

Translation and Creativity, by Kirsten Malmkjær, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, 140 pp., £34.99/£120.00 (paperback/hardback), ISBN 9781138123274/9781138123267

Kirsten Malmkjær's scholarship in translation studies has covered a broad perspective of the discipline, ranging from linguistics to pedagogy to children's and canonical literature. Her new monograph draws together this breadth of interests to examine a fundamental –and contentious– characteristic of translation: to what extent can translation be considered creative? Malmkjær calls on another of her interests, philosophy, to shape her examination of this issue. The early chapters of the study seek to define creativity in translation; firstly, by parsing Kant's theory of creativity into ten elements. It is notable that Malmkjær has turned to sources from the sciences and social sciences –for example, the neuroscientist Nancy Coover Andreasen or the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi– to underpin her thesis that translation is a fine art and therefore intrinsically creative, thus subjecting the nebulous concept of creativity to rigorous scrutiny. Malmkjær is particularly interested in the question of whether originality is essential for creativity and aims to unpick the relationship between imitation, or copying, and creativity. She quotes the professor of management and organization, Alf Rehn: “if we got better at copying, the other aspects of creativity would work better as well” (2011, p. 137). Malmkjær finds this “a promising insight in the context of translation, if we think of translating as in some sense derivative” (p. 25). Her proposition, that imitation and creativity need not be mutually exclusive, is a theme that runs through the whole book.

Chapter 2 revisits Kant's ten characteristics of creativity, systematically examining the application of each of these elements within the translation process in order to assess whether translation is a creative exercise. Malmkjær engages closely with the distinctions between “translation, translating and translations” (p. 33), something that is all too often overlooked in theoretical discussions of the discipline and the activity of translation, and identifies the “translational eureka moment” as one thing that can make the connection between translation and creativity, while accepting that “not every moment need be as great as every other” (p. 33). Malmkjær illustrates her argument with a wide range of intriguing examples. One such is a reference to the case of Bart Van Es (2018a), to support her contention that “some translations will qualify as pieces of fine art whether or not the original text falls within that category” (p. 46). In following up this lead, I learned that the prizewinning biography *The Cut Out Girl: A Story of War and Family, Lost and Found*, which Malmkjær describes as “a piece of literary art in English”, was written in English by a Dutch-speaking professor of English who later recounted using his skills “working in archives, translating, and paying attention to style” to write “creative non-fiction using the resources of the novel (such as literary descriptions and reconstructed conversations) alongside statistics and transcribed documents” (Van Es, 2018b). Translation is one element in a larger skill set available to Van Es, demonstrating the versatility and reach of translation but also the blurred lines between translation and creation. Malmkjær admits that her conception of translation as creative might at first make it “difficult to distinguish [...] from non-translational text creations” (p. 48), but goes on to make a convincing case for seeing the translation process as different from other text-focused activities.

The third chapter thus investigates the translation process from a theoretical perspective –although this chapter also includes practical guidelines on “how to be a translator” (p. 67). Malmkjær draws on linguistic theory to examine how meaning

interacts with translation, based on the sharing (or not) of “passing theories” of meaning between writer, translator and reader. Malmkjær depicts a vigorously intervening translator who may “engineer” or “actively seek” the degree of correlation of passing theories between the writer and reader (p. 57). This is where the spark of creativity becomes apparent. Having investigated both experimental and speculative studies in language processing for translation, Malmkjær turns to another philosopher, Roger Scruton, to support her recommendation that translators need to adopt an “aesthetic attitude” (p. 67) if they are to have the best chance of producing a creative translation. She warns, however, that this attitude “does not of itself guarantee creative translating” (p. 68). This significant warning provides a useful reminder that no aspect of translation can be taken for granted.

An extended fourth chapter conducts a detailed examination of the creativity of practical translation using the template which Malmkjær has so painstakingly constructed in the earlier pages. Malmkjær presents the work of a range of translators in the literary fields (prose, poetry and drama), including their own descriptions of their approaches. It is refreshing to have the translator’s voice so prominently highlighted. These are invariably well known translators who have been accorded what Anthea Bell once described to me as “the luxury” of a translator’s note; in some cases (Jean Boase-Beier and David Johnston, for example) they are also academics who theorise their translation work, or translators such as Ros Schwartz who are sufficiently connected to the academic system to be published in academic volumes (2006). Nevertheless, Malmkjær insists that creative translation is not the preserve of academia noting that “[a]cademic attention to a text does not require a further theory, but nor does it preclude it” (p. 80). It would have been interesting for this tension between academic and professional translators to have been explored further.

In the later stages of the chapter, Malmkjær the academic conducts a “written version of Think Aloud Protocol research testing” on Malmkjær the translator, taking her readers through her translating thought processes and decisions in her own translation of Hans Christian Andersen’s tale *The Princess and the Pea* (pp. 83-93). Malmkjær’s back-translations of the Danish source text make it possible to follow the process closely and –in my case– argue with her translation choices. I would have found it helpful in assessing those decisions if Malmkjær could have stated the brief for her translation: what was she aiming to communicate to her readers –and who are they? Malmkjær’s translating strategy, however, is not the issue at point; she goes on to clarify that whichever strategy may be adopted by the translator, “the success of their application is likely to be significantly enhanced if the aesthetic attitude has been adopted to the source text before and during translation” (p. 93). It is this aesthetic attitude which is the culmination of Malmkjær’s argument for translation as a creative activity.

Malmkjær’s book is a sustained journey through philosophy and experimental study to investigate the nature of creativity in translation. Engaging, clearly analysed and explained, the study provides an opportunity to reflect on approaches to translation and the creativity involved. Malmkjær’s personal interests and examples add passion to her argument. Concluding, Malmkjær insists that translating is an activity “worthy of respect” (p. 106); so indeed is this book.

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