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## Hypertext and Translation

With advances in computing the new hypermedia environment has enabled its users to call up information on the Internet, access virtual libraries via the World Wide Web, and disseminate texts from a home computer connected by modem to any other computer terminal. Given the immediacy of accessing, retrieving and publishing materials globally, the current transition from print to electronic technology signals a period of cultural change analogous to that brought about by the Gutenberg revolution. Computers are not only transforming the ways in which communication takes place in the latter part of the twentieth century, but are also beginning to alter the ways in which research and teaching is conducted in the Humanities. Seen from the point of view of Translation Studies, it should be acknowledged that whilst American English, as the dominant language of computing, has reduced the need for translation in terms of global communication, computer and CD technology are also, however, affording possibilities for practicing and studying translation, as well as thinking about it, that have only just begun to be realized.

The term 'hypertext' was first used by Theodor H. Nelson in the 1960s to highlight the new possibilities afforded by electronic text. Unlike text published in book form, hypertexts are virtual texts, which can be cross-referenced and linked to any number of other texts. This allows users to navigate their own pathways through a given text or corpus of material, to create networks with other related texts or images, each link leading to another, ad infinitum. Users are thus given increasing control as to what they read and how they read; and although they cannot change the texts produced by another person, they can interactively engage with, assemble and re-write those texts, which they download and save onto their own hard disk. Whilst this is transforming both our concept of what a text is, and our experience of reading and writing, it is also affecting existent conventions of reading, writing, translating and editing. Here, a text is no longer a unified entity with clearly identifiable borders, but an open network in Roland Barthes' or Umberto Eco's sense; nor is the hypertext bound by the strictures of a single or clear reading text, as is the case in current practices of textual editing, requiring a linear, sequential mode of reading; but, by contrast, what an open hypertextual environment can display, is a text's entire history of production and transmission. The vantage point for translation is that multivariant versions can be called up simultaneously, compared, annotated, and therefore also reworked.

So far, the most important projects that have used computer technology to enable the comparison between different textual variants of the same foreign text are: Paul D. Kahn's *Chinese Literature* web, which allows access to the different versions of Tu Fu's poetry, including the Chinese text, transcriptions, varying translations, other reference and contextual material; and the hypertext system developed by a team at Dallas Theological Seminary, *CD Word: The Interactive Bible Library*, which stores different versions of the Bible together with the Greek texts, dictionaries and commentaries. Both systems are designed as an aid to the scholar giving comprehensive access to materials that would otherwise remain scattered in libraries across the globe, and an aid to students facilitating ready access to this material. Since hypertexts allow users to sift through various versions as well as requiring them to choose which path to follow through these texts, they positively encourage users to take on an active role in the process of meaning production,

to produce a translation of their own from the texts on the screen. As such, hypertexts foster collaborative writing, blurring the very distinction between writer, reader and translator, precisely because at each turn that the user makes a choice, linking one version to another, annotating this or that, the user is adding his or her own 'versioning'.

Hypertexts are also a visual reminder of the impossibility of putting a stop to the proliferation of meaning; which is to say, the quest to unlock the text's definitive meaning and transfer the original intact to produce an equivalent target text, is rendered untenable with the simultaneous presence of a whole series of differently translated versions of ostensibly the "same" source text. Equally, the virtual presence of all the writers, be it the foreign author, the translators, editors and commentators, undermines the notion of a univocal authorial voice, which might be decoded and then reproduced faithfully by the translator. As such, hypertexts materially embody many of the theories proffered by postmodern thinkers, who have questioned the supremacy of notions such as authorship, originality or uniqueness, and who have sought to deconstruct the hierarchical relations which valorize uniqueness over variation, original over translation, author over reader. In arguing that a text is always an intertext, that is, a trace of other texts, itself a translation of other texts and fragments of language, postmodernists have unthought and unhinged the conceptual difference between original and translation, between what is deemed primary and unique, and what is deemed secondary and second-rate. In practicing many of these theoretical tenets, the multi-user format of hypertexts announces a new way then, not only of reading, writing and translating, but also of studying and researching texts, literatures and translations.

**Karin Littau 1997**

### **Further Reading**

Landow, George P., *Hypertext. The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992

Laviosa-Braithwaite, Sara, 'Computers and Translators', in *The European English Messenger*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1996): 39-41

Littau, Karin, 'Translation in the Age of Postmodern Production: From Text to Intertext to Hypertext', in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Special Issue on 'Translation', edited by Ian Higgins, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1 (1997): 81-96