

**“Traduttore, traditore” – the Italian saying means ‘The translator is a traitor’.**

**This saying has inspired and frustrated translators: who wants a job of which the best that can be said is that if you do it well enough, it renders you invisible?**

**Write an essay on translation and its hazards in any area in which you have encountered it, from literature and film to marketplaces and A+E departments.**

Translation is widely appreciated as a challenge, particularly in today’s ‘information society’<sup>1</sup> where the creation, distribution and even manipulation of information is synonymous with life. This intrinsic nature of changing something from one medium to another is encapsulated in the phrase ‘traduttore, traditore’, described as a ‘multilingual cliché’ by the lecturer Mark Davie,<sup>2</sup> and used to mock the untrustworthiness of translators. The aphorism dates back from before the 19th century, but is still very much part of the vernacular. One translator credits its ability to remain so established and infamous with the ‘potent etymological binding’<sup>3</sup> of the two words, making it both memorable and concise. However, many translators would resent being described as traitorous: the work they do is detailed and complex, and the phrase has arguably been overused, being dubbed ‘tedious’ by the American translator Weinberger.<sup>4</sup> Translators and interpreters strive for accuracy and clarity in their work, always aspiring to conjure up images that convey the desired meanings of original texts no matter the idiomatic and cultural boundaries. Translation, particularly in our global society, is ubiquitous and pervades all strata of society where language is used, and within the scope of this short essay, it would be impossible to cover every problem faced by translators. Therefore, this essay aims to outline the problems faced by translators in their attempts to be precise and exact, yet not overly clinical: from preserving neutrality and translating the ‘untranslatable’ in literary works and the arts to issues like diplomacy and cultural barriers.

Translators face huge challenges in the arts: music, film and literature all require translators to not only convey a distinct meaning, but also preserve the creator’s style. This is particularly striking in the translation of opera libretti, where translators have to make the meaning concise enough that the audience is not distracted by a long, florid translation and can focus on the on-stage performance. Many libretti translators apply the ‘skopos’ theory,<sup>5</sup> in which translation is driven by a purpose and the original text almost functions as a brief on which the interpreter can develop their opinions, rather than having to provide a word for word translation. This can often mean that any metrical or lexical exuberance such as rhymes and alliteration is ‘lost to purpose’<sup>6</sup> and content is given total priority. Ożarowska cites an example from ‘Die Zauberflöte’ (The Magic Flute) by Mozart, where the original German libretto is full of alliteration and has a clear alternate rhyme scheme, but in a 2003 performance at the Royal Opera House, this was sacrificed for lucidity, resulting in an almost comically functional English translation.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, translators who lose the elegant manipulation of syntax achieved by the original librettist face criticism for their utilitarian

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<sup>1</sup> Garate, A. M. (no date)

<sup>2</sup> Davie, M. (2012)

<sup>3</sup> Ledehendler, L. (2009)

<sup>4</sup> Allen, E. and Bernofsky, S. (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Trisnawati, I. K. (2014)

<sup>6</sup> Desblache, L. (2009)

<sup>7</sup> Ożarowska, A. (2017)

approach, with their work being described as 'just informative'.<sup>8</sup> The implication that translators should not lose any of the original style of the text is arguably unfair: for the majority of the audience, the action on stage takes precedence over surtitles, and it seems harsh to expect a translation that is exact in both a lexical and a factual way, that conveys the plot.

However, there is a further challenge for translators of song, in that their translation must meet the metrical demands of the original. Scansion is paramount in music due to the nature of song: the use of words and melody together to create ambience and add layers of meaning. In his thesis, Verseveldt describes the 'musico-centrism' of songs: there is often more emphasis placed on the music than the lyrics.<sup>9</sup> This means translators have to obey the music in a sense, complying to harmonic and rhythmic needs of the original melody. The verbal and nonverbal messages have to be transmitted concurrently, meaning that the words have a dual purpose both to explicitly state and implicitly suggest a message.<sup>10</sup> Many prominent translators have offered guidelines explaining how to translate songs, in order to help translators with the challenging task. Low states that there are four main elements to consider when translating lyrics, namely sense, naturalness, rhythm and singability.<sup>11</sup> He stipulates that many translators focus too heavily on rhythm and rhyme, sacrificing all the other elements in the process. This can be heavily damaging to the overall impression of the song, resulting in a somewhat disjunct product, but also makes the task of translating a song much more challenging. When there is no set metre or scansion with which the translator can comply, they have to rely more heavily on the implicit and explicit messages in the original text, sometimes leading to convoluted or unclear translations which try too hard to convey multiple interpretations.

