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# Distribution and translation

<https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2020-0139>

Received November 18, 2020; accepted January 7, 2021; published online February 19, 2021

**Abstract:** Translation has traditionally been viewed as a branch of applied linguistics. This has changed drastically in recent decades, which have witnessed translation studies growing as a field beyond, and sometimes against, applied linguistics. This paper is an attempt to think translation back into applied linguistics by reconceptualizing translation through the notions of distributed language, semiotic repertoire, and assemblage. It argues that: (a) embedded within a larger textual-media ecology, translation is enacted through dialogical interaction among the persons, texts, technologies, platforms, institutions, and traditions operating within that ecology; (b) what we call translations are second-order constructs, or relatively stable formations of signs abstracted from the processual flux of translating on the first-order; (c) translation is not just about moving a work from one discrete language system across to another, but about distributing it through semiotic repertoires; (d) by orchestrating resources performatively, translations are not just interventions in the target language and culture, but are transformative of the entire translingual and multimodal space (discursive, interpretive, material) surrounding a work. The paper argues that distributed thinking helps us de-fetishize translation as an object of study and reimagine translators as partaking of a creative network of production alongside other human and non-human agents.

**Keywords:** assemblage; distributed language; semiotic repertoire; translation

## 1 Introduction

Let us begin with an anecdote. The British linguist, poet, and translator Mike Baynham related to me one of his little vignettes in translating poetry. One July morning in London, upon reading the poem ‘Los Apuntes del Ser’ (Notes on Being) by the Valencian poet José Iniesta (<http://www.artemispoesia.com/?p=1518>) on Facebook, Baynham fell in love with it on first sight and had it translated into English within two hours. He sent the translation to the poet Iniesta who expressed

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enthusiasm about the English rendition. Iniesta then passed on the translation to his friend in the U.S.; the latter pointed out a possible issue with the last line in the translation: ‘The dumb enormity of having been’, which Baynham had translated from *la muda enormidad del haber sido* in the original Spanish.

The word ‘dumb’, according to Iniesta’s friend, strongly invokes the sense of stupidity rather than silence, at least in American English. Iniesta then asked Baynham if he might consider making a slight alteration in wording. Baynham obliged, changing his last line to ‘speechless enormity’, arguably a more idiomatic translation of the original *muda enormidad* than ‘dumb enormity’, even though he did not quite agree with the reasoning for the change at first: ‘Not a great idea to mess with the poet’s preferences ... if you choose to translate a poet who is living and kicking you can’t assume you have a free hand’ (Mike Baynham, personal communication).

Now following Lawrence Venuti (2008: 6), Baynham’s response would be symptomatic of his being ‘psychologized’ into identifying with the author of the source text, because his ‘self-presentation’ has unconsciously been ‘shaped’ by ‘the individualistic conception of authorship’ especially prevalent in Anglo-American cultures. Accordingly, in deciding to abandon ‘dumb enormity’, Baynham has compromised his subjectivity by smoothing out the original line to chime in with the linguistic sensibilities of English-language readers, presumably under the interpellation of the discourse of fluent translation.

I would prefer to understand this scenario in a rather different light. The phrase ‘speechless enormity’ can be seen as the outcome of a triangulation among Baynham the translator, Iniesta the poet, and the poet’s American friend. It arose out of a to-and-fro negotiation: the poet’s interest in the translation; the American friend’s suggestion; the poet’s feedback to the translator; and the translator’s response to the feedback. There are also non-human elements participating in the making of this translation, in this case Facebook, which provides the media platform on which the poet read the poem and interacted with the poet. And the story does not end here.

Recently, Baynham decided to Google the phrases ‘dumb enormity’ and ‘speechless enormity’ out of curiosity. He found that the former collocation was already in circulation, which meant it was somewhat clichéd from a literary standpoint, whereas the latter collocation was relatively unused. Quite independent of the poet’s (friend’s) suggestion, Baynham now thinks ‘speechless enormity’ is retrospectively the better choice. Had he strongly asserted his autonomy as a translator and rejected the poet’s (friend’s) feedback, he would not have arrived at this translation which he has now come to prefer. Thus, in addition to Facebook, the translation event in question might also include Google’s search function, through which the translator subsequently validated his revised translation.

And in the background of all this are the comparative genealogies of ‘dumb enormity’ and ‘speechless enormity’ as these phrases are used by contemporary English-language users, which make the latter phrase stand out as the translator’s (retrospectively) preferred choice.

I cite this anecdote to offer an initial handle on how translation may be conceived in terms of a distributed event. That is to say: it does not dwell in or emanate from the translator’s mind alone; nor is the target language and culture the exclusive or privileged frames of reference. Translation studies, then, should be less about pitting the translator’s universe against the author’s, and more about locating both translator and author within a relational network that also includes other human as well as nonhuman elements.

The backstory to this is that translation studies started out as a branch of applied linguistics, as part of a pedagogical model in language teaching. This has changed drastically in recent decades, which have witnessed the development of translation studies as a field beyond, and at times against, linguistics. Indeed, translation studies as we know it today grew out of an antagonism against linguistic approaches to translation, which were deemed restrictive in their isolation of the act of translating from its sociocultural milieu. The work of Catford (1965) on linguistic shifts, of Vinay and Darbelnet (1995 [1958]) on translation procedures, and of Nida (1975) on analysis-transfer-restructuring (based on Chomskyan idea of deep structure) are cases in point. Yet as Mona Baker points out, even though linguistic approaches do have their weaknesses, ‘much of the criticism that continues to be levelled [by translation scholars] against linguistically-oriented work is arguably misinformed’ as it is based on an understanding of linguistics dating to the 1960s and 1970s, hence failing to take into account more recent linguistic perspectives on translation (Baker 2005: 285).

