proper names of famous people were once translated from their source language into Italian while today they are not, e.g., William the Conqueror is known in Italian as *Guglielmo il Conquistatore*, whereas Prince William is known as *Principe William,* translating the title but keeping his name in English. Another common example of foreignization applies to *realia*, a Latin word that is used in translation theory to describe terms and expressions referring to culture-specific material elements. Nowadays, translators are trained not to translate *realia* since they are untranslatable based on the fact that they represent

unique elements that can't be found in the target language and culture. For instance, if we analyse the concept of a country house, we could have the English term cottage, the Russian term *dacha*, and the Italian *agriturismo*. The three places have different features that characterise each of them, making them unique. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to translate any of the three terms into the other languages.

This is possible thanks to the training acquired but also the selection process at the basis of each translation. It is evident that the choice is not only whether to apply a foreignization approach. It is also extended to the avoidance of a paternalistic tone and a self-centred interpretation, acknowledging the differences thanks to a full awareness of your own standpoint.

In performing the translation of the report *From Live to Digital* by AEA Consulting, I underwent a standpoint reflexivity process that brought me to the following considerations:

1) Theatre in the UK is much more popular than in Italy. Drama is a common subject in British schools and the tradition of theatre is stronger than in Italian culture. This was evident from the many research studies about theatre and performative arts carried out and cited in the report.

2) The report was published in the UK in 2016 but the translation was assigned to me only in 2021; this means that the interest in Digital Theatre and Event Cinema was first shown in the UK and only later in Italy. This proves that the British approach is more innovative while the Italian tends to be more conservative. However, the Italian market might have been forced to explore some digital and alternative options after Covid pandemic and the strict restrictions applied to events and public places in Italy.

3) Both British and Italian businesses operating in the theatre and cinema fields have suffered a severe revenue decline due to streaming platforms. This crisis was already reported in 2016 and escalated during Covid pandemic due to the restrictions, leading to the closing of many venues.

Having assessed the Italian and the translator – therefore, my – stance, the actual translation and selection process could begin. My analysis focused on the peculiar features of the British industry and the innovative solutions that were not known in Italy.

The examples I will analyse here are the rendering of the strings "Live-to-Digital" and "Event Cinema," the core topics of the report. "Live-to-Digital was born in the UK, but not in the theatre sector. Commercial music and opera led the way. In 2003, David Bowie launched his album, Reality, to 50,000 fans in 88 cinemas in 22 European cities, via a satellite link to a live performance in London's Riverside studios. The success of this event, orchestrated by New York-based BY Experience, inspired the Metropolitan Opera to develop, in 2006, its Live in HD series in collaboration with the same distributor. Dubbed 'Event Cinema', the simulcasting of live performances into cinemas and outdoor spaces (including Lincoln Center Plaza and Times Square) proved to be a game-changer that spawned the 'Live-to-Digital' category. Within two years, other opera companies followed in the Met's footsteps, including, in the UK, the Glyndebourne Opera, that in 2008 screened its productions of *Giulio Cesare, Tristan und Isolde* and *Così Fan Tutte* into ODEON cinemas" (AEA Consulting, 2016).

Given the profound connection between Live-to-Digital and Event Cinema and the British culture where they appeared and were developed, the strategy applied while translating the report was to treat them as *realia*. Indeed, some research proved that there weren't any equivalent in Italian – and there aren't at the time of this article either. The choice was to apply the principle of foreignization, highlighting the British nature of these experiences by using the English terms. At the time of the translation, it was considered that this could have created a sense of distance in the Italian audience; however, this choice took into account the fact that both expressions contain common English words that could be intelligible to most of the Italian readers, especially the target readers interested in this specialised report. Moreover, throughout the report these phrases are explained, and examples are given. Therefore, the names kept in English don't hinder the general comprehension of the text; instead, translating them would have implied the use of ethnocentric violence (Venuti, 1995).

Self-reflexivity and Creative Writing

At this point, it is worth analysing Susan Bassnett's dialogic metaphor regarding translation (Bassnett & Bush, 2008). Bassnett considers the translation process as a dialog between the author and the translator. She even details it further and divides it into two different levels: first, self-discovery and self-perception – understanding your own standpoint by comparing it to the other's – second, a conscious interaction with the source text from which something different is created. It is evident that she combines Lynch's standpoint reflexivity with Meschonnic's performative reflexivity, adding the concept of "something creative." In Bassnett's theory, translators embark on a self-exploration journey thanks to the encounter with the Other. It is correct to say that the Self comes to light as an opposition to the Other. Moreover, Bassnett defeats the long-standing idea of the "faithfulness" in translation, speaking about this practice as "creative writing." This is due to the inward turn of her theory that focuses on the translator's consciousness and subjectivity in response to the source text, thus performing a responsive translation.

