

REVIEW

TRANSLATING RENAISSANCE SCIENCE: PHILLIPE SELOSSE AND THE HISTORIAN'S DILEMMA

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'The Underlying Pattern of the Renaissance Botanical Genre *Pinax*', Selosse, P. in Skaffari, J. et al. (eds.) *Opening Windows on Texts and Discourses of the Past*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2005, pp 161-178, €125, ISBN 9789027294586.

'Traduire les termes de couleur: la chromonymie en botanique à la Renaissance', Selosse, P. in Blampain, D., Thoiron P., and Van Campenhoudt M. (eds.) *Mots, Termes et Contextes: Actes des septièmes Journées scientifiques du réseau de chercheurs Lexicologie Terminologie Traduction*, Paris: Contemporary Publishing International, 2006, pp 619-629, Open Access,¹ ISBN 9782914610315.

'Traduire la nomenclature botanique néo-latine de la Renaissance: la linguistique au secours de l'histoire des sciences', Selosse, P. in Duris, P. (ed.) *Traduire la science: Hier et aujourd'hui*, Paris: Contemporary Publishing International, 2008, pp 25-43, Open Access,² ISBN 978-2-85892-352-6.

One of the possible situations interepistemic translation can illuminate is the process of translationality involved in the history of science. Science changes through time to reflect new discoveries or understandings regarding the world, and this raises problems similar to those seen with ancient versions of current language. No one expects a native speaker of any language to understand its early medieval form, making temporal translation a necessity. However, the situation with science is even more complex because it never depends on two languages alone, but on their *epistemic* backgrounds. When science is translated transtemporally, it is also translated interepistemically for the very paradigms (the ways the world is seen) change through time. Compare, for example, the geocentric and heliocentric worldviews.

The purpose of this review is to find commonalities between the concept of interepistemic translation that is the theme of this special issue and the ideas presented by the French linguist Phillipe Selosse. Selosse's ideas go back to his doctoral dissertation in Linguistics, *Un Aspect de l'Épistémè de la Renaissance: Méthode et "Nomenclature" dans l'Œuvre Botanique de Caspar Bauhin (1560-1624): Une Approche Linguistique*, defended in

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¹Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marc-VanCampenhoudt/publication/236577177_Mots_termes_et_contextes/links/561d4e6208aef097132b20f9/Mots-termes-et-contextes.pdf (Accessed: 10 July 2024)

² Available at: <https://books.openedition.org/msha/8751> (Accessed: 25 Mars 2024)

2000. However, since the dissertation is not readily available, this work reviews three papers derived from it. His 2005 chapter 'The underlying pattern of the Renaissance botanical genre *Pinax*' presents his ideas regarding the *épistémè* of the Renaissance but does not explicitly mention its connection to translation; this only comes later in 'Traduire les termes de couleur: la chromonymie en botanique à la Renaissance' (2006) and 'Traduire la nomenclature botanique néo-latine de la Renaissance: la linguistique au secours de l'histoire des sciences' (2008).³

In his 2005 paper, Selosse expands the Foucaultian concept of *épistémè* to signify a period-specific configuration which determines the foundations (i.e. the 'hows' and 'whys') of knowledge production, not only in the scientific context but also in religious, philosophical, professional, and folk contexts as well. Thus, any scholar that wishes to properly understand the ideas of another period without anachronistically misrepresenting them would have to reconstruct the *épistémè* of that period, just as Selosse does with the scientific Renaissance genre *pinax* exemplified in the works of naturalists Gesner and later Bauhin.

In Selosse's next paper (2006), these ideas are related to (interlingual) translation, as he aims to show that

[...] to understand and translate terms that hide numerous difficulties (technical language, dead language, different *épistémè*), it is necessary to reconstitute them to their knowledge paradigm through multiple contexts (referential, taxonomic, cognitive, epistemic, and socio-historical) (Selosse, 2006, p. 619).⁴

Taking Renaissance botanical nomenclature as an example, Selosse identifies numerous problems for interlingual translation. First, there is the matter of translating a dead language, as most of the texts of the time are in Latin. This then becomes a 'double translation', as words are translated first from their vernaculars into Latin and then into current French. The translator also has to take account of diachronic distance (the way meanings change through time); conceptual heterogeneity (as certain categories, such as colours, are not perceived objectively but filtered socially and culturally); taxonomic heterogeneity (a term may refer to multiple species, while a single species may be denoted by multiple terms); and finally, absence of the referent (for example, in the case of plant colours, since all conserved specimens from the time will have lost their original colouration). Thus, it is not enough to merely translate these terms to identify a particular plant, since this, which Selosse (2006, p. 621) calls a "realist temptation from referentialism", can obscure the *épistémè* of the time.

