

## ***Cover Songs: Metaphor or Object of Study?***

**Jonathan Evans**  
**University of Portsmouth, UK**

### **Abstract**

Thinking about translation involves the use of metaphors. However, the use of metaphors is flawed, as they only partially describe translation. This flaw can be interesting, though, if it stimulates new thoughts and new ways of thinking. This paper investigates one such metaphor, that of the cover song. By analysing three different covers of Joy Division's 1980 single 'Love Will Tear Us Apart', the paper shows how covers are often similar to translations and questions whether the link is stronger than just a metaphor. Finally the paper considers the use of studying translation as part of a larger group of texts that revolves around the idea of adaptation.

Trying to explain to non-translators what happens in translation is sometimes difficult. Explaining how sticking too close to the source text will often leave you with a target text that does not quite seem right, but at the same time needing to stay within sight, as it were, of the source text, just seems to confuse most people, who assume that translation is a lot more straightforward and simple action than it actually is. For if it were a simple action, machine translation would be a perfect solution: there would be no ambiguity and Google translations would always be correct. As translation is a complex action, we tend to describe it using metaphors, some of which are more accurate than others. I would like to analyse a metaphor I often use when describing translation, before wondering whether thinking of translation in this way allows us to connect it to other trans-textual practices, which could thus change our understanding of the study of translation.

Michael Hanne (2006) has analysed many of the metaphors for translation, from reconstruction (pp.211-12), the Benjaminian piecing together of fragments (pp.212-13) and transplantation (pp.213-15), to cannibalism (p.216) and hijacking (p.221), among others. The problem of many of the metaphors for translation, as Lori Chamberlain (2004) has pointed out, is that many are sexualised, and use negative metaphors of femininity to represent translation in a negative light. Writing of the infamous *belles infidèles*, Chamberlain notes that 'like women, the adage goes, translations should be either beautiful or faithful' (p.307).

A metaphor which evades this sexualisation, and the one with which Chamberlain begins her essay, is the metaphor of translation

as performance. A translation is the performance of the source text in a different language. This metaphor certainly has some charm to it, as it makes translation sound quite respectable: 'Like a musician, a literary translator takes someone else's composition and performs it in his own special way', writes Robert Wechsler (1998, p.7), assuming that translators (and musicians) are masculine. This metaphor sounds good, bringing translators to the level of virtuoso performers of a text that was written by someone else, and at the same time allowing translators to imprint the text with their personality, 'in their own special way'. The obvious problem, as Wechsler goes on to point out, is that normally a musician is performing a piece designed to be played on a musical instrument, whereas a text written in English is not really intended to be performed in French. Nor, as Wechsler also notes, are musicians likely to be the sole performer of that text for its period of copyright, as often happens with translations. So is this metaphor a failure?

The problem of metaphors, as Hanne (2006, p.221) points out, is that '[they] draw attention to just one thread of the translating process'. They do not fully describe translation. Following Susan Haack, Hanne (p.211) notes that this 'imperfect character' of metaphors may be useful, as it can suggest new links and new ways of thinking, and we could add that even the faults of metaphor can stimulate new thoughts, if only to correct previous assumptions. Indeed, Lakoff & Johnson (2003, pp.139-46) suggest that new metaphors can entirely change the way we think, and even one that we do not subscribe to may give us the opportunity to think in a new way. 'New metaphors', they say (p.145), 'have the power to create a new reality'. So, even if our metaphor is not perfect, it can help us think.

One metaphor I have often found myself using to describe literary translation, and especially the translation of poetry, is that of the cover song in popular music. Once this would have meant a cheaper performance of a song that had been made popular by another musician or group (Dyer 2007, p.33), but now it seems to more widely refer to a musician or group known for performing their own<sup>1</sup> material performing a song originally written by or for another musician or group. Linda Hutcheon (2006, p.93) notes how some cover songs are 'openly meant as tributes', performing an act of homage to the original artist, while others 'are meant to critique'. These latter question the values of a song by performing that song with different emphases, bringing different facets of the song to light. This is possibly why covers are so interesting, as they can engage with the text in a variety

of ways; some stay close to the original style and feeling, others use new instrumentation and bring new feelings to the same text. And yet all these various different versions of a song are still experienced as the 'same' song.

