

RESEARCH ESSAY

ASSIGNMENT: Choose a topic, directly related to writing, from the list below. You will research the topic, or aspect of the topic, using relevant academic books and/or articles so that you will become well informed about your chosen topic. You will write an analytic academic research essay based on some of what you learned about your topic.

TOPICS: a genre, a writing theory, a writing relationship (writer-text-reader), a writing theorist, the writing process, idea generation and writing, composing, a writing technology or tool, writing pedagogy, a historical issue related to writing, writing in professional environments

PROPOSAL: If you wish to have feedback on your essay proposal from your tutorial leader, email your "Research Essay Proposal Form" to your tutorial leader on or after October 19.

ESSAY DUE DATE: Completed Research Essay is due **November 23 by 11:00pm** via WORD email attachment emailed to your tutorial leader.

GENRE: Analytic Academic Research Essay

LENGTH: 1750 – 2000 words (7-8 pages) plus a title page and works cited page(s)

RESOURCES: The essay is to be based on a significant number of academic articles and/or books found through the York library.

GRADE VALUE: 15% of total course grade

Murder, Murder! The Murderous Translator's Power in Contemporary Translation Studies by
Dismantling the Writer-Text-Translator Relationship

One may assume that the hyphen joins the three components of the writer-text-translator relationship into a single, connected linear process similar to its grammatical function. However, in reference to contemporary translation theorists, any sense of equality between the components are disturbed by the dialogic nature of the relationship which contribute to the freedom of the translator: an active agent, reader, and refracted writer (Zhang & He; Buffagni et al; Lefevere). The translator's multifaceted role aids in the figurative death of the writer-text component of the relationship—the writer being the original author of a piece of work, and the text being the original, untranslated piece of work written by the writer (Barthes). Through this exercise of creative power, the translator's solitude drives them to form a close relationship with their rhetorical situation that is shown to be complicated by the loss of the writer-text component (Bilen; Wren-Owens). This paper will explore how the creative act of translation gives dominance to the translator, resulting in the elimination of the text and writer in the writer-text-translator relationship and giving rise to a new self-proposed translator driven relationship.

The period of contemporary translation studies witnessed a shift in its research paradigm around power, approaching the act of translation from a translator-centered perspective (Zhang & He). In the traditional period, translation was viewed from a writer-centered perspective and subsequently text-centered in the modern period (Zhang & He). However, what led to another adjustment was the “intersubjectivity shift” concept that claims translation is dialogic and an intentional and interpersonal interaction steered by the translator (Zhang & He). If this is true, then the supposed equality between the components in the relationship is non-existent. In the context of power and this new research paradigm, the translator cannot properly comprehend and

interpret an original text which in turn makes the translator inferior to the writer-text component (Zhang & He). Although, to counter this idea of comprehension, that kind of inferiority is exactly what cultivates a translator's rise to power.

In particular, theorist Walter Benjamin builds off these notions in the contemporary translator-centered theory to illustrate how the translator's status is by cause of an original text inciting their subjective thinking during the translation process. In his 1921 essay "The Translator's Task," Benjamin writes that "content and language constitute a certain unity" in an original text (Benjamin 158). If these factors cannot be separated, the translatability of an original text and whether an adequate translator can ever be found to render its meaning precisely come into question (152). He proposes that boundless trust in remaining faithful to an original text is not possible because, as demonstrated through the intersubjectivity shift, there is no such thing as having complete objective knowledge: acting independent from one's personal feelings (155). These two variables clashing when a translator sits before an original text is notoriously described as the battle between fidelity—being faithful to the original writer and text—and freedom—diverging from the original writer and texts' meaning (160). The text, although situated in the middle of the original writer and translator as a sort of mediator in the relationship, is seemingly superior to the translator since it places constraints around language and content onto the translator (Benjamin). However, freedom, the natural successor over fidelity, unleashes the hold the original text has over the translator allowing their subjectivity to take the reins of the relationship (Benjamin). Thus, the relationship between the writer-text-translator become scrambled—soon to be de-hyphenated—once a translator chooses freedom.

