The Vexed Question of Creativity in Translation

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1 As a relatively young discipline, translation studies has borrowed many of its concepts and metaphors from neighbouring fields within the human sciences. Some borrowings—such as the translation-as-communication metaphor—have met with virtually instantaneous and lasting success. Others have struggled until they are superseded or redefined. It is perhaps too early to come to a definite judgement about a concept that, relatively recently, has found its way into the literature on translation. This concept—creativity—is a borrowing from cognitive sciences, though one may suspect that part of its attraction and success simply comes from the positive, artistic connotations that surround the word in non-scientific contexts. Indeed, one can almost hear the sighs of relief as translation—that essentially secondary and long decried activity—comes to vie with more noble endeavours such as authorship and writing. Creativity should, I shall be arguing, have a place within translation theory, but the question is just what place. The following pages attempt to shed some light on the subject.

2 Before addressing the question of what creativity (and creativity in translation) may be, it is useful briefly to adopt an epistemological perspective and to consider just how such a concept has managed to find a place within the writings on translation. The seeds of today’s “creative translating” were probably sown centuries ago, with the recognition that literal translation was stilted or unacceptable, that some form of re-writing was inevitable. Creativity as such was not an issue, as the translator’s role, when considered, was seen to be a subservient one, with discussions focusing mainly on the merits of literal versus free translation. It was only with the coming of age of translation studies as a fully-fledged discipline that the question of creativity could finally be addressed. Put briefly, translation studies have allowed the translator to exist in his or her own right—the necessary precondition for creativity to come into its own in the context of translating. But to what, exactly, is one referring when one writes of creativity in general terms, and more specifically of “creative translating”, or a “creative translation”?

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There is no one simple definition to be found of creativity. As Balacescu and Stefanink point out, researchers in the field are “careful not to give a definition and prefer to speak of ‘aspects’ of creativity, the newness of the created product and the positive reception given by experts evaluating the product”. The criterion of newness is also suggested by Kussmaul, as is that of adequateness (2000a, 118). By applying such criteria, we may decide that a particular translation (or part(s) of a translation) may be judged to be creative. The logical step from there would be to say that a creative product implies a creative process; this is where several researchers choose to focus their attention.

We can, broadly speaking, identify two contrasting ways of looking at the process of translating. The first is a global approach that sees the translating process as creative per se; the second considers creativity as being potentially part of the translating process. Among the first we can place Paul Kussmaul and Michel Ballard. The introductory chapter of Kussmaul’s *Kreatives Übersetzen* clearly shows the global approach: “The main aim of my book is to make us all aware of the fact that translating is a highly creative activity”.

Michel Ballard (1997: 86) also puts forward the general principle that rewriting in another linguistic system means creating:

> Ce que l’on a mis longtemps à accepter en traduction c’est le fait que la réécriture à l’aide d’une autre langue suppose des écarts ou des transformations qui font partie d’un acte de création qui se poursuit dans un autre matériel linguistique : une certaine différence (contrôlée) fait partie de la survie du texte.

Ballard points out that the translator tends to work on the basis of literal translation and calque structures, and that any move away from such choices is indicative of creativity. He examines different types of creative activity, including addition and elimination, the treatment of proper nouns and anaphorisation, and the move between the general and the particular. The general principle—that the inevitable rewriting that translation involves is creative—is clear, but the way in which he discusses the question makes us suspect that he is not altogether happy with the translating-equals-creating paradigm. Ballard obliquely refers both to “automatisms” and “instinct”, but without really exploring the import of these terms that potentially undermine the global vision, suggesting as they do that some translator activity seems far from creative. A wider view of translating is necessary.

The problem posed by an overall approach equating the very act of translating with creativity can be seen when one considers three variables. The first of these involves the type of text to be translated; the second looks at translator experience and competence; the final variable is the professional setting in which translating takes place. The three variables help us to identify particular stretches of the translating process where creativity is not necessarily absent, but not necessarily present either. An experienced professional working on certain types of texts in an institutional or other defined framework will have routines. And the moment one speaks of routines, one envisages translating a source-text in a way that will in part be “mechanical” or “automatic”. The former adjective occurs as early as 1963 in the writings of Jirí Levy, who drew a distinction between the “creative” and “mechanical” translator. More recently, in her article entitled “Interpreting Strategies and Creativity”, Alessandra Riccardi (1998: 174) refers to “automatic strategies that are skill-based, carried out as routine”. The examples cited (“welcoming, greetings, thanking, different points of an agenda, all the stereotypical parts of a conference or meeting, but also normal or non-marked sentence
structures and verbal collocations”) are taken from the world of interpreting, but have their equivalents in the world of translating. An experienced translator does indeed develop routines: the reading of the source text will spontaneously, or mechanically, trigger target-language solutions which have already been in part formed by the external parameters applicable to the particular translation situation—the institutional setting, intended public, translation order and so on. But just what might such solutions be?