This poses an ethical question: can a responsive – therefore, subject – translation be acceptable? As Susan Petrilli (2003) suggests in *Translation Translation*, responsible translators should respond to the original and, to do so, they should interpret, react to, and transform the text.

According to Hermans, translators should be seen as "constantly co-producing the discourse, shadowing, mimicking […] but occasionally – caught in the text's disparities and interstices; and paratextually – emerging into the open as a separate discursive voice" (Hermans, 1996, p. 43). It could be said that in the last few decades, translators have been promoted from mere message conveyors to authorial voices. Like actors interpreting a character, translators interpret the text expressing their subjectivity. This process has also been possible thanks to the many reflexive processes applied more or less consciously, thanks to which translators could become more and more aware of their own positioning and role.

Going back to the ethics of a responsive translation, it should be noted that the response in the translation process does not go back to the author but

addresses another reader, the actual final reader of the translation, so the dialog itself is not a reflexive operation. Antoine Berman argued that translation fulfils its ethical aim when it creates "an opening, a dialogue" (Berman, 1992, p. 4).

Furthermore, Berman's view of reflexivity in translation encompasses all the above illustrated theories conceiving reflexivity in translation as a form of criticism. Like criticism, translation is a form of reading and commenting on the original work that reveals its hidden side. Throughout all his works but especially in *L'épreuve de l'étranger* (Berman, 1984), he theorised a reflexive objectivation in translation, calling for reflection and self-reflection in a practice that had long been analysed by non-translators. This philosophy was based on his idea that it was not possible to practise translation without reflecting on it. At the same time, only scholars would reflect on translation without practising it.

Berman promoted a psychoanalysis of translation in the sense that ethics in translation derives from the fact that translators are aware of their own positioning in relation to the source text. To achieve that, self-reflexivity is essential. Commenting further on this, he spoke about retranslations as an analytical process in the psychoanalytic sense of uncovering the hidden truth. Indeed, retranslations are an excellent exemplification of the idea that different translators do interpret and render the same text differently.

In the case of my translation, the report *From Live to Digital* by AEA Consulting could be considered a technical paper since it describes the creation, progress, and diffusion of the digital phenomenon in the theatre and cinema industry citing surveys and other papers. It is commonly believed that the so-called technical translations, namely those dealing with technical sectors and specialist terminology such as medicine or law, are only concerned with accuracy and not style. Indeed, all the theories mentioned so far were based on literary translations only. However, translators agree on the fact that even technical translations have a certain style, therefore allowing translators to create a responsive translation.

In the report, apart from technical terms that have a more defined equivalent in a specific field (for example: EN sample = IT *campione*) some more literary expressions allowed me to translate the source text in a more responsive and stylistically personal way. Below are a couple of examples from

the report with my translation into Italian and a back translation into English for your convenience:

1) "understanding […] is in its infancy": IT *La comprensione* […] *è ancora agli albori*. Back translation: understanding […] is at an early stage.

2) "Commercial music and opera led the way": IT *Sono state la musica commerciale e l'opera a spianare la strada*. Back translation: Commercial music and opera opened the way. It should be noted that in Italian the verb has been positioned before the subjects to emphasise them even more instead of using the standard subject-verb-object structure. The same sentence could have been rendered using the SVO structure keeping the same meaning but with less emphasis.

These examples prove that even in technical translations there could be expressions that leave some room to translators for stylistic choices that highlight their voice and personal interpretation of the text. It's in these cases that the translator's separate discursive voice could emerge, as theorised by Hermans.

Technologies and the Future of Reflexivity in Translation

The use of technology in translation has been studied since the 1950s but only in 1996 machine translation was made available on the web for small texts (ANITI, 2019). Since then, the use of machine translation has spread thanks to the advances in technology and the improved accessibility to the Internet, also through mobile devices. As described by Wang and Sawyer (2023), machine translation could be classified based on the method or methods applied:

1) Ruled-based machine translation (RBMT) retrieves linguistic information from dictionaries and grammars and performs the translation from the source to the target language on the basis of those pieces of information.

