Research Report | The Radical Translations Project

Some Challenges in Using Translation as an Approach to Revolutionary History

by
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The relation between translation studies and historical research is often one of missed encounters. This article suggests that beyond conceptual differences, this lack of encounter is also due to practical difficulties. My focus is the UK-based project Radical Translations: The Transfer of Revolutionary Culture between Britain, France and Italy (1789-1815). We are a small team working on a corpus of approximately 500 revolutionary-era translations and a prosopography of some 250 translators to create a significant database. Our aim is to track the mobility of revolutionary language—not only what it says but how it travelled, where it went and what it became. How did translation enable democratic movements to extend radical ideas of liberty and equality into new contexts? And how was a transnational revolutionary idiom adopted, adapted, resisted or rejected in the effort to create locally and culturally specific tools for political action on the ground?
translationscholarswhonotfamiliarwiththishistoriography".¹Bythesame
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Whilethe disseminationofFrenchrevolutionarycultureinEuropeandacross
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lationremainshiddenfromview.Itishiddeninpartbyastillprevailing
assumptionthatrevolutionarydisseminationisatypeofforeignpropaganda
eemanatingfromtheFrenchcore,overwhichlocalpoliticalcultureshadnoc-
control.This project, in contrast, repositions translation not as passive recipients
butaskeyculturalmediatorsseekingtospreaddemocracyintothenewcultures
anddifferentlanguagecommunities—acontestedpracticethenasnow. Wede-

¹ChristopherRundle,“TranslationasAnApproachtoHistory”,TranslationStud-
²This UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project began in 2019. Although I am
writing this article in my capacity as a principal investigator, the ideas discussed express a pro-
cess offlection undertaken by the entire research team, notably by the two co-investigators:
Professor Erica Joy Mannucci (University of Milan-Bicocca) and Dr. Rosa Mucignat (King’s Col-
lege London). The task of identifying translations and populating the database has largely been
carriedoutbyDr.BrechtDeseureandDr.NiccolòValmoriasPostdoctoralResearchAssociates
and Dr. Nigel Ritchie as Postdoctoral Research Assistant. Dr. Tazio Morandini was research assis-
tantat Milan-Bicocca, identifying Italian documents and debates. The data-modelling and website
design is by King’s Digital Lab, in a team led by Dr. Arianna Ciula. For more information see
http://www.radicaltranslations.org/.
fine as ‘radical’ any translation that aims to extend democratic and egalitarian ideas into new contexts. This includes both inter-cultural exchange between languages and intra-cultural translation in which texts are adapted to domestic ends, as the revolutionaries sought to cross all sorts of linguistic, geographic, social and cultural boundaries.¹ How did translation enable democratic movements to reach wider publics and cast themselves as part of an international struggle? And how was a transnational revolutionary idiom adopted, adapted, resisted or rejected in the effort to create locally and culturally specific tools for political action on the ground?

Our investigation centres on two main axes of transmission: one connecting Britain and France; another crossing the Alps to Italy. Italy and Britain participated intensely in the experience of revolution in ways that challenge the diffusionist model of communication in contrastive ways. Outside France, Italy was arguably the society most changed by the Revolution and Britain, or so it is often assumed, the least. Yet far from being passive collaborators of the French, the Italian radicals translated the political egalitarianism of the French Jacobins into new contexts and became a key influence on 19th-century international socialism.² Britain’s political traditions meanwhile served as a vital model for the French revolutionaries³ and many prominent British radicals spent time in

