

Interpretation: A Merging of Voices and Bodies in the Performance of Translation

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This paper attempts a new reading of the interpreting process through my perspective both as a professional interpreter and a literary scholar. I examine this "translation in performance" as a merging of voices and bodies which celebrates the interpreter's (non)presence. In simultaneous interpreting, the interpreter's body remains enclosed within the limited space of the interpreter's booth; it is only the voice that escapes through the cables to reach the audience's ears, thus covering the speaker's voice and leading to a split of voices and bodies. The interpreter regains his body only in consecutive interpreting, when he is physically present. Nevertheless, again in this case, the interpreter is a non-presence that must remain invisible, although in full view. The body here is only a tool through which the speaker's body communicates his message. Nevertheless, the interpreter manages to establish a presence through his intervention in the speaker's body/text, thus erupting the pretense of an invisible practice.

In this paper I wish to discuss the complex nature of the interpreting process (performance, mediation, reproduction, manipulation) and the roles of interpreter, speaker and audience in their constant struggle to communicate. It is the multiplicity and diversity of the interpreting process that I wish to promote, manifested in the meaning of the word "interpret" which alludes both to the openness of language and the games of power involved in its manipulation.¹ An etymological approach to the term also reflects the complexity of the interpreting process; as Alfred Hermann suggests in his work "Interpreting in Antiquity": "irrespective of whether the

1. As the *Longman Dictionary* suggests "to interpret" means both "to understand the likely meaning of (a statement, action, etc.) [and] place a particular meaning on."

word 'interpretes' is derived from 'inter-partes' or 'inter-pretium,' the term designates the human mediator positioned between two parties or values, performing far more diverse activities than simply providing linguistic mediation between parties transacting business" (18).

Within this context, the interpreter is called upon to experience and perform a multiplicity of roles in his/her absence. The interpreter interprets/performs the textual body of the speaker and reproduces it in another physical and textual body in a self-annihilating process that celebrates the play of language. Included in, and at the same time excluded from, the scene of interpretation, the interpreter celebrates the paradox of the multiplicity and merging of absent/present voices and bodies performing their different/same texts simultaneously. What are the consequences of all this on the games of power involved in the ritual of an interpreting process?² Is the interpreter allowed any autonomy, does s/he partake of the power and knowledge involved in such a context?

The interpreter's laboring body, imprisoned in the enclosed space of the interpreters' booth, remains merely an absence for the audience; it is only the detached voice that can escape this physical constraint. It is through the voice that s/he establishes a presence. Identified with the spoken text, s/he is thus limited to the presence of a textual body, while totally wrested from a physical presence. Does Lawrence Venuti's suggestion, then, that "translation continues to be an invisible practice [...] rarely acknowledged" (1) find its full manifestation in the case of interpreting?

The interpreter's body, through its absence and the presence of his/her voice which is detached from the body, is turned into an illusion, an imaginary that inhabits the audience but is always physically absent. The physical absence is absolute when the interpreters' booth is not in the conference room; in these cases, it is usually somewhere above, with windows overlooking the room. It takes some time for the interpreter to discover the secret passageways that lead to the booths, which creates a Jane-Eyre effect on him/her who is called upon to discover the gothic attic in the Rochester Tower, and it turns into a mad-woman-in-the-attic effect once she establishes

2. Quite interestingly, Foucault, in his text "The Order of Discourse," refers to ritual as one of the "complex systems of restriction" that determine exchange and communication: "Ritual defines the qualification which must be possessed by individuals who speak (and who must occupy such-and-such a position and formulate such-and-such a type of statement, in the play of a dialogue, of interrogation or recitation); it defines the gestures, behavior, circumstances, and the whole set of signs which must accompany discourse; finally, it fixes the supposed or imposed efficacy of the words, their effect on those to whom they are addressed, and the limits of their constraining value" (62).

herself in the enclosure? This absolute invisibility of the interpreter reinforces the uncanny effect on the audience who can never establish a physical presence for the voice they receive from their earphones. The other case is a mobile, fold-away construction that is usually placed at the back of the conference room. In this case, the interpreter can be seen through the windows of the booth, but heard only through the earphones. It is the windows that establish contact with the audience and the speaker, and it is these windows that make him/her feel like a showpiece exhibited in a window-case, when members of the audience turn to look at him/her, perhaps because of the need to establish an actual body instead of an illusion, an imaginary that can never materialize. Nevertheless, in both cases, the presence of the interpreters does not visually disturb the conference proceedings or violate the law of silence and invisibility imposed upon the interpreting process.

However, the interpreter manages to transcend his/her inclusion in the enclosed space of the booth which marks the exclusion from the social event of the conference, and participate in the conference proceedings through his/her absence. This seems to take us back to the body/mind division. The body is absent from socialization, while the mind/voice is what develops into a social subject (Martin 26). The body remains within (the enclosure of the booth) and at the same time without the social event. Within, since it is located in the same space, therefore included, but without (excluded) as its enclosure forbids direct socialization.