³ Selosse gives another case study in his 2012 paper, which discusses the translation of category terms instead of descriptive ones. See: Selosse, P. "The Role of Carolus Clusius (1526-1609) as Translator in the Emergence of a Taxonomic Terminology in Botany," in *Translating Knowledge in the Early Modern Low Countries*, Cook, H. J. and Dupré, S. (eds.). Zurich: Lit, 2012, pp. 349-368.

⁴ All quotes were translated into English by the review author.

To these statements, Selosse (2008) adds two relativistic postulates: that science is a discourse that represents the world but that is not *itself* the world; and that language is the only way we have to access mental representations (themes, ideas, or concepts). The corollary of these statements is that linguistic forms cannot be ignored or supposed to be transparent in disciplines like History of Science, History of Ideas, or Philosophy.

To substantiate these claims, Selosse offers a case study on the translation of descriptive botanical terms, restricted to colour designations in a first study (Selosse, 2006) and expanded to other terms in a later one (Selosse, 2008). In his 2008 chapter, Selosse aims to “show how the ignorance about morphosyntax and the semantics of a language stage can hide essential particularities of a scientific paradigm,” presenting the following description by Bauhin in 1623 as an example: *Lacuta montana purpurocaerulea major*. This could be simply translated as ‘*Grande laitue de montagne bleu pourpre*’ [literally, large lettuce from the mountain purplish-blue]. However, Selosse tackles one term after another to show that such a direct translation destroys the Renaissance *épistémè* to which it originally belonged. First, to take ‘*Lactuca*’ as a *genus* in the translation presupposes a Linnean interpretation, though this taxonomy would only appear more than a century later (Selosse insists that the exact order of the words must be kept in the translation to convey the Renaissance taxonomic *épistémè*). As for ‘*montana*’, this is shown to be a false friend since it does not designate only mountain plants but also ones that grow on slopes and that occur in other regions but were observed by the naturalist on slopes or in mountains. ‘*Purpurocaerulea*’ does not refer to a shaded mixture of violet (which at the time was already referred to by terms like ‘*violaceus*’, ‘*violaceum*’, or ‘*violacea*’), but to two distinct colours which were not even adjacent in the colour spectrum (it is a coincidence that this case mentions blue and purple). What is more, the colours are not regressively named in Latin (i.e. to be understood as blue with shades of purple) but rather, the main colour is given first and then joins the second in a progressive compound adjective so that a more accurate translation would be ‘purple blue’. Lastly, ‘major’ should not be translated as ‘grande’ but as ‘plus grande’ to preserve the sequential and specific nature of the difference between the plants presented in Bauhin’s list.

Thus, from the perspective of translation method, it is essential to not rely on linguistic *a priori*s such as going for the most fluid or natural translation or having a pretension of equivalence between two morphosyntactic systems (the comparative in Latin equivalent of the positive in French): the objective is always to wonder about the choice of a language part or construction, however neutral it may seem, to obtain the most faithful translation which accentuates the particularities of the thought (Selosse, 2008).⁵

Thus, to keep the Renaissance *épistémè* in the current French language, the best translation would not be the natural sounding ‘*grande laitue de montagne bleu pourpre*’ but the more awkward ‘*Laitue des lieux pentus poupre bleue plus grande*’ [literally, lettuce

⁵ Selosse made another comment regarding translation method earlier. As translations cannot convey an entire *épistémè*, a critical and technical apparatus is needed.

of steep places purple blue bigger]. To use the former translation is to eliminate everything that constitutes the epistemic *milieu* that designated the original description.

Now, anyone familiar with Selosse's comments on translation will notice similarities with interepistemic translation. Although Selosse does not engage with Translation Studies theories in these texts, his example of an interlingual translation from Latin to French includes an interepistemic translation between the Renaissance epistemic system and the current one. According to Selosse, the translator is presented with the option of either translating in a way that sounds natural to the reader but loses the epistemic foundations of the source text or, alternatively, of using strange-sounding phrasing in order to preserve those foundations (essentially the same dilemma that translators of literary texts face between domestication or foreignization). As Selosse is concerned mostly with historians of science in his texts, he considers the first option to be wrong because historians need to be aware of the wider knowledge structures that sustain the text and not just the words. Selosse also connects deeply to a vertical diachronic view of translation. Anyone who performs an interlingual translation of a text from long ago needs to be aware of the *épistémè* of the time to avoid committing epistemicide. In other words, they need to be aware of the translationality inherent to science so as not to falsify an earlier paradigm in their translation.

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