

Hypertext and translation

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Abstract

In the language of informatics the hypertext is computer writing organized in non-linear fashion. In this paper our focus is on the hypertext as the reading-text in a strong sense, that is, as privileging the reader. Here reading does not develop in a single sense, through which the author with his authority obliges the reader to follow the order of the text as a function of author intention, thereby stopping the reader from having his own space and moving as a function of what the text suggests to him. The hypertext is free from its author. What counts is the text. In the hypertext associational logic takes the place of deductive logic. The hypertext is predominantly dialogic. It operates a sort of Copernican revolution as it shifts the centre from the author to the reader, eliciting a reading-writing rather than a reading-fruition process. The hypothesis we intend to verify is whether or not the hypertext may become a method for translation. Taking the hypertext as our starting point we shall delineate a methodics with important implications for translative practice.

In the language of informatics the “hypertext” is writing with computers, writing which is organized in non-linear fashion. This kind of writing resorts to neither a single type of sign nor system of signs. The hypertext offers a *system* or *methodics* for empowering a *non-linear writing-reading process* through computers. This implies the possibility of “pasting” pieces of a text into a “network” and shifting freely, “surfing” through the net, choosing a trajectory from the multiple alternatives a hypertext offers. A hypertext can be understood metonymically as a text that responds to this type of methodics or system. In what follows we shall consider the advantages of using the hypertext as a paradigm for a theory of interlinguistic translation.

The hypertext is a reading-text in a strong sense, in other words, it privileges the reader insofar as it allows him to choose from different reading trajectories. In this context reading does not develop in a linear sense, in a single sense, the “right sense.” In the case of linear reading, the author obliges the reader to move according to the order of exposition and as a function of author intention. Consequently, the reader is stopped from cultivating his own space and moving freely as a function of what reading provokes in him in terms of an uninterrupted flow of ideas, stimuli and associations. In hypertexts, dialogue between interpretant signs and interpreted signs – the place where meaning and sense are formed – concerns the text directly. The author is of secondary importance. But the issue at stake is to understand what the text says and not what the author intended it to say.

The author is not always aware of the interpretants he puts into his own discourse. He also provides interpretants *unintentionally*: interpretants which the reader identifies and which belong to interpreter discourse. However, their traces are present in the author’s discourse. There are no net lines of demarcation between the intentional and the unintentional, between the fortuitous and what was preestablished

by interpretants present in author discourse. Nor is there a net line of demarcation between interpretants offered by the author and those offered by the interpreter.

While in the process of studying “anagrams,” Saussure was seized by the fear that what he traced in the texts he was analyzing was nothing more than what he had read into them himself. Anagrams: something fortuitous or a rule effectively followed by the author? According to Starobinski, Saussure made the mistake of netly distinguishing between the “effect of chance” and “conscious procedure.” Starobinski believed that both chance and consciousness should be put aside and that the anagram should be viewed as an aspect of the word process – which is neither purely fortuitous nor fully conscious (cf. Starobinski 1971: 154).

Texts that break through the boundaries of their own time and flourish beyond contemporaneity, in the “great time,” as understood by Bakhtin (1970), develop new meanings and senses.

We can say that neither Shakespeare himself nor his contemporaries knew that “great Shakespeare” whom we know now. ... But do we then attribute to Shakespeare’s works something that was not there, do we modernize and distort them? Modernization and distortion, of course, have existed and will continue to exist. But that is not the reason why Shakespeare has grown. He has grown because of that which actually has been and continues to be found in his works, but which neither he himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive and evaluate in the context of the culture of their epoch.

Semantic phenomena can exist in concealed form, potentially, and be revealed only in semantic cultural contexts of subsequent epochs that are favorable for such disclosure. (Bakhtin 1986: 4)

Text materiality is not only achieved with respect to the interpreter. Similarly to all communicative processes, the text emerges as semiotic materiality not only in the sense that it resists the interpreter, is autonomous from the latter, has its own signification that does not depend on the interpreter and may even escape him: the text has its own materiality, objectivity, independence, a capacity for resistance and self-signification *with respect to the author as well*. Language (including the language of literary genres) used by the author resists the author himself, leads him by the hand and even says things that the author had not established he would say.

