

Translation as a Genre: The Status and Mapping of the Discipline

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“Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process.”

(Bakhtin 1981: 7)

Abstract

In this article, we discuss two genres representing two types of signifying practices and “language games”: literature and translation as different text-forms. While literature is a place of innovation, contestation, and transgression, translation represents a static and repetitive activity that reinforces the established order and structures. Using a Bakhtinian definition of genre and Simeoni’s concept of habitus in translation, we explain how the two genres work and how translation could become a more generative and productive form of interaction, challenging society and its expectations.

Definition of genre

The concept of genre is rooted in M. M. Bakhtin’s work on speech genres, defined as stable types of individual utterances imposed by language in any communication, oral or written. Genre is, in that sense, a social convention established by tradition and the repetition of the same patterns of speech and writing, thus shaped within a specific social situation and according to the formal properties of language. But, as stated by Bakhtin, the utterance – understood as a unit of communication – is more than a statement or response: it is an anticipation of a real or potential listener, an opening to future, forthcoming utterances. In his essay “Epic and novel,” Bakhtin points out that genre is also a generative practice, not a timeless pattern of narration but rather a historical activity situated in time and space. Genre is not only a recognition of the recurrent

situation but also a renewal, interrogation, and contestation of the existing forms and meanings, able to incorporate new voices and open new paths and channels of communication. Every new utterance introduces a dialogical relation to preceding utterances by giving a response to recurring situations (agreement, disagreement, negation, interrogation, judgment, etc.). This multiplicity of meanings is not only the constituent feature of the utterance but it also represents a powerful force for renewal of a genre. Moreover, there is no meaning without genre identification as the linguistic code itself is insufficient to convey it properly. In fact, according to Stanley Fish, the existence of the genre is validated once it is misinterpreted or mistakenly recognized. For instance, in the French movie by Bertrand Tavernier *La fille de d'Artagnan*, inspired by Alexandre Dumas's novel *Les trois mousquetaires* (*The Three Musketeers*), the plot's turning point is when the heroine Eloïse mistakes a simple laundry list for an encoded message about a conspiracy against the king. She misinterprets the meaning because she misinterprets the genre, which leads her to respond to the message in a completely inappropriate manner. Thus, the meaning is grounded in the genre, and there is no correct understanding of the meaning without proper genre identification. In fiction, this kind of mistake can be very productive in organizing the plot and achieving a specific esthetic effect – comical, deceptive, or misleading. However, in real life, in a professional exchange, a diplomatic encounter or in scientific communication, this type of misinterpretation can provoke rather difficult or even critical situations.

In his historical survey of genre evolution, Bakhtin distinguishes two main categories of genres: ancient, fixed, and already more or less dead genres, transmitted from the ancient world (epic, tragedy), and new, emerging, and developing forms, one of them being the novel. Bakhtin stipulates that the novel is the only genre able to cope with the present because of its capacity to incorporate and transform other genres as well as to connect with the “openended present” (Bakhtin 1981:7): “In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and

inconclusiveness.” (*Ibid.*). Thus, it plays a double role: one of its own intrinsic renewal because it achieves a self-consciousness (*Ibid.*: 6), and the other, of a new genre production. The emergence of the novel and its subsequent evolution are linked to the appearance of a new creative consciousness of the polyglot world at the end of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Renaissance, not a world imprisoned in *monoglossia* – a perfect and neutral harmony of voices where one language is deaf to the other, but rather a world of linguistic contacts and cultural exchanges (*Ibid.*: 12), a world inhabited by conflicts, contradictions, oppositions, tensions, and constantly exposed to the difference. In fact, the cultural landscape that brought the novel into modern times was diversified not only because of a sudden ‘appearance’ of the foreign presence, but also because of the popular tradition of laughter, which undermined the official culture of seriousness, order, and stability. The consciousness of the European elite was shaped and shaken at the same time on different levels by the rediscovery of Europe’s own past back to Antiquity, by the sudden recognition of other cultures and languages from the continent and beyond, as well as by the inner conflicts and tensions present in every society, the major one, as mentioned, being the unofficial popular oral tradition with its own order, temporality, and language.

