

# Translation as Event: Performing and Staging Translations

O'KEEFFE, B., Cercel, L., & Agnetta, M. (Eds.). (2025). *Translation as Event: Performing and Staging Translations*. Zeta Books.

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“Translation as Event. Performing and Staging Translations” was published by Zeta Books in 2025. It partly reproduces the third issue of the *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics*, which is an open-access journal. This volume revolves mainly around two topics: performativity and the eventfulness of translations. It seeks to answer questions like whether translations perform in the host culture and whether translators can be viewed as performers. What are the essential criteria that such translations need to fulfil to be performative and eventful translations? Are all translations eventful, or only some? How is the eventfulness of a translation to be measured?

The essays in this volume look at an enlarged definition of translation whereby translation is viewed “as a travelling concept” (p. 314). The central idea around which the essays in this volume revolve is that we need to understand translation “outwards”, as an “experiential” process, which means challenging the “word-based model of reading reality” (p. 315). Translation is “meaning-making” (p. 304) using the written word, sounds, images and colours. The essays in this volume convince the reader that “translation is not subservient to the source text...”, it, in fact, has the “potential to transgress and transcend the source text” (p. 314). Each essay in this volume “encourages autonomy for translation” (p. 322). By adopting this approach, translation ceases to be a discipline and becomes a philosophical enquiry. Viewing translation in this light proves that Translation Studies is not a saturated field of study.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section is an introduction to the volume by the editors, titled “On the Eventful Nature of Translations”, which is followed by its German translation of the same, titled “*Zur Ereignishaftigkeit von Übersetzungen*”.

Apart from this introductory essay, there is only one other essay in German by the Translation theorist Radegundis Stolze. The fact that the journal issue is open access and six of the seven essays are in English makes for a good read even for readers who do not know German.

The introductory essay by the three editors sets the stage for understanding the “eventfulness” of translations by citing a case study. A celebrated Romanian poet, Lucian Blaga, translated J. W. v. Goethe’s classic German work *Faust*. Blaga had been banned from publishing by the then communist government since 1948, but had been allowed to translate. Blaga’s translation was an event because it sold 25,100 copies in just three days. Two years after the publication, the celebrated author gave his first public appearance after long years of being away from the public eye, titled “Encounters with Goethe” to a frenzied fan crowd, which left “broken chairs and ripped parquet” (p.16) in its wake. It is neither the source text nor the translation that made Blaga’s translation an event, rather “the subtle interplay between factors like...” the translator (p.16) as producer and a banned author, the audience starving to hear from their favourite author, the sociocultural system and the historical context of Blaga’s resistance to the then communist regime. It is both the “individual (hermeneutic) and the collective (sociological, historical) factors that constitute such an event” (p. 17).

After this introductory framework on eventfulness to the book, the second section begins, which explores translation as a performance and an event through seven essays. These essays thematise different translation traditions ranging from the verbo-centric to the multi-medial, to define the criteria for translations that can be termed as performative and eventful. Brian O’Keeffe’s, Radegundis Stolze’s, and Priyada Padhye’s essays look at the verbo-centric tradition. The other four, namely the essay which is written jointly by Ralf van Bühren, Alberto Gil and Juan Rego, the one by Marie Herbillon, by Angela T. Tanatini and Ma Carmen África Vidal Claramonte, look at translation not as a word-based model of reading reality, but rather as a multi-medial reality encompassing varied subjects like song, dance, architecture and sign language. An attempt has been made

here to give an overview of each essay, which seeks to arrive at a definition of the essential parameters of eventfulness and performativity in translations using different theoretical frameworks and theoreticians.

The first essay, titled “The Events and Non-Events of Translation”, is by Brian O’Keeffe. In this essay, O’Keeffe starts by posing the question of whether translations can be eventful at all. He looks at Stanley Fish’s notion of actualisation to define eventfulness (p. 98), Clive Scott’s idea of translation, which is “a setting in motion of languages” (p. 106), where the destination is not known. He later invokes Benjamin on translatability and untranslatability as well as Barbara Cassin’s idea of untranslatability (p. 108). Jacques Derrida proves to be most fruitful for his discussion on the eventfulness of translation. For Derrida, it is the *coming* from the ‘future’ that is eventful. Hence, the arrival of a translation is unpredictable. “And it may be that the thwarting of what’s expected, possible, foreseeable or deemed practically feasible for translation (and its putative “economies”) is what characterises the event of translation” (p. 111). Derrida says

“Once the event arrives, it takes place (in French, the verb is *avoir lieu*), and hence takes a place previously not provided for it [...] circumscribing space-time itself” (p. 112).

This gives eventhood in translation a temporal-spatial dimension, also echoed in other essays of the volume. O’Keeffe stresses the criterion of ‘unpredictability’ for translations to be eventful. Then he derives from Derrida’s discussion that:

“[...] translation’s event must happen [...] in the blink of an eye [...] as an unexpected invention or reinvention of the original text [...] invented as other to what it once was”.

The *other to what it once was* can be referred to as “irreversibility of translation” (Agnetta, 15). The four criteria that O’Keeffe determines for eventhood of translations are unpredictability, the suddenness of the translation, the irreversibility of the process of translation and the futuristic dimension to its *coming*. To these four

(not exactly numbered by O’Keeffe as I have here) is then added “making the impossible possible”.

“For that’s what an event really is: the refutation of the saturated field of (im)possibilities in the enactment of what was previously deemed impossible, and thus the demonstration that the field wasn’t saturated at all” (p. 113).

As an example, he provides James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* as an eventful translation. On performativity in translation, the essay cites a case study but does not provide as rich a theoretical discussion as has been provided for the ‘eventhood’ of translation. Brian O’Keeffe’s essay, which is rich in a theoretical base, does not offer any conclusion.

The four criteria mentioned in Brian O’Keeffe’s essay are also found in Priyada Padhye’s essay titled “Translating Divinity in the Liminal Space. Performative Translations in the Medieval and Early Modern Period in India”. Padhye observes that not all translations can be performative and eventful. She tries to identify the criteria for such translations for the medieval and early modern period in India. In order to identify the criteria for eventful performative translations, she gives examples of two translations from the medieval period: namely, the *Bhāvārthadeepikā* of Saint *Dnyāneshwar* and the *Kristapurān* by the Jesuit priest Father Thoman Stephens. For this purpose, she finds Erika Fischer-Lichte’s work useful because she identifies ‘emergence’, ‘autopoietic feedback-loop’ and ‘unpredictability’ from Fischer-Lichte’s work as essential criteria that performative translations must fulfil. To this she adds Larisa Cercel’s concept of the ‘translator’s co-presence’ (pp. 191-197). She then expands this theoretical framework to include her own two categories, namely “timelessness” and “transgression”. To explain “irreversibility” in translation, she also refers to Sachin Ketkar’s definition of translation as a “‘new animal’ [...] a text in a different *yonī*” (p. 195). The new text is

“That translated text, that when retranslated into the matrix code or the language, is not identical to the matrix text” (Ketkar, 2022).

To define a performative translation, she refers to the practice of translation in medieval India. Here she borrows G. N. Devy's definition of translation, which is "revitalizing the original" (p. 195). The last category that she identifies is 'transgression' (p. 197). Even in Padhye's text, one finds the previously mentioned temporal aspect as key to qualifying performativity in translations. She uses the etymology of the word *Kalākār* as explained by the singer Kailash Kher in an interview where he says that a *Kalākār* gives shape to the "*Kalā*", i.e. the art, in this case of translation, at the same time gives the *Kal*, i.e. the future of the *Kalā* an *ākār*. For Padhye, only those translations which shape the craft of translating and impact the future of translation are performative translations. Her essay concludes with the observation that the use of the quatrain meter called *ovi* and the dialogic nature of the *Bhāvārthadeepikā* and the *Kristapurān* could be considered as the pre-requisites for producing a performative and eventful translation in the medieval and early modern period in India. These translations, in her opinion, fulfil the criteria for performative and eventful translations identified by her, namely, timelessness, eventfulness, emergence, autopoietic feedback-loop, translator's co-presence, transgression and unpredictability.

Radegundis Stolze's essay is the only essay that is in German. No English translation has been provided. It starts with the presumption that translation as a performance is not possible without the

"Mental framework of enculturation and this in turn includes the personal and collective knowledge of the world and language, as well as emotionality in individual creative writing." (p. 127).

This is illustrated by comparing German translations of the poem "The Hill We Climb" by Amanda Gorman, which was read at the inauguration of the American President Joe Biden in January 2021. "The Hill We Climb" is an invitation to all Americans to uphold democracy and equality for all. Stolze compares three translations of the poem in her essay. One is her own translation, the second is a crowd-sourced translation on the internet and the third, is the one commissioned by the publishing house Hoffmann and Campe to three women (activist translators) who (according to Stolze) were

identified because they were “coloured, marginalised and foreign” (my translation - p. 135), therefore better in a position to feel what the author, an African American herself, felt.

Seen from the hermeneutic perspective, a text is a “word event” only if the reader feels that the text has been addressed to him/her. This is achieved by the visuals created by the metaphors used (p. 147). Stolze questions whether it is only the social position of a translator that makes him or her understand the message, or it is the capacity of a translator to be able to put himself/herself in the position of the author through close reading, research, background knowledge to be able to reformulate his/her message with empathy in another language just like actors on a stage enter different characters? She believes that a translator must be ready to be led by the text rather than only by one’s own hermeneutic understanding of it. She calls it “hermeneutische Offenheit” (hermeneutic openness-my translation, p. 154)

Now I turn my attention to the essays that explore eventfulness and performativity in the non-verbo-centric tradition in translation. Ralf van Bühren, Alberto Gil and Juan Rego’s essay titled “Performance as Translation. The Representation of the Sacred in the “Sagrada Familia” (Barcelona) by the Interaction of Architecture, Visual Arts and Liturgy looks at a broader concept of translation encompassing art, architecture and religion. This transdisciplinary study asks whether the performance itself has an essential translational dimension. The essay “examines how performative actions can translate the transcendent or invisible ‘sacred’ into an aesthetic experience.” (p. 159). The authors look at the event of the dedication of the church of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona together with the homily of Pope Benedict XVI. In the liturgy, the rite, text language, art and architecture work together harmoniously into an integrative action that can shape the aesthetic experience of the “sacred”. The three performances in this event, namely, the architecture of the church, the Catholic liturgy (which is the official and communal worship of God in the Catholic church) and the language of the homily (which is the sermon given by a priest or a bishop in a church) did not have a linear, one after the other, occurrence. All performances occurred side by side and

complemented each other to perform a “semantic polyphony” or *Gesamtkunstwerk* (p. 182) (to use Wagener’s term).

Marie Herbillon looks at the translation of a song from one language to another and its performance by the singer on stage. Her essay is titled “Translation as Multi-Layered Performance: The Case of ‘Le Feu au Coeur’, Bertrand Belin’s French Cover of Bob Dylan’s ‘Ain’t Talkin’”. Herbillon not only discusses how the song itself has been translated/adapted from American English into French but also adds Belin’s own performance of the translated song as a translation of the original American song. Herbillon argues that a “song could possibly be conceived of as the performative par excellence, namely as the ‘most event-ridden utterance’ (Derrida, 1988, 19) in discourse.”

Angela T. Tarantini’s essay titled “When Performance is not a Metaphor for Translation” discusses the interpretation of sign language translation of live musical performances. Tarantini

“Examines the practice of sign language interpreting in music as a translation and performative practice, and expands the concept of performativity to encompass the evental and experiential aspects of translation” (p. 285).

Tarantini makes use of the theoretical framework of the performance theorist and philosopher Stuart Grant, who differentiates between “the performative event, performance, the moment of performance and the theatrical as opposed to the performative” (p. 289 & 230). Performative events may be many, ranging from an inaugural ceremony to cooking to a job interview, etc., but the performance is that moment which has the essence of performance, that moment in which the performer decides to use one possibility of performing from a range of possibilities available to them. That moment, according to Grant, is improvisational, regardless of how well-rehearsed it may be. This moment of performance is like “the blink of an eye” (p. 290); it is fleeting in nature (p. 291). This is where the theatrical performance and the performative event differ. This theoretical framework is then applied to song signing. Tarantini questions where the emotion in a song is.

Is it intrinsic to the text of the song, or is it experienced by the listener of the song?

“So, how can an interpreter translate an element that is not in the text, but is their own experience of the text? I would argue that this is not dissimilar from any other work of translation. The work of the translator is to convey the meaning of a text, but that meaning will always be their own interpretation (i.e. their understanding) of the same text, their experience of the text.” (p. 303).

Ma Carmen África Vidal Claramonte’s essay “Translation and Dance. The Case of Matthew Bourne” explores translation at the intersection of text and dance, as the title suggests. In her article, she analyses Matthew Bourne’s ballets, which are translations of previous literary and operatic works. She takes the case of Bourne’s *The Car Man*, which she views as “an embodied performance” (p. 311). She says that Bourne uses bodies, music and movement to re-translate in order “to update” old meanings (p. 310). While translating literary and operatic works into dance, he

“Deconstructs genres and genders by subverting opera and dance but also straight and gay binary oppositions, thus creating richer and more ambiguous identities and characters” (p. 311). Thus, she invokes Emily Apter’s understanding of translation as “outwards” an “experiential process” (p. 315).

The seven essays and the introductory essay try to outline useful parameters for identifying eventful and performative translations covering a broad spectrum of verbo-centric to non-verbo-centric translations. This book offers a peek into rich and useful theoretical concepts that can be activated to identify or create performative translations. It can also prove to be very useful in teaching translation.

## References

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## About the Reviewer

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