



Angela T. TARANTINI

Universiteit Utrecht

When Performance  
is not a Metaphor  
for Translation:  
Translation as  
“Performative Event”

**Translation as Event.  
Performing and  
Staging Translations**

Brian O’Keeffe  
Larisa Cercel  
Marco Agnetta  
[eds.]

3/2023

**Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics  
Jahrbuch für Übersetzungshermeneutik**

Journal of the Research Center  
Zeitschrift des Forschungszentrums

**HK**

Hermeneutics and Creativity, University of Leipzig  
Hermeneutik und Kreativität, Universität Leipzig

DOI: 10.52116/yth.vi3.73



**Cite this article:**

Tarantini, Angela T. (2023): „When Performance is not a Metaphor for Translation: Translation as ‘Performative Event.’“ In: *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics 3: Translation as Event. Performing and Staging Translations* (ed. by Brian O’Keeffe, Larisa Cercel, Marco Agnetta), pp. 283–310. DOI: <10.52116/yth.vi3.73>.

# When Performance is not a Metaphor for Translation: Translation as “Performative Event”

Angela T. TARANTINI  
Universiteit Utrecht

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to theorise translation as a performative event (term coined by Stuart Grant 2013). Theories on translation and performativity in Translation Studies have historically been developed from Linguistics or from Performance Studies. Perhaps less known among Translation Studies scholars is the work of performance theorist and philosopher Grant, who recognises the need for a clearer definition of terms related to performance theory and practice. He therefore draws a clear distinction between “*the performative event, performance, the moment of performance, and the theatrical as opposed to the performative*” (Grant 2013: 127). These concepts provide a starting point for my theoretical analysis of sign language interpreting of popular music and live concerts. In my research I have demonstrated that in the work of sign language interpreter-performers, the performative event as intended by Grant (2013, 2015) is itself the translation, and the moment of performance is itself performative not in a metaphorical sense, but in its tangible embodiment and in its very essence (see Tarantini 2023). In this article I will look at how Grant’s theories are applicable to translation more broadly, and can be functional to theorise translation as an event: a performative event.

**Keywords:** Translation, Sign-language-interpreted music, Performance.

## 1 Introduction

This article<sup>1</sup> starts from an analysis of the performativity of sign-language-interpreted music to demonstrate how in the practice of song signing, the actual “performative event” (as intended by Grant 2013, 2015) is itself the translation (cf. also Tarantini 2023). The conclusions drawn from this theoretical investigation are then applied to the work of the translator more broadly in order to verify whether the act of translation, understood in the broadest sense of the term, can be considered a performative event. Before delving into the theoretical aspects, however, it is necessary to define the object of my analysis. There are different types of songs in sign language, ranging from original compositions by deaf song-signing artists to amateur signers who attempt to translate a song into a sign language, to professional interpreters, either deaf<sup>2</sup> or

- 
- 1 This study is part of a larger and recently-concluded project titled “When Accessibility Becomes Performance: Sign Language Interpreting in Music and Live Concerts as ‘Performative Rewriting’”, which was carried out at Cardiff University with funding received from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 101024733.
  - 2 Scholars in Deaf Studies (see e.g. Kusters et al. 2017) have put forth the proposition that we should move away from the d/Deaf and hard of hearing nomenclature and use ‘deaf’ as umbrella term. Until recently, the convention was to use the lower-case ‘deaf’ to refer to the physiological condition of hearing loss, and the capital D in ‘Deaf’ to indicate a person who belongs to a sign language community and whose cultural identity is connected to their deafness (see Ladd 2003). Some scholars (see e.g. Morêdo Pereira 2021) maintain that the distinction d/Deaf is still relevant, and in some countries (like Australia or the Netherlands) the definition ‘hard of hearing’ (*slechthorend* in Dutch) is commonly and extensively used. In this article I will use ‘deaf’ as broad umbrella term as suggested by Kusters et al. (2017). However, when

hearing, who translate music for accessibility purposes or for self-expression. The most recent and comprehensive classification of signed songs is provided by Morêdo Pereira (2021: 101).<sup>3</sup> In this article, and in my work in general, I focus exclusively on songs signed by professional interpreters, whether hearing or deaf, with the aim of facilitating access to music for deaf signers, whether as a live interpretation service or as a recorded video. Working from the premises theorised in Tarantini (2023), this article examines the practice of sign language interpreting in music as a translation and performative practice, and expands the concept of performativity to encompass the evental and experiential aspects of translation. In order to do so, I will apply the definitions by performance theorist and philosopher Grant (2015, 2013) to the work of the sign language interpreter-performers first and then, more broadly, to the work of the translator in general. I will then combine this new perspective of the ‘performance’ of the translator with the theories currently being formulated amongst scholars who conceive of translation as experiential (see Campbell/Vidal 2024a, Blumczynski 2023, among others).

In this article I use the term ‘translation’ as an umbrella term, in the awareness that there are differences between interpreting and translation. The term ‘translation’ is often used “for a written target-language reformulation of a written source text” whereas “interpretation or interpreting [is used for] a non-written re-expression of a non-written source text” (Gile 2004: 11). However, there are many areas of overlap between the two, and particularly in the practice of song signing. Some

---

quoting the work of other scholars verbatim, I will use their words and therefore their nomenclature/spelling.

- 3 Other classifications have been put forth by Bahan (2006) and Maler (2013).

signed songs are a form of interpreting (e.g. live interpretation services) while others can be classified as sign language translation rather than interpretation. For examples, videos where the interpreter-performer has the time to translate the lyrics, prepare the performance, film it and share it on social media can be considered a form of sign language translation, whereas a live concert would be a form of sign language interpreting (depending on how much preparation time the interpreter-performer had, though). I will therefore use the term ‘translation’ as an umbrella term to refer to any practice which entails the transposition of the lyrics and other nonverbal elements of the musical text into sign language in the context of song signing.