2) Statistical machine translation (SMT) uses mathematical models to translate in the language pair using prior collections of text known as corpora. After having analysed them, the software chooses the translation with the highest level of accuracy.

3) Neural machine translation (NMT), the most recent one, uses an artificial neural network to predict the likelihood of a sequence of words.

Technical translators do use computer-assisted translation software, commonly referred to as CAT tools, to help them with specific terminology. However, even if it is possible to pre-translate the text, the final decision is always made by human translators (Han, 2020). As Karpińska (2017) suggested, the use of CAT tools is one of the minimum requirements for professionals wishing to deal with technical translations given the numerous advantages in terms of terminology coherence and accuracy and, from the clients' perspective, also in terms of cost reduction. Indeed, CAT tools are suitable for technical texts because of their high level of standardness and predictability, two key factors on which the functioning of CAT tools is based.

More recently, with the emergence of artificial intelligence and the launch of ChatGPT, the ethical implications of the use of these tools in translating have been fiercely debated. This applies both to translators, who perceive these tools as potential competitors, and especially to end-users, who show excitement in not depending on translators any longer. As Brusasco (2018) explained, in the last few years, having immediate access to a number of everyday-life activities through the Internet has reduced the clients' patience, also when it comes to waiting for a translation to be delivered. This has led to lay people resorting to machine translation – and now OpenAI – because they are seen as time and cost-saving. However, a post-editing phase is always necessary at the time of this article since technology is not able to deliver ready-to-use translations yet.

How will this affect the future of reflexivity in translation? Considering Derrida's (1982) reflection on reflexivity and translation, only if an experience of uncertainty, indeterminacy and undecidability is possible, a real ethical translation is achieved. According to his definition of undecidability not as the impossibility but indeed the condition of possibility of acting and

deciding, machine translation doesn't perform any reflexive process. Indeed, machine translation is not independent as it's based either on dictionaries or on corpora. Moreover, the fact that machine translation replicates the same model based on the same sources could lead to the constant reproduction of mistakes or inaccuracies and, generally speaking, to linguistic impoverishment (Brusasco, 2018).

Artificial intelligence might be able to undergo a selection process by scanning and comparing previous texts to provide a less automated and more well-suited translation. However, in my opinion, this would eliminate the personal interpretation and consequent discursive voice of each translator. Is this the price to be paid for a completely unbiased translation?

Moreover, users of OpenAI, such as ChatGPT, are at risk of data breach. It is known that this software processes the information loaded to improve the model's performance and conduct research (Vaccino-Salvadore, 2023). Users resorting to AI to have their texts translated may not be aware of this risk, as opposed to professional translators who are subject to a code of ethics, which also implies protecting their clients' privacy. For the same reason, translators using OpenAI could run into legal – or at least ethical – issues.

As for now, as Kadiu (2019) highlighted, it's important to integrate machine translation into translation theory and study programs to raise the awareness of scholars and future professionals on this matter that will inevitably dominate any debate on translation. The ultimate question should be how translators can implement technological advances rather than rejecting them. As suggested by Galati and Riediger (2023), the profession is likely to focus on transcreation and post-editing tasks, thus providing the unparalleled human sensitivity where machines are still lacking behind.

Conclusions

This article shows the many reflexivities involved in intersemiotic translation practice and the link between reflexivity and ethical translation. Performative reflexivity is always present in translation practice even unconsciously, since

translators always undergo a selection process. Having shelved the idea of fidelity in translation, scholars have focused on the translator's position and responsibility. Consensus has been reached that reflexivity is the mean through which translators can really aim for an ethical translation. Indeed, ethical translation doesn't require the translators to be invisible and to reject their subjectivity. Instead, it's a matter of self-exploration and position awareness, juxtaposition between the Self and the Other, acknowledging that interpretation is always a personal act and can't be completely unbiased. Through the intentional processes of standpoint and self-reflexivity, translators are able to create a unique responsive translation. This avoids trampling on the source culture while also providing an enriching experience for final readers. It can be concluded that various forms of reflexivity are at the basis of a well-informed human translation process. However, machine translation is more and more used, and it is evident that software doesn't adopt a reflexive approach at the time of this article. The issue of the future of translation and its reflexivity is subject to the development of technologies applied to this practice and remains open.

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