

## WHAT IS A TRANSLATOR?

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**Abstract:** I copied the title from Foucault's text, "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur" in *Dits et écrits* [1969], Paris, Gallimard, 1994, that I read in French, then in English in Donald F. Bouchard's and Sherry Simon's translation, and finally in Spanish in Yturbe Corina's translation, and applied for the translator some of the analysis that Foucault presents to define the author. Foucault suggests that if we cannot define an author, at least we can see where their function is reflected. My purpose in this paper is to present those surfaces where the function of the translator is reflected or where it can be revealed, and to analyse the categories that could lead us to the elaboration of a suitable definition of a Translator. I dare already give a compound noun for the translator: *Translator-Function*.

**Keywords:** Translator. Foucault. Author. Function. Spaces.

## ¿QUÉ ES UN TRADUCTOR?

**Resumen:** El título es una copia del texto de Foucault "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur" en *Dits et écrits* [1969], París, Gallimard, 1994, que leí en francés, luego en inglés en la traducción de Donald F. Bouchard y Sherry Simon y, finalmente en español en la traducción de Yturbe Corina, y

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apliqué para el traductor algunos de los análisis que Foucault presenta para definir al autor. Foucault sugiere que si no podemos definir un autor, por lo menos podemos ver donde se ve reflejada su función. El propósito de este artículo es presentar esas superficies en donde la función del traductor se refleja o donde puede ser revelada y analizar las categorías que logren conducirnos a la elaboración de una definición pertinente del Traductor. Me atrevo a adelantar un nombre compuesto para el traductor: *Traductor-función*.

**Palabras clave:** Traductor. Foucault. Autor. Función. Espacios.

### **As a way of Introduction**

The project of writing this article has gone through various translation steps. The idea first appeared in my mind when I was translating from French into Spanish Diogo Sardinha's book *Ordre et Temps dans la Philosophie de Foucault*. The challenge of pouring into Spanish such a clear thought on Foucault as Diogo Sardinha's, led me to reflect on the translation activity as I was working, so I decided to start writing down my reflections, obviously in Spanish. When I finished the translation of the book, I continued to use Foucault's work to illuminate my considerations on What is a Translator, and as most of the supporting references I was reading were French (either translated from English into French or originally written in French), I naturally went on writing my reflections in the latter language. Consequently, I had to translate into French what I had already started writing in Spanish, sure that the article would see the light in French. Finally, I started reading in English Réal Fillion's book, *Foucault and the Indefinite Work of Freedom*, turning the flow of my reflections in English. I presented in English the preliminaries of this discussion at a round table in Anvers in 2013. Hence, the reflections that started in the act of translation from French into Spanish, were then translated into French. And what I had written so far in French, I then translated into English in order to harmonize with my stream of thoughts. This is how, English happened to be decisively the language of this article.

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Many attempts have been made to try to define what translation is. Perhaps less as far as “what a Translator is”, using “what” instead of “who” following in the footsteps of “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur”. Some of the definitions repeat themselves from century to century, some new ones appear opposing to the older ones. One thing is certain, as soon as you raise the question “what is a translator” more and more questions arise:

- What can we be as translators?
- How can we define ourselves today as translators?
- Within which boundaries are we allowed to define ourselves?
- How do we translate?
- To what extent may we intervene in the text?

Evidently these questions don’t have a single solution, if any. But, are these the proper questions to ask? We shall see by the end of the article.

### **1. Surfaces on which the function of the translator is reflected – Based on “What is an author” by Foucault**

Foucault suggests that if we cannot define an author, at least we can see where their function is reflected. In the case of the translator we could begin with the following surfaces where the function of the translator seems to be reflected:

- On the name of the translator: the fact that his name appears or not in the translated text
- On the relationship of appropriation: the translator is not the author and yet, his degree of responsibility for the translated work is shown according to the place where his

name appears: on the cover, on the first page, clearly visible or only visible enough.

- On the relationship of attribution: what the text says cannot be attributed to the translator, nonetheless, the translator can use certain strategies in order to gain visibility.
- On the position of the translator: the translated book includes a preface, an introduction or an epilogue of his own, or translator notes appear throughout the text.

In the absence of a proper definition, we can then risk a preliminary description of the translator: the translator can be described as one whose name appears on the translated text, under the title and the author's name, in medium size letters sometimes, some other times in smaller letters, in the centre of the page or at an angle, in any case, sometimes preceded by the words “translated by” in passive voice, other times “translation by” as a complement.

If we follow the categories proposed by Foucault concerning the author, and apply them to the translator, we could enunciate the following: *the translator is a proper name that is visible, -wishfully- on the front page of the translated text and whose activity is grammatically described as passive or complementary.* (By the way, this is not Foucault's position with respect to translation. Foucault (1964), in “Les mots qui saignent » , in *L' Express*, 29 août, pp. 20-21, exposes his position concerning translation, which is pure and simple Schleiermacher's).

