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Writing with Translational Constraints: On the “Spacy Emptiness” Between Languages

Lily Robert-Foley

The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. Such a *dissemination* cannot be under our control. Yet in translation, where meaning hops into the **spacy emptiness** between two historical languages, we get perilously close to it.

Gayatri Spivak, “The Politics of Translation.”

(202)

What lies in between languages in translation? Is that space (if it is a space at all) empty or full, visible or invisible, loud or quiet? Is it a lost space full of unknown truths waiting to be uncovered, or a new space waiting to be created?

Two opposing models for conceiving this paradoxical “spacy emptiness” of which Gayatri Spivak writes might be identified as 1) descriptive and 2) generative. A descriptive approach aims to uncover structures inherent to the relationship between languages that translation reveals but which fundamentally precede the work of translation. A generative approach treats the space between translations as creative: a new text or language emerges from translation. Although they may appear as oppositional, these approaches present points of overlap, such that no one thinker of questions of translation falls wholly under one category or the other.

In what follows I begin with Mona Baker’s and William Frawley’s use of Gideon

Toury's constraints as rules governing and pre-existing the work of translation. These come from social, pragmatic, linguistic and creative constraints in source and target text and culture alike. In translation, they condition the choice of text; the reception of translation; and the work of translation itself, through such things as omissions, additions, displacements, reordering and rewording. I then explore generative approaches in the work of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Susanne Lotbinière-Harwood and Marilyn Gaddis-Rose. At the close of the article I envisage adapting translational constraints adapted from the descriptive model, and combining them with a generative model, to see what might happen if they were used as the constraints of a language unto itself: to translate a source text into a language that does not yet exist.

A possible point of departure for both approaches could be constellated at Walter Benjamin's notion of the *reine Sprache* or "pure language." Benjamin's *reine Sprache* could be read in either way: descriptive or generative. In one interpretation, translation creates a pure language that does not exist in one single language; in another, it reveals this profound, universal language, hidden deep within the structures of language itself. Carol Jacobs suggests that the *reine Sprache* is *language itself*; as such, it brings about a kind of monstrosity, in which spirit is decomposed into body, meaning into words (83). It therefore *reveals* language itself by *creating* the distinction drawn by Paul de Man—who builds on Jacobs' argument—between "*das Gemeinte* (what is meant) and *Art des Meinens* (the way in which a language means)" (27). For Antoine Berman, the *reine Sprache* *intends* towards a universality that could only be expressed in a pure language (*reine Sprache*), but never attains it (*L'Age de la traduction*, cahier 6). Regardless of whether the *reine Sprache* may attain a universality that exists neither in the original nor in the translation, neither in the source language nor in the target language, it is nevertheless safe to say that it inhabits a space "in-between" languages. Benjamin opens up this conceptual space which subsequent theorists

have attempt to fill.

The descriptive approach described below belongs to a linguistic or sociolinguistic heritage, whereas the generative approaches come more from cultural or philosophical branches of Translation Studies. This article represents therefore an attempt to put two approaches into dialogue with one another, and to write at a place where both branches might be termed “poetic.”

Excavating Translational Constraints: Descriptive Approaches

In addressing the space between translations, Mona Baker appeals to the notion of a “third code” and hypothesizes the existence of translation universals. These universals are for Baker the “product of constraints which are inherent in the translation process itself” (246) and occur across all languages and all text types. Baker cites tendencies in translation towards “explicitness” (243), “disambiguation,” a “preference for conventional grammaticality” (244) as well as certain types of habitual formulations that either exaggerate or interrupt norms in the target language. These are for Baker “a symptom of what is sometimes referred to as ‘the third code’” resulting from “the confrontation of the source and target codes” (Baker 245). The tendencies Baker cites then are “symptoms,” that is, signs for a deeper structure that exist in the third code. Studies such as those found in *Translation Universals: Do They Exist?* (2004) followed in the wake of this and other important articles (Vanderauwera 1985, Blum-Kulka 1986, Laviosa 1996, 1998), seeking to confirm or disprove Baker’s hypotheses and to search for even more translation universals. Much of this work is done using the electronic tools of corpus linguistics and deserves more attention in the realm of poetic, philosophical or political approaches to translation theory.

