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Loredana Polezzi

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***Translation Studies* Forum: Translation and migration**

Editorial note

The following contributions open a new *Translation Studies* Forum topic that picks up on some of the themes addressed in earlier forums: the theoretical and practical nexus of translation and migration. In view of the frequency with which these two terms are currently appearing in combination, it seems timely to discuss them in the framework of a broad and interdisciplinary notion of translation. The editors welcome further contributions to the debate initiated by Loredana Polezzi's paper.

Translation and migration

Loredana Polezzi*

Department of Italian, University of Warwick, UK

The link between translation and migration is a recurrent trope of recent critical writing. Its popularity underlines the increased centrality of both notions (and corresponding practices) in contemporary society, as well as the anxieties associated with them. Starting from translation as a linguistic activity, this article asks in what ways language practices connected to migration can be linked to translation. It considers the different positions occupied by migrants as agents or objects of translation, and the sites where translation and self-translation take place. The language practices which emerge from migrant writing are then discussed as a possible example of self-translation, asking whether the migrant-as-artist can offer at least a partial response to negative models of translation as a form of control over linguistic heterogeneity. Finally, the article examines the connection between migration, translation and political action, suggesting the need to understand how these relate to a contemporary biopolitics of language.

Keywords: translation and migration; self-translation; migrant writing; biopolitics of language; globalization

Linking translation with migration has become a recurrent trope in critical writing over the past few years. The connection between the two notions has been drawn by translation studies scholars but also, and increasingly, by specialists in anthropology, sociology, philosophy or literary theory. The popularity of the link is in itself revealing: it underlines the increased centrality of migration and of translation (as notions but also as practices) in contemporary society; and it foregrounds the suggestive as well as anxiety-inducing nature of any interweaving of the two. Since both terms are connected to the way in which we, as individuals and as groups, mark the boundaries that define who we are, their coupling holds out the promise of

*Email: L.Polezzi@warwick.ac.uk

change, but also openly exposes us to difference, awakening deep-seated fears echoed in words such as invasion and contagion.

The terrain on which translation encounters migration is thus represented either as a utopian or a dystopian location – but always as one where crucial stakes are placed and played out over “our” future. Those stakes concern shared understandings and operative formulations of notions of identity, community and home, as well as of the way these relate to institutions and apparatuses: the nation state (with its corollaries of national languages, cultures, literatures and so on), citizenship and the rights attached to it, the policing of geographical and social borders. They are also integral to our attempts to explain contemporary macro-phenomena, starting with globalization and its attendant forms of renewed localism, and including new modes of communication capable of forming what Arjun Appadurai (1996, 48) has called “global ethnoscapes”. The question of connectedness has become so central to our vision of the world that Zygmunt Bauman has even proposed the figure of the interpreter as the new protagonist of our times, suggesting that mediation is the key role to be played by intellectuals today, in place of (or at least side by side with) the more traditional task of legislation. With “pluralism irreversible” and “a world-scale consensus on world views and values unlikely, [...] communication across traditions becomes the major problem of our time”. Intellectuals as interpreters then become the masters of “the art of civilized conversation”, and the imperative Bauman sets out for us (or, rather, for what appears to be an elite group undertaking an elite activity) is: “Converse or perish” (1987, 143). It is difficult to imagine a more cogent formulation of the mixture of fear and expectation that colours our perception of a world in which increased mobility makes difference inescapable, demanding its negotiation just as it offers its exciting riches to our grasp, and questioning what being “civilized” means and what it entails.

Bauman’s position is also indicative of a further characteristic of the current debate on translation and migration: the increasingly metaphorical way in which the word “translation” and, to an extent, also the word “migration” are being used. The debate on cultural translation has moved in this direction, starting with Homi Bhabha’s formulation of “culture as translation” (1994). Some authors are explicit about this broad interpretation of the term,¹ others simply push the boundaries of the notion of translation as far as they can, until it all but coincides with that of communication.²

