

Self-reflexivity and the Labor of Translation: Insights for Comparative Rhetoric

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Abstract

As opportunities for transnational engagements continue to increase in the age of globalization, there is a pressing need for responsible methods that attend to the power asymmetries inherent in all comparative endeavors. Scholars of comparative rhetoric have called attention to the importance of self-reflexivity and the ethical complexities of speaking for/about others. Meanwhile, scholars in translation studies have grappled with similar questions as an increase in intercultural research across disciplines has brought translation issues to the fore. This paper examines advancements in translation studies scholarship that have inspired translation scholar-practitioners to embrace self-reflexive practices in their work. One promising way forward is calling for more nuanced, personal accounts of the hidden labor of translation in comparative work: honest accounts that confront, rather than suppress, the frustration and disorientation that often accompany such labor. I conclude with implications for the first-year writing classroom.

In their 1998 translation of the *Analects of Confucius*, Ames and Rosemont lament that translators before them have depended on Western terms and concepts when translating non-Western texts, resulting in culturally reductionist representations of those original texts as “little more than very naïve versions of what Western thinkers have been doing” (pp. 310-11). Such works not only risk misleading readers with over-simplistic depictions of non-Western cultural and rhetorical traditions, but also perpetuate assumptions of the nature of translation as involving a fairly straightforward transfer of meaning from one writing system to another. To attempt to counter this trend, scholars have called for the need to examine cultures on their own terms as much as possible (Mao, 2003) and to more directly address the complexity of translation and comparison work.

Scholarship in comparative rhetoric, however, has varied in the extent to which the labor of translation is explicitly addressed. In many cases, comparative rhetoricians themselves may not engage directly in translation, and instead choose to work collaboratively with a translator. As Lipson and Binkley (2009) explain, the “examinations of ancient non-Western rhetorics are mainly conducted by scholars who do not have expertise in the languages and perhaps in the historical cultures involved” (p. 4). While some believe that it is not necessarily a comparative rhetorician’s responsibility to have a working knowledge of the language of the culture being studied, others argue that it is essential to have an intimate knowledge of both the language *and* culture (Lipson and Binkley, 2009, p. 9). Given that translations can be shaped by the translator’s ideological interpretations of the original text (Hall and Ames, 1995, p. 279), an otherwise sound comparative analysis may be “led astray”

by an overreliance on second-hand translations (Mao, 2003, p. 412). Thus, there are compelling exigencies for comparative rhetoricians to be deeply involved in the labor of translation in order to strive for ethical representations of the other, whether they themselves translate texts or collaborate with a translator.

Given these imperatives, the fields of comparative rhetoric and translation studies have exhibited similar trends with regard to the invisibility of the labor of translation. According to the equivalence paradigm in translation theory, it is taken for granted that translators simply transfer meaning cleanly and efficiently from one language to another. That is, translation rests on the presumption of equivalent terms between languages and cultures. According to the “theory of sense” within the equivalence paradigm, translators move from the original text, to a “third element of comparison” or *tertium comparationis* that exists beyond the realm of any language, and then into the target language (Pym, 2014, p. 17). Despite critiques, the equivalence paradigm has persisted as a model for understanding translation, as a “convenient fiction that allays suspicions of non-similarity” and serves to “reduce cognitive effort” (Pym, 2014, p. 40). The assumption of equivalent terms across languages, as well as equivalent concepts across cultures, has influenced practices of knowledge production across a range of academic disciplines.

Translation scholars have voiced concerns about the limitations of the equivalence model of translation and the general lack of recognition of what a translator’s work entails. Translation scholar Michael Cronin (2003) points to how translators are constantly under pressure to produce translations to meet the demands of a new information economy. Further elucidating the nature of underappreciated labor of translators, Lawrence Venuti (2008) aims to shed light on the translator’s marginal status and make “the translator more visible so as to resist and change the conditions under which translation is theorized, studied, and practiced today” (p. 13). Carol Maier (1995) contends that translators desperately *want* to discuss the “never-static, highly paradoxical activity” that is translation and the “disquieting but potentially enabling flux implicit in all signification” (pp. 21-22). However, Maier observes:

Expected by readers and publishers to provide the results of translation rather than a record of their explorations...flux becomes identified with defeat rather than discovery, and translator’s notes are often written in apology, as asides, endnotes or footnotes, introductions or afterwards, rather than communications from the “space between.” (p. 22)

These recent works, among others, point to the dearth of translation scholarship that explore the complex nature of translation work and the unacknowledged experiences of translators themselves. In response to these calls, translation scholars have stepped up to the task in recent years, providing models for self-reflexivity that may be valuable for scholars of comparative rhetoric. Before reviewing these approaches, I briefly turn to ongoing conversations about the relationship between theory and practice, to further clarify the importance of self-reflexivity.

