

# Part V Introduction

## Expertise in Translation

*Sven Dupré*

Translation is an epistemic practice. In the wake of the seminal work on the cultural history of translation initiated by Peter Burke, the field of the history of science and medicine has shifted towards discussing practices of translation.<sup>1</sup> Instead of asking about the “fidelity” or “faithfulness” of a translation (previously thought of as a copy or replica of an original), the focus on translation has allowed historians of science and medicine to scrutinize the changes and transformations of knowledge in motion. We no longer look at these processes of translation as betrayals of the original, but as processes productive of knowledge.

Against the “illusion of linguistic transparency” (in the words of Lawrence Venuti), making the translator invisible, the agency of translators is key in processes of epistemic translation. Yet, as Venuti has argued, “all translation, regardless of genre or text type, including translation that seeks to register linguistic and cultural differences, is an interpretation that fundamentally domesticates the source text.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, not all translators become visible nor is all translators’ agency recognized. Paying attention to the ethics and politics of translation highlights that translation is a process of inclusion and exclusion. The contributors to this section scrutinize the conditions under which translators become visible or remain invisible.

A focus on translation can reveal silenced, marginalized, and multilingual voices without falling into the trap of repeating the binary logic of translation as a movement between distinct languages or cultures. But we should also acknowledge that translation is destructive, and that translation is as much about silencing the voices of translators of all sorts—such as local informants—and erasing knowledge as it is about creating new knowledge. Importantly, Marwa Elshakry has shown how the strategies of translators and attitudes towards translations have depended upon ideas of the nature of science, which were also shaped by geopolitical factors.<sup>3</sup> In a recent essay on a new global history of science, James Delbourgo relates this anecdote:

When Sultan bin Salman of Saudi Arabia left Earth on the shuttle *Discovery* in 1985, the prince became the first Arab and first Muslim astronaut in space. In preparing for this flight, NASA officials were unsure how this cross-cultural collaboration would work, so they invited personnel from the oil company Aramco to provide bin Salman's American colleagues with a one-day seminar in Saudi culture. "When people heard about Saudi Arabia, ... they would have perhaps been reminded of Lawrence of Arabia, of camels and sand, of harems and sultans and princes and sheikhs. A lot of Americans didn't quite know what to make of a Saudi astronaut. What kind of person would that be, and how do you integrate him as a crew member on a space shuttle?" In reality, this knowing Saudi prince had an MA in communications from the University of Denver, understood American culture, and spoke English rather better than the French astronauts associated with his mission. ... "But somehow ... NASA administrators had less worries about cultural misunderstandings with the French."<sup>4</sup>

Views on translation are colored by geopolitics, regardless of the historical period in which they occur. Translations, Ralph Bauer and Jaime Marroquín Arredondo have argued, were not "the happy product of multicultural cooperation conducted for the benefit of humanity at large"; rather, "they were deeply enmeshed in early modern geopolitics and sociopolitics of conquest, imperial rivalry, and protonationalism."<sup>5</sup> European translations of Amerindian knowledge were highly dependent upon networks established by colonial authorities in the Americas, which included native sources of knowledge—for example, knowledge of the names and uses of local plants. However, the colonial character of cultural translation in the early Americas caused the voices of these native informants to be suppressed in the European publications. Bauer and Marroquín Arredondo adopt the term "transculturation," emphasizing the personal agency in translations, which they regard as "open and conflicting processes of negotiation across cultures."<sup>6</sup> That contrasts sharply with views of translation as encapsulation, resonating with the construction of the idea of Europe as the rightful heir to the Greek heritage, which underlies much scholarship on translation movements. Envisioning translation as transculturation holds the promise of reorienting the Eurocentric history of science and medicine.

In this section, Amos Bertolacci (Chapter 13) and Nicola Polloni (Chapter 14) both go the heart of one of the most important premodern translation movements, in twelfth-century Toledo. They bring out the teamwork involved in translation and describe how several translation teams collaborated and competed in the city. The choices of what and how to translate depended upon the institutional frameworks of which the translators were part, the identity and the aims of translators, and the intended audiences of the translations. Likewise, in her chapter

(16), Maria Auxent shows that Richard Eden's translation of Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia universalis* transformed it to make it serve the needs of the political environment in which it was designed to land.

All these chapters thus speak intricately to the new histories of translation written by Peter Burke, Laurence Venuti, Marwa Elshakry, James Delbourgo, Ralph Bauer, and Jaime Marroquín Arredondo. Some linguistic transformations did violence to the source texts. As Bertolacci shows, the Latin translations of Avicenna were selective, excluding most of his work in logic and mathematics, to create an image of Avicenna that was very different from its Arabic original and more in line with the philosophical identity of the translators and their intended audience. It is an instantiation of the destructive character of translation, and the entanglement of translation in geopolitics, that the translations of Avicenna also erased most of its Islamic elements.

Moreover, Bertolacci and Polloni focus on the collaborative character of translation. Collaboration was necessary, as translation teams had to rely on complementary linguistic expertise. In twelfth-century Toledo, Ibn Daud and Gundissalinus combined their knowledge of Arabic and Latin. However, as Polloni shows, they also used vernacular Castilian as their language of communication. This not only highlights the multilingual environment—often richer than just consisting of the languages of the source and destination texts—upon which translation depended, but also reveals the complex relationship of translation with orality and literacy. With reference to Michel Callon's work on the sociology of translation, Harold Cook approaches translation as the process of speaking on behalf of a concern, thus extending the meaning of translation to that of giving voice (by speaking on behalf of groups of humans, or in the case of Callon's research, even scallops), sometimes by displacing other voices. This once more underscores the destructive character that translations can have.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, in her chapter (15), Florence Hsia quotes Walter Ong's seminal work on orality and literacy: "Orality knows no lists or charts or figures."<sup>8</sup> Hsia scrutinizes the process of translation of celestial observations into tables, thereby showing how translation is embedded in a range of paper practices—that is, a much wider set of practices of reading and note-taking. The compilation of translations, the piling up of multiple renderings from multiple source languages, and the reorganization of source materials adding commentary upon commentary seems to have been characteristic rather than exceptional for translations in the premodern period. Embedding translation in a world of paper practices nicely brings out this point, the continuum between translated texts and commentaries upon them. But it also raises the important issue of the limits of the concept of translation, and leaves us with an open question to ponder for the future: What is epistemic translation? What does it encompass? And when do we no longer speak of epistemic translation?

## Notes

- 1 Burke and Hsia, *Cultural Translation*. For an overview of the more recent literature, see Dupré, “Science and Practices of Translation.”
- 2 Venuti, *Translator’s Invisibility*, viii, xii.
- 3 Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*.
- 4 Delbourgo, “Knowing World,” 397–98.
- 5 Marroquín Arredondo and Bauer, *Translating Nature*, 22.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 7 Cook, *Translation at Work*, 16; Callon, “Some Elements.”
- 8 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 96.

## Bibliography

- Burke, Peter, and Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, eds. *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Callon, Michel. “Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay.” In *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, edited by John Law, 196–233. London: Routledge, 1986.
- Cook, Harold, ed. *Translation at Work: Chinese Medicine in the First Global Age*. Leiden: Brill, 2020.
- Delbourgo, James. “The Knowing World: A New Global History of Science.” *History of Science* 57 (2019), 373–99.
- Dupré, Sven. “Introduction: Science and Practices of Translation.” *Isis* 109 (2018): 302–7.
- Elshakry, Marwa S. *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Marroquín Arredondo, Jaime, and Ralph Bauer, eds. *Translating Nature: Cross-Cultural Histories of Early Modern Science*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge, 2018.