In what follows I will trace a different route: starting from translation as a linguistic activity, I will aim to ask in what way language practices connected to migration can be linked to translation. This will require some reflections on migration – and, especially, on migrants as agents of translation – as well as a discussion of sites of translation and self-translation. Voice and location are strategic elements in determining what role translation plays in the lives of migrants, as well as in ascertaining what figurations of translation and of migration emerge from that encounter. And while the political nature of language is certainly not exclusive to migration scenarios, migration enhances its visibility, highlighting the interplay of linguistic choices which are variously permitted, frowned upon, singled out for praise, or simply barred. I will then discuss the language practices which emerge from migrant writing in order to illustrate the close relationship between self-translation and polylingualism, asking whether the migrant as artist and as self-translator can

offer at least a partial response to negative models of translation seen as a form of control over linguistic heterogeneity.

The final section will further examine the connection between migration, translation and political action, suggesting the need to understand how these relate to a biopolitics of language. This is perhaps the key reason why the nexus between migration and translation is so disquieting and yet so central today: because it goes to the heart of the relationship between individuals, groups and the power exercised over our lives. Reading translation through a line of thought that goes from Arendt and Foucault to Agamben, I want to ask whether our obsessive interest in language and its identitarian qualities should necessarily be read as a reification of alterity – and whether translation therefore necessarily becomes an instrument of control – or whether there are spaces for translators and self-translators to act as witnesses to the experience of migration and to sustain multilingual practices which defy any rigid association between state, language, identity and the apportioning of rights.

Migrants as objects and agents of translation

Just like “translation”, “migration” is an increasingly polysemic word and one which can be stretched in a number of directions. The figure of “the migrant” as an iconic protagonist of our times has become a container for a wide range of more specific representations, from the image of hordes of illegal immigrants pressing at the borders of “Fortress Europe” in search of an escape from poverty, to the refugees and *sans papiers* whose plight is at the centre of contemporary humanitarian concerns; from the diasporic members of increasingly scattered transnational communities, to the well-travelled standard bearers of new brands of cosmopolitanism. These distinct incarnations evoke widely differing scenarios and provoke a range of reactions: protective closure and open-armed solidarity are both possible and well-documented responses to the phenomenon of migration. In any discussion which joins translation with migration, we need to keep in mind this variety both of realities and of representations, as well as the significant difference it makes in terms of needs, practices, locations and agents. It is one thing to imagine the utopian interconnectedness and cultural productivity of global diasporas, another to travel the routes of their individual members, for whom often borders remain firmly in place and that right to travel which Caren Kaplan (1996, ix) named as one of the core assumptions shared by US citizens (and, I would add, by most citizens of the West) becomes an individual and collective desire which is subject to constant threat. Focusing on the migrants – specifically “migrants” in the plural, with their baggage of diversity and difference – rather than on an abstract notion of migration and an equally impersonal image of “the migrant” also acts as an antidote for too metaphorical a use of the idea of translation. If we take into account people rather than, or at least as well as, texts, then the implications of “translating” them necessarily foreground ethical questions: there is, after all, a crucial difference between “manipulating”, “domesticating” or even “betraying” a literary work and doing the same with a human being.³

Migration, if we consider it from the perspective of translation, reminds us that it is not only texts that travel, but also people. This is perhaps the key fact for a translation studies approach to migration, and the one which can have the greatest impact on how we conceptualize both the discipline and the work of translation.

Once we consider the mobility of people as well as that of texts, the linear notion of translation as something that happens to an original (usually a written document which already exists as such in a specified language) as it moves across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries becomes largely insufficient. Translation takes place not just when words move on their own, but also, and mostly, when people move into new social and linguistic settings. Additionally, people have a tendency to keep moving, to occupy multiple places and spaces at once, to be part of different yet connected communities. As Maria Tymoczko (2006, 16) pointed out, we are used to imagining monolingualism as the norm, but it may actually turn out “that plurilingualism is more typical worldwide”. This is almost invariably the case in colonial and postcolonial contexts, but it also applies whenever multiple languages coexist in close proximity, whether as a legacy of a community’s past or as a testimony to its recent enlargement, as in the case of societies which are absorbing substantial migration flows. Here, translation does not simply move across geographical borders (at least if by these we understand the frontiers marking the external boundaries of the space occupied by a community), but rather emerges from within and sustains communication among members of one or more groups, depending on mechanisms of identification, levels of assimilation, and histories of integration or non-integration.

