3. Ethical translations for social design

Elena Caratti

3.1 The being of translation

The being of translation is to be openness, dialogue, cross-fertilisation, decentralisation. It is to relate, or it is nothing (Antoine Berman, 1997).

Translation is everywhere, it is the foundation of every form of cultural and social interaction in the globalized world. We find it within the global sphere of culture and social exchanges, in that multiform and dynamic space that Lotman calls the semiosphere (1994). As Anna Maria Lorusso specifies, this space is an eventful universe, with internal frictions, external pressures, destabilizing inventions, and difficult contacts (Lorusso, 2010, p. 83).

Within this constantly changing context, translation (and its processes) is traceable inside our cultural production processes; in the transfer of content through language and its codes; but also when we question the meaning and finalities of things; when we wonder about cultural identities; when we correlate content to media and vice versa;

when we search the link between ideas and their material realizations; when we try to identify a link between different types of designed artefacts, or between different individuals, or between individuals and designed artefacts.

Translation can be interpreted beyond the common inter-linguistic translation. As Piotr Blumczynki points out, through the translation paradigm we consider the relationship between different communities, between artefacts and communities, between different times and places; between what is fixed and what is dynamic; between exercising force and experiencing influence and so on (Blumczynki, 2016, p. 9).

According to the author, translation is *ubiquitous* (Blumczynki, 2016, p. 13) and strongly intertwined with other disciplines. From this perspective, translation provides a basis for a genuine, exciting, serious, innovative, and meaningful exchange between various areas of the humanities (semiotics, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy), through both a concept (what) and a method (how) (Blumczynki, 2016, p. 4). This transdisciplinary dimension is also present in design. The contribution of the humanities has generated new visions and new design paradigms, which, in their turn, have produced new knowledge, new meanings, new methodologies, new ways of conceiving designers and users, new design projects, and new visions for the future.

In this chapter we state that translation and social design are both ascribable to transfer processes in which communication, interpretation, negotiation, collaboration, service, exchange with, and for the Other, all come into play through an ethical aptitude.

We affirm that translation studies share some issues and ideals with social design (some assumptions and principles we would like to highlight); the aim is to bring out the importance of an ethical dimension in design practice because its values can inspire and guide design itself.
Social design is defined by Elisabeth Resnick as

> **the practice of design where the primary motivation is to promote positive social change within society. […] The term "social design" highlights the concepts and activities enacted within participatory**

approaches to researching, generating and realizing new ways to make change happen towards collective and social ends, rather than predominantly commercial objectives. Social design can therefore be understood to encompass a broad set of motivations, approaches, audiences and impacts. For instance, these may be embedded within government policies or public services extremely critical of divergent from these (Resnick, 2019. pp. 3-5).

Looking at the relationship between translation and social design allows us to understand how they are not only empirical activities, but they can also be reflective practices with a deep ethical vocation.

3.2 Translation is a metaphor transferable to social design

As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson affirm, our common conceptual system, on the basis of which we think and act, is essentially metaphorical in nature (Lakoff and Johnson, 1998, p. 77).

Considering translation through different metaphorical associations allows us to explicate its internal and external relationships, its meaning, its processes, its values, and its connections with social design that can be reinforced.

Translation as a crossroads of disciplines

Translation studies are a transdisciplinary research area that is defined in terms of a reflective and praxeological discipline: it is a science of and for practice, which reflects on a form of practice and offers it elements of clarification and orientation (Jervolino, 2007, p. 12).

Translation is rooted within the humanities (semiotics, linguistics, anthropology, social sciences, psychology, history, philosophy etc.), but it's also connected with disciplines concerning new technologies (computer assisted translation, or systems for automated translation through AI), economy, and strategic competences. Similarly to social design and design for social innovation, translation is a combination of different factors: a strong cultural component connected to the humanities, operational knowledge supported by technology, and

creativity, within a broader context that reflects on its processes from a pragmatic point of view. As Manzini asserts,

> **in practical terms, design for social innovation is a blend of different components: original ideas and visions (from design culture), design tools, and creativity (which is a personal gift), within the frameworks of a design approach (deriving from previous reflexive design experience) (Manzini, 2015, p. 63).**

Translation as transfer of texts

The concept of text constitutes for translators and semioticians a formal tool useful for describing all human, social and cultural phenomena found in the semiosphere. Design outputs can be considered as texts capable of conveying certain content, with its specific features, recognizable boundaries, internal processivity and so on (Marrone, 2010, p. 5).

They are created and negotiated within cultural dynamics fostering the relationships with other texts (other design projects), other discourses and other languages. From this perspective the process of transformation of texts into other textual configurations can be associated with translation processes, in other words they are the basis of the conformation of every type of text or design project. More specifically, they are achieved through the passage from a source text to a target text (Jakobson, 1959), or, according to Torop (1995), through the transfer which takes place from a prototext (text of the sender's culture) to a metatext (text of the recipient's culture) (Osimo, 2007-2014, p. 7). This transfer between prototext and metatext is analogous to the transformation of the design brief in the design output.