Merging Theory and Practice

Alastair Pennycook (2010) takes issue with the privileging of theory over practice in applied linguistics and calls for a dismantling of the theory vs. practice dichotomy in order for practice itself to be more robustly theorized. He claims that practice has been routinely under-

theorized as “theory’s Other” (p. 20). Translation scholars have echoed Pennycook by pointing out how theory and practice are inextricably tied in translation studies; Anthony Pym (2014) asserts, “since all translators are always theorizing, it would be quite wrong to separate the theory from the practice” (pp. 4-5). Similarly, Massardier-Kenney et al. (2016) explain that “translation scholars routinely produce translations, a fact that makes the separation of theory and practice untenable” and that both terms should “exist in a relationship of mutual interrogation” (2016, p. 1). The exigencies of maintaining an intimate link between theoretical and practical work have inspired many translation scholars to delve deeply into real-world implications of theory, including the ethics of translation and translator positionality. Importantly, these efforts have contributed to a growing body of work in which translators provide personal accounts of their own experiences with processes of translation (Massardier-Kenney et al., 2016). Contrary to our traditional, unidirectional notions of theory being “applied” to practice, these autobiographical or narrative pieces reveal how, in reality, this is a bidirectional process by which practice constantly shapes theory.

The direct acknowledgement of the mutually interrogative relationship between theory and practice in translation studies may be similarly productive for scholars of comparative rhetoric. Parallel to the observation that “all translators theorize” because translation theorists engage in translating texts, it can be said that all comparative rhetoricians theorize as well, as they themselves engage directly in comparative projects. If the field of comparative rhetoric directly attended to the merged, reciprocal nature of theory and practice, this could open up new avenues for scholars looking for ways to incorporate more self-reflexivity in their work. Although the value of self-reflexivity has been acknowledged, guidelines for how to be self-reflective remain scarce. One possible avenue is for comparative rhetoricians to offer more personal narratives about their labor in comparative work and translation.

Approaches for Self-Reflexivity in Comparative Rhetoric

Mary Garrett (2013) argues for greater self-reflexivity among comparative rhetoricians, stating that textual interpretations depend largely on the scholars’ ability to reflect on their positions of power and ideologies in relation to their subjects of study. To counter the tendency for researchers to fall back on identity categories such as race, religion, gender and socioeconomic status when discussing positionality, she suggests that we should focus more on factors such as “institutional contexts, academic training, and intellectual genealogy” (2013, p. 249) and “the personal, the life story, and its influence on one’s research” (p. 250). However, the dominant trend has been for scholars to resist incorporating self-reflexivity in their work on these levels. Garrett offers three techniques for self-reflexivity recommended for qualitative researchers more broadly: mindfulness, attention to emic perspectives, and empathy (2013, pp. 252-253). In conclusion, she contends that “self-reflexivity often means frustration, emotional discomfort, and the shock of a disturbingly more accurate image of one’s self” (p. 254), offering a valuable starting point for discussions about self-reflexivity in comparative rhetoric.

Garrett frames the personal in terms of what may be viewed as autobiographical criticism, wherein a scholar reflects on a wide array of life experiences that may shape how they view and interpret their subject matter in their research. The kind of personal reflection being forwarded here can be viewed as a systematic assessment of various identifiable factors – “family dynamics, childhood location, intimate relations, personality, accidents of life” (Garrett, 2013, p. 251) – that have possibly contributed to one’s positionality at the time of

research. A potential drawback to this kind of systematic review of identity categories and/or life experiences is that it may continue to be vulnerable to marginalization in academic scholarship--in the form of a surface-level disclaimer or to be neglected altogether--due to the sheer range of factors have shaped, over a lifetime, one's unique position in a particular spatial-temporal moment. Scholars may be hesitant to engage in self-reflexivity because of the difficulty of choosing and articulating experiences to connect to the local project at hand. An alternative approach, then, may be to begin with the local, by reflecting on particulars of the experience of engaging in the labor of comparative work and/or translation.

Comparative rhetoric as a field should do more to welcome the sharing of personal narratives about the labor of comparison, parallel to the way translators have begun telling their stories of the hidden labor of translation. This may be a hard sell to a scholarly community that has pushed storytelling to the sidelines of academic scholarship, denying its place as a valid and valuable form of intellectual meaning-making. Storytelling has gained a reputation of being non-rigorous, and thus unfit for scholarly work, usually reserved for first-year composition classrooms to help students transition into university-level writing. Despite the way personal narrative is often sequestered as its own genre, separate from the rhetorical analysis or argumentative essay, however, Christiansen (2016) suggests that "to explicitly make connections to one's life in an argument piece does not make it a less valid or less objective argument. It merely makes explicit what is always functioning in the background." Even within scholarship that does not contain obvious elements of the personal, Christiansen says that "lurking autobiographies are... just below the surface of most of the arguments we make." Thus, the first step toward increasing self-reflexivity in comparative rhetoric is to take seriously Garrett's observation that scholars' capacity to be self-aware about their work depends on "what we believe we need to be self-reflective about" (2013, p. 249). We must first recognize how storytelling as a form of analysis, meaning-making and theorizing continues to hold marginalized status before we can re-theorize the personal as a rigorous and invaluable resource for future theorizing.

