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Translation Disease: Proximity Gone Awry

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*A translation must preserve the sense of its original, and it is not hard to imagine, or find, instances of texts claiming to be translations of such and such a work, but bearing so little resemblance to the original, preserving so little of the sense of the original as to be 'no translation at all.' But there is no imaginable way of saying precisely how much of the sense of the original must be preserved, for a putative translation really to **be** a translation of some text.*

—Patrick Wilson, *Two Kinds of Power*, 1968. p. 10

In our work on proximity, we looked to translation as one manner of achieving some degree of proximity between authors and recipients at some cultural or temporal distance from one another (Bonnici & O'Connor, 2022). We assert that when a translation does not adequately present the “sense of the original” to some recipient there is a dis-ease.

We present here considerations of three trans medial translations that have caused dis-ease. We look at novel to film, poem to cantata, and novel to film to television series translations to examine various strains of dis-ease. Upon early consideration, we realized Wilson’s call for a “turn to the functional” provides a means of determining whether a translation is “inadequate” – has gone awry. We then fit the concept of translation into our model of proximity as a way to consider whether a “putative translation really [is] a translation of some text.” Ultimately, we argue that one person’s disease may be another’s cure.

Thoughts on some translations

Laurie Bonnici: In high school I gravitated toward modern foreign languages. A natural polyglot, I voraciously absorbed Spanish, French, and German – speaking, reading, and writing. As a result, I was awarded a study abroad experience in Mexico. Such an educational experience would afford understanding beyond the literalness of language – it should bring a greater completeness of understanding that lingers between without evident connection.

When we think of the word ‘translation’ many a thought is drawn to the work of interpreting content of one language into another – Spanish to English, English to French, Greek to German, etc. Famous translations include:

- The Bible, which has been translated into 450 languages from its original Hebrew text
- Indian Sutras, translated by Buddhists for Chinese audiences
- The Qur’an, translated from Arabic into 100 different languages

- Treaty of Kadesh, a peace agreement concurrently written by Egyptians and Hittites
- Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," translated from American English into French

Each of these famous works has been interpreted through various translation types. Twain's translation was playful, engaging in back-translation. This process used the French version as the source material to make a translation to English. The Treaty of Kadesh was a legal translation which evaded a literal approach. Although co-scripted, the Egyptian version was blunt while the Hittite was evasive of wording. While the Qur'an is considered sacred and should not be violated, it was believed that it should never be translated. However, concern for understanding the Islamic belief was important and drove translation into languages for understanding across the globe. Translated versions of the Qur'an are described as interpretations of the original. The Sutras, similar to the Qur'an are categorized as localization translation efforts where interpretation allows for fit with a particular culture, in this case Chinese culture which was attractive to monk countrymen. Each of these translations is a shift from one language to another. But even more so, they are shifts in values and understanding from one culture to another to increase chances of understanding and adoption – what we refer to as assimilating proximity.

It is to be assumed, if not wholly expected, that translation from one language to another will result in marked changes in meaning for the reader. But what of translations within language but between formats? Here we specifically consider book to screen translations – commonly referred to as adaptations. Our considerations of these translations specifically are around the concept of stickiness as it relates to the assimilation of proximity.

My study abroad experience afforded me fluency in the Spanish language. No longer did I need to rely on literal translations from English to Spanish to navigate conversations and other day-to-day living in Mexico. However, it wasn't until my return States side that I realized how deeply a language impacts the psychological and cultural components of our being. Just months after my return I was speaking about the loss of a dear friend to cancer. Certainly, words and phrases such as sadness, deep loss, emptiness were appropriate. But there was a lingering nagging at my consciousness to use language to convey a sentiment I was experiencing. The only word I could think of was a word in Spanish, 'ajeno.' We can use English to describe the word – external or unconnected, to name a couple. But these fail to convey a sentiment – one that does not exist in the American culture.

