

Rhetoric, Translation, and the Rhetoric of Translation

Russell Scott Valentino
Jacob Emery *Indiana University, Bloomington*
Sibelan Forrester *Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA*
Tomislav Kuzmanović *University of Zadar, Croatia*

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Rhetoric, Translation, and the Rhetoric of Translation

An Introduction

Russell Scott Valentino

Indiana University, Bloomington

Jacob Emery

Indiana University, Bloomington

Sibelan Forrester

Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA

Tomislav Kuzmanović

University of Zadar, Croatia

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Identifying the rhetorical features of any manner of communication requires stereotyped forms of expression. To understand what they are being told, and even more to be persuaded by it, people need to recognize a novel situation as a variation on a theme with which they are already familiar. Rhetorical theorists since Aristotle have known this. They call these canned formulas *topoi*, or places. When the occasions are typical enough they are called *commonplaces*. Surprisingly, the form of communication called translation offers fertile ground for rhetorical exploration, not least because when it comes to translation people have been repeating themselves for millennia. If their repetitions have often appeared new and, to use a medieval commonplace, “never seen before,” it is largely because of the skillful variations in which they have been expressed, and the changing circumstances of a changing world, which tend to make each generation think or—perhaps better—feel that it has discovered if not created something altogether new rather than learned something that people before them knew, too.

The truth is that, outside of certain technical spheres, about which we shall have more to say below, translation has changed very little over the centuries. It is characterized today, as it has ever been, by the need for careful study of a foreign language and culture, by a thorough understanding of the text from which a translation is derived, and by skillful manipulation of the receiving culture’s language and expressive modes. Obviously, this is not an

exhaustive definition of the activity of translation, and in fact the wide variety of translation commonplaces may derive in part from an inscrutable quality that, like the figure of the translator, who shifts between cultures, appearing to belong to and speak for one or the other from one moment to the next, makes it difficult to say what translation, in fact, *is*. In other words, we keep trying and keep failing to describe it adequately, and each failure invites still more attempts, covering the same or similar ground, approaching but never quite reaching the unrepeatable source.

To claim that people have been repeating themselves does not mean to say that all conversations about translation are identical. The fact that translation from one language to another is embedded within ideas about how languages may be distinguished from one another, and that these ideas change from time to time and place to place, makes such a claim untenable in any but the most abstract sense. “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy,” quipped the linguist Max Weinreich, and this thought—first expressed, significantly, in Yiddish—points to the conditions of power upon which translation always rests.¹ Our understanding of the clear demarcations among languages, especially as markers of national affiliations, is not only relatively new: it is relatively contestable, depending on the nation and the time (for instance, Bellos, 2001, 11-23). To borrow a formulation of Mikhail Bakhtin, national languages are always projects that, if not worked at, have a tendency to bleed into other languages, drift and innovate and mix.² Making them solid requires consistency, rules, grammar, teachers of grammar, schools, dictionaries, newspapers, and standard ways of editing, and it is upon this apparently solid foundation that translation rests. Translation marks the boundary between the point where one nationally recognized language stops and another begins. Translation validates a language with its own sovereignty.

¹ “*A shprakh iz a dialekt mit an armey un flot.*” Weinreich attributed the phrase to a teacher from a Bronx high school who attended one of Weinreich’s lectures between December 1943 and June of 1944. The earliest known published source for the phrase, in Yiddish, is Weinreich’s “*Der YIVO un di problemen fun undzer tsayt,*” *YIVO Bleter* (Weinreich, 1945).

² This idea appears in various forms throughout Bakhtin’s writings. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson have grouped it under the global Bakhtinian concepts of “unfinalizability” and “heteroglossia.” For their discussion, with reference to several of Bakhtin’s pronouncements, see *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Morson and Emerson, 1990, 36-40 and 139-42).

Most claims that begin with the words “translation is like” fall somewhere amid a network of commonplaces that surround an inscrutable center and rest upon conditions of power. These commonplaces often appear as sparkling lights that blink on and off, luring us towards them according to our proclivities, interests, and politics. Thus translation as intercultural exchange flickers on a green tower while translation as art glows red in the café *en face*. Translation as performance has its own top floor marquee, while outside the basement below translation as midwifery hangs its lantern. The betrayer burns a black lamp, hidden behind an Italian dictionary. The hijacker’s bulbs are bright, multicolored, twined around a loudspeaker. The cannibal watches from the tangled undergrowth across the avenue, eyes bright. The wires crisscross, the power flows from the invisible source.

