



## Response by Bachleitner to “Translation and the materialities of communication”

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## Response by Bachleitner to "Translation and the materialities of communication"

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In her article, Karin Littau proposes a material or medial turn in the humanities and social sciences to end the neglect of the material basis to every act of communication, including translation. This proposal is warmly welcomed. As a comparatist who has for some time been trying to build bridges between literary studies and book history, I strongly support Littau's point of view – all the more since I am less optimistic regarding the general acceptance of such ideas in the humanities, and especially in literary and translation studies. I am not so sure that McLuhan and the other authorities for the importance of mediality and technicity whom Littau quotes (e.g. Kittler, Ong, and Gumbrecht) have really provoked a "crisis in the self-understanding of the human sciences". For brevity's sake, in my response below, I leave aside literary studies to focus on translation studies.

Only the most idealistic hardliners, such as those nostalgic for deconstructionist linguistic analyses (Littau quotes Derrida: “we are spoken by language”), will deny the theoretical validity of her arguments. There may also be certain differences between “national” schools and scientific traditions; that is, between English-speaking areas on the one hand and French- and German-speaking areas on the other. Be that as it may, much work still seems needed to convince scholars in the field that the materiality and technicity of media really do impact the wording of a text and its meaning and that therefore an analysis of mediality in the study of a given translation is essential. The question is not either “meaning, interpretation and language” or “the material technologies and techniques that underpin cultural practices such as reading, writing, translating, painting, counting, etc.,” but rather how to integrate the material approach into the methodological repertoire of a discipline that is, after all, destined to teach strategies for successful translation in the diverse situations of the modern world that make interlingual mediation necessary. Otherwise the reference to the mediality of every text and translation will remain a footnote in everyday academic discussion and teaching.

In her earlier article in *Translation Studies* (“First Steps Towards a Media History of Translation”), Littau had already provided some examples for the inevitable interconnectedness of textual details and media – for “the ways in which successive media technologies have arguably shaped practices of translation” (2011, 9). Cicero’s famous statement in *De optimo genere oratorum* that he did not translate word for word but instead tried to safeguard the argument and its impact on the reader (or rather listener) by translating sense for sense arises from his writing in a primarily oral culture where rhetorics provided the norms for text production. It is very likely that Cicero also composed his texts orally, dictating them to a scribe. As Siobhán McElduff (2015) explains, speaking and reading Greek was part of elite identity in Rome. In an oral culture the speaker vouches for the truth of a text and also for its stylistic qualities. Texts were presented to the public orally; in a live performance, Cicero could not translate literally and act as a mouthpiece of another – in this case Greek – author. Even when translating he had to remain himself, the famous author and orator.

In the Middle Ages, handwritten codices were the usual medial format; continually rewritten by scribes and authors, texts were unstable and variable. Writing in general and translation in particular were part of a constant process of revision, often with no authoritative source text. In addition, the form of the codex, usually comprising a number of different texts and encouraging compilation, blurs the boundaries between translation and original writing. Print technology fixed the written word (at least compared to scribe culture), and thus from the Renaissance onwards translating word for word made much more sense than ever before. On the other hand, the reading public grew and differentiated considerably. Given that books meant to transcend the circle of the learned needed to be easily readable and comprehensible, fluency became an important characteristic of the translated text. In many cases, illustration and other layout features formed constraints forcing translators to adapt the text to a certain length. Reading quickly, reading silently and in private were parameters that considerably changed the demands on translations as well. Finally, digital text obviously has its own rules. Scrolling across screens, sentences should be neither too complex nor too long; interactivity offers a comparatively active role to the formerly passive reader, who, for instance, may choose a path through a hypertext by clicking on hot words, setting words in motion in a kinetic poem, giving input to start a software program, and so on.

There are many other convincing examples of the influence of the medium on text production, including especially factors immediately applicable to contemporary times: that is, the connection of most media with a certain audience (even if “the masses”) should be taken into consideration not only when analyzing/evaluating a translation, but also when planning a translation of one’s own. What, *inter alia*, can be learned from the history of translation is the relativity of standards and practices that often seem “natural” and unchangeable but are actually dependent on historical circumstances, including the state of development of media.