Je ne sais quoi

It is this failure to convey sentiment – to build a bridge of understanding between humans who share the same language that lingers from interpretations of book to screen adaptations. We offer as example a recently authored book – best seller turned to big screen – *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens (Newman, 2022; Owens, 2018).

My introduction to the book was through a close network of friends who frequently discuss and share what they read. Owen's book was one of many, but one that strongly impacted our conversations around our readings. Although all



Composite by O'Connor

concurred that the book conjured up beautiful imagery, there were differences in evaluation of narrative. Our differences held deep conviction of difference. Some of us felt the book was consistent in tone throughout the novel while others detected a nearly indistinct change in tone – as if it were “a bit sophomoric.”

With respect, these differences were embraced as one of our group was touched by the sexual violence due to a personal experience. It was not until the recent debut of the movie that we revisited the book and our analyses. We all agreed that the imagery was well displayed in the movie, some small differences in translation from book to movie existed – though not to distraction. For the most part, characters translated in demeanor and appearance. Even the location seemed true to the book (despite being filmed in Louisiana, not North Carolina where the story is set). Our discussion turned to the lingering difference among us. The question was posed – did those who experienced a change in tone in the book experience this in the movie? Interestingly there was a unanimous feeling that it went undetected in the movie. Yet this was not to the distraction of the viewers when considering the overall story translation from book to screen. Yet conviction remained that it was evident in the book.

Our query turned to how was this detected by some readers but not others in our group? One reader, who did not detect the shift in tone, stated they felt that the author must have experienced sexual trauma. Further exploration revealed that imagery in the movie of sexual misconduct was so real it “took their breath away.” Only someone with proximity of experience could be impacted so deeply – so

profoundly. It was this realization that turned our attention back to the difference in interpretation of prose. Assumptions were that the difference in tone was so subtle that it went undetected by some. Our discussion revealed that those in the group who had been victim to sexual abuse did not detect the shift in prose while those fortunate to be free of such experience identified the change when reading the book.

We use “disease” in its older sense of “lack of physical comfort, tranquility, state of mind” to describe reactions of original authors and reactions of readers/ viewers/ listeners of translations. We witness two distinct disease reactions to the book. Those who detected the shift in narrative experienced disease with the reading experience. A few described the shift as an indicator that the author could have ended the book sooner. Content within the shift seemed unnecessary or distracting. Meanwhile, those who had suffered sexual abuse in real life, who read the book unaware of the shift in tone, experienced increased feelings of disease around content – shared experience correlated with post-traumatic response.

Through this shared experience of adaptation, we see vestiges of interpretation and localization translation. The same content was experienced differently across readers (interpretation). Lived experiences afforded proximity to content (localization translation). However, without the lived experience, the sentiment failed to translate to some readers. In neither experience does this impact understanding of the story. Among us there remained an unspoken, untranslated (mis)-understanding. Those who experienced sexual trauma which resulted in undetected shift in prose could not convey the experience to those without lived sexual trauma. There were no words to translate the feeling, the sentiment, the emotion. We can label a strand of the web as shared lived experience – direct experience with sexual trauma. This conveys a difference in interpretation. But we cannot translate the sentiment. For some, the strand is left un navigated – does not stick. We are left with a ‘je ne sais quoi’ in plotting the web of proximity.

Brian O’Connor: As an undergraduate student of Greek and Latin literature, I became quite taken with the work of Gaius Valerius Catullus (c. 84 – c. 54 BCE). Why so? His poetry was the antithesis of the heroic tradition, short pieces of a few lines or a few pages rather than, say, the 12,000 lines of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The voice is often first person and the topics personal rather than great tales of heroes and gods. It is, perhaps, of no small interest that Catullus was deeply influenced by Callimachus (Καλλίμαχος), the polymath at the Museum & Library of Alexandria who authored the Pinakes – a catalogue of all the poetry and prose within the Library. Callimachus was, himself, a highly influential poet.

One of my favorite poems is generally referred to as *Catullus 85*, the 85th poem of the 116 known works by the poet. An elegiac couplet, its entirety is but two lines. The premise that the poet has just been dumped by a woman by whom he had been enchanted and now was beginning to desire in a more lasting relationship.