Exploring the discrete commonplaces of translation discourse in English is likely to take the form of short excursions into the rhetorics of accuracy, violence, equivalency, communication, loss, and mimesis. Instead of indulging in any of these micro-explorations, here we test more general waters in an attempt to situate the rhetoric of translation amid a variety of discursive and disciplinary trajectories, particularly in relation to teaching and learning.

The wide divide between practice and theory has its own points of rhetorical interest, as does the divergence between the relatively new field of Translation Studies as an offshoot of applied linguistics, on the one hand, and of literary theory, on the other, particularly in its comparatively inflected modes. There is a parallel to this divide, however, in the fact that contemporary translation practice might also be understood as an offshoot of foreign language instruction, literary history in the commentary and intervention mode (as in Classics or philology), and creative writing. Each of these domains operates through commonplaces and assumptions about audience and effectiveness, using tropes that often contain complex unarticulated arguments that, once made explicit, help to define the interests and aims of their practitioners. More than this, they help to clarify what is at stake and how to measure the successes and failures of such differently marked approaches.

We must contrast the pedagogical aspect of this project to what might otherwise look like a purely descriptive engagement, much as there was a pedagogical aspect to Wayne Booth’s seminal study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which our title echoes (Booth, 1961). Rhetorical scholars, translators, historians of translation, teachers of literature and language, and theorists of translation and cross-cultural

communication (the most likely audiences for this special issue) will see each of their approaches in clear demarcations along a spectrum that puts them into greater focus, helping to inform practice and clarify the often fraught language of what poet and translator Cole Swensen once characterized as “the blood sport of translation” across the entire range of these forms of writing.³

Rhetoric plies a middle ground, with plenty of theoretical gravitas, history, and connections to neighboring fields to constitute a field of its own, but also with a grounding in real communication situations and handy concepts that—like “kairos” (timeliness), “ethos” (character), and “lexis” (style)—are highly applicable to translation. Such concepts have rarely been applied to the study of translation in a systematic manner, despite the fact that many Translation Studies approaches, from those of Lawrence Venuti and Susan Bassnett to those of David Damrosch and Emily Apter, have operated within often unstated rhetorical fields. To take a well-known example, the notion of the “translator’s invisibility,” which Venuti coined in the mid-1990s, is essentially a study in the rhetorical category of “ethos.” When thought of in this way, it becomes clear that invisibility can be deployed as part of an implicit argument, a means of moving an audience. The hidden claims of such an argument might be explicitly formulated such that the translation in question is an “authentic” replication of the original or, at least, of those aspects of the original that matter; the author’s words here are implied as appearing in English without intervention—if not magically, then at least with utmost faith and rigor. The translator’s invisibility (or rather, silence) serves to highlight the translator’s absence of agency exerted on (think: willful intervention in) the original text during the process of carrying that original text over from its source culture to that of the reader, suggesting that the work has not been contaminated by some unauthorized third party (the translator). To test such an assumption, one can simply observe the degree to which such notions about communion with the source are discarded the more visible the translator becomes, especially when the translator’s own inventions are highlighted. The rhetorical positioning of the translator shifts, and she or he becomes an author, discarding the translator’s cloak, and voilà, visibility and invention are joined in the authorial persona. The entire implied argument pivots on the fulcrum of the translator’s authority (*ethos*).

