

Comics and Translation: Introduction

Tilman Altenberg

Ruth J. Owen

Comics are extremely culturally mobile: since their rise to popularity in the early twentieth century, comics have travelled extensively and with increasing ease across linguistic and cultural borders. This themed issue of *New Readings* examines the translation practices that have facilitated this cultural mobility. Some comics characters are part of a cultural heritage that has never been confined to a specific language. Some comics have found their primary audience in a country or language that is not their makers' own. For the disciplines of comics studies and translation studies, the prevalence of translated comics demands consideration of all the facets relevant to text-only translation, plus the unique facets raised by comics' multimodality, the "co-deployment and interplay" (Zanfei 60) of language and images. Meaning in comics is created at the conjunction of written text, drawings and blank space, with the readers and the culture. Undertaking to translate that meaning can entail: rewriting text with no redrawing, rewriting text with partial redrawing, rewriting text with complete redrawing, or retaining the text with complete redrawing.

Frequently, comics are produced by a creative team, involving at least one writer and one graphic artist but often larger teams, in which a translator becomes one of several collaborators in an industrial production process (Duncan, Smith and Levitz 268). As articles in this journal issue point out, Lawrence Venuti's concept of the translator's invisibility in the US-American context is instructive for comics translation globally, where the "practice of reading and evaluating" (1) has concealed the status of comics as translations. This invisibility seems to apply more markedly because "the combination of image and text in comics is contested ground from the point of view of definitions" (Postema 101). Translating comics affects, in principle, the entire repertoire of expressive means in both verbal and visual modes, as well as the ways in which they interact. Even the linguistic translation of comics has some distinct practical issues: spatial issues akin to those in subtitling, to do with fitting the new language into the extant text boxes and speech balloons. But modifying or replacing the drawn artwork can also be considered comics translation, if "All the 'languages' used by comics can be 'translated' within and/or between semiotic systems" (Zanettin, "Comics in Translation" 12). In a workflow where the decisions taken and tasks carried out involve a range of specialists, each focusing on a specific step in the translation process (widely understood), the linguistic translator may well be only one of several agents of a

collaborative effort to recast a given comic for a new audience (cf. O'Sullivan 7) and not even legitimately termed the 'translator proper'.

The articles in this themed issue are indicative not only of the complexity of the medium and the myriad issues involved in translating comics, but also of the diversity of angles from which comics translation can be studied. In an overview of comics translation as an academic focus, Federico Zanettin compares it to software localisation. He ends his essay by asserting,

the study of translated comics may provide useful insights into an understanding of translation as a complex process of intercultural communication, involving quite a few people and much more than simply the replacement of written text in speech balloons. ("Comics in Translation Studies" 97)

Articles here seek to tease out for analysis aspects making up that complex process. There is, after all, no sense in which we would normally consider translating a painting or drawing (although its title be silently translated in displays and reference books), despite the fact that visual art continuously constructs, clips, redeploys and refashions extant images and motifs. Will Eisner's classic definition of comics form as "sequential art" alerts us to the difference, namely the comics' narrative or plotting. Complete re-drawing might then be akin to the adaptation of a play, and translation in drama close to translation in comics, because of the interplay between a translated speech-based script and a visual performance. Two articles in this journal issue focus on the translating of the visual in comics, the graphics and the typefaces, respectively; four on the translation of the verbal in the processes of adapting, abridging and localising text. All, especially in conjunction, raise the issue of who the comics translator is: a graphic artist, an editor, or a letterer, rather than an author, or some combination of all these.

Complete redrawing is addressed, the graphic artist as translator, in the opening article by Rachel Weissbrod and Ayelet Kohn on two serialised comics from the 1930s and 1940s, which were republished in book format with new artwork in 2013. Weissbrod and Kohn examine the complex relations that emerge between the new versions and the sources, the visual and the verbal modes, and the newly illustrated comics and their visual intertexts. Although in both cases the verbal text in Hebrew has been carried over from the serialised comics, the balance between what has been transferred, on the one hand, and the shifts created by the books' new illustrations, on the other, differ significantly in each case. The article assesses how the translator-illustrators instil new life into preserved, but otherwise forgotten texts by a highly regarded poet.

Highlighting the visual effect of text in comics and the translation issues that can arise involves highlighting the letterer as translator. The article by William Spencer Armour and Yuki Takeyama examines the use of Japanese-language typefaces and their translation into English, by taking as an example a double page from popular shōnen manga *Bleach* by Tite Kubo. In a meticulously documented discussion, the article points out the different semiotic reach of typefaces in the languages

and cultures concerned. The case study suggests that, although the Japanese language offers a smaller reservoir of fonts for manga creators to choose from than languages written in the modern Latin alphabet, in Japanese manga the use of specific fonts is codified more clearly and exploited more systematically than in their English translations.

Japan, the largest and most varied comic book market in the world, is represented in three discussions in this themed issue. The second of these discusses material at the intersection of Shakespeare adaptation with English-language manga—translating the translation so to speak, in an ongoing chain, undertaken by a translation team. The British *Manga Shakespeare* series and its Brazilian translation is the focus of Márcia do Amaral Peixoto Martins's article. Taking the example of *Romeo and Juliet*, the article examines how Shakespeare's tragedy has been translated twice on its transition from English-language drama to Portuguese-language manga. The article shows the translational function of shifting the setting from Renaissance Italy to contemporary Japan, reproducing key lines from Shakespeare's play, translating for a young readership more familiar with comics conventions than with classical drama, and framing the text with the Brazilian paratexts.