To be sure, even after translation studies set out on its irreversible turn toward cultural studies, sociology, and other disciplines for methodological resources, translation scholars have continued to pursue linguistic lines of inquiry into translating. Discourse linguistics proves to be an enduring source of inspiration. *Inter alia*, House (2015) applies the register model to devise her schema for translation quality assessment; Hatim and Mason (1997) propose their communicative theory of translation based on a social semiotic understanding of static and dynamic uses of language; Munday (2012) examines the evaluative nuances of translators’ decision-making from the perspective of stance; and Baker (2018) mobilizes Gricean and Hallidayan concepts to the analysis of various aspects of translating such as pragmatic implicature, thematic structure, information ordering, cohesion, and coherence (see Baker (2005) for a succinct survey and the collected papers in Malmkjaer (2018) for a detailed review).

On the whole, however, it appears linguistics has lost much of its shimmer in translation studies, which now tends to give more analytical premium to the extra-linguistic to foreground its interdisciplinary edge. This programmatic paper attempts to *think translation back into (applied) linguistics*. It does so not by reverting to old models of linguistic transfer (Catford, Vinay and Darbelnet, Nida), but by reconceptualizing translation through the lens of distributed language, semiotic repertoire, and assemblage. These latter notions have captured the imagination of applied linguists by offering new metaphors to reimagine the ontology of language and the structure of communication. This paper asks whether the same conceptual apparatus has purchase in helping us reimagine translation both as process and as product, and explores the theoretical implication of a distributed view on translation.

## 2 Distributed language and semiotic repertoires

My idea of distribution is informed by the concept of distributed language, an approach developed within the language sciences by psycholinguists and further extended by sociolinguists. Although developments in multimodal studies since Halliday have already opened up language and translation to nonverbal modalities (e.g., Boria et al. 2020; Kress 2010), the study of communication is seen to be generally dominated by anthropocentric models. Such models focus on how human agents operate language as a static, homogenous, and disembodied system possessing structural and functional integrity: ‘a self-sufficient totality, a structure *sui generis*’ (Hjelmslev in Steffensen 2015: 107).

Arising out of a ‘deep skepticism toward the idea that a language is an autonomous structure *sui generis*’ (Steffensen 2015: 106), the distributed language approach debunks human-centric models of communication by dispersing the agentic capacities of language users across human and nonhuman *actants*. An actant ‘can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action’; it is that which ‘acts or to which activity is granted by others’ and ‘implies *no* special motivation of *human individual* actors, nor of humans in general’ (Latour 1996: 373; original emphasis). Nonhuman actants in communication events would include the physical spaces or material platforms in/on which communication unfolds; the semiotic (e.g., visual, verbal, auditory, kinetic, tactile, olfactory, gustatory) and technological (e.g., writing, mouseover, voice recognition, eye tracking) affordances made available in those spaces or platforms, as well as the full range of material artefacts weaving through spaces, people, activities, and utterances.

On a distributed view, language is not a unitary nor a stable phenomenon governed solely by human agency (Steffensen 2015: 108). On the contrary, it is ‘an

open-ended meshwork of interlinked functioning components [...] founded on material dynamics that know no single stable state based on abstract form' (Thibault 2011: 213; in-text citations omitted). Heterogeneously constituted and 'temporally situated [...] in contextualised episodes of communication' (Love 2007: 705), language is conceived as reiterative, dispersed, and multiscalar rather than discrete, systemic, and synchronous. Specifically, it has three inter-related features:

- *Language is ecological*, in that it is not ascribed 'ontological autonomy' (Steffensen 2015: 108) as a codified system or cultural artefact. Thus, language is not all about (verbal) language; it is an 'activity in which wordings play a part' (Cowley 2012: 4), embedded in social events that 'link bodies with the physical environment and cultural traditions' (*ibid.*) and emerging 'from the ecologically grounded dynamics of embodied, interpersonal coordination' (Steffensen 2015: 108). Language must therefore 'be investigated as an integral part of a non-symbolic ecology' in order for us to understand 'the cognitive dynamics of human agency in a larger extended ecology' (*ibid.*: 109).
- *Language is dialogical*, in that it is 'grounded in neither bodies nor society but the play of dialogue' (Cowley 2012: 5). It is not an a priori structure. Rather, it is produced at the intersection of the '[c]ontingencies of our lives' (*ibid.*) and within 'the material interactivity and intrinsic expressivity of our bodies' (Thibault 2011: 241) as part of a holistic process of sense-making: 'we entwine dialogue with actions and, thus, set off expressions of power and experience of relationships' (Cowley 2012: 5). Language is also dialogical in that its situated performance draws together a multiplicity of elements external to the communication event in question, thus 'unit[ing] situated activity with situation-transcending meaning-potentials that shape action' (Steffensen 2015: 109).
- *Language is non-local*, in that it does not reside as a discrete substance in the human brain, in the grammar of a language, or within the lines of a text; instead, it arises as an intertextual matrix formed out of non-local elements mobilized from broader repertoires across space and time—elements which may not be apparent on the local or surface-level manifestation of communication. In partaking of sense-making, language functions as 'an ecological extension of embodiment', not as 'an independent ("local") realm *sui generis*' (Steffensen 2015: 113).

