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Translation as a Spatial Process: The Linguistic Landscape of Caroline Bergvall's Soundworks and Installations

ABSTRACT

In a constantly evolving, interconnected world, both urban and rural space has become a symbolic site of linguistic and cultural gathering. Thus, translation implies a spatial dimension in which different voices converge to represent a plural, heterogeneous world. Among experimental artist Caroline Bergvall's interlinguistic and multimodal soundworks, the installation *VIA (48 Dante Variations)* and the performance *Ragadawn* highlight the importance of the migration of languages through creative exchange. In this case study, through works that invite a real and figurative journey through language(s), sounds, silence, noise, discourses, and history, I engage with the latest trends in Translation Studies to conceive space as a semiotic landscape that communicates beyond linguistic boundaries. Translating these multimodal works also entails translating a multilingual setting in a creative way, conceiving the environment as a palimpsest (to be) translated, and highlighting the figure of the translator as a cultural agent.

Keywords: language migration, vocal composition, performative translation, multilingual space, Caroline Bergvall.



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INTRODUCTION

With the appearance of innovative, interdisciplinary, and multimodal textual artworks, and taking into account the poststructuralist theories of Roland Barthes (1968) and Michel Foucault (1969), the reader and the spectator acquire new prominence. The work is no longer considered to be completed until it has been interpreted. The space in which the work is (re)produced and (re)interpreted acquires a predominant role. Through this redefinition of the text, the new conception of the discipline implies going beyond words, in the traditional sense, to take into consideration “a social semiotic approach for understanding how distinct modes such as speech, writing, gesture, image, and sound function as semiotic resources in order to facilitate the representation and communication of meanings” (Boria and Tomalin 5).

Considering the complex creative process at the conceptual and formal level of multimodal works that “challenge the word-based model of ‘the reading’” (Apter 149), innovative approaches are making their way into Translation Studies. Translation nourishes, and is nourished by, other disciplines (Bassnett; Bassnett and Johnston), including intersemiotic perspectives that consider multiple sign systems, making translation a transfer not only of linguistic elements, but also of different referents reflected in art (Campbell and Vidal; Ott and Weber; Dot; Pârlog; Boria et al.), such as movement, intonation, staging, or even silence, intermingling the concepts of reader and viewer.

Thus, in this article I aim to explore the translation of multimodal and interdisciplinary experimental literary works. Further, I intend to address the relevance of translation and adaptation, especially as they relate to elements such as text and sound. Starting with the relationship between language and creativity and applying the theories of the Outward Turn, Experiential Translation and Multimodality, I shall offer a translational study of Caroline Bergvall’s works, especially the installation *VIA (48 Dante Variations)* and the performance *Ragadawn*. According to Edmond, Bergvall’s perception of artistic creation “offers an embodied, gestural alternative to models of purely discursive or linguistic iteration. She locates agency . . . in the moment where multiple systems meet in embodied gestural acts. Bergvall investigates various forms of iteration and gesture in writing and performance, especially through the gestural physicality of speech” (111).

THE TRANSLATION OF A MULTILINGUAL LINGUISTIC SOUNDSCAPE

Translation becomes a (re)interpretation intrinsic to any exchange among languages, whether pictorial, musical, or literary (Vidal Claramonte). Considering the multiplicity of artistic media through which these innovative works can be represented, the linguistic and sensory materials explored by theorists such as Campbell and Vidal, make tangible the semiotic process of creating meaning.

Based on this translational approach, any discourse that reinterprets a previous meaning through another code, with the ultimate aim of communicating and regardless of the medium used, will be conceived as translation. This process is therefore considered as a transdisciplinary phenomenon developed in a hybrid space, where “[m]ediation increasingly plays a role in dissemination as a way of making work and directs attention to the translative and transformative aspects of cultural performativity. This broadened yet specific disposition of translation . . . plays out cultural traffic in more ways than one” (Bergvall and Allsopp 3). Considering the performance of the work, there is a clear relationship between “linguistic translation and spatial translation” (Rabourdin 3), especially in those places where, as Sherry Simon states, “languages compose ever-changing palimpsests and where spaces are charged with the tension between here and elsewhere” (*Translation Sites* 2). These places, with a strong linguistic and cultural component, offer a sensory experience, a physical sense of belonging, of closeness and remoteness. Hence, memory plays a fundamental role: “While translation can be an instrument of suppression, counter-translation can bring languages back into circulation” (4), stimulating the “discussion of language and language interactions as a feature of a city’s identity” (Simon, *Cities in Translation* 7).

