Chronotopos
A Journal of Translation History

Elke Brems, Pieter Boulogne and Jack McMartin

"L'Internationale" on the move

1/2024
DOI: 10.70596/cts178

Herausgegeben am / Éditée au /
Edited at: Institute of Applied
Linguistics and Translatology
(IALT), Leipzig University
ISSN: 2617-3441

Zum Zitieren des Artikels / Pour citer l'article / To cite the article:
Brems, Elke; Boulogne, Pieter & McMartin, Jack (2025): "L'Internationale" on the move, *Chronotopos* 6 (1), 5-11.
DOI: 10.70596/cts178

Elke Brems & Pieter Boulogne & Jack McMartin

"L'Internationale" on the move

Just over a hundred and fifty years ago, in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War (1870), Paris was taken over by insubordinate soldiers of the National Guard. Over the course of two months, the insurgents attempted to create a new political system, a working-class community, which separated church and state, introduced social housing, abolished child labour, and gave employees the right to take over abandoned enterprises. At the end of May 1871, this Paris Commune was violently ended by the French army. After circa 15,000 communards were put on trial by the conservative French government in Versailles, order was re-established. But the dream of addressing social injustice would not be forgotten. Immediately after the defeat the Commune, in June 1871, one of its members, Eugène Pottier (1816–1887), commemorated it in a poem, written in French, which he named "L'Internationale". Seventeen years later, in 1888, the Belgian socialist and composer Pierre De Geyter (1848–1932) set Pottier's poem to music. "L'Internationale", previously a poem, was (re)born a song.

If the song "L'Internationale" has since become and still is a worldwide symbol of social struggle, it is because it was translated and often retranslated into dozens of languages and made to serve in many contexts. This focus issue presents new research on versions of "L'Internationale" in different languages, historical contexts, social settings and media and explores the transnational and transmedial links between them. In doing so, we want to demonstrate how insights from (song) translation studies, reception studies, cultural memory studies and social history can be combined productively to explore the worldwide circulation and myriad social uses of one of the world's most iconic, impactful and widely translated songs.

The study of translation as it relates to music is still an emerging field. In 2008, a special issue of *The Translator* entitled "Translation and Music" (Susam-Sarajeva 2008) was a first important effort to focus perspectives in this area. In the meantime, scholars such as Peter Low (*Translating Song: Lyrics and Texts*, 2017), Lucile Desblache (*Music and Translation*, 2019) and Johan Franzon et al. (*Song Translation*, 2021) have contributed to bringing the field to fruition. Alongside (and generally preceding) these recent, more conceptually and empirically exhaustive efforts are publications on specific genres, such as religious songs (e.g., Nida 1964), opera (e.g., Gorlée 1997), popular music (e.g., Kaindl 2005), musicals (e.g., Franzon 2008), animated films (e.g., Martín-Castaño 2017) and chansons (e.g., D'Andrea 2023). More generally, song translation remains an under-researched subject in translation studies. As Lucile Desblache (2019: 27) has it, "musical transnationalism, transculturalism and translation in the narrow (translation involving song lyrics or writings about music) or wide

(transcreation or mediation of musical styles and genres) senses of the word, remain largely unexplored."

Another largely unexplored area is the intersection of song translation and *history*. It is here that we hope to situate this focus issue on the translation history of "L'Interationale". We build on the basis laid by the Dutch scholar Jan Gielkens (1998a: 83), who in his study about "how 'L'Internationale' travelled around the world" wrote that "stories about 'L'Internationale' can be told for all language areas and all countries. Until now, those stories have been told too little and too often wrong because they are full of socialist heroism and romanticism".[1] This is also reflected in the existing historiographical work on the song, which, as Gielkens states elsewhere (1998b: 1), was, at least before the twenty-first century, almost exclusively written by leftist historians and displays a clear ideological bent. Furthermore, although "L'Internationale" has been frequently translated and many secondary sources note that it is sung in many different languages, very few studies have so far dealt with the song *as a translation*. Often translational aspects are overlooked, to the extent that some scholars are completely unaware of the textual and ideological differences between different language versions. Donny Gluckstein's "Deciphering The Internationale: the Eugène Pottier code" (2008), which mistakenly bases claims about the ideological aspects of the French original on an English translation, is but one example. An exception is Ron Kuzar, who, in his article "Translating the Internationale: Unity and dissent in the encoding proletarian solidarity" (2002), looks at English and Hebrew translations of the song to show how they encode different ideologies (in his case Zionism) and adapt the text to different societal contexts.