Odi et amo. Quare id faciam fortasse requires
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior. (Catullus & Merrill, 1966)

In English it is rendered something like this:

I hate and love. How can I do this you might ask.
I don't know, but I feel it happening and I am torn apart.

There are some intriguing issues around the translation from Latin to English. At the time of Catullus, “amo” had more the sense of “fuck” today and it is in Catullus that we see the beginning of a shift to “love” in today’s sense, but those two senses are not yet distinct. Similarly, there is considerable discussion over “excrucior” – does it mean something like crucify, general suffering, or being torn apart by teams of horse? Intriguing as such matters of word-for-word translation are, it is another form of translation that gave me dis-ease in 1965 and to this day. We cannot have a conversation with Catullus for an author’s opinion, though we can do scholarly examinations and exegeses.

For our purposes it is the structure of the poem that matters. How does one translate the structure? *Catullus 85* has been noted for some centuries for its structure as much as for its words, as one might expect of a poem. The poet has compressed the entangled, wrenching emotions of lost love in 14 words. When spoken in Latin, the poem has elisions that join, importantly, two nouns at the opening and two verbs at the end. Hate and love are literally one, as are feel and torn apart.

Odi **et** amo. Quare **id** faciam fortasse requires
Nescio, sed fieri sentio **et** excrucior.

The poem is first person, brief – about 11 seconds – and the elisions (highlighted in yellow) tangle the poet’s feelings together. An audio recording of the poem is available at the 2 minute, 35 second mark in classicist Christopher Francese’s discussion of *Catullus 85* (Francese, n.d.).

Carl Orff set *Catullus 85* within his cantata *Catulli Carmina*, composed 1940–1943. His is a translation of format, of medium – the words remain: Odi et amo. Quare id faciam fortasse requires. Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior. Set to music and

performed by a group result in a piece quite different though the words remain the same. The words “Odi et amo” are pronounced distinctly and discreetly, no elision. The words are repeated. First, Odi, odi odi; then Odi et a a a amo; then all three words again. These are sung by multiple voices. In most recordings the “Odi et amo” portion occupies about 24 seconds – more than twice the length of the entire poem spoken. The Catullus 85 portion of the cantata generally occupies about 78 seconds of the cantata – seven times the spoken version.

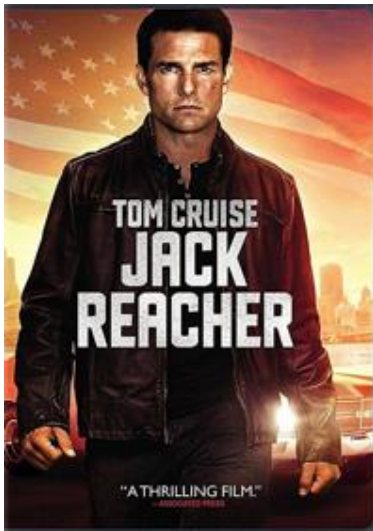
Orff changed the structure. One might ask what is the source of dis-ease? Catullus and the neoteric poets, in the school of Callimachus and the tradition of Sappho, specifically rejected the epic traditions, the tales of heroes and gods told at great length. The multiple voices and orchestra of the cantata could be seen as more of the epic approach. Yet, audiences have liked the work and recordings are abundant. What was dis-ease to my sense of Catullus’s work, was not dis-ease to many modern listeners. (Orff, n.d.)

We might ask “proximity to what?” For the young classicist, the jewel-like encapsulation so much emotion in 14 words seemed extraordinary – the structure mattered. Yet, for concert-goers, an unaccompanied solo speaker presenting the same 14 words would not have fit the idea of a cantata – they would likely have felt dis-eased, especially if they did not understand Latin.

How big is Jack Reacher

We turn to a modern-day triangular translation issue – filmic translations of Lee Child’s Jack Reacher novels. The combined sales of all the titles in the series about a retired military police investigator has passed 100 million copies. Motion pictures followed.