In this context, individual and collective representation through an artistic intervention acquires ideological nuance, especially in those situations “where translation is seen as a contested zone that negotiates power relations between two or more languages representing different and sometimes conflicting socio-cultural identities” (Lee, “Introduction” 20). Consequently, it is particularly relevant to show that the intermingling of languages in these spaces, identities, and works goes beyond mere overlap. In fact, as Simon states:

Translation sites argue against multilingualism as a simple juxtaposition of languages. Instead of seeing cities as avenues of free-flowing words, they crystallize language relations in time and space, defining specific moments of exchange or confrontation. They focus attention not on the multiplicity of languages but on their interactions and their rival claims. (*Translation Sites* 5)

The emphasis on experience during the process of receiving the work—“more specifically, our own experience that occur[s] in time and space” (Blumczynski 19)—means that, “[i]nstead of providing any definitive answer to the problem of how a translated text can be interpreted in terms of its identity function, [we] seek to expose the ambivalence inherent in such interpretation” (Lee, *Translating* 90). Thus, an interdisciplinary methodology is needed which goes beyond the previous formal pillars of linguistic transfer, broadening the perspective and strategies prevalent in Translation Studies. Specific fields such as digital artistic practices (Dot), as well as the “Outward Turn” (Bassnett and Johnston; Arduini and Nergaard), offer the translator certain tools to go beyond linguistic transfer. Such an epistemological opening requires a broadened understanding of the work *per se* as an open-ended creative process with a plural language (Carter).

Such a theoretical framework allows for a deeper linguistic analysis of Bergvall’s work, the evolution of which is already evident in the title of her academic thesis “Processing Writing: From Text to Textual Interventions” (2000). Beginning with Jakobson’s tripartite division (Jakobson 68–69), Bergvall employs intra- and interlinguistic, as well as intersemiotic practices to obtain a creation which generates “complex intersections of theoretical, historical, sonic, performative, spatial, and visual dimensions. . . . The installation work, often created collaboratively with practitioners in other media, situates language within environments more typically associated with visual or sound productions” (Kinnahan 232–33).

Bergvall’s open-minded conception of language takes on a performative and dynamic character in which the source text, whether visual, aural, or written, is merely an instrument for internal and external interpretation, as highlighted below:

These questions inevitably move the writing process toward types of “locative” or “operatic” works, that are interdisciplinary, collaborative, multivocal, allographic. . . . My installations, my audioworks are in an open traffic with my writing. They inform one another. To install language in a space inevitably opens up the piece to very different questions around perception, readerliness, immersion, obstacles etc. And yes, the work is set up and the audience, the viewers, or listeners [or translators] then find their own way through it. (Kinnahan 245)

As Bergvall explains, and as will be shown in the works selected for analysis, her idea was to give the original text an air of performance. For this purpose, new material was added and the conventional sequence of the elements was altered so as to blur the traditional reading order, keeping in mind the fact that “translation is a response to an address and hence not

fully under our control; that it is situated and interpersonal; that it requires receptiveness and openness to difference, etc. These ideas are in constant circulation themselves" (Blumczynski 60).

FROM WORDS TO PERFORMANCE: BERGVALL'S LINGUISTIC EXPERIMENTATION WITH FORM AND CONTENT

With the aim of designing a more specific study corpus, the works *VIA* (48 *Dante Variations*) (2004) and *Ragadawn*, conceived as part of the *Language Stations* project (2016–), have been selected for analysis. Despite having begun her artistic career with literary works in which she played with language in its multiple forms, "Bergvall is also a multidisciplinary contemporary artist, working in performance, installation, collage, sound, . . . and book works; as an artist working in performance, her body—and more specifically . . . her voice—features as a significant part of her work" (Fournier 105).