Once we renounce the assumption of monolingualism as the linguistic norm of human communities, more dynamic processes come to light – in terms of both the agents of translation and the nature of the process. Migrants will almost inevitably come into contact with translation, but that contact can take different forms, anything from informal everyday interactions to potentially life-changing encounters with the health or legal systems. Single individuals as well as communities will need to move between different languages, of which they may have varying degrees of command; and translation, whether carried out by them or by others, will become not an occasional intrusion into their lives but a key instrument enabling or forcing them to perform multiple roles in multiple settings: as members of their families, as workers, as citizens of a specific state.

Agency is a crucial issue in the encounter between translation and migration. Michael Cronin (2006, 45) has observed that migrants can gain the ability to translate, adopting what he calls an autonomous practice of translation, or be translated by others, in which case translation is enacted via heteronomous practices.⁴ And they can use translation as a strategy of assimilation, attempting to incorporate themselves into the language and the culture of the host group, or as a form of accommodation, trying to negotiate spaces of resistance and of survival for the language and culture of their origins (*ibid.*, 52). Migrants, then, may also become translators, as well as or instead of requiring (or being posited as requiring) translation. They may have the opportunity to shift from objects of translation to active subjects, to agents in the process. In each case, however, not just who does the work of translation but also, crucially, who authorizes and enables it are substantive variables that alter the balance of power and the dynamics between the mechanisms of production and reception of that which is being translated.

As roles multiply, the locations where translation takes up residence proliferate too. The language practices of migration inscribe translation within the space of the receiving community as much as in the lives of the migrants themselves. And the work of translation comes to inhabit both public and private spaces. Taking

migration into consideration forces us, then, to ask not just what translation is, but also who is and who is not a translator, where, and why. Which languages are officially or unofficially recognized as suitable means of communication in different circumstances, from everyday life to official contact with public institutions? What visibility and status is granted to different languages and language variants, from the national idioms of host countries to those of the migrants' places of origin, from written to spoken variants, from standard forms to regional dialects? Who is in charge of demarcating the boundaries between different languages and their respective roles? Which translations, going in what direction, carry greater power, and why? And how far does the map traced by actual linguistic, translation and self-translation practices coincide with the official map of desired (or prescribed) language behaviour? These are all questions which are directly relevant to policy-making in relation to migration and to its policing, as well as to the lives of migrants, both as individuals and as communities.

In public contexts, the migrant is often perceived as someone who necessitates translation, whether as a form of support or as a means of control, or both. As a professional figure of mediation, the translator or interpreter then becomes at once a promise of fairness and a cipher of distance: the need for mediation reiterates difference and makes it officially visible in the same gesture which is meant to bridge it. Doris Bachmann-Medick (2006, 38) has described the "translated" migrant as someone who is "'rendered', or pulled to and fro, between one culture and another", but there is a further and even more disquieting connection to be drawn here if we think that both "rendition" and the Latin *traducere* also convey the meaning of forced relocation and imply at least the threat of violence. The requirement of translation as a heteronomous practice thus carries both protective and aggressive connotations, and constructs translation as both an offensive and a defensive strategy, which, while offering migrants a voice, also reiterates their difference and insists on controlling who does the speaking, where and when. Translation as a marker of distance then also becomes an instrument of containment against possible contagion – where contagion is constructed not as a Piercean opportunity for productive contamination and change,⁵ but rather as a threat of invasion to be avoided through the deployment of appropriate defences.

For the interpreter/translator, this conceptualization of translation and of the practices that go with it evokes ethical and professional dilemmas which have been explored at length in the debate on voice and voicing conducted by scholars of postcolonial and subaltern studies, in ethnography's critical assessment of a method centred on the notion of culture as text, and in the ongoing discussion of practices such as community interpreting and community translation. The opposition often drawn between interpreting and advocacy in situations in which migrants come face to face with legal institutions is a case in point. Significantly, interpreters who work in these contexts have pointed out both their uneasiness with such an artificial distinction and the discomfort (both moral and physical) that often accompanies their role (Wadensjö 1998; Maier 2007). At a theoretical level, we know there is no innocence in any kind of mediation, but while interpreters are increasingly prepared to acknowledge the risks and pitfalls of their own role, it would seem that both media perceptions and official policies still need to acknowledge – rather than ignore, or decry as either illegitimate or a regrettably necessary evil – the active role played by interpreters and translators in shaping interactions between migrants and institutions.

