



'Insider' translation: An anthropologist as translator of anthropology

by Susan M. DiGiacomo

"For me this is the essential challenge in translation: hearing, in the most profound way I can, the text in Spanish and discovering the voice to say (I mean, to write) the text again in English."

Edith Grossman, Translator's Note to the Reader, *Don Quixote* [1]

As a result of a series of nonreproducible biographical contingencies (a story detailed elsewhere; see [2]), I am both an anthropologist and a translator of anthropology. The first author I translated, 20 years ago, is now my colleague in the anthropology department of the Catalan university where we both teach. I run a departmental publication support service for my colleagues and our graduate students that includes translation into English from Catalan and Spanish. Because I write in Catalan as well as in English, I have also translated Anglophone anthropology into Catalan. What enables me to do this is the linguistic and cultural fluency I have acquired over the course of three decades, beginning with my dissertation fieldwork in Barcelona, the Catalan capital, in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Because I count medical anthropology among my specialties, my familiarity with medical discourse and the structure of medical writing allowed me to become a translator of biomedicine as well. For two years I ran an in-house translation service at a foundation connected to a Barcelona children's hospital. I still retain a few faithful clients from that period, and I also work as part of a group that translates all 10 yearly issues of a Spanish dermatology journal into English.

While good translation in any discipline is faithful to the original in terms of meaning, linguistic register, usage, technical vocabulary, and voice, translating texts in my own field of research and teaching allows me to blur the boundaries of translation to a considerably greater extent than I would attempt in translating biomedicine, crossing over into author's editing, acting as a peer reviewer, and rewriting. I do this carefully, because my aim is not to substitute my voice for the voices of my clients but to represent their voices in English. This kind of effort has its parallel in ethnography, where the aim is not to speak for mute cultural Others, but to allow them to emerge through an ethnographic text that, in addition to disciplinary conventions of representation, is strongly marked by the ethnographer's subjectivity. This is quite distinct from biomedical writing, in which 'voice,' as an anthropologist would understand it, is notably absent because the instrument of

knowledge production is an experimental protocol, a statistical programme, or a diagnostic test; hence the heavy use of passive verbs that obscure agency, suggesting that any similarly expert objective observer would 'see' the same results. What is valorized is objectivity, constructed rhetorically through narrative structure and syntax. Subjectivity is to be avoided at all costs because it threatens the generalisability of the work.

My job, then, in translating biomedicine is to help my physician clients achieve something approximating the objective and impersonal biomedical voice of the articles published in the English-language journals they cite. By contrast, in translating anthropology my point of departure is one I share with all writers of ethnography: the starting assumption that the instrument of knowledge production is the person of the ethnographer. Biography and experience position us in the world, situating us in ways that both facilitate and inhibit our understanding of the phenomena we propose to study. Voice is one of the ways in which subjectivity is embodied in ethnographic writing. This is a point to which I will return later.

A not insignificant portion of the work I do involves correcting or, more often, retranslating texts incompetently translated by someone else. These tend to be clumsily literal renderings that reveal ignorance of basic concepts in anthropology and a view of translation as the substitution of words in one language for words in another language. They are tone-deaf on three levels simultaneously: English syntax and usage (even when the translator is a native English speaker), anthropological discourse, and the author's voice. Following is an example, an abstract:

I hereby present a case-study of a Brazilian *frequent flyer* I met during my field work at *Clinica Psiquiátrica* in Genoa. Her account put forth a meaningful duality: she was living in a perfect state of syncretism and pluralism both causal and treatment wise. On one hand, she was employing rituals of white magic and Candomblé in order to be cured, she defined her disorder as a "*spiritual disease*", and she declared the cause of her suffering to be the presence of "two *exus*" – two demon spirits. On the other hand, she situated her disorder in a biomedical context and correctly followed the pharmacological treatment prescribed by the local psychiatrist. She defined her illness as "depression" and voluntarily >

An anthropologist as translator of anthropology

- > went to the clinic when she felt “anxious and self-harmful”. In her eyes, both systems were effective and operative. Unlike other informers for whom the folkloric system granted healing whereas the biomedical only provided a cure, Silvia considered both as a remedy, a temporary relief to her condition of being “different”.