From the point of view of both creation and translation, it is important to emphasise the linguistic influence of Bergvall's Franco-Norwegian origins, as well as her personal and professional development in Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. In this respect, as Fournier argues, "Bergvall's lines push against the grammatical and syntactical parameters that so-called proper English sentence exist within; while there are a few grammatically sound fragments, many utterances are glitchy phrases that fail to properly begin, end, or signify clearly" (106).

On this basis, Bergvall builds multimodal and interdisciplinary (often interconnected) works, including performances (*Conference of the Birds*, *Drift*, *Ghost Cargo*, *Language Stations*, *Night & Refuge*, *Noping*, *Ragadawn*, or *Sonoscuro*), installations (*1DJ2Many*, *Crop*, *Drift*, *Middling English*, *Noping*, *Say: Parsley or Via*), soundworks (*Oh My Oh My*, *Up We Get*, *Hafville –submerged voice–*, *O Sis*, *VIA* (48 *Dante Variations*), *Ride*, *After Gysin*, or *Fuses–DJ Rupture Mix–*), drawings (*Together*, *Broadsides*, *Goodolly*, *Gong*, *Drift*, or *Philomela*), books (*Alisoun Sings*, *Drift*, *Meddle English*, *Middling English*, *Ghost Pieces*, *Fig*, *Goan Atom*, *Éclat*, *Flesh Accoeur*, or *Strange Passage*). She also creates films, mostly performative outcomes of some of the works mentioned above, especially in terms of sound and voice—a common element in most of her output:

A recording is an inscription, so it allows the live voice, the speaking, to survive itself and its own liveness. It is editable and recyclable. It can also be a social document of a slice of audio life. It is a form of writing, even if

it demands different tools and approaches to writing as it moves us from reading to listening, from the page to the audio and oral environments. (Kinnahan 244)

In her works, Bergvall plays with sound, space, and visual elements through language, taking “the semantic to be produced both aurally and visually” (Perloff 42). Considering the multiplicity of this type of creations, it is evident that the focus, especially in experimental/experiential literature, and therefore experiential translation (Campbell and Vidal), is no longer on what concept is created through language, but on how this concept is conveyed through interdisciplinary artistic representations and multimodal channels.

268

A. VIA (48 DANTE VARIATIONS) (2004)

Perfectly exemplifying the relationship which I seek to establish in this article—that between the emergence of a new type of multimodal, intersemiotic text and translation—*VIA (48 Dante Variations)* (2004) is a variation piece whose bedrock is a selection of 47 English translations of the first tercet of Dante’s *Inferno*. It was composed by Ciaran Maher around a fractal structure, itself based on Bergvall’s 10-minute recorded reading in a neutral voice, but with modulations of intensity and rhythm. It is worth mentioning that the work as an annotated text appears in *Fig* (2004). In fact, Bergvall had offered a 48th translation of Dante’s tercet for a printed version (CHAIN’s *Translucination* issue, Fall 2003, under the joint editorship of Juliana Spahr, Jena Osman, and Thalia Field). In this respect, she stated: “This late addition broke the rule of the task, its chronological cut-off point. I subsequently removed it” (*Via (48 Dante Variations)* in *Fig* 65). Nonetheless, the work, conceived as a sound performance, was exhibited at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona (2004) and the KUMU Museum in Tallinn (2005), although the sound text was first presented at the tEXt02 festival in Exeter (2002). With some elements, such as an audiotext, headphones, and the text itself printed in metallic letters on the wall, the spectator witnesses the performance visually and sonically in an enclosed, specially conditioned space, in a museum hall in which, surprisingly, the work is not open to external agents that could modify it in an unexpected and improvised way.