Translation studies scholars cannot settle for the simple awareness that the many versions of "L'Internationale" that fill the world differ from the first, as well as from each other. It is our task to identify and scrutinize these differences: which textual and musical guises did the song take on in translation? What was left out, altered or added? Why, and to what ideological or social effect? In order to interpret these textual shifts, we adopt a contextual approach, looking at the production, circulation and reception of the translated songs. Which actors were involved in the song's circulation, translation, reception and performance? How does the song *work* in a given target culture and context? At which specific events was it sung and performed? Was it co-opted by the state or by countercultures? In other words, this special issue wants to investigate and connect the textual shifts and social uses of translations of "L'Internationale" in some of the myriad cultural contexts in which they emerged and circulated. Our approach connects four interrelated perspectives, facilitating conceptual diversity while also providing measures for comparison: the spatial, the temporal, the ideological, and the multimodal. The seven case studies collected here draw on these four perspectives, each in their own way, to capture "L'Internationale on the move".

[1] Gielkens's words in the Dutch original: "Verhalen over de Internationale zijn voor alle taalgebieden en alle landen te vertellen. Tot nu toe zijn die verhalen te weinig verteld en te vaak verkeerd, omdat ze vol zijn van socialistische heroïek en romantiek." All translations of citations are by the authors.

The **spatial** dimension points to a tension between the song's national and international aspirations. Its text was conceived in memory of a *French* historical event, after all. It was performed during congresses of the French worker's movement, gatherings that also attracted supporters from abroad. Soon, it would find its way to the international socialist congresses at the turn of the century: Paris 1900, Amsterdam 1904 and especially Copenhagen 1910. By then, so many translations of the song had emerged that most Europeans could sing it in their own language. This delocalization process lifted "L'Internationale" from its local context and initiated countless social uses in many different contexts around the world.

An illustration of the manner in which geography, among other parameters, can affect translation strategies can be found in the contribution by **Erwin Snauwaert**, who examines Spanish translations of "L'Internationale", including one situated in the historical-geographical reality of the Cuban revolution. This focus issue also sheds light on the *Nachleben*, the afterlives, of the song in the Netherlands and Flanders, Russia, Romania, Germany, and the English-speaking world. In all these geographical contexts, the song kept its title and, in line with it, its international character. "L'Internationale" was both a song that united socialists of all shades all over the world (and thus preeminently international) and a song that, when translated and retranslated in diverse contexts, could function in a very specific local and national (sometimes even nationalist) way. Joep Leerssen (2018: 169) argues in his book on national thought in Europe that "one of the outstanding features of nationalism is that it is a supremely international affair, spilling from one country to another, spreading ideas, books and symbols freely across the map, spawning copycat movements at great distance". But even beyond nationalist uses, the international song proved to be a very useful narrative template (cf. Rigney 2012: 85) to help people articulate and imagine their local story. Translation could thereby help to cut the song to measure.

A second dimension is that of the **temporal**. Taken together, the contributions of this focus issue cover a wide time span, from the song's conception to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The act of singing "L'Internationale", in whatever language, is also a way of recalling other times it was used and sung. Rigney (ibid.: 70) states that music and aurality serve as connectors between past and present, and that "singing is an important medium of collective memory, one that provides a living and, indeed, embodied connection between the past and the present through the voices of the participants". In some instances, it is sung out of nostalgia for bygone days, in others as a call for a better future, in still others as both retrospective and forward-looking at once. The original text itself is unambiguously focused on the future and calls for the creation of a tabula rasa for a new order which was in the process of realization. However, its uses do not always align with this clean-slate stance. Each time the song is sung, it is imbued with new meanings; the contemporality of the performance and its uses in the present influence our (re)interpretations of the song's past and future. A good illustration of this mechanism can be found in the contribution by **Christophe Declercq**, who focuses on the circumstances surrounding Billy Bragg's 1989 retranslation of "L'Internationale" into English. The reworked song was performed at that year's Vancouver

Folk Festival, held just after the events in Tiananmen Square, where Chinese youths had (unironically) sung the "L'Internationale" as part of their protests. Bragg's rendition contains several new verses in an effort to help the song resonate with new groups and causes and to "redefine what socialism and what communism means in a post-Marxist sense" (cf. BRAGG / MILLER 2000).