## 2 Sign-Language-Interpreted Music, or Song Signing

In recent years, a number of practitioners have started to translate popular music and live events (such as concerts and musical theatre) into sign language as a way to facilitate access to music to deaf signers. Among the organisations that provide this type of service are *Performance Interpreting* in the UK, *Auslan Stage Left* in Australia, *Muziektolken* in the Netherlands, and interpreter-performers such as Giulia Clementi in Italy, and Amber Galloway Gallego and Holly Maniatti in the USA (among others). This practice, also known as ‘song signing’ in the UK, and ‘sign dancing’ or ‘muziek tolken’ (music interpreting) in the Netherlands, has been object of analysis in disciplines such as Deaf Studies (cf. Cripps 2018, Cripps et al. 2017) and Musicology (cf. Maler 2015 and 2013, Mangelsdorf et al. 2021, Holmes 2017), but so far has received very little attention from Translation Studies scholars, with some noticeable exceptions (e.g. Desblache 2020, Tarantini 2025). There are a number of reasons why this practice may have been over-

looked in Translation Studies. One could be that in order to conduct an analysis of the translation of songs into sign language it is vital to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, as this practice cannot be scrutinised without drawing on a wide range of disciplines. Interdisciplinary work always brings limitations and challenges with it, as a scholar cannot possibly master all the different disciplines this practice draws upon (Translation Studies, Performance Studies, Music, Musicology, Sign Language, Accessibility Studies, Deaf Studies, etc.). Another reason could be the one put forth by Desblache, a scholar in Music and Translation, who claims that the reticence to investigate accessibility practices in music is due to the fact that:

for many, in many contexts [...], music is still considered as separate from other forms of expression, and best left to specialists. In some case, it is true. [...] But in most situations, basic knowledge of song form, prosody and musical genre suffices. (Desblache 2020: 725)

Another reason why this practice has been overlooked in Translation Studies could be the fact that song translations are not always welcome by the deaf community (cf. Cripps et al. 2017: 3; Fisher 2021: 2; Holmes 2017: 200). While acknowledging the importance of the issue, an in-depth discussion thereof is beyond the scope of the present study, but also beyond my limitations, given that I am a hearing Translation Studies scholar. I do, however, believe that more cross-/interdisciplinary work is required to fully understand the practice of translating songs into sign language. A theoretical perspective from Translation Studies, which has thus far been lacking in most work on this topic, could be useful to other disciplines and increase our understanding of these practices in the context of the global entertainment industry and the current translation landscape. Moreover, the study of sign-language-interpreted music functions as a case study whose premises, and

possibly the conclusions, can be applied in Translation Studies more broadly.

### 3 Grant's classification of the elements of 'performance'

After Robinson first analysed translation as a performative activity with perlocutionary effect (cf. Robinson 2003), a number of scholars have engaged with the notion of performativity in translation in some form or another, so much so that Bigliuzzi et al. (2013: 1) started talking about a “performative turn” in Translation Studies. This has led to a view of translation “*as performance*” (Aaltonen 2013: 386, original emphasis, see also Agnetta 2021). The performative turn in Translation Studies has bred two distinct yet related notions of performativity. Performativity can be seen as related to the performance of the translator, thus related to the effect of the work of the translator on the actual ‘text’ (cf. Cheetham 2016), or, more broadly, to the actual “*acts of translation and what these did in particular contexts*” (Bermann 2014: 288, original emphasis), thus related to the effect of translation on society at large. According to Bermann the discipline of Translation Studies has broadened its focus to encompass “the cultural and political *acts and effects of translation*” and to examine “the *doing of translation* [...] but also the doing of translators, readers, and audiences” (Bermann 2014: 288, original emphasis). Similarly, Michela Baldo understands performativity “in terms of an activist translation, understood as a political activity aimed at achieving social transformation” (Baldo 2019: 74).<sup>4</sup> Theatre translation scholar Marinetti (2013) also views the notion of performativity as re-

---

4 On the topic of translation and activism, cf. also Tymoczko (2010).

lational to the audience, rather than an intrinsic feature of the work of the translator.

The notion of performativity in Translation Studies has been developed working either from Austin's linguistic notion of performativity (cf. Austin <sup>2</sup>1975), as did Robinson in *Performative Linguistics: Speaking and Translating as Doing Things with Words* (2003), or from performance theorists such as Schechner (<sup>3</sup>2013, 2003) and Worthen (2003), as did Aaltonen (2013) and Marinetti (2013, 2018). However, I believe that the theories mediated from Performance Philosophy could contribute to the discussion, as also noted by Campbell/Vidal (2022). According to performance theorist and philosopher Grant there is:

a persistent confusion in performance studies, caused by the historical accident that, in English, the word 'performance' can be used to designate a number of different phenomena. No doubt the collapse of sign and referent in Austin's performative utterance contributes to this situation (1975, 5-6). (Grant 2013: 127–128)

Grant (2015) states that with theorisation of the performative utterance in linguistics, in which “the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action” (Austin <sup>2</sup>1975: 5), “the boundaries between the *saying* and the *doing* have collapsed” (Tarantini 2023: 101, original emphasis). Despite it being “a founding moment in the discipline of performance studies” (Grant 2015: 214), this collapse has caused terminological and conceptual confusion. The confusion identified by Grant in Performance Studies has been somehow ‘transposed’ into the discipline of Translation Studies. As a matter of fact, when talking about ‘performativity’ in Translation Studies, scholars feel the need (and rightly so) to provide a working definition of the term, and that could be the consequence of this ‘original’ confusion identified by Grant (2013, 2015). Grant’s proposes a distinction between “*the performative event, performance, the moment*



*of performance, and the theatrical as opposed to the performative?*” (Grant 2013: 127, original emphasis), which stems from the need to clarify the confusion surrounding the vague notion of performance. While Grant’s classification has already been applied to the work of song signers (cf. Tarantini 2023), in this article I argue that his distinction could be functional to clarify the notion of performance and performativity in Translation Studies more broadly.