But, my preliminary attempt at a definition would better be based on my own reading process for this exercise: *the translator is not only a miniature, shadowed name, he is not a passive character; he is in the first instance, a reader and a reader of translations.*

## 2. From Jean Delisle's *La traduction en citations*<sup>1</sup>

I am now going to move onto Jean Delisle's work, to comment on some of the quotations contained in his book, that happen to be of interest for this article. I went to the complete work of each author Delisle referred to, in order to perceive the quotation in context. Therefore, besides including Delisle's title, for each citation on which I comment I am giving the specific bibliographical reference related to the author I am dealing with. Meschonnic, who wrote the preface for the book *La traduction en citations*, says of this work that it is a dictionary of points of view. The book is organized by themes presented in the form of quotations by different authors, without additional comments, which represent then diverse views, often opposite; nevertheless, no value judgments are formulated. It is organized alphabetically and the topics go from Adaptation, Back Translation, Censorship, Ethics, Loyalty, Metaphors of Translation, coming of course to the Task of the Translator, the Untranslatable, until the Vanity of the Translator, to mention just a few of the 106 topics included.

One of the sections that arose my interest, for the question posed in this paper to be solved, is entitled "Defining a translator". I shall mention five quotations (A-E) that caught my attention and I will state my observations on them:

- a. **"The translator is not a technician of words (although he must feel comfortable among them), nor is he a sub-species of the expert (although he should know how to use sophisticated methods and tools), he is a creator"**, says Philip Stratford<sup>2</sup> in « L'écrivain clandestin », François Bilodeau, trans. (1993).

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<sup>1</sup> DELISLE, Jean (comp.) (2007). *La traduction en citations*. PUO.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Stratford "L'écrivain clandestin", François Bilodeau, trans., dans *Liberté*, n° 205, 1993 pp. 120-131. [Philip Stratford, published with Maureen Newman, (1975), a *Bibliographie de livres canadiens traduits de l'anglais au français et du français à l'anglais*, with a second edition in 1977.]

The statement the “translator is a creator”, does not help us much in the construction of our definition. Nor the way in which Stratford includes in his text the common place “*Traduttore, traditore*”. But, when we go on reading the article, we find that “the translator is someone who instead of trying to deal with words in a mechanical way, establishes lively relations with them” (Stratford 1993: 124) and whose task “is to establish not an equation but a fruitful tension between the author’s style and his own” searching then for “resonance” (Stratford 1993: 125). The translator’s method, which requires an extremely close and intimate relationship with the original, transforms the translator in someone who -and so, Stratford ends the entry-, “in the shadows, and often anonymously, devotes himself to promote exchanges among human beings” (Stratford 1993: 131). This is the way in which resonances function, in the interrelation among one individual and another; between one culture, the source culture, and another, the receiving culture.

There follows then my second attempt at building a definition, although still incomplete: *The translator is a reader and, even more, a reader of translations, whose work helps promote exchanges among human beings.*

**b. “The translator is a creator of language as much as an importer of problematics”.** (Marc de LAUNAY<sup>3</sup> in *Cinquièmes Assises* [...] 1989: 177 ).

Translator-creator is and will remain a commonplace and also a matter for controversy, but the second part of this quotation can be helpful to us. The translator as an importer of problematics is not someone who simply sends a message from one language to another to be faithful to the content. He is suspicious, he causes problems,

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<sup>3</sup>De Launay , writes *Qu’est - ce que traduire* (2006) motivated by Schleiermacher’s *Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzen*.

he introduces problematics, and this is because he is not defined, he “is in the making” says Maniglier<sup>4</sup> in a dossier dedicated to Bachelard and the concept of problematic (Maniglier 2012: 23). Problematics as it sounds, understood in the bachelardien sense of the word is “a pragmatic ontology for which *to be* does not mean *to be finished*, but on the contrary *to be in the making*. That problems are in fact vectors of structuration, while structures are always in the making, are just some of the wider implications of Bachelard’s concept of ‘problematic’...” (Maniglier 2012: 23). The translator as a being in the making suits well to our present manner of thought. Foucault uses “problematic” when studying the history of a concept.

We can now move forward in our attempt at trying to elaborate a comprehensive definition:

*The translator is, in the first place, a reader and, even more, a reader of translations. As an importer of problematics by means of his translations, the translator helps promote exchanges among human beings.*

- c. **“The translator is inferior; he is always situated after the author, post-synchronized. He offers the publishable author to the readers while he is forgettable. The author flourishes, the translator dies out, the first is deployed, the second folds in himself. The author is creation, the translator dissimulation. The translator is just a fleeting voice.** (Albert BENSOUSSAN, 1995: 13).