If the novel is a predominant genre in the West, then Dostoevsky is the master of this genre because of his ability to incorporate many voices, accents, and forms of verbal hybridization, the ability to open one word to another and one language to another in order to break any unifying form or structure into pieces. While German hermeneut Hans-Georg Gadamer considers genre as being a part of tradition, the fusion of the past and the future – hence stressing the intersubjective character of genre that conveys norms, values, and meanings, Bakhtin insists more on the tensions between individuality and society, creativity and norm, monological and dialogical consciousness, self-sufficiency and openness, tensions that emphasize on rupture and discontinuity rather than on continuous and fluid transmission¹. The main role of genre is then to reconcile these opposing forces: on the one hand, stability and

permanence of well established forms of speech and writing, and on the other hand, their renewal and elasticity. To achieve this reconciliation, as the French linguist François Rastier points out, genre, being a semiotic space of intersubjectivity, has to be mediated by the symbolic order. The individual articulation and production of meaning is, in that sense, regulated by social practice and imposed norms which control and maintain all levels of social and individual interactions. Those who do not belong entirely to the society – young children without full mastery of language or marginal people – can only use idiosyncratic forms of speech, out-of-genre frameworks providing an intelligible connection to other people in any context of communication, from more authoritative (obedience) to more dialogic (face-to-face interaction) contexts.

Another French linguist, Dominique Maingueneau, considers genre as a macro-act of language, having a global illocutionary value (1990: 11-12), while literature is a meta-genre that includes all the literary discourses. This meta-category clearly indicates the border between life and art in order to guide the receptor in his/her ‘meaning-making’. Of course, it is possible to play with this border and invite the receptor to make the necessary adjustments. Modern literature, theatre, opera, exhibitions, installations, and other artistic manifestations are in fact spaces of real interaction between all the protagonists of the esthetic event. Once the hierarchy between author, actor/character, and the public is abolished, a new intersubjective space is created to reorganize the interaction. In every case, there is a mutually understood tacit contract between the producer of the event and the public, a contract which is, of course, valid only during the esthetic representation. But both spaces – reality and art – are strongly interconnected and interwoven because they maintain an ongoing dialogue: art is always rooted in real existence, and life can be inspired by imagination. This idea is also discussed by Bakhtin in his text “Problem of oral genres” when he introduces the discussion about genre transformation and inter-genre influences. The distinction made by Bakhtin between simple genres (free, ordinary, everyday, verbal activity, e.g. joke, conversation, or song) and complex genres (more rigid, higher and extra-temporal discourse of science, arts, or

religion) brings the idea that real life is constantly nourished by esthetic creation, abstract thinking, and scientific research. In fact, reading a book or watching a movie can have a concrete impact on someone's existence. But not without reason, Bakhtin insists on the ordinary, less formalized, and more spontaneous genres practiced in everyday interactions, because, according to him, they constantly challenge what is permanent and crystallized. Thus, a simple genre can confirm, confront, subvert, or transform a complex genre according to its specificity and position occupied in the more complex genre. A similar simple genre incorporated into a complex genre confirms its validity (e.g. a joke or an anecdote witnessed in real life incorporated into the comical genre), while atypical elements or ideas provoke a transformation or reorganization of the hosting basic genre (e.g. prose incorporated into a poem). However, the novel, according to Bakhtin, has a unique status: it is a poly-genre without having any specific generic canon, representing a mobile space able to accommodate a diversity of elements, motifs, and chronotopes that bring forward its own evolution.

After having discussed the interconnection between simple and complex genres, between existence and the realm of thinking and artistic creation, how should one define the relationship between a genre and a single literary work? What kind of interactions do both involve? Even if genre is a matrix for literary practice, even if it imposes rules and patterns on the writer, genre is incapable of generating all the contracts with potential and anticipated receptors. In fact, reciprocity is established between the genre and the text because the latter can impose its own contract on the reader; it can establish new textual strategies, of which three examples are given by Maingueneau (1990: 122):

1. texts situated on the margin of the genre;
2. texts playing with the genre, incorporating other genres (irony, parody, distortion etc.);
3. texts pretending to establish a new contract with the reader, escaping the *diktat* of a specific genre.

As he points out, genre cannot be considered as a simple text mould that produces faithful copies, but rather as the relationship between a single text and its genre. In that sense, the text, fully respecting the genre, can be innovative and original, or the text promoting its self-autonomy can be mediocre. It is therefore important to establish what kind of connection or dynamic the text introduces to the genre itself (*Ibid.*: 122-123).

Usually, a given genre reduces and regulates the transgressions to its own norms, which are eventually introduced by a text (*Ibid.*: 134). But tradition and literary institutions also play a crucial role. In the case of an existing but unclassified text, it is the tradition that regulates its status, and in the case of innovative esthetics, it is the institution that will accept or reject the text as a valid literary contribution. On the other hand, the norm being applied by social agents, such as literary critics or receptors, can be challenged or even changed once the new category is introduced as a valid artistic practice (e.g. the Nouveau Roman in the 1960s).