In his article titled “What if? Performance is Risk” Grant claims that the *performative event* could be “a ritual, a theatre show, a sports game, a ceremony, a rehearsal, a social occasion such as a date or a job interview, a presidential inauguration speech, the cooking of a meal, the painting of a picture, a prayer” (Grant 2013: 128–129). Instead, the word *performance* “refers to that moment of the performative event in which it performs, in which it is performed [...] performance is understood here as a kind of essence which makes performative events performative” (Grant 2013: 129). In another research output Grant (2015: 216) defines this as “the essence of performance”, which in my opinion is even clearer. Grant then moves on to the notion of the *performative moment* (or *moment of performance*): a moment irremediably bound in time:

the moment of *decision*. This decision is not to be understood as the decision of the will of a subject choosing among pre-existent options, but of the complex set of forces at play which necessitate and determine the actions of the performer giving themselves over in the coming forth of the absolutely singular instance of the improvisation. The decision offers itself to the performer. (Grant 2013: 129–130, original emphasis)

Grant (2015) works from Heidegger’s notion of *Augenblick* which translates literally into “the blink of an eye” and “describes a ‘decisive moment’ in time that is both fleeting yet momentarily eventful” (Ward 2008: i). Using the Heideggerian concept of *Augenblick*, “the moment of vision, which tempo-

realizes itself in a resolution” (Heidegger 1962: 394, as cited in Grant 2015: 220), Grant theorises and defines the concept of “moment of performance”: that performative moment in which the performer “chooses amongst the range of possibilities open to them in that instant” (Tarantini 2023: 102, working from Grant 2013, 2015). According to Grant, that moment is always, at least in part, improvisational, regardless of how ‘well-rehearsed’ a show is. To further clarify the notion of the performative moment, which is tied to its fleeting nature and its temporality, Grant (2013) draws another distinction, i.e. that between the *theatrical* and the *performative*.

The *theatrical* dimension of the performative event is the showing-to, the attempt to represent, make predictable and repeatable, to communicate with or affect another, the endurance of the sign, the material, the temporal. The *performative* dimension is the flash of the moment of the coming-forth, the almost imperceptible, unencompassable, and inexperienceable inceptive occurrence, the doing, which, in its apprehension, ceases to function as what it was, and joins the apparatus of the theatrical, the enduring. The performative temporalises, the theatrical is already in time; in the theatrical, the representational gap of metaphysics has already opened, the performative occurs as the unfolding of Being. A performative event is always, in these definitions, a combination of the theatrical and the performative. The two dimensions always work together as complementary axes of the temporality of performance. In the performative event, the theatrical and the performative cannot exist without each other. (Grant 2015: 216–217, original emphasis)

Grant’s theorization of the performative event, the essence of performance, the performative moment<sup>5</sup> and the theatrical vs the performative is functional to a discussion of the practice of sign-language-interpreted songs but also, more broadly, is ap-

---

5 Grant (2013, 2015) uses the terms *performative moment* and *moment of performance* interchangeably, as well as *performance event* and *performative event*. In this article I do the same.

plicable to the work of the translator in general. I will start from the specific case study and then move on to the broader context of translation.

Let us apply Grant's definitions to the specific case study of song signing. The *performative event* would be a concert, a musical theatre performance, or the filming of an interpreted song which is then sometimes, but not always, uploaded on YouTube or other social media. Whether the event is live or recorded is irrelevant for the purpose of this analysis. There are, of course, differences between the two practices, most importantly that with a live performance the interpreter-performer gets immediate feedback from the audience, and their performance is ephemeral. The *moment of performance*, or *performative moment*, is when the interpreter has to choose between the vast array of options available to them to transfer what they consider 'the message' of the original 'text' (I will go back to the notion of 'message' and 'text' later). It is what Grant defines "the moment of *decision*" (Grant 2013: 129, original emphasis), and that moment is always, at least in part, improvisational, even if a performance is well-prepared and rehearsed. As scholars who have often given lectures and seminars and/or presented at conferences, we know all too well that, no matter how much we write and prepare and rehearse a presentation or a lecture, the moment of performance, the moment in which we give the presentation or lecture, will be at least in part improvisational. According to Grant, that moment will be a combination of *the theatrical* and *the performative*, the theatrical being what is rehearsed and 'scripted' and the performative being what is improvised in the performative moment. It is in the *moment of performance* that the *essence of performance* manifests itself, and makes the moment of performance, in fact, performative. If we understand performativity as both an attribute of performance and as the potential to achieve social transformation, we can

see how in sign-language-interpreted music, performativity is an element and a carrier, if not the main vector, of accessibility.<sup>6</sup>

Grant's distinction clarified different concepts that until then had been vaguely classified under the umbrella term 'performance.' I believe that this vagueness contributed to the development of different definitions of performativity in Translation Studies. By applying Grant's classification, we can see that performativity is attributed to the essence of performance, which manifests itself in the performative moment, during a performative event. Performativity is then irremediably linked to the event itself, and to the moment of performance. A performative understanding of translation, then, must necessarily entail the conceptualisation of translation as an event.

#### 4 Translation as an event

Grant's clarification of what was once ambiguously classified as 'performance' sheds light not only within Performance Studies and Performance Philosophy, but also in Translation Studies, for those scholars working across disciplines and/or adopting and adapting terms and concepts mediated from Performance Studies and Performance Theory. The fact that the notion of performativity was elaborated working from a vaguely defined notion of 'performance' and 'performative' may have contributed to the multiple and sometimes blurry definitions of performativity within Translation Studies. If we apply, as we have, Grant's nomenclature to the work of sign language interpreter-performers, we can say that:

---

6 An extensive discussion on the topic goes beyond the scope of the present article. For a more detailed insight of the notion of performativity as a vector of accessibility, and of the combination of performativity intended as 'relational to performance' and as 'relational to the audience', I refer to Tarantini (2023).