¹ As Lieven D’hulst observes the relation between inter and intra is “gradual and dynamic, to the extent that they may merge or even switch positions”. In terms of our project, this is relevant to plurilingual situations such as 18th-century century Italy when the literate elite could read and write in French. See “(Re) Locating Translation History: From Assumed Translation to Assumed Transfer”, Translation Studies 5, no. 2 (2012): 139-55, 152.
³ For example, there has been much recent scholarship on the influence of English republicanism on the French Revolution. We have relied chiefly on Rachel Hammersley, French Revolutionaries and English Republicans: The Cordeliers Club, 1790-1794 (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2005); Raymonde Monnier, “Les enjeux de la traduction sous la Révolution française. La transmission des textes du républicanisme anglais”, The Historical Review/La Revue Historique 12, no. 0 (30 December 2015): 13-46, Marchamont Nedham, De la souveraineté du peuple, et de l’excellence d’un État libre / par Marchamont Needham; traduit de l’anglais et enrichi de notes par Théophile Mandar; édition présentée et annotée par Raymonde Monnier (Paris: Éditions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2010). See also the special issue edited by François Quastana and Pierre Serna, "Le républicanisme
France.¹ Influential trans-Atlantic and Irish connections, moreover, enabled a polycentric circulation that took translations far from any putative intentions of an original source text or author. Revolutionary translations, in this sense, reflect a continuous process that goes beyond the polarity of source and target culture to include self-translations made by bilingual authors in a plurilingual context, indirect translations, retranslations and even translations back into the original source language.

Yet the specific role of translation in promoting a pan-European radical sphere has remained largely unstudied. This is somewhat surprising given that translation itself has been the focus of recent attention by cultural and literary historians alike. This project intervenes in both translation and revolutionary history. We have so far identified over 500 translations with a radicalising purpose that have never been systematically examined. This includes published translations, self-translations, texts presented as translations, as well as unpublished or projected translations, blocked by rapidly changing political events and recoverable from newspapers, publisher’s prospectuses, and personal correspondence. Some translations are mostly literal, ‘radicalized’ by politicizing prefaces, such as the first Italian translation of Diderot’s *La Religieuse* (1797) or Labaume’s 1799 French edition of *Robinson Crusoe*; others, such as Fantoni’s versions of Chénier’s *Hymne à l’Être Suprême*, are new works keeping the original title. Even more complex are cases such as Part I of Paine’s *Age of Reason* (1793). This unfinished draft of radical anticlerical sentiment was translated into French by


Lanthenas a year before the final, toned-down version appeared in both French and English. Finally, an untold number of translations and fragments of translation appeared in newspapers, pamphlets and other ephemeral media, reaching a wider and more diverse readership than book circulation alone. A major challenge of this project is to recover this rich vein of revolutionary translations, often inserted without attribution and not registered in standard library catalogues.

To understand translation as a political act, however, it is also necessary to recover the lives of the translators themselves. It is often noted that prominent Italian revolutionaries such as Salfi or Ranza translated from the French, or that some French revolutionaries were prolific translators (eg. Mirabeau, Lanthenas, Bonneville or Barère), but the broader cultural aims and linguistic strategies of their translations have mostly been overlooked. Our project addresses this gap through our digital prosopography of roughly 250 translators, which ranges from revolutionaries who were well-known translators, to lesser-known radicals, to anonymous or pseudonymous translators whose lives are barely known at all. This prosopography is thus intended as a first step towards exploring in more depth how translation was used to tackle significant asymmetries in political, cultural and material resources faced by those wishing to extend radical ideas of liberty and equality into new contexts.

In its focus on the mobility of revolutionary language, this project contributes to the renewed interest in transnational approaches to the French Revolution.¹ Recent, paradigm-shifting work on the Caribbean², as well as new scholarship


on the “age of democratic revolutions”, “sister republics”, the Mediterranean basin, and the impact of the French Revolution along the so-called British ‘fringe’, has sought to replace a Francocentric model of diffusion with multiple histoires croisées, no longer circumscribed by the territorial boundaries of pre-established states. This re-orientation has been accompanied, within political history, by a pragmatic turn that has highlighted the role of communication in conditioning the range and variety of context-dependent public interventions that reflect local life-worlds. Challenging established notions of ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ these new studies have enlarged our understanding of the importance of cultural intermediaries, those go-betweens capable of brokering relations across multiple borders: between states, religions, languages, genders, classes as well as political, cultural or intellectual fields.


6 For the concept of brokerage see Delbourgo, James et al., eds., The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820 (Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2009). For its relevance to the history of revolution see the introduction and special issue edited by Maxime...
A similar development is evident within translation studies which for several decades now has emphasized the pragmatic function of translation as ‘action with a purpose’.¹ Moving away from notions of ‘influence’, scholarship has stressed how translation activates multiple reception horizons as it travels across space and time², thereby revealing the importance of aporias, resistances,³ ‘misreceptions’⁴ or even ‘untranslatability’⁵ for understanding how cultural influence works in practice. By illuminating historical inequalities between languages and cultures, histories of translation have provided precious empirical evidence for how cultural transfer works in practice.⁶ They have also drawn attention to translators themselves as important political, ethical or ideological actors. Mona Baker, for instance, has demonstrated how translation


³ Maria Tymoczko, ed., Translation, Resistance, Activism (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).