The original Spanish (written by a native Italian speaker) is competent, though not perfect, and reads as follows:

Presento un estudio sobre una *frequent flyers* brasileña conocida durante el trabajo de campo en la *Clinica Psiquiatrica* de Génova. Su narración presentó una sugestiva dualidad: vivía en un perfecto sincretismo y pluralismo causal y asistencial. Por una parte utilizaba los rituales de magia blanca y Candomblé para curarse, ubicaba su trastorno entre las «*enfermedades espirituales*» y reconoce en la presencia de «*dos exus*» – espíritus demonio – la principal causa de su sufrimiento. Por la otra, coloca su enfermedad en el contexto biomédico y utiliza adecuadamente una terapia farmacológica proporcionada del psiquiatra territorial. Define su mal «*depresión*» y voluntariamente acude en la clínica cuando si percibe «*agitada y con comportamientos autolesivos*». Para ella ambos los sistemas son eficaces y efectivos. A diferencia de otros informantes donde el sistema tradicional garantiza una sanación, mientras que el biomédico sólo una cura, para Silvia ambos son un remedio, un alivio temporal a su condición de «*diversa*».

My re-translation reads:

This article presents a case study of a Brazilian “frequent flyer” (a psychiatric euphemism for relapsing patients) I came to know during my fieldwork at a psychiatric treatment center in Genoa. Her narrative reveals a syncretic explanatory model and a pluralistic approach to treatment. Defining her disorder as a “spiritual disease,” she traced her suffering to the presence of two *exus* or demon spirits from which she sought relief through white magic and Candomblé rituals. Simultaneously, she situated her disorder in a biomedical context, defining it as “depression,” voluntarily going to the clinic when she felt “anxious” and inclined to harm herself, and adhering assiduously to the pharmacological treatment prescribed by the local psychiatrist. In her eyes, both systems were useful and effective. Unlike other informants for whom traditional forms of therapy held out the promise of true healing while biomedicine merely offered a cure, Silvia regarded both as remedies, sources of temporary relief from an affliction she experienced as being “different.”

“*Una sugestiva dualidad*” is not really “a meaningful duality;” the author is taking note of a paradox, the starting

point in many ethnographic texts. The original Spanish text contains a number of minor grammatical mistakes: “*flyers*” is plural, but the author is referring to a single individual; the verb tenses shift from past to present; some verbs have missing or incorrect prepositions. The first translation corrects most of these, but misses the syntactic problem in “*vivía en un perfecto sincretismo y pluralismo causal y asistencial.*” Which adjectives modify which nouns? The solution is awkward and the linguistic register, at the end, inappropriate: “she was living in a perfect state of syncretism and pluralism both causal and treatment wise.” “Causal wise” is ungrammatical, and “treatment wise,” something one might hear in casual speech, sorts badly with the pomposity of the opening: “I hereby present” and “her account put forth,” both of which sound legalistic rather than academic. People do not “correctly follow” treatment regimens, they “adhere” to them. “*Informantes*” is translated as “informers,” which places the text in the domain of police investigation rather than ethnography; the correct translation is “informants.” People may engage in acts of self-harm (“*comportamientos autolesivos*”), but they are not “self-harmful.” “*El sistema tradicional*” is not, in anthropological discourse, “folkloric” but simply the traditional medical system. “Relief to,” incorrect in English, is a literal translation of “*alivio a.*” The original contains two footnotes (not reproduced here because of space constraints), inappropriate in an abstract; the first translator simply translated them. My translation eliminates the long footnote entirely, since it introduces an unnecessary level of detail, and reduces the short footnote to an explanatory parenthesis.

In this case, my task was to resituate the text in ethnographic discourse and standard English usage. This situates the author as one conversant with the relevant concepts and theoretical approaches in her discipline, and knowledgeable about the abstract as a literary form. The risk of a bad translation is that it can all too easily cast doubt on the quality of the research and the analysis, damaging a neophyte author’s credibility as an anthropologist.

At the other end of the spectrum, I have both retranslated and translated directly from the original writing by mature professionals in my field. There are three authors with whom I have worked frequently enough over periods as long as two decades so that I have a sense not just of their research, but of their style as ethnographic writers. In these cases, my task is not to improve their writing through the translation process, as is often the case with less experienced writers, but to allow their voices to speak through me.

