

Book Review

How Does it Feel? Point of View in Translation: The Case of Virginia Woolf into French

Charlotte Bosseaux

Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007, pp. 247.

In this book, Charlotte Bosseaux explores the idea of point of view in fiction and how it is affected through translation. The book adopts a comparative perspective, similar to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) and draws conclusions from various translations of English texts (here two novels by Virginia Woolf) into French. The writer bases her argument mainly on narratological and linguistic data, using corpus processing as an assisting tool for more objective quantitative analysis of two novels by the English novelist Virginia Woolf, namely *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, and their various translations into French. The study, which was originally carried out as a project in fulfilment for the award of the Ph.D. degree, compares these two English novels not only with their French versions but also investigates the extent to which the different French translations were able to transfer the “feel of the text” (an expression which the author borrowed from Paul Simpson) as intended by the original author, using computer-assisted methods to substantiate her argument and to facilitate the search for items. The author offers a model for analyzing point of view by adopting certain techniques from narratology, Halliday’s systemic functional grammar, linguistics, and translation studies. This review begins with an outline of the book chapterwise pinpointing the main ideas in each chapter followed by a short critique of the ideas and scope of the book.

The first chapter presents the general theoretical foundations on which the author bases her argument. She begins with discussing the concept of “point of view” in works of fiction and its impact on the orientation of the readers, consciously or unconsciously, towards

the “feel of the text”. She also argues that scholars of narratology, stylistics and literary criticism have discussed this point in detail, but little attention was paid to the impact of translation on the point of view of a work of fiction. Translators, she maintains, leave their imprint (or what she calls “discursive presence” (p.23)) on the works they translate due to personal, ideological or cultural reasons, and the extent of modification of the point of view of the original text can vary once transferred from a source language into a target language. Not only that, such modification can vary from one translation to another even of the same text. In order to prove her argument, the author takes the above-mentioned novels and studies their translations into French by different translators. Her analysis is based on computer-assisted corpora studies and hinges on investigating four concepts: deixis, modality, transitivity, and free indirect discourse.

The point of view of a work of fiction is the perspective that the novelist adopts to shape the fictional world from a particular angle whereby the readers are “given access to the world of the fiction through a person’s view of the fictionally created work” (p. 15). The author maintains that although narratology and forensic stylistics pay much attention to point of view in fictional works, little has been done in that respect with reference to translation. That is to say, narratology deals with point of view irrespective of whether the work of fiction is in its original language or translated from another language. However, the author stresses that a translator does have presence in the text s/he translates, and this presence is manifested by the selection of certain linguistic elements and structures, consciously or not, and the main issue here is to see why and how such elements were chosen and the extent to which the translator’s choices have an impact on the “feel of the text”. For this reason, the author attempts to set a model of inspecting the issue of how translators transform or transpose point of view into the target language, and this model derives its basic elements from narratological, stylistic, linguistic and translation studies.

In the second chapter, the author discusses the different categories of point of view, which determine the feel of the text. She

selects deixis, modality and transitivity as 'layers of the multilayered notion of point of view' (p. 53) as well as of 'communication process' (p. 35). She starts with deixis or the spatio-temporal point of view. Deictic elements are used for pointing and referring; they are "ways of selecting objects from any represented environment in order to draw someone's attention to them" (p.28) and can be linguistic or non-linguistic. "Deixis", as seen here, "deals essentially with relations in space and time and is always seen from an individual's perspective" (ibid.), and as far as works of fiction are concerned, "[it] refers to the orientation of text in relation to time, place and personal participants" (p. 31). The indicators are personal pronouns, tense and adverbs of time, adverbs of place and other locatives. As for modality, i.e. the linguistic features reflecting the speaker's attitudes towards a proposition, the author follows mainly Halliday's definition, and looks at modality as an interpersonal approach to point of view. She also follows Paul Simpson's classification of modality or modal systems: deontic modality (attitudes expressed by use of modal auxiliary verbs), boulomaic modality (expressions related to the speaker's wishes or desires, e.g. 'I hope/regret', etc.), epistemic modality (expressions showing the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of a proposition, e.g. 'He might be wrong', 'evidently', etc), and perception modality (expressions showing that the degree of speaker's 'commitment to the truth of the proposition is based on human perception and, more particularly, visual perceptions'(p. 38), e.g. 'It is clear that he is wrong'). The third layer is transitivity, which, according to the author, 'refers to the way meaning is represented in a clause [and] the function to transmit information between the members of societies' (p. 44). It 'shows how the speakers encode their mental picture of reality in language and how they account for their experience of the world that surrounds them'(p. 45) through verb phrases and noun phrases in clauses, which express semantic processes and participants (being the essential parts of clauses) and also circumstantial references (as complementary parts of clauses). These processes are divided into five categories: material processes (expressed by verbs of doing), mental processes (verbs of thinking and perceiving), perception processes (seeing and hearing), affection

