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Writing Through Contemporary Self-Translation

A Constructive Technogenetic Intervention

This article is a theoretical sketch or note on the relationship between human and machine as regards writing and translation of one's own texts, or "self-translation." I propose expanding or modifying the concept of self-translation to include translation that incorporates digital media, more specifically machine translation, into the process. Furthermore, I claim that self-translation of this kind is, in fact, self-reflexive writing that constitutes a "constructive technogenetic intervention," a concept discussed by N. Katherine Hayles. In addition to Hayles, this brief piece responds to Rainier Grutman's observations on the field of self-translation and is to be read as an extension or adaptation of Grutman's ideas. To complement more traditional forms of self-translation, I suggest considering the writing practice described in this article as their contemporary counterpart.

1 Double Writing Process

After writing in one language, which may or may not be their native tongue, the self-translator¹ is compelled—for artistic, political, economic, or personal reasons—to translate what they have written into another language. This may happen immediately or only after a gap in time, even after the text in the first language has been published and perhaps translated by someone else. Assuming for the current purposes that the self-translator does not wait for the first text to be published—and thus fixed—but rather translates an unfinished work-in-progress, it is conceivable that they would return to the first text and rework it based on their fresh translation. Also, having rewritten the first text, they are likely to return again to the translation and alter it based on the changes they have made in the first language. As this reciprocal dynamic between the two texts continues and intensifies, instead of an original text and its self-translation, what emerge are two parallel texts of comparable status authored by the same individual in two different languages. Thus, the process of translation becomes, in effect, a "double writing process" (Grutman 259).

Consider then what happens when a third language is introduced to break or bridge the linguistic binary of the self-translator. Although, as Eva Gentes has pointed out, trilingual writing formations and publications open up many

fascinating possibilities (278), what I am referring to here is not (another) natural language, but rather a language of another kind: the programming language of the machine translator.² For in this instance, rather than “manually” translate their text, the self-translator has a machine translation program translate it first. Utilizing it to varying degrees, they then take the machine translation and treat it as a found text, using it for the purposes of their own translation. More concretely, they write over parts of what the computer has translated, while also including words, phrases, or larger portions of text that the computer has suggested, some of which would otherwise not have found their way into the text. Thus, a digital agent in the form of machine translation software is introduced and incorporated into the writing through self-translation process. More importantly, a close causal relationship between the self-translator and the digital media emerges in which the human writer can be seen to write with and against the intelligent (i.e. capable of learning) machine.

To distinguish it from more traditional forms of self-translation, which date back to at least the Middle Ages (Hokenson and Munson 17–77), but have only recently received proper attention in translation studies (Grutman 257), this algorithmically aided—or, more correctly, mediated—form of self-translation could be called contemporary self-translation. In fact, unless the contemporary self-translator anachronistically refuses to use common digital technologies (and thus, to follow the logic of the argument, ceases to be a *contemporary* self-translator), their text is very likely to be algorithmically mediated in one way or another, even if they are not explicitly using machine translation or other forms of natural language processing.³ As Frederik Kaplan has argued, Internet search engines along with their autocomplete functions (which correct misspelled words, in addition to suggesting statistically probable searches) push natural languages in more algorithm-friendly and economically viable directions, striving to shape and exploit the words we enter into seemingly innocuous text-entry fields (Kaplan 57–62). Thus, contemporaneity is, in this instance, both an advantage and a burden—an advantage in that, as I claim, algorithmic processes can enrich and invigorate self-reflexive writing processes; a burden in that these same processes are made possible by corporate players whose interest in language is capitalistic.

2 Technogenesis and the Question of Progress

However, here I would like to follow another line of thought. Such is the interdependent relationship of the human writer and the digital media in contemporary self-translation that my proposition is to view this practice as an example of “technogenetic intervention” (83), a term N. Katherine Hayles takes up

in the context of the digital humanities in *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (2012). Building on, among others, Bernard Stiegler's (1998) work on the relationship of technics and the human, by "technogenesis," Hayles refers to the co-evolution of humans and technologies and their reciprocal influence on each other's development (10). Hayles writes of "contemporary technogenesis" as distinct from the co-evolution of humans and non-digital tools, e.g. the writing tools used by practitioners of traditional self-translation (18). In contemporary self-translation, digital media and their users together form "complex adaptive systems" (18) in which technologies are continually changing while also changing those entwined with them. Clearly, the biological meaning of adaptation, becoming better suited for one's environment, is key to Hayles's hypothesis. In contemporary technogenesis, adaptation involves compatibilities (and/or incompatibilities) between "organisms and their environments, recognizing that both sides of the engagement (humans and technologies) are undergoing coordinated transformations" (81).