The fact that the accumulation of time inevitably alters the status of the song is also central to the contribution by **Pieter Boulogne** about "L'Internationale" in Russian: in times of revolution, the song was actively forged by Lenin into an instrument to mobilise the masses, whereas under Stalin, especially during the Second World War, singing the Russian version of the song became a diplomatic problem. A similar evolution is described by **Laura Cernat** in her contribution about the translation of Pottier's hymn into Romanian: the song was first translated in 1907, when peasants rebelled against the rural landlords; by the late 1940s, "L'Internationale" had become one of the official songs of the imposed communist regime, and in 1989 the last communist dictator went to his death singing it. As Müller succinctly states, "the past is an argument" (MÜLLER 2002: 23), an ongoing negotiation where different actors try to establish their version of past events as truth. The same can be said about defining the song's possible futures.

The third dimension concerns **ideology**, here understood not merely as political instrumentalization, but in its broad sense, as the set of beliefs and values shared with a particular group (VAN DIJK 1998). Whereas translators of "L'Internationale" often faced censorship, leading to a translation's suppression or publication abroad (as in the case of the first Russian translation), even uncensored translators tended to adapt their versions of the original to the dominant ideological norms of the receiving (sub)culture. Additionally, the personal ideological beliefs of the translators, whether in line with the mainstream ideology or opposed to it, also manifestly influenced choices made during the translation process.

The influence of the translator's ideology on the translation is central to the contribution by **Elke Brems** and **Francis Mus** about two Dutch translations of "L'Internationale". They compare the canonical Dutch translation by the communist activist and prominent poet Henriette Roland Holst (1869–1952) with a lesser-known translation made by the Dutch poet Ernst van Altena (1933–1999). Holst's translation testifies to her strong socialist idealism, but can also be linked to her own poetics (word choice, tone, etc.) as a writer. The version by van Altena is different insofar as it is a retranslation undertaken with the explicit aim of 'restoring' the original meaning of the poem.

Interestingly, ideology is not only a factor that shapes the translation, but also the *framing* of the translation. This is demonstrated by **Jan Ceuppens**, who in his contribution looks at the different recontextualisations of the 1910 Emil Luckhardt version of "L'Internationale" in German, which stands as the classic, generally accepted version, so much so that it has been used by ideologically competing factions within socialism, in very different contexts and very different musical interpretations. Ceuppens examines the ways in which Luckhardt's text has been recontextualised in settings ranging from large-scale orchestral arrangements in the German Democratic Republic and at trade

union events to solo guitar interpretations in the context of German student movements of the late 1960s. In doing so, he touches upon aspects of temporality and multimodality. Other contributions illustrate that, notwithstanding the ideological variety that can be found around the (international) song "L'internationale", the factor of socialism is always present – although what was declared to be 'socialist' policies in regimes like that of Stalin or Ceaușescu had little to do with the ideology underlying the original song.

A fourth dimension refers to the **multimodal** nature of "L'Internationale". Multimodality is integral to the research object itself: like any song, "L'Internationale" has three main foci: the musical, the verbal and the performative (cf. GOLOMB 2005; KAINDL 2005). It is common to refer to music as a 'universal language' and therefore to assume that music travels well because there is no need for translation. However, just as its lyrics are subject to translation, so too does the music of "L'Internationale" undergo myriad changes to accommodate its target contexts, whether performed by a military band in Red Square, a singer-songwriter in a documentary, a group of activists closing a meeting, etc. The different versions remain recognizable, however, as the composition by Pierre De Geyter.