Baker credits her use of the expression “third code” to William Frawley’s “Prolegomenon to a Theory of Translation” (1984). Frawley however does not seem to posit

anything like universals; indeed, his language seems to betray if anything a disdain for them: “The activity of the translator is thus not the production of a translated sign, which is the standard view and which suggests that translation is the disembodiment of some ‘universal significance’ and its miraculous reincarnation by the translator into another code” (261). The “universal significance” to which Frawley refers is not at all the same as Baker’s translation universals; for Frawley, it is the newness generated from the contamination of codes that happens in translation that is of interest, not the existence of translation universals. In my reading of Frawley, the “third code” refers to the translation itself, that is, to the text produced by the mixing of codes. Here again is Frawley:

[P]lacing semantic information under the constraints of another semiotic code (literally double coding it) inevitably binds it to that new code and hence the interlingual translation, long steeped in the preservation of something (meaning, content...), actually gains from the recoding since . . . there is information only in *difference*, and the differential coding, the recoding, is what allows the interlingual translation to produce any information at all. . . . The translation itself, as a matter of fact, is essentially a third code which arises out of the bilateral consideration of the matrix and target codes: it is in a sense, a subcode of each of the codes involved. (257)

[R]adical innovations occur when the third code begins to ‘break away’ from both the matrix and target codes. As the new code establishes its own rules (its own redundancy), the dependency of that code decreases and the possibility of new knowledge from that code increases. (261)

The process of recoding, in Frawley's thinking, is capable of taking on a life of its own, of creating something endowed with "its own rules." The notion of the third code is profoundly dependent on *difference*, as Frawley underscores through the use of italics. The fact that the two codes are not perfectly equivalent is in fact the condition for the production of new knowledge contained in the translation. One could level the critique that if going from "matrix code" to "target code" produces a "third code" embodied in the translation, perhaps the target code and third code are two halves of what is made whole in the matrix code: an external linguistic code and a code created in the unique structure contained within a specific text (touching on but not assimilated to language codes independent of text). On the other hand, the hypothesis of such a third code is so compelling that I would rather not reduce it to a binary, even if that binary were composed of two pairs rather than two single units. In a model comprised of four codes (matrix language, matrix text, target language, target text) instead of two (matrix code and target code), the third code might emerge as a distinct fifth element, as a new text embodied not in the translation but in an interliminal writing uncovered only in metalinguistic activity of stereoscopic reading.

Both Frawley and Baker use the word "constraints" in an interesting way. Their use comes from Gideon Toury's analysis of the role of norms in translation (1978):

In its socio-cultural dimension, translation can be described as subject to constraints of several types and varying degree. . . . In terms of their potency, socio-cultural constraints have been described along a scale anchored between two extremes: general, relatively absolute *rules*, on the one hand and pure *idiosyncrasies* on the other. Between these two poles lies a vast middle-ground occupied by intersubjective factors commonly designated *norms*. (Toury 54)

Toury adapts a theory of norms taken from sociology and social psychology to different levels of the translation event, beginning with the source language and culture and the target language and culture. However, he also extends this theory of norms to the act of translation itself. Stepping outside the norm, although not invalidating it, would be considered DEVIANT BEHAVIOR (55). Toury divides these into preliminary norms (choice of text; directness of translation—whether a translation is translated from an original or from a translation) and operational norms affecting the “matrix” of the text in the act of translation. But since we are dealing with translation, this matrix is necessarily comparative and the operations therefore occur in the “relationships . . . that would obtain between the target and source texts.” Toury calls “matricial norms” the occurrence (representation?) of operational norms in the “relationships” between source and target text. Although Toury does not use this vocabulary, I would argue that these operational norms indeed take place in an “in-between” space or “third” space.