Salvatore Zingale has described the translation process in design through a model that essentially envisages two phases: the first, pre-translative, which, on the basis of problematic content and instances, preludes the generation of an instruction-text that determines the start of the project; the second, translative, which envisages the transition from instruction-text to artefact-text in which expression and content merge and are made usable to the final recipient (Zingale, 2016, pp. 85-88).

Translation as a creative process

The translation process, like the design process, is a creative procedure that has a concrete impact. It does not obey purely expressive research; texts, like designs, condition behaviour, enter people's lives and modify them. According to Torop's definition of Total Translation, (and successive reworkings), we can identify different translation processes which we can also find in design practices:

- *Mental translation*: corresponds to the process of conceptualization (that also includes the processes of reading and writing);
- *Meta-textual translation*: is the equivalent to the use of meta-texts to facilitate the decoding of the main text by highlighting relevant aspects of it (e.g., presentations or summaries of a project, teasers or deconstructions of a project to identify its structural and content components);
- *Intra-linguistic translation*: consists of reformulations, rewritings, redesignings within the same semiotic system (for example from visualizations to other forms of visualization);
- *Interlinguistic translation*: is the linguistic transfer between two different languages;
- *Intersemiotic translation* (which includes synesthetic translation and intermodal translation): implies the transfer between different semiotic systems (e.g., between verbal and visual, from verbal to film, from verbal to sound, from visual to sound, and vice versa);
- *Intextual translation*: is based on the transfer of text fragments, quotations, allusions, reminiscences, details;
- *Intertextual translation* (Intermedial translation): is an expansion of content, referencing of content and prior knowledge (text to text), extension of the project into neighbouring areas (intermediality, transmediality, crossmediality);
- *Cultural translation*: is a mediation of meanings between different cultural systems (cultural meanings are conditioned by the cultural code that generated them, the temporal, geographical, social and ideological location of issuers and recipients cannot be disregarded);

- *Automated translation*: consists of the AI-mediated translation processes in which intersemiotic (from verbal text to visual or filmic text) and intrasemiotic (rewritings) translations take place;
- *Ethical translation*: is an ethical-practical mediation that does not aspire to the *perfect translation* (to the perfect project), but acts in the name of a common good, of respect for the other than oneself, according to a concept of plural humanity.

Translation as directional decision

When we design and when we translate, we define an outcome (the metatext) that is different from the starting text (the prototext).

The final solution of a translation (or a design process) is the result of an interpretation, which is conditioned by the culture of the translator/designer, but also from the interpretation and culture of the final beneficiary of the translation/design project. It is therefore essential to study the relationship of texts/design projects with their addressee (or with other texts), and to reflect on the behaviours or the overall value system they generate within society.

From this perspective, it's important to be aware that translation, and at the same time social design, are the result of a series of active decisions that are not reversible and that can be imperfect.

Translating and designing are never neutral, they cannot disregard the temporal, geographical, social, and ideological locations of the people involved.

Translation as cultural bridge

Translation can create a cultural bridge between a starting cultural system and an arrival cultural system. At the same time, the design project is a sort of compromise between the culture of the designer and that of its target audience.

The translator and the designer have a double responsibility of decoding/interpreting reality for themselves and for their addresses. They face a creative process, rich in difficulties and complexities, that involves a continuous choice of meanings they want to actualize in the final metatext/design output. They make connections between different cultures with the significant risk of

producing prejudices or stereotyped visions that create divisions and exclusions of the most fragile people.

Translation as otherness and hospitality

Translation can be considered as one of the most significant intercultural phenomena. The real challenge of translating, in fact, is to welcome the Other by giving him hospitality in one's own language and culture. This happens without the translator's language and culture denying the Other, but by assimilating the foreign element into one's own culture (Cavagnoli, 2019, p. 8).

As Arduini asserts, translating brings into play the relationship with the Other and the question of diversity, and it makes us reflect on who we are (Arduini, 2020, p. 62). It means to act in welcoming the foreigner as such, and recognizing his creativity and expressiveness without giving in to an assimilating and ethnocentric translation.

This is a challenge that social design should embrace. As Zingale argues, it means moving within a space of possibilities, to refocus into that missing part of experience that is neither normal nor neutral. He also states that within design, otherness nurtures inventive thinking and at the same time helps to advance the degree of human awareness, self-awareness and responsibility (Zingale, 2022, p. 40).

Social design is itself a social activity with a strong collaborative and participative dimension that is open to the Other; it presupposes a continuous exchange *with*, on *behalf of*, and *in the interest of* the Other (designing is inseparable from negotiations), (Zingale, 2022, p. 25). This exchange takes place not only pragmatically, but also through an ability to make ethical decisions, and to have insights into possible futures with an open gaze at the Other, beyond oneself.

