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The weblog: a tool for literary translators

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The application of weblogs to on-line translation workshops is a new research area in Translation Studies. In this article, the author extends the use of weblogs to literary translation in a new framework, and argues that the weblog has the potential to be a communication and documentation translation tool. The weblog helps the literary translator in the translation process and in the post-translation phase in a number of ways. It can act as a ‘mediator’ between the author of the work under translation, the translator, and the prospective readers. It also provides facilitated ‘collaborative possibilities’ for the translation itself, by creating a virtual world around the translation which is bigger than the translator’s small, isolated space. The author also examines the ways the weblog may become an impediment to the translation or even to the literary translator, and offers some solutions in order to optimize its application to literary translation.

Keywords: weblog; translation technology; translation tools and resources; literary translation

Introduction

In this article, my aim is to propose several possibilities for literary translators to apply weblogs (or blogs) to their practice of translation. Although a weblog is generally known as a journal for keeping and expressing personal thoughts and reflections, it can be used for a very specific purpose in translation – and in literary translation in particular. Literary translators can benefit from the weblog in a number of ways as a tool to promote their translations. The weblog easily provides a virtual world for the translator to communicate with prospective readers. It also helps the translator solve problems by posing them to the weblog’s readers and receiving their reflections. Possible readers can include other fellow translators who may share similar problems, or any other translation fans who are interested in theoretical and practical discussions of translation. Weblog readers can offer several kinds of contributions, they may have some interesting information about the literary work or its author, and that can help the translator.

In what follows, I first present some introductory information about the weblog. Next, I discuss how a literary translator can apply the weblog to translation, and I look at the advantages and disadvantages of weblogs in literary translation. This will include a discussion of how the weblog can be a possible impediment to literary translation, and the ways to optimize its application by reducing or downsizing the impediments.

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Weblogs in short

A weblog, according to the *Collins English Dictionary* (2003), is ‘a journal written on-line and accessible for users of the internet’. For Blood (2002, p. 1), the author of *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog*, a weblog is ‘a coffeehouse conversation in text, with references as required’. The history of weblogs goes back to 1998 and 1999 and is first associated with Jesse James Garrett, the editor of *Infosit*, and Cameron Barrett, ‘a web junkie’, as he puts it himself. What connects these early founders is the fact that they brought together lists of web pages that could be accessed by anyone. One famous example was Barrett’s list *Camworld*, which grew out of the links to web design articles and his college students’ interest in HTML. After his class ended, he kept updating the site, because he realized his ‘audience had grown much beyond [his] initial students’ (*Camworld*; see also Blood, 2002, pp. 2–3 for more information about the history of weblogs). Blood (2000) has also argued that the very term ‘weblog’ was coined by Peter Merholz, president and one of the founders of *Adaptive Path*, in early 1999. He used to pronounce it as ‘wee-blog’, which later was shortened to ‘blog’, with the weblog editor referred to as a ‘blogger’.

The blogging experience is not only about expressing yourself on the web, it is also about hearing back from other like-minded people. Blogs today are not just for entertainment or idea-exchange; they are sources of information. This is one of the main reasons why people are increasingly keen to read more detailed – and in some cases, more reliable – news and outlooks in weblogs. As the weblog emerged, it was considered a platform for people’s random thoughts on the web. A change occurred when the writers started blogging on more critical issues, such as political and social affairs. For example, in times of political or natural crises, some bloggers receive more hits than usual, and can even become the center of the world’s attention. One such case was Salam Pax, ‘the Baghdad blogger’, a weblogger from Iraq who, as Plommer (2009) puts it, became ‘a global media phenomenon’ during the war in Iraq in 2003. Even now, we can find numerous books written on how to earn money by blogging (see Wright, 2005).

Many blogs are political in terms of their content and have therefore turned into ‘powerful tool[s] of freedom of expression’ (Pain, 2005, p. 5) in some parts of the world, especially in autocratic countries. The motivations for bloggers to keep a blog may vary, however, there are three main reasons according to Blood (2002, p. 27): information seeking, reputation building, and personal expression. In the light of Bourdieu’s sociology of culture, weblogs can contribute to the symbolic capital of translators (see Bourdieu, 1993) in the first place, and this in turn may increase the economic capital of translators. Blood (2002, p. 12) also argues that a ‘good weblog on any subject provides a combination of relevance, intelligent, juxtaposition, and serendipity’. We will see how the weblog of a literary translator can combine some of these elements.

Weblogs come in many varieties and have different categorizations, but the most common are personal, topical, friendblog, directory, and photoblog. *Technorati*, which claims to be the recognized authority on what is happening on the World Wide Web, ‘currently tracks 102.6 million blogs’ (10 September 2008). *Technorati* sees blogs as powerful tools, as they ‘engage the writer and reader in an open conversation, and are shifting the Internet paradigm as we know it’ (10 September 2008).