The text has its own irreducible autonomy with respect to the meaning attributed to it by the interpreter. And this is true whether a question of the interpreter who “reads” the text, the “reader,” or the interpreter who “produces” it, the “author.” The text tells of a sense that is *other* with respect to the sense conferred upon it by the interpreter-self. Therefore, the text is endowed with its own objectivity, materiality, capacity to resist with respect to interpreting, signifying consciousness. This is the alterity of the sign that determines and decides the limits of interpretation, whether “author” or “reader” interpretation. Contrary to Eco, the problem of the “limits of interpretation” (1990), in light of which he reconsiders the problem of the “open work” (1962) and the role of the reader, “*lector in fabula*” (1979), cannot be solved in terms of “habit” or social convention. The limits of interpretation are given by objectivity, materiality, autonomy of the text, in other words, by its alterity with respect to the interpretant-self – whether this be the “reader” or the “utterer,” the person who produces the text, the author himself with all his authority. The problem

of the limits of interpretation is closely connected with the problem of the sign's alterity and dialogism, and cannot be treated separately from the latter.

Translation necessarily consists in negotiation and contract which concerns the relation between *translator* and *text* and not *translator* and *author*. Negotiation and listening, negotiation and answering comprehension are inseparable here. Their dialogic nature is given by the alterity, autonomy, resistance, objectivity, in a word, *materiality* of the text to be translated.

The meaning of a sign cannot be circumscribed to a certain type of sign or sign system, such as a given historical-natural language. Meaning coincides with the interpretant trajectory which knows no boundaries of a typological or systemic order. This is particularly obvious in the case of the hypertext, but this also concerns translative processes where the interpretants, whether verbal or non-verbal, belong to another language, to another linguistic-cultural modeling system.

Furthermore, the hypertext escapes the deductive model according to which a given trajectory starts from certain premisses and leads to a given conclusion. Deductive logic is replaced by *associative* logic, which is the logic of translation understood as reading-writing, it involves active participation and responsive understanding at the highest degree. Similarly to the hypertext, the relation between premisses and conclusion is established through associations based on the translator's personal memory, on the drift of his remembering, on his interests, curiosity, experiences, ability to "distract," such that deferral from the interpreted sign to the interpretant sign is not decided by constriction, by deduction as in the indexical relation. Here, instead, the relation between interpreted and interpretant proceeds by hypothesis, it is based on reader initiative and inventiveness, and requires inferences mainly of the abductive type – which in certain cases are particularly risky.

The hypertext emerges as something towards which a translation should tend toward. Answering comprehension in reading-translation should take a text-reading hypertext as its model. But this type of reading is not yet very familiar to us. For centuries reading has implied following the author, never losing sight of him, watching where he comes from and where he is directed to the extent that any digressions, distractions or stops in his discourse even end up annoying the reader.

Some texts are written by the author to deviate the reader and leave him free to choose his own reading trajectories. According to Roland Barthes (1984), some authors have warned us that we are free to read their texts as we like best and that our choices are of no interest to them (Valéry). With such reflections Barthes refers particularly to literary writing, which calls for a sort of re-writing process in order to be read.

In this case, hypertextuality is a consequence of the predominantly dialogical character of the literary text, of its inexorable intertextuality, its capacity to shift the signifier, which opens signification in the direction of *significance*. But, to fully achieve their status as hypertexts through reading, these texts require education in reading which literary criticism obstructs when it concentrates reader attention on what the author says and on the autobiographical, psychological, ideological, historico-social reasons for saying it.

Beyond contents and technical modalities in using hypertexts we must underline the epistemological and methodological contribution that may come from the

intermedial hypertext for our understanding of the text and, consequently, for an adequate approach to the text in translation processes.

The hypertext augments the associative and personal character of reading, it establishes a movement with the text according to various senses, it frees reading from a single type or system of signs, it accustoms us to a dialogic relation with the text. All this can influence our approach in reading-translation, reading capable of creating differentiated trajectories, reading with the eyes raised, reading as “writing-reading,” as says Barthes.