One could describe the process of translation in a similar way: different translators will focus on different aspects of the text and bring those to the fore, some will stamp their own personality on the text and others will appropriate it to their own uses, yet the text is still, in many ways, the 'same' text. The source text really does not change, but our perceptions of it do with each new translation. This is certainly most clear in poetry translation, where there seems to be more retranslation or multiple translations of a single text, but I think it could also be said of any literary translation. Indeed, the translator experiences this multitude of possibilities inherent in the text when translating, yet is often forced to choose only one. So the metaphor of the cover song seems to allow for a freedom of the translator that other metaphors might not, without necessarily making the activity of translation into a negative act, or reinforcing negative stereotypes. It could even be said that by talking about translations like cover songs, it would become acceptable to start liking a translation more than its source text, in the same way as it is acceptable to like a cover of a song more than the original song. In fact a good cover can lead one back to the original song and a re-evaluation, or rediscovery, of the original artist.

I wonder, though, whether the cover song is in some way not just a metaphor but some sort of cousin to translations. There would appear to be this relationship between them that allows the metaphor to seem practical, and almost reversible: it does not take a great leap of imagination to discuss cover songs as translations, taking one text from one idiom and making it into a text in another idiom, especially when we think of covers that use radically different instruments. The song might, for instance, change from an electronic track to an acoustic song, its significance<sup>2</sup> also changing in this motion. The song would remain in many ways the same song, and in the legal sense it still would be, as covers are credited as being written by the original songwriter, but it has also altered. This sounds very much like the relationship between a translation and its source text, even if slightly awry. While there is no 'translation proper', in Roman Jakobson's (1992, p.145) terms, or inter-lingual translation, there seems to be a mix of what Jakobson calls 'intra-lingual' and 'inter-semiotic' translation here: there is no change in language, nor really of media, yet there is a change of musical rhetoric or idiom in the text.

To explain better how covers mirror translations of poetry, I would like to analyse three different covers of Joy Division's song 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' (Joy Division 1980a): one by José González (Joy Division 1980b), one by Nouvelle Vague (Joy Division 1980c), and one by Susanna and The Magical Orchestra (Joy Division 1980d)<sup>3</sup>. All three covers come from outside of the UK, as González is Swedish, Nouvelle Vague are French and Brazilian, and Susanna and the Magical Orchestra are Norwegian, but none of them translate the lyrics of the song, continuing to sing it in English, possibly due to the cultural status of English in popular music. However, it would have been possible for them to translate the song, as songs are translated and performed in different languages (see Gorlée 2005, especially Klaus Kaindl's chapter on pop music (pp.235-62); see also Low 2003). They chose not to, which means that our analysis must focus on how the song is changed musically, and how this change affects the listener's perception of the song.<sup>4</sup> The source text here is taken to be the recording of 'Love Will Tear Us Apart', first released as a single in 1980, although Joy Division may have played the song live previously. In a way, this parallels the use of a published text as a source text: it is assumed that this version can be taken as the definitive one, although other versions of the text have existed.

Joy Division's song is three minutes and twelve seconds, with a fairly fast beat that sounds almost electronic in its regularity. This makes the track feel slightly rushed, and marks a change in the band's sound. Indeed, it seems to point the way to the sound of New Order, which is what the remaining members of Joy Division became after singer Ian Curtis's suicide. The bass is clear and plays a short repetitive riff that underpins the melody played on guitar and keyboards, yet it is also this bass that gives the song its edge, linking the sound of the track back to earlier songs by Joy Division. The keyboards are quite high pitched, resembling an organ in their sustain. In the refrain they seem to lift up, giving the chorus a feeling of optimism. Curtis's voice sounds neither upbeat nor tired, and one could mistake the song as a celebration of love on first hearing, although you would have to ignore the lyrics to do so. However, listening to the full lyrics of a pop song may not be integral to the experience of listening to the song, as they are only one part of it.

The difficulty presented by this text is its position in the history of the band. It was released as a single not long before Ian Curtis's suicide, and it becomes hard to interpret it once this information is available: it seems to indicate depression, sadness. It starts to point the later listener to Curtis's suicide, yet there is no textual evidence

for this. It would seem as likely to point to a dissolution of the band – the title hints at that, as does the line 'taking different roads'. Again, there is no textual evidence for this, but it is interesting how the listener projects a reading of the text from what knowledge they have of that text's production. Pop songs are also very commonly interpreted through the situation of the listener, and appropriated in ways that could never have been intended by the musicians<sup>9</sup>. It is this aspect of appropriation of a song that becomes apparent in covers.

José González's version seems as if it should not be so different. It is played on a guitar and has a male voice. However, the lack of rhythm section changes the song. It seems more intimate now, as if it were being sung to someone. González's voice seems very similar to Curtis's; again it seems neither happy nor upset, just singing. It is not too high up in the mix, and does not override the music. The song sounds similar enough to the original, although it is transposed into a more folk-like register by the shift from electric to acoustic instruments.