- the performative event is the concert, the musical theatre show, the video where the interpreter-performer provides their signed interpretation of a song;
- the performative moment is when they choose amongst the range of possibilities open to them;
- the essence of performance is what makes that moment performative;
- the theatrical vs the performative is what is ‘scripted’ and rehearsed vs what is improvised in the performative moment.<sup>7</sup>

Can Grant’s terminology in relation to performance be applied to the work of the translator more broadly? If we adopt a performative understanding of translation (cf. Cheetham 2016), and we consider translation as a performative action (cf. Robinson 2003) with an impact both on the text and on society at large (cf. Bermann 2014, among others), then it is not only possible, but also functional to clarifying what we mean by the ‘performance’ of the translator, “the *doing* of translation [...] but also the *doing* of translators, readers, and audiences” (Bermann 2014: 288, original emphasis).

In the practice of ‘simple’ interlingual translation, or “translation proper” as defined by Jakobson (1959: 233), the performative event would be when the translator is sitting at their desk, translating a text of any kind. In the context of live interpreting, it would be when the interpreter is providing their live interpretation service, be it in person or remotely. The performative moment is the moment when the translator chooses among the various options available to them while translating or interpreting. As practicing translators and/or interpreters, we know that those choices are hardly ever straightforward.

---

7 As I argue elsewhere (cf. Tarantini 2023), that is the moment when accessibility becomes performance.

The essence of performance is what makes that moment performative. If we understand the practice of translation and interpreting as a performative practice, we can see how performativity manifests itself through the essence of performance, which is what will ultimately make the performative moment performative. In this sense ‘performative’ means that the practice of translation, or rather, the event, will have an impact both on the work (i.e. the translated text) and on the recipient (i.e. the reader or the audience). The moment of performance will be a combination of the theatrical and the performative, i.e. a combination of what has been ‘prepared’ and what is ‘spontaneous’ at the moment of performance. While it is easier to see how this is applicable to a live event, like a live interpreting job, even in the practice of a written translation, the translator finds themselves in the position to choose among the range of possibilities available to them. Despite the preparation they may have put in translating a certain passage or certain terminology, and the amount of research carried out on a specific topic or semantic area to translate a specific word or sentence, at the moment of performance, i.e. while translating, they might decide to go down a different route. The difference between the two is a fundamental one: while the moment of performance in a live show is ephemeral and irreversible, a translator working on a text sitting at their desk can always go back and revisit their decision. Yet, the “moment of performance” is the moment of decision, much like Grant claims. Even though in the case of the translation of a written text, that moment of decision can be re-winded and re-enacted, the decision made in that moment when the translation is ‘performed’, i.e. the performative moment, is ultimately what the audience will read. Translation, then, can be seen as an event, and a performative one at that.

At this point, two considerations need to be made: the first is related to the performative moment, and the second is related to the theatrical vs the performative. When defining the performative moment as “the moment of *decision*” Grant (2013: 129, original emphasis) specifies that:

[t]his decision is not to be understood as the decision of the will of a subject choosing among pre-existent options, but of the *complex set of forces at play* which necessitate and determine the actions of the performer [...]. The decision offers itself to the performer (Grant 2013: 129, my emphasis).

Scholars working in Sociology of Translation claim that the translator also has to take into account “a complex set of forces” (to use Grant’s words) such as agents, structures, “culturally connotated value systems and ideologies” (Wolf 2007: 4). Much like the performer operates within a complex semiotic system, the translator works within a multi-layered social structure and, to use Grant’s phrasing, the decision offers itself to the translator, and the decision will be the outcome of that complex set of forces at play, where the issue of power is of vital importance, and the agency of the translator is only one of those forces. The second consideration is related to the distinction between the theatrical vs the performative in translation. The notion of the theatrical and the performative as theorized by Grant is easily applicable to the performative event of live interpreting jobs. Grant notices how in a performative event “[t]he performative temporalises, the theatrical is already in time” (Grant 2013: 130-131). In the case of the translation of a written text, the audience (in this case the reader) will not witness the performative moment in ‘real time’, because the decision will have been made, and will already be temporalized. This, however, does not mean that the performative moment did not take place. While “the performative occurs as the unfolding of being” (Grant 2013: 131), what the reader experi-

ences is already “temporalize[d] in a resolution” (Heidegger 1962: 394, as cited in Grant 2015: 220).

So far, I have discussed the application of Grant’s theories to the practice of sign-language-interpreted music, and to the work of the interlingual translator in general. However, more recently there has been a tendency in Translation Studies to broaden the focus of investigation to encompass more and more cross-disciplinary and intersemiotic practices that focus on the experience of translation.

## 5 Translation: from performative to experiential?

Recently, a group of scholars, artists, and practitioner-researchers have gathered in the *Experiential Translation Network* led by translation scholars Ricarda Vidal and Madelaine Campbell.<sup>8</sup> The network epitomises the shift from a performative to an experiential understanding of translation that we are currently witnessing, and an enhanced interest in the notion of intersemiotic translation. This was already evident in the chapters included in the book edited by Campbell/Vidal (2019). However, the more recent work carried out by the members of the network (but not only) seems to further transcend the classic, Jakobsonian idea of intersemiotic translation (Jakobson 1959), as we shall see. The work of Karen Bennett (2024), investigating soundscapes and intersemiotic translation, and that of Irene Fiordilino (2022), dancer, choreographer and scholar who researches mapping as a method to translate kinaesthetic experience, are just examples of the work carried out by scholars working in translation and the arts, either in collaboration with artists (see Perteghella/Clausen 2022) or cross-disciplinarily,