Thus seen, communication is a contingent effect of the grid of interactions between language (in all modalities), persons (including their bodies), spaces (physical or virtual), artefacts, technologies, cultural traditions, and other material aspects of the communication setting (Thibault 2011: 223). An important corollary of this is the identification of *orders* of language (Love 2017), where language as formally

acquired—in the form of bounded sets of lexicon, grammatical rules, discourse patterns, and so forth—is a *second-order construct* abstracted from *first-order languaging*. The latter term describes communication in a pre-institutionalized state, as ‘a distributed and heterogeneous biocultural resource that is spread over persons, environmental affordances, artifacts, cultural patterns and values’ (Thibault 2011: 240). The process of languaging is embodied, embedded, enacted (it exceeds representation in the mind) as well as extended, distributed, and situated (entailing material aspects of the communication situation external to the mind) (Steffensen 2012: 187). As a dynamic flux of semiotic energies, it precedes and underlies the symbolic order of language, which as an institutionalized system is disembodied, decontextualized, and hyper-structured.

In sociolinguistics, scholars have used these insights to unsettle the conventional view of multilingualism as the juxtaposition of plural codes taking the form of named languages (Hindi, Catalan, Thai, Korean, Turkish), highlighting the inadequacy of this code-view in accounting for the semiotic complexities of communication in superdiverse environments. From a distributed perspective, communication manifests fundamentally as first-order languaging, which does not draw on stable and homogeneous sets of sounds, words, structures, or pragmatic rules, i.e. second-order language. On the contrary, the latter is distilled out of the messy labyrinth of first-order languaging.

This radically impacts on the way we understand communication as socially-situated events. On a distributed view, communication is based not on neatly delineated linguistic systems, but on continua of resources cutting across named languages, language varieties, dialects, registers, and discourses. Hence, communication in multilingual settings is not just about going *between* languages. It is also about going *within*, where the intralingual and interdiscursive dimensions of text and talk complement the interlingual, as well as going *beyond* language as such, hence beyond the code-view of multilingualism, encompassing various other material and sensory modalities. Thus, in superdiverse environments such as markets and restaurant kitchens where people from various linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds come together to conduct mundane transactions, language entwines with spatialized, nonlinguistic resources in the effectuation of communication. These include the embodied, embedded, and enacted aspects of communication such as gesture, mime, dress, posture, and physical performance, but also the extended, distributed, and situated dimensions such as artefacts, spatial configurations, and sensory stimuli (Pennycook 2018: 52).

This means that rather than thinking of language as a singular or primary mode of signification, we should instead be thinking in terms of *repertoires*:

clusters of heterogeneous (multilingual, multimodal, multisensory) resources deployed dynamically, flexibly, and tactically on-site and in real-time according to the communication contingencies at hand (Pennycook 2018: 47–51). The notion of repertoire is an important one, for it ‘pushes language outside the head, not merely as a social resource but also as a spatial and artefactual one’ (Pennycook 2017: 277). From this perspective, the material setting in which communication occurs is not merely a background against which a language event unfolds; the setting is itself an integral part of the communicative repertoire that includes language, objects, people, and space.

On a repertoire view, communication is a socio-cognitive act that is performative as well as transformative of languages, persons, objects, and spaces. This connects us into a more intricate understanding of multilingualism. For Canagarajah (2018), *translingualism* is not simply multilingualism. It arises from synergistic interaction among verbal resources ‘to generate new grammars and meanings, beyond their separate structures’ (31); such interaction takes place within ‘expansive spatial repertoires that transcend text/context distinctions and transgress social boundaries’, entailing meaning-making abilities that accommodate ‘the role of social networks, things, and bodies, beyond mind and grammar, requiring strategic emplacement’ (52). This view resonates with Li’s (2018) concept of *translanguaging*, which is ‘not simply going between different linguistic structures, cognitive and semiotic systems and modalities, but going beyond them’ (23). Ultimately, communication is not just about text and talk between individuals. It transforms social spaces within which individuals construct knowledge and make sense of reality through an orchestration of resources, ‘bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience, and environment; their attitude, belief, and ideology; their cognitive and physical capacity, into one coordinated and meaningful performance’ (23).

### 3 Questions for translation

Why use a distributed lens to think translation? Because it has the potential to disable the coagulation of translation unto itself by embedding it within a textual ecology that includes authors and translators, original and translated texts, as well as the complex layers of embodied materialities surrounding cultural production. Ensuing from this thinking is a non-hierarchical network that flattens the source-target relation, allowing us to step outside of polemic cycles where authors and translators are alternately championed to the detriment of the other. Elsewhere (Lee 2020), I argued that contemporary translation studies has a tendency to assert its disciplinary identity rather too strongly, turning translation into an object of fetish. Calling

this syndrome *translatophilia*, I maintained that the act of translating is too often constructed as a marginalized Other, and that translation studies tends to romanticize its enterprise through an unqualified resistance to the Author and the Original:

The prevailing discourse in translation studies, powerfully rehearsed in Venuti ... is by now too familiar: that translation does not merely reproduce a source text, but reinterprets it in alignment with the target language and culture. Such polemic operates well within an intellectual milieu in which postcolonial critique prospers. Carried too far, however, it risks romanticising the resistive potential of translation as colony, in hyper-correction of the perceived hegemony of the colonising Original (Lee 2020).