3.3 For an ethics of otherness

The ethical act of translation and the ethical act of social design consist in recognizing and receiving the Other as Other. It means acting in the name of difference against cultural homogeneity, beyond economic and political needs, and in opposition to any hegemonic

pretension of cultural domestication. Based on this this assumption, translation and social design are interpretable as political acts aimed at encountering the Other through translation processes.

In social design, or in design for social innovation, the encountering with the Other happens through collaboration.

Ezio Manzini pointed out the importance of *collaborative encounter*: collaboration take place when people encounter each other and exchange something (time, care, experiences, expertise, etc.) in order to receive a benefit; as Manzini highlights, they create a *shared value* (Manzini, 2015, pp. 92-93). Starting from these premises, the encounter with the Other becomes real when there is a concrete *active* and *collaborative involvement* that starts from the *ethos* (the ethics) of otherness. All social intervention projects are inseparable from communication, discourses, and therefore, from translative practices, which should be based on the ethics of otherness.

According to Jaques Rhéaume, it is possible to distinguish four different forms of ethics, based on the relationship between ethics and otherness (Rhéaume, 2007, pp. 19-38).

- The first form is defined in term of *ethics of conviction,* and is represented by scientific reasoning, by the reference to be validated, by demonstrated knowledge which is universal in scope. The ethics of conviction can rely for example on professional knowledge, itself conferred by scientific knowledge. It is ideally suited to a kind of transferring or asserting of certain truths that need to be known or applied to others. The translation project can be finalized to convince the Other by a prescriptive or seductive language. From this perspective the Other is subject to the same basic principles, only based on strategic thinking.

- The second category is described as *ethics of responsibility*, which assumes that human behaviour is determined solely and exclusively by individual choices. As Maiello observes, it is an ethics that pays great attention to analyzing the consequences of behaviour and, therefore, of the

restorative actions that result (Maiello, 2015, p. 16). Rhèaume refers in even more detail to the principle in terms of *act as you would want others to act with you*, (this can be connected to the translation concept of hospitality that means to be open and accept the foreigner). This is the universal rule underlying the social contract the individual enters with his/her peers within society (Rhèaume, 2007, p. 23). Translated into its communicative dimension, this form of ethics is less focussed on the transmission of convictions or acquired truths than on the active response of the Other. It's less about convincing than about helping the Other to autonomously discover the direction for his/her action.

- The third form of ethics concerns the *ethics of discussion* (definable also as ethics of negotiation that is the core of translation processes). According to Rhèaume, to understand its traits, it's useful to recall Jürgen Habermas's affirmation that only through discussion, debate and negotiation will a community be able to establish rational norms of civil living and common action. This varies from restricted groups (micro-social entities), to the democratic functioning targeted in many organizations or associations, or even social movements. Shared information, debate and collective decision-making on important issues are all part of this general framework. Ethics is not disconnected from the political dimension of translation and social design. In this case, the Other is the citizen as an equal subject, able to participate in the social innovation process through collaboration and co-participation.

- The fourth and final category is defined as *ethics of the finitude* that is strictly connected to the living human being, for whom emotions, health and death are guiding dimensions of conduct at least as much as reason and will. It is the result of a search into the most advantageous actions for society, and of a social participation based on a shared awareness that reality is mutable; that human reason is limited; and that actions can be unpredictable and uncertain. The ethics of the finitude introduces more indefinite, more open, and at the same time, more limited actions

centered on the consciousness of the finitude of the human
being but also of the presence of unequal human relationships.
This is a kind of ethics where translation as design practice is
conceived in term of praxis, a reflexive action with the Other.

In the real world these categories are flexible, they can intertwine,
different forms of ethics can be predominant at the same time in
some geographical areas or in some historical periods. As Rhèaume
affirms, these categories express the various moments of a neces-
sary dialectic between the universal and the singular, the individual
and the collective, the subjective identity and the relationship with
Others in search of meaning and direction in human life (Rhèaume,
2007, p. 25).