Translators in literature face innumerable challenges simply because language is polysemic: one word can have multiple meanings.<sup>12</sup> This element of semantics is often exploited by authors, who use wordplay and imagery to imply complex layers of meaning, but for translators this can pose issues. Phrases which are open to interpretation, without direct, clear meanings often have exegetical complications<sup>13</sup> because the translator has to strike a balance between clarity and subtlety. In fact, the difficulties involved in translating metaphors are so numerous that the phenomenon has been dubbed 'untranslatability'<sup>14</sup> which stems from the fact that the aim of a metaphor is to be indirect. Translators are obliged to convey meaning in a way that is not so blatantly stated that it ruins metaphorical significance, but that remains clear and true to the original message. Due to the complex nature of metaphors, translators have to keep in mind the clarity of what they are translating. In one metaphor, there are multiple unknown quantities, and various comparisons being made, therefore the translation has to explicitly state some of the parts of the metaphor to aid understanding.<sup>15</sup> As well as this, the translator has to ensure that the translated text has its own stylistic grace and merit. Despite having multiple strategies to deal with translating

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<sup>8</sup> Snell-Hornby, M. (2007)

<sup>9</sup> Verseveldt, V. S. (2006-7)

<sup>10</sup> Low, P. (The Pentathlon Approach) (2008)

<sup>11</sup> Low, P. (Translating songs that rhyme) (2008)

<sup>12</sup> Vicente, A. and Falkum, I. L. (2017)

<sup>13</sup> Khan, G. (2017)

<sup>14</sup> Mohammed, Q. A. (2007)

<sup>15</sup> Crofts, M. (1998)

metaphors, for instance leaving the metaphor entirely in a literal sense, or exploiting cultural similarities to try to convey the same meaning through idiomatic expressions, many translators face problems with misinterpretation or lack of loyalty to the original text.

Another issue that is increasingly relevant for translators is the problem of neutrality within translation. The Oxford English Dictionary defines neutrality as “an absence of decided views, expression or strong feeling”<sup>16</sup>, and the difficulties connected to maintaining ambivalence are only amplified in high risk situations, like conflict zones, where translation is critical and has widespread consequences if not done correctly. The American Translators Association states that translation’s role is to “convey meaning between people and cultures faithfully, accurately, and impartially”<sup>17</sup>, and the unequivocal stipulation that translation should be impartial highlights how crucial neutrality is for translators and interpreters. Although some interpreters are driven by ulterior motives and do betray accuracy of translation and neutrality to convey their preferred view, lots of interpreters in war zones face unreasonable social stigma because of the nature of their job. Translators are, in a sense, perpetually in a liminal space, and they have huge power to be ‘traitorous’ and betray the meaning of the subject matter they are translating. In his essay about the translator as a performer, Kahane describes how interpreters are perceived as ‘other’; because they are not always understood by everyone around them, they are distrusted and frequently seen as an imposter.<sup>18</sup> This uncertainty is often exploited, and despite efforts to build relationships between enemies through interpreters, there will always be a heavy reliance on loyalty. Both the translators and those whose words are being translated have to have complete mutual trust and confidence, and when this relationship falls down there can be shocking consequences. One report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees states that, on average, an interpreter is killed every 36 hours,<sup>19</sup> a statistic that exemplifies human nature’s intrinsic fear and hatred of what it does not understand. This xenophobia is also shown in language itself: the word ‘xenophobia’ is derived from the Greek word ‘xenos’, meaning both strange and foreign, linking the two words on a lexical level.<sup>20</sup> However, the role of a translator is crucial, and it seems that, no matter how hard interpreters try to preserve meaning, in high pressure scenarios like conflict zones, those who cannot understand and do not trust their translators will always be suspicious, often with damaging results.

Another scenario where translators face problems is the medical sector. While they do not face the imminent physical dangers associated with conflict zones, the decisions they make and their word choices can have large impacts simply because of the precision of medicine. One example of this can be found in Welles’ essay ‘Found in translation’<sup>21</sup>, a discussion of different ways to translate the ‘untranslatable’ and how to maintain accuracy without sacrificing neutrality. She makes a compelling argument about different extents of bilingualism: fluency in a language is vastly different to understanding all the cultural nuances of a country, and this is clear in an example she cites involving health surveys. Measures of risk perception in English often include words like ‘probably’ and ‘possibly’, but

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<sup>16</sup> Oxford English Dictionary (no date)

<sup>17</sup> American Translators Association (2010)

<sup>18</sup> Kahane, E. (2016)

<sup>19</sup> Estopace, E. (2018)

<sup>20</sup> Oxford Standard English Dictionary (2004)

