

## Translation as an embodied practice: The case of dance notation

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Following the emergence of skopos theory in the 1980s (Reiss and Vermeer [1984] 2013), the field of translation studies began to shift its focus away from the source text and questions of equivalence while, with the cultural turn in the 1990s, outlined in works such as those by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (1990, 1998), the figure of the translator moved more firmly center stage, emerging as a creative agent in their own right and not a mere interlingual scribe. Since these two significant refocusing phases, the discipline has become increasingly interested in the lives and works of individual authors and translators (cf. Chesterman 2009 for an early overview). Researchers have investigated the translator's immediate environment – libraries, contacts, working conditions –, the broader socio-historical context surrounding both source and target text as well as the paratextual elements accompanying the words themselves, analyzing the practices of the working translator and the genesis and evolution of the translated text through the study of manuscripts, drafts and other working documents (Munday 2013), with emphasis, for example, on the role played in these investigations by archives (Paloposki 2016, Wardle 2019).

Following a similar timescale, outside the sphere of translation studies, in fields as diverse as pedagogy and sport, there has been a parallel increase in interest in embodiment, defined here as “having, being in or being associated with a body” (Smith 2017, 1), and how it can contribute to mental phenomena. Moving away, therefore, from the traditionally peripheral importance attributed to the body in the western philosophical tradition, characterized by Cartesian dualism, where the mind is viewed as fundamentally separate from the body, a significant number of cognitive scientists are now theorizing “embodied cognition”, a position that emphasizes the role of sensory and motor functions in cognition itself (Foglia and Wilson 2013). In their view “there is no fracture between cognition, the agent's body, and real-life contexts”, and, therefore, “the body intrinsically constrains, regulates, and shapes the nature of mental activity” (319). While it is beyond the scope of this article to enter into the many applications and repercussions of these observations, it is crucial to stress the variety of fields implicated in this process. The suggestion that meaning is grounded in mental representations of perception, emotion and, crucially, movement is currently being investigated in disciplines including (second) language acquisition, philosophy and psychology, among others.

In the light of this, and moving beyond the individual agency of the translator, this article investigates the repercussions of observing the intersection of translation practice with the physical dimension, in line with current research on embodied cognition. It begins with a brief outline of cognitive embodiment outside the field of translation studies before moving on to examining some of the many areas where translation and physicality overlap. The example of dance notation will then be introduced, prompting a series of questions raised by such a practice, questions that will ultimately shed light on developing an embodied translation practice in general.

## COGNITIVE EMBODIMENT OUTSIDE THE FIELD OF TRANSLATION STUDIES

Christopher Eccleston opens his study on embodiment with a strong statement, on behalf of himself and his fellow psychologists: “We take for granted the obvious truth that the objects of our study (personality, motivation, emotion, cognition, and behavior) are quite literally embodied. We are encased by flesh in a physical being that defines the limits of our ability to act upon the world, and provides the medium by which the world acts upon us” (2016, 1). Embodied theories postulate that the body, and more specifically bodily systems that have evolved for perception, action and emotion, are also implicated in “higher” cognitive processes. In a pedagogical context, there is, for example, a reassessment of the experiential framework offered by educational methods such as that developed by Maria Montessori, in view of studies in embodied cognition:

Montessori’s insistence on connecting doing and thinking, emotion and cognition, and body and mind is in line with emerging interdisciplinary perspectives on the embodied mind; and this convergence of perspectives may provide a useful alternative framework for thinking about preparing students for lifelong learning, rather than short-term performance on normative tests (Rathunde 2009, 206).

Again, within pedagogy, embodied approaches to areas as varied as reading skills and mathematics have shown encouraging results, incorporating physical manipulation of objects such as toy representations of characters for the reading tasks and Lego pieces for the mathematical problems. More intriguingly, “once children have had experience with physical manipulation, they can engage in imaginary manipulation and thereby apply the strategy on their own” with similar results (Glenberg 2008, 370). Indeed, as Foglia and Wilson comment, “much current research on embodiment emphasizes less the body’s direct role in cognition than its implied role in reenactments of experience in the brain’s modality-specific systems for perception and action” (2013, 319). In other words, even when we experience no direct physical sensation, our minds process the information by drawing on previously experienced sensorial events.