To my mind, translatorial tendencies can be moderated by a distribution approach to translation, which reclaims possibility spaces between perceived nodes of fixity (author/original) and fluidity (translator/translation), highlighting the dynamic movement and dialogic synergies between the two poles (cf. Jaspers and Madsen 2019). More than that, it transcends that polarity by bringing into the fold nonhuman actants as well as nonverbal modalities often relegated to the margins of language.

In view of the themes addressed above, we might generate the following questions and speculations in respect of translation-as-distribution:

- If language is ecological, dialogical, and non-local, could we not think of translation on those same terms? Embedded within a larger textual-media ecology, translation is enacted through dialogical interaction among the persons, texts, technologies, platforms, institutions, and traditions operating within that ecology. This gives rise to a different ontology of translation: translation, like distributed language, is non-local in that it is not the sole preserve of the translator's creative and subjective mind and is therefore not a local realm *sui generis*.
- What we call translations (the textual entity) are second-order constructs; they are stable formations of signs abstracted from the processual flux of translating on the first-order. The method of source text-target text analysis, often used to demonstrate how translation inevitably alters original writing, is based on the second-order construct of translation. Should we not also examine the intricacies of *first-order translating* (the *-ing* suffix is important here), which, in analogy to first-order languaging, will help us understand the hither-and-thither dynamic between translators and authors (and other actants in the network, for instance, editors from publishers, translation memory, Google Translate), with a view to transcending the irreconcilable bipartite?



- If verbal language is but one component of multilingual, multimodal, and multisensory repertoires, could we not say the same of texts or writing? On this conception, a text is constituted not by language alone, but by loose clusters of features—the language (by no means a homogeneous entity), of course, but also the material-body of the text, its inscription technologies (typography, orthography, colour), its composition and layout, the affordances of the media spaces it traverses, and so forth (more on this below). Translation, then, is not just about moving a work from one discrete language system across to another (cf. the code-view to multilingualism). It is about distributing a work through semiotic repertoires, where features from one resource cluster (encompassing and exceeding the source language) synergize with and re-embed in resources from another resource cluster, including but not limited to the target language. Different translations respond to a work by mobilizing different resources, and jointly create extended and expansive repertoires around that work.
- If communication is performative and transformative, could translating not be the same? By orchestrating resources performatively, translations are not just interventions in the target language and culture; they are transformative of the entire translingual and multimodal space surrounding a work (discursive, interpretive, material). Translations may alter the author's perception of his or her own work, enacting a feedback loop from target to source, and may even be counter-appropriated by the author in further creations.

## 4 Assemblages: translation as rhizomatic development

Closely affiliated to distributed thinking is assemblage thinking. In Deleuzian terms, an assemblage is

a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind (Deleuze and Parnet 2002: 69).

An assemblage may be conceived as a loose coming-together of things—the hyphenated 'coming-together' here enacts this loose connectedness on a metalinguistic level. As a 'sympathy' of elements 'co-functioning' under the façade of lateral 'alliances' rather than top-down 'filiations', it speaks not to established, vertically-aligned structures. What we have, rather, are contingents

of spatio-temporal and socio-material matter, Body without Organs, always susceptible to being broken up along lines of flight and recombined into planes of consistency within modulations of desire (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Suppose we speak of a text, including a translation, as an assemblage. What is that supposed to look like? Adapting the features of assemblages identified by Müller (2015) and incorporating insights from Adkins (2015) and DeLanda (2016), we might characterize the ontology of a text-as-assemblage in the following terms:

- *Relationality*: a text is constituted by heterogeneous elements that come into relations with one another to form a contingent whole. These relations are ‘exterior’, meaning the constituent terms (phonology, morphology, lexicogrammar, discourse patterns, typography, orthography, materiality, and so forth) retain a certain autonomy from the relations among them; and the text as a whole is larger than the sum of those terms.
- *Productivity*: texts ‘are not primarily mimetic; they are not a representation of the world’ (Müller 2015: 29); rather, they produce new modalities of signification and new ways of organizing language expressively.
- *Heterogeneity*: assemblages are, in Adkins’s (2015: 14) terms, ‘concrete collections of heterogeneous materials that display tendencies toward both stability and change’. Thus, a text-assemblage is made up of linguistic as well as semiotic (non-linguistic) elements, including, *inter alia*, the material-technological setup of a text and the platform space in which a text is produced, disseminated, and consumed. The way a text is put together is shaped by the affordances made available through the languages, modes, and media involved. A birthday card, for example, is more than the well-wishing words printed on it; it is a multimodal gestalt with an overall affective charge emerging from the interactions among languages, images, typographic and orthographic choices, material composition (e.g., texture of paper, use of pastiche), as well as colours (Jaworski 2020).
- *(De)territorialization*: territorialization refers to ‘the determination of the spatial boundaries of a whole’ and ‘the degree to which an assemblage’s component parts are drawn from a homogeneous repertoire, or the degree to which an assemblage homogenises its own components’ (DeLanda 2016: 22). Despite their appearances, texts are not permanent entities; they territorialize by morphing into shape and deterritorialize when they morph out of shape. In other words, texts establish linguistic and semiotic territories ‘as they emerge and hold together but also constantly mutate, transform and break up’ (Müller 2015: 29). This feature comes into relief in the digital language art of John Cayley using an algorithm-driven visual technique called transliteral morphing (<http://programmatology.shadoof.net>). Or if we consider a text in translation, where a text is deterritorialized (i.e. it mutates, transforms, breaks up) from the original language and culture, and then reterritorialized into a whole in a different

language and culture. Translations are subject to the same recursive processes of territorialization and de-/re-territorialization when they undergo further translation or other ‘post-translation’ elaborations (Gentzler 2017).

