

**Carsten Sinner**

## So, what is translation to you?

Lin Moniz, Maria & Lopes, Alexandra (eds.) (2017): *The Age of Translation. Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Concepts and Debates*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

---

2/2019

DOI: 10.25365/cts-2019-1-2-10

Herausgegeben am / Éditée au /  
Edited at the: Zentrum für  
Translationswissenschaft der  
Universität Wien

ISSN: 2617-3441

---

Zum Zitieren des Artikels / Pour citer l'article / To cite the article:

Sinner, Carsten (2019): So, what is translation to you? Lin Moniz, Maria & Lopes, Alexandra (eds.) *The Age of Translation. Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Concepts and Debates*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, *Chronotopos* 2 (1), 180-189. DOI: 10.25365/cts-2019-1-2-10



## Carsten Sinner

So, what is translation to you?

Lin Moniz, Maria & Lopes, Alexandra (eds.) (2017): *The Age of Translation. Early 20th-century Concepts and Debates*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang (Passagem. Estudos em Ciências Culturais. Studies in Cultural Sciences. Kulturwissenschaftliche Studien 11). 253 p. Contributors and Subject Index. ISBN 978-3-631-71657-1

Here we have another volume with contributions on what the editors and authors from the perspective of cultural studies (rather than *Cultural Sciences*, as stated in the name of the series) call *translation* – but without actually explaining what they exactly refer to when using this term. It would thus come as no surprise if translation studies scholars considered the main research object of some of the volume's articles to be beyond their field of research. Due to the different approaches to translation(s) that we find here, some of the contributions will be discussed in more detail than others.

In their introduction, the editors try to define the 20<sup>th</sup> century as “the age of translation”. They state that “the 1900s have witnessed an explosion of translations not only in the sheer number of translated books, articles and other textual evidence, but also, and perhaps more significantly, in the pivotal role translation began to assume as a metaphor, a conceptual and/or analytical tool at the heart of humanities and social sciences” (p. 7); they add that “Doris Bachmann-Medick has discussed this ‘translational turn’ in a number of articles, reflecting how the impact of translation as a conceptual category is able to shed light on liminal spaces that would otherwise remain obscure” (p. 7).

The editors argue that “in the 1900s, communities could no longer be described in terms of a monolingual monoculture” (p. 7) – but most communities or societies in Europe *before* 1900 can hardly be described as being monolingual monocultures, can they? Rather, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was perhaps the century in which most of Europe's formerly multilingual communities disintegrated or became extinct through war, flight, expulsion, deportation and brutal language policies, and more and more

people all over Europe were forced into monolingualism in one of the dominant national languages ever since. It is therefore quite astonishing to read that “[t]wo world wars, gender and race struggles, the colonial experience and the slow demise of European empires, all conspired to put an end to an overall perception of cultural homogeneity” (p. 7-8). It’s easy to think of examples that contradict the editors: the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an end of German speaking communities in most middle and eastern European countries as a reaction to the atrocities committed by the Germans during the war; it saw the disappearance of Spanish speaking Jews from the Balkans; it witnessed the extinction of Yiddish speaking communities; it was the century of brutal persecution of anybody daring to speak anything but Spanish in Spain; and I could add a long list of other instances of disappearance of cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe.

Bachmann-Medick’s approach seems to have been a bit predated here. Most of what the editors say about the 20<sup>th</sup> century might hold true only for the last two decades, and only for the most advanced Western European societies. The articles that I am going to review here focus, however, mainly on the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is sometimes erroneously referred to as “the early 20<sup>th</sup> century”. The editors seem to confuse data and periods; they mention, among others, Benjamin and Jakobson as early 20<sup>th</sup> century, notwithstanding the fact that the contextually relevant writings of both date from the late 1930s. Here, we should bear in mind that scholars in the field of cultural studies or their colleagues in linguistics or translation studies were not attracted *at all* by heterogeneity until the late 1960s, early 1970s, and in most areas not even before the 1980s. In some areas of research, such as theoretical linguistics, homogeneity assumptions introduced into research in the 1950ies have been dominating ever since.

I believe it is important to thoroughly determine the concept of translational turn as used by the editors because doing so directly impacts how translation can to be understood. Some of the texts gathered in this volume refer to translations and translation studies, others do not actually deal with translated texts at all and it is unclear how these contributions fit into what is referred to as cultural studies. The editors could have considered the (very important) fact that there was, of course, no translational turn in translation studies, and as long as the idea of translation in the field of translation remains faithful to the assumption that you only *translate* when you change the linguistic variety (that is, language or dialect) of a text into another, the translational turn cannot happen within the discipline called translation studies.

