

Writing about embodiment as an act of translation

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Writing about embodiment is an act of compression: reducing the sensory complexity of someone else's physical experience, or even one's own, into written language that somebody else will understand through sight or sound.

It is an act of abstraction, excerpting part of a narrative or a life and putting it to another purpose, where indeed one may – and possibly one always should – worry that it is overstepping into appropriation.

It is also an act of translation, where recognising the writer as an intermediary in the translator's sense might help us be explicit about what it is we do when we write about bodies, and why writing about *militarised* embodiment might be so unnerving.

Translation, for certain anthropologists and literary critics, can go on between more things than just languages; between forms of expression, for instance, or between cultures. Talal Asad wrote of the 'cultural translation' that anthropological fieldworkers engaged in when they learned new languages simultaneously with learning other ways of life, so that they could write about them later in and for the metropole, where mastering the position of cultural translator gave them a claim to social authority that could not be challenged without superior knowledge of both codes (Asad 2010 [1986]: 15–26); Homi Bhabha used it to describe the position of a foreign gaze looking back on a home country which he saw as characterising exilic and diasporic literatures (Bhabha 1994: 164). However it is used, it has something to do with ambiguity, inequality and structures of (post)colonial knowledge and power.

Translation scholars are often not so sure about the metaphor of cultural translation. Maybe it supposes too simple a notion of what translators working between languages do in order to make meaning when they are mediating between them (Jordan 2002: 100; Tymoczko 2010: 110); maybe it reifies the 'source cultures' and 'target cultures' that are supposedly being translated out of and into, when we would be better off questioning how and why the symbolic boundaries between the cultures were formed (Chesterman 2010: 104). If translation can have value as a metaphor, suggests Mary Louise Pratt, it is not for what it says about the intermediary's process, so much as what it says about the positions they inhabit when they do so:

Perhaps this question invites us to reflect on the power (not the task) of the translator, as the one who knows both the codes; the one who has the power to do justice, be faithful, yet also to capture, deceive, betray one side to the other, or betray both to a third. (Pratt 2010: 96)

Translation scholarship increasingly centres the intermediary, and puts them in the centre of conflict as it does so. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993)'s postcolonial challenges to authority have already exposed the politics of translation. The intermediary comes into the centre in another way when one perceives how deeply linguistic intermediaries are implicated in what may be life-or-death deliberations during conflict: gathering intelligence by listening in on radio; making interrogations possible; summarising news for foreign audiences; determining whether or not a person's linguistic performances make them credible as the refugee they claim to be (M Baker 2006; Inghilleri 2008, 2010; Jacquemet 2010; Colla 2015). These are not new roles for translators and interpreters – some of them, allowing for

technological innovation, are as old as warfare – but translation scholars in this moment have been compelled to theorise them. (And why *this* moment, when those roles *are* so old?) To whom or what does the translator ultimately owe loyalty (hint: not necessarily, maybe not even ever, to their ‘client’)? When, and if so how, should the translator intervene in the content of what they are relaying? When should the translator add commentary beyond what’s in the ‘source text’, or distance themselves from what they report – and indeed might it sometimes be more ethical not to translate at all? (Baker and Chesterman 2008)

These are all political choices, as is the question of how closely to assimilate a translation to its audience(s’) expectations or how strategically to use translation to unsettle the very expectations the audiences have brought. What, asked Spivak, should a translator do when translating Bengali poetry into English? And would it be the same, translating Anglophone gender-and-development discourse into Bengali? These questions are inherent to the task but their ethics all depend on the translator’s power, and the powers they stand in relation to.

The subtitler experiences and exercises this power in a tightly-confined textual space. Subtitling is a problematic kind of compression, as we’re told by critical visual anthropologists who study and make subtitled ethnographic film. The compression of meaning in a subtitled text ‘banishes alternative readings and establishes itself as definitive’, writes David MacDougall (1998: 174), who nevertheless has to use subtitles in his own films. Subtitled translation, like any other kind, is a potential and frequent tool of colonial simplification and appropriation, as Trinh Minh-ha recognised even as she tried to subvert it in her own film-making (Minh-ha 1991: 60 in Nornes 1999: 29). But this is even more so than usual, they imply, when a translation has to mediate both between languages and between text and sound.

Henrik Gottlieb (1994) calls subtitling a ‘diagonal translation’, using a diagram I can’t reproduce here (copyright) but can describe. (A little bit of compression even here, but not half as much as when I’m excerpting the arguments of whole books to fit a space.) On the horizontal axis, he charts mediation between one language and another; on the vertical, he plots the act of expressing speech in text, responding to a different set of senses. Two processes at once.