Creating a weblog is rather an easy job, thanks to free webhosting sites. One of the most popular web hosting sites is *Blogger*, which was set up in 1999, bought by Google in 2003, and now hosts more than eight million blogs. In just three steps, you can create a free weblog and start blogging. Managing a weblog does not require any special expertise, and basic knowledge of the internet is sufficient to run a weblog and benefit from it, provided you have something interesting to say and keep posting. There are, however, more advanced tools like *MovableType*, *DotClear*, and *Wordpress* for more experienced bloggers (for more information, see the *Handbook for Bloggers and Cyber-Dissidents* published by Reporters without Borders).

No matter what kind of blog the translator uses, its interactivity is an important factor when compared to other kinds of media. Commenting on a weblog is usually by readers or visitors: they comment on each post in the weblog by using the comment capability incorporated within the blog structure or template (on how to comment on weblogs, see Darragh, 2008). Comparing the blog phenomenon with other forms of media, Blood (2002, p. 19) maintains that 'it is the link that gives weblogs their credibility by creating a transparency that is impossible in any other media'. We will return to links and the comment system in the weblog later.

The weblog in Translation Studies

Until very recently, no mention was made of any possible use of weblogs in Translation Studies. For example, in Landers' *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide* (2001), the mention of useful advanced technologies, or the translator's tools for literary translators, are limited to dictionaries, either printed, electronic, or available on the internet. According to Haddadian Moghaddam (2008, p. 126), the reason may be the novelty of weblogs, and the lack of experience in using them in translation, particularly in literary translation. Literary translators should not turn a blind eye to the increasing popularity of weblogs in today's communicative world; rather, they can acknowledge their importance, apply them in translation, and examine their effects on the process and quality of translation. My last few years' observation of a weblog by the Iranian literary translator Amir Mehdi Haghighat (see Haghighat n.d.) confirms that this is the right time for literary translators to learn to use weblogs in their profession. The reticence of literary translators, however, does not stop many freelance translators from using weblogs, and many of these weblogs can be found on the internet (for a list of such weblogs, see *TranslationDirectory*).

The application of weblogs to literary translation can contribute to the development of new areas of research in Translation Studies. This can be part of what Tymoczko (2005, p. 1082) sees as 'responses to technological shifts and globalization' in her seven trajectories of research in Translation Studies that are most likely to be 'productive in coming decades'.

One way to incorporate weblogs in the framework of Translation Studies is by looking at the applied branch of the Holmes-Toury map of Translation Studies, extended by Munday (2001, p.13) into three subdivisions: translator training, translation aids, and translation criticism. Translation aids are subdivided into 'IT applications', 'dictionaries', and 'grammars'. Munday (2001, p.13) further subdivides 'IT applications' into three more divisions: 'translation software', 'on-line databases', and the 'use of internet' (Figure 1). I have elsewhere suggested the inclusion of the weblog in the 'use of internet' (Haddadian Moghaddam 2008, p. 128).

In another ‘updated and revised model’ of Holmes’s schema of Translation Studies, Quah (2006) divides the applied branch into four sub-branches: translator training, translation technology, translation policy and translation criticism/evaluation. The translation tools here are limited only to translation memory (TM) and terminology management systems (TMS), with no mention of weblogs. Even though Quah’s (2006, p.42) ‘updated and revised model of Holmes’ schema’ encompasses some of the most recent technological advancements, like localization tools, and distinguishes between automatic translation tools and computer-aided translation tools, surprisingly, it ignores the internet in its classification.

In a recent classification of translation technology tools and resources, Alcina (2008) presents her ‘proposal for classifying the components of translation technologies in five large blocs’:

- (1) the translator’s computer equipment;
- (2) communication and documentation tools;
- (3) text edition and desktop publishing;
- (4) language tools and resources; and
- (5) translation tools.

According to Alcina (2008, p. 97), communication and documentation tools include ‘the concepts, tools and resources that translators use to interact, through the computer and networks, with their actual or potential clients, with other translators or specialists, or to obtain information and data from other computers or servers’. At its best, the weblog can be regarded as a kind of interactive tool for the translator, as it provides a free and friendly platform for communication between the source agent, or mediator (the translator), and the target agent (the weblog readers or the book readers, who read the final translation). What is the purpose of such interactions? According to Alcina (2008, p. 97) their purpose can be ‘to seek translation jobs, to settle doubts about a certain job, to send and receive texts, documentary research and consult websites that offer specialized knowledge’.