Tom Cruise, popular action-adventure actor portrayed Reacher in two feature films with gross receipts approaching half a billion dollars. Amazon Prime produced an eight-episode series based on the first Child novel, that was ranked number two by Nielson in the category of streamed series. Tom Cruise was replaced by Alan Ritchson for the series.



What does the original author think of the translations?

Both filmic translations of Jack Reacher were popular and both even have cameo appearances by Lee Child. One controversial aspect of the translations makes them of interest here – how big Jack Reacher is. In the novel he is described as about 6 feet 5 inches tall and very broad. Tom Cruise is 5 feet 7 inches tall. Many who had read the novels were upset with the size difference. In this instance we have comments from the author about the two filmic translations. Child had commented favorably on Cruise's portrayal of Reacher, noting that the large size of the character on the page was a "metaphor for an unstoppable force" and that few are better playing "unstoppable steely determination" than Cruise (Shoard, 2011).

However, Child eventually agreed with those who objected to Cruise because of his size:

"I really enjoyed working with Cruise. He's a really, really nice guy. We had a lot of fun. But ultimately the readers are right. The size of Reacher is really, really important and it's a big component of who he is...So what I've decided to do is – there won't be any more movies with Tom Cruise. Instead, we're going to take it to Netflix or something like that. Long-form streaming television, with a completely new actor. We're rebooting and starting over and we're going to try and find the perfect guy. (Andreeva & Hipes, 2018)

How might we think about translation?

It is worthy of note that “translation” is derived from the same verb as “transfer” and both have the sense of “moving a thing from one place to another, change of position, transfer of property or rights from one person to another, transferred or figurative use of a word, transfer of ideas from one context to another, action of translating from one language to another.” (OED)

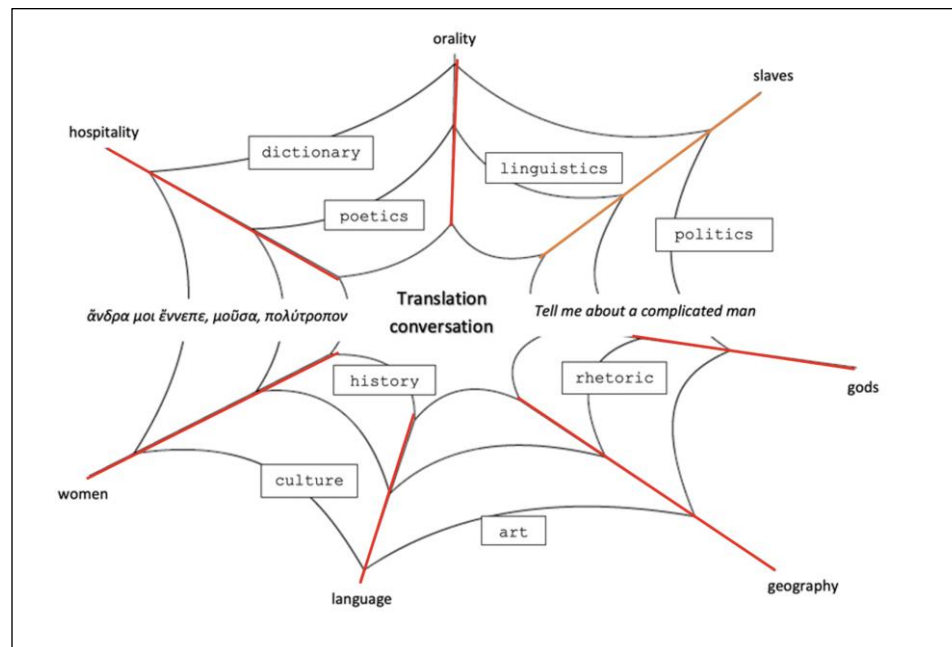
Translation is a form of representation. As such, some things are highlighted and some things are left out. If this were not the case, the translation would simply be another instance of the original. As Marr notes, the user of a representation can only make use of it if they know the coding system – the rules for what is selected and how it is coded.