Although I won’t take into account this statement for the definition I’m trying to build, but I mention it because it shows

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<sup>4</sup> Patrice Maniglier “What is a problematic?” in *Radical Philosophy* 173 (May / June 2012), pp. 21-23.

how some translators see themselves. Of course, the translator is situated after the author, it cannot be otherwise, but he is neither inferior nor superior. Bensoussan is a prolific translator. He has translated from Spanish into French celebrated authors like Vargas Llosa, Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig or Lezama Lima, among many others, and has even received translation prizes.<sup>5</sup>

I rather not discuss it but contrast it with the following quotation:

- d. “Translators -such curious beings, so open to the Other, mediators, sometimes suspects, agents, ambassadors, path openers, smugglers- they live a sort of exchange first in themselves and in their own language. As they receive and give at the same time, they are transformed and they transform; they are living places of exchange”. (Betty BEDNARSKI<sup>6</sup> 1999).**

Evidently, the translator is suspected of bringing problematics to the fore. Within this act of exchanging, the discussions motivated by the new knowledge that arrives at one culture or at the other, generate unusual movements leading to indefinite transformations. That translation actually implies transformations is, I believe, a consensus. Translators have also been compared to smugglers transporting knowledge from one border to the other. However, the fact of describing them as “living places of exchange” provides an interesting element to light the way our query “what is a translator”

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, Bensoussan’s conception of the obscurity of the translator can be understood in the sense of the mirror-man as represented by René Char in his poem *La conjuration*. I translated the poem from French into Spanish and commented on the relation of this figure with translation. The mirror-man dances, he shines and reflects his light with every movement, risking his own annihilation. See, “El conjuro: a manera de epílogo” (Pulido 2014: 67- 69).

<sup>6</sup> Betty Bednarski , « La traduction comme lieu d’échange », dans Beaudet, 1999 : 127 en BEAUDET, Marie-Andrée (dir.) (1999), *Échanges culturels entre les deux solitudes*, Sainte-Foy (Québec), Presses de l’Université Laval).

has raised. A translator could be represented by a place, but a very particular one, “a living place of exchange”.

Before a further attempt at a definition of a translator, and closing the quotation section, I will mention one more from an author very dear to me:

- e. **“The translator is a writer of an original singularity, precisely where he seems not to claim any. He is, secretly, the lord of the differences between the languages.”**  
(Maurice BLANCHOT, 1971: 71),

writes Blanchot in « Traduire » *L'Amitié*. So translation is not a matter of equivalences, but of differences, but most importantly it is an act of friendship, even more valuable when we don't even know the author-friend we are translating and whom we cannot fail. This quotation takes us, inexorably, to Ricoeur's concept of “linguistic hospitality” that he applies to translation, presented in his text *Sur la traduction* (Ricoeur 2004). The manner in which the receiving culture accepts the foreign text involves an ethical position defined by the rules of linguistic hospitality.

I refine then my definition:

*The translator is, in the first instance, a reader and, even more, a reader of translations. As an importer of problematics and with the will for linguistic hospitality deployed in his translation work, the translator transforms himself in a living surface over which exchanges among human beings take place.*

### 3. From Foucault's parrhesia

Parrhesia<sup>7</sup> is a practice of Truth-telling. We will try to see if there is any relationship between parrhesiastic practices and translation practice in order to situate in them the Translator, not any more as a traitor, but certainly as a Truth-teller.

When we are translating we are continuously establishing a relationship between identity and Alterity, between saying and doing. Between the identity given by our own language and discourse and the Alterity of the language and discourse of the Other, the Foreigner. As we translate we recognize the discursive system upon which that Alterity is inscribed. We apprehend what it says, and we make this saying inhabit our discursive system by translating: relationship then between saying and doing. For this relationship to be ethical we need first to identify the discursive Truth of the original.

Foucault analyses four fundamental modalities of Truth-telling (*dire vraie*): The truth of the prophet, the truth of the wise man, the truth of the pedagogue, to arrive at a fourth one, *Parrhesia*, that he approaches to the truth of the philosopher and which seems to embrace the former three. I will leave aside the truth of the wise man, as the wise man, the *sage*, holds the truth leaving no other possibility to the others but to follow him. This would be contrary to what we are trying to state about translation. I shall limit my exposition to the Truth of the Prophet and the Truth of the Pedagogue and try to see if the translator fits at least in these two Truth-telling discursive modalities, arriving eventually at parrhesia.

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<sup>7</sup>“Parrhesia” is ordinarily translated into English by “free speech” (in French by “*francparler*”, and in German by “*Freimüthigkeit*”). “Parrhesiazomai” is to use parrhesia, and the parrhesiastes is the one who uses parrhesia, i.e., is the one who speaks the truth. Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia* 6 lectures given by Michel Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, Oct-Nov. 1983 : <http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/>

- The truth of the Prophet: the prophet is recognized by others as a Truth-teller who doesn't speak in his own name, he speaks on behalf of someone else, he conveys and articulates a word and utters a speech that is not his, he is an intermediary between the present and the future, he reveals what is dark for men, he is an interpreter.