<sup>21</sup> Welles, R. F. (2016)

the Spanish cognate 'probablemente' conveys less certainty than 'probably' does in English. While this difference seems inconsequential to an English speaker who merely sees the words as cognates and assumes they mean the same thing, in a medical setting it is crucial that risk perception is not misinterpreted, for emotional and human reasons as well as legally. It is widely considered that it is left to the discretion of the translator to decide how literal or figurative their translation should be<sup>22</sup>, but in settings like medicine and healthcare, where precision is paramount, many translators tend to err on the side of caution and be more literal to avoid legal trouble. They are arguably less like the traitors of the expression 'traduttore traditore' with their pursuit of total clarity, even if they are forced to forego elegance and subtlety. Neutrality is less of a problem for these translators who avoid interpretation and personal response through the impersonality of the texts they are translating. Translation of the 'untranslatable' is, and always will be challenging, but there is a spectrum of ways to deal with maintaining neutrality and clarity, varying depending on the situation and subject matter.

Finally, another contemporary issue in today's turbulent political climate is the problem of diplomatic translation. The translators are required to maintain a 'terse' style, avoiding words like 'please'.<sup>23</sup> Mazza, a diplomatic translator, embodied this point in a recent interview where he said the aim was not to be 'kind', but to give 'kindly consideration'.<sup>24</sup> These strict guidelines leave translators with both a very rigid structure, but also great pressure to avoid evoking a sense of double standards: they are obliged to maintain neutrality by treating all their clients with political evenhandedness. Should they present an overly brusque or agreeable character, there could be widespread political implications. Diplomatic translators are also in the unique position that they have to present a lexical character through their translations; their employer might have a certain rhetorical foible that is critical to expressing their views, and this can be challenging to present credibly. They also have to maintain a broad knowledge of the politics and current affairs of multiple countries, as well as the socio-economic status of their own country.<sup>25</sup> The method of remaining neutral while translating subject matter of immediate significance is known as 'political equivalence'.<sup>26</sup> However, it is not only political equivalence that can be challenging to maintain: simple mistakes can have amplified consequences, particularly because of the lack of trust between interpreters discussed earlier in this essay. In today's society, so much emphasis is placed on immediacy and instantaneous results that accuracy is sometimes sacrificed: Anna Miles, an experienced translator, described her own mistakes in an interview for BBC<sup>27</sup> and this demonstrates that even the most adept interpreters are still subject to human error. One example of mis-translation having an extreme impact was during World War 2, when the US dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese response when asked if they would surrender was 'Mokusatsu', translated as 'not worthy of comment'. As well as this, the word can also be translated as 'no comment', implying that Japanese leaders needed more time to consider their decision.<sup>28</sup> This potential mistranslation resulted in over

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<sup>22</sup> Chen, Q. (2010)

<sup>23</sup> Berdy, M. A. (2011)

<sup>24</sup> Mazza, J. P. (2011)

<sup>25</sup> Luque, A. F. (1999)

<sup>26</sup> Mingxing, Y. (2012)

<sup>27</sup> Watts, G. (2014)

<sup>28</sup> Kroulek, A. (2015)

200,000 deaths<sup>29</sup>, and exemplifies the pressure on translators. Even one word can have global consequences, and it seems surprising that, despite this, translators in a diplomatic setting still face intense pressure to translate and listen simultaneously. Diplomatic translation is challenging, with the aim to be “neutral, unbiased and even *invisible*”<sup>30</sup>, and this is arguably something that even the best interpreters can only aspire to. Unlike translating literature or medical journals, diplomatic translators cannot take time to reconsider phrasing and wording; they are expected to act instantaneously, and this is one of the greatest hurdles of interpretation in a society ruled by “a culture of immediacy”.<sup>31</sup>

To conclude, translators face a plethora of issues in their work today. As language pervades every branch of society, so must translation. From the precision and accuracy of medicine and diplomacy to the depth and elegance of music and metaphors, interpreters have to find new ways to convey meaning without losing the original style and sense of text, song or speech. Translators can access many sets of rules and guidelines to aid their work, but ultimately it is the translator’s judgement that drives them. The hazards they face are multifaceted: losing neutrality and accuracy, sacrificing the elegance of the original work, or even causing humanitarian problems in the cases of conflict zones, medicine and diplomacy. It will always be challenging to translate anything, and as Goethe puts it, “the work is and will always be one of the weightiest and worthiest undertakings in the general concerns of the world.”<sup>32</sup> Criticising translators seems hypocritical: it is the very nature of their human expression that makes them superior to the digital translation software that is increasingly prevalent in today’s society, and they mean that today’s society is able to include a diverse array of languages and idiomatic cultures.

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<sup>29</sup> Children of the Atomic Bomb (2007)

<sup>30</sup> Buri, M. R. (2015)

<sup>31</sup> Romero, L. E. (2015)

<sup>32</sup> Goethe, J. W., Sfetcu, N. (2015)

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