It is only by making that role fully visible, acknowledging both its importance and its ambiguities, that the political nature of mediation, its impact and its ethical implications can also become more transparent.

In some cases, there is another position open to migrants: that of self-translators. This alternative is not always available, and is more common in less institutionalized spaces, where the polylingualism which accompanies migration leads to a proliferation of translation practices. From a translation studies point of view, it is crucial to note that when migrants act as their own self-translators, the boundary between an “original” and its translation becomes particularly fuzzy, requiring us to broaden the notion of translation. Many cases of self-translation, in fact, do not follow the familiar binary model in which a pre-existing source text moves across linguistic and cultural frontiers in a linear fashion. Non-linear forms of translation are common in migration contexts and include all of those cases – and perhaps these too are the norm, rather than the exception – where source and target text interact in more complex ways: at times because one does not simply precede the other, or does not even exist; or because the two cannot be neatly separated; or, often, because the initial translation continues to generate further transpositions, back-translations, and reverberations. Exploring the figure of the migrant as self-translator and the forms that translation takes in these circumstances, along with their ethical, political and strategic implications, is one of the tasks that we should set for future research. For the moment, traces of those practices can be found in the accounts, fictional or otherwise, produced by migrant writers.

Translation as self-translation: The case of migrant writing

Frequent examples of what I have called non-linear processes of translation can be found in literature written in a host language and connected to experiences of migration. Here we are moving from actual migration processes to their textual representation as a form of creative expression. Traces of autobiographical experience can nevertheless be found in migrant writing, as can social and political intentions, bringing this textual form very close to the notion of a deterritorialized minor literature developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1986). The question of language is crucial to the ways in which migrant writers (migrants *as* writers and artists) can and do exercise their agency. Samia Mehrez, Paul Bandia, Maria Tymoczko and others have written of the reciprocal implication of postcolonial writing and translation, yet migration and migrant writing – whether explicitly postcolonial or not; that is, whether the country of migration and the language of adoption are those of an ex-colonizer or otherwise – are just as rich in translational practices.⁶ In particular, both postcolonial and migrant writing require us to enlarge our definition of translation to include within it self-translation and polylingual writing. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2009) has written of the many ways in which self-translation has been integral to his creative work: as auto-translation of completed books into English; as an “exercise in mental translation” when composing directly in the ex-colonial language; as a form of parallel writing and assiduous rewriting, also involving “mental translation in reverse” from English to Gĩkũyũ, in the case of his novel *Mũrogi wa Kagogo/Wizard of the Crow*. Abdelkebir Khatibi, on the other hand, has turned an entire novel, *Amour bilingue* (1983), into a meditation on living with multiple languages, stressing, like Ngũgĩ, both the productive and the

destructive power of self-translation as a creative and an existential practice. These are just two eminent examples of how writers, their choices and their motivations can be a pertinent source of information on how the questions of language and translation enter the life of migrants. For some, the dominant experience is that of loss, or even betrayal (of a mother tongue, a home community, a native tradition). For others, however, the move across languages marks a greater freedom and a wider choice. This is not just a matter of reaching larger audiences or achieving worldwide recognition through inscription within a model of world literature based on notions of centre and periphery, as in Casanova's "world republic of letters" (2004). The choice of a language other than one's mother tongue also brings with it an additional degree of, if not an insistent requirement for, creative freedom: being oneself in the language of the other can be the ultimate act of self-fashioning.