This same link between the sensorimotor domain and cognitive tasks underlies much of the work by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: building on their seminal work on conceptual metaphors, the authors provide ample evidence for “hundreds of primary metaphors that pair subjective experience and judgement with sensorimotor experience” (1999, 49). One such example would be the metaphors that fall within the category of *DIFFICULTIES ARE BURDENS* whereby such expressions as “she’s

*weighed down* by responsibilities” rely on understanding the physical sensations related to “muscular exertion” in the context of “the discomfort or disabling effect of lifting or carrying heavy objects” (50). Although the specific concept drawn upon in the metaphor can change from one culture to another, there is a common reliance on physicality and spatialization that transcends all traditions (1980, 19).

Ongoing studies into online communication – and social media in particular – and how users create communal experiences through technological innovations (Osler 2020), highlight the physical dimension that has been integrated into written language: this “digital embodiment” is evident in the extensive reliance on emojis to fine-tune utterances and avoid misunderstanding. Evolving from the initial use of basic punctuation marks, through emoticons typified by the “smiley face”, emojis now variously replace features of prosody, indicating surprise, irony and humor but also communicate our emotional status with symbols for joy, anger, loss of patience and so on. Although the range of emojis appears almost boundless, studies show that, of all the symbols and images available, it is those representing facial features and hand gestures, mimicking real-life physical expression, that are consistently the most frequently used (McCulloch 2019, 158): this reliance on non-verbal communication mirrors conversational situations in real life where a significant percentage of input is provided by extra-linguistic factors (Lapakko 1997, 66).

A further example of a domain very much associated with the intersection between body and mind is that of embodied practices such as yoga, meditation and mindfulness, where poses, balanced positions and movements are used to achieve positive outcomes in both physical and mental dimensions. Within the context of martial arts and combat sports, Alex Channon and George Jennings report on studies into the embodiment of gender through physical activity: “these works suggest that women training in self-defence are able to reconstruct their gendered selves, rejecting notions of innate female weakness and violability, thereby coming to embody a ‘re-made’, ‘empowered’ sense of femininity” (2014, 6).

## TRANSLATION AND THE PHYSICAL DIMENSION

Turning our attention to translation studies, there are obvious ways in which our bodies are implicated in the production, interpretation and reception of texts. As mentioned above, all forms of non-spoken language communicate semantic content that can, if necessary, be translated into a conventional written text; sign language is perhaps the most obvious example of this; stage translation for theater or opera has to take into account the physicality of the performers as well as their breathing patterns and voice projection; audio-visual translation mediates any culturally specific gestures observed on screen and, more specifically, dubbing has to parallel the timing of facial expressions and the morphology of lip movements while subtitling seeks to take into account the eye movements of the audience as they read the text and follow the images on screen; audio description has to decide what information, including that conveyed by gestures and movement, can be translated into words within the time constraints imposed by the audiovisual text; in her discussion of corporeal paratexts, Kathryn Batchelor concentrates on the parties within an interpreting context where the body language of one of the par-

ties can raise questions for the interpreter, in so far as they have to decide whether or how far they should go in attempting to translate any meaning communicated non-verbally (2018, 181); a further aspect discussed by Batchelor is the physical presence of the interpreter themselves and how certain features might influence the communication between the two main interlocutors: “These factors might include such things as the interpreter’s gender, his or her overall manner or mood, his or her positioning in the room, eye contact, gaze in the room, the dynamic that develops directly between the interpreter and one or both of the primary parties, and so on” (182).