---

8 URL: <<https://experientialtranslation.net/>> (05/01/2024).



using art as a medium but with a theoretical framework mediated from Translation Studies (see Vidal Claramonte 2022). Similarly, a collection edited by Tarantini, Fiordilino & Chojnicka (in progress) looks at multimodality and the arts in themselves as forms of intersemiotic translation inherent in artistic practice and research. In the introduction to the recent collection edited by Campbell/Vidal, the editors claim that:

the translator's subject position in relation to the semios and materiality of the 'original' is transformed by the role of experimentation, creativity and play [...]. Experiential translation views translation as a holistic, co-creative process of discovery and renewal in a dynamic ecological context where Western anthropocentric discourse is displaced by a pluriverse of local and global, analogue and digital, (dis)embodied voices. (Campbell/Vidal 2024b: 2–3)

The whole collection revolves around this notion. Along the same lines Blumczynski, going back to the original understanding of translation as the transfer of relics, explores “translations of bodies, living and dead, from a semiotic and experiential perspective” (Blumczynski 2023: 37). Despite this distinct and recognisable trend, much like Blumczynski I will refrain from talking about another ‘turn’ in Translation Studies. First and foremost, because the notion of performativity and that of experientiality are not mutually exclusive, but quite the contrary, as we shall see. Rather than a ‘turn’, I would say that the notion of performativity is being integrated with that of experientiality, and I will explain how in the following section. Secondly and perhaps most importantly because I echo Marais’ notion that while the various turns in Translation Studies:

had the aim of expanding the conceptualization of translation [...] on the one hand, many of these broadening efforts did not broaden the conceptualization of translation itself, but just broadened the context in which interlingual translation is studied. On the other hand, I do not think that the turns, jointly, have provided us with the broadest possible conceptualization of translation. (Marais 2019: 7)

In his *(Bio)Semiotic Theory of Translation*, Marais (2019) argues that translation should be viewed as a process of meaning-making involving different codes, not necessarily verbal. Marais makes his claim starting from the assumption that the great misnomer in Translation Studies has been an understanding of intersemiotic translation working from Jakobson, according to whom “intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of *verbal signs* by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 1959: 233, original emphasis). According to Marais, instead, scholars should adopt a Peircean conceptualisation of intersemiotic translation, where both sign systems can be nonverbal. Marais goes on to state that an understanding of translation as a meaning-making process involving any kind of sign systems would, indeed, provide scholars with the broadest possible conceptualization of translation, without the need for further ‘turns.’ Moreover, as Blumczynski (2023) has cautioned us to remember, the very notion of “translation proper” is what delimited an originally broader concept of translation which already entailed an experiential and a material and corporeal component.

## 6 Meaning-making in sign-language-interpreted music

A meaning-making process involving different sign systems, not always and not necessarily verbal, is epitomized in the work of song signers, i.e. those professional interpreters (or interpreter-performers, as I call them) who incorporate nonverbal elements of the text in their signed interpretation. Sign language interpreter-performers translate the lyrics (i.e. the verbal element of the text) into a sign language, which is another verbal sign system. A first and superficial glance would make us believe that the practice is nothing but a form of interlingual

translation: a translation from a natural language (e.g. English) to another natural language (e.g. British Sign Language). Even though there is an obvious change of modality, from aural to visual, one could be led to believe that the translation would still be between two natural languages only, and that the process would entail the mere translation of one verbal code into another verbal code. However, simply by watching the performance of a professional song signer we can see that nothing could be further from the truth. A detailed analysis of the performance by Dutch song signer Hanneke de Raaff when interpreting into Dutch Sign Language the song *Shum* by Ukrainian band Go\_A is not necessary to understand the extent to which elements other than verbal are embodied in her interpretation (De Raaff 2021). If we look at the YouTube video, from min. 00:37 to min. 00:52 we see how she uses a depicting sign, an iconic gesture which reminds the audience of a person playing the flute. From min. 01:40 to min. 02:07 she resorts to a series of different strategies to embody the sound of a synthesiser first (min. 01:40), and then a creative way to combine the depiction of the sound of the flute (with her mouth) with the movement of the dancers we see in the video behind her. This is just an example, and an extensive analysis of different strategies utilized by different interpreter-performers in different sign languages is beyond the scope of the present article.<sup>9</sup> In this specific instance the interpreter combines the depiction of how the sound is made (through the synthesizer and through the mouth in the case of the flute) with elements from the original videoclip to translate as many elements as possible, both aural and visual, into a performance art, intersemiotically. This

---

9 For a more extensive discussion on the different translation strategies interpreters utilise to embody nonverbal elements of a song, see Fisher (2021) and Tarantini (2025).

makes her translation a performative event which unfolds on a plurisemiotic level.

One of the scholars who have analysed song signing, Vicky Fisher (2021), scrutinising the practice of what she calls “embodied songs”, maintains that a song

is a gestalt—an integrated entity (object, structure or *experience*) in which the whole is *experienced* as something greater than, or different from, the sum of its parts. Meaning and affect are established through the specific combination of patterned words, rhythm, melody, harmonies, and instrumentation, supplemented by a range of non-acoustic features such as gestural body movements and dance, performers’ personalities, and visual elements including clothing and lighting. (Fisher 2021: 2, my emphasis)