The difference between “operational norms” and “matricial norms” is hard to grasp, but I believe it has to do with when and how they occur. Operational norms “direct” the translator’s activity, whereas “matricial norms” are what is then affected by the operational norms—the visible outcome of the translator’s operations. This poses an interesting problem about how norms are to be perceived, observed and thus quantified, measured and studied: “what is actually available for observation is not so much the norms themselves, but rather norm-governed instances of behavior. To be even more precise, more often than not, it is products of such behavior.” (65)

The decryption of operational norms then comes from the observation of matricial norms. A metaphysics of reading is here established between what is visible (matricial norms) and what is invisible (operational norms) that is mimed in the distinction between “norms themselves” and “products” of “norm-governed instances of behavior.” Getting at

these norms would ideally be a process of description: the description of the products of norm-governed behavior would lead us to norms in their pure state, a *kind* of pure language insofar as it transcends observable phenomena. This pure language is grasped using the tools available to this branch of translation studies, which studies the norms of translational activity (such as corpus linguistics). Toury's descriptive approach could thus be reread as generative insofar as deeper structures of norms *generate* "norm-governed behavior." Alternatively, one could turn this around so that the identification of norms is actually *generated by* the reading of the products of norms.

Combining these two ways of thinking of Toury's approach as at once a generative and descriptive one, I would like to propose an exercise in reading rather than a definitive assertion of truth. Could we entertain the idea that this experience of discovery is in fact concomitant with creation, namely that observation creates and that creation uncovers? In other words, could we merge the operational norms and the matricial norms into a new singular venture?

So-called *matricial norms* may govern the very existence of target-language material intended as a substitute for the corresponding source-language material (and hence the degree of *fullness* of translation), its location in the text (or the form of actual *distribution*), as well as the textual *segmentation*. The extent to which omissions, additions, changes of location and manipulations of segmentation are referred to in the translated texts (or around them) may also be determined by norms, even though the one can very well occur without the other. (57)

This list of translation operations recall many a handbook on translation pedagogy, or

companions to contrastive stylistics. For now, let's take one such instance that repeats Toury's almost to the letter. Henri Meschonnic's four forms of "teratology" in translation include "suppression" (or omission), "ajouts," "déplacements" of units or groups of units, and the last, "non-concordance" (one unit translated with many) and "anti-concordance" (many units translated with one). "Anti-concordance" may also be known as "contre-concordance" (27).

As a side note, I would argue that the distinction between *suppressions* and *ajouts* is actually a matter of perspective rather than of operation or procedure—as least as far as in-betweenness is concerned, since a *suppression* becomes an *ajout* seen from the other side, and an *ajout* a *suppression* in the same manner. The whole point of trying to get at and work in the in-between space of translation is to not have to pick a side, to not have to locate a definitive starting point for translation in either the "original" or the "copy." The same goes for notions of loss or gain. What is a loss in the translation is a gain in the original; what is a gain in the translation is a loss in the original, inviting one to wonder whether there isn't a terminology more adapted to the in-between space than "loss" and "gain".

Meschonnic sets down these operations as "teratologies." What in Toury was identified as a description of translational norms, in Meschonnic becomes a monstrosity or a deformation. Carol Jacobs, speaking of Benjamin's *reine Sprache*, likewise locates monstrosity in between languages: it is the decomposition of a certain unity between meaning and language into language itself—its parts and materials. As we know, monstrosity has philological ties to *mostrare*, to show, and hence to representation; it is also linked to the margins of the norm, or the space in which DEVIANT BEHAVIOR happens. Jacobs's rendering of monstrosity has close ties to a radically literal, foreignizing way of translating that gestures toward the fringes of translational norms. Literal translations break down language into fragments, complicate the stitching together of word and meaning in keeping with Jacobs's

reading of Benjamin's metaphor of the broken vase: "With the joining together of translation and original, language remains a broken part" (Jacobs 84). To show, then, or to make visible the operational norms of translation, is also to deform, to create.