- *Desirability*: texts bring fragmented and fragmentary elements together into continuous flows of meaning through desire. A desire for creative-critical expression motivates writing, while a desire for interlingual or crosscultural mediation motivates translation.

Assemblages embed and beget assemblages (see DeLanda 2016: 20–21). If a text, whether original or translated, is an assemblage in itself, then a higher-order assemblage obtains when we bring original and translated texts together with other actants into an ensemble of related entities. A repertoire perspective, explained in the previous section, enables us to cut through constructed borders along the lines of languages, modes, or media, and to conceive of a text as proliferating itself in multiple translations over continuous repertoires. Ensuing from this proliferative movement is an assemblage, a heterogeneous, open-ended constellation of interrelated texts. To borrow Bennett’s (2010) interpretation, each of these interrelated texts is a ‘member-actant [that] maintains an energetic pulse slightly “off” from that of the assemblage’ (24). The member-actants of an assemblage can grow or shrink with time, and each member-actant is subject to internal modification (35). Thus, as collectivities of energies, or ‘living, throbbing confederations’ (23), textual assemblages are continually shaped and reshaped as more text-bodies join (or drop out from) them and as existing text-bodies reconfigure into new semiotic energies emanating different affects and vital forces.

Texts-in-assemblage are not fossilized in a structured series with defined source-to-target lineages and directionalities, what Deleuze and Parnet (2002: 69) call ‘succession’ and ‘lines of descent’. Rather, the texts of an assemblage are *rhizomatically distributed*. The image of the rhizome (or plateau) evokes a non-hierarchical and de-centred spatiality whereby elements enter into a dynamic and fluid configuration. Unlike a tree structure complete with its vertical filiation of trunks, branches, and roots (and it is therefore no surprise that tree diagrams have become a visual heuristic in structuralist linguistics), a rhizome points to unbounded lateral development, with multiple roots and offshoots creating simultaneous entanglements with each other laterally or diagonally. With a rhizome, growth does not occur along predictable or methodical pathways, because any part of a rhizome can potentially become a root (think ginger roots), that is, a point of origin producing offshoots, which in turn become roots bearing other offshoots.

If writing is motivated by a desire for creative-critical expression, then on a rhizomatic view, translation extends that desire by opening up new *roots* of expression in other languages, modes, and media. Translations do not so much

devolve from source texts—hence tracing *routes*—as develop with them, alongside them, fostering connections in different directions and evolving new, nonlinear formations. Given that texts are assemblages, translating ‘alongside’ implies that texts do not always move from one language into another as organic wholes, which in turn challenges the view that translators must be fully versatile with the language and culture of both source and target before they can even begin to translate.

On this point let us look to applied linguistics, where Canagarajah (2018) proposes a rhizomatic approach to understanding language proficiency. In contrast to traditional models privileging lexicogrammatical foundations, a rhizomatic approach opens up the possibility of non-native users operating with limited verbal resources from specialized registers (e.g., the genre of scientific discourse) in a named language without having acquired the grammar of that language in full: ‘Such performance with a small collection of verbal resources from a language does not have to make one’s language capacity suspect, as these resources work with other semiotic resources [artifacts, gestures] to gain their coherence and meaning’ (51). The implication for language acquisition is that language proficiency need not always develop upward from a stable base of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. It can also happen sideways, starting with a fragmented pool of vocabulary in a relatively narrow register, and combining this with other verbal and nonverbal resources into translanguaging and multimodal performances. In this way, second or foreign language users deterritorialize so-called native speaker proficiency and reterritorialize vibrant formations of communication beyond attested methodologies in language learning.

In a similar vein, translations can be fragmentary and partial. They can intercept a source text obliquely, extracting and developing its resources (not the whole text-body). These resources may be called *memes*, where memes are defined as the textual economy, conceptual motif, or aesthetic logic that makes a text ‘click’.<sup>1</sup> Memes reveal the prismatic (Reynolds 2020) and rhizomatic nature of translation: different translations may choose to develop different memes from the same source text; or the same memes may be instantiated in divergent ways in different translations with recourse to their particular repertoires and the affordances available in the languages, modes, and media in use. Hence, a source

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1 My notion of memes therefore differs from that espoused by Chesterman (2016), who defines memes as ‘concepts and ideas about translation itself, and about the theory of translation’ (3). For Chesterman, translation norms, tendencies, strategies, and values are memes by virtue of their being recognized and deployed by translators; they constitute a meme-pool, ‘a pool of concepts at the disposal of translators who wish to improve their expertise’ (149). On more theoretical levels, memes accrue into *supermemes*, ‘ideas of such pervasive influence that they come up again and again in the history of the subject’ (3). Translation-as-rewriting is a supermeme that has dominated the imaginary of contemporary translation studies.

text undertakes rhizomatic development in a myriad of potential translations, including self-translations and indirect translations, each rhizome being a contingent and necessarily partial extension of that text (see Lee and Chan 2018).