There are two issues at stake here. First, if a weblog is a translation tool, what kind of tool is it? Second, what makes this tool unique and different from other on-line translator communities and mailing lists that generally facilitate communication between translators?

Figure 1. The extended applied branch of Holmes-Toury map of Translation Studies. Based on an original figure from J. Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies*, 2001, p.13. With kind permission by John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia. www.benjamins.com

In the context of the recent classification proposed by Alcina, and based on our case study of the weblog of an Iranian literary translator (2008), I would like to borrow Alcina's term and argue that the weblog is a communication and documentation tool that can be one of the internet services available to literary translators. Communication and documentation tools can provide translators 'with good communication with their clients [the weblog readers or the future readers of published translation] or enable them to offer their services in a suitable form through a well-designed webpage' (Alcina, 2008, p. 97). The weblog is one such well-designed webpage.

To answer the second question, we should look at a number of facts. First, the literary translator is the initiator, the blogger, and the moderator of the blog, while in other forms of online communities the translator is just a member, expected and obliged to observe the associated rules. This limits the translator's agency to a great extent. The second fact proceeds from the first. The literary translator's leeway provides the ground for a focus on literary translation and the works adopted for translation. Haddadian Moghaddam (2008, p.132) distinguishes three differences between the on-line translation workshop and traditional ones: 'round-the-clock opening, facilitated interaction with the translator, and absence of any formal setting and formality'. Taken together, they can distinguish the weblog from other forms of inter-translator on-line communities such as mailing lists or discussion groups (see Wakabayashi, 2002).

A similar idea on the use of the weblog in an on-line translation workshop deserves our attention here. Influenced by Walter Benjamin's theories, Nadiani has developed a very interesting concept and a CD, in an attempt to elaborate the idea of digital literature in literary translation. In this interactive software, called *transit-text*, Nadiani (2004), see also Nadiani (2008) aims 'to show the transformations which "traditional" literature undergoes when transferred to a digital medium, where it becomes a multimodal "transit text"'. His interactive CD provides a sample of the author's works, his biography, a word-to-word translation, a published translation, a connection between all of these components, and the possibility to hear the voice of the original author and the translator. As Nadiani (2004, p. 7) argues, and has shown in practice, these multimodal 'transit texts' can be used 'both in the teaching of literature and as a means for teaching literary translation'. This whole project has faced copyright problems (personal communication, 2 December 2009); however, its potential, and many of its features, are available in weblogs without facing the problems associated with copyright.

The unique feature of interactivity can be fully employed by the literary translator to communicate with readers of the weblog, many of whom are the prospective readers of the published translation. When literary translators play the role of bloggers in literary translation, they are no longer lonely and isolated translators, surrounded by different kinds of dusty dictionaries. The weblog gives them the opportunity to enlarge the world around their translation.

Now we will proceed to explain how the literary translator can apply weblogs in literary translation.

The weblog in literary translation

For at least the last two or three decades, translators have changed their stereotyped image, and we have seen that 'the antiquated image of a lone translator, armed only

with a pencil or typewriter and surrounded by dusty books, is no longer realistic' (Austermühl, 2001, p. 1). The most recent developments in communication technologies, the Internet and the advance of the localization paradigm in particular (Pym, 2010), have brought significant changes to the process of translation, the very definition of translation, and the work and the function of the translator. The Internet is 'changing the status and visibility of translators and translations. Not only can professionals now easily work transnationally via email, but the need for translation itself is also changing' (Munday, 2001, p. 191). Although today's translators are working in a global network, equipped with better communication and financial opportunities, literary translators are still absent from the game, because they appear unwilling to extend their knowledge and the use of advanced technologies beyond email and typing with computers. In a world where technology is at the service of translators, they should be able to select the right tools for translation. Translation tools here, to adopt a rather old definition, refer to those applications 'designed to facilitate human translation through providing a terminology management system, instant access to on-line dictionaries, and other utilities' (Newton, 1992, p. 2). According to Haddadian Moghaddam (2008, p. 126), weblogs can be seen as one new tool for literary translators, in addition to the services provided by machine translation, terminology databases, online dictionaries, and libraries. This tool, with its covert values, 'can help good translators improve the efficiency and quality' of their translations (Austermühl, 2001, p. 1). This, in turn, contributes to the accumulation of different kinds of capital (symbolic and economic) for literary translators in the light of Bourdieu's cultural sociology. Moreover, this is all for free.