Translators have called for a "scrutiny of practice" in which we focus on the ambivalence of translation as an activity (Maier, 1995, p. 22). We could therefore reorient Garrett's framing of discomfort as an unfortunate and unavoidable side-effect of self-reflexivity by recognizing it as one of the goals of self-reflexivity, or as a sign that one is engaging in productive self-reflection. Translation scholars have increasingly identified these experiences of tension and disorientation as a rich resource for theorizing practice. Crane et al. (2009) explain that engagement with experiences of translation "produces moments of friction and hesitation [at which] meanings and conceptualizations are challenged by new ideas and thoughts" (p. 40). It is thus important to hone in on these moments of friction and hesitation, rather than ignore them. Maier further explains that translators feel compelled to "suppress their disorientation" in the face of "a familiar language breaking down under the pressure not only to accommodate but also to transmit the unknown...there is almost a resolute avoidance of the "between" in which that breakdown occurs" (1995, p. 22). It is perhaps these moments of flux and in-betweenness that deserve greater engagement in comparative rhetoric in the form of personal narratives. Narratives about the labor of comparison and translation, without shying away from tales of disorder, ambiguity, and the unresolved, would bring comparative rhetoricians back in touch with the "lurking autobiographies" that remain just beneath the surface.

Comparative rhetoricians may benefit from recognizing the ways in which representations of the other are unavoidably interpretive and mediated through the perceptions of the comparative rhetorician-translator-ethnographer—seeing all cross-cultural work as

entailing invention, through narrative. To further blur the divide between the genres of narrative and academic scholarship, Mona Baker offers the narrative theory framework, which forwards the notion that translation choices should be viewed “not merely as local linguistic challenges but as contributing directly to the narratives that shape our social world” (Baker, 2007, p. 156). She argues that translators contribute to how political and social narratives are framed and are perpetuated in public discourse and, eventually, in national or cultural memory. Given this framework, then, translation can be considered “in terms of the narratives they activate: the identities, trajectories, values they (re)present” (Horner and Tetreault, 2016, p. 22). More widespread acknowledgement that translation and cultural rhetorics are already involved in the production of narratives may open up further opportunities for stories of practice.

Implications

As scholars challenge the assumption of Western concepts as universal and instead seek to examine non-Western cultures on their own terms, there should concurrently be more opportunities for them to write about their experiences with translation, whether they themselves are directly producing textual translations or collaborating with a translator. Ames and Rosemont (1998) offer a model for this type of reflective work when they detail their endeavors in translating the *Analects* in their glossary of key Chinese terms (pp. 45-65). The glossary provides the Chinese characters, along with holistic definitions that draw attention to prior translations of the terms, related terms and concepts, competing translations, nuanced analyses of how connotations arising from English terms may be distorting the Chinese term, and their philosophical stance in relation to how they decided to translate a term in a particular way. As a result, the glossary goes well beyond its function of providing mere “definitions” – it serves as a window into these scholars’ first-hand *experiences* with translation and comparison. Ames and Rosemont employ a comfortable first-person perspective which affords them to smoothly transition in and out of reflective narrative and philosophical discussion. They later use the Appendix as a space for a hybrid style of both supplementary information and reflective commentary on their frustrations, hopes, and intentions, again highlighting the complex processes of translation work. Normalizing reflective writing within formal academic publishing, as well as offering more platforms from which to share and circulate scholar-practitioner narratives, may be promising steps forward for the field of comparative rhetoric, composition, and language education more broadly.

Though beyond the scope of this current article, there is vast potential to explore ways in which these perspectives on translation can inform the teaching of writing, particularly in light of globalized higher education and increasingly diverse student populations. Scholars have been critical of English-Only curricular policies that have historically characterized college composition (Horner and Trimbur, 2002) and have argued in favor of incorporating translation activities to allow students to draw from their full linguistic repertoires. Kilfoil (2015) advises rhetoric and composition graduate programs to go beyond the perfunctory foreign language requirement and more centrally integrate collaborative translation work into their curricula (p. 338-341). Kiernan, Meier, and Wang (2016) propose a translation assignment which ask groups of multilingual students to translate the same single text from a shared home language into English. Students are asked to compare translations and reflect on the translation process itself, including how they felt during the activity and specific choices they made (pp. 93-94). Importantly, the focus of such assignments would not be the “accuracy”

of translations, but rather, allowing students to practice metacognitive skills and share their processes of linguistic and cultural negotiation that are often invisible in language education contexts, while developing communicative strategies to talk *about* language, writing, and meaning-making in everyday interactions.

Comparative rhetoric stands to gain by taking a page from translation studies and encouraging self-reflexive narratives that honestly confront the often disorienting labor of comparison and translation. Making space for such narratives will be one step towards more nuanced and culturally sensitive representations of rhetorical traditions around the world. Readers will be encouraged to engage with an unfamiliar culture from emic perspectives and question their assumptions about the equivalence model of translation and the nature of language more broadly. Finally, these considerations in the realm of scholarly knowledge production have implications for the writing classroom that warrant further exploration, particularly in the ways in which writing instructors can use translation to foster critical discussions of writing processes, positionality, and cross-cultural communication.

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