Many of the translation “tendencies” identified by such researchers as Jacqueline Guillemin-Flescher (1981) or Hélène Chuquet and Michel Paillard (1987) correspond to “automatic” solutions. French verbal nouns tend to become verbs in English, and the complex syntactic structures found in, say, *Le Monde*, will be automatically simplified by the experienced translator. When translating into French, anaphorical devices used to avoid repetition naturally (or perhaps, following Ballard, “instinctively”) spring to mind, with *la police* turning effortlessly into *les forces de l’ordre* or *Germany* becoming *outre-Rhin*. The translator will opt for standard grammatical choices whenever they suggest themselves. But there are, of course, many occasions when such solutions simply do not work. A complex text may defy all ready-made solutions, and emphasis on style may lead to extensive rewriting. It is here, we feel, that there may be an element of newness, a moment of potential creativity.

Our interest is thus in those parts of texts that cannot be translated mechanically, that require some kind of *ad hoc* approach. For Rosemary Mackenzie (1988: 201), such an approach means using problem-solving strategies:

Many of the problems that face translators are of the open-ended kind, i.e. there is no pre-determined solution, they cannot be solved consciously under controlled conditions, and the solutions cannot be subjected to absolute verification. Thus their solution requires the use of problem-solving strategies that are creative in nature.

Even though Mackenzie specifically links problem-solving strategies with creativity, we should question her use of the term strategy. Andrew Chesterman (1998: 214) has given the following definition of the concept of translation strategy:

[...] a standard, well-tried textual solution to a particular kind of translation problem, either one that is specific to a given source-target pair, or one that applies more generally.

What we are moving towards is the identification of a moment in the translating process where the translator is brought by conscious effort to rewrite in a genuinely new way. This is where we may look for creativity, but we must be prepared to find many examples of both the ordinary and the questionable among the texts we examine. This, I feel, is one of the weaknesses of some of the examples used in the works addressing creativity in translation, as I will attempt to show below.

When examining instances of creativity, we are necessarily looking at the product rather than the process. In a sense this obscures our judgement, as we look at published translations using a whole series of criteria. This can easily lead to one researcher seeing evidence of a creative process, where others see a banal target text. Many solutions to translation problems are at best poor compromises or attempts at some form of originality. But as Kussmaul carefully points out, creativity is not an absolute but a relative measurement. One of his examples, however, (2000b: 43) does test the meaningfulness of creativity. He examines a sentence that occurs in a passage from *Newsweek* talking about quality time:
Such nuances quickly dropped away as baby-boomer couples found quality time an immense help in juggling two careers and a potty chair.

Kussmaul’s discussion revolves around the way his students have attempted to translate the juggling image at the end of the sentence.

2. ... zwei Karrieren und Windelwechseln unter einen Hut zu bringen.
3. ... zwei Karrieren und ein Kindertöpfchen unter einen Hut zu bringen.

In all three translations, juggling is replaced by unter einen Hut zu bringen (the expression literally means to put under one hat). This is judged to be a good choice, and part of the creativity of the whole sentence as the expression is both new (in relation to the original) and appropriate. The first two translations are moreover judged to be appropriate (the first speaks of child and careers, the second of carriers and nappy-changing), whereas the third, the only one that specifically mentions potties, is judged to be more questionable. But in highlighting creativity, another, perhaps more important, aspect is passed over concerning the overall impact of the proposed translations. Indeed, nowhere do we feel the dynamic nature of the English metaphor: the German equivalent is colloquial but static, the fundamental image—slightly absurd, ironic—has been watered down. It may be thought to be a “fairly good” translation, but it is only a part solution.

