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**Professor Piotr Blumczynski,
Doctor of Translation, Professor of Translation
and Intercultural Studies,
Director of the Centre for Written and Oral Translation,
Queen's University, Belfast, UK**

TRANSLATION AS EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

Translation has traditionally been viewed as a process of transferring meanings and messages either within a single language (rewording, or intralingual translation) or between different languages (interlingual translation). The latter practice, labelled by R. Jakobson «translation proper» [4, p. 233], has conventionally been held as a conceptual centre of gravity for the discipline of Translation Studies. While intersemiotic translation was also included in Jakobson's classification, for decades there was a consensus among scholars that translation used in relation to non-textual entities (for example, people, objects, places, emotions, and so on) constitutes a metaphorical extension of the interlingual prototype. «Real» or «proper» translation was invariably concerned with languages and texts; people and objects could only be «translated» figuratively. Such a prototype of translation is effectively disembodied: it is a series of mental operations that cannot be observed directly but only in their verbal manifestation.

Recent years have brought a radical challenge to this view. From a biosemiotic perspective, it has been argued that «translation is the process of constructing complex semiotic relationships between living organisms and nature, between living organisms and other living organisms and between living organisms and artifact» [7, p. 69]. In short, to live is to translate, and awarding a privileged status to textual transmission demonstrates a «lingual bias».

Meanwhile, the central status of (inter)lingual translation has also been questioned, based – somewhat ironically – on linguistic data in which translation has been historically linked to the body and to the material domain

[1; 3]. The English words *to translate* and *translation* are derived from the Latin verb *transfero*, meaning «carry over» or «carry across». Latin did not have separate words to describe the movement of objects and the «movement» of meanings or words: the latter figurative use (indicated here by inverted commas) was a metaphorical extension of the former physical, material, and literal sense. The early uses of *transfero* and *translatio* in Latin (and their counterparts in a broad range of languages which have borrowed these words) are revealing because of their specific reference to the movement of bodies. Since the early Middle Ages in Latin, and from at least 14th century in English, *transfer(o)* and *translatio(n)* described not only (inter)lingual transfer of ideas and texts (in which the movement is imagined), but also the action of physically conveying or moving a person or thing from one place or position to another [3, p. 10–14]. There are good reasons to take this physical, material sense as primary, both in historical and conceptual terms. If abstract concepts draw on more basic, physical, and sensory experiences, then it must be admitted that people and things were translated long before texts [3, p. 13].

Two highly specialised senses of translation, strongly connected to embodiment, described the action of (a) relocating a Church official to a new seat and (b) moving the dead body or relics of a saint, ruler, or other significant person [2; 3]. Tracing ancient and medieval, religious, and cultural practices of translation – the ceremonial movement of officials and sacred objects [3, p. 45–143] – allows us to appreciate a range of aspects of translation that may otherwise be ignored or misunderstood.

Viewing translation as a predominantly material phenomenon involving bodies (rather than as a mental process operating on abstract linguistic and textual material) is an innovative approach that is slowly working its way into mainstream Translation Studies. It has been embraced by a growing number of studies and successfully applied to migration [2; 8], arts [6; 7], and indigenous epistemology [9]. More research into various dimensions of embodiment in different cultural settings is needed as we progress towards growing a fuller understanding of translation in all its complexity.

References

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