In spite of the importance of the medium that carries a translation, we should not forget the human agents as well as institutions involved in the production and distribution of translations and the audiences addressed. Media do not develop and work by themselves in a mystical way; they are invented, developed, adapted and eventually exchanged for other tools by human beings to serve certain purposes. When Littau asks, “what is a printer without a printing press; or a translator without a medium?”, we must also ask, “what is a medium without humans?” if we are not to fall into the Derridean trap of believing that we are entirely “spoken” by media. We should not forget to draw attention to the fact that the very use of media also raises a number of political questions: access to and use of media as a mechanism for inclusion or exclusion is undeniably connected with questions of power and economics. The simple question of “who translates what for whom and why” raises sociological issues that extend beyond material studies. In a volume co-edited with Michaela Wolf (Bachleitner and Wolf 2010), I drew attention to the many agents contributing to the production and distribution of translations who may be regarded as players in a “field”, to borrow a phrase from Pierre Bourdieu (2006). So the translators, publishers and readers, audience and critics still have a certain ideal of a proper translation of a literary or scientific text, along with the medium that sets the frame of the possible and usual. Together, these factors and agents exert an influence on any translation’s style and should therefore be included in its analysis.

Another aspect that may immediately strike most translation studies scholars is expanding on the differences between printed and digital text. The practice of footnoting ambiguous and/or difficult to translate passages is regarded as clumsy and outdated by most print publishers, but in the digital medium hyperlinks seem less intrusive, which means that the translator’s need to opt for one facet of meaning to the exclusion of others may be compensated for much more easily. Digital texts are less stable than printed books, but this also means that it takes just a couple of clicks to update a translated text, correcting the errors that are inevitable in any piece of writing. The textual instability that may remind us of scribal culture is thus problematic from the point of view of a source’s reliability but advantageous for the flexible handling of textual revisions or the representation of possible versions of an ambiguous passage.

Finally, Littau proposes the opening up of traditional disciplines, notably a fusion of comparative literature (especially comparative media) and translation studies. Questions of mediation, transfer and translation have always been at the crossroads between various disciplines, and of course comparative literature and translation studies are closely related. But does it really make sense to mix up interlingual translation and intermedial transfer (“remediation”) – that is, a book illustration, or a film and computer game based on a novel; the transformation of music into picture or text and vice versa; the plethora of intermedial transitions that occupy such a prominent place in contemporary digital media art?

A mega-discipline covering comparative media studies is a tempting vision but would be so broad as to require an immense range of expertise (e.g. scientific know-how such as computer programming or technical know-how for animation and all other sorts of cinematic tricks). Comparative literature has long had to combat the suspicion of being a megalomaniac super-discipline that attracted only dilettantes, and subsequently cultural studies was rightly criticized as a discipline claiming to have the key to all aspects of history and culture, including the arts, politics and everyday life. It seems wise to avoid all exaggeration and instead rely on interdisciplinary cooperation and teamwork. Nonetheless, putting aside such “strategic questions”, by all means let’s continue to create an awareness in literary and translation studies of the need for taking into consideration the history and peculiarities of the material carriers of textual information.

### Note on contributor

**Norbert Bachleitner** is a professor of comparative literature at the University of Vienna. His fields of research include the relations between English, French and German literature from the eighteenth to the twentieth century; the history of literary translation and transfer; the modern novel; digital literature; and the sociology of literature, especially the history of the book and censorship. He has recently edited two collections of essays: “*Die Bienen fremder Literaturen*”. *Der literarische Transfer zwischen Großbritannien, Frankreich und dem deutschsprachigen Raum im Zeitalter der Weltliteratur (1770–1850)* (2012, with Murray G. Hall) and *Nach Wien! Sehnsucht, Distanzierung, Suche. Literarische Darstellungen Wiens aus komparatistischer Perspektive* (2015, with Christine Ivanovic).

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## Response by Bassnett to “Translation and the materialities of communication”

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Translation studies is a fast-moving, rapidly expanding field. Where once there was a relatively small group of researchers discussing functional approaches along with theories of equivalence, today there is a global network with distinct lines of enquiry into translation that include the literary, the linguistic, the sociological, the cultural, the technological, the anthropological, the political, the historical and the individual, to name but some of the