Why should contemporary self-translation be approached in terms of technogenetic intervention? What distinguishes it from the countless other algorithmic adaptations that make up the media ecologies of the 21st century? First, it centrally involves language, an embodied medium of human thought (Dove 372). Second, because it involves language, it is at the core of the challenges digital media pose to human cognition—challenges impacting, for example, human attention, which is becoming a scarce resource (Lanham xi). For Hayles, the main question is, "how digital media can be used to intervene constructively in our present situation" characterized by widespread uncertainty as to where our deepening engagement with digital technology will ultimately lead (83). The "technogenetic spiral" (or the accelerating interlacing of humans and technologies) both enables and requires constructive interventions (83). As it does not, in principle, entail progress—a point that Stiegler (95)⁴ also stresses—the potential for both desirable and undesirable change remains on individual, societal, and global levels, a fact that is made dramatically apparent by changes in reading and writing practices.

Reading practices evolving in response to the prevalence of contemporary digital media—a topic that Hayles discusses in detail—can be seen as adaptations or "strategic responses to information-intensive environments" (61). On the one hand, they allow us to function in our media environments by increasing our capacity to absorb different types of information quickly. On the other hand, they can be seen to constitute a deterioration of concentrated reading practices that have been at the heart of contemporary literary studies and, more generally, at the core of what has traditionally been considered good reading. Thus, hyperreading (i.e. digital reading) highlights the ambiguities of technogenesis, an evolutionary process that always implies complex negotiat-

ions and tensions between the interests of corporations, individuals, and other actors.

3 Room with Mirrored Walls

Within the field I come from, artistic research (an inter-, trans-, or post-disciplinary domain in which research is carried out in and through art work) there is an ongoing debate on the role and status of writing as a part of research.⁵ Simply put, the debate stems from the question, why must artistic research follow other fields in presenting its research processes and outcomes in the form of (discursive) writing, if the actual research happens in the artworks themselves. My claim that methods such as those practiced by the contemporary self-translator are examples of constructive technogenetic interventions—analogue to the ones Hayles makes reference to in the context of the humanities (83)—should be understood in this context. However, in this particular article, I am less concerned with what impact, if any, the idea of the artistic researcher as self-translator has on the field. Rather, my question is how to actually verify that technogenesis is taking place and that there is something to intervene in. In other words, how to show that human writers (no matter what their field or genre) and their digital technologies are actually bringing about profound embodied changes in each other.

The rapid rate at which digital media evolve, for its part, is plain to see—and machine translation is no exception in this regard. It might not have lived up to the expectations of Warren Weaver’s “Tower of Anti-Babel”—which was, as Hayles also points out, paradoxically a basement that allowed individuals trapped in their towers to descend to a common cellar and communicate with each other (Weaver 11; Hayles 162)—, but machine translation continues to evolve as its developers adopt and implement new approaches.⁶ Despite (or, indeed, due to) accelerated technological development, detecting technogenetic changes is no easy feat, for as Hayles writes, “the instruments by which one might attempt to measure these changes are themselves part of the technical environment and so are also involved in dynamic transformations” (81). Discerning the changes on the human side of the technogenetic equation is particularly difficult here, as that would require monitoring and interpreting the bodily changes occurring as one writes. How has, for instance, the contemporary self-translator evolved in relation to their traditional counterpart? More to the point, how does the contemporary self-translator continue to evolve as a writer through the use of machine translation and other digital media?

Rather than try to show what kind of embodied changes contemporary self-translation entails, I will here take the somewhat more modest route of

proposing how the inclusion of digital media in the self-translation process transforms the practice on a more general level. In order to do that, I will first take a closer look at self-translation *per se*. As we have seen, self-translation is a highly particular form of translation and one very close to writing—so close, in fact, that their difference may be negligible. Certainly, in light of the contemporary discussion of self-translation in translation studies, the differences between writing and translating seem so fluid that it is tempting to ask whether all translation is, in fact, (re)writing, and all writing (a form of) translation (Bassnett 289). The term “self-translation” refers to both the process and its outcome, as Rainier Grutman points out (257). What differentiates a self-translator such as the one I described above from bilingual and polyglot writers who switch from one language to another on an everyday basis? In Grutman’s view, the key difference is in the degree of consciousness: self-translators are not only fluent in two or more languages; they make a conscious decision to write in more than one language (Grutman 257). Crossing over from one language to another is thus not (only) dictated by practical reasons, but rather the result of a strategic choice, which highlights the significance of translation as something other than the mere transfer of text (and meaning) from one language to another (the machine translator could be seen to attempt just this).