Jacobs is not the only one to find monstrosity and DEVIANT BEHAVIOR erupting from the space between translations. In *The Third Language*, Alan Duff, posits a similar kind of literalness that creates a third language: "[T]he translator who imposes the concepts of one language on to another is no longer moving freely from one world to another but instead creating a third world—and a *third language*." (10) For Duff, however, this foreignizing instinct is deeply negative, and indicates a "harmful" (10) or "inappropriate" (14) translation. An inappropriate translation in his reading is any translation that "sounds wrong" (4), an aural observation that he traces back to a too strong influence of source codes on target ones. This is also because hybridity in Duff creates "badness" (20). "Each text is an entity, and its wholeness must be preserved; but it can be preserved only if the translation is itself coherent, if it is *one* language, and not a mixture of styles and languages, not a third language." (12).

Duff devotes his book to describing this third language that is indeed written in a hybrid, interliminal space. This interliminal third language produces monstrous—but I would also argue therefore, wonderful—results. To give one example, Duff cites a translation written in a third language (again: when source codes are imposed upon target ones, making the latter strange and monstrous), which includes in a list of other items, "*male and female and children's fashion*" (Duff's italics). He argues that this translation makes it seem as though "children belong to a third sex" (15). What could be more interesting than demonizing the translator (or the writer of the original text, which Duff also does), would be to allow the strangeness of the translation to open into new potential worlds such as one in which children belong to a potential third sex. This is one thing that might happen when we combine descriptive and generative approaches into a "monstrous" third text.

Generative Approaches: Third Code as Potential Writing

In Homi Bhabha's reading of Benjamin, an in-between space is the generator of newness:

Unlike Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man I am less interested in the metonymic fragmentation of the "original." I am more engaged with the "foreign" element that reveals the interstitial; insists in the textile superfluity of the folds and wrinkles; and becomes the "unstable element of linkage," the indeterminate temporality of the in-between, that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which "newness comes into the world." (227)

Here, Bhabha is referring to another strange metaphor of Benjamin's in which translation is "like a royal robe with ample folds" covering the unity of "fruit and skin" in the "original." (258). Bhabha places emphasis on the folds of the robe in a desire to shift lenses from purity to hybridity. This hybridity is generative of newness. Rethinking hybridity as a creative space is a common motif that has more than once articulated itself as the decomposition of systems in bilingual thinking and writing, for example in Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestizaje*, cannibalism in Oswald de Andrade, transcreation in Haroldo de Campos, *créolité* in Glissant, Chamoiseau, Bernabé and Confiant, or in queer thinking on translation (Lacayo, Nathanaël). In these versions, the in-between space is neither empty nor pure but rife with possibilities for creation. This is in many instances connected to a reading of the metaphysics of power that is perhaps most simply expressed in the rhetoric of the colonial empire: centrality, fixity, order and unity.

In Gayatri Spivak's work, translation is used as a model for cultural difference that

challenges colonial structures of domination in sense-making. Indeed, her expression “spacy emptiness” reprised in my title is taken from an article on the *politics* of translation: “The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. Such a *dissemination* cannot be under our control. Yet in translation, where meaning hops into the **spacy emptiness** between two historical languages, we get perilously close to it” (Spivak 202). What Spivak argues for is what she calls “intimacy” with the foreign text—which is not just language but what is “beside language, around language.” Her rhetoric is significant—intimacy is linked to an act of “surrender to the text” (201)—and implies that the lesson she is teaching is meant for those wandering blind in Western privilege (“I want to claim the right to the same dignified complaint for a woman’s text in Arabic or Vietnamese” [203]), in particular, for Western feminists (“The task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency.” [201]). Spivak inverts geo-political power imbalances through the medium of translation. However, the rhetoric of “surrender” resembles that of faithfulness, in which the translator submits to a source text totally. It further implies that this faithful, submissive translation is in some way possible, such that translation could be considered a transparent activity. This makes for an interesting paradox since the original text itself is not transparent, but is rather for Spivak a “fraying of language” (205) in which “rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic” (202). The intimacy to be attained comes at entering into the relationship between logic, rhetoric, and silence at play in a literary text. This relationship is unattainable in the original; and yet, translation attains to it. We might see traces of the *reine Sprache* here.