Part I on “Concepts & practices in 20<sup>th</sup>-century translation” starts with Cristina Roquette’s contribution “‘Double-voiced words’: from Bakhtin’s heteroglossia to heterolingualism in writings by hyphenated authors” (23-44). Roquette opens her article with the absurd assertion that “Translation Studies only emerged as a discipline in its own right in the late 1970ies” and claims the existence of a “strictly linguistic-centered notion of translation” (23) until the 1980s. This is probably the moment when translation scholars would prefer to put the book aside because it becomes clear that this is a layperson’s view on translation. Roquette claims that her intention is to explain “Bakhtin’s contribution to Translation Studies” (25), but she actually just summarizes some of his positions on dialogism and heteroglossia and thereafter presents individual examples from translations of one single text – by a Canadian author with Portuguese roots (that is, a Portuguese-Canadian and, thus, a “hyphenated author”) – and its translation into Portuguese. She apparently does this to illustrate how useful Bakhtin *could be* for the analysis of translations. The question remains as to why she speaks of his contribution to translation studies and not of what his work *might mean* for translation studies. In particular, it repeatedly becomes clear that Roquette, when she speaks of *translation*, only refers to literary translation, for example, when stating that “Mikhail Bakhtin [...] has been very influential on the recognition of the dialogic and polyphonic nature of narrative, and as such of great importance to translation” (11). This minimises the possible importance of Bakhtin to translation (as a process) in general even further.

Furthermore, only a few text passages were actually analysed, and we do not know why Roquette chose them. The reader does not get any information on how the study was conceptualized and carried out, whether the analysed examples were chosen for a special reason and also processed according to an established method, and whether other translations were analysed within perhaps a larger project. Apparently, no representative study is presented, and a look at just a few text passages does not allow to extrapolate anything regarding other translations, or translations in general. Some of the passages that – from the author’s point of view – seem to be poorly translated should not just be explained in terms of heteroglossia and hyphenated identities in the source text, but also be put into relation with the expertise of the translator. But why spend time analysing some more or less randomly chosen examples of one single (bad?) translation? In addition, Roquette apparently relies on her own expertise, but why should her opinion be more valuable, why should her judgment be more valid than the translator’s? The author herself mentions her own *opinion* of the translation of the Canadian anthem into Portuguese and explains that “[t]ranslating the anthem

into Portuguese strips it of its symbolism and deprives the text of a heterolingual co-presence” (39). But this is just an individual’s opinion, one clearly contrasting with the translator’s belief. Despite everything that is being said in this volume on turns and the overcoming of a “strictly linguistic-centered notion of translation” (23), in Roquette’s article we get a stark example of the confidence of and reliance in *just one single opinion*, the author’s own. And such a way of acting probably only characterizes one thing: theoretical—Chomskyan—linguistics, popular since the 1960ies. Apart from that, it would be interesting to see if her judgment were the same if the performed anthem were in Korean or any other less “accessible” language. Who is supposed to read this translation? Just bilinguals? Portuguese with perfect skills in English? The author could have taken it a bit further and thought of other language pairs and other instances of “heteroglossia” and “heterolingualism”.

Roquette ends her article by explaining that “[a]s with most translations of writings by hyphenated authors, occurrences of heterolingualism were to be ignored” (41). What motivates the author to make such a drastic quantification at this point? She neither mentions own studies that allow for such a far-reaching claim, nor does she quote any other scholars. So, is all of this, once again, just opinion? The author could have benefited from taking a look at other instances of “heteroglossia”, especially from text samples that reflect language use in bilingual communities where two closely related languages are spoken, such as Catalan and Spanish, in order to see that her claim is just not correct.

The volume’s second contribution, by José Antonio Sabio Pinilla, focuses on “The philological underpinning of Translation Studies in Spain and Portugal” (45-66) and tries to give a short historical overview of the recent past of translation studies in Spain and Portugal. The article starts with a definition of the term *philology* from the Spanish normative dictionary (which reduces it to a science that studies a culture as manifested in its language and literature). This decision is not very convincing if we consider the countless self-reflexive debates on the tasks of philology within the corresponding subdisciplines, on the one hand, and the fact that language-for-special-purposes aspects do not play a major role in this dictionary, on the other. To illustrate the latter, it is worth looking at the Spanish Academy’s definition of *interpretación* (‘interpreting’): the meaning that is relevant to our discipline is not even mentioned there, and even worse, *interpretación de lenguas* is explained as an administrative unit where legal documents and papers are translated into Spanish or other languages. The author’s explanation for the lack of translation theory in BA programmes in Spain and Portugal directly points to the Bologna system of studies.