As the author herself explains in the introduction to the work, “I had started this piece by accident. Stumbling upon Dante’s shadeless souls on my way to other books” (64). Given that Dante is one of the most widely translated authors, it was necessary to start with a criterion for selection.

Thus, Bergvall collected the first lines of the translations from Italian into English, gathered at the British Library up to May 2000. In the same year, the first reading of the variations was carried out together with composer Ciaran Maher, who “unearthed an added line, an imperceptible grain, my voice’s fractals, and we let it run, hardly audible, underneath the structure of the reading voice, . . . magnified shrapnels of interior sound. The 48th variation” (ibid.).

In this respect, it is interesting to consider Goldstein’s observation, as follows:

Via suggests that showing difference and discrepancy is more accurate than an erasure of one text to be replaced by another, or than the construction of an illusion of smooth, flawless meaning according to our preconceived notions of semantic logic. . . . The work also creates new space for a “silent” observer (Bergvall does not contribute a translation of her own) as an important role of both witness and action. With her gesture of rigorous examination of others’ interpretations, and careful consideration of how to perform what she observes, she also manages to achieve equilibrium with readers by delegating part of the responsibility of the reception and interpretation of historical texts. *Via* ultimately provides a space for the reader to consider the obstacles, failures and rewards of crossing and sharing boundaries of language.

269

If we analyse the work from a conceptual perspective and take into account Bergvall’s own words, it might seem that her job was merely to select, check, copy, combine, and order a series of translations for the chosen tercet. Bergvall stresses how punctilious she was in this process, checking and correcting possible errors regarding the authorship of the translation or its date of publication. For this reason, it is particularly curious that the Irish writer Seamus Heaney appears on two occasions, specifically as the translator of tercets number 6 and 16, both dating from the same year. Although it is true that this could be a revision of a previous translation or two different versions by the same translator, the translation of the first of these tercets is in fact by the American poet Thomas William Parsons, who translated Dante’s *Divine Comedy* a century earlier, in 1893. Possibly, however, this wink at the recipient calls into question concepts such as authorship.

Furthermore, Bergvall acknowledges the increased complexity of the compositional procedure at later stages. It was no longer just a matter of (re)producing each translation, but of adding her voice and becoming a creator through the voices of others. It is worth highlighting the performative dialogue among translations, because of “the dramatic conversation of texts it has generated. The action of this poem belongs not only to the forty-eight translations, however, but also to Bergvall herself

as reader and performer. . . . Bergvall intervenes with a woman's voice and a creative rearrangement of a predominantly male textual tradition" (Bermann 286–87). Among other examples, the selection of certain translations and the decision to present them in alphabetical rather than chronological order mean that the final result is not a set of copies from the same fragment in various translations, but an entirely new work, which allows Bergvall to

[u]nderstand . . . translation in its erratic seriality. There are ways of acknowledging influence and models, by ingestion, by assimilation, by one's total absorption in the material. To come to an understanding of it by standing in it, by becoming it. Very gradually, this transforms a shoe into a foot, extends copyism into writing, and perhaps writing into being. This whole copying business was turning out to be a hands-down affair. This was an illuminating, if disturbing, development. (Bergvall, *Via* (48 *Dante Variations*) in Fig 65)

This work, which lacks chronological or semantic linearity, does not manifest a sense of progression, but rather gives the reader the opportunity to understand translation as a testimony to the passage of time, showing that the source text always remains unchanged, but that translation, as its own entity, needs to renew itself in order to survive. Based on intra/interlinguistic repetition and variation, questioning notions such as fidelity by offering different interpretations, this work "puts literary translation directly in the spotlight. It presents translation as an ongoing act, a performing that engages reader or audience as much as translators themselves" (Bermann 286). Indeed, it has been (re)translated into Portuguese and Polish. While in the latter case the authorship is unknown, in the former, the project was carried out by Adriano Scandolara, who, following the idea proposed by Bergvall, compiled 17 official translations of the same work into Portuguese, adding an introduction.