Curiously enough, a variation of the same example is used by Balacescu and Stefanink (2003: 138). The same three translations are discussed, but the third is this time judged to be impossible, as it transforms the hat metaphor into a literal expression (one literally sees the potty under the hat). As the other two translations are judged to be creative, an attempt is made to explain how the process of creativity functions, inspired by Fillmore’s “scenes and frames theory”, Rosch’s prototype semantics and Schank’s “memory organisation packets”. Even if the explanations given are enlightening, they nonetheless turn our attention away from two interesting aspects of the question, such as Balacescu and Stefanink present it. First, we note that their literal translation of the sentence with their choice of gérer dampens the impact of the original: Ils avaient des difficultés à gérer deux carrières et la chaise percée pour enfants. Secondly, we are told that the hat metaphor in German is the predictable translation choice (la locution métaphorique... s'impose), which raises the whole question of mechanical versus creative translating. If a competent translator will automatically choose unter einen Hut then the problem simply becomes one of collocation. And where Kussmaul suspends final judgement, Balacescu and Stefanink categorically reject the third translation.

We have reached the point where we need to look more closely at the two key conditions posed for creativity: newness or “novelty”, and appropriateness or acceptability.

There is no easy way of showing that a translation solution is genuinely new. Translating by its very nature produces change and difference: Michel Ballard, quoted above, is right to speak of “gaps and transformations” brought about by the inevitable moments of rewriting. It is no surprise that potty chair in the example quoted has become successively “child”, “nappy-changing” and “potty”. The three solutions are said to be new in that they “differ” (Kussmaul) from the original, but this is an inescapable fact of translation—that nothing can stay the same or identical, meaning that “new” is fundamentally a question of degree. In this case, the absence of a dictionary translation for potty chair inevitably leads to a discernable degree of difference (“child”, “nappy-
changing” and “potty” are not the same as the original) but nothing is introduced that is not culturally implicit in the original.

All this, however, does not go to say that the only new elements in translation are the natural result of differences between languages and cultures. Another of Kussmaul’s examples (2000a: 120) illustrates this point, even if in his analysis he does not refer to the genuinely new element in the target text. He examines the English and German translations of the character Panoramix, the Druid in the Astérix comic books—respectively called Get-a-fix and Miraculix. The name in French, it must be said, is not particularly inventive, referring to the character’s far-ranging vision. The two translations in this sense appear to be “better” or let us say more immediate, as the first evokes the Druid’s magic potion, the second the potion’s miraculous effects. They are new in that they are different, but the explanation put forward by Kussmaul—that there is a change of focus, that different “figures” have been chosen within the general “ground” of the overall scenario, serves primarily to explain their appropriateness rather than their newness. All we mean by “new” is “different while being equivalent”. Unless we look at what is, after all, an extra and hence genuinely new element in the English translation—the comic touch introduced through the slang “fix” (the magic potion is, after all, a type of drug) and which is simply not there in the French. Not only is this new, but also, it may be said, highly appropriate for a comic book. But this leads us onto dangerous ground as it forces us to consider the nature of our value judgements linking “new” with “appropriate”.

Many published translations contain “genuinely new” elements. These can be of two types: additions, and (radical) changes. Additions proliferated during the belles infidèles period, and are still found, albeit in much lower proportions. Radical changes are everywhere, and constantly test our notion of what “appropriate” might be. The sequel to Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’ Diary is called Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason. In French it becomes Bridget Jones : L’Âge de Raison. This is different indeed, with âge bearing no apparent connection to the edge of the original. Now there may be reasons to do with marketing, or book titles that have already been used, that might justify such a choice. But on the face of it, this is merely a weak translation, and any idea of creativity seems to be beside the point.

My next example does appear to be “genuinely new” and creative. It is the punch-line of one of Harold Pinter’s early revue sketches, Trouble in the Works, in which the two characters (we take them to be the director of a company and the union representative) discuss worker unrest. The men no longer wish to make the various absurd-sounding devices turned out by the factory:

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WILLS: They hate and detest your lovely parallel male stud couplings, and the straight flange pump connectors, and back nuts, and front nuts, and the bronzedraw off cock with handwheel and the bronzedraw off cock without handwheel!
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The punch-line occurs a couple of lines later:

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FIBBS [broken]: Tell me. What do they want to make in its place?
WILLS: Brandy balls.
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It is both succinct and absurd, a fine example of bathos. Eric Kahane’s translation is certainly inventive but fundamentally alters the nature of the text:
FIBBS, effondré: Dites-moi... Qu’est-ce qu’ils ont envie de fabriquer à la place de tout ça?
WILLS: Des bittes d’amarrage pour la marine à voile.

