B.J. WOODSTEIN

TRANSLATION AND GENRE


Reviewed by Alexandra-Maria VRÎNCEANU
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania

Translation and Genre by B.J. Woodstein aims to provide answers to questions such as ‘what is the concept of genre?’, ‘how do genres differ across cultures and languages?’, ‘what is the correlation between genres, styles and text types?’. Moreover, a paramount question that weighs heavily not just on the linguists’ minds, but also on those of translation scholars, is related to how texts belonging to various genres get translated, as well as how the genre itself plays into the process of translation.

Woodstein begins by employing a top-down approach regarding the matter, starting with the concept of ‘genre’ at a macro-level, moving on to various genres and text types, before focusing on the topic from a Translation Studies viewpoint. As such, six different genres have been chosen for the purposes of the book. The author justifies her choice (women’s writing, LGBTQ+ literature, crime fiction, children’s literature, and science fiction), and she addresses the subjective nature of the analyses conducted. There is a personal connection at play, as the author explains that the chosen genres stem from her experience teaching an MA course on the translation of generic texts when, faced with the students’ need to pigeonhole texts using clear labels so as to translate them accordingly, she realized there were limitations to this view. Thus, each section begins with the author defining each specific genre and its main features, then some characteristics of its translation. The conclusions see Woodstein deconstructing the notion, as well as piecing it back together as a series of expectations. What is refreshing in Woodstein’s study is that, while she
acknowledges the uses of labels and categories as far as genres are concerned, one should not overlook the risks of pigeonholing, which poses restrictions to all parties involved in the production, translation, and the reception/reading process.

Next, the author proceeds to define ‘genre’ as she understands it and uses it in her work. Thus, while acknowledging that the concept itself is difficult to pigeonhole and label as it is so common currently, she starts from the broader definitions provided by other scholars, such as Bawarshi, Reiff, and Dimock, before formulating her own: “[...] a way to categorise groups”. It is paramount to note that, while Woodstein notes that specialists such as Christiane Nord or Katharina Reiss also use terms such as ‘text types’ or ‘text varieties’ with the same purpose, she views the former to have a broader sense, while ‘genre’ is more specific to her. She then goes on to list notable scholars (Bennett and Royle), for whom genres are literary ‘types’ or ‘styles’.

Prior to moving on to the various chapters dedicated to the individual genres, the author lists other scholars’ categorizations of ‘genres’, from the core ones (lyric, epic/narrative and dramatic) to more extensive classifications and their subdivisions (including, among others, elegy, songs, comedies, biographies, etc.), which Woodstein contends vary across cultures, to even narrower and specific ones (women’s fiction versus the so-called ‘chick lit’). Moreover, the differentiation into genres is debatable in itself, as it bears highlighting that power dynamics play a paramount role: some may take precedence over others in terms of likelihood of publication, notoriety, and respect stemming from the author’s identity and how they are perceived. The notion of skopos or textual function is another factor at play, for it also affects how the sender and receiver perceive and decode the text.

Thus, the first genre is that of women’s writing, where the author begins with a caveat, namely that it is erroneous to assume that, just by being a woman, one must write or read only certain types of works. After coming to a definition encompassing the belief that women’s writing is so-called because it centers on women’s lives, experiences and emotions and acknowledging its debatable nature, Woodstein focuses on the specifics of translating the works belonging to this genre. What follows are various tenets, notions, and strategies for dealing with these text types, by way of reputed scholars like Olga Castro, Emek Ergun, Luise von Flotow, Françoise Massardier-Kenney, Kim Wallmach or
Gayatri Spivak, among others. Therefore, methods such as adding female characters, making the language less sexist, aiming to translate more works by women and making them more readily available, the importance of the translator’s ‘agency’ in their rapport with the text. Meanwhile, it is pointed out that other scholars advocate for ‘an absence’ of strategy for such texts by women and focus on defining the notion of ‘woman’ as she is perceived in the text. Woodstein also comments on Carol Meier’s notion that any gender identity could translate texts belonging to this genre armed with the right methods, stating that, in today’s political and societal context as far as sex and gender are concerned, things are not so clear-cut. The author concludes that, as translating such works is a political effort as well, both attention and effort are required, all the while never losing sight of the notion of ‘gender’.