Informatic hypertext practice has at last blocked the excessive interest that readers have shown in the author for centuries, it abolishes the privilege conferred upon the sources (in terms of people, historical context, etc.) of a text. Such excessive interest and privilege has generally been sanctioned and augmented by literary criticism – the only discipline in schools and universities which attempts to provide a method for the way we approach texts, contributions in this sense from such disciplines as textual linguistics or semiotics of text are recurrently missing.

What is important to underline in the hypertext is the text and the multiple trajectories according to which it may be read. Censorship in relation to non-linear, “disorderly,” erratic readings, readings that drift and lose their bearings, may at last come to an end as a consequence of the way this text is produced, characterized as it is by hypertextuality and multimediality. With this type of censorship, respect for authority, the author’s, according to which a text is usually read, also comes to an end. In this case the reading-text predominates over the pre-scribed text. Also because, the multimedial hypertext is not the word of an author, but the result of a multiplicity of different contributions, competencies and expressive means.

The multi-medial hypertext frees the text-reading as such, whatever the text’s function. From this perspective, the multimedial hypertext achieves a *Copernican revolution in the sense that it shifts the centre from the author to the reader*, if not for the first time certainly in the sense that it institutionalizes this shift, eliciting a reading-writing rather than reading-fruition process, the writing of reading (independently from recourse to the written sign, transcription). *This capacity that the multimedial hypertext renders visible is important to evidence for translation theory as the objective a reading-translation should work towards when understood in terms of answering comprehension, especially when a question of the literary text.*

The hypertext is a *method* for the amplification of the capacity for *writing as a modeling procedure*. Writing as modeling characterizes *language* understood as a species-specific feature distinctive of mankind. Similarly to language thus described, the hypertext does not proceed in a linear sense. Instead, it organizes connections among parts that are distant from each other in the interpreted-interpretant network forming that text. Linearity is superceded by the network. In this sense the hypertext is less limiting, less binding than the traditional written text, or better, than *the traditional way of writing and reading*. The hypertext shows that to write and to read is not necessarily to write and to read in sequence, to channel thought into one line after another, and according to a privileged order as we have been taught since childhood.

The hypertext is not only a *method*. As anticipated, a *methodics* can be delineated starting from the hypertext, with important implications for translation practice and theory. Literary texts show a strong movement in the direction of the hypertext.

The dialectics revealed by the Russian formalists between the “fabula” and the “plot” reveals the literary text’s vocation for the hypertext. And that in all this the translator is passive is by no means true: his expectations, inferences, “answering comprehension,” his impatience are not only calculated, but determine the organization itself of the text, its style and syntax: *lector in fabula*, as Eco says. As much as it may be linear, a novel presents, suggests “multiple readings” in various degrees, depending on the level of monologism or polylogism characterizing that text.

The poetic text lends itself to multiple readings at the highest degree. The fact that the poetic text is difficult to translate is a symptom of what would seem to be its linearity, but this, however, is only apparent: a single signifier may lead into different interpretive trajectories. For this reason it is often difficult to find a corresponding signifier in another language with the same capacity for shifting. In French Baudelaire’s *L’Albatros* opens with the word “*Souvent*” which in Italian is translated as “sovente” or “spesso.” The problem is that this translation inevitably loses an interpretive trajectory that signifies in the direction of “sotto vento” (Prete 1995), (it also loses the connection with “*souvenir*”) which, instead, is evoked by the French word.

“Decentralization” of the hypertext, the fact that it doesn’t have a fixed centre, but is a system that can be infinitely decentred and recentred, has implications for the de-centralization of cognitive activities as their condition for orientations that are open and unprejudiced. Such an attitude is particularly necessary in the relation with a foreign language and in translation practice understood in terms of interlinguistic dialogue. The capacity for decentralization and recentralization becomes the formative condition of identity open to alterity, identity capable of interrogating automatisms and customary pragmatico-interpretative trajectories. From this perspective, the practice of the hypertext accustoms us to the sign’s shifting and, therefore, to the capacity for interrogation of the universe organized in given sign systems, those of the source language in the first place. This process makes it possible to receive and give hospitality in another language to a text in translation that was originally modeled in a completely different linguistic-cultural universe from the original.

English translation by Susan Petrilli

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In English "leeward."

In English "remembering."