processes (liking, hating), and processes of cognition (thinking, understanding). An additional point to this is the discussion of transitivity vis-a-vis ergativity as techniques of expressing voice. The last point discussed in chapter two is free indirect discourse and its position with reference to translation. So far as Woolf's fiction is concerned, free indirect discourse in this context can be taken to mean 'a choice medium for revealing a fictional mind suspended in an instant present, between a remembered past and an anticipated future' (p. 119). The author generally elaborates different types of discourse: direct speech, indirect speech and free indirect speech; the last one is the most important in the argument as it suits the narrative techniques (interior monologue and stream of consciousness) used by Woolf in her two novels in hand. The author reflects an awareness of the complexity of these techniques and the potential problems involved particularly while trying to translate a text and aiming to preserve point of view and the feel of the text.

Having discussed the idea of focalisation in the second chapter, the author moves on to explain the methodology of applying the above-mentioned techniques to the novels and their translations in the third chapter. Here, *The Waves* and its translations (two translations by Marguerite Yourcenar 1937, and Cecile Wajsbrot 1993) and *To the Lighthouse* (three translations by Maurice Lanoire 1929, Magali Merle 1993, and Franoise Pellan 1996) are investigated using corpus-based techniques and computer software. Deixis, modality and transitivity are investigated in *The Waves*, while free indirect discourse is studied in *To the Lighthouse*. The employed techniques of corpus investigation are: 1) type/token ratio: a token is a sequence of 'characters delimited by space' (p. 72) and is also known as a 'running word'; 2) mean/average sentence length; and 3) lexical density/variety. The programmes used for this investigation are Wordsmith Tools and Multiconcord. These programmes facilitated the author's task of finding specifically chosen words and phrases in the corpus of the novels and their translations, which the researcher had already set by managing first to get the texts converted into Word documents. These procedures make the model proposed by the author easier and more

precise; yet, she acknowledges the necessity of the human hand in selecting the relevant examples since the computer stands helpless in, for example, distinguishing polysemy.

The fourth chapter starts with a brief glance at Virginia Woolf, her techniques, her works, and the novels (as well as their translations) discussed in the book. She then sets out to investigate deixis, modality and transitivity in *The Waves* and free indirect discourse in *To the Lighthouse*. The premises of the discussion are that the feel of the text can be investigated by looking at the linguistic choices of the original author and of the translators and the strategies followed by the translators to convey what is there in the original. And this can be determined by the data collected and based on the corpus driven approach.

Chapters five and six present case studies of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* respectively. In the former, she collects data as to how the translators of this novel translated certain expressions: e.g. exclamations (yes, oh and of course), interrogations (but why, but how), the temporal adverb (now) in combination of the past tense and conditional, and adverbs denoting inward debate and (un)certainly (surely, certainly, and perhaps). The selection of the examples is based on the idea that Woolf's novel advocates personality and subjectivity, and the findings of the case study proved that there are instances of transposition on free indirect discourse which (even if they are few in number) have some impact on the feel of the text in general, and that the tendency to transpose expressions of free indirect discourse is more in Merle's translation than in Pellan's. Lanoire also transposed some expressions from free indirect discourse into indirect discourse and/or direct discourse, and her translation all-in-all 'gives less direct access to the thoughts of the focalising characters' (p. 158) than Merle's and Pellan's. Pellan's translation is estimated to be the closest to the original. On the other hand, in *The Waves*, deixis is studied through the repetitions of the locative and temporal adverbs (here, there, now and then), and the emphatic use of the personal pronoun I 'in order to see whether the translator's linguistic choices affect the narratological