Most migrant writers who have chosen to write in an adopted language maintain strong traces of the presence of other tongues, other codes and other cultures, creating forms of polylingual writing which are always already marked by the presence of translation and whose existence would not be possible without the intervention of translation processes. Their work incorporates translation as a constitutive element, rather than as an accident that happens a posteriori. And they are not so much translanguaging exiles as heterolingual polyglots, in the sense in which Rainier Grutman (2006) speaks of heterolingualism as the foregrounding of different languages within one text. This kind of self-translation and polylingual writing has points of contact with the classic formulations of polyglossia and heteroglossia, which for Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) were the centrifugal forces at work within any language and were capable of counterbalancing monoglossia's centripetal pull towards linguistic centralization and unification. "After all," Bakhtin noted, "one's own language is never a single language: in it there are always survivals of the past and a potential for other-languedness" (ibid., 66). This diversity, which is always both already present and possible in language, "achieves its full creative consciousness only under conditions of an active polyglossia"; at that point, "two myths perish simultaneously: the myth of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified" (ibid., 68). It is this possibility of other-languedness and its implications for linguistic coexistence that the self-translation practices of migrant writers foreground within their adopted language. To do so, they must also eschew complete assimilation, since it is their "outsidedness" (another Bakhtinian term) which grants them their perspective. Bakhtin rejected any type of assimilation (the ultimate centripetal force, after all), and in one of his later essays explicitly identified difference as a key critical and hermeneutic (but also political) tool. Against the "one-sided and thus untrustworthy idea that in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one's own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture", he set the realization that "in the realm of culture, outsidedness is a most powerful factor in understanding", since "without one's own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign (but, of course, the questions must be serious and sincere)". In this kind of "dialogic encounter of two cultures [...] each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched" (1986, 6–7).

Bakhtin's image of a dialogue among two inherently open cultures, based on difference and linguistic heterogeneity, suggests an empowering and enriching role for the migrant as translator and cultural interpreter (perhaps as a twin figure to

Bauman's intellectual as interpreter). It also offers a positive reading of the "outsidedness" of migrant writing and of the role it can have within the host culture. Only a restricted number of migrants, however, can find this kind of voice as self-translators and cultural producers, potentially forming yet another elite group. And even then, the space they and their work occupy is strictly regulated, so that they have limited control over who will be reached by their words. Routes to cultural production and, perhaps even more so, to distribution and visibility are often narrow if not blocked for many migrants. And, with some exceptions, their cultural products, if they do reach the market, are more likely to remain marginal than to become mainstream. On the other hand, migrant writers can also adopt strategies which play on the inclusion and exclusion of specific sectors of both national and transnational audiences: Ngũgĩ's choice to prioritize English over Gĩkũyũ or vice versa, and his decision to self-translate or otherwise, are examples of macro-strategies open to the migrant writer. Edwin Gentzler (2008, 143–79), discussing American border writing, has also underlined how micro-strategies such as mistranslation, partial translation or even non-translation can constitute active ways of engaging in complex games with existing and potential readers. Perhaps, then, we can ask, with Maria Tymoczko (2006, 16), whether in a world imagined as predominantly plurilingual, it might become the turn of the monolingual to be "marginalized and relegated to restricted and impoverished domains of cultural participation and competence". Certainly, however, we can think of the arena of cultural production as a contested space in which images of migration as utopia or dystopia, and practices of translation as self- or hetero-definition, are repeatedly played out.

What happens if we transport these observations back from the realm of representation to that of everyday life? Here the question remains of what effective agency is afforded to migrants both as individuals and as groups through processes of self-translation. These processes permeate the lives of migrants, even when they do not take the form of artistic production; yet, beyond the individual and often also isolated voice of the self-translating writer, there are many for whom the question of audibility, to use Cronin's term, remains fraught.⁷ Will migrants' accented languages, their polylingual self-constructions, be recognized and accepted, both by the literary and academic establishment and by the reading public or, for the many who are not writers, by state agencies and local communities? Will there be spaces available for the circulation and reception of those voices? And will these be public spaces, granted by official institutions, or alternative routes for the fruition of forms of cultural exchange and hybridization in search of recognition? Who will grant to whom, or who will manage to appropriate, the right to self-translate? Who will decide who can self-translate (and initiate contagion) and who needs to be translated or even silenced (and therefore contained)? Ultimately, self-translation is not, in and of itself, a solution to the political and ethical questions posed by migration. As in the case of interpreters, what the example of migrant writers points out is rather the importance of acknowledging the pervasive presence of polylingualism, treating it increasingly as the norm rather than the exception, and making the role of translation (whether self- or hetero-translation) fully visible. Instead of deploying translation as a form of containment and control, or wilfully ignoring its presence – at our own risk, as it were – it makes much more sense to use it, in all its forms, as a guide to the heterogeneity of human communication.

