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Translation Studies Forum: Representing experiential knowledge

Editorial note

Below are two additional, collaborative responses to our latest Forum on translating experiential knowledge. The author of the original provocation piece, Şebnem Susam-Saraeva, has also kindly provided a closing contribution which seeks to wrap up these stimulating exchanges. The issues raised in the discussion have attracted a lot of attention and we hope that the debate will not end here. Indeed, the editors would at any time welcome full-length submissions taking the various threads highlighted in this Forum in new directions.



Response by Kotze and Strowe to “Representing experiential knowledge”

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In March 2021, a (social) media furore over the suitability of the translators of Amanda Gorman’s poem “The Hill We Climb” erupted, prompted by an opinion piece by Dutch activist Janice Deul. Deul (2021) questioned the choice of Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, a novelist and poet, as Dutch translator of the poem, asking whether this would not have been a good opportunity to hire a translator who was, as she put it, a young Black woman and a spoken word poet like the source author. In the debate that ensued, this was frequently misinterpreted/-represented as a statement that nobody *but* a young, Black, female spoken word poet could translate the text (see Kotze 2021 for discussion).

A critical analysis of this case highlights a comparatively neglected aspect of the question posed by Susam-Saraeva in her Forum piece. When we ask “who *may* translate whom?” or “who has *‘the right’* to translate/interpret/represent whom?” (Susam-Saraeva 2021, 84; emphasis added), those questions, while important and worthwhile, risk obscuring other questions about the agency of decision-making and the power dynamics involved. The language used around this debate hides some of the institutional and social forces and the power structures relevant to the discussion; we need both a careful investigation of the implications of questions about who *can*, *may*, or *should*

translate and a discussion of the structural elements of society and institutions that facilitate those modalities.

The Forum provocation and previous responses focus on these modalities around the verb “translate”. Susam-Saraeva (2021) asks whether someone without similar experiential knowledge *can translate* the texts about pregnancy and birth that she examines, in terms of the translator’s ability to do justice to the corporeal, experiential, embodied knowledge that the text encodes. Similarly, Henitiuk and Mahieu (2021) explore how a translator’s lack of experiential knowledge leads to distortions in the re-encoding of a text. The modality of permission, who *may translate*, is also explored at this level, in terms of the sense of those being represented that they are comfortable authorising a particular translator to represent them (or not). Pregnant women may feel that they are not well represented by a translator who has not experienced pregnancy, which may come into conflict with the permission to translate granted to a particular translator by the publisher or copyright holder. These judgements around permission most often also depend on an assessment of the ability of the potential translator. The question of who *should translate* draws then on both of these, as well as on external ethical concerns regarding whose assessment of *can* and *may* are to be prioritised, as we see in Shread (2021).

All of these concerns, however, are essentially “local” to the translator and their engagement with the single text, or to the transmission of the single text itself. At most, as with Shread’s analysis of the postcolonial context of her translation or Henitiuk and Mahieu’s discussion of the feelings of the Inuit authors regarding who translates their stories, the translator’s decisions about *should* are influenced by knowledge of the wider political or social situation. Discussions of *can/may/should translate*, however, are all still perceived primarily in relation to the individual, including their relation to the text and their understanding of the context, and the information contained in the text itself.

When a question then arises around whether a translator without particular experiential knowledge *can/may/should* translate a text involving that knowledge, responses tend to be equally local. At an individual professional level, because translators’ self-perception and perception of the task of translation involve their ability to research and learn about new topics in order to be able to translate them, the suggestion that there is knowledge that cannot be acquired intellectually through research, but must be experienced and embodied, may be viewed as an affront. It effectively means that the individual translator’s ability is limited in a way that cannot be compensated for. In addition, because this concept of learning is built into the practice of translation, and because translation itself is often positioned as a way to acquire new knowledge about other cultures and modes of being, that same suggestion also has the potential to provoke scholarly ire. In the Gorman case, we see both professional translators and translation studies scholars framing their discussions around the value of learning in translation and translation as learning (e.g. Barrios 2021; Chakraborty 2021; van Doorslaer 2021).