The tactical advantage of translation lies precisely in its metonymy, the selective capturing of meaning-making resources operative in the source text and interacting them—crosslingually, intersemiotically, and transmedially—with resources in the target repertoire. This means that translators need not claim to represent a source text in its entirety, which is too heavy a burden. Translation's niche lies rather in bricolage. As noted above, non-native users of, say, English can communicate in the language meaningfully by drawing resources from their spatial and semiotic repertoires and strategically emplacing them in a communication assemblage (Canagarajah 2018: 50). By way of analogy, translators can communicate a source text, or just a slice of it, not by *mimesis*, but by *memesis*; that is, through creative engagement with the memes of a source text by mobilizing the full range of semiotic resources at one's disposal.

## 5 Work as assemblage and distributed texts

On this rhizomatic view of writing and translation, what does a work look like and what are the implications for the translator's subjectivity and agency? With reference to the transposition of print texts to electronic environments, Hayles (2005) proposes Work as Assemblage as a heuristic for understanding how a work disperses its textuality across different material platforms to create what I call Distributed Texts.

Work as Assemblage designates 'a cluster of related texts that quote, comment upon, amplify, and remediate one another' (Hayles 2005: 105); it is taken as the textual counterpart of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic construct of Body without Organs. Hayles's argument is that electronic texts differ from print texts in terms of their materiality, defined as the interaction of the embodied characteristics of a text with its signifying strategies (*ibid.*: 277); therefore, the intermediation<sup>2</sup> of a print text on an electronic platform (e.g., the digitization of William Blake's oeuvre into an electronic and interactive archive) would give rise to a different text if substantive differences in materiality can be found, that is, if the electronic version of the work is inflected by the affordances of the technological media.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Intermediation' is Hayles's preferred term to Bolter and Grusin's (2000) 'remediation'. To Hayles (2005: 33), the *re-* prefix suggests having a particular medium as an originary point, whereas *inter-* suggests interaction and multiple causalities.

To bring translation into view, we may complicate this intermediation process by introducing linguistic and cultural variables, which Hayles (2005: 277) sets aside while conceding that ‘these too obviously play a role in how materiality will emerge’.<sup>3</sup> The crucial point, at any rate, is that the process of intermediation, easily extendable to translation in general, rests on a view of *embodied textuality*: ‘instantiated rather than dematerialized, dispersed rather than unitary, processural rather than object-like, flickering rather than durably imprinted’ (*ibid.*: 103). Each embodied version of a text ‘creates possibilities for meaning by mobilizing certain aspects of its physicality’, and if we may add in relation of translation, other verbal and nonverbal resources accessible to the translator. What emerges is a Work as Assemblage whereby

texts would spread out along a spectrum of similarity and difference along which clusters would emerge. Texts that differed only slightly would occupy adjacent points (say, different editions that closely matched each other in physical characteristics), while outlying members of the cluster might include texts in different media (Braille rather than print, an electronic version of a print text, a film version of a novel, etc.). These clusters can usefully be considered to constitute a ‘work,’ without implying that ‘work’ is a single convergent object (Hayles 2005: 104–105).

My conception of Distributed Text, which brings translation into the fold, is congenial to Hayles’s Work as Assemblage, especially as many of her examples (Braille version of print text, film version of novel, etc.) can readily be seen as translational. Following Hayles’s cue, I think of translation, in all its various guises, as distributive of a source text by instantiating the latter in different text-bodies, each embodying a rhizomatic development, as noted earlier. Translations may spawn yet other translations, scaled along varying degrees of similitude (e.g., translation vs. adaptation and appropriation; see Sanders 2016), thus recursively extending the rhizomatic alliances.

We are then in a position to see a work as a more expansive construct that ‘spread[s] out along a spectrum of similarity and difference’ (Hayles, cited above). If ‘spectrum’ still has the suggestion of linearity, we might qualify this with reference to Latour (1996, 2005) and imagine a text as being spread across different nodal points, which connect with each other into an enriched intertextual network, in which things qua actants are as agentic as human actors. At any rate, a text is not ‘a single convergent object’ (Hayles, cited above). Equally, the same phenomenon can be theorized in terms of how the same resources, or memes, tend to be circulated across

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<sup>3</sup> Notably, Hayles (2005: 89) views intermediation, ‘the transformation of a print document into an electronic text’, as a form of media translation, where translation is used as a trope. This tropic view of translation, however, blends in with substantive translation in her discussion of the translation views of Benjamin and Borges (*ibid.*: 110–116).

different media, leading to what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls ‘media convergence’. Hence, as a work distributes itself, the embodying media, a term I construe broadly to encompass language medium, converge within the assemblage, such that a work becomes *overdetermined* by being worked through any number of times in different languages, modes, and media.

Any textual work, therefore, is potentially distributable into several translational rhizomes, each drawing on a different set of semiotic affordances. In other words: a single cognitive-perceptual schema can find reverberations and repercussions in different material formations. This recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s *folding*, through which ‘a single abstract Animal’, or topological animal, ‘can be folded and stretched into the multitude of different animal species that populate the world’ (DeLanda 2016: 151):

A unique plane of consistency or composition for the cephalopod and the vertebrate; for the vertebrate to become an octopus or Cuttlefish, all it would have to do is fold itself in two fast enough to fuse the elements of the halves of its back together, then bring its pelvis up to the nape of its neck and gather its limbs together, into one of its extremities (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 255).