In a more global sense, however, we must ask what a rhetoric of translation would actually look like. In some ways it would surely

³ In a personal communication with Russell Valentino.

be a corrective to thinking of translation as a non-rhetorical activity, from an *ars gratia artis* standpoint at one extreme or a technical standpoint at the other. These are in fact the two radical conceptions of translation in which this non-rhetorical aspect of translation most frequently appears. In the first case, translation is its own form of artistic expression, where a translator is inspired to create in the receiving culture's language and the creation stands as an artistic work in its own right, its success or failure dependent purely on its own aesthetic merits. At the other extreme lies a range of lexical items with exact equivalents, e.g., the word for the computer term *interface* or the hinge of a door. These are technical usages that have limited, specialized, and exact equivalents in other languages, at least at first glance. For "interface" and "hinge" also have figurative usages that make the exactness we might think is there to begin with look rather more tenuous. Writing as a form of audience-free self-expression suggests a non-rhetorical act that contrasts the production of technical equivalents for lexical items in another language. In the first case, it is as if the authorial role has completely taken over the ethos of the translator; this author is an English language author writing in English, for the purpose of English—some poets refer to this self-positioning as "writing to the language"; in the second it is as if the author disappears completely, and the translator is a mere conduit. It does not matter who might fill that role; the same word always results.

Both of these extreme cases are fascinating abstractions. But to the extent that they might be realized, or attempted, in the practice of translation, they are also naïve and wrong-headed. For translations are always—whether conceived of as artistic or technical or anything in between—rhetorical acts, acts conditioned by considerations of the audience for whom they are imagined. And this is true not only at the global level, the level of why a text comes into being in English, but also at the level of every local decision made in creating the text, from paragraphing to discrete lexical items, commas, periods, and quotation marks. And fragments. In this sense, there are as many different modes of translation (which means methods of creating it, reading it, engaging with it, and so on) as there are audiences for it, and there are many different conceivable audiences—from devoted religious readers to first-grade poetry explorers, historians, literature students in college survey courses, foreign language learners, critics, reviewers, and more. Whenever someone begins from that common phrase "translation is," with its weak little copula verb no less, that person has an audience in mind, often unspecified, sometimes not even clear in her or his head, but always there to condition the aims of

any translation, its existence, its manner of work, and, most importantly, any judgments that might be made about its quality or effectiveness. This fact, moreover, points to the major failing of all forms of automated translation, whether performed by means of a database or algorithms or by some manner of machine: They do not act rhetorically; they are not sensitive to the specific conditions of an audience, not yet at least.

The rhetoric of translation, then, is corrective on the one hand, that is, to thinking of translation as non-rhetorical. On the other, considering translation through the prism of rhetoric can provide a bridge between highly theorized approaches, which look at translation and tend to place it within other domains, such as post-colonial studies, linguistics, or literary theory, and, by contrast, highly practice-oriented approaches, as in creative writing circles, which have tended to see little or nothing of use or interest to them when they look at the historical pronouncements of their comrades in disciplines such as comparative literature or English. A rhetorical approach can sit squarely between these often opposing ways of engaging in translation and provide insight into each. It can translate the one for the other and vice versa.

Understanding how translation functions in a rhetorical frame of reference can be made clear by contrast to neighboring kinds of writing, those that might look similar on first consideration but whose distinctive differences point out the contours that surround and give translation its own shape. In effect, to clarify what translation *is*, we might borrow an insight from Gilbert Highet's *Anatomy of Satire*, in which the contours of a genre come into focus by contrast with the kinds of writing that are closest to it but still distinct, a little like the way a note becomes clear when an instrument is out of tune.⁴

For instance, the dominant foreign-language teaching methods in the U.S. over the last thirty years or so do not in principle welcome translation, especially in its “grammar/translation” mode, which foreign language pedagogues have sometimes derided as a crutch used in the classroom by imperfect speakers, hiding their lack of fluency behind grammar rules and rote translation drills that do little but take up valuable class time. The definition of proficiency from which the criticism derives, by contrast, rests on a bias towards fluent speaking and personal expression as a category of language use. Thus in the standard oral proficiency interview

⁴ Highet's use of this analytic technique is perhaps clearest where he distinguishes satire from its neighbors of invective, lampoon, comedy, and farce (Highet, 1962, 151-156).