Similar in many ways to the *Manga Shakespeare* series, which continues a long-standing tradition of popularising literary classics by adapting them to the comics medium, the titles published in a series like *Books for Beginners* aim to make canonical thinkers and their principal works accessible to a wider audience. Nayelli Castro's article here, written in Spanish, examines the 2013 Spanish translation of a Japanese manga adaptation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762), paying due regard to its complex relationship with the philosopher's reception in Japan and in the Spanish-speaking world. After retracing the history of the source text's translations, rewritings and appropriations into Japanese and Spanish, the article considers this intersemiotic version of Rousseau's classic work as a refraction of an 'original' and 'canonical' Rousseau. The article argues that the Spanish manga can be read as a complex translation, which synthesises and rewrites Rousseau's work both visually and linguistically.

Highlighting the identity of the narrative voice in a translated comic corresponds to the translation being the result not only of a translator's work in a target language but of the workings of a receiving culture. Sarah Viren embarks on a critical reading of the way in which the gendered "we" in Maitena Burundarena's comic *Women on the Edge* (Sp. *Mujeres alteradas*) has been rendered for readers in the United States and Spain, respectively. Viren's article shows that the English translation for the US market and the version published in Spain coincide in their emphasis on Burundarena's gender, while downplaying her country of origin and the comic strip's rootedness in Argentine culture. However, the myth of a universal female experience suggested in the translations of *Mujeres alteradas*, rests on the false assumption of a common language shared by all women and neutralises cultural differences. Deploying the concept of localisation, the article contends that both translations examined bend narratives of gender to fit local markets in a global world where gender is increasingly exportable and commodified.

Approaching comics translation through the practice of an individual text translator of a corpus of comics, the final article is built around an interview. Taking selected statements from that interview as a starting point and prompt, Isabelle Guillaume illuminates Lili Sztajn's practice as a comics translator from English into French and the implications of her practice for translation issues more widely. The article provides insight into working conditions in French comics translation from the 1970s to the present, many of which also have a bearing on other contexts. The examples of specific linguistic challenges encountered—among them multilingualism, intertextuality, profanity, slang and censorship—are taken from Sztajn's translations of works by acclaimed comics artists Robert Crumb, Alison Bechdel and Posy Simmonds. The article concludes with a brief discussion of Sztajn's advocacy of foreignisation and some of the implications of this strategy in a professional context that subscribes predominantly to the opposite view.

There is no single history of comics translation, but rather many national and formal and thematic histories. Rather than being lured into thinking that infinite generalisations can be made, we actually need to begin with small clusters of individual translations and that is what these articles do. The contributions here are case studies of specific acts of comics translation within clearly circumscribed cultural contexts. Together they examine the comics translator's practices as a graphic artist, a letterer, an author, an editor, a team. Many more case studies such as these are needed—from as wide a range of languages and comics genres as possible—in order to theorise the varied, versatile and dynamic practice of comics translation.

Works Cited

- Duncan, Randy, Matthew J. Smith, and Paul Levitz. *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Print.
- Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Tamarac: Poorhouse, 1985. Print.
- O'Sullivan, Carol. "Introduction: Multimodality as Challenge and Resource for Translation." *Translating Multimodalities*. Ed. Carol O'Sullivan and Caterina Jeffcote. Spec. issue of *JoSTrans* 20 (2013): 2–14. Web. 10 July 2015.
- Postema, Barbara. *Narrative Structure in Comics*. Rochester: RIT Press, 2013. Print.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Zanettin, Federico. "Comics in Translation: An Overview." *Comics in Translation*. London: Routledge, 2008. 1–32. Print.
- . "Comics in Translation Studies: An Overview and Suggestions for Research." *Actas do VII Seminário de Tradução Científica e Técnica em Língua Portuguesa – 2004: Tradução e Interculturalismo*. Lisbon: União Latina, 2005. 93–98. Print.
- Zanfei, Anna. "Defining Webcomics and Graphic Novels." *International Journal of Comic Art* 10.1 (2008): 55–61. Print.

Create comics and graphic novels that jump off the screen. DA Muro. Paint a picture. Experiment with DeviantArt's own digital drawing tools. Add to Favourites. Comment. See More by ZoeShroomie. More like this. ES(CHS translation): Introduction. 3. 5. 699 (1 Today). By ZoeShroomie |. Watch. Published: July 6, 2018. "Comics in Translation: An Overview." Comics in Translation. London: Routledge, 2008. 1-32. Print. -. "Comics in Translation Studies: An Overview and Suggestions for Research." Actas do VII Seminário de Tradução Científica e Técnica em Língua Portuguesa -2004: Tradução e Interculturalismo. Reissued with a new introduction, in which the author provides a clear, detailed account of key concepts and arguments in order to issue a counterblast against simplistic interpretations, The Translator's Invisibility takes its well-deserved place as part of the Routledge Translation Classics series. This book is essential reading for students of translation studies at all levels. View. Show abstract. Multimodality as challenge and resource for translation. Article. Full-text available. Comics and Translation: Introduction. Tilmann Altenberg, Ruth J. Owen. Published: 1 January 2015. by Cardiff University Press. in New Readings. New Readings , Volume 15; doi:10.18573/newreadings.100. Publisher Website.