That is surprising, at least. Because, above all, it seems to me that it is related to the replacement of philology with translation training based on the students' own choice. Nearly anybody wants to study philology in Spain and Portugal anymore, and – this applies at least to Spain – due to a lack of foreign language skills, at least in some universities translation training at the BA level does actually not deserve this designation as the courses are usually largely devoted to language acquisition. This is also the reason why currently ongoing PhD projects want to find out why final-year translation students still have insufficient language skills. The author, however, does not ask the important question of why there are nowadays more than 25 universities in Spain offering translation training as compared to only a couple of them back in the 1980s.

The text shows blatant errors in the chronology of events as the author transfers the reforms of the Moyano Law from 1857 to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Surely a typo, but the consequences for the understanding of the text by uninformed readers are serious. The fact that the Portuguese editors did not notice this speaks volumes. Also otherwise the chronology is quite curious: the author starts rather late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and by doing so skips any notions on translation from before, and which might have lead to the way it was actually dealt with in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (such as the philological translation method mentioned, in an unchronological manner, in subchapter 2.2.2), then moves from subchapter 2.1, “The weight of the humanist tradition: the first half of the twentieth century”, to “The concept of translation before 1980” in subchapter 2.2, where he actually reports on things that occurred in Portugal during the 1920s or in 1943 (which would better fit into 2.1) in order to dedicate chapter 3 to “Translation Studies as a discipline”. Astonishingly, here we read about things that happened in “the final quarter of the twentieth century”, which leaves us with the question of why the years before 1980 were actually treated separately. While the author mentions some research projects carried out at Catalan and Galician universities (61), he skips the Basque approach to translation and omits the fact that the interest in translation in the multilingual regions of Spain differs greatly from the monolingual part of the country. But part of what this contribution definitely lacks is dealt with in the following article by Enrique Íñiguez Rodríguez.

Íñiguez Rodríguez's chapter on “The Iberian absence: translations of Modern Greek literature in Europe during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (67-86) is an instructive presentation, rich in facts and details, despite the fact that it deals with something about which you can most of the time only speculate. Montserrat Franquesa Gòdia's wonderful study about Bernat Metge and the translation of classical texts, or lack

thereof,<sup>1</sup> could be an inspiration for researching the reasons for the “Iberian absence” because here we are shown, in great detail, why certain translations were created, and why certain authors or books were not, or just partially, or only at a very late stage translated. Íñiguez Rodríguez mainly gives an account of the volume of existing translations, and although the article contains multiple figures and tables (with percentages and proportions of translations from and into different languages, of genres translated, works translated per author, etc.), the article is rather pleasant to read.

Part II on “Translation, power & conflict – Imagining Others in times of hostility” begins with Teresa Seruya’s “Salazar translated: on translation and power under the Estado Novo (1933–1950)” (89-109). Seruya examines the role and politics of translation in the Portuguese National Propaganda Secretariat (founded in 1933) under the far right, clerical-fascist regime (which was installed in 1930 and ended only in 1974). She focuses on how the regime exported some of its texts via commissioned translations into other European languages. After a brief introduction to the field, the author presents her corpus and a selection of translations of political speeches and writings of António de Oliveira Salazar, Portuguese Prime Minister from 1932 to 1968, which were published as an anthology. Seruya then moves on to the external history of the translations of these speeches, by presenting, in a brief overview, their translations into French (two translations from 1937 and 1940, respectively), German (one translation from 1938), and Czech (the Czech translation was aborted due to the occupation of Czechoslovakia and remained unpublished). Seruya concludes that translation was a relevant tool for the government’s strategy of deploying soft power. The article is enriching, but the author could have benefited from similar studies on translation as a propaganda instrument to promote a dictatorship’s image abroad, which could have been listed in her bibliography.