Technology constrains subtitles further. The most frustrating thing about watching subtitles when you speak the original language is often how much of what people are speaking they leave out; what a diminished experience the viewer in the target language must be getting, you may think, even if everything in the subtitles is correct. Traditional subtitling software limits how many characters appear per line and lines per screen, and there are conventions about how long any pair of lines should stay in vision for (Brondeel 1994); it’s even more constrained than, say, trying to summarise a conference panel on Twitter.

That doesn’t mean subtitlers can’t find ways of conveying more through their translations than subtitling conventions let them do. Talking about her research with an Egyptian activist–translator collective, Mosireen, when she visited my university this year (M. Baker ed. 2015), Mona Baker showed a video of a protest where subtitles pulsed in and out of vision to communicate the rhythm of a chant. Her project has held a workshop for volunteer subtitlers in Cairo to explore further ways of intervening in subtitling conventions to retain more than usual of what would typically be compressed (Guthrie 2014).

The paradox of writing about embodiment might be best summed up by thinking about this process of audiovisual translation. While the audiovisual translator must perform two types of translation at the same time, writing about embodiment compresses even more senses into written language. What writing do we do, then, when we put embodiment into words?

The move from embodiment to language is, first, a shift of form: if languages are codes, then so is form; the form of a translation isn't always the form in which the original was expressed. The visceral memories, sensations and imagery that military writers record in memoirs, qualitative researchers transcribe from interviews, or autoethnographers write into their own notes and publications condense combinations of all the senses into text. They face the unmeetable requirement – often further constrained by socially-constructed myths of the unspeakability of combat – of using language to evoke *everything* in the reader at once. Or maybe deliberately to keep some things back.

But what makes writing about embodiment *and militarism or militarisation*, specifically, as discomfiting as those I meet on panels and workshops keep suggesting that it is?

The military is, as well as everything else, a mystique that works on bodies; it *must be* a mystique that works on bodies to be able to be the other things a military is. To take seriously the military institution's power in shaping the bodies that constitute it, and its power in shaping ideas about many other bodies that are not part of it or would never even be genuinely allowed into it, means acknowledging the dynamic of identification and indeed desire that goes into producing bodies and selves that can and will take part in the ultimate task of war, the destruction of other bodies. Every form of power is, to be fair, embodied; perhaps it is militarisation's multiscalar reach, from grand strategy to the keeping of the trained armed hard-edged body, that leaves us with discomfort; perhaps it comes from having to perceive the gulf between the power it invites you to imagine you can embody and the breaking of the bodies, and the minds, it leaves behind.

When writing about embodiment, at some stage we have to feel, or sometimes just imagine, how that embodiment occurs; we have to *translate* embodied feeling into words. (I'm not sure these are all codes I was supposed to learn, or to have access to; and of all the things that I could write about, why this?) Yet there is never just one code on each side of the translation. We write in numerous academic conventions and each have different positions in relation to them. The codes of militarised embodiment are similarly numerous and stratified (Enloe 1990; Sylvester 2013): think of how embodied practices of militarisation differ among states; among service branches and units within each state's armed forces; how the intersections of gender, ethnicity and race refract them; or what becomes of the disabled militarised body and the disabled militarised self. How do we learn the codes? It differs for us all. Of those of us who try to interpret these practices as academic knowledge, some served in armed forces (for varying lengths of time, with different outcomes), others didn't, some indeed if compelled would take any course of action apart from serve; some have been targets of militarised violence, some have been inflictors of it, some were both. Networks and structures of militarisation, in their global reach, shape the conditions of all our lives. Writing about militarised modes of embodiment and theorising these forms of power, if we take the translation metaphor with us, means grasping both the codes at once: the code of theory and critique, and the code of how the military produces, disciplines, treats and unmakes bodies.

If writing about embodiment is a sensory compression, it is also a sensory translation, joining written language with the remembered-or-imagined body in a nexus which is distinct for every writer. In the middle of a turn towards storytelling, creative work and fictionalised narrative as ways to convey something about the international that the academic article supposedly can't do (Dauphinée 2013; Edkins 2013; Jackson 2014, 2015), what can we learn from or as translators who bring to the surface ways to exist, sometimes more comfortably and sometimes less, with both the codes at once?

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Biographical note

Catherine Baker is Lecturer in 20th Century History at the University of Hull. She specialises in the international politics of popular culture and of translation/interpreting, and in the contemporary history of the post-Yugoslav region. She has been studying militarised masculinities since her PhD and her first book, *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991* (2010). Her other books include *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s* (2015) and her articles have appeared in *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (forthcoming), *International Peacekeeping* and elsewhere.

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