structure of the novel' (p. 118). Modality is investigated through the repetitive use of modal verbs expressing notions of necessity, obligation, possibility and permission, as well as two *verba sentiendi*, i.e. to feel and to know and also to seem and as if. Finally, transitivity and ergativity are 'examined to see how the characters' experiences are encoded in the clause and if the translators' choices of structures affect characterisation' (ibid.): here, the author has selected certain verbs of material processes (break, cast, catch, drop, fling, move, open, pull, push, shatter, shut, tumble, and turn). The final result of the investigation indicates that 'both translators of TW (i.e. *The Waves*) have left their imprint on the texts in very different ways' (p. 221-222), substantiating Mona Baker's argument that individual translators have their specific touches on the translated text (Bosseaux 2001: 82) and Rachel May's conclusion that 'the translator represents a separate owner-creator with respect to the text' (qtd. in Bosseaux 2001: 222).

The book ends with the conclusion, summarizing the achievements made through the study and proposing ideas for future research in this area. Generally speaking, the book is useful in the sense that it offers a model of analysing fictional works with reference to empirical data based on corpus studies and assisted with computer software. This makes the study and its findings more objective than otherwise. Other studies of the translation of literature focus less on language itself and pay more attention to other considerations, such as the effect of translated works on a specific literature. And even if language is studied, the judgments drawn may boil down to impressionistic conclusions and judgements. It is only through inductive methods that a translation quality can be plausibly measured. This book serves as a practical model using criteria from narratology, linguistics, computer science, and corpus studies, all directed towards the study of fictional works. The author's choice of Virginia Woolf's novels is interesting as well as challenging. Woolf, like the other modernists, made experimentations with her novels. The philosophy in her novels seems to lie more on the structure of presenting the ideas, the punctuation, and the repetition than on other considerations in such a manner as to echo her revolt against the Victorian concepts of

realism and verisimilitude and to assure her affinity with the avant-gard Modernists. This is a double-edged weapon. The conversational nature of her novels (whether in terms of interior monologue or dialogue or telepathy) makes it possible to penetrate the character's mind, but can the workings of human mind be fully grasped even in reading novels in the original language, let alone their translation? Besides, selecting specific lexical and grammatical items cannot be taken for granted as the only index of point of view nor the feel of the text. The book, useful as it is, still has some limitations. It is successful in realizing what it aims at, i.e. comparatively studying point of view and proving through objective criteria that it gets affected through translation; hence the feel of the text. The idea that individual translators have their special touches while translating (due to considerations known to them, e.g. cultural, structural, political, ideological, etc.) is not new, and the criteria taken up as touchstones of comparison are not all about what a text is or how the fictional world is evoked in its totality. Meaning and making sense of the fictional world, Bosseaux concedes (p. 158), is still subject to interpretation, which is a concept that tends more to subjectivity. The last issue that may be raised is the validity of Bosseaux's model with reference to other languages: will it yield the same results as was the case between English and French? English and French have a lot in common, but will the case be the same between English and, say, Oriya, Hindi or Arabic? This still requires more research, because not only the structures are different between these languages, but also are the world-views and intellectual make-ups.

Finally, some mistakes can be noticed here and there in this otherwise well-written book that could have been avoided with a little more careful proofreading. For example:

P.35, 2nd para, line 13 : in order to the study the linguistic...

P.44, 2nd para, line 2 : to examine the feel of the text in the originals texts

P.73, 2nd para, line 6 : trends of linguistics shifts.

P.74, 1st para, line 7 : lower that

P.121, 2nd para, line 16 : and, finally, Finally, exclamations...

P.130, last para, line 11 : can be see in...

P.181 1st para, line 4 : for example,. if ..

P.190 last para, line 3 : this study highlight the fact that.

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