⁵ Barbara Cassin, Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles (Seuil, 2004).

enables a local or domestic struggle to position itself globally, as part of a collective movement of social and political change that bypasses traditional representational politics.¹ Maria Tymocko has shown how translation becomes a means of resistance in situations of censorship, coercion or repression.²

It remains the case however that little is known historically about translators and their social, political and professional identities, despite a growing number of collaborative projects examining the 18⁰-century boom in translation.³ When it comes to revolutionary era translations, these have mostly been examined on a case-by-case basis that often assumes the form of a one-to-one

² Tymocko suggests that both translation and resistance work by similar metonymic process: in both cases a choice needs to be made about what aspect of a dominant power or culture to challenge and what to keep silent, see “Translation, Resistance, Activism: An Overview”, in Translation, Resistance, Activism (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 1-22.
relation (France and Britain, France and Italy, France and Ireland, France and Wales)¹ or focuses on exceptional individuals.² A notable exception is the work of Jonathan Israel, magisterial in its account of the circulation of radical texts in several European languages, but mainly concerned with the transmission of radical ideas rather than the actual practice of translation.³

This project, by contrast, puts translation at the centre of revolutionary lives. Translation is understood here not as a container for the transport of culturally prestigious objects but as an event, a time-based activity whose agency is revealed through a nuanced understanding of the political chronology against which it unfolds. This has important implications both for translation studies and the history of radicalism. After all, any histoire croisée immediately confronts the problem of translation. An English radical is not the same as a French Jacobin or an Italian patriot. An English “Jacobin” was usually branded as such by their enemies, while an Italian “Jacobin” may well be limited to the few revolutionaries loyal to the Constitution of 1793 or connected to the French neo-Jacobins, (another debatable term) that remained in government after the defeat of Robespierre.⁴ This already suggests that the problem of ‘indigenous’ or


‘imported’ political identities extends not just to translation but also to chronological framing.¹ If we are to understand how these distinct, but interrelated, radical movements interacted with one another and how they became changed through this inter-action, relying on standard national chronologies will not do. Instead, we must understand how different individuals and groups entered and exited the process of revolution at different times contributing jointly to the construction of a shared, if differentiated, experience of revolution.

Translation, it seems to us, is an exceptional resource for just such a study. Not only does any translation belong to at least two chronologies, that of the source and target culture, it also lends itself particularly well to both a diachronic and synchronic analysis. This goes to the heart of our project which seeks to register the reciprocity, asymmetry and even reversibility of revolutionary history as it was experienced by different protagonists at different times. The first challenge of our project, therefore, was to find a way for translations and revolutionary events to be thought together, using several timelines that could be “rearranged against each other”.² On our project website, we have addressed this problem by providing a set of digital tools that allow each translation or source-text to be mapped onto five political chronologies, covering three linguistic areas (English, French and Italian). These are not standard chronologies,

¹ As Glyn Williams observes, in Britain the first calls for political democracy came during the American crisis in the 1780s. The moment of breakthrough for the British popular movement was not 1789 but the events of August 10, 1792, when a number of French terms also came into use by the London Corresponding Society (p.72). See Artisans and Sans-Culottes: Popular Movements in France and Britain during the French Revolution (London: Libris, 1989), 7-12. For the Italian context, by contrast, the Constitution of 1795, which signalled the defeat of a certain kind of radical project in France, marked a new beginning. A spate of translation activity accompanied the Triennio which began in 1796. This included translations of both the 1793 and 1795 Constitutions as Italian democrats sought to adopt the French experience to Italian reality. For more on this problem of “radical time lines” in the Franco-Italian context see Erica Joy Mannucci, “The Democratization of Anti-Religious Thought in Revolutionary Times: A Transnational Perspective”, Comparative Critical Studies 15, no. 2 (1 June 2018): 227-45. We have registered some 50 translations of constitutions, or constitution-related documents in the project database so far, including unattributed Italian translations of the 1793 Constitution, uncovered by Mannucci and Tazio Morandini. For more information see Morandini’s blogposts on the project website, Beyond Translation I and II: Adapting Constitutions for Italian Regeneration.