3.4 The ethics of the translator-designer

This contribution was finalized to create a relationship between
translation (as act and process), and social design through
an ethics of otherness. Being a social translator-designer means
having a special ethical sensitivity, which enables him/her to face
the challenges of our complex times. He/she needs to have multiple
capabilities which are of support in his/her choices and actions:

1. from an endodisciplinary point of view, the attitude
    of self-criticism and the ability to search for the meaning
    of things with an aptitude for decoding their languages,
    even if the totality is elusive;
2. the ability to work beyond disciplinary fences, in order to
    address social issues from a transdisciplinary perspective fa-
    cilitating the creation of interconnections amongst different
    research areas, cultures and design skills.
3. a sensibility which facilitates negotiation processes among
    humans, beyond prejudices or stereotypes, with an open-
    ness to multiple cultures, against all forms of ethnocentrism
    and in favour of a cosmopolitan ethic (Galimberti, 2023, p. 50)
    and cultural plurality;
4. a critical gaze toward any form of automatisms generated by
    new technologies or AI, with the acceptance that responsi-
    bility doesn't only concern the pure production of results or

the proper execution of an algorithmic process beyond any horizon of meaning;

5. the capacity of making appropriate economical choices according to an ecosystem logic, remembering that there is an interdependence between the well-being of the individual and that of the planetary ecosystem. As Capra reminds us «the needs of the planet are the needs of the person… the rights of the person are the rights of the planet» (Capra, 2013, p. 327);

6. a consciousness that we must now move from an anthropocentric ethics to a planetary ethics according to a systemic paradigm, because, as Galimberti argues, the subsistence of the entire human species is at stake (Galimberti, 2023, p. 49);

7. the ability to operate and cooperate recognizing the power of language and translation, (and thus the linguistic hospitality), as the basis of human evolution and interaction. Only through discourse is collaboration realized, and only through collaboration is it possible to find unexpected solutions within an ever-changing context.

As Hannah Arendt suggests in her essays, we need to return to rethink the meaning and value of our actions, to rediscover a dimension of action that makes us truly human and open to interact with others for the good of humanity and the whole world; we think that translation (as an act and as a process) can work alongside social design in the pursuit of these objectives.

References

Arduini S. (2020), *Con gli occhi dell'altro. Tradurre*, Jaca Book, Milan.

Arendt H. (2012), *Vita activa. La condizione umana*, Bompiani, Milan, 1958.

Baule G. and Caratti E., edited by, *Design è traduzione: il paradigma traduttivo per la cultura del progetto*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.

Berman A. (1997), *La prova dell'estraneo. Cultura e traduzione nella Germania romantica,* Quodlibet, Macerata.

Blumczynski P. (2016), *Ubiquitous Translation*, Routledge, New York and London.

Capra F. (2013), *Il punto di svolta. Scienza, società e cultura emergente,* Feltrinelli, Milan.

Cavagnoli F. (2019), *Tradurre come ospitalità*, Alfabeta2. Available at http://www.francacavagnoli.com/2019/10/11/traduzione-come-ospitalita/. Accessed May 2024.

Clarke A. J. (2019), *Émigré culture and the origins of Social Design*, in Resnick E., ed., *The Social Design Reader,* Bloomsbury, London, New York.

Galimberti U. (2023), *L'etica del viandante,* Feltrinelli, Milan.

Jakobson R. (1959), On linguistic aspects of translation, in Brower R. A., ed., *On Translation,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Lakoff G. and Johnson M. (1998), *Metafora e vita quotidiana*, Bompiani, Milan.

Lorusso A. M. (2010), *Semiotica della cultura*, Laterza, Rome-Bari.

Lotman J. (1994), *Cercare la strada. Modelli di cultura*, Marsilio, Venice.

Maiello G. (2015), *Etica e traduzione nel XXI secolo*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Naples.

Manzini E. (2015), *Design, When Everybody Designs. An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*, The MIT Press, Cambridge.

Marrone G. (2010), *L'invenzione del testo,* Laterza, Rome.

Osimo B. (2014), *La traduzione totale: spunti per lo sviluppo della scienza della traduzione*, Kindle Direct Publishing: Osimo Bruno.

Osimo B. (2021), *Traduzione come metafora, traduttore come antropologo. La semiotica ci fa capire*, Kindle Direct Publishing: Osimo Bruno.

Resnick E. (2019), *Introduction,* in Resnick E., ed., *The Social Design Reader,* Bloomsbury, London, New York.

Rhéaume J. (2007), *Étique et alterité, de quelle étique et de quelle alterité?,* in Cognet M., Montgomery C., edited by, *Étique de alterité. La question de la culture dans le champ de la santé et des services sociaux,* Les Presses de L'université Laval, Laval.

Ricoeur P. (2001), *La traduzione. Una sfida etica,* Morcelliana, Brescia.

Tonkinwise C. (2019), *Is Social Design a Thing?,* in Resnick E., edited by, *The Social Design Reader,* Bloomsbury, London, New York.

Torop P. (1995), *Toytal'nyj perevod*, Tartuskogo Universiteta, Tartu: IZD.

Zingale S. (2016), "Come una traduzione. La traduzione del senso nel design", in Baule G. and Caratti E., edited by, *Design è traduzione: il paradigma traduttivo per la cultura del progetto*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.

Zingale S. (2022), "Attraverso l'alterità. L'Altro nella cultura del progetto", in Zingale S., edited by, *Design e alterità. Conoscere l'altro, pensare il Possibile*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.