We can relate the Truth-telling of the prophet to the one of the translator in various points. The intention of the translator is always to tell the truth, at least a discursive truth. He doesn't speak in his own name; he speaks on behalf of the author. He acts as an intermediary between the past, the present and the future: the past – the original text-; the present –his translation; the future –the reading of the translated text. He makes an interpretation of the original text in order to reveal what is dark for a group of readers, due to the lack of knowledge of that particular foreign language of the original.

But the Prophet differs from the parrhesiastes in the sense that this one does speak on his own name. He says what it is, leaving no place for interpretation. The recipients must have the courage to accept this truth. They must believe in it.

The Translator condenses both discursive Truths, –the truth of the Prophet and the truth of the parrhesiastes-, when he is translating he doesn't want to leave place for interpretation; he is saying what it is in the text. But when he hands the book to the reader he cannot control the discourse he just translated. The task of the reader of translations should be to believe in the task the translator has just accomplished, he must have the clarity of mind to accept the text handed to him, as a discursive truth.

- The truth of the Pedagogue: The one who teaches, the technician, his is a technical modality, he says the truth about a practical knowledge, about a Know-how, he formulates what he knows and transmits it to the others, expecting to establish a relationship with them based on a common knowledge. He ensures the survival of knowledge.

Here we see the image of the translator in the Benjaminian sense; he guarantees the survival of the original text and is generous to offer it to others, expecting to create a reliable relationship with his readers. We see the translator reflected on the Truth of the Prophet and on the Truth of the Pedagogue, believing in his own interpretation, trusting in what he is translating. Sure and at the same time apprehensive of what others are going to learn from his text. It certainly is a transcendental responsibility.

-The parrhesiastes has the moral qualities which are required, first, to know the truth, and secondly, to convey such truth to others. He has the courage to take the risk to tell the truth.

In this kind of definition we see the translator at work. Every translation is a risk, and the translator feels it that way, because he knows something the others don't know and he takes it as his duty to tell it. Freedom and duty are implied in parrhesia. But these two qualities need a commitment with knowledge. The translator has to know deep enough the topic he is dealing with, he is open to a continuous never-ending learning. He is bound to accept the fact that his scholarship will never be fulfilled. What he has to offer is not the truth, but a discursive truth. Ethically, he is offering a discursive translation truth to his reader.

Henceforth, to the question "What is a translator?" I will offer the following answer, that condenses the elements I had presented before, coming back to the compound noun Translator-function, I had stated at the beginning of this text:

*The translator is a living surface over which a discursive translation truth is deployed.*

Receiving cultures and source cultures ought to measure the implications of this deployment.

## Conclusion

The Translator as an Indefinite worker of Freedom

Let's finish by a translation matter. Réal Fillion, author of the book *Foucault and the indefinite work of Freedom*, explains in the Conclusion:

As I mentioned when I first introduced the expression that forms the title of this book, it is because Foucault ties the notion of freedom to this critical *work* that I think a more appropriate translation of « *indéfini* » is *indefinite* rather than *undefined*, in the sense that it is a kind of work that must be taken up ever anew, that it has no term or end, that it is in being indefinitely engaged that our freedom manifests itself, however fleetingly. (FILLION 2012, p. 388-389).

With the conviction that in his translation he is telling the discursive truth of the original, the translator takes it as his duty to offer it to the reader, rather than handing it over, entrusting it; the translator entrusts his work to the reader, to the public, thus, he enables the freedom for the translated work to start anew, within each fresh interpretation, or even by means of eventual re-translation, promoting the translation practice as an *indefinite work of Freedom*, always *in the making*.

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We may come to think that the questions we have been asking when trying to explain what is translation and how we can describe

our activity, are not the proper ones. Probably the questions to ask now based on what Foucault calls “the aesthetics of the self” would be:

- Should we problematize the concept of *Translator*?
- What are the moral, ethical, and intellectual conditions which entitle the translator to consider himself a truth-teller of an original text?
- What are the consequences and/or the possibilities of telling the discursive truth of a foreign text in a translation?
- Are there any power relations involved in the Truth-Telling of a Translation?
- How should a Translator be trained in order to become a discursive Truth-teller?
- Under which conditions the function of a Translator as a discursive Truth-teller is fulfilled?
- Within which discourses can he fulfil his task?
- And, between which languages?

Answers to these questions, if we finally agree that these are the proper ones, should have consequences on the academic curricula and their corresponding syllabus, which have been generally defined on the basis of translation strategies, theories and techniques, leaving aside specific discourses and, even worse, neglecting the most important component of the translation activity: the translator himself.

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