Within the limited space of the booth, the interpreter is called upon to forward the process of communication through an interaction with the speaker and the audience in the conference room. However, there is no actual contact with the "other(s)" of this interaction. The necessary actors of communication are replaced by modern technology; the interpreters are called upon to interact with this voice they receive in their head from nowhere, to enter a dialogue with a physical body they may not be able to see, and a textual body they receive and have to reproduce and send back to the conference room, through a microphone, to an audience that looks at a voiceless speaking subject speaking in a bodiless voice. And what is more, the physical speaking body seems to ignore them; they are not there for the speaker or for the audience. The speaker goes on with his/her text, always negating the interpreter's presence, and consequently reinforcing the absence effect on the interpreter, who has to follow suit and play the established role of the invisible shadow, always "true" and "faithful" to its owner. As a result, the interpreter tends to lose him/herself in the discourse of the speaker, following the rhythm of his text, the order or chaos of his speech.

This split between body and voice that the interpreter experiences, even

if subconsciously, is further reinforced by the identification with the speaker. The interpreting process forces him/her to turn into the speaker's "shadow" as I mentioned earlier, "a faithful image of the body but of a lighter substance" as Otto Rank puts it in *The Double* (82). But for the interpreter, the speaker feels more like a double, rather than the shadow's master. His/her "I" is literally lost in the speakers' "I"s, since s/he uses the first person for every speaker on the podium. Thus, s/he tries to incorporate this "other" within so that s/he can become the "other" and speak for that "other," who has suddenly become the "one." Eye contact with the speaker is imperative, because of the need for contact with the body through which and for which s/he is speaking. The interpreter looks at his/her reflection in the speaking subject, and re-produces the reflection's utterances.

This unknown double, has to be fully incorporated before it is reproduced in translation. And it is not only the spoken or sometimes written text that is reproduced; it is also the speaker's body itself that is automatically reproduced by the interpreter, who seems to share the speaker's passion through gestures and body movements. Interpreters do perform the speakers' presentations; there are actually two presentations going on: that of the speaker on the podium and the one of the interpreter in the booth, who follows suit, automatically reinforcing contact with the physical and textual body.

The loss of the interpreter's self to the "other" is manifest in consecutive interpretation, where the interpreter suddenly establishes a physical presence. It is then that the interpreter's body escapes the private space of the booth, and becomes public. Both bodies are now present, and both voices. The black veil is lifted and the physical presence is revealed, but is it? Instead of simplifying things, this situation seems to make it even more complicated. The interpreter feels like the negative of a photograph, like a non-presence, again speaking for somebody else, and identifying with this "other," only this time contact is closer.

The major dilemma that arises for the interpreter in consecutive interpretation and reinforces the split between self and other is the (grammatical) person the interpreter has to use when speaking; will it be the first person, the "I" (which denotes the speaker) or the third person, the "s/he" (the one who is being spoken to)? The correct practice, whether within the enclosure of the booth or in full view, is to use the first person, that is, become an impersonation of the speaker. Quite often it is too difficult for the interpreter to be divested of his/her persona and become this other, so s/he oscillates between both first and third person pronouns and verbs, unable to be voluntarily fully divested of his/her identity. It seems that it is much easier to

make the choice from the inside, rather than from the outside. The enclosure of the booth facilitates the incorporation of the other's body and identity. Exposure makes it impossible to identify fully with a foreign body, when the interpreter's own body is manifest.

The question that arises, then, is how can the interpreter negate his/her own presence, and assimilate that of an "other"? However, this appears to be a false dilemma, since s/he cannot really negate something that is not, a non-presence? When s/he is speaking, his/her voice does not belong to his/her body; it belongs to the body of the speaker, and so does the interpreter's body, it seems; a corpus that is incorporated into another. It feels as though s/he is the negative of a photograph, present but actually absent from the scene, lost in the presence of the other's body, a battle and a merging of bodies and voices all present and absent simultaneously. When it is the interpreter's turn to speak, s/he does establish a presence, and it would seem that it is the speaker's (both physical and vocal) presence that is momentarily suspended.

But we should not forget that the interpreter is there as a non-presence, as I suggested earlier. S/he speaks without being spoken to, an invisible link in the communication chain. This invisibility is established when the event appears on television. It is there that s/he comes to realize that s/he is merely a voice-over, since most of the times s/he is cut from the shot, and left outside the camera lens. His/her absence is once again confirmed.

Could this be considered as the death of the "I" for the interpreter? The interpreter is suddenly caught in this game with texts, bodies, voices, where s/he has to experience the death of the self in order to give life to the double, to the other and his text. So, we are considering a death-and-life process; the interpreter negates the "I" and the physical body, and gives life to a new body - the textual body - by re-producing the text of the speaker. Thus, the continuous references to the objectivity of the interpreter, to his/her non-existence, to the inability to exert any form of control over the foreign textual body. The interpreter feels this as a violation, the violation of the physical body which is pierced by a foreign text and is forced to re-produce it, to reproduce this strange and sometimes foreign "signifier."

Interpreters, then, are supposed to remain mere vehicles of the speaker's text, subjugated or negated bodies divested of any form of power. The disciplined body, the restricted laboring body is obliged to remain faithful and accurate to the "other" textual body. But that is only in theory; in practice, the ambiguity of subjugation and power in language is manifest in this case as well. The very title of the profession "interpreter" alludes to the

semi-autonomy of the interpreter, to a freedom to intervene in the foreign body and manipulate it.