(OPI), a speaker is provided with a situation in which she or he is unlikely to know all the specific words that might pertain to that situation. For example, you are getting a haircut and you want to tell the stylist that you would like to shorten the bangs and thin the hair at the temples. The problem is designed with the assumption that the language learners being tested most likely will not know the words for “bangs,” “temples,” and “to thin”; their proficiency is measured by how well they are able to maneuver around their ignorance, that is, circumlocute. Circumlocution is what native speakers do all the time, in the many situations where they do not know the precise vocabulary; it constitutes a meta-speech strategy of sorts that, when combined with a variety of language rudiments, enables superior speakers to communicate in just about any situation. This highly effective model of teaching and justifying foreign language as a subject of study in higher education clearly demarcates one of the main contours of translation, which focuses on comprehension and expression in writing of *someone else’s* thoughts and desires. In practicing translation, one must pay especially close attention to what other people write and how they write it. If one does not know the words, one has to find them out, not find a way around them. In translation, circumlocution is rarely an option. Nor can one skip over what one does not understand, or stop paying attention when one does not agree.

The teaching of literature offers another domain from which translation may be distinguished. Translators sometimes like to say that translation is the closest form of reading, implying that it is a variety of close reading. It is not, and *how* it is not helps to show what translation in fact *is*. Close reading is a New Critical method of analysis. Its particular bias does not lean, as proficiency-based language instruction does, toward prolix expressivity, where performance is measured largely by how well one can get around words one does not know in order to say what one wants. Instead, close reading showcases invention, while the model of writing it favors is one that marshals a plethora of words, derived from but ultimately external to a text, in order to launch them at that text in the service of the “original” idea or “discovery” that the interpreter is proposing. Apprentices to the method in freshman introductory courses have long been routinely encouraged to quote from a work but then “do things” with the quoted material, shape it amid their own argument, control it as part of their critical explication. The analytic skills being taught have to do with unraveling the strands of the text under consideration in order to show how they ultimately cohere in a meaningful whole. Moreover, the exploration of the text takes place by means of a critical reflective apparatus

that should ideally maintain its distance, and not, for instance, engage in naïve identification with characters, or any of the other typically unsophisticated reading practices of those who have not been properly schooled. The high Modernist bias in this approach should be evident. Such a lack of sophistication among his American students was a favorite target of Vladimir Nabokov's irony. He called us "minor readers" when we identified with the characters in books.⁵ The point here is not about close reading *per se* but about the reliance on invention and critical distance by literary scholars and the manner in which these help to demarcate translation—especially when it is practiced without additional words of explanation, without scholarly intervention.

Isaiah Berlin once famously set out hedgehogs and foxes as categories of thinkers on the basis of a Greek fragment from the poet Archilochus: The fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing. "Taken figuratively," Berlin wrote,

the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general. For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single, central vision [...] and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory [...]. The first kind of intellectual personality belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes (Berlin, 2008, 24-25).

And so Plato was, according to Berlin, rather a hedgehog and Aristotle rather a fox; Dante, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky were clearly hedgehoggish, while Shakespeare, Voltaire, and Joyce were all foxy.⁶ But when Berlin then turned to Lev Tolstoy and asked whether he was "a monist or a pluralist," whether his vision was "of one or of many," the question didn't seem to apply. It seemed to "breed more darkness than it [dispelled]." What sort of a thinker, Berlin asked, was the man whose work his essay was intended to explore? This was a terribly clever move for the start of an extended analysis of Tolstoy's philosophy of history, a subject that very likely required a bit of cleverness to engage his readers. When faced with the question of what Tolstoy was, Berlin turned his little intellectual personality game into a profound psychological tool: Lev

⁵ Nabokov's opinion is typically forthright and categorical: to identify with a character in a book is "the worst thing a reader can do" (Nabokov, 1980, 4).

⁶ Berlin's 1950s lists are clearly marked by their lack of diversity.

Nikolaevich was, he suggested, by nature a fox, but a fox who believed in being a hedgehog, a fox who really wanted to be a hedgehog.