Bhabha’s third space likewise contains something of the unattainable *reine Sprache*, in that it is “unrepresentable in itself” (37). Might this be a trace of desire for a mystical, pure language transmitted through the secrets hidden in genealogies of influence? Does

Bhabha's insistence on the folds of the royal robe succeed in doing much more than locate the *reine Sprache* there?

To transcribe transparently a non-transparent relationship between rhetoric and logic is not the only possible version of what it is to be a feminist translator. Here is another take on it from Susanne Lotbinière-Harwood's work, *Re-belle et infidèle / The Body Bilingual*:

Traduire n'est jamais neutre. C'est l'acte d'une subjectivité à l'œuvre dans un contexte socio-politique précis. Le je qui traduit inscrit son savoir, ses choix, ses intentions, ses convictions, dans le texte qui se réécrit. En effet il est possible, au moment du passage de la langue de départ à la langue d'arrivée, de faire apparaître un mot ou un monde. (27)

Translation is never neutral. It is the act of a subject at work within a specific social-political context. The *I* who translates inscribes her knowledge, her choices, her intentions and her convictions into the text she is rewriting.

Translation can thus be a veritable political tool. Indeed, in the passage from departure to arrival language, it is possible to make appear or disappear, a word or a world. (My translation)

For Lotbinière-Harwood, being a feminist translator is the opposite of remaining faithful to the source text; it is to change and deform the source text the better to introduce into it the previously silenced voices of both women and translators, a silence that signals their allegorical alliance. Lotbinière-Harwood sees translation as a political tool in much the same way as does Spivak, but inverting the position of power also inverts the approach to translation. Translation then becomes a metaphorical site for working through power

imbalances. Lotbinière-Harwood locates power on the side of the source text, and in so doing, gifts the translator the right of authorial intervention. Spivak locates power on the translator's side and so attempts to right this power imbalance by restoring authority to the source text, calling on the translator to "surrender."

Both theorists play with "constraints" of text and culture in order to generate new discourse, and in both cases, something important like the administering of feminist justice happens in the in-between space of translation. Indeed, Lotbinière-Harwood's expression "in the passage" may actually be read in two different ways: that translation is the creation of new worlds or that *in between* a source text and a translation, a new world is created.

Marilyn Gaddis-Rose presents another reading that takes place in this "passage" between texts, namely through the notion of interliminal space that emerges in a practice of "stereoscopic" reading produced by the work of translation. Reading across texts in several languages brings out new meanings not available in a reading of a text in a single language. As with hybridity (newness constructed from old blocks), Gaddis-Rose takes both a descriptive and a generative approach to the in-between space of translation: the translator writes a new text, accessible neither in one nor the other text of a translation solely, but anchors this reading in a firm belief in the signifying power of both text and translation. We see this in her relationship to the initial signifying metaphysics of the text to be translated: "we should we feel we are moving inside what we are reading, examining literature from the inside, a way of making sure that we feel it from within" (13). That a text can be conceived of having a "within" and, presumably, a "without" relates to a signifying model that likewise has a within and a without: a body of language, a soul of meaning.