While there is still much to unpack from the modalities themselves (including, for example, how ability is assessed, and to what extent different forms of knowledge are valued), what we want to focus on are the broader contextual factors and power structures that come into play around these modalities. These involve other key verbs as well as other subjects, and deserve, we argue, to be part of any discussion of who *can/may/should translate*. Because they focus on the local levels, many of the discussions

around the translation of Gorman's text or of the idea of translating experiential knowledge, in general, seem to draw a straight line from individual ability to a "right" to translate. These discussions side-step the fact that there are usually many translators who *can* translate a text – that is, either self-assess as able to complete the translation or are assessed as such by others – but that they will not all be granted the translation commission, and usually none has any abstract "right" to be given the task. In the discussion of experiential knowledge in translation we must examine not only how the value of experiential knowledge is perceived and acknowledged, and how such knowledge is performed in translation (and related actions such as secondary witnessing), but also how translation tasks are allocated, distributed, and recognised. In other words, we also need to consider which social, economic, political, and institutional forces and agents are involved in *choosing* who will translate. This is in our view a pressing (if not the most pressing) dimension of the question of "who can or may translate" – who is given opportunity, institutional permission, and endorsement to translate.

First, because the translations we are talking about are often part of a market industry, the perception of the importance of knowledge, experiential or otherwise, is impacted by considerations that may have nothing to do with translation, experience, or language. In the case of the Dutch translation of Gorman's poem, the publisher Meulenhoff chose as its translator Rijnveld, a poet and Booker Prize-winning novelist who not only does not share Amanda Gorman's experience of being a young black woman in a predominantly white country, but also, by their own admission, is not particularly good at English (Wittman 2020), and has never published a translation (van Rooijen 2021). The "right" to translate here, or rather the choice of a translator for publication, would seem to be based not on subject knowledge (experiential or otherwise), genre expertise, or translation expertise, but on marketability (see also Kotze 2021).

An additional, interrelated factor is the structural inequalities that exist within publishing, related to the (under-)representation of minority/minoritised groups. The lack of diversity in the translation (and publishing) industry in many contexts is widely acknowledged (see Daum 2021; ELV News 2021; Society of Authors 2021). A translator will not be given an opportunity if they are not able to access the space in which opportunities exist. The imperative of marketability, combined with the structural (under-)representation of minority/minoritised groups in publishing, conspire to create a situation in which existing structural inequalities have a high likelihood of being reproduced in choices about who *will*, if not who *should*, translate. The question of who can (or may) represent thus arises, by and large, because structurally, institutionally, and politically, the translation and interpreting industry lacks representativeness.

When we consider then the notion of "secondary witnessing", a powerful concept with undeniable implications for translation, we must ask not only whether a translator is able to serve as a secondary witness, but what kinds of structures encourage particular people to take on this role or discourage or prohibit them from doing so. These power dynamics appear in the usual directionality of this kind of discussion, where individuals from majoritised, central groups are permitted/encouraged/paid to witness the stories of individuals from minoritised, marginalised groups. It is telling that in many of the examples in the Forum as well as the Gorman case, the experiences in question are those of marginalised groups, and the translator in the position of attempting to inhabit them is not a member of the group. Because of the lack of diversity in the industry, situations in

which the experiences of marginalised groups are translated by people who are not members of such groups are common. And here, of course, we also come back to the issue of the value placed on experiential knowledge; the experiential knowledge of marginalised groups is often seen as a type of knowledge that can be acquired by anyone. It is these dynamics that underlie the situation in which members of the majoritised community are positioned as potential secondary witnesses.

Questions of who can and may translate thus need to be considered not only from the abstract perspective of whether translators are able to represent such knowledge or inhabit others' experience, and have the right to. We need to consider who is given the opportunity, structurally and institutionally speaking, to do so – and what this tells us about who has the power to speak/represent, and who is spoken about/represented. Representativeness needs to be considered as much as representation, and the question who *should* translate needs to be seen not only as a reflection of the ethical imperatives of responsibility towards the text, author, client, and audience at the local level, but also as a reflection of the ethical imperative to establish a more equitable and representative translation and publishing industry, in contexts characterised by inequality. From expanding beyond the local modalities of translation, we thus find that we must examine a number of other questions surrounding the translation of experiential knowledge: not simply “who may translate whom”, but “who authorizes these modalities for whom, and based on what structural features or assumptions?”

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Response by Choi, Evans and Kim to "Representing experiential knowledge"

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Şebnem Susam-Saraeva's original Forum piece addresses the question of *who may translate whom*. Starting with a focus on experiential knowledge, i.e. knowledge learned through lived experience, she quickly moves on to questions related to "racial, ethnic, sexuality and gender-based identities" (2021, 85). These identities, following and expanding on Susam-Saraeva's point, are grounded in bodily and lived experiences, which may themselves be viewed positively, for example positive sexual experiences, or as more negative experiences ranging from micro-aggressions to outright abuse. Susam-Saraeva is right to highlight the complexity of sharing and translating lived forms of knowledge. The debates of whether such complexity is "fully" appreciated in translation are commonly witnessed in various cultural contexts. A notable Korean case would be the debates of the first of the two Korean translations of the Korean-American author Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995). The novel explores Korean immigrants'