Vicky Fisher works with an interdisciplinary perspective integrating “dance, cognitive psychology, multimodal linguistics, education theory and embodied cognition” (2021: s.p.). Given that she does not work from a Translation Studies perspective, Fisher does not explicitly engage with the debate of whether intersemiotic translation should be considered from the perspective of Jakobson, as most translation scholars have done until recently, or from Peircian semiotics, as Marais (2019) suggests. While according to Jakobson intersemiotic translation “or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 1959: 233, original emphasis), Marais (2019) posits that intersemiotic translation can be between two nonverbal sign systems. This position seems to be prominent in the contemporary Translation Studies landscape (see Campbell/Vidal 2024a, among others). Going back to the issue of the translation of songs, the notion that a song is a gestalt, and that it is experienced, as suggested by Fisher (2021) can be useful to analyse the translation of songs into sign language from the perspective of Translation Studies as it addresses the need to redefine what we understand as ‘text,’ as advocated by translation semioticians Sütiste and To-

rop (2007). According to Translation Semiotics, it is essential to establish “the boundaries of the translation text, which in semiotic analysis is one of the first procedural moves towards understanding something in its wholeness or as a whole” (Sütiste/Torop 2007: 193). In semiotics, a *text* is characterized by its material form, defined by boundaries such as a frame, beginning, and end, and can be made of any substance: it does not necessarily have to be verbal but can instead (or in addition) be musical, pictorial, multimedial, multimodal, and so on. A *message* is a form communication from the sender to the receiver transmitted by means of words or other signals. From the viewpoint of semiotics, any text performs three main functions: it conveys information, carries cultural memory, and generates new meanings (Lotman 1990: 18). In translation semiotics we can speak of predominantly *discrete* and predominantly *continuous* types of text generation mechanism: the former produces texts in which the “basic bearer of meaning is the segment (= the sign), while the chain of segments (= the text) is secondary”; in the latter, the basic meaning carrier is the text as a whole, and it would be difficult to isolate its component signs (ibid.: 36). Given these premises, one of the questions that I wished to address in my research on sign-language-interpreted music is: what are the elements of a ‘musical text’ that sign language interpreter-performers strive to convey in their interpretation?

To answer this question I have carried out interviews with interpreters from different countries working with different sign languages. I interviewed nine sign language interpreter-performers: three from the Netherlands, one from Italy, one from Australia, and four from the UK. During the interviews, all the interpreters said that for them the most important element to convey about a song is ‘the emotion.’ This response somehow confirms Fisher’s notion of a song as a gestalt: an

item which is more than the sum of its single components. To put it in a semiotic perspective, the basic meaning carrier in a song is not a single segment (a single sign) but the chain of segments, i.e. the text as a whole, where the meaning is generated in a continuous form, and it is difficult to identify single components as meaning carriers. However, while ‘emotion’ is not, in itself, a discernible element (or segment) of a song like rhythm, key, or tempo, it is what the interpreters I interviewed identified as the core ‘message,’ the most important part of the ‘text’ to convey. But where is the emotion in a song? Is it an intrinsic feature of the song or is it something that is fostered in the listener by the song itself? According to music scholar Minors “[t]here is a long history of music and emotion, not least in music intended to produce emotive response. It facilitates the production of emotions in the listener via association. Aristotle (BC 367–347) observed: ‘hearing alone among the objects of sense... affects the emotional temperament of the hearer’” (Minors 2022: 339). Minors goes on to state that “[m]usic itself does not hold emotion” (Minors 2022: 340), but rather, the emotion is a response of the listener to the music. Following Larsen, Minors maintains that “music is able to express emotions” but “a distinction ought to be made between music itself and the *experiencing* of it” (Larsen 2007: 71, as cited in Minors 2022: 339, emphasis added). So, how can an interpreter translate an element that is *not* in the text, but is their own *experience* of the text? I would argue that this is not dissimilar from any other work of translation. The work of the translator is to convey the meaning of a text, but that meaning will always be their own interpretation (i.e. their understanding) and their experience of the same text. Once more, a Peircian understanding of the meaning-making process can contribute to the discussion. According to Peirce’s triadic model of semiosis, any semiotic act requires an interpretant, which is

an intermediary between a sign vehicle and its object, contextually qualifying a sign's meaning by situating it within a web of signs (CP 1.339, 1905). In other words, signs signify with the translative support of interpretants, thus rendering meaning intelligible in the context of interpretants that serve as proxy 'translators.' (Melanson-Ricciardone 2022: 146).

Viewing translation as a process of meaning-making, as suggested by Marais (2019), as a process of semiosis where the interpretant is "an intermediary between a sign vehicle and its object", i.e. its target audience, allows us to take the word 'translator' outside the quotation marks. The translator is the interpretant which renders the meaning of signs intelligible, without the need to draw a line between verbal and nonverbal signs in the case of intersemiotic translation.

## 7 Conclusions

The idea of a song, and consequently of its translation, as something to be experienced suggests that a signed song is a *performative event* (or *performance event*), intended both as an act to be carried out on the part of the interpreter, and as an *event* to be experienced, both by the interpreter and by the recipient of the translation, i.e. the audience. However, as I hope to have demonstrated, Grant's notion of performative event is applicable to the broader context of translation, and not only to the case of sign-language-interpreted music. If we understand translation as a performative practice (cf. Robinson 2003, Cheetham 2016) and apply Grant's (2015, 2013) distinction and definitions, then a performative understanding of translation allows us to see any act of translation as a *performative event*, and any act of reception as an experience. While in the case of a live interpretation gig the two happen simultaneously, and one might influence the other, in the case of a written translation or a recorded interpretation, such as a signed song filmed

and uploaded on social media, the production and the reception take place in discrete moments. Even where there is a gap between the *moment of performance* and the moment in which the audience experiences the *performative event*, translation is both a performative act to be carried out by the translator, and an event to be experienced, both by the translator and by the audience or readership.

An understanding of translation as a performative event combines the theories put forth by scholars within the “performative turn” with the current trend of understanding translation as ‘experience’, and thus confirms Blumczynski’s notion of translation as “a cultural phenomenon and a social practice [which] involves a holistic, psychosomatic engagement traceable to corporeal transfer” (Blumczynski 2023: 4). Blumczynski (2023: 179) states that translation is “a shared, material experience [...] mediated by the senses.” To that, I would add that translation understood as a performative event allows us to expand the potential range of objects and phenomena that can be analysed as an experience of translationality (to use Blumczynski’s words) both in Translation Studies and in Reception Studies, but also in Accessibility Studies related to translation.<sup>10</sup>

## 8 References

- AALTONEN, Sirkku (2013): “Theatre Translation as Performance.” In: *Target* 25/3, pp. 385–406. DOI: <10.1075/target.25.3.05aal>.
- AGNETTA, Marco (2021): “Zur Translation als Performance mit Texten.” In: AGNETTA, Marco / CERCEL, Larisa [eds.]: *Text Performances und Cultural Transfer. Textperformances und Kulturtransfer (= Translation Studies, Bd. 6)*. Bukarest: Zetabooks. S. 9–32.