Alongside these examples of translation practice that imply an embodied component, the physical dimension is also frequently referenced in the literature of the discipline. A number of metaphors associated with translation draw parallels with (parts of) the body, such as Haroldo de Campos’ metaphor of cannibalism, which in turn draws on Oswald de Andrade’s earlier *Anthropophagic Manifesto* ([1928] 1991). The text, now often quoted within the context of postcolonial translation studies, initially referred to the writing practice of Latin American authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz and José Juan Tablada and was extended only later to translation strategies widely adopted in Latin America, whereby authors and translators do not seek to copy European literary models directly but rather “devour” them and incorporate them in their texts on their own terms. In this radical approach, “the bodies of both cannibal and cannibalized, through the sort of exchange of energies, transfusion, consumption and reincorporation, become indissolubly linked, so that one no longer can assert the independent existence of one another” (Cisneros 2012, 37). Another “bodily” metaphor representing a contrasting point of view, ventriloquism, describes the translator’s role as a conduit for the voice of the source author, imagining the translated text as emerging from inside the translator’s body: “The translator [...] has to ventriloquize and give voice to the literary, fictive characters created by the novelist. These characters reside in the belly of the translator and are made to speak through him” (Jarniewicz 2013, 331).

A more subjective position emerges from Primo Levi’s account of his experience of the translation of his works by others. Referring specifically to the translations of his memoirs recounting his imprisonment in Auschwitz and subsequent journey back to Italy, his interventions can be viewed as an antidote to the enforced passivity he perceives in his role as a “translatee” and it is arguably significant that he talks about the “writer who is translated” rather than “the writer whose works are translated”. The almost visceral relation between language and embodied self emerges and the description of the translation process is redolent with physicality and aggression, reminiscent of the link between violence and language described by Levi in his accounts of life in the concentration camp:

Being translated [is] a state of semi-passivity similar to that of a patient on a surgeon’s gurney or a psychoanalyst’s couch, and it abounds in violent and conflicting emotions. The author who finds before him a page of his own work translated into a language that he understands will, variously, or all at once, feel that he has been flattered, betrayed, ennobled, X-rayed, castrated, planed smooth, raped, embellished, or murdered. Rarely does he remain indifferent toward the translator [...] who has jammed his nose and his fingers into his viscera (2015, 2123).

## DANCE NOTATION AS AN EMBODIED TRANSLATION PRACTICE

Having established some of the many ways in which physicality is embedded in translation practice and theory, the focus of this article will now move to one specific area of embodied practice, namely dance, and analyze how a number of notation systems have developed over time as a means of recording choreographies. In describing how the notation seeks to represent movement, position, interaction between dancers and their environment, the questions raised can be viewed as analogous to the questions posed by the interpretation of embodiment in general.

Unlike conventional interlinguistic translation, where the source text is transformed into the target text, dance notation is a practice that first “translates” movement into written symbols, to record the choreography but then, often after a considerable time gap, the same symbols become the source text, as it were, and are translated back into movement, facilitating a new staging of the dance. Once written down, and in the subsequent transition back from notation to physical movement and ultimately performance, just as in any other form of translation, there are varying degrees of possible interpretation. Dance notation, therefore, appears to be the ideal site for investigating the embodied quality of translatorial activity.

Like theatrical representations and musical performance, dance is, by its very nature, an ephemeral art, surviving through its instantiation, through being performed repeatedly. However, while drama and music have a long tradition of written documentation – namely the playscript and the musical score – dance has tended to fare less well in its means of recording the component parts of each work. Historically, classical ballets have been transmitted from one generation to the next through a combination of oral and gestural tradition. Before video recordings, and still today in many companies, the traditional way in which choreographies are handed down from one cohort of dancers to the next is through the figure of the *répétiteur* or *stager*, often former dancers themselves, whose role it is to pass on not only the steps but also their execution in the form judged to be the closest to the wishes of the original choreographer. One of the drawbacks with this method, however, can be the apparently idiosyncratic interpretation of some *répétiteurs* of what constitutes the “text” to be transmitted and, indeed, advocates of notation argue that transcription systems avoid what can be highly subjective interpretations. The task of passing on the dance is even more fraught when continuity of memory is lost and subsequent restagers are confronted with disparate source materials such as “newspaper reviews, collaborators’ correspondence, the choreographer’s drawings and plans, an annotated musical score, class notebooks, models of the scenography, and personal accounts by the original participants” (Pouillaude 2017, 235), without necessarily having witnessed the dance themselves.