Sterling and Scott provide insight into the translation process in the preface to their rendition of *The Republic* by Plato: “Translation can never reproduce the original. Variances in vocabulary, sentence structure, word order, idiom, and cultural context are ...the principal reasons why translation must be a matter of conversation and not mere copying.” (Plato, 1996)

The “matter of conversation” can be seen as a manifold construct. A translator converses with the circumstances of the authoring of the original message, and with the circumstances of the likely audience. Similarly, each individual engaging with the translation message converses with the message through their own capabilities and needs.

Translation web of proximity

In our work on proximity, we developed a web of proximity for Emily Wilson’s translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* to illustrate the translator’s conversations with the earlier text and its environment and the future readers and their environment (Homer, 2018). In this particular web, the translator is central to the translation, working to bring attributes of an earlier work into alignment with attributes of a contemporary audience. The translator cannot know all the attributes of either the original author or all members of the contemporary audience; however, with some research they can know many of the attributes and they can add to the conversation by stating their assumptions and practices. For example, Emily Wilson embeds her translation of the *Odyssey* within 80 pages of discussion of her research on the cultural and linguistic foundations of the text and her efforts to align her translation with the abilities and assumptions of her intended audience, along with maps and a glossary.



Proximity Web

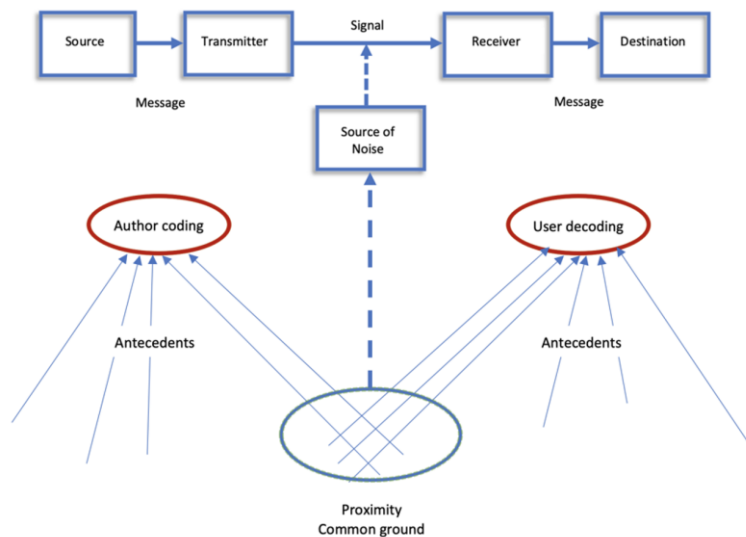
Situational fitness of translation

Our examples of differing reactions to the same message, the same putative translation, bring us to Shannon and Wilson. The text claiming to be a translation is a message. Shannon (1948) asserts that the message does not in and of itself contain meaning; an author generates a message within a certain coding system, making assumptions about the decoding abilities of an audience. The message carries only those coded marks. The recipient of the message engages with the codes and derives what they are able to, desire to from those codes.

Wilson's notions of situational relevance and accessibility are useful companions to Shannon here. Why someone engages with a message and the degree to which a message is linguistically accessible (here meaning whatever coding system), conceptually accessible, and critically accessible have significant bearing on the functionality, the meaning for the user (Wilson, 1977).

Translation is a channel between a message using one representation coding system and a user not familiar (perhaps totally unfamiliar or merely not so facile as desired.) The channel carries representations of the radials and connecting arcs.

We overlaid our construct of proximity onto the typical graphical representation of Shannon’s model of communication to represent the distinction between message and meaning, as well as Wilson’s notion of functionality depending on accessibility. Here we assert that the degree of overlap between an author’s coding system and all the antecedents to the message and the decoding abilities of each user and all the antecedents to the engagement with the document is the inverse of the noise in the system. The greater the overlap, the greater the functionality of the message. Antecedents likely include language, style, coding / decoding ability. Also likely is purpose of the original author, the translator, and the individual recipient: motivation, articulation education, felicitation (Pratt, 1998).