---

10 For an extensive discussion of translation and accessibility, see Greco (2018, 2022) and Di Giovanni (2018), among others.



- AUSTIN, John L. (1975): *How To Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- BAHAN, Benjamin (2006): "Face-to-Face Tradition in the American Deaf Community." In: BAUMAN, Dirksen L. / NELSON, Jennifer L. / ROSE, Heidi M. [eds.]: *Signing the body poetic. Essays on American Sign Language literature*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 21–50.
- BALDO, Michela (2019): "Translating Spanish Transfeminist Activism into Italian. Performativity, DIY, and Affective Contaminations." In: *gender/sexuality/italy* 6, pp. 66–84.
- BENNETT, Karen (2024): "Translating from Music. The *Soundscape* Course and its Theoretical and Practical Outcomes." In: CAMPBELL, Madeleine / VIDAL, Ricarda [eds.]: *The Experience of Translation. Materiality and Play in Experiential Translation*. London / New York: Routledge, pp. 159–173. DOI: <10.4324/9781003462538>.
- BERMANN, Sandra (2014): "Performing Translation." In: BERMANN, Sandra / PORTER, Catherine [eds.]: *A Companion to Translation Studies*. Oxford, UK: Wiley, pp. 285–297.
- BIGLIAZZI, Silvia / KOFLER, Peter / AMBROSI, Paola (2013): "Introduction." In: BIGLIAZZI, Silvia / KOFLER, Peter / AMBROSI, Paola [eds.]: *Theatre Translation in Performance*. New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis, pp. 1–26.
- BLUMCZYNSKI, Piotr (2023): *Experiencing Translationality. Material and Metaphorical Journeys*. London & New York: Routledge.
- CAMPBELL, Madeleine / VIDAL, Ricarda [eds.] (2019): *Translating across Sensory and Linguistic Borders. Intersemiotic Journeys between Media*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- CAMPBELL, Madeleine / VIDAL, Ricarda (2022): "Knowing 'An Anna Blume'. Performative & Experiential Translation: Meaning-Making through Language, Art and Media." Paper presented at King's College London, 13–15/07/2022.
- CAMPBELL, Madeleine / VIDAL, Ricarda [eds.] (2024a): *The Experience of Translation. Materiality and Play in Experiential Translation*. London / New York: Routledge.
- CAMPBELL, Madeleine / VIDAL, Ricarda (2024b): "Introduction. Materiality and play as affective and embodied means of (un)knowing." In: CAMPBELL, Madeleine / VIDAL, Ricarda [eds.]: *The Experience of Translation. Materiality and Play in Experiential Translation*. London / New York: Routledge.

- CHEETHAM, Dominic (2016): "Literary Translation and Conceptual Metaphors. From Movement to Performance". In: *Translation Studies* 9/3, pp. 241–255. DOI: <10.1080/14781700.2016.1180543>.
- CRIPPS, Jody H. (2018): "Ethnomusicology & Signed Music. A Breakthrough." In: *Journal of American Sign Languages and Literatures*. URL: <[http://journalofasl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2018/08/ethnomusicology\\_cripps.pdf](http://journalofasl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2018/08/ethnomusicology_cripps.pdf)> (07/02/2022).
- CRIPPS, Jody H. / ROSEMBLUM, Ely / SMALL, Anita / SUPALLA, Samuel J. (2017): "A Case Study on Signed Music. The Emergence of an Inter-performance Art." In: *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 13/2, pp. 1–24.
- DE RAAFF, Hanneke (2021): *Go\_A – Shum*. URL: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcRss8CPW-s>> (07/02/2022).
- DESLACHE, Lucile (2020): "Music and Accessibility." In: BOGUCKI, Łukasz / DECKERT, Mikolaj [eds.]: *The Palgrave Handbook of Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 713–731.
- DI GIOVANNI, Elena (2018): "Participatory Accessibility: Creating Audio Description with Blind and Non-blind Children." In: *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* 1/1, pp. 155–169.
- FIORDILINO, Irene (2022): "Mapping. An Original Method of Practice and Research." In: *Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice* 7/1, pp. 59–78.
- FISHER, Vicky J. (2021): "Embodied Songs. Insights Into the Nature of Cross-Modal Meaning-Making Within Sign Language Informed, Embodied Interpretations of Vocal Music." In: *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, pp. 2–20. DOI: <10.3389/fpsyg.2021.624689>.
- GILE, Daniel (2004): "Translation Research versus Interpreting Research. Kinship, Differences and Prospects for Partnership." In: SCHÄFFNER, Christina [ed.]: *Translation Research and Interpreting Research: Traditions, Gaps and Synergies*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp. 10–34.
- GRANT, Stuart (2013): "What if? Performance is Risk." In: *About Performance* 12, pp. 127–144.
- GRANT, Stuart (2015): "Heidegger's *Augenblick* as the Moment of the Performance." In: GRANT, Stuart / MCNEILLY, Jodie / VEERAPEN, Maeva [eds.]: *Performance and Temporalisation. Time Happens*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 213–229.
- GRECO, Gian Maria (2018): "The Nature of Accessibility Studies." In: *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* 1/1, pp. 205–232.