taken “off the shelf”, but have been carefully constructed to reflect a typology of events that intersect both translation activity and the history of radicalism. These include censorship, war, legislation, state formation, diplomacy and key political or social events—all events that might trigger a renewed interest in translation, whether as a mode of overt communication or as a covert activity through which a translator may ‘hide’ behind another text or author.¹ As Mona Baker explains, for militant or engaged translators, translation choice can be likened to “an index that activates a narrative.”² It is a way for the translator to situate themselves within the larger political or social narrative whose outcome they seek to influence or shape.

This brings me to the second challenge of this project: namely the difficulty of identifying what changed as the revolutionary message was communicated across borders of all kinds. Although in this iteration of the project our bibliography only contains records of translations and their paratexts, about which I will say more below, it nonetheless foregrounds the role of language in the transfer of any message. As Roman Jakobson famously observed, given grammatical and other constraints of language, any interlingual translation requires either recoding (when a message needs to be conveyed through entirely new words) or explication (when a message needs to be more fully unpacked and explained in the target language, a process which may rely on loanwords, neologisms, semantic shifts or circumlocutions).³ In terms of the revolutionary period, what Jakobson calls “creative transposition” is apparent whenever there is a metaphorization of language, whether in revolutionary poetry or song or, indeed, other kinds of political language. Explication, by contrast, tends to make the message more concrete. This phenomenon is observable in both the Italian and Greek translations of the Constitution of 1793, in which an otherwise abstract French article on public education is expanded by giving concrete examples as to how it can be adapted to a local reality (education for girls and boys, languages taught, types of schools etc). Translation, in other words, enables us

¹ This typology was devised by Professor Erica J Mannucci, with input from Drs. Brecht Deseure and Niccolò Valmori.
to track the symbolic dimension built into all languages, the determining factor of possible expressions. It also allows us to recover the ways in which the revolution was experienced as both idea and reality, as translators reflected on how to extend, implement or even reject those aspects of the revolutionary model that failed to express their own reality.

The third challenge we faced was how to articulate the role of the research team in defining the time frame and scale of analysis. A “radicalising translation”, after all, is not part of a “buried reality” that can simply be dug up. Rather, it is a quality that we hope can be revealed and better understood through our interpretative tools, notably the corpus and prosopography that we have constructed and the chronological time frames that we have used. As Werner and Zimmerman argue, any histoire croisée is more than a history written in the plural because the need to justify the choice of scale and frame raises the question of how the past and the present relate.¹ In other words, it asks the researcher to consider what part of the past still generates meaning.

On this point, it is worth noting that this project was initially sparked by the synergy between the academic work of the investigators and the experience some of us had with our students when we tried to translate and perform a radical French revolutionary play into present-day English. The dramaturge who led this project had the idea of inviting contemporary activists whose reactions were incorporated as part of the play.² The different responses—ranging from engaged to dismissive—revealed the centrality of translation not only in keeping certain revolutionary keywords alive but in identifying the tensions and contradictions of this language as it moved into new contexts.³ While this to-

¹ Histoire croisée “raises the question of its own historicity through a threefold process of historicization: through the object, the categories of analysis and the relationships between researcher and object. It thus provides a toolbox that, over and beyond the historical sciences, can be applied across a number of other disciplines that combine past and present”, Werner and Zimmerman, “Beyond Comparison”, 32-33.
² For more on this project see https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/-/projects/performing-utopia.
³ Drawing on this experience we have decided to integrate a series of additional collaborative workshops as part of our research method. The idea is that by participating in acts of translation, alongside professional translators, students and other civil society activists, we also re-enact part of the experience of revolutionary language itself. This constitutes a feedback loop between our research questions and the “impact strategy” that is a required element of all UK grant applications.
and-fro between past and present, source and target language, occurs with any act of translation, it is especially pronounced in the revolutionary context. This experience prompted us to design a project that would address the following questions:

- How might a focus on radical translation challenge our understandings both of what is ‘radical’ and what is a ‘translation’?
- What happens when a transnational revolutionary idiom has to be translated in specific languages, each equipped with its own historical frames of references?
- How can translation help us understand how some political ideas become assimilated while others are perceived as foreign, untranslatable or displaced?
- How can translation pinpoint the contradictions and tensions of revolutionary language that remain relevant and meaningful even today?

