Presentation

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TRANSLATING TESTIMONY

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.

PRESENTATION

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 neglect 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 is vital for the production, understanding and circulation of testimonial narratives across cultures and generations, the effects of translation processes have rarely been acknowledged in scholarly debates on testimony. Indeed, in Holo-

caust studies specifically, translation remains “one of the great unspoken issues” (Davies 2014, 161). If it is not simply disregarded as a neutral, transparent, and therefore negligible “supplement” grafted onto an immutable original, translation is often viewed as a form of betrayal of a sacralized text (or speech) that can only be conceived of in terms of “loss” and “inauthenticity”. The cases brought together in this dossier correct such reductive views on the relation between testimony and translation and invite a more complicated, nuanced and case-sensitive approach.

Apart from collecting a broad range of case studies, this dossier also incorporates insights and approaches from different disciplines, including the fields of law, political sciences, literature and linguistics. The two main fields of study that provide the broader context for this disciplinary variation, however, are memory studies and translation studies. The former provides a framework from within which to study the relation between loss, trauma and translation in a broad philosophical sense, whereas the latter has since long pursued a more critical understanding of translation in terms of power.

Translation – and the inevitable problem of untranslatability that comes with it – is often used as a metaphor signaling a primordial loss enacted by testimony itself: that of an original, intimate and non-communicable experience of violence. Victims of political violence find it difficult to understand and express what they have lived through, let alone “translate” this experience into a language comprehensible to outsiders. Testimony, in its broad philosophical sense, thus reveals the discrepancies between history, memory and narrative, between language and life – or death, since in the context of the Holocaust,

the “programmed non-event” (Coquio 2003, 34) destined to obliterate its own traces, testimony is often interpreted as “witnessing by proxy”. In Primo Levi’s view, it is an attempt to speak on behalf of the “integral witnesses” who “touched bottom” – to voice a lacuna that carries the name of the *Muselmann* (Levi 1989, 84). As Lina Insana has indicated in her monograph on Levi and the translation/transmission of Holocaust testimony, translation for Levi becomes a “metaphor for Holocaust witnessing” (2009, 11). The suspicion towards translation is therefore symptomatic of the perception of “loss” inscribed in existing testimonies, and which lays bare the incapacity of language to render an “unspeakable” or even unknowable limit experience.

The issue of translation is further complicated by the conceptualization of testimony as a “present act”, inextricably bound up with the person of the witness who “signs” his or her testimony (Derrida 1996) and has the ethical obligation to function as a “living memory” for future generations (Dulong 1998). It is through the witness, then, or through the text that comes to stand for the witness, that we as outsiders can encounter the original experience. With the reader “witnessing the trauma witness” (Felman & Laub 1992, 58), a chain of transmission is established which is referred to in French as “*passage de témoin*”. If memory work is founded in the direct encounter with the witness’s body-text, then one can imagine the consequences of exposing the tortuous processes of translation that compromise the very idea of authenticity and immediacy. In both trauma and translation studies, the proximity between testimony, translation and trauma has yet to be fully explored. In this dossier it is discussed in relation to contexts such as the Nazi

camp, 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 Iețcu-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 for translation” (Tymoczko & Gentzler 2002, xvi). The poststructuralist and postcolonial frameworks that have informed such critical investigations of the many intersections between 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 linguistic practices that take place in particular contexts, for particular reasons and with particular readerships in mind. The focus in this dossier lies on the close analysis of concrete instances of translations. Central to such an analysis is the textual comparison between source and target material – slippages and omissions when rendering witness accounts in courts and commissions; the importance of terminology in a camp survivor's account, in judicial evidence or administrative procedures; the

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 textual and contextual features. 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 earliest reports on life in the Nazi camps, Sharon Deane-Cox conceptualizes the work of translating as one of “secondary witnessing” in order to underscore the agency of individual translators who leave their interpretative mark on the text. Yet her analysis reveals in the first place the determining impact of external sociocultural conditions on the translated text's reception in the 1940s and 1950s: Rousset's book is indeed an atypical testimony written “against the current” because it focused on concentration camps solely, while the world was looking at Auschwitz. The time may be right, Deane-Cox suggests, for a new English translation that “could serve to restore the significance

of Rousset's work to contemporary debates, reframing it as an interesting counterpoint to claims regarding the ineffability of traumatic experiences, and as a reminder of the breadth of Nazi persecution”.

Rather than discussing the “accuracy” or “faithfulness” of a translation to the authentic voice of the witness (either audible in oral testimony or resonating in the text), some authors in this volume explore the highly constructed nature of the “original” itself. They demonstrate how the specific form and format of testimonial discourse is shaped not only by the political, cultural and historical circumstances in which they are produced and circulate, but also by successive operations of editing, transcribing, and archiving. Anneleen Spiessens demonstrates that the testimonies delivered by Rwandan *génocidaires* and edited by French reporter Jean Hatzfeld in 2003 are necessarily “relayed” and therefore “layered” stories – the result of a conscious *mise en scène*. Much as Hatzfeld tries to convince his readers that they hear the authentic “voice” of the perpetrators in the text, the collected testimonies in fact rely on a careful discursive construction that is possibly exposed in translation. Signs of the translator's presence in the English and Dutch texts create a *mise en abyme* effect, ultimately drawing attention to the constructed and polyphonic nature of the original accounts. Spiessens' article therefore not only problematizes the idea of a “consonant” or “innocent” translation, but it also challenges the very possibility of a “*témoignage brut*”.

In a similar vein, Antjie Krog and Nosisi Mpolweni uncover the complexity of archival processes based on selection, translation and transcription of oral testimonies. “The archive – all archive – every archive – is figured”, 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 “refigure” the South-African archive 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 difficulty, for the interpreter, 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-Bursac, 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 entextualization 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 Kausalya 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 *Dohra Abhishap*, Merrill meditates 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 in 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 Robert 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 sets off expanding, in ephemeral circles of resonance and possibility." And also here, translation emerges as an intricate but integral aspect of testimony 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 "commodification of revolutionary language" and to invent and shape new, post-revolutionary, realities. ■

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