Applying this to literature, for instance: a literary work, analogous to Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘abstract Animal’, can *enfold* itself into other languages, into different registers or discursive styles within the same language, or into different modalities and media platforms, such that a singular work can be said to distribute its memes into different semiotic infrastructures that converge to form an assemblage. On this view, a literary work is a topographical form with the potential to spin off into different manifestations as virtual options. For DeLanda (2016: 130), that topographical form is called the *diagram*, which ‘captures the structure of the space of possibilities associated with an assemblage’s variable components’. Žižek (2018: 20) cites an example directly relevant to translation: the transposition of Shakespeare’s plays into contemporary settings with ‘a different twist without losing their effectiveness’ demonstrates the workings of a literary assemblage whose elements are relatively autonomous and therefore subject to ‘radical re-contextualization’. A Shakespeare play therefore serves as an enfoldable template generating infinite cycles of translations and adaptations.

But we must push further and ask: if the various translations of a work emanate from an abstract topographical form, does that mean the potential for all translations is always already there in the source text as a pure In-itself, that is, as something locked into the signifiers of the language of writing? To this Žižek (2018) responds in the negative, using an intriguing analogy to demonstrate how an object’s potentiality ‘is not immanent to it independently of its relations to others’ (34):

In the same way, in eroticism, new ‘potentialities’ of sexual pleasure are what a good lover brings out in you: s/he sees them in you even though you were unaware of them. They are not a pure In-itself, which was already there before it was discovered; they are an In-itself that is generated through a relationship with the other (lover) (Žižek 2018: 33).

Bouncing off this analogy, we might say that the potentiality of a textual work to unfold into its translational—crosslingual, intersemiotic, and transmedial—formations is not so much immanent as it is relational; it arises through the interactions of a work’s memes with the affordances of different languages, modes, and media through which it traverses.

## 6 Distributive agency

An assemblage approach to text and textuality necessitates a revised conception of authorial subjectivity, and for that matter, translatorial subjectivity as well. Hayles’s notion of Work as Assemblage is meant to reverse traditional notions of the (authorial) subject, which tends to be seen as unitary, which is to say, as singular. This unitary and singular view of the subject leads to the construction of a textual work as an ideal, immaterial entity that somehow captures authorial intentionality through its wordings (Hayles 2005: 106). From an assemblage point of view, however, every embodied instantiation of a work is a different text articulating that work through the specificities of its own medium. Materiality signifies. Since the nodal texts in a Work as Assemblage ‘take the distinctive form of rhizomatic tendrils branching out from one another in patterns of fractal complexity’ (Hayles 2005: 106), they dovetail into the semiotic foldings of a work while remaining embodied in the particularities of their media.

If we accept the view that a work is scattered across an assemblage in a plethora of embodied, rhizomatic forms, then subjectivity must accordingly be understood as ‘dispersed, fragmented, and heterogeneous’ (Hayles 2005: 106). For Hayles, the corollary of the Work as Assemblage is that subjectivity ‘cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered unified’:

Rather, the subjects producing it [the Work as Assemblage] are multiple in many senses, both because they are collectivities in and among themselves, and also because they include non-human as well as human actors (Hayles 2005: 107).

Thus, for example, electronic literature can be seen as co-authored by human writers and computers as well as programmable media. The authorship can be further complicated if we consider the individuals who write the software programs and engineers who configure the logic gates creating bitstream (Hayles



2005: 107). The human author is therefore not the only actor in the assemblage, whose effect is accrued from the totality of interactions among human and nonhuman actants (see Latour 1996, 2005).

It is here that Hayles and Venuti seem to coincide in their thinking. Venuti (2008) famously berates the romantic conception of authorship, under which an author's ideas, emotions, thoughts, and personality are abstract essences that can be enframed in a text as well as extracted and transferred into another language, as if the materiality of the text had no bearing on signification. This conception is produced by the ideological discourse of instrumentalism (Venuti 2019). For Venuti, the translator exercises a full range of authorial creativity by refracting an original text through the prism of the target language and culture. The translation is somehow capable of carving out its own singular domain over which the author of the original text has no purview. As I pointed out elsewhere (Lee 2020), the problem here is that while Venuti's critique is completely respectable from a postpositivist point of view, he reifies yet another subject and subjectivity: that of the translator and translatorship. As it were, the initially deconstructed or distributed authorship is refolded into yet another kind of authorship, this time in the person of the translator.

Assemblage thinking helps us circumvent the romantic conception of both authorship and translatorship, and it is here that Bennett's (2010) concept of *distributive agency* proves instructive. For Bennett, an assemblage 'owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it' (34); its subjectivity is an *intersubjectivity*; its causal model that of emergent and multiple causalities; and its agency distributed, composite, confederate (29–37). Thus, for example, a blackout can be attributed to any kind and number of human-nonhuman interactivities within the 'electric power grid', comprising such elements as electromagnetic fields, computer programs, profit motives, lifestyles, economic theory, and so forth, where the agency of the assemblage is distributed from minute electron movements to politicians in Congress.

The theoretical value of assemblage thinking lies in affirming 'a vitality distributed along a continuum of ontological types' and downplaying human exceptionalism while highlighting 'the human-nonhuman assemblage as a locus of agency' (Bennett 2010: 37). It blocks the consolidation of subjectivity in general by acknowledging the co-existence of multiple subjects, thereby preventing one mode of subjectivity from lapsing into another. It forestalls what I have called the fetishization of the translator and translatorship: the translator may be no less an author than the author of the original text, but certainly no more; by the same token, it is all very well to celebrate a translation as no less original than the original text by virtue of the creative interventions involved, but it is hardly more original (Lee 2020). If human exceptionalism is to be downplayed, it is not enough

to simply dismantle the agency of authors (of source texts), per Venuti's (2019) 'hermeneutic' approach. As equally human agents, the translator's subjectivity too must be deconstructed under the same hermeneutic logic. Translation is no sacred cow, and translatorship is not, cannot be, a transcendental category.