Zsófia Gombár’s “Theatre Translations Censored in Portugal (1929–1945)” (111-132) “examine[s] the position of theatre translations on stage in *Estado Novo* in a more systematic and data-driven manner” (112), and highlights the changing position of British and US-American plays. As historical background for the study, Gombár compares the “Fascist Theatre Policies” of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and “semi-fascist” or “para-fascist” Portugal (cf. 112). It is unfortunate that the author’s claims about perceived trends and tendencies sometimes lack reference – so the

---

<sup>1</sup> Montserrat Franquesa Gòdia (2013): *La Fundació Bernat Metge, una obra de país (1923–1938)*. Barcelona: Publicacions de l’Abadia de Montserrat.

reader does not always know whether it is just the author's opinion or the factual outcome of her PhD project (in which the presented study is embedded). We find, for example, a whole paragraph on mediocrity that characterises the propaganda theatre of both the German and the Italian regimes (114), with only the following note at its end: "For more information, see Berezin, Cavallo, Drewniak, *London Theatre*, and Strobl". If this is meant to serve as a reference for the origin of the paragraph's information, it is a rather unorthodox way of doing so. Gombár sets out her approach and her sources in detail, but it does not become very clear how she actually understands the term *censorship*, that is, whether she only counts as such the manipulation of existing translations, or also includes the decision to prohibit the translation of certain plays in the first place. She retrieves her information from the censorship files stored in the National Archives of the *Torre de Tombo*, and also from the Archives of the National Theatre Museum in order to find out about censorship of theatre *performances* (116) and explicitly states that her scope is contextually confined "to the analysis of theatre translations staged or *destined to be staged*" (115, my emphasis) – both interpretations are feasible at first glance. In her findings, she discusses, in detail, the mode of translation, source languages and countries the plays came from, and compares translation statistics on different languages and countries, including the evolution of figures for German, British and American plays in the decade before and the years after the outbreak of World War II. Gombár then deals with the (surprisingly small) numbers of censored theatre translations: four American, one German play, commenting very briefly on the reasons for textual cuts. The question whether censorship also includes orders forbidding certain translations is not addressed. As in other contexts the mere existence of censorship led to self-censorship by both authors and translators, it seems of particular relevance to add text-based analysis to this data-driven approach in order to get a bigger picture of censorship in the Portuguese theatre of the *Estado Novo*.

In the volume's next contribution, "Bound by translation: Portugal and Brazil in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (133-151), Ana Teresa Santos analyses the relationship between Portugal and Brazil based on Brazilian translations that were imported in Portugal. After an outline of Luso-Brazilian relations in general, the author moves on to cultural and literary relations in particular. She highlights the impact of a postal agreement from 1924 that reduced taxes and allowed for closer cultural relationships between the two countries (until then, Brazilian books were almost unknown in Portugal) and points to the specific importance of the literary journal *Presença*, which contributed to the dissemination of then-current Brazilian literary production.

Santos relates that “a phenomenon described as an invasion of the Portuguese bookshops by Brazilian books was reported as early as 1933” (138); the success of Brazilian books was also based on a low currency exchange rate, which made an import economically interesting. Together with Brazilian books, the imports also included translations into Brazilian Portuguese from other languages, as Santos shows with quotes from various sources. However, these findings seem to be exclusively based on statements by persons such as editors or co-owners of publishing houses, and do not refer to a scientific assessment of sales figures of Brazilian book companies or (private?) library catalogues or registers. The same holds true for the following description regarding forbidden books, among them “clandestine Brazilian translations” (141). This term could be read twofold: either referring to illegally translated books or to legal translations that are bought or held in secrecy in Portugal – with Santos meaning the latter. Santos’ reflections on these clandestine imports are apparently based on the findings of other authors, for example, Seruya (who contributed an article to this book herself), and one of the editors, Moniz, who in a study of censorship reports from the 1950s “have found that Brazilian translations were only a small part of the books that caught the censors’ attention” (142). In the following paragraphs, the author gives a few examples of Brazilian translations that were forbidden in Portugal, and here it gets clear that Santos’ concept of censorship does not correspond with that of the previous article, and then, by sharing some more examples of Brazilian book companies and publishing houses, she shows that the Portuguese censorship authorities were well aware of the illegal imports. Although Santos does not present exact data or figures, she turns to quantification in her statements: e.g., “Many Livros do Brasil translations that were to be found in Portugal were therefore authored by Brazilian translators [...]” (148). In her conclusion, Santos explains the difficulty “in tracing some of the Brazilian translations as an obvious consequence of the clandestine nature of the corresponding purchasing and reading activities herself” (148). At the end, you get the impression that everything said is very vague. Regarding the presence and dissemination of Brazilian books, and among them translations, it might be interesting to research private libraries and the legacies of private book collectors.