The texts the Catalan authors write do not necessarily correspond rhetorically and structurally in every way to an American model of anthropological writing, and when I translate, I try to preserve difference on this level of the text. There are different national traditions of writing

An anthropologist as translator of anthropology

ethnography, and within those traditions considerable individual variation. Lawrence Venuti [3] defined translation as “the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target-language reader.” If I believed that this is what translation really is, I don’t think I could do it. Framed in this way, it is an act of violence and cultural imperialism. The translated text should be one that does not erase difference, but transposes it, and in this translation resembles the ethnographic enterprise itself. An anthropological text does not eliminate cultural difference by assimilating Others to ourselves, but instead makes their otherness accessible. In the same way, in translation ‘intelligibility’ is always relative, never absolute, and the translator’s aim is to reduce the opacity of the foreign text, not to do away with its foreignness. While this obliges the American reader to work a little harder, I try to facilitate this task, making an unfamiliar kind of text as accessible as possible by holding myself to a high standard of fidelity to the value of language as a way of knowing, not merely a code.

For some time I have been tracing parallels between translation practice and ethnographic practice, and until recently I thought I had located most of the important ones (see [4]). All ethnographers know that their very presence alters the context they observe and write about. Until I chanced last year upon an essay posted on my oldest client’s blog [5], however, I had not imagined the extent to which the translator’s increasing familiarity with the author’s voice and style not only allows the translator to ‘embody’ it [5], but the extent to which the author’s voice and style may, in response, develop in ways he or she did not initially anticipate. Comelles analyzes the passage from the first text on which we collaborated as author and translator, to a second text at a remove of ten years. During that decade, Comelles’ style and ethnographic voice in Catalan had evolved and matured, and both of us had had occasion to experiment in our own work with an ethnographic genre known as autoethnography, the use of personal experience as an analytic category. Comelles writes of the first text as a co-production, an implicit recognition of the translator’s authorship. This is rare enough in a world in which translation is generally viewed not as productive but as reproductive, lacking in creativity and originality, a copy in another language. His insight, I think, is grounded in another nonreproducible biographical contingency: the experience of growing up trilingual, using Catalan, Spanish and French in different contexts and for different purposes. What he has to say about the second text, however, took my breath away. While the translated text is, he says, fully “his,” the boundary between Self and Other has shifted (an effect also produced by the best ethnographies). “It is,” he writes,

as if Susan had stepped into my skin, and the emotional force of my ethnographic experience, originally written in Castilian, has been transferred entire

into the English version with the same delicacy as if I/she had written it. ...I can only understand this degree of shared sensitivity as a result of common experience in relation to severe illness, but I would also say that Susan’s work over ten years as my editor and English translator seemed to allow her to become me, or perhaps it is that I too, conscious of her sensitivity and ability to embody my narrative style, feel liberated when I write in Castilian a text she will translate, because I know that her English version will capture precisely the narrative tone I used, a tone whose music is fundamental in turning an academic text into a fully personal one (my translation).

At this point we are well beyond what we can easily recognise as the objective advantages of an author/translator partnership in which both share the same technical vocabulary and professional discourse. The double pronoun “I/she” points toward a double transformation: over time and successive collaborations, the translator has become not only an interlocutor but a kind of alter-ego, and the author’s voice, in response, is liberated to become more authentically his. The possibilities of transformation and even transgression inherent in ethnographic practice, then, are also present in translation practice. Anthropologists and translators not only facilitate the movement of ideas across boundaries; they themselves are boundary crossers, shape changers, and thus subversives, challenging the commonsense notion that identities are fixed and unitary (see [4]).

Anthropologists commonly have recourse to translation as a metaphor to explain what the interpretation of cultures consists in. My experience as an anthropologist translating anthropology suggests to me that translation may be more than a metaphor, something closer to a metonymy of the ethnographic encounter. This would help to explain its potentially transforming power for both translator and translated author.

Susan M. DiGiacomo

*Departament d’Antropologia, Filosofia i Treball Social
Universitat Rovira i Virgili
Tarragona, Catalonia, Spain*

*and
Department of Anthropology
University of Massachusetts at Amherst, USA
susan@anthro.umass.edu*

References:

1. Grossman E. Translator’s Note to the Reader, p. xix. Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Edith Grossman, translator. New York: Harper Collins; 2003.
2. DiGiacomo SM. Autobiografia crítica i teoria antropològica. *Revista d’Etnologia de Catalunya* 2004;25:124-134.
3. Venuti L. *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London and New York: Routledge; 1995. p.18.
4. DiGiacomo SM. Consider Translation: A Roundtable Discussion. Contributors: Steven Engler, Susan Bassnett, Robert Bringhurst, and Susan M. DiGiacomo. *Religious Studies Review* 2004;30 (2,3/April, July):107-120.
5. Comelles JM. De etnografies, traductors, i traduccions. 2008: <http://elmargendelmargen.blogspot.com/search/label/traduccion>. Accessed January 20, 2010.