There is a real need, therefore, to maintain some form of documented evidence of the sequence of steps, the bodily expression of the dancers and its unfolding in space and in relation to the music. In the context of classical ballet, the guiding principles for recording dance, identified by Kenneth Archer and Millicent Hodson, must address the following five concerns: the preservation of masterworks, determination of authenticity, clarification of authorship, identification of the original bal-

let and the provision of a base for any future intervention by scholars and artists (2000, 1). Although not commonly referred to and still, by and large, the preserve of a very limited number of experts, there is a long tradition of dance notation – indicative of its continued usefulness – including a wide variety of written systems, for recording at least some of the component parts. In the western tradition alone, Ann Hutchinson Guest identifies more than one hundred systems, although there is also evidence of Egyptian hieroglyphs depicting dance moves and sacred Indian texts dating back to the 2nd century BCE, setting down rules determining the gestures used to depict different themes and emotions (1984, xi).

One brief example, to illustrate the effectiveness of “dance scripts”, can be the intertextual network that sprang up around Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem *L’après-midi d’un faune*, first published in 1876. To accompany this publication, Édouard Manet, a personal friend of Mallarmé’s, produced a series of engravings to embellish the text, a first intersemiotic translation of the poem, to use Roman Jakobson’s terminology (1959). As well as interlingual translations, such as Roger Fry’s 1936 English version of the poem, “The Afternoon of the Faun”, Mallarmé’s verses spawned musical translations, the most famous of which is arguably Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, which premiered in Paris in 1894. For all these works (the “source” poem, its English translation, the engravings, the musical score) we have surviving tangible records of how their creators intended their works to be enjoyed. However, when Vaslav Nijinsky came to choreograph his innovative ballet using Mallarmé’s original title and Debussy’s music, for Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes company (1912), the need to record his composition – and with it the need to set down his vision of how it should be staged – prompted him to devise his own system of notation, partly based on Stepanov notation, the system widely used at the time by St. Petersburg’s Mariinsky Theatre dancers (Hutchinson Guest 1998, 148). Apart from a small number of extant photographs, there are no other records of Nijinsky’s performances, due in no small measure to Diaghilev’s banning of film recording – he felt the quality of the jerky films of the time would not do justice to the virtuoso performance of his company. The only official document, therefore, for Nijinsky’s choreography of *Faune*, is his notated score, the final manuscript of which is held today by the British Library in London.

Following on from Nijinsky’s foray into dance notation, a number of other systems were devised during the first half of the 20th century, specifically in response to the new forms of expressive dance, going beyond the more highly conventionalized movements and steps of classical ballet. One such system is commonly known as Labanotation, presented for the first time by the Hungarian dancer, choreographer, and dance/movement theoretician, Rudolf von Laban in Vienna in 1928. While earlier systems relied on combinations of abbreviated terminology, tracings of the lines described by the dancers on the stage and anatomically “realistic” renditions of their bodies as stick figures, with Labanotation there is a distinctive move towards a system based on abstract symbols, what we might term a “language” of dance. In devising such a system, its creator must decide which elements to include, prioritizing those identified as essential from a functional point of view but also including the possibility of recording what constitutes the distinguishing features of each individual

choreography. In the case of Labanotation, perhaps the most widely used system still today, the notation develops vertically on the page, with a central line down the middle of the stave, separating the left side of the dancer's body from the right. Rather than representing disconnected poses or positions, the symbols are arranged to indicate unbroken continuity of movement (Hutchinson Guest 1984, 232). They can convey information about which body parts are moving – and their synchronicity with the musical score – as well as the height at which the movement develops, its directionality (forwards, backwards, left, right or diagonally), level (upwards, horizontally or downwards) and speed (from quick, sudden movements of brief duration to slow, sustained movement of long duration). Other features rendered by Labanotation include support (which parts are carrying the weight of the body), flexion (whether it be of the wrist, the knee, the whole leg, the spine), rotation (turns or twists, clockwise or counterclockwise, of the whole body or of a limb), placing of the feet, position of the dancer(s) across the stage and any potential interaction, such as in a *pas de deux* or the more choral movements of the *corps de ballet*.