The games that this experimental approach enables are potentially endless. Although it is true that a particularly interesting comparative approach would be to copy Bergvall's compositional procedure and compile translations of the same source work into different languages, it is also possible to combine translations of the same tercet in different linguistic combinations, to translate the entire source text by mixing translations by different authors, or even to reorganise the different versions in chronological order. In all cases, the translation would be experimental both in form and content, and would offer a new version of Dante's *Inferno*, while emphasising the importance of translation as a constantly evolving process—which is, after all, the main purpose of the majority of Bergvall's works.

B. LANGUAGE STATIONS: RAGADAWN (2016–)

Language Stations was conceived as a project “that centred on landscapes, time zones, trans-locality and writing in context, and the records of voices of migrant poets, translators, academics and activists, to capture the shifting array of languages in the UK and the EU” (Farinati 34). As Bergvall states, the initial aim of these encounters was to record various language speakers, but the project was subsequently expanded to include debates and workshops regarding artistic exchanges and language migration through “research into old European languages as well as languages spoken by more recently settled communities” (*Language Stations*). Consequently, the collaboration of more than forty poets, translators, and academics integrated approximately eighteen languages and translations into the *Dawn Chorus of Languages*, based on one of the sentences composed as a multilingual refrain: “passengers we are passages we are passengers we are passages we are passengers.” This ongoing project deals with the idea of a “process of revitalizing connections between poetic forms as well as minority or migratory languages active in Europe: anciently rooted languages, as well those present through more recent settlements,” following “a symbolic map of some of the languages involved in early medieval lyric poetry across pre-European territories” (Bergvall, *Language Stations*).

This chorus as a linguistic intervention was performed between 2016 and 2019, in urban and rural, natural and culturally specific enclaves: Romansh in Geneva, Farsi in Copenhagen, Galician in Santiago de Compostela, Ladino and Sicilian in London, Provençal in Aix-en-Provence, Occitan in Toulouse, Welsh in Liverpool, and Icelandic in Manchester, among other scenarios. From 2019 onwards, the new encounters were recorded by Bergvall and Watson, and later turned into a performance by composer Rebecca Horrox. *Dawn Chorus of Languages* represents an ongoing project that has inspired other performances, such as *Conference of the Birds* (2018) or *Nattsong* (2021), a work in collaboration with sound designer Jamie Hamilton, which addresses the constant migration of words in isolated or social contexts. As Farinati argues,

[t]his piece introduces the theme of “night”—*Natt* means night in Norwegian (Bergvall’s native language). Here, poetic fragments, monosyllabic utterances and broken words eventually cluster around puzzling questions: “What shelter shelters? How sheltered are you?” Meanwhile, the medieval etymology of the word “refuge” is traced before it is drowned out by the background noise. In Latin, the word *refugium* means shelter, but it also comes from the verb *refugere*, which means “to run away from.” The complexity of this push/pull reaches

its climax with an overwhelming sound of street protesters, followed by a lament made from a repeated exclamation: “ohmy ohmy ohmy ohmy.” (34)

In a similar vein, yet transcending the linguistic background of these works in conceptual and formal terms, *Ragadawn* is described by Bergvall as

a sunrise vocal performance to be performed outdoors from the last hours of night until the very early morning. A multisensory composition for two voices, multiple recorded languages and electronic drones to accompany and celebrate the slow rising of day. It draws on ancient and contemporary musical and literary sunrise traditions, while also addressing the linguistic territories of the UK and EU. Language and languages, song and speech, sites and sounds, breath patterns, electronic frequencies and passing noise are all at work in this project. *Ragadawn* recalls the large rhythmic patterns that connect all beings both to nature and society, and the awakening of mind and body. It is a powerful and moving voicework performance which fights off contemporary isolation and reconnects audiences to time, place and each other. (*Ragadawn*)

Following the discussion of the relationship between linguistic choice and the location in which the work takes place, each reading offers—as with translation—a culturally specific framework. Moreover, the exceptionality of the moment and the space—in natural settings, such as the northern coast of the Scottish Isles and a southern harbour in France, a mere few days before the lockdown—offered a personal, physical, and sensorial experience:

The change from dark to dusk to light, the transformation of shadows into outlines into shapes, all this brings about a complex range of experience explores [sic] both the celebratory and wondrous rise of day but also the hidden anxieties and rising sorrow it can provoke. *Ragadawn* tunes in to the ambiguity present with the rising of day. The texts written and performed by Caroline Bergvall function as physical and rhythmic connective elements. Spoken lines are created as repetition patterns and vocalised breath rhythms. (ibid.)