There is always a back-and-forth movement in theoretical position-taking: among categories there are breakages, overlaps, slippages where discourses dodge or weave in between one another. No theory is absolutely coherent, no more than any individual can be

representative of an identity “type” in what is rather a *bricolage* or negotiation of conflicting ideological positions and identities. If the thinkers treated in the first section (Baker, Frawley, Toury, Meschonnic, Duff) generate meaning in their descriptive readings, those treated in the second (Bhabha, Spivak, Lotbinière-Harwood, Gaddis-Rose), rely on a belief in the descriptive and signifying power of text to generate newness in hybridity. An idea of a third code as something to be recovered and reconstructed and that of a third space in which something new is created need not necessarily be at odds. What might take place if we decided to situate ourselves at this very locus of distinction separating foundational structure and unpredictable creation?

Translation as a Creative Process

Translation of a creative text is obviously a creative endeavor. However, as we saw in Meschonnic, Jacobs and Duff, translation may be seen as creative likewise in the way it deforms language, creating newness through hybridity. On the obverse side, translation may create homogenization, in keeping with Baker’s hypothesis that translations display a “preference for conventional grammaticality” (244) and that they create norms in language where before there was *DEVIANT BEHAVIOR*. It is not therefore an inherent feature of translation to either disrupt or normalize. Rather, its disruptive or normalizing power comes from the relationship of the translator to the constraints of translation. Writing in the in-between space between languages calls for a careful examination of the procedures that occur in translation and *their capacity to create or generate text*. Used as generators of text, these procedures become constraints in a more narrow, Oulipian sense, as deep or invented structures that are used as the actual *stuff* of writing (“language itself” to use Jacobs’s phrasing). This practice would seek to accomplish in the same breath the *reading of structure* and the *writing of form* by situating itself in the cleft between observable behavior and

unrepresentable norms.

One such attempt to do just this is present in the work of the Outranspo (see work in this volume). Outranspo is unique in that it encourages descriptive translation research as well as creative experimentation. This is both its monstrosity and its force. The translation pre-fixes first set down by Pablo Ruiz Martin and modified and progressively amended by members of Outranspo since its inception are attempts to develop constraints for DEVIANT BEHAVIOR with regard to the translational act. Jonathan Baillehache's attempt to classify the types of operations encountered the same problem in locating fixed points at which translational phenomena may be observed. This relates to the slipperiness of inhabiting an in-between space. A first attempt consisted of trying to classify the constraints according to whether they affected the source text or the target text; however, even this varied profoundly based on the individual methods of the translator. Categorizing *when* an actual operation occurred ended up being very difficult, if not impossible to determine, precisely because translation does not happen on one end and then on another: it is always already *in the in-between space*.

Getting at this in-between space between languages where descriptive and generative approaches intermingle may require a step beyond the metadiscourse of classification, namely towards creation. I have attempted to do this elsewhere in the creative project I call "graphemachine" (Xerolage, 2013). This work attempts to use neither source codes nor target codes but the *very code of translation itself*—what happens *in between*—as a way of deforming languages and texts. It asks the question: could the operational constraints of translation be used as a motor for potential writing? It identifies linguistic segments and units (different in each graphemachine), and uses operational constraints of translation such as omission, addition, displacement, reordering and rewording in the Oulipian or more precisely Outranspian sense to create new texts. Written in no known language, these texts are, in

keeping with Outranspo's list of translation prefixes, a kind of "Neo-Translation: a translation made towards a made up language, created specifically in order to make that translation."

It is unfortunate that this work can only exist in a monstrous state in which one half is dissected from the other; I would like someday in the right context to bridge the gap between creative and critical discourses, as a way of revealing the creative dimension at work in all scientific research. This work might not be without interest for translation studies or for critical work on writing under constraint, insofar as combining approaches does more than merely signal their existence: it uncovers the performative (descriptive *and* generative) power of operational constraints, in the monstrous in-betweenness of translation. There is, then, a sense in which combining creation and critique is itself representative of a generative in-betweenness akin to the one found in translation, but falling in-between institutional disciplines and for that very reason, monstrous and DEVIANT. But perhaps it is true what Bhabha says: that it is indeed in this monstrous hybridity that newness may be found?

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