An assemblage perspective locates the author's and translator's agencies within a *flat topography* (Latour 2005) or *flat ontology* (DeLanda 2006), such that they relate to each other as part of a co-functioning where neither has ontological privilege over the other. An example from Steffensen (2015: 109), which I elaborate as follows, aptly illustrates this point. I am a household omelette maker relying on a tried-and-tested recipe using unfertilized eggs from domesticated chickens. I live in a community where omelette is part of the everyday palate and its consumption has accrued into a cultural practice. Nothing stops me from exercising all kinds of creativity in my routinized omelette production: I can make alterations to the widely circulating recipe; I can think of more efficient or energy-saving ways to cook the eggs; I can experiment cooking eggs with different kinds of oil; I can even ruminate on the implication of cooking eggs for the environment. But the subject 'I' here does not operate independently of the omelette-making community writ large. Despite my capacity to make all kinds of innovations, 'this capacity both holds for me and the author of the recipe ("what happens if I add arsenic to this recipe?")', and thus *individuals' agency is neither absolute nor purely based on free will*, whatever that is' (Steffensen 2015: 109; emphasis added).

Substitute the translator for the omelette maker, and what this means for translation becomes clear. The translator can be recognized for all the agency s/he deserves, but this agency 'is neither absolute nor purely based on free will'. On the contrary, a translator's agency is defined and weighted dialogically against the author's agency—which is itself relative. And both author and translator operate dialogically within the analogical practice of making and eating omelette, which includes other human as well as nonhuman actants (e.g., the chickens and the institutions or technologies that sustain their breeding). Creative interventions made in the course of translating (deviations from and innovations to the 'original' omelette recipe), however significant, do not change this fundamental dialogism underlying the discursive event, even as they showcase the translator's agency.

As noted above, assemblage thinking also democratizes the notion of agency by taking on board nonhuman agents alongside human actors, moderating anthropomorphic interpretations of complex events and avoiding the pitfalls of human-centric thinking. Through this lens, the problematic of translation studies is no longer about wresting translator's rights from the author of the original text. Nonhuman aspects, such as the media and technological propensities of a translation event, too, are relevant parts of the writing assemblage. Hence, translation studies must have in regard the agentive capacity not only of authors and

translators, but also of nonhuman actants in the assemblage such as book artefacts, inscription technologies, digital software, algorithms as well as other diverse materialities surrounding the circulation and mediatization of cultural artefacts. In the final analysis, what we call a text, including a translated text, is a semiotic effect of the interaction between human and nonhuman actants within specific time-space and material-cultural conditions. As Hayles (2005: 107) maintains, a ‘robust account of materiality focusing on the recursive loops between physicality and textuality’ is central to an appreciation of the dynamics of the Work as Assemblage.

## 7 Conclusion

Distributed and assemblage thinking offers a radical intervention to translation studies in enabling a different imaginary of textuality. In this imaginary, translation is not seen as exerting a centrifugal force away from the source text, nor does it merge the target centripetally into the source. Rather, translation enters into a distributed relationship with the source text pegged at various degrees of proximity, becoming a part of an extended, embodied, and enacted repertoire over a range of languages, modes, and media and exercising its creativity within the loose links of an assemblage. Translations, as I have mentioned, are themselves open to distribution, and this recursive looping of languages, modes, and media complicates the idea of authorship, translatorship, and originality. The distributive agency of assemblages means that authors and translators, originals and translations must be understood as processes in flux rather than discrete persons or objects vying for discursive control.

This proposed shift in our ontological understanding of texts potentially reverses normative perceptions of the source-target and author-translator divide. Since original texts and their translators are distributed over a repertoire, it is possible to see all texts as ‘provocations to go in search of translation’, to adapt Hayles’s (2005: 114) formulation that texts are ‘provocations to go in search of meaning’. Translations, then, represent further provocations in the perennial search of meaning, where the rubric of translation remains open to articulation toward other mobile, *re-trans-super-poly-metro-post* procedures (cf. Pennycook 2016). In this scenario of distribution, it is entirely possible for translations to add value to the original texts by drawing on linguistic and semiotic resources not available to or not accessed by the original.

A distributed account of translation echoes the translation views of Borges, for whom ‘it is entirely possible for an “original” text to be unfaithful to its translation (in the sense of being inferior to its successor)’ (Hayles 2005: 114, drawing on Kristal), in reversal of normative translation logics. The ensuing textual space is, in

Borges's conception, one in which 'original' and 'translation' become notional, fluid identities that can morph into each other. Rather than articulating *away from* originals, translations can be seen as 'drafts circulating *along with* the original in a stream of provisional attempts' (Hayles 2005: 116; emphasis added) to pursue meaning. In this vision,

texts in an assemblage intermediate one another without necessarily bestowing on any one text the privileged status of the 'original.' Everything is simultaneously a translation of everything else, each united to the others in a rhizomatic network without a clear beginning or end (Hayles 2005: 115).

If translating is a provisional attempt in provoking meaning alongside writing, then translators and authors are truly equal partners in the constant pursuit of meaning-in-dispersal and in the co-construction of a work-in-distribution, with neither party being more equal than the other.

**Acknowledgements:** This research was supported by a General Research Fund from the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (Project Code: 17602219).

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