Benjamin pioneered the contemporary research on the translator having a sense of free will that the original text and writer does not have that philosophical hermeneutic translation

theorists expanded on. These theorists proposed the concept of “understanding as translation” whereby translators are understood to be active agents, not passive recipients, framing the translation process as a manifestation of the translator’s subjective interpretation (Benjamin; Zhang & He). Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the most influential hermeneutics of modern thought in the 1960s, suggests if the translator is an active agent, then the text, too, must be active (Bilen 4). In his concept the “historicity of understanding,” he argues that there is a finite and historical nature to human experience, emphasizing both the translator and the text are dynamic objects in history that are actively influenced by everything around them—and everything, too, can be changed, translated again, and so on (Bilen 9). A translated text is therefore just another object created in history that is destined to be confronted by a translator’s subjective knowledge, including their cultural background, life experiences, political views, biases, or aesthetic tastes when interpreting the original (Bilen; Zhang & He). The creative liberties afforded to a translator through freedom reduces the purpose of the writer-text in the relationship to impressionable components for the active agent translator. This leaves any chance of fidelity, and the linear structure of the relationship, far behind the translator.

The contemporary period of translation acknowledging a translator is a subjective creator of, to quote Gadamer, “historical objects”—previously referred to as a translated text up until now—exemplifies that the translator is capable of pursuing independence outside the relationship while still steering the translation process (Bilen). The original writer, furthest away from the translator in the hyphenated relationship structure, becomes their opponent because they possess similar duties: being a reader and a writer. To delve into the former, hermeneutic theorists assert that translators are not casual readers, but inventive and engaged ones (Zhang & He). In his famous 1971 essay “Traducción: literatura y literlidad” theorist Octavio Paz lent

further insight into Gadamer's conceptualization on understanding, describing translating and creating as twin processes that involve an outward movement (Buffagni et al 94). He explains it is through the movement of reading and re-reading that the translator dismantles the original text and liberates the words as it is being processed through their subjective knowledge, developing their own interpretation as a reader would when reading text on a page (Buffagni et al 94; Brisolara 120). The historical object is thus created by a continuous communication between the translator and the original text, not the absent original writer (Buffagni et al). As Benjamin earlier inferred, the translator and the original text are bonded through the act of reading (Buffagni et al; Benjamin). However, the translator is dissolving the original texts' content, meaning, and language, its source of power, through subjective reading. Hence the original text is barely hanging onto the relationship—the hyphen is losing thread.

What results in the figurative murder of the original text is the translator writing a new historical object that takes over as the most current alive text once it has been published, but before that, a translator must act on its second duty: being a refracted writer (Bilen; Lefevere). In the 1980s, Andre Lefevere developed prominent theories on rewriting (Shuping 56). Translation, he claimed, is rewriting that includes criticism, reviewing, summary, and adaptation that solely benefit the translator (Shuping 56). Lefevere began to investigate systems in rewriting, later introducing the “refractions” theory (Shuping 56). By “refractions” he means an adaptation of a text to a different audience—in this case a new language audience—with the intention of manipulating the original text into a historical object that will hold new meaning for the audience (Lefevere 4; Shuping 55). His concept is derived from discourse in physics where an original text is processed through the writer, or refracted through the prism of the translator the same way that light does, back onto the reader (Lefevere; Shuping 56).

In 1982, he reproached his conceptions, combining rewriting with the refraction framework to create the term the “refracted writer,” a role the translator presumes (Lefevere; Shuping 56). Lefevere then re-argues that “translations are not made in a vacuum for they are undertaken in the service of power” of the refracted writer who is a free active agent with plenty creative agency, like Paz recognized, to manipulate the dialogic nature of translation (Shuping 57; Buffagni et al; Lefevere; Wren-Owens). In the relationship, the translator is strengthened by their reader and writer capabilities while the writer-text are in service to the refracted writer’s translation process. The thread holding the writer next to the text, too, is thinning and these two weakening hyphens are inevitability going to snap, removing them from the relationship.