- GRECO, Gian Maria (2022): "The Question of Accessibility." In PEREGO, Elisa / TAYLOR, Christopher [eds.]: *The Routledge Handbook of Audio Description*. London / New York: Routledge, pp. 13–26.
- HEIDEGGER, Martin (1962/2001): *Being and Time*. Transl. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford UK / Cambridge USA: Blackwell.
- HOLMES, Jessica A. (2017): "Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness." In: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70/1, pp. 171–220. DOI: <10.1525/jams.2017.70.1.171>.
- JAKOBSON, Roman (1959): "On Linguistics Aspects of Translation." In: BROWER, Reuben A. [ed.]: *On Translation*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 232–239.
- KUSTERS, Annelies / DE MEULDER, Maartje / O'BRIEN, Dai (2017): "Innovations in Deaf Studies: Critically Mapping the Field." In: KUSTERS, Annelies / DE MEULDER, Maartje / O'BRIEN, Dai [eds.]: *Innovations in Deaf Studies. The Role of Deaf Scholars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–53.
- LADD, Paddy (2003): *Understanding Deaf Culture. In Search of Deafhood*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- LOTMAN, Yuri M. (1990): *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: Tauris.
- MALER, Anabel (2013): "Songs for Hands: Analyzing Interactions of Sign Language and Music." In: *Music theory online* 19/1, n. p. DOI: <10.30535/mto.19.1.4>.
- MALER, Anabel (2015): "Musical Expression among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers." In: HOWE, Blake / JENSEN-MOULTON, Stephanie / LERNER, Neil / STRAUS, Joseph [eds.]: *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 73–91.
- MANGELSDORF, Heather H. / LISTMAN, Jason / MALER, Anabel (2021): "Perception of Musicality and Emotion in Signed Songs." In: *Music Perception* 39/2, pp. 160–180. DOI: <10.1525/MP.2021.39.2.160>.
- MARAIS, Kobus (2019): *A (Bio)Semiotic Theory of Translation. The Emergence of Social-cultural Reality (Routledge Advances in Translation and Interpreting Studies)*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- MARINETTI, Cristina (2013): "Translation and Theatre. From Performance to Performativity." In: *Target* 25/3, pp. 307–320. DOI: <10.1075/target.25.3.01mar>.
- MARINETTI, Cristina (2018): "Performative Rewriting. Foreign Language Performance as Translation." Paper presented at the conference *Per-*

- formance and Translation*. Nida—Fondazione Universitaria San Pellegrino, Misano Adriatico, 9–12/04/2018.
- MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR PSYCHOLINGUISTICS. URL: <<https://www.mpi.nl/people/fisher-vicky>> (07/02/2022).
- MELANSON-RICCIARDONE, Sophia (2022): “Algorithmic Translation and Emotional Outrage: A Semiotic Analysis.” In: PETRILLI, Susan / JI, Meng [eds.]: *Intersemiotic Perspectives on Emotions: Translating across Signs, Bodies and Values*. London: Routledge, pp. 145–159.
- MINORS, Helen J. (2022): “Music Speaks. The Role of Emotional Expression in Music for Sci-fi Fantasy Films.” In: PETRILLI, Susan / JI, Meng [eds.]: *Intersemiotic Perspectives on Emotions: Translating across Signs, Bodies and Values*. London: Routledge, pp. 332–348.
- MORÊDO PEREIRA, Joana (2021): *Deaf on Stage: The Cultural Impact of Performing Signed Songs*. Ph.D., Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Centre for Multidisciplinary and Intercultural Inquiry with The Deafness, Cognition and Language Research Centre, University College London.
- PERTEGHELLA, Manuela / CLAUSEN, Sophie (2022): “Collaborative Art-making as Translation.” In: *Performative & Experiential Translation – Meaning-Making through Language, Art and Media*. Paper presented at King’s College – London, 13–15/07/2022.
- ROBINSON, Douglas (2003): *Performative Linguistics. Speaking and Translating as Doing Things with Words*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- SCHECHNER, Richard (2003): *Performance Theory* (= *Routledge classics*). Revised and expanded edition, with a new preface by the author. London / New York: Routledge.
- SCHECHNER, Richard (2013): *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Edited by Sara Brady and Corporation Ebooks. London / New York: Routledge.
- SÛTISTE, Elin / TOROP, Peeter (2007): “Processual Boundaries of Translation: Semiotics and Translation Studies.” In: *Semiotica* 163/1–4, pp. 187–207. DOI <10.1515/SEM.2007.011>.
- TARANTINI, Angela T. (2023): “When Accessibility Becomes Performance: Performativity as an Element and Carrier of Accessibility in Sign-language-interpreted Music.” In: *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* 6/1, pp. 93–109.
- TARANTINI, Angela T. (2025): “Patterns of Performativity: Strategies by Sign Language Interpreters to Translate Music into Sign Language.” In: DE FRANCISCI, Enza / MARINETTI, Cristina [eds.]: *Translation in the Per-*

- forming Arts. Embodiment, Materiality, and Inclusion*. London: Routledge, , pp. 131–155
- TARANTINI, Angela T. / FIORDILINO, Irene / CHOJNICKA, Joanna [eds.] (in progress): *Multimodality and the Arts. Creative and Performative Processes as Intersemiotic Translation* (working title). In *Advances in Translation* series edited by Jeremy Munday. London: Bloomsbury.
- TYMOCZKO, Maria (2010): “The Space and Time of Activist Translation.” In: TYMOCZKO, Maria [ed.]: *Translation, Resistance, Activism*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, pp. 227–254.
- VIDAL CLARAMONTE, M. Carmen Africa (2022): *Translation and Contemporary Art. Transdisciplinary Encounters*. New York: Routledge.
- WARD, Koral (2008): *Augenblick. The concept of the ‘Decisive Moment’ in 19th- and 20th-century western philosophy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- WOLF, Michaela (2007): “Introduction. The Emergence of a Sociology of Translation.” In: WOLF, Michaela / FUKARI, Alexandra [eds.]: *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, pp. 1–35.
- WORTHEN, William B. (2003): *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.