This “performance writing” (see Bergvall, “Performance Writing”) can only be based on textual scores “constructed using minimal lines, misspellings, disjointed phonemes, neologisms and lyrical narrative fragments which, when repeated, sung, spoken or whispered, have a profound, incantatory effect on the listener. . . . Far from the conceptualism of concrete poetry, her sound poems vibrate outwards” (Farinati 34). According to Bergvall’s description, this work represents a symbolic, sonorous, linguistic,

geographical, and transhistorical journey that “activate[s] the histories and movements of ancient lyrical poetry” (*Ragadawn*), evidencing the rich influence of Middle Eastern musical and literary forms on European lyrical composition.

In this journey through geographies and languages, spaces and recitals, listening becomes a collaborative and plural action. Thus, “[a]t the heart of each site is an encounter and an unresolved exchange. Like translated texts that display the double realities of which they are composed, they are unsettling, exposing the lineaments of difference” (Simon, *Translation Sites* 2–3), highlighting the semiotic relationship between the work itself and the linguistic landscape in which it is situated.

273

CONCLUSIONS OF AN UNFINISHED PROJECT

Attempting to conclude this study can only lead to opening up new approaches to these innovative multimodal texts. Translation of experimental literature in general—and of visual poems and graphic narratives in particular—requires an updating of the critical apparatus in the light of how differently authorship, interpretation, and equivalence are conceptualised.

Caroline Bergvall's textual works, with their inter/intralingual games, have hardly been translated. In addition to the Polish and Portuguese translations previously referenced, Vincent Broqua, Abigail Lang, and Anne Portugal translated into French a set of texts collected in *Meddle English: New and Selected Texts* (2011), and published them under the title *L'Anglais Mêlé* (2018). A comparative study between these versions would be of great interest, because

[p]oetically, multilingual work can provide all sorts of avenues into questions of complex belongings, accents, and idiolects, questions of cultural translation or non-translation. It carries an explicit politicization around language use and cultural exchange. Instead of ease of access, it can be lack of understanding we are faced with. (Kinnahan 239)

These works that approach translation from a formal and conceptual point of view highlight the need to “rethink translation, not as a short-term product or a process, but as a cultural condition underlying communication” (Gentzler 7). Such new multimodal texts make it clear that approaching them through a creative process leads us to conceive translation as an art form with extralinguistic value (Malmkjaer). As with translation, “variations also serve to highlight the uniqueness of each performance or instantiation of the text. The iterations of writing extend

into the iterations of variations: each live or recorded performance, print or online publication constitutes another version” (Edmond 113). In this regard, the uniqueness of each of those versions gives testimony to “the depth and thickness of the language we are speaking right now” (Bergvall qtd. in Nissan).

The works analysed in this article are developed in settings as different as a closed museum and an open urban/natural landscape. Her conceptual poems are the repetition or copying of other translations, as well as a performed reading and staging of their readings in different spaces. As Vidal Claramonte states, “in the eyes of many contemporary philosophers, repetition is more about difference, because . . . repetition involves rewriting stories initially told in other contexts so that they acquire a different perspective. In this sense, repeating is often a political act” (*Translation and Repetition* 15). Indeed, “Bergvall’s use of repetition reflects a much larger contemporary problem: the attempt to recognize the singularity of each person and text while also addressing the systemic causes of the bodily and cultural peril faced by many in our increasingly interconnected but unequal world” (Edmond 171). Translation evolves away from prescriptivist approaches and towards a recognition of creative practice that integrates the multiplicity of social, cultural, and artistic voices, in a process of unlimited interpretations.

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