The following paper, “The experience of World War I in Portugal through translation” (153-167), by Maria Lin Moniz, focuses on narratives on World War I that were translated into Portuguese and published in Portugal between 1916 and 1939 – Moniz speaks of “the archaeology of World War I narratives” (166). She examines the role they played (or might have played?) in representing the war and

shaping public opinion. Her contribution touches upon what was actually translated, when, and with what effect; she deliberately skips addressing who translated, how, where, and for whom, and does also not consider the actual contents, the way these narratives were rendered in the target language, or the actual dissemination of the translated works. The author states that the number of translations increased against a backdrop of decreasing (and finally even ceasing) own Portuguese publications on the war, and had thus an important role in filling this void in the literary system and depiction of World War I (154).

In “Dispatches from Berlin: news translation in the golden age of foreign correspondence” (169-188), Elisabeth Möckli presents a case study, in which she examines 18 letters (written between 1935 and 1939) between the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* and three of its foreign correspondents (who spent at least some time reporting from Nazi Germany) and one unpublished memorandum (from 1936) by Charles Lambert (who was one of these correspondents). By referring to Bielsa and Bassnett (2009)<sup>2</sup>, Möckli states that, although reporting “usually involved translating extracts of texts and speeches”, “[v]ery few foreign correspondents [...] considered themselves to be formal translators, despite the fact that they regularly performed translational acts pertaining to all of the different stages of the translational process” (170). On the basis of these writings, Möckli explores to what extent these three correspondents – referred to by Möckli in a rather denigrating and simplistic way as “news translators” – were able to make decisions on selecting (or excluding) information, as well as their motives in doing so, and other factors that influenced their actions.

Part III of the volume, “Engendering literature through translation”, leads us to Marta Teixeira Anacleto’s “Intersectioning identities and censorship: translating *Brigitte* for/by the Mocidade Portuguesa Feminina (M.P.F.) in the 1940s” (191-207). The author investigates the role of the Portuguese translations of Berthe Bernage’s *Brigitte* novels in the context of the female wing of the Portuguese Youth Movement, and reflects on identity construction through reading, translating, and self-censorship. This contribution is, basically, a description and contextualisation of the French originals and their corresponding translations, substantiated with extracts of the literature dealt with.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bielsa, Esperança / Susan Bassnett (2009): *Translation in Global News*. London, etc.: Routledge. (This publication is erroneously referred to as „Bassnett and Bielsa“ in the article text and included as „Bassnett, Susanne [sic] and Esperança Bielsa (2009)“ in the bibliography.)

In “‘A woman’s place is in the home’? – Portuguese translations of studies on the condition of women and guides of good conduct (1910–1950)” (210-227), Sónia Martins Pereira and Maria Teresa Cortez contextualise Portuguese translations of essays on “good conduct guides” for women. Unfortunately, their textual choice and the criteria applied are not always clear. For example, the authors present a selection of essays in defence of women’s rights, published in Portugal before 1933, that “should be mentioned” (211), without explaining why those texts were chosen and what makes them seem worth to be included. They also refer to “a large number of foreign guides, mainly translated from French, which were published for the first time and/or reprinted before 1933” (213), “namely those included” in a table comprising several pages. Adding on that, we also get a rather superficial – perhaps because of limited space? – contrastive analysis, which compares the Portuguese version of *Woman and Home* by Orison Swett Marden (1915) with a Spanish one from 1920, and another Portuguese one from 1934.

The volume’s final article, “Tocatta & Fugue, On Authorship, translation & originality” (229-246), by Alexandra Lopes, deals with a fictional biography, i.e. the pseudotranslation *The Little Chronicle of Magdalena Bach* (1925) – with the biography’s author using the *idea* of translation as a motif and as a tool for achieving literary goals. This contribution thus only fits into the volume when taking a pure literary standpoint.

*In summa*, the reviewed volume’s articles – and even within the three thematic parts – are very heterogeneous. Bringing together these different texts under one bracket appears to have only been partially successful. A lack of cross-references throughout the volume underlines this statement. Some of the articles presented are absolutely enriching for the history of translation and point to the need of further research, while others can hardly be regarded as relevant for translation studies – even with an extremely broad concept of translation in mind.