For the self-translator—and now I speak from the standpoint of my own self-translation practice—, self-translation is a means of thinking, a method of carrying out (or, at the very least, intensifying) artistic and intellectual inquiry and creation. The act of translating into another language constructs a self-reflexive space, akin to a rehearsal room with mirrored walls, in which the parallel texts reflect back on each other, “cross-fertilizing each other,” as Grutman writes (257). They enable a cross-linguistic examination of one’s thoughts and thought processes that would, if one were to write in just one language, be missing or externally imposed (by supervisors, examiners, or editors). Through the foreignization of one’s own text a perhaps paradoxical domestication, a recapturing or extension of one’s thoughts, occurs.⁷ In this regard, self-translation is not only a means of thinking, but also a strategy for gaining textual efficacy: the twofold writing process stretches the limits of the writing and the writer, in the best case scenario resulting in not only increased textual density and precision, but in deeper, more comprehensive knowledge. For writer-researchers in particular, this motivation is strong enough to compel us to repeatedly partake in an activity that some regard as absurd (why would anyone, after all, want to go to the trouble of writing their text twice), and that (according to even the most prominent self-translators of the 20th century such as Samuel Beckett or Vladimir Nabokov) requires overcoming a strong feeling of disgust (Grutman 257).

4 Self-Translation as Extension

What, then, does machine translation have to offer this self-reflexive process? In the part of his essay on self-translation entitled “Textual relations,” Rainier Grutman attends to two topics germane to this discussion: self-translation as extension and the question of authority (258). How do self-translations compare to translations made by others? Do they have distinct features? In this connection, Grutman refers to Jacqueline Risset’s essay *Joyce Translates Joyce* (1984), which deals with James Joyce’s “Italianizations” of his own unfinished text fragments from what was to become *Finnegans Wake* (Grutman 258–259). In Risset’s view, conventional translations (of Joyce) tend to be “hypothetical equivalents of the original text” compromised by their “fidelity and uninventiveness”; Joyce’s own versions of the texts, in contrast, constitute “a kind of *extension, a new stage*, a more daring variation on the text in progress” (Risset according to Grutman 258–259; emphasis added).

My wish is not to further reinforce the dichotomy between self-translation and translation performed by others. Instead, I would like to point out that, in the case of writing through translation (i.e. clearly writing parallel, distinct texts rather than adhering to the structure and logic of the original and its translation), a translation made by someone else, no matter how interesting, would be unworkable, as it would not contribute to the writing process itself. Why? Simply because it would not be produced by the same hands, as it were, as the original—it would not afford the writer the same practical, embodied information as the self-translation. It would rather be a finished product in itself, unmovable, insoluble, even if unprotected by copyright. Risset’s idea of self-translation as an “extension, a new stage” is, however, useful in another way. It aptly describes how self-translation works: the writing emerges only after it has been extended by self-translation, only after a new stage has been set up for it. Without this extension, this new stage, we would remain at the monolingual starting point of the process. In contemporary self-translation, machine translation plays a key role in the creation of this stage, as it functions as the machinic other—or co-foreignizer—against whose algorithmic proposals the self-translator weighs their choice of words. Certainly, not all of Google Translate’s suggestions, for instance, constitute “more daring variations on the text in progress,” but given machine translation’s current capabilities and its potential for further development, it is already capable of carrying out this role and likely to be even more so in the future. If the contemporary self-translator adapts to the machine translator by resisting and exploiting it, the machine translator is, in the logic of the technogenetic spiral, sure to change in ways that make it more and more usable for this purpose—until a tectonic shift in the technological landscape reconfigures this bind, or makes it obsolete altogether.