According to theorist Roland Barthes, a writer is destined to be figuratively murdered in the translation relationship because the meaning of the text is refracted by the manipulative translator (145; Lefevere). In his 1977 essay “The Death of the Author,” famous for refuting traditional literary theories, Barthes declares that “to give writing its future [...] the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of an author” (148). He uses the analogy of an original writer disappearing like a dancer at the end of its imaginary literary stage as a translator disentangles the original piece of work through refracting until it carries out a meaning constructed from their subjective knowledge (Barthes 145; Lefevere; Benjamin). The body of writing, Barthes describes, is the very identity of the original writer and once they are disconnected from it through the translator reading, rewriting, and refracting a new historical object, the writers’ voice and life of the text—their culture, identities, passions, humour, feelings, and intended impressions—is lost (Barthes 147; Lefevere). The contemporary period theories of Benjamin, Gadamer, Paz, and Lefevere come together to eliminate the original writer through Barthes’ ideology. The translator’s birth as a creative active agent, reader, and refracted writer

allows them to exercise their freedom in its highest form so that the writer enters its own death (Barthes 142).

Barthes further posits that once an original writer is removed, the claim to decipher a text takes ground with the all-mighty translator and their rhetorical situation (147). In sum, the original writer is dead. Their text, too, is dead at the hands of the new historical object; the translator no longer has or requires the writer-text-translator relationship (Wren-Owens). The hyphenated nature of the relationship is now rendered non-existent because the translator has the necessary tools extracted out of the original writer and their text as a creative, refracted writer to work independently for the remainder of the translation process (Paz; Lefevere; Zhang & He). Drawing on terminology from the aforementioned theorists in this paper, the translator forms a new relationship: the refracted translator-new historical object-audience relationship (Lefevere; Gadamer; Wren-Owens). The translator continuously refracts, working in tandem with themselves to finalize the new historical object to its audience; as the translator gives meaning to a text, they establish the reputation of the dead original writer and imposes it onto the audience.

In a case study, linguistic scholar Liz Wren-Owens analyzes Fernando Pessoa's texts and his relationship with Portuguese translator Antonio Tabucchi, known for making Pessoa's fiction more widely known in Italian and radicalizing conceptions of the self and identity in his translations (Wren-Owens). Through their refracted translator-new historical object-audience relationship, she demonstrates how translation is a creative act—Tabucchi, being an active agent, reader, and refracted writer that figuratively murders Pessoa (Wren-Owens 378; Zhang & He; Lefevere; Paz; Gadamer; Barthes). In a passage from Pessoa's "The Poet is a Pretender: Two Hundred Quotations selected," Tabucchi translates: "It could be said that their organizer has behaved like a true predator, with his intention of creating his book of Pessoa: a book of

fragments from that fragmentary, labyrinthine yet systematic Book which Pessoa left us” (Wren-Owens 383). Tabucchi intertwines an autobiography of his own reading of Pessoa in the translated historical object (Wren-Owens 386). He constructs a refraction of Pessoa as a predator while mocking the very text which he is translating. Clearly, Tabucchi no longer needs Pessoa and can form his own understanding of the text, immorally creating Pessoa as a character in his own work and freely giving voice to his thoughts and personhood to his audience of readers (Wren-Owens 386).