To apply the “appropriate” argument one has, of course, to consider the necessary adaptation for stage, where one must ask if a short punch-line (des marrons glacés for example) would produce a similar effect—which well it might. Arguing that the English simultaneously exploits two registers (the technical and the vulgar) rather misses the point, at least for the chute, where the (just possible) vulgar interpretation of balls simply seems irrelevant. In all events, our judgement on the translator’s creativity is suspended on a much more general notion of appropriateness which is nothing more and nothing less than the classic problem of all translation.

The examples from Helen Fielding and Harold Pinter both confirm the importance of the criterion of appropriateness when one comes to judge creativity. A translator can, after all, experiment with both novel and inventive texts that do nothing more than test the boundary separating translation from adaptation. But creativity should be reserved for those who, in the words of Antoine Berman (1999: 40), respect the fundamental contract linking a translation with its original. This contract... interdit tout dépassement de la texture de l’original. Il stipule que la créativité exigée par la traduction doit se mettre toute entière au service de la ré-écriture de l’original dans l’autre langue, et ne jamais produire une sur-traduction déterminée par la poétique personnelle du traduisant.

By explicitly linking creativity with rewriting, Berman provides us with a framework allowing us to pinpoint the limitations that need to be put on the use of such a concept. The moment one comes to comment on or judge a published translation, one must not let one’s enthusiasm for the process (insofar as it can be reconstructed) blind one to the nature of the judgement that one is bringing to bear on the result. As Berman notes, it is all too easy to concentrate on the translator’s personal poetics, irrespective of the contract that necessarily links him or her to the original. The danger is that when one wishes to uncover instances of creative translating, one will lose sight of the general picture, of possible translator incompetence or what I have called elsewhere “ontological translation”, where translators seek to exist as writers in their own right, irrespective of the claims made by the author. The temptation is to see the result as conclusive evidence of a process. Now, the target text is merely partial evidence of a process that has been interrupted at the point when choices have had to be made. The target text, in this sense, is more an obstacle to understanding creativity than a clue as to its nature, as it is only evidence of a final result. It is only when one “opens out” the target text and examines the range of possible choices from which it was taken that one can start to have some insight into the creative process. The process is potentially, but not necessarily, present, not as a form of pure or unbounded creativity, but during moments when rewriting can imply—if mechanical translation is excluded—the creative exploring of the vast potential of one’s language.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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NOTES

1. This point is developed in D’Hulst, 1992.
2. “Faithfulness”, “fidelity” and “equivalence” are a case in point. As Shuttleworth & Cowie (1999 [1997]) point out, “fidelity” tends to be replaced by “equivalence”, and “faithfulness” has been redefined (i.e. by Gutt, 1991). “Equivalence” is both widely used and widely criticized (by Ladmiral, 1995, in particular), with the more general notion of a relationship between source and target texts superseding the more specialized usage proposed by Vinay & Darbelnet (1958), where “equivalence” was identified as one of their seven translation procedures.
5. The following quotation, where the author comments on translator choice, is instructive: “Voilà sans doute les raisons qui ont amené (d’instinct?) le traducteur à opter pour l’allongement du rythme...” (Ballard, 1997: 97, my emphasis).
7. No context is given, and the English has become a little awkward: “They had difficulties to juggle two careers and a potty-chair”.
10. This point is developed in Hewson, 1997.
11. R. Roberts (1992) points to the fact that de Musset’s “translation-adaptation” of Thomas De Quincey’s Confessions of an English Opium-Eater was republished in 1965.
ABSTRACTS

The concept of creativity is relatively new in the field of translation studies. For some researchers, the act of translating itself implies creativity while for others, creativity is only potentially present. The various criteria that may be used to judge target texts are examined (newness, adequateness), as is Berman’s definition of the translation contract, which helps us to set the limits of creativity in translation.

Nous nous proposons dans cet article d’explorer le concept de créativité en traduction. Il s’agit d’une part d’examiner l’éventuelle adéquation entre la réécriture qu’implique tout processus de traduction et l’acte de création, d’autre part d’explorer les divers critères (la nouveauté, l’acceptabilité) auxquels on peut faire appel lorsque l’on examine un texte source et sa traduction. Le concept bermanien de contrat de traduction permet de mieux cerner et de contrôler les limites de la créativité en traduction.

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