We borrow Berlin's gambit here partly because of the equivalently dry word "translation"—which has a powerful way of turning people's eyes up into their foreheads whenever it is invoked (an effect likely compounded by combining "translation" with "rhetoric")—and partly because the activity of translation, like Berlin's enigmatic Tolstoy, does not fit comfortably in any of the categories one usually encounters in discussions of writing, whether scholarly or creative. On one side, theorists, critics, and practitioners of translation remind us that we read translations differently than we do non-translations,⁷ and commentaries on the specific nature of translation practice, as opposed to the practice of fiction, poetry, or drama, are legion (for instance, Weaver, 1989). But another side suggests that we routinely forget about the fact of translation while we are reading; we read over or through it, feeling that we are somehow communing with the author through a magically or inspirationally channeled version of that author's voice in English.⁸ Some on this other side would have us see translating as akin to dual authorship,⁹ where translators and authors differ "in name alone,"¹⁰ or where translation is a form of "rewriting" if not "pure writing."¹¹ The question of what sort of activity literary translation is vis-à-vis authorship does not seem wholly

⁷ Lawrence Venuti's short "How to Read a Translation" points to the difference in reading practice (Venuti, 2004), as does Eliot Weinberger's "Anonymous Sources" (Weinberger, 2002).

⁸ Lawrence Venuti famously finds fault with such "simpatico" assumptions in his *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Venuti, 1995).

⁹ It is worth noting that Amazon.com currently lists nearly all translations as "by [author's name] and [translator's name]"; more substantively, the historical connection between poetry and translation has been noted frequently by poets and translators alike, from Kenneth Rexroth to Anne Carson, W. S. Merwin, Charles Simic, and Rosemarie Waldrop.

¹⁰ Quoted in Leighton, 1984, 18.

¹¹ Andre Lefevere uses the concept of "rewriting" in his works on translation (see for instance *Lefevere*, 1992); Elizabeth Harris suggested the notion of translation as "pure writing" in an unpublished 2011 lecture at Indiana University South Bend entitled "Translating Voice in Fiction: How an Italian Character Travels into English." The concept formed the basis of a 2014 AWP panel featuring Harris and fellow translators Esther Allen, Susan Bernofsky, and Bill Johnston.

appropriate; it, too, seems to “breed more darkness than it dispels.” Yet it is not lack of information that makes us pause. Translators, translation historians, and translation theorists have told us a great deal about the practice and its history in many different language traditions. Nor can translation be considered obscure in any usual sense of the term: you read the source text, look up the words you might not know, then start shaping lines in the receiving culture’s language that correspond to the qualities you want to bring out. Why then does the question seem out of place? When asked what translating is, in relation to authoring, what are we to say?

The essays collected here offer responses to this and related questions on the topic of rhetoric and translation. In “Towards a Rhetoric of Translation for the Postdramatic Text,” Madeleine Campbell attempts to break free of the common binary of authorial intention and audience effect by means of the literary concepts of expression and affect, especially as employed in key works by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In “*Skopos* Theory as an Extension of Rhetoric,” Isabelle Collombat takes up one of the fundamental concepts of the field of Translation Studies for an exploration of its intersections with rhetorical inquiry. Jose M. Dávila-Montes’s essay “Translation as a Rhetoric of Meaning” attempts to address the absence, noted above, of rhetoric-centered approaches to the study of translation, particularly core notions of Translation Studies that tend to be mediated by assumptions about meaning and language.

Anastasia Lakhtikova’s “Code-Switching in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Walcott’s *Omeros*” provides an in-depth case study of the manner in which the challenge of communicating difference to portray marginal, hybrid cultures may be akin to those employed by a foreignizing translator, laying the groundwork for “a new readability.” And Cristina Sánchez-Martín’s “The Transcoding of ‘Women’s Empowerment’ as ‘Empoderamiento de la Mujer’” focuses on the translation and proliferation of a single phrase across a variety of contexts, employing an approach informed by concepts from post-colonial studies and transnational rhetorical feminism. Finally, we append an exchange entitled “A Dialogue on Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky,” the occasion for which was a symposium on the author and his work held at Indiana University Bloomington in fall 2016. We believe the phenomenon of this author’s recent re-discovery and introduction to English readers as a major figure of European Modernist literature provides an ideal case for studying how the institutions of publishing—through selection, translation, editing, design, and marketing—help to shape our understanding of which texts are included within the category of “world literature,” along

with the very idea of what “world literature” means. How such an author is reconstructed as a classic, virtually from scratch, for a contemporary English audience, adds an important and timely case study for the subject of rhetoric and translation.

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