Exploring how music travels entails not only accounting for the interaction between the musical and the verbal when a song is translated (e.g., questions pertaining to singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm and rhyme, cf. LOW 2003), but also how music contributes emotive intensity to meaning-making, how singing along enhances community embodiment, and how changes to the musical score or performance can be linked to specific social contexts and uses. Drawing inspiration from film narratology, **Jack McMartin** examines the auditive and visual meaning-making resources at work in documentary film. His contribution looks at 'translatedness' (representations of translation, and the degree to which they are made explicit) in the short documentary *The Internationale* by Peter Miller (2000). The key question is how translation is represented, in terms of multimodal narrative techniques, in a film about one of the world's most widely circulated and widely translated songs. He concludes, among other things, that the documentary's narrative holds up (re)translation of "L'Internationale" into English as the best way to revitalize the song's change potential and redeem it from past misuses.

For each case study of this focus issue, the combined perspectives of spatiality, temporality, ideology and multimodality have proven to be fruitful in bringing to light the roles translations and translators have played in the continued circulation of "L'Internationale" across cultural, geographic and ideological boundaries. More generally, this special issue contributes new perspectives to the fascinating space where music, translation and history meet.

References

D'ANDREA, Giulia (2023): "Sur la retraduction des chansons". In: PEETERS, K. & VAN POUCKE, P. (eds.): *Retranslation, Thirty-Odd Years after Berman*. Special issue of *Parallèles* 35 (1), 137–150.

DESBLACHE, Lucile (2019): *Music and Translation: New Mediations in the Digital Age*. Palgrave Macmillan.

FRANZON, Johan (2008): "Choices in Song Translation: Singability in Print, Subtitles and Sung Performance", *The Translator* 14 (2), 373–399.

FRANZON, Johan; KLUNGERVIK GREENALL, Annjo; KVAM, Sigmund & PARIANOU, Anastasia (eds.) (2021): *Song Translation: Lyrics in Contexts*. Berlin: Frank & Timme.

GIELKENS, Jan (1998a): "Hoe de Internationale haar wereldreis maakte". In: SOUBRY, L. & VERMOTE, M. (eds.): *Pierre De Geyter: het grote lied van een kleine man (1848–1932)*. Ghent: AMSAB, 70–88.

GIELKENS, Jan (1998b): "Maranga mai te hunga: De Internationale internationaal". *IISG Research Paper* 35, 1–18.

GLUCKSTEIN, Donny (2008): "Decyphering The Internationale: The Eugène Pottier Code", *International Socialism* 120 (2). http://isj.org.uk/decyphering-the-internationale-the-eugene-pottier-code/

GORLÉE, Dinda L. (1997): "Intercode Translation: Words and Music in Opera", *Target* 9 (2), 235–270.

KAINDL, Klaus (2005): "The Plurisemiotics of Pop Song Translation: Words, Music, Voice and Image". In: GORLÉE, D. L. (ed.): *Songs and Significance: Virtues and Vices of Vocal Translation*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 235–262.

KUZAR, Ron (2002): "Translating the *Internationale*: Unity and Dissent in the Encoding of Proletarian Solidarity", *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2), 87–109.

LEERSSEN, Joep (2018): *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

LOW, Peter (2003): "Singable Translations of Songs", *Perspectives* 11 (2), 87–103.

LOW, PETER (2017): *Translating Song: Lyrics and Texts*. London: Routledge.

MARTÍN-CASTAÑO, Mónica (2017): *Translating Disney Songs from* The Little Mermaid *(1989) to* Tarzan *(1999): An Analysis of Translation Strategies Used to Dub and Subtitle Songs into Spanish.* PhD thesis. Coventry: University of Warwick.

MILLER, Peter (director) (2000): *The Internationale*. New York: First Run/Icarus Films, 30 min.

NIDA, Eugene A. (1964): *Toward a Science of Translating*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

RIGNEY, Ann (2012): *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SUSAM-SARAJEVA, Sebnem (ed.) (2008): Translation and Music, Special issue of *The Translator* 14 (2).

VAN DIJK, Teun A. (1998): *Ideology, A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: Sage Publications.