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Experimental Translation: The Work of Translation in the Age of Algorithmic Production

Tiffane Levick

RÉFÉRENCE(S) :

Lily Robert-Foley, *Experimental Translation: The Work of Translation in the Age of Algorithmic Production*, Goldsmiths Press, 2024

TEXTE

1 Lily Robert-Foley opens her book, *Experimental Translation: The Work of Translation in the Age of Algorithmic Production*, published by Goldsmiths Press in 2024, by acknowledging the significant progress made by machine translation and the increased uncertainty surrounding the place for human beings in the literary arts, the topic of many impassioned discussions of the place of humans in future. She asserts that a worthwhile response to the "threat" of AI lies in resisting traditional translation paradigms and practices, which is what she proposes to do in the 226 pages of her book. Her very thorough introduction enters into dialogue unpacks a multitude of issues, including but certainly not limited to the choice of the term "experimental" in her title (itself a nod to Walter Benjamin's seminal 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"), the evolution of machine translation and its consequences on the way in which we envisage the notions of signified and signifiers, the law of fidelity and the role of norms, as well as the thorny issues of authenticity and originality.

2 After her introduction, Robert-Foley proposes seven thematic chapters, each dedicated to a separate translation procedure, taken from the typology advanced by Vinay and Darbelnet in their 1958 book *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*. These procedures, borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation, have become a point of reference in many translation programmes, especially in the traditional "thème"

and "version" classes offered in French universities that prepare students for competitive state exams (the *agrégation* and the CAPES in particular), despite the many issues identified in the framework itself by a number of scholars (including Michel Ballard and Anthony Pym. Having emerged in a period where linguistic approaches to translation were in vogue, the classification of translation choices they propose has proved, as Robert-Foley asserts, "sloppy" (26), and points to the difficulty of applying rigid labels to language. The widespread contemporary use of the model proposed in 1958 pushed Robert-Foley to reimagine the procedures for translation practice in the 2020s and beyond, and she presents her own "creative hijacking" of each.

3 Throughout her seven chapters, Robert-Foley invites us along on her explorations, "interrogating, challenging, resisting and opposing the norms of translational practice" (10), never leaving us behind. The *Handbook of Translation Procedures* that she proposes as a (fittingly) electronic complement to her monograph allows her readers to take the theoretical reflections further and experiment themselves with the ideas she lays forth. The countless activities she proposes (that she has tested herself in a range of settings) invite her readers to become active participants in the experiments she outlines, tampering with rules and meaning, exploring the relationship between sound and shape, moving backwards and forwards in time and between mediums. Robert-Foley calls for an approach to language use, to creation, and to recreation embedded in collaboration and in experimentation, encouraging readers to engage in their own form of creative-critical research (borrowing this term from Delphine Grass). Her book, and her handbook, resist prescriptive, normative approaches to translation and pave the way for creative human practices within and between languages.

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