This brief description can go some way towards indicating the highly complex nature of such notation systems and the degree of training required to achieve familiarity with the symbols, whether it be to produce them in transcribing a choreography or in reading them to visualize the movements. Indeed, one of the central issues faced by notators is the amount of information and degree of complexity required of their transcription. In this, the questions Hutchinson Guest suggests a notator should ask themselves, provide an enlightening parallel with those invoked by *skopos* theory in translation studies: “Who will read this score and for what purpose? To get a general impression of the work? To study it in depth? To reconstruct the sequences? To perform them?” (337). Another question that is often levelled at proponents of dance notation is why not record choreographies with cameras, especially given the technical advancements that guarantee high-definition filming as well as secure storage conditions. While some dance companies do make use of these instruments, many do not rely on them uniquely and prefer to integrate filmed recordings alongside their tradition of notation. There are two main reasons for not relying solely on video records: film, in most situations available to a dance company, cannot record a three-dimensional image and therefore cannot capture dancers (or parts of them) hidden by others or movements to the back of the body; most crucially, however, a filmed recording would necessarily be a document of one individual performance that might contain errors and would certainly be the recording of the idiosyncratic performance of those specific dancers, on that specific night, however praiseworthy that one performance might be. As one notator, Anna Trevien, puts it: “Would you ask an actor preparing Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, to learn the role, the words, the intention behind those words, from a DVD of Mel Gibson’s version of *Hamlet*? Or would you hand a recording of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* to a musician, expecting them to learn their part in the orchestra by listening to it?” (2018)

As with literary translation, therefore, the hermeneutic process underlying the transfer from one code to another cannot be reduced to a mechanical process whereby content A automatically corresponds to content B. As we have seen,

the notation represents only certain elements of the dance, those elements considered to be the essential characteristics or the core components of the piece, the defining features that distinguish it from other dances. The individual dancer or restager then has varying degrees of freedom to further characterize and customize the piece, just as a translator would with a literary text (Wardle 2022). Sarah Whatley's distinction between choreographic style and performance style is useful here – although it should be remembered that the choreographer is not always present when dancers are learning their steps: “Some dancers may be required to learn patterns of movement as set by the choreographer, with little opportunity for creative input during the construction stage. Alternatively, dancers may contribute much to the creation of the dance material, acting more as the ‘agents’ of the choreographer. In this case the choreographer may well be in more of a directorial role, editing and shaping the dancers’ material” (Duerden and Fisher 2007, 118). Also interesting here is the dialectic relationship between the originator of the dance and its performer, a two-way process that unfolds in the embodied transmission of the dance as choreographers frequently draw on dancers’ natural proclivities and abilities to shape their work.

Rachel Duerden and Neil Fisher elaborate on this point by explaining that, while autographic arts such as painting allow for only one original – even an excellent forgery of the *Mona Lisa* is just that: a forgery – the allographic arts such as music and dance have no direct equivalent whereby no single performance, not even the first performance, can ever be classed as definitive (130). They add: “As a performing art, however, dance has the potential for a dynamic existence: ever changing, but capable of living through those changes. New performers can re-invigorate the work and bring new insights to it, as has frequently been demonstrated, especially in theatre and in music.” (130) The notation, therefore, must be viewed as the structure around which each company of dancers can bring their interpretation to life: “Today we might speak in terms of wanting to encourage in students an ‘embodied understanding’, meaning the bodily intelligence that a translator learns to develop and that a knowledge of the conceptual frameworks of notation can facilitate” (128). Dancers, thus, are requested to develop this bodily intelligence and achieve an embodied understanding, in order to produce their own retranslation of the choreography for new audiences.