The second genre is that of drama, with its many definitions having as a primary element its performative nature. On the matter of discerning between drama and other text types, the distinction is made between ‘the page’ and ‘the stage’ and, thus, between ‘theatre’ and ‘drama’ translation. To this end, Woodstein provides two profiles of the theatre translator: the direct and the indirect one, as well as various strategies that the translator resorts to, which include “[...] adaptation, rewriting, versioning, and transplanting. The main notion to take away, the author contents, is the fact that the translation of texts belonging to this genre require both cultural mediation, as well as interchange. Methods and strategies proposed for translators by way of acclaimed scholars such as Jozefina Komporaly, Phyllis Zatlin or Sirku Aaltonen are listed and commented upon, in view of concepts like ‘foreignization’ and ‘domestication’, namely how much of the cultural charge of the text should be adapted to the target culture. The notions of ‘subbing’ and ‘dubbing’ are not forsaken either, as well as those of ‘performability’ and ‘performativity’, for the author stresses the common element that should be borne in mind by translators: the audience and the reception of the target text.

LGBTQ+ literature is the third genre tackled in Woodstein’s work, who sensibly begins by defining what is meant by the initialism itself and acknowledges that there may be some who do not feel they necessarily fall in with any of the categories, with ‘queer’ being considered the umbrella term that is more encompassing and inclusive. What follows is the author pondering, as she
did with the genre of women’s writing, on the exact definition of LGBTQ+ as a
genre, taking into account possible limitations and caveats. As far as translating
texts belonging to this genre is concerned, after the selection of works to
translate, particularly for political and social reasons, strategies range from
those employed in feminist translation, to what Woodstein suggests as being
two major strategies, namely ‘acqueering’ and ‘eradicalisation’, with the former
entailing the emphasis of queerness, and the latter removing any queer elements
and rendering the work less radical. The chapter ends with the author pondering
an important question, namely whether the translator of such texts need be
queer themselves to fully grasp the profound references and allusions in
LGBTQ+ literature. As such, Woodstein ascertains that, while any translator is
entitled to work on a text, it must be borne in mind that he/she/they are required
to be clear about their position on the continuum between acqueering and
eradicalisation.

The fourth genre is that of crime fiction, which could also be referred
to as ‘detective fiction’, ‘thriller’ or ‘suspense’, therefore it encompasses many
subgenres. After a brief historical background of works belonging to this genre,
as well as looking at several types of texts considered to be included herein
(female sleuth, historical mysteries, locked door mysteries, feminist crime or
even children’s crime fiction, etc.), Woodstein rightfully ponders whether crime
fiction is a subgenre of literary fiction as a whole, or whether it is a different
breed, while also acknowledging the stigma surrounding the ‘commercial’
nature of thrillers. The language (slang, jargon, various dialects, etc.), ideology
and portrayal of the genders are also tackled. Insofar as the translation of this
genre is concerned, ideology is a major factor, for the translators’ political and
cultural views will influence how they perceive the contents of the source text.
What is particularly refreshing in this chapter is that Woodstein also includes
examples of the portrayal of female characters in several Swedish thrillers (such
as the Millennium Trilogy) where, as opposed to the vulgar language (of male and
female characters alike) in the source text, the English target text toned down
and euphemized women’s language. As for the strategies employed by
translators for texts belonging to this genre, the author focuses on the aspects
related to dialect, slang, jargon, and provides references to various scholars’
works, where they deal with the importance of elements such as repetitions, the
creation and keeping of suspense, resorting to an advisor to help with the slang
in the target language, adding in explanatory glossaries if needed, using ‘substandard’ language, words from a specific dialect, etc. While overexplaining is a pernicious trap in which the translator could fall, it is important, the author points out, that said translator refrains from imparting their own notions and interpretations. Moreover, the translators tasked with texts belonging to the genre of crime fiction must also keep their target readers’ expectations of such texts at the forefront when choosing their strategies.