In our modern society, genre undergoes a constant change because of technology: the electronic medium has become a new way of production and reproduction, distribution, reception, and communication, in literature, visual arts, and other fields. According to Régine Robin, this technological tool makes possible an experimental postmodern writing in search of more fragmented and free ways toward artistic creation:

Tout le mouvement moderniste puis postmoderne et expérimental de la littérature a tendu vers la dislocation des formes traditionnelles, vers la discontinuité, la fragmentation, la ruine du sens, la dé-linéarité, la déséquentialité, la destruction de la totalité, voire de la totalisation. Il a rencontré les pratiques formulâiques du roman populaire, celles du journalisme et du cinéma, de même que l'esthétique du montage et du collage. [...]Les possibilités de la machine n'ont fait que généraliser, à la fois dans le quotidien de notre environnement et dans les possibilités littéraires, ce mouvement. (2004: 15)

Moving from a social space governed by norms and rules to an unlimited virtual and extremely mobile and heterogeneous cultural and linguistic community of technology users raises legal and ethical issues in arts, research, pedagogy, economy, and global communication in general. Nonetheless, it represents, at the same time, an alternative and highly challenging space of interaction and creativity in which translation is omnipresent but very often invisible to most Web users.

Genre in translation or translation as a genre

While genre is a very important element in literary studies, it is of a much lesser importance in translation. First, translation studies is a recent academic field situated at the crossroad of various disciplines and dealing with highly theoretical issues as well as with purely pragmatic constraints. Second, new domains and professional realities are constantly changing the discipline's configuration and challenging the existing knowledge and methodologies. Thus, there is no one and unique representation of translation as a discipline because of its complex and mobile character. Third, translation is generally invisible because of its inferior status as a social and professional activity compared to literary production, which is highly valorized.

From the pedagogical, practical, and research points of view, translation is thought, practiced, and discussed according to three main fields: pragmatic translation (circulation of knowledge and information), literary translation (enriching the world of literature), and the translation of philosophy and social science (transmission of different traditions of humanist knowledge)². Pragmatic translation is governed by a communication model³: transparency and efficiency are to be achieved by adaptation, clarification, or even modification in order to facilitate readability and information delivery. The translator has to be familiar with the specific area of scientific or highly specialized knowledge as well as with the related concepts and terminology in both the original and the target languages. However, the model of translation is the same

for every field, one that achieves the most efficient communication in terms of economy of time and effort. By contrast, in the Western tradition, literary translation can be achieved through at least the following two conflicting methods: either foreignization (translation reproducing formal specificities of the original text) – according to Venuti's terminology, or domestication (ethnocentric or even narcissistic translation focusing on the target receptor). The tension between the two models indicates how difficult it is to incorporate the Other/the Foreigner in the translated text, how problematic is the experience of distance and difference, which can be either visible or completely hidden to the new reader. As for the translation of philosophy and social science, this genre is a special case as it occupies an ambivalent position situated on the border between pragmatic and literary translation. In some cases, the literary aspect of the text has to be carefully transferred into the target language in order to respect not only the meaning of the original, but also the meaning-making performed by the author. The translator's task is an even greater challenge when translating a philosopher or a thinker: every text and its author belong to a specific philosophical or scientific tradition, and translation should aim at having a dialogical impact, or otherwise, should stimulate a dialogue between both culturally situated knowledge and different schools of thought and traditions.

Now, if we consider translation as a meta-genre, a meta-category including any type of interlinguistic transfer, and take into consideration the three previously discussed major translation genres, how should one organize the division of genre on a lower level? What sub-genres should be identified and how should they be classified? To answer these questions, we have to take into account the following:

1. pragmatic translation includes many fields of knowledge such as medical, pharmaceutical, technical, and scientific among others;
2. literary translation includes two main categories: poetry and prose (short story and novel);

3. the translation of philosophy and social science includes different fields of knowledge, for example, logic, hermeneutics, psychology, and psychoanalysis (the most emblematic cases are those of Heidegger and Derrida because the linguistic aspect of their works is central to their philosophical systems).

But this static and vertical model (genre/sub-genre) is far from being efficient at adequately covering the complexity and variety of the existing translation practices. The main issue is the lack of a proper way to classify mixed, hybrid, or “impure” forms of translating and to solve the problem of a multilingual text or communication. For instance, advertisement is a form of communication but it is also an artistic creation; drama translation has to focus on the orality of the written text to be performed on stage; audio-visual translation deals with visual, oral, textual, and technical aspects that have to be taken into consideration. The binary classification between oral and written, literary and pragmatic, and human and automatic translation, appears in fact anachronistic and out of date: it tends to minimize or oversimplify the complexity of the interlinguistic transfer which can manifest itself in different contexts and activities, and can consequently raise a broad range of questions or problems such as: who should teach pragmatic translation (scholars or practitioners)? and literary translation (scholars, writers, literary critics or any translator)? How should one situate the growing field of interpretation studies (IS) within translation studies (TS)? As a part of the latter or rather as a completely independent field of knowledge and scientific investigation? Another problematic aspect has important ethical ramifications: is it necessary to elaborate an independent general ethics in translation that would bridge, for instance, translation and the specialized field, knowledge and the public, or rather to call for an applied ethics to solve isolated problems in a specific situation, and remain submitted to a particular genre and field? Language issues also resist to binary logic once the original text is written in more than one language, or is clearly addressed to the multilingual reader. A bilingual translator trained to work in only two languages