Suppose that I am a literary translator and would like to translate an English novel into my mother tongue. As mentioned before, *Blogger* is a free web hosting site, offering different kinds of templates or layouts, and I would choose more user-friendly templates like *Herbert* or *Tekka*. After I create my weblog in three steps, I register it in several search engines, such as Technorati or Blogwise, and inform others about my weblog (see *Handbook for Bloggers and Cyber-Dissidents*, 2005). A very good source of information for new bloggers is Prologger. It offers valuable information about creating, managing, and promoting your blog. In addition, there are numerous tools that have been developed over the last few years for bloggers. One such tool, provided by *Blogger*, is the commenting tool, appearing at the end of each post on the weblog.

Having created my weblog and informed others about it, I should inform my fellow translators about the work that is going to be translated. As I start translating the novel, I keep posting to the blog about the translation, my translation problems, and so on. Little by little, I will create a bigger world around my translation that is quite different from the typical world of translation. It is not only me who is translating; I have many readers who are interested in my translation and willing to see it ultimately published. In this way, they contribute to the translating process and experience it themselves too.

In my study of Haghighat's weblog (Haddadian Moghaddam, 2008), I provided some examples of the kinds of contributions and discussions between the translator/blogger and his visitors. In a close analysis, we showed the nature of such interaction and the many possibilities the weblog offers. In the light of a similar line of interest in Haghighat's weblog, my argument that a weblog can contribute to the accumulation of a translator's symbolic and economic capital is quite relevant. Although

Haghighat used to benefit from a free web hosting site for his blog, he has his own website today, where posts on his previous translations are archived under the works' titles. He has also made it possible for his visitors to order his translations through several Iranian online bookshops.

Professional literary translators are among the busiest social human beings. They have to both meet the deadlines and make ends meet (see Holger, De Haan & Lhotová's survey, 2007/2008, on literary translators' working conditions in 23 European countries). Like many other professionals, they 'depend for their livelihood on their social connection with other human beings' (Robinson, 1998, p. 192). It appears that the very nature of the profession of literary translation has pushed literary translators into an isolated, small world. How, then, to push them forward and remind them that the use of advanced technologies far exceeds that of email and typing translations on the computer? For me (2008, p. 141), literary translators and translation teachers should take the first step.

Advantages and disadvantages

The advantages of a weblog for literary translators depend on the ways it is being used and maintained. Through a blog, the literary translator faces a unique landscape, which 'is not mapped by conventional geographies' (Bush, 2001, p. 127). Another great advantage of the weblog in literary translation is the way in which it connects the translator to a living author by inviting the latter to cooperate actively and be part of a multi-agent translation process. This means that the author helps the translation and reflects upon the feedback received by the translator, all of which are available to the public.

Since the application of the weblog as a translation tool is very recent in Translation Studies, it might appear untimely to discuss its impediments. However, once readers start commenting on your weblog, the weblog itself can become an impediment to your translation. In what follows, I will explain why and mention how you can control this.

The greatest challenge facing the application of weblogs in literary translation is its novelty as a translation tool. To the best of our knowledge, there are no other experiences similar to the study I provided earlier, so we do not have enough empirical data to draw reliable conclusions. However, we can overcome this problem by popularizing the weblog among literary translators and studying its application to literary translation. To begin with, the younger generation of literary translators seems to be more willing to embark on such experiences compared with the older generation, who tend to adopt a more traditional approach to translating. A very good idea can be to incorporate weblogs into the practice of literary translation seminars or workshops at undergraduate courses. Designing some small-scale empirical studies can enhance this and provide more ground for research. For example, the translation teacher can turn the translation class into a collective body of commentators, who comment or cooperate with the practice of a professional translator who is translating a certain novel. Overall, such exercises will help us better apply the weblog to literary translation by overcoming its problems.

Another possible disadvantage of the weblog in literary translation is the fact that the translator may receive a number of irrelevant comments that distract their attention and cause them to spend some time reading or responding to them. There are a few points at stake here, as we have illustrated in the case study mentioned

earlier. One issue is that not all visitors enjoy the same level of translation knowledge. The degree and scope of interest in translation varies from person to person. Our recommendation for the translators is to analyze 'the feedback and comments received, [...] and direct the discussion towards translation by asking the visitors to observe certain rules when commenting on the blog's posts' (Haddadian Moghaddam 2008, p. 141). We also argued that the best case for using a weblog in literary translation is the 'simultaneous use of the weblog with the translation' (2008, p. 141). While the translators adopt a new work, they should start blogging and defining rules for the visitors to observe while commenting on the posts. It is also highly recommended to organize an online translation workshop with professional literary translators, who have either initiated using weblogs as a translation tool, or are willing to spare some time participating online in the workshops without leaving their table.

What remains to investigate in the future is how such an approach can further provide new insights on literary translation, beyond the question of quality, but also on the workload of the translators. In addition, we need to be aware of the fact that some of the most celebrated literary translators may still prefer old habits.

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