1. Constructing a Corpus: Some Challenges

In terms of a working method, our primary task was to capture the time-sensitive nature of radical translations as actions and interventions in a revolutionary context that itself was changing very quickly. This difficulty was compounded by the fact that there is no pre-existing catalogue of translations undertaken during the revolutionary period, much less anything resembling a ‘corpus’ of radical translations. We thus have had to construct our own lists, partly by relying on existing repertories and, in a few cases, bibliographies of translations,¹ and partly from gleaning clues from older historiographies that

For more information see the project website.

may mention translation in passing, or from the more recent case-studies established by scholars.¹ Collating a preliminary list was therefore a necessary first step to creating a more restricted corpus that would enable us to answer our research question, namely what makes a translation radical?

Our starting point was a classical definition of radicalism as containing some but not necessarily all of the following elements: egalitarianism (which includes abolitionism and feminism), anti-clericalism, republicanism, democratizing impulses, emphasis on self-determinism. We also had a core set of prominent ‘radicals’ known to have engaged in translation activity at key points in their life (inter alia, Barère, Salfi, Holcroft, Lanthenas, Bonneville, Ranza, Merry). Additionally, we wanted to include published translations, self-translations, pseudo-translations as well as unpublished or projected translations blocked by rapidly changing political events. A careful analysis of the metadata from library records constituted a first approach. We also analysed publisher’s catalogues, important literary journals and records of associations such as the London Corresponding Society, the Circolo costituzionale in Milan, and the emphCercle Social in France. Political newspapers were another vital resource as they contain many snippets of translations. Some, like Ranza’s short-lived L’amico del popolo (1798) consisted almost entirely of selected translations.² Using these initial assumptions, we set out to identify and collate documents that would enable us to test our working definition, which was left deliberately crude at this early stage.

In addition to the challenge of finding translations, we also had to define criteria for selection in a way that did not predict the outcome. It quickly became clear that we were dealing with two broad categories of texts: a core of self-evidently radical texts or translations and a penumbra of less obvious cases where the translation could be radicalising even in cases where the source text

¹ We have acknowledged our debt to other scholars through the extensive (and still growing) bibliography on the project website and, crucially, in the notes and annotations that accompany each record entry.

² See Niccolò Valmori. "Revolutionary Translators and the Political uses of Translations in Milan during the revolutionary Triennio, 1796-1799". Unpublished article.

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may appear to be neutral. In the case of translations which reactivated well-known radical sources (for example the translations made by the Cordeliers club of 17th-century English republican texts), we wanted to see where and when these translations took place, in order to better understand how they were translated, why and by whom. But we also needed a mechanism that enabled us to ‘predict’ situations in which translation was an indirect or covert means of radical activity. How might translations of source texts that superficially may not appear radical nonetheless be considered radical within specific contexts of desire and repression?

Such contexts may include macro-events such as censorship or regime change. For instance, the translations of d’Holbach, falsely attributed to Jean-Baptiste Mirabaud, were undertaken by William Hodgson and Charles Pigott while in Newgate Prison. Or they may reflect more general social conditions, such as the position of women, that would have made the direct expression of democratic ideas difficult or impossible. In the latter case, the problem lies not just in identifying historical people and their covert uses of translation. It also calls into question how we, as researchers, approach and locate relevant translations. Novels are a good case in point. Elizabeth Inchbald’s Nature and Art, considered to be a ‘Jacobin’ novel in France was translated into French three times in 1797, including in a joint translation by Isabelle de Charrière and Isabelle de Gélieu. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s sentimental novel, Paulet Virginie (1787), first translated into English in 1788, was retranslated in 1789, 1795 and 1796, including by the well-known radical Helena Maria Williams. These multiple re-translations indicate its growing importance for the abolitionist movement.

