

Translational Transactions: Introduction

Karen Grumberg

University of Texas at Austin

Corine Tachtiris

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

TRANSACTIONS ARE IN THE BUSINESS OF BUSINESS. A transaction generally involves buying and selling, an exchange of capital, goods, or services. Etymologically, “transaction” comes from the Latin *trans* (across or through) and *agere* (to set in motion); transactions are dynamic, they entail movement, they are uncontained. It is not difficult to see how such characteristics came to be interrelated, particularly in today’s world, where the disintegration of boundaries in the name of globalism allows capital to flow in networks that are almost certainly the most ubiquitous form of intercultural and transnational encounter, communication, and exchange.

Translations are transactions par excellence; they invite literature into the realm of the transactional and the global, figuratively and literally. The most basic transaction involved in translation is that between the translator and the source text. In the encounter with the text, translators must negotiate their position as both readers and writers, both consumers and producers of text—neither fully one nor the other. Other transactions—theoretical, literal, and institutional—abound in translation: from translators’ private negotiations with words and syntax to publishers’ considerations of markets to readers’ consumption of a text originally written in a language they do not read to critics’ assessment and the global reception, including the awarding of prizes in various categories. However, even though the acts of writing, translating, and reading often are characterized as solitary, they actually consist of layers of mutually constituting social and institutional relations. The multiple transactions underlying every translated text, critically, shift according to a variety of factors, including each agent’s first language, race, religion, gender, political affiliation. These movements reflect, in part, the mobility made possible by the confrontation with translation; the idiosyncrasies and assumptions common in one language, one culture, leave a different impact or an impression on another.

The transactional nature of translation and its effects lies at the very core of contemporary debates about the concept of world literature. For David Damrosch, world literature is literature that “gains in translation,” implying the creation of surplus value in the transaction. Emily Apter’s focus on untranslatability, on the other hand, suggests the impossibility of transacting between the incommensurable currencies of different languages and cultures. Apter pushes against world literature as a set of market forces organizing the flow of texts according not only to economic but also to cultural capital, as described by Pascale Casanova. The economy of “centers” and “peripheries” through which texts and capital circulate is much more complicated than Casanova’s model, according to Rebecca Walkowitz, as she breaks down a supposed one-to-one correlation between literature, culture, language, and nation. Walkowitz’s “born translated” texts are not minted in the national currency but rather arise out of a series of multilingual and multicultural transactions even before they hit the page.

These diverse facets of translation as transactional drive the current issue of *Dibur*, which challenges conceptualizations of both transaction and translation as strictly binary social relations (producer and consumer, source language and target language). This special issue grew out of the 2019 annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, where, as a member of the Hebrew Literature division, Karen proposed a panel, “Hebrew Translational Transactions,” spurred by that year’s MLA presidential theme, “Textual Transactions.” The panel’s broad goal was to explore the interplay between translation and transaction in the context of the Hebrew language and Hebrew literature specifically. In this issue of *Dibur*, we broadened the scope to include all the major languages of the Middle East: Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Taken together, the essays in this issue provide a regional perspective that adds another layer to the translational transactions each essay investigates, whether literary, linguistic, social, or political.

In her essay on the poet and translator Yaakov Fichman, Maya Barzilai shows how Fichman, in two important essays published in 1913 and 1923 in Palestine, argued for the centrality of translation for the success of the Zionist project. She identifies two distinctive but complementary poetic strategies employed by Fichman to this end. His economic terminology suggests that interaction with other languages through translation would not corrupt Hebrew, as some of his contemporaries feared, but rather would stave off its impoverishment, benefiting the national endeavor from *without*. Relatedly, his use of gendered metaphors posits the activity of translation itself as a form of productive masculine labor that would contribute to the Hebrew language and uphold national ideals through the conquest of foreign languages and, thereby, of Hebrew itself. This conceptualization of translation as a site marked by collective power, prestige, and privilege entailed the exclusion of literary figures whose age, race, or gender did not accord with this paradigm.

Analyzing the Arabic reception and translation of S. Yizhar’s famous novella *Khirbet Khiz’ah* within Palestine and in the wider Arab world, Rachel Green shows how such global encounters challenge or confirm the local Hebrew interpretation of the text’s ethics. Drawing parallels to the postcolonial Anglophone reception of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Green argues that at least two divergent “affective currencies” emerge from an analysis of the novella’s Arabic reception. The first is empathy, which stresses an awareness of and engagement with the other and thus has “the potential to *do things* in the wide world.” The second, personal distress, is concerned primarily with the effects of the novella’s events on the (Jewish) self. The text’s “Arabic afterlives,” Green argues, are the ground for an “affective economy” that hosts currencies of

empathy and distress in response to the translated text. The diverse ongoing Arabic transactions with the translated text, shows Green, highlight the limits of the liberal discourse of empathy and point the way to alternative negotiations of power differentials that might lead to more just global social relations.

Taking up the question of Hebrew-to-Arabic translation from a contemporary perspective, Michal Raizen considers the Arab engagement with Arab-Jewish literary memory via a dynamic recuperative process she dubs “translating the Arab-Jew.” The transaction takes place both in the contemporary practice of these texts’ translation—which she sees as part of a strategy to re-create the story of Arab-Jews—and in the reclaimed historical narratives themselves. Inviting Arab readers to read texts that have been translated from Hebrew, Arab-Jewish authors like Almog Behar participate in a collective, regional recovery of Arab-Jewish memory and experience while also establishing their texts and their authorial selves as tenuous traces of those memories. With a focus on two of Behar’s translators, Nael Eltoukhy and Mohammed Abud, Raizen demonstrates how translation functions as a key mode for establishing and consolidating the presence of Arab-Jewish culture and history. While mostly grounded in Cairo, her essay concludes with a consideration of Berlin as a site that nourishes mutually impactful encounters—social, cultural, and textual—among Jewish and non-Jewish Arabs.

Danielle Drori analyzes autobiographical essays and memoirs by two Jewish intellectuals to consider the circumstances and implications of their literary languages: Jacqueline Shoheit Kahanoff, who was born in Cairo, lived in the United States, Paris, and Tel Aviv, and wrote in English; and Naïm Kattan, who was born in Baghdad, has lived in Paris and Montreal, and writes in French. Theorizing these authors through Pascale Casanova’s notion of “translated men,” Drori sees them as world literary figures whose language choices—whether made by themselves or by the network of people involved in the publication and circulation of their works—influenced their reception and determined their categorization within particular canons. Literal and figurative translation positioned both Kahanoff and Kattan as “tightrope walkers” balancing among the various languages and national spaces they traversed. Perpetually unresolved and ambivalent concerning their linguistic and national identities, these authors align neither with the monolingual model of national literature nor with the world literature paradigm that arose as its multilingual alternative.

Huda Abu Much examines the case of the *Huriya* anthology of Arab women’s writing released by Israeli publisher Resling without obtaining copyright permission for the translations into Hebrew from the authors it featured. Though the translator and editor for *Huriya* may have wished to give a voice to Arab women, Abu Much argues, they ultimately silenced these women by not giving them a say in whether or how their work is translated into Hebrew. In addition to experiencing gender oppression, the authors felt that the appropriation of their work without permission resembled the colonial oppression of the Israeli state and forced them into a position of normalizing relations between Israel and the Arab world. Abu Much relates these publishing practices to the persistence of Orientalism and sexism, notwithstanding the good intentions cited by Resling. At the end of her essay, she offers the Maktoob publishing house as a model for Arab-to-Hebrew translation with a bilingual, binational approach, working against current power imbalances.

While translation copyright violations can uphold oppressive power structures, they might also offer the possibility for subversion, argues Babak Tabarraee in a sociological study of

translation into Persian in Iran. Using an autoethnographic approach, Tabarraee describes the cultural, social, and economic capital associated with learning a Western language, especially English, in the late twentieth century. This has led to an upsurge in translations by a generation of young translators who have also been able to take advantage of the fact that Iran does not participate in reciprocal copyright treaties with most other nations, leaving the translators free to circulate their texts without regard for permissions. Linking this “type of legally permitted piracy” to fan culture and fandubbing in particular, Tabarraee illustrates how the practice has given young Iranian translators not only a means of financial support but also “a subcultural voice to rebel against [their] social, cultural, and ideological constraints.”

Amr Kamal shifts the focus from literature to subtitling and dubbing in audiovisual media in the Arab world. Kamal traces the history of current audiovisual translation practices to the Anīs Ebeid laboratory, established in 1940, to show the long influence of subtitle translation on the standardization and modernization of Arabic. With the rise in access to satellite channels, however, Arabs increasingly consume media in a variety of dialects and registers—from formal Arabic (*fushā*), to Egyptian dialect, to Syrian dialect, to formal Damascene Arabic—used to dub and subtitle everything from Turkish soap operas to Japanese anime and American cop shows. Kamal analyzes this polyglossia through a fascinating sketch from the Egyptian version of *Saturday Night Live* in which the characters speak “like the television.” These examples allow Kamal to elaborate a polyglossic—rather than the traditionally conceived diglossic—Arab linguistic world that also decenters Egypt as the standard-setter of Arabic language.

In the artistic contribution for this issue, Aron Aji puts translational transactions into practice with his English-language renderings of some of Ferit Edgü’s Turkish “Minimal Tales,” which relate personal and historical cycles of violence, especially as experienced by the Kurdish minority. Defying genre distinctions, these “Minimal Tales” distill moments into remarkably sparse, compact prose through “re-instancing”: “a process of extraction to strip the memory of everything extraneous, everything that has been re-membered by association or fictionalized, and to re-instance that which has persisted through time.” In his introduction, Aji reflects on the difficulty of translating these stark yet lyrical tales where every word counts immensely as it “serves to build only the quintessential minimum.” Aji’s translation thus operates according to a strict balance sheet as it transacts between Turkish and English.

Taken together, the pieces in this issue demonstrate that translations move through multi-layered and multilateral economies—be they financial, geopolitical, cultural, social, or affective. As they circulate, translations also transact ambivalently with power in its various forms, including the nation, imperialism, patriarchy, intellectual property rights, and linguistic hegemony. The very same translation project or practice might subvert one hierarchy while reinforcing another. Evaluating the effects of translation on world literature and the world at large requires, then, investment in a multivalenced approach that moves beyond assessing the “quality” of the translation product to the context of its transactions. Perhaps most critically, acknowledging the transactional nature of translation invites us to engage with translated texts as dynamic forms of cultural expression that are inherently fluid and perpetually relational. A