(passive/active or foreign language/mother tongue) would undoubtedly fail at the task of properly translating a multilingual original text.

Considering the practice and pedagogy of translation according to a genre distinction brings another element into the discussion: the translating habitus, understood as the “(culturally) pre-structured and structuring agent mediating cultural artefacts in the course of transfer” (Simeoni 1998: 1). Daniel Simeoni points out that the problem in translation is not necessarily linked to the professional habitus (translatorial habitus), but rather to the translation’s status in the field, because it is not considered as a writing practice, one that is solely reserved to writers, but rather as a reading activity (*Ibid.*: 19). Were translation considered as a form of writing, then, as Simeoni argues, it would have been structured as an independent field, as is the case with literature. Instead, diverse translation practices are relegated to a particular field of knowledge (literature, economy, law, medicine etc.) and are submitted to their own constraints, and, by extension, to their ethics. In that case, translators are governed by different social habituses and not by a specific independent translatorial habitus. This means that a professional competence in translation is associated to the field and genre specificity: the higher factual knowledge in a field, the lesser freedom of movement from field to field. By analogy, the higher status of the genre (e.g. poetry), the lower status of the translator (consider, for example, the popular belief that it is impossible to translate poetry).

Proposing translation as a different and independent text-form or genre, or as an independent field of professional activity, as suggested by Simeoni, implies deconstructing the static image of translation as an activity focused on a more or less mechanical repetition⁴ and the subservient respect of the established order (social and professional). To conceive translation as a fully independent genre means considering it as having its own rules, agents, and habitus, and consequently as being a place of innovation, contestation, and transgression, in which critical thinking is also

involved. While literature exemplifies a free exploration of imagination and creativity, translation connects with the foreign culture invigorating the target context and imposing a necessary distance to better understand our own identity and sense of belonging to a specific culture. Both of them, literature and translation, are generative and productive forms of interaction, having the power to challenge the current expectations and social norms. The translation activity has, in general, an impact that greatly surpasses the information exchange limited to some specific field of knowledge, intellectual activity or artistic creation: “[...] translations, rather than being a secondary and derivative genre, [...] [are] instead one of the *primary* literary tools that larger social institutions – educational systems, art councils, publishing firms, and even governments – have at their disposal to ‘manipulate’ a given society in order to ‘construct’ the kind of ‘culture’ desired” (Bassnet 1998: x). In today’s world, translation plays an even more important role not only as a situated practice in a specific target culture, but also as a global way of constructing different communication conventions, especially to accommodate a multilingual interaction and, by extension, to build a transnational culture able to host a growing number of contacts, including even the smallest entity. More importantly, translation should not only serve as a tool to provide new information and knowledge all around the world, but it should also promote and defend a linguistic and cultural diversity to avoid, as Trivedi puts it “a wholly translated, monolingual, monocultural, monolithic world” (Trivedi 2007: 6).

Notes

1. The two hermeneutic perspectives of Gadamer and Bakhtin should be understood in terms of the different cultural and socio-political contexts they belong to. If Gadamer belongs to the continuity of the German hermeneutic tradition of Dilthey, Schleiermacher, and Heidegger, Bakhtin’s system of thought is, on the contrary, situated in the critical and historical moment of a newborn Soviet state. The concept of discontinuity acquires here a double status: philosophical and existential. Gadamer writes: “Our own past and that other past toward which our historical consciousness is

directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition.” (Gadamer 303).

2. For a more detailed discussion about Holmes’s initial “map” of translation studies, see Toury (1995: 10).
3. This communication model is deeply grounded in Anglo-Saxon culture and English language but tends to be perceived, accepted, and adopted without any critical distance as a universal model no matter the languages and contexts in contact. For a critical perspective in linguistics, see Wierzbicka (2006a, 2006b, and 1999), and in scientific communication, see van Djick (2003).
4. Translation tools and technology, e.g. a translation memory (TM) system that can store segments previously translated, perfectly portrays the idea of translation as a merely mechanical process.

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