The creative act of translation is thus (re) defined as conferring “on the text to the autobiography of one’s own reading and one’s own creative ambitions, both inaccessible to others but available to appropriation” (Wren-Owens 386). If, as Benjamin suggests, translators inevitably give a new life to work because fidelity is not possible, Tabucchi has given life to a construction of Pessoa that was not governed by the original text but appropriated by his subjective knowledge and carried out by his creative polyphonic roles (Wren-Owens 386; Benjamin). The missing writer-text component of the relationship gave Tabucchi full ability to put his active agent, reader and refracted writer role to the test in his rhetorical situation. The audience, his Italian readers, who are likely hoping for an accurate and critical refraction of the original text may be easily fooled by what they are reading and what they imagine Pessoa, the perceived writer of the text, to be at the expense of Tabucchi (Wren-Owens 386).

In the contemporary period, the translation process is driven by the translator in the writer-text-translator relationship to the extent that they begin dismantling the relationship with their creative freedoms in true epistemological fashion. Such freedoms constitute the lack of objective knowledge which render a translator an active agent, and an engaged reader and refracted writer (Benjamin; Zhang & He; Buffagni et al; Lefevere). Through this, the translator

must be aware that they are slowly killing off the writer-text component. However, as illustrated in Wren-Owens' case study, the complex process of reading and refracting exist in the subjective mind and thus cannot be separated from the translator's creative and biased thought processes. The rhetorical situation, namely the audience, is a secondary process that emerge from the relationship's ashes and prove to be at odds with the new historical object because it is a physical representation of the translator's exercised creative power. Indeed, there is much beauty and significance with the act of translation that cannot be undermined, and the nature of subjectivity does beg to question whether translators can truly be blamed for actions that are only human. Conversely, it does invite discussion on an intersecting perspective with this paper: translation is a cultural practice as much a linguistic one, and translators can abuse their obtained power to further selfishly destructive, hegemonic motives that factor into the socio-cultural, political, and economic lives of historically oppressed communities. Research is needed to understand how the writer-text-translator relationship, and the harmful unintended or intended consequences, can be saved from the murderous translator—hyphen destroyer.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Contributions in 83*, vol. 3, no. 8, 2001, pp. 142-148.

<https://sites.tufts.edu/english292b/files/2012/01/Barthes-The-Death-of-the-Author.pdf>

Benjamin, Walter. "The Translator's Task." Translated by Steven Rendall. *Traduction*,

Terminologie, Rédaction, vol. 10, no. 2, 1997, p. 151-165.

https://german.yale.edu/sites/default/files/benjamin_translators_task.pdf

Bilen, Osman. "The Historicity of Understanding and the Problem of Relativism in Gadamer's

Philosophical Hermeneutics. *Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change Series I*,

Culture and Values, vol. 27, 2000, p. 1-193. [http://www.crvp.org/publications/Series-I/I-](http://www.crvp.org/publications/Series-I/I-27.pdf)

[27.pdf](http://www.crvp.org/publications/Series-I/I-27.pdf)

Brisolara, Valéria Silveira. "The Translator as an Author." *Nonada: Letras em Revista*, vol. 1,

no. 16, 2011, pp. 107-125. <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=512451674008>

Buffagni Claudia., Garzelli Beatrice., and Zanotti Serenella. *The Translator as Author:*

Perspectives on Literary Translation. Transaction Publishers, 2011.

https://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=NIJQKDjv_WIC&oi=fnd&pg=PA91&dq=translator+writer&ots=jbKEikoAfi&sig=GkrANi77i516r8Sb1Lt0kV3I8q0&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=translator%20writer&f=true

Lefevre, Andre. "Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of

Literature." *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1982, pp. 3-20. *JSTOR*,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3194526>

Shuping, Ren. "Translation as Rewriting." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*,

vol. 3, no. 18, 2013, pp. 55-59.

http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_18_October_2013/6.pdf

Wren-Owens, Liz. "Translating Pessoa: Agency, Creativity, Refraction." *The Translator*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2020, pp. 380-393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2020.1904723>

Zhang, Jiao and He, Wei. "The relationship between the author and the translator from the perspective of power of tenor of discourse: a case study of the peritexts of the translations of Mengzi" *Journal of World Languages*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2018, pp. 132-149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21698252.2019.1617972>