5 Authorial Control

I conclude by touching on the question of authorship from another direction. With regards to the authority of the self-translator, Grutman alludes to how the relationship between author and translator is conventionally perceived (259). Customarily, authors have control over their work and translators are expected to adhere to their intentions. Therefore, Joyce's by all accounts inventive re-writings of his own texts gain prestige simply because they are the work of the author himself. Even venerable translations made by skilled translators pale in comparison. The self-translator is free to make radical changes to the target text (and, for that matter, to the source text too), changes that would be considered questionable, to say the very least, had they been made by another translator, as Menakhem Perry points out (Perry according to Grutman 259). Grutman cites several other authors that concur. The "writer-translator," as Brian Fitch calls the self-translator, is widely seen to be best positioned to grasp the intentions of the original author, to possess "intimate knowledge" (Cohn) unavailable to "any ordinary translator," leading to this "unusual degree of acceptance [of the author as self-translator]," as Grutman describes it (Cohn and Fitch according to Grutman 259).

For its part, the machine translator has no intimate knowledge of any particular text. Moreover, it is not programmed to search for the intentions of any particular author. Instead, its algorithms approach the translation of any given text as a mathematical task, in which words and phrases from the source language are paired with their most probable equivalents in the target language. Rather than reason for consternation, for the contemporary self-translator accustomed to the affordances and limitations of the media, the seemingly narrow approach of the digital agent becomes a tool to work with. Not only does it deviate from how the context-conscious self-translator would initially translate their text, presenting them with options that may lead to further changes (surely also improvements) later in the writing process, the digital agent is free of the human problems that both privileged and unprivileged translators, with their concern for (or disregard of) the author's perceived intention, present. Bypassing and deconstructing authorial power regimes, the machine translator works according to a technical scheme, according to code that can be understood despite the "black box" nature of commercial algorithms (cf. Pasquale 2015)—making it a transgressive, adaptive media in the act of writing one's text and reworking one's thoughts anew.

Notes

- 1 This article stems from my artistic doctoral research *Algorithmic Adaptations*, which I am currently completing at the Performing Arts Research Center, Theater Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki. In my research, I focus on contemporary (i.e. digitally mediated) self-translation as an auto-reflexive practice. By self-translation, I understand the translation of one's own writing into another language or other languages. The argument I make in this article and in my research is that the introduction of digital media significantly changes the self-translation process by opening it up to the influence of technology and even to digital co-authorship.
- 2 By machine translation, I refer to algorithmically governed translation carried out by computer programs that utilize natural language databases. Machine translation plays a key role in the artistic practice upon which my artistic research is based. Having first become a central element of my performance practice—for example, in the *love.abz* performance series (2011–2015) and *Mind Machine* (2017)—, it has subsequently also become a crucial medium in the writing of the written part of the research. In addition, conceptually it figures prominently in the central claims of the research.
- 3 Christopher Manning states that natural language processing (NLP) or computational linguistics “is a field at the intersection of computer science, artificial intelligence, and linguistics.” Its goal is “for [the] computer to process or ‘understand’ natural language in order to perform tasks that are useful,” such as translation (Lecture 1, *YouTube*).
- 4 Stiegler writes, “If technology, which for a long time has been synonymous with progress, is no longer necessarily perceived as such, or rather, if it is no longer obvious that progress is tantamount to benefit for the human race, a feeling found deep in the multifarious reactions of resistance to development, can it still be affirmed that technoscience submits theory to useful finalities—usefulness still being understood as usefulness-for-humanity?” (95).
- 5 In 2016, the Society for Artistic Research (SAR) organized an international conference, the topic of which was writing in artistic research. The description of the conference on its website provides an overview of the debate on writing in artistic research: “The relationship between artistic practice and writing in the context of research is a challenging and much debated topic, both in and outside of art degree programs. Often the relationship is felt to be one of friction, opposition or paradox. Writing gives an explicit verbal account of the implicit knowledge and understanding embodied in artistic practices and products while at the same time art may

escape or go beyond what can be expressed by words and resist (academic) conventions of accountability.” *Writing as Practice, SAR20* available at <<https://www.sarconference2016.net/rc/index.html>>.

- 6 Recently, neural machine translation (NMT), which utilizes artificial neural networks developed in artificial intelligence research, has emerged as a “new paradigm in the machine translation field” (Castilho et al. 109). Manning has described NMT as “the approach of modeling the entire machine translation process via one big artificial neural network” (Lecture 10, *YouTube*).
- 7 I borrow the dichotomy foreignization/domestication from Lawrence Venuti, for whom they represent opposite translations strategies, the former having the potential to “restrain the ethnocentric violence of translation . . . [as] a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of world affairs, pitched against the hegemonic English language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others” (qtd. in Kearns 285).

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