Shannon, Wilson, proximity overlay

User reactions and putative translations

Given these constructs – the dichotomy of good / bad translation evaporates, with the possible exception of Wilson’s “...instances of texts claiming to be translations of such and such a work, but bearing so little resemblance to the original, preserving so little of the sense of the original as to be ‘no translation at all’” (Wilson, 1968). The situational functionality is the measure. The greater the proximity, the greater the likelihood of functionality and the lower the likelihood of disease.

Taking inspiration from spider webs led us to thinking of the connections between user attributes and text / author / translator attributes in terms of “stickiness.” What combinations stick well enough for a user to be satisfied with a text; or, in a case

such as Tom Cruise as Reacher, so stuck on an antecedent attribute as to reject a connection that might otherwise be acceptable. Stickiness is essentially the intersection of antecedents impacting / facilitating decoding and functionality of a message – the functional antecedent dance partners.

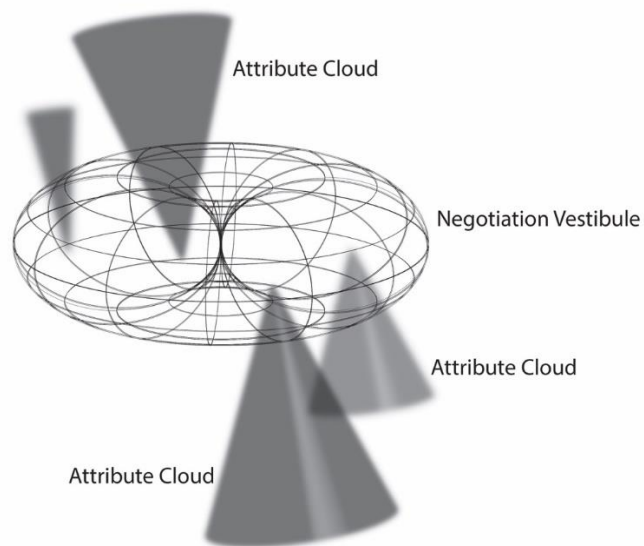
We can map user reactions to messages and to messages that translate other messages. As to whether we can exactly predict which translations will work for each and every user we must, at least for now, agree with Wilson that “there is no imaginable way of saying precisely how much of the sense of the original must be preserved, for a putative translation really to **be** a translation of some text.”

Looking ahead

Agreeing with Sterling and Scott (Plato, 1996) about conversation being a crucial concept in translation – and we would argue, in any information seeking setting – we have returned to an earlier representation of our proximity construct. Here we have represented as a vestibule, the commons on which one might stroll about seeking connections with others who might be suitable partners in the dance of functional antecedents.

We imagine the vestibule as not only a space in which to wander about randomly, though that can sometimes be a good idea – browsing. Rather it is a space with suggested paths, signposts, tracking, dynamic restructuring, filtering, etc. Many aspects of such a vestibule exist already, of course – cataloguing, hashtags, aggregated reviews, and suggestions based on previous viewing are but a few. The vestibule is a setting for the conversation of translation – a place for the multiple conversations, the engagement of multiple sets of antecedents. It is the purposes and coding / decoding abilities of the “original author,” the “translation author,” and each user (“personal re-author”) to negotiate connections of attributes.

We see the negotiation vestibule similar to an airport terminal. It’s not a destination. Rather it is a transitional space between where one once was and where one is headed – even when we might not know where that is. A place where one encounters unknowns to solve needs – grabbing a meal, catching a nap, or chatting with a stranger. It is a waypoint in the pathway to our destination. We see the negotiation vestibule as a set of possible paths offering a new set of experiences of which we may have little previous knowledge, some familiarity, or no knowledge at all. A source of connections to ease dis-ease.



A setting for the conversation of translation

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