## CONCLUSION

In the same way, translation in its broader sense can be seen as a performing art, with translators attempting to go beyond the words on the page to inhabit the text, capture the movement, emotion, sensation as suggested by the author and act it out through their own physical connection with the world. As described above, physical manipulation can open a pathway to imaginary manipulation: the translator, through this conceptual dimension, is given access to an embodied experience of the text and is thus able to produce an original creative performance. Concentrating attention on translation systems such as dance notation, can help focus attention on how bodies and movement become signifiers, conveying meaning in their own right and how

this physical presence can be integrated into translation practice in general. Within the field of translation and gender studies, for example, attention is focused on the intersection between language and our complex biological, sexual and gender identities (Simon 1996; von Flotow 2010). From the first works putting forward a feminist approach to translation – from choosing the source texts to translating and promoting the prominence of the role of women as authors, translators and publishers, to formulating strategies to facilitate the emergence of the feminine in the translated text – one of the prominent features has been that of foregrounding the physical presence of women. More recently, a similar approach is now directed at how the translator's agency can impact the discipline in the light of queer studies, recognizing and challenging the heteronormative paradigm of many cultures, both past and present (Epstein and Gillett 2017; Baer 2020). If translation is to be considered a privileged site for the negotiation of textual realities, then surely the translator has the opportunity – and, we might posit, the duty – to challenge the ongoing lack of diversity represented in the current cultural landscape.

Other areas of the discipline that stand to benefit from an embodied approach include a growing interest in translation and accessibility in contexts such as museums, sporting and other live events, subtitles that attempt to enhance the audience's experience of the audiovisual product with information about tone of voice, volume, provenance of off-screen noises or voices and so on. Major cinematic productions are also integrating some thought-provoking features, alongside more traditional reworkings of classic texts: films such as Armando Iannucci's inclusive color-blind casting for his cinematic remake of *David Copperfield* (2019) is an ideal example of how, in this case, skin color becomes one of the many features that allows the film to both respect and reinvent the novel from which it takes its lead, creating something new and relevant for modern audiences. Another similar example is Joe Wright's 2021 musical film *Cyrano*, based on Edmond Rostand's 1897 play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. In this case, the perceived physical inaesthetic characteristic shifts from being Cyrano's abnormally large nose in Rostand's original to his lack of physical stature in the film, where the part is played by Peter Dinklage, an actor with achondroplasia, a genetic disorder whose primary feature is dwarfism. This shift accentuates issues surrounding physical norms, conventions of beauty and the nature of love by presenting the viewer with a retranslated text that draws attention to itself and, in so doing, can initiate debate.

In conclusion, therefore, thinking about the issues involved in translating the body and movement within the relatively conventionalized context of dance, we can identify wider reaching implications for integrating the body and its movement in further contexts where language – the word – has often been the focus of the translator's attention: as discussed above, examples include the rendering of non-verbal communication within interpreting or conveying meaning communicated by the body in the context of audio description. The implications, however, can be far more wide-reaching: ideas of subjectivity, identity, mortality, and spirituality are often centered around the physical bodies we inhabit, while contemporary debates such as body shaming and transgender rights or socio-political movements such as Black

Lives Matter and Me Too are rooted, to varying degrees, in values inscribed in our physical identity. Questions of meaning, equivalence, interpretation, variation and translatability have long preoccupied the academic field of translation studies. Approaching these issues through the prism of an embodied practice such as the transfer from dance to notation and back, encoding movement, integrating the physical with the linguistic and cultural, provides a challenging and, hopefully, stimulating addition to the ongoing debate.

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Embodied cognition. Dance notation. Labanotation. Embodied translation.

This article investigates the repercussions of observing the intersection of translation practice with the physical dimension, in line with current research on embodied cognition. The paper begins with a brief outline of cognitive embodiment outside the field of translation studies before moving on to examining some of the many areas where translation and physicality overlap. The example of dance notation will then be introduced, prompting a series of questions raised by such a practice, questions that will ultimately shed light on an embodied translation practice in general.

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