Nouvelle Vague shift things a lot further. When listening to them it is worth remembering that 'nouvelle vague' means not only 'new wave', referring to the French film movement of the late fifties and early sixties, but is also a synonym for punk, which was also sometimes called New Wave in the UK. It also translates the Portuguese term 'bossa nova', also meaning 'new wave', and referring to the music of Brazilian origin that appeared in the Sixties.

The Nouvelle Vague version of the song begins with the sound of waves and possibly the sounds of a beach, and a guitar. The singer's female voice changes how the listener experiences the song, changing the connotations that come with the sound of a voice. The pace of the track is much slower than in the original, which makes it seem a little more plaintive, although the way the singer sings means that it becomes harder to follow the lyrics, which appear less important than the general ambience of the song. The shift of musical genre, from post-punk to bossa nova, also shifts how the listener approaches the song: for a British listener it no longer conjures up an urban environment, but moreover a beach, and sunshine. This is, in part, due more to the associations connected to these genres than to the music itself. Nouvelle Vague succeed in making the song recognisable and yet changing it significantly. It has become other while remaining itself.

Susanna and The Magical Orchestra seem to push the music out

furthest. The instrumentation is now just an electronic keyboard, with a sustained sound on each note, and Susanna's voice. The tempo is much slower than in any of the other versions, bringing out the quality of a lament in the text. This is a sad song. Susanna's voice suggests so, as does the atmosphere of the music. It's a lot quieter, which seems to suggest a more personal interpretation, which neither Joy Division nor Nouvelle Vague allow, with their fuller instrumentation. The 'again' of the refrain seems more stressed here: the narrator of the song seems to feel that all this pain or heartbreak is inevitable.

All these different versions alter the text and the listeners' relationship to it, bringing different elements to the fore, without damaging or destroying it. All three covers seem to come from a position of appreciation, rendering homage to the original song rather than criticising it. The interest of analysing the transformations undergone by the song, without its lyrics changing, lies in the idea that although the words of the song have not changed, its signification and the way the listener interacts with it do change. Each of the versions sends one back to the original, but at the same time to other versions, making the one song into a body of work as well as a single song. Recent approaches to translation as an act of writing, such as Lawrence Venuti's (1995) much maligned 'foreignizing' translation, as well as Clive Scott's work on translation as experimental writing (Scott 2000; 2006), have suggested that translation can utilise similar practices of defamiliarization and interaction with the source text. Indeed, the way in which these covers seem to be readings of the song, at the same time as the song, echoes what Scott (2006, p.4) says about the space of translation not being the text itself, but 'in the spaces of a psycho-physiological encounter with the text'.

Thinking through similar forms of cultural activity which are based on an intertextual relation with a source text, as translation is, encourages us to broaden our ideas of what translation can be, and to extend the field of Translation Studies. By looking at how we interact with other types of trans-textuality, such as cover songs, we can begin to question how we read and interact with translations. Indeed, the link between translation and other intertextual activities, such as the cover song and the film remake, requires further study. Gerard Genette (1982) includes translation in his discussion of trans-textuality, and Linda Hutcheon (2007, pp. 171-72) includes it at one end of a spectrum of adaptations. When translation is viewed as one of this larger group of adaptive activities, some of the problems of discussing translation, such as the relation between source text and target text, can be viewed afresh, and freed from narrow categories

such as fidelity. Setting it in this context would not only help breathe life into the subject, but also make it central in a larger interdisciplinary field that would encompass cultural artefacts in general, rather than allowing translation to recede into a branch of applied linguistics. The above analyses, no matter how tentative, hopefully have shown that there is something worthwhile to thinking about other intertextual texts using the ideas and methods of translation studies. Sometimes what appears to be a loose metaphor can yield, on further inspection, a whole new way of thinking.

## Notes

1. The term 'own' may not refer to music they have written, but also music written for them, and recognised as 'their' style.
2. Due to the difficulty of deciding the 'meaning' of a piece of music, significance seems a better word, suggesting as it does a process of signification. Jacques Attali (1985/1977, p.25) uses 'signification' to refer to the meaning of music.
3. All these songs are available through *itunes*, as well as on traditional media.
4. Since I am not a musicologist, I must here apologise should the analyses seem lacking in professionalism. I hope that they will still demonstrate my point, despite this.
5. Michel de Certeau (1984, pp.30-34) suggests that this is indeed a common practice in popular culture, allowing what seem at first to be consumers to be producers at the same time.

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