Here, it would be interesting to return to the origins of the word in Greek, *thi-ermineia*, which alludes to the ancient god Hermes (*Ermis-ermineia*), the messenger of the ancient Greek gods who worked as the mediator of their will. Socrates refers to the etymology of the name Hermes in Plato's *Cratylus* in the following words:

this name 'Hermes' seems to me to have to do with speech; he is an interpreter (*ερμηνεύς*) and a messenger, is wily and deceptive in speech, and is oratorical. All this activity is concerned with the power of speech. Now, as I said before, *εἶρειν* denotes the use of speech; moreover, Homer often uses the word *εμήσατο*, which means "contrive." (87)

Therefore, we are talking about a relationship with the divine, with a beginning, a relation with a god, but quite paradoxically this god mediates and communicates the word of others, without allowing access to the original and primary word. Hermes is language itself which hides the void, a death. As Socrates implies, he is not merely a messenger, but a thief and an impostor; he can manipulate discourse to achieve his objectives, as his name testifies: he exploits discourse, he manipulates it and transfers the god's messages in their absence. Consequently, Hermes' discourse suggests the death of the gods, the origin of discourse, and leads to an anarchy (lack of origin/authority in Greek), as this arche/authority/origin is lost behind his own discourse. But in the case of Hermes, we are talking about a double relation with death, because apart from the carrier of the discourse and consequently the death of the gods, he is also the soul-carrier, the god who is supposed to lead the souls to Hades, the underworld. Therefore, his presence itself is a message, the message of an imminent absence.

The same process of exploiting, manipulating discourse, and killing the origin/authority of discourse is experienced in the interpreting process. The speaker is physically present, but his/her text, the moment it leaves him/her, is manipulated, killed, and re-produced by the interpreter, a reproduction to which the speaker has no control. Words are omitted, sentences changed, meanings altered, since the simultaneous nature of the process and the speed of spoken discourse make faithfulness and accuracy - two imperatives in written translation - impossible. This manipulation by the interpreter can even reach the extreme point of censorship, a censorship that is either requested by the organizers, or considered necessary by the interpreter for political, cultural or other reasons.

It seems that the shadow has suddenly acquired a life of its own, an autonomy, and it has come to challenge its owner. This idea of the double, as Otto Rank informs us, may have started from the concept of the preservation of the ego, but in the course of its history it turned into its opposite, that is the ego's extinction. Freud refers to Otto Rank's approach in his text "The Uncanny":

This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is found of representing castration by a doubling or multiplication of a genital symbol. The same desire led the Ancient Egyptians to develop the art of making images of the dead in lasting materials. Such ideas, however, have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man. But when this stage has been surmounted, the 'double' reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. (356-57)

The interpreter, then, very much like the shadow in Andersen's fairy tale, which not only escapes the dominance of its master but, having established a much more powerful and successful identity, comes to challenge its previous owner; quite significantly, the story ends with the master being executed, after being accused and found guilty of having gone mad and believing itself to be a person (Rank 11).

The speaker, then, is severed from his/her textual body, in the same way that the interpreter is severed from his/her physical body. Interpretation is there to underline the elusive character of speech, its non-belonging. As Derrida puts it,

That speech and writing are always unavowably taken from a reading is the form of the original theft, the most archaic elusion, which simultaneously hides me and *purloins* my powers of inauguration. The *letter*, inscribed or propounded speech, is always stolen. Always stolen because it is always *open*. (178)

So, it is this openness that the process of interpretation foregrounds, by focusing on the stolen quality of speech.

Now, to go to the third party of the interpreting process, the audience. One wonders how the audience experiences this split: a body speaking with another's voice; the speechless body is present while the speaking body is absent, coming from the unknown. This merging of voices and bodies is experienced by the audience as another split, between what the eye can see

and what the ear can receive. This situation becomes even more intriguing when the speaking body is gesturing and speaking passionately, and the audience can hear the quietest and calmest of voices coming out of their earphones and dressing this highly animated body.

This uncanny effect on the audience is further reinforced by the time delay. Everything is delayed, for an audience split in two: those who can understand the speaker and those who have to hear the speech from the translation. Jokes play twice, once for those who understand and a second time, considerably later, for those who hear the interpretation. In the case of President Putin, the reporter involved in the incident received the President's invitation three days after its delivery, and indirectly (through a news programme on television). So, even if he had wanted to make use of it, it would have been too late.

At times, however, the audience is not satisfied with the role of the passive receiver, and they intervene in the interpretation, by making comments on the interpreted text. This intervention seems to blow up the entire process, since the law of silence in interpretation is violated and, from an invisible procedure, interpretation suddenly comes to the forefront and regains its lost visibility. Through this explosion, all participants enter a dialogue on the interpreting process (the speaker from the podium, the audience from their chairs, and the interpreter from her enclosure). It is at these moments when the game of interpretation is celebrated and all absences/presences can establish their role in the performance.

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