As for the fifth genre, that of CHILDREN’S LITERATURE, after attempting to define the features of ‘children’ and ‘childhood’, namely the readership itself, the author differentiates between ‘children’s literature’ and ‘young adult literature’, and she lists some subtypes (e.g. alphabet books, early readers, etc.). Tied to skopos is also the matter of why children read and, thus, the function of such works: pedagogical or source of entertainment. In a nutshell, Woodstein concludes, it boils down to ‘readability’, for the audience is two-fold, encompassing both parents and children alike. The thorny matter of sexually explicit and violent content in such works is tackled, for it goes to show that it is adults that have the final say in what children’s literature contains, thus the same power dynamics referred to insofar as women’s and LGBTQ+ literature are concerned are also present here. Thus, both for authors and translators, matters of appropriateness, function, style, power should all weigh heavily. In terms of strategies employed when tasked with translating texts that fall into this genre, while also referring to her own translation experience, as well as to other scholars’ works (Oittinen, Shavit, Lathey, Klingberg and others), Woodstein draws attention to the importance of adapting the cultural context, deletion where necessary, compensation, equivalence and, last but not least, to the readability factor (tied to the performability in drama translation), as such texts also tend to be read aloud by parents to their children. As she has done thus far for the other categories, the author once again ponders whether, in order to be a good translator of texts belonging to this category, one must have children of one’s own, before pointing out an even more insidious matter at play, once again tied to the power dynamics, namely the tendency to underestimate the young readers and, thus, ‘purifying’ and changing the text too much, rather than “[...] meeting children where they are” (51).
The last genre Woodstein talks about is that of **science-fiction** that, historically, has been difficult to define, ranging from a type of literature that mixes prophecies with contemporary science, or literature “[...] premised upon a radical discontinuity from the empirical world” (52), whilst other scholars (Luckhurst) insist upon a certain ‘looseness’ and the fact that this genre breaks boundaries. After looking at several features of the genre (the notion of time, more precisely time-travel and the future, the desire to bring about change to society, scientific advancements, trips to outer space, the settings used, presence of other life-forms aka aliens, etc.), Woodstein once again turns to the specifics of translating science-fiction works, purporting that, as is the genre itself, so the translators will need shifting and multidimensional approaches. Thus, a common element agreed upon as a difficulty when translating these texts is the scientific and technical terminology, interspersed with literariness. Other suggested translation strategies include explanatory footnotes or in-text annotations, addition, free translation, the latter being particularly important in terms of ensuring that, first, the translator understands the intricacies and references in the source text so that they may render them by adapting, where necessary. Woodstein makes several welcome comments with respect to these strategies (as devised by Gao and Hua), namely that, while most object to the over-use of footnotes, as SF is already seen as something transcending traditional norms, they are acceptable in this case. The main idea towards the end of the chapter is that, regardless of the approach taken by the translator, how science-fiction works are translated matters in terms of their reception and, consequently, depends on how the genre is perceived across cultures.

The conclusion sees B. J. Woodstein return to the initial discussion with respect to genre, its limitations in terms of how it is defined and interlaced with notions like mode, category, style, or text type, acknowledging that, by labelling certain works as belonging to a certain genre, all parties involved are affected to some degree (author, translator, publisher, editor, etc.). What is emphasized is that genres contain subgenres, the membership of which is constantly evolving and shifting, therefore translators are urged to operate bearing that in mind: not diving in with preconceived notions and keeping the writer’s intentions and audience expectations at the forefront. Whilst considering the text function and type, as well as its features and subtleties, translators are also subjected to that ever-present antithesis of power and freedom, namely how much do they
actually have at the end of the day? A refreshing angle taken in this article (or, as Woodstein calls it, *Element*, as it is part of a broader series, called “Cambridge Elements”) is her constant reference to her own experiences and work as a translator, interspersed with reference to the works of notable and reputable scholars active in the respective fields. Thus, beyond the theoretical discussions and framework provided at the beginning of each chapter, through the many examples provided for each genre, the reader can better grasp the connections made and the defining features of the genres presented, as well as a series of translation strategies and approaches, each with their advantages and disadvantages.