In order to capture, therefore, a solid core of radical activity and a larger, more diffuse penumbra, our database needed to cross-reference what were essentially four distinct data-sets: on texts, people, events and places. The tighter the cross-referencing, the more visible the connection between particular procedures of translation (including changes of genre or form, word choice and function) and the transfer of revolutionary ideas and culture more generally, which naturally involves other kinds of texts and not just translations, as well as various linguistic, cultural and political constraints, not all of which are immediately or directly ascertainable. As Lieven d’Hulst has observed cultural “transfer is an opaque process—partly visible, partly mental and therefore only
partly observable”.¹ It was therefore important for this project to construct a corpus that drew attention to readily accessible features of translations as well as demarcating less visible, and more inferential kinds of cultural transfer, as I discuss below.

2. Texts: A Bibliography of Translation

Following Pym, we decided to include in our corpus as much of the “surface level text as possible”, including those elements of paratexts that are “carried over into publisher’s catalogues, reviews, or other lists by which they eventually come to us”.² On one level, this was a pragmatic decision. By the end of the 18th century, the concept of faithfulness to an original was just beginning to predominate as a value, and many translators in our own corpus actively debated the value of adapting translations to local contexts. Within the radical literary sphere in particular, there was a wide range of activity labelled under ‘translation’, with sometimes only the title remaining of the original text or even the reverse. Moreover, as I have already noted, given the speed of events during the revolutionary period (when wholesale reversals of power relations took place over days and weeks and not years), we were interested in capturing not just published translations, but unpublished or projected translations, recovered from newspapers, government archives, publisher’s prospectuses and personal correspondence.

Given that we wanted to correlate bibliographical information about translations and source texts to people, places and events, we were advised to use BIBFRAME, a cataloguing system, based on the Library of Congress, which enables records to be filtered by genre, theme, translator, publisher, date of publication.³ But translations also repackage source texts in an astonishing variety of ways—abridging, adapting, extending, condensing, extracting, reworking and

¹ D’hulst, Lieven, “(Re) Locating Translation History: From Assumed Translation to Assumed Transfer”, 142.
³ BIBFRAME describes itself as a next generation cataloguing system with the goal of relating bibliographical records with the much larger web of data. See https://www.loc.gov/bibframe/faqs/ accessed May 1, 2021.
creating new collections of original works. To capture this aspect of radicalizing translations, our data-model incorporates a particularly rich typology of translations, going much further than the book or reception histories that have featured in most studies of the revolutionary period. Each translation record is accordingly given one or several of the following descriptions, adapted from the Library of Congress classification system: abridged, adapted, extended, compiled, simplified, integral, partial, retranslation, new translation, compilation, self-translation, pseudo-translation, indirect translation.

Each entry has also been extensively annotated to make visible the paratextual features of the translations, for example whether it includes a prefaces, dedication, notes, addenda, false or fictitious imprints, revolutionary dating and so forth. We have decided to create separate records for all the paratextual metadata in our corpus in order to enable qualitative as well as quantitative analysis. In literary criticism, paratext is defined as material that surrounds the text. It is here that the translator’s voice can be heard and evidence gleaned as to why and how a particular text was translated at a particular time. ‘Minor’ paratextual elements such as the choice of dedicatee, or a date expressed in the revolutionary calendar, or a printer’s motto echoing revolutionary slogans, can become key markers of a radical translation, especially in cases when the source text has no recognizable radical content. Such elements express how texts and ideas themselves travelled or were adapted over time, in this case over a relatively short time frame of convulsive political change.

On a more conceptual level, paratext foregrounds the communicative function of translation as an active strategy of framing. For example, Angelica Baz-
zoni’s 1797 translation of Labène’s *De l’éducation dans les grandes républiques* (1794) is dedicated to “Al Popolo Sovrano” and addresses itself to citizen-mothers—a “community-building” paratext if there was one. Joel Barlow’s 1792 English translation of Brissot’s *New Travels in the United States of America* (1788) is accompanied by a veritable hermeneutical apparatus of footnotes and addenda, referencing the significance of the text for the subsequent events that took place in France. As Kathryn Batchelor has observed, “it may be more intuitive to categorise these types of [translation] paratexts not so much in terms of what they are, but what they do.”¹ To further recover how translators sought to extend radical ideas beyond the intended or imagined readership of a source text, our database classifies paratexts according to the following pragmatic functions, adapted from Nottingham-Martin², Kovala³ and Batchelor⁴:

- **Meta-communicative:** reflecting on the conditions and constraints of communication and translation
- **Community-building:** referencing groups of readers (imaginary or actual)
- **Hermeneutical:** presenting an in-depth commentary and interpretation of the source-text
- **Text-activating:** removing epistemic obstacles to the reader’s understanding, clarifying culture-specific references, reframing text for situated audience

Simple enough for classification, these functions make it possible to analyse patterns that recur across our corpus, even if any given text can fulfil several functions simultaneously.⁵ They also serve as heuristic tools that enable provisional answers to questions such as: Was there an increased intensity of certain kinds of translation practices around certain kinds of events? Did these functions coalesce around people or “geo-political” locations? which keywords came

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⁵ Dr. Rosa Mucignat spearheaded the rationale and design of this aspect of our database.
under most scrutiny? When and what kinds of translations required greater or lesser explication in the target language? Were certain genres or subjects considered more or less adaptable for target audiences, if so when and how?

3. Prosopographical Data-set

If our corpus is constituted in a conceptually “top-down” manner, our prosopography of translators attempts to refine our understanding of the role of translation in political activity from the “bottom up”, in relation to people, their networks, the organisations to which they belonged or patterns of exile. Prosopography can be defined as the investigation of the common characteristics of a group of people whose individual biographies may be largely untraceable or only indirectly known. It can also be used as an “indirect means of research” to understand: a) the shape of ideas (philosophical, scientific, political or other) that do not always have an identifiable ‘source’ but nonetheless contribute to the emergence and success of major cultural movements (Enlightenment, humanism are commonly cited examples) and b) the activities and motivations of historical actors, especially when it comes to their behaviour and motivation as part of a group.¹ As Armando and Belhoste observe, it is particularly useful for registering the complexity of a “pluralist movement”² in which the challenge is to capture both a committed core of known agents and a penumbra of less


obvious people who were sporadically involved and/or could be considered ad-
herents in certain contexts.

In our database we use prosopography primarily as an “indirect means” to
understand not so much individuals en soi but their translation activities. Some have well-documented lives. Others are far less documented and exist only
as traces in certain archival sources. When we find a name or mention of a
translator who moved in radical circles but whose works do not yet feature in
our bibliography, this prompts us to look for other works. This is especially
important for identifying the many translations published in newspapers and
ephemeral print media. Linking translators to printers or other networks, for
example through such tools as the CERL thesaurus, sheds light on anonymous,
pseudonymous or uncertain attributions. It also allows us to make some infer-
ences about motivations for translation activities. To what extent can a trans-
lator’s voice, or even his or her lexical choices, reflect the language or choices
shared by a group?

Traditional prosopographies tend to rely on an extant register or some other
historical document as the basis for establishing a social group that is typically
assumed to be well-defined. Our database on the contrary aims to highlight
translation as a social and political activity that criss-crosses multiple social or
political groups. Such networks provide evidence of how translators might be
seen as belonging to an informal social group—a set of multiple individuals who
share characteristics in common. Such a group does not necessarily align with
a pre-existing network or adherence to an organisation. Moreover, given the
convulsive historical events of revolution, we are interested in recovering an
embryonic or even truncated social identity, that can be made visible from the
ways a given translator might employ his or her contribution against unfolding
events. For instance, even if the Italian translator of Thomas Paine may not
have known Lanthenas, Paine’s French translator, he may have shared similar
networks, which can be empirically uncovered or researched. Additionally, or in
cases where such information is absent, his translation can be placed alongside
other translations of Paine and analysed formally, narratively and lexically to
see whether and how it may have addressed itself to a similar reading public or
positioned itself as part of the same or different ‘imagined community’.

That said, organisations play an important role in our database as places
where the bibliographical and prosopographical side of our project makes con-
tact. Examples include political associations that promoted the publication of certain translations, or newspapers that served as a political organ. Place is another important point of contact. As translation, by definition, is an activity that criss-crosses at least two cultures and social or political groups it serves as a vital resource for reconstructing the transnational movement of people as well as texts, important given that a number our translators may also be exiles, