

BOOK REVIEW

TRANSLATING SCIENCE, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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Traduire la science : Hier et aujourd'hui, Pascal Duris (ed.), New edition [online]. Pessac: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 2008, 234 pp, €54,99 (paperback) ISBN : 978-2-85892-495-0, €11,99 (e-book) ISBN 978-2-85892-495-0¹

Published in 2008, this book brings together contributions to a conference that took place in 2006 in the context of the research project *Le livre scientifique. Définition et émergence d'un genre (1450–1850)* [The scientific book. Definition and emergence of a genre (1450–1850)]. The volume, *Traduire la science: hier et aujourd'hui*, [Translating science: yesterday and today], which shares its title with the conference, deals primarily with translations and translators, past and present. The focus on translation is intriguing, suggesting perhaps that the research group found translations to be a key factor in the development of the scientific genre. This would be in line with Halliday and Martin's assertion (1993) that the scientific genre was developed intentionally alongside the scientific revolution.

The aim of the book, as set out in Duris and Ducos's Introduction, is to "offer a cross-section of perspectives on history (of science or ideas) from linguistics, philosophy and literary studies, on the work of translation in different periods and across different scientific fields (astronomy, botany, physics, chemistry, etc.) and on its actors".² The eight chapters indeed explore epistemological questions related to translation and science in a series of case studies ranging from the Middle Ages to the present day. However, in terms of the scientific disciplines discussed, four of the nine chapters discuss natural history (ch. 2, 5, 6, 8), while others tackle astronomy (ch. 3, 9 and appendix) and physics (ch. 4). It would be near-impossible to bring together in a single-work studies of all scientific disciplines (however these are defined) from such a vast timeframe, but since almost half of the contributions in this book relate to natural history, one cannot help but feel a sense of imbalance. Personally, I was disappointed not to find a chapter discussing chemistry, despite Thierry Hoquet pointing out in his chapter that the reform in scientific language at work at the time of Linnaeus (his object of study) also affected chemistry, crystallography and anatomy.

Translation is explored broadly within these chapters. The introduction emphasises the multidimensional role of scientific translators through history, highlighting that "in

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¹ Available at: <https://books.openedition.org/msha/8706?lang=en>

² All translations from this French book are my own.

addition to their role as interpreters, they needed to make accessible to their readers new theories, concepts, terms and nomenclatures that were still being debated. They became in turn annotators, commentators, editors, illustrators and popularisers, according to the trends of the time.” While the authors tend to consider these operations as supplementary to the core act of translation, we might just as easily consider them translational processes in and of themselves. Indeed, many of the chapters would not be out of place in this special issue of *Translation Matters* on (Inter-)epistemic Translation, as we will see.

The conference on which the book is based was held at the *Maison des Sciences de l’Homme d’Aquitaine* [Aquitaine Human and Social Sciences Research Centre], which also published the work. The eight contributors are all prominent researchers in French universities, and four work or were working at *Université Bordeaux Montaigne*, in the Aquitaine region. The limited number of contributions and the relatively limited geographical provenance of the contributors suggest a relatively low interest in this kind of scholarly discussion at the time of publication, which is regrettable for such fascinating subject matter.

The Introduction, authored by the book’s editor, Pascal Duris, alongside Joëlle Ducos, outlines the scope of the book and highlights the difficult role of the science translator through the centuries: a role made difficult primarily by the introduction of new ideas and new language created to express these ideas. The difficulty lies therefore in the need to translate between different knowledge systems (i.e. in the complexities of interepistemic translation).

Chapter 1 begins in the same place as many of the current discussions of translationality and epistemic translation (see Bennett, 2023; Blumczynski, 2023; Robinson, 2017): the *translation studii* of the Middle Ages. Joëlle Ducos argues that this act of translating knowledge from antiquity did not consist merely of a linguistic transfer from one language to another but encompassed reflections on the text and its different versions, and often involved vulgarization through lexical choices. She draws attention to the geographical, temporal and intellectual aspects of the translation process, and to the diversity of translation strategies employed. Ducros proposes that translation is itself a driving force for scientific reflection – not merely a tool for communication, but an integral part of the development of scientific discourse, and, as such, of science itself. Focusing particularly on the role of terminology, she highlights the epistemological questions that arise in its translation and points out that a term can only truly function in a language if the readers understand the concept; hence, the reader is inevitably involved in the translator’s decision-making process.

The second chapter, authored by Philippe Selosse, is reviewed in this issue by Pedro Navarro, and so will not be discussed here. As for Chapter 3, this considers translation and vulgarisation of astronomy in *Renaissance* France, citing the increased use of vernacular languages in 16th century Europe as a driving force for translations and vulgarisation. Violaine Giacomotto-Charra discusses the ways in which the translators of astronomy texts tailored their work for this new, naïve audience, both in the choice of the texts to be

translated, but also in their interventions within the texts. Indeed, she considers translation to be the ultimate form of vulgarisation – in keeping with some more recent statements on the subject made within the framework of (inter-)epistemic translation (e.g. Robinson, 2017; Bennett, 2024; Navarro, this volume).

In the fourth chapter, Jean-François Baillon considers two translations of Newton's *Optiks*: those of Pierre Coste (1720) and Jean-Paul Marat (1787), providing a detailed account of the social context of each of the translations and the translators' biographies.

Both Chapters 5 and 6 discuss translations of the Swedish biologist, Carl Linnaeus. Chapter Five, authored by the book's editor, Pascal Duris, discusses the difficulties of translating Linnaeus' new botanical nomenclature from Latin into French at the end of the 18th century. He discusses the different potential approaches to translation of the terminology (Gallicising the Latin terms, paraphrasing them, or both) and the problems associated with each one, which stem from the fact that Linnaeus created a new language in order to describe and name living things. Just as in Chapter 3, the ultimate question being explored here is how best to communicate a new way of thinking, which is being expressed in new language (based here on Latin), in a language and to people who have no prior knowledge of either – once again, a question of interepistemic translation. Thierry Hoquet, who discusses present-day translation of Linnaeus in Chapter Six, joins Philippe Selosse in warning against retroactively imposing a modern understanding of the world on readings of historical scientific texts. He emphasises the difficulties involved in understanding Linnaeus' text and the many potential traps a translator could fall into, particularly in terms of 'false friends'. We might conclude from this that the translator must first get to grips with the 'foreign' historical language of the original text in its episteme, in order to then be able to translate it into the modern episteme in an act of interepistemic translation.

Chapter 7, written by the historian Patrice Bret, is centred on Mme Picardet, a prolific translator of Enlightenment science into French. The chapter provides insights into this fascinating woman, who distinguished herself from *salonnières* of the period by her active involvement in the scientific conversations of the time, including through translation. It was not uncommon for her translations to include comments and observations penned by her, and Bret notes the importance of her contributions, citing her as an example of the social practice of science and the trend towards vulgarisation in this period.

Many of the chapters presented above contribute to our understanding of the translational processes involved in the transition from the Early Modern period to the current scientific mode of enquiry. The question of how to introduce epistemes to a new audience (as discussed in Chapters 3 and 5) is particularly relevant to those interested in the transmission of Western knowledge to indigenous peoples (and vice versa), and those interested in vulgarisation. Other contributions are pertinent to discussions of how specialist science is transformed into popular science or into forms more commonly seen within the humanities, such as literature and cinema. The eighth chapter of this book falls into this third category. In this chapter, Isabelle Poulin considers the multifaceted identity of Vladimir Nabokov, whose poetic and subjective writings on lepidopterology exclude him

from accepted scientific discourse; Nabokov's own presence within his texts sets him at odds with the norms of the scientific episteme. In contrast to the deliberate processes of vulgarisation discussed in the previous chapters, Nabokov, as presented by Poulin, seems to be unable or unwilling to conform to the norms of science and to adapt the literary form of his writings. Poulin does not speak of scientific and literary epistemes, but rather 'cultures', and states that Nabokov, "in choosing this 'literary' style, [...] seeks to remove the need for translation that arises from the chasm between these two cultures".

The terms 'epistemic translation' and 'translationality' are not mentioned explicitly in this work, which was published nearly ten years before Douglas Robinson's book on translationality (2017). However, as we have seen, the contributors address many themes relevant to these discussions, from vulgarisation to the confrontation between different epistemes, which makes this work of interest to scholars from both History of Science and Translation Studies. The heavy emphasis on case studies has the advantage of providing concrete examples of the concepts being discussed, but, as is true of all case studies, the observations are not necessarily generalisable. Additionally, contributions from other fields, such as chemistry, medicine and geology, would have provided welcome variety.

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