A biopolitics of language?

The language of containment and contagion, policing and proliferation, which I have been using in my discussion of translation and migration brings with it echoes of contemporary debates on the nature of politics. In the final section of *The Will to Knowledge* (1998, 139–40), Michel Foucault identified biopower, understood as “the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life”, as the distinguishing characteristic of modern politics. With the emergence of biopolitics, new problems arose, which required the development of suitable instruments of control. Among those issues, alongside factors such as birth rate and public health, Foucault also listed the question of migration (*ibid.*, 140). While the strategies aiming to control these phenomena have become increasingly complex in the modern world, Foucault noticed that “it is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them” (*ibid.*, 143). Language, and with it translation, are among those phenomena which keep escaping control and therefore also eliciting attempts to contain them. If migration constitutes a problem for biopolitical power, then translation, its agents and its sites, as potential routes of contact and contagion, also need careful management. And if translation – in all its forms, including self-translation and polylingual practices – is a form of proliferation, a source of change and transformation, a genuine means of access to the “outsidedness” of cultures, then its policing, the policing of its voices, will be as crucial as the policing of bodies.

We are by now used to thinking of the translation of texts as intimately connected with power and its asymmetries, and of relationships among languages as marked by hierarchies of power. Perhaps it is time to go further and reflect in more depth on the political nature of translation – an undertaking in which migration can be a crucial case in point. Hannah Arendt (2005, 93) recognized human plurality, “the coexistence and association of *different men*”, as the fact on which politics is based. And Giorgio Agamben, attempting to bring together the work of Arendt and that of Foucault in his discussion of the biopolitics of contemporary societies, identifies language as the supplement which distinguishes human politics from any other form of social interaction, the element which allows us to move from the distinction between pleasure and pain to that between good and evil, right and wrong, and which ultimately makes us what we are: “*homo sapiens loquendi*” (Agamben 1998, 3, 7; 2007, 8). The terrain where translation encounters migration, where the work of translation is directly connected to migrants and to their lives, where linguistic and cultural difference overlap and become visible, then emerges as a key location for the struggle over the control of individual lives as well as social processes. That terrain is an eminently political space and any act of translation that inhabits it is, therefore, an eminently political action. It is significant that for Arendt (1994, 299), the refugee, one of the possible incarnations of the migrant, was the figure on whose fate the whole system of thought based on the concept of human rights was destined to fail and to fall – because refugees interrupt the continuity between humanity and citizenship which underpins the modern nation state.⁸ Translation and its agents (institutions and state agencies, publishing houses, interpreters, self-translators, migrants-as-translators) can play a vital role either in containing and distancing, or highlighting and maintaining, that humanity; in bracketing off difference or in affirming the porous nature of cultural, linguistic and national borders and the

productivity of encounters. Translation as Bakhtinian “outsidedness” – as an outsidedness genuinely prepared to ask serious and sincere questions about what is and what is not “foreign” – can provide vital spaces within any group or society for the elaboration of difference and the work devoted to its understanding. It can also become, therefore, a core component of political action and of political justice.⁹

Mapping the locations and voices, the places and the agents of translation in connection with migration is an important part of understanding the politics of our societies. The biopolitics of language, its formulations and its permutations can tell us perhaps more than we think about contemporary conceptions of what is “human”. And making visible the multiple acts of translation and self-translation that permeate the experience of migration constitutes a possible answer to the interpellation voiced by the refugee, at a time when, as Arendt already feared, “masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous” (1973, 459)¹⁰ and when, additionally, we are witnessing the move from a notion of personal identity based on social relations and interactions to one of “identity without the person” – an identity constructed “on the basis of data that is merely biological” and strictly measured by biometric technologies (Agamben 2011, 51–4). Against that impersonality and that objectification, translation as a consciously political act can foreground the complexity, the mutability, and perhaps even the intimacy inscribed within social communication by the presence not just of language as such, but of human languages in all their plurality.

In different but at least potentially complementary ways, translators and self-translators can qualify as political actors and also, importantly, as witnesses to the issues surrounding migration. Their voices can be heard where other voices might otherwise be silenced. However ambivalent or subject to exploitation they might be, those acts of translation and self-translation have at least the potential to bear witness not just to the experience of the migrant but also to our understanding of being “human”. Translation as witnessing thus becomes a gesture against the dehumanizing nature of contemporary power and its attempts at containment (of voices, of bodies, of movement, and of “civilized conversation”). And perhaps this testimonial vocation, rather than any immediate mimetic intent aimed at reproducing the everyday life of the migrant, is the reason why figures of interpreters and translators necessarily abound in that section of contemporary artistic production that focuses on the experience of migration.

Translation as an act of witnessing, however, is only imaginable and can only make sense as part of a wider range of practices which sustain the multiplicity of languages and of voices, striving to make the polylingual complexity of communication both visible and audible, while at the same time debunking the myth of monolingualism as norm, as well as that of language (singular) as the ultimate marker of a fixed identity – and therefore also as the absolute mark of the indelible alterity of “other-languaged” migrants. If, on the other hand, we think of translation only as an isolated, linear, controllable and controlled process, firmly in the hands of a recognizable elite of intellectuals and denying any space to the many self-translations operated by migrants, then the risk is that it will mostly act as an instrument of containment, helping to reify difference while ostensibly erasing it, and continually reinstating the distinction between what and who belongs and what and who does not.

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Notes

1. Nikos Papastergiadis, for instance, clearly states that he is interested in “the concept of translation as a metaphor for understanding how the foreign and the familiar are interrelated in every form of cultural production”, in an attempt to analyse how the deterritorialization operated by migration shifts the shape of culture “towards flux rather than stability” (2000, 122–4).
2. Bauman is heading in that direction, of course, but for a further example see Martin Fuchs’s discussion of “social translation” as both an implicit and explicit phenomenon and of how an “interactional concept of translation changes the understanding of social relationships” (2009, 26).
3. Andrew Chesterman (2010, 104) makes a similar point: “Texts that are translated do not suffer in the tangible sense in which human beings may suffer when they are ‘translated’. To use the identical term thus risks blurring significant ethical differences”.
4. See also Cronin (2000).
5. I borrow this reading of Pierce’s theory of signs from Fabbri (2000, 82).
6. The two labels of “migrant writing” and “postcolonial writing” are notoriously difficult to define. Here I am using “migrant writing” to refer to writing produced in a host language and directly related to the experience of migration; not all migrant writing is autobiographical in nature, nor is all of it inscribed within postcolonial writing, though these categories can and often do overlap.
7. According to Cronin (2006, 73), even when “the practice of translation is audible in the mouth and language of the newcomer as translator”, we may need to ask what effect this will have if, as a norm, “the translation labour of the immigrant is rendered inaudible through a zealous pursuit of translational assimilation. The more successful the product of assimilation, the less audible the process”.
8. For a discussion of Arendt’s views on refugees, see Agamben (1998, 126–35). Refugees are, of course, a specific category, and different kinds of migrants are associated with different configurations of social visibility, status, agency and voice.
9. This is one of the reasons why Cronin (2006, 71) is right in stating that “a theory of political justice not only requires a theory of international justice but also demands a theory of translation”.
10. See also Villa (1999, 13–14).

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Response

Leslie A. Adelson*

Department of German Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, USA

Loredana Polezzi’s remarks on “a recurrent trope in critical writing” are meant as both an assessment and an intervention. Not content to note the mere fact of increasingly asserted links between translation and migration throughout the humanities and social sciences, she additionally points to the very “centrality of migration and of translation (as notions but also as practices) in contemporary society”. Beyond this and to her great credit, she calls for heightened analytical attention to specific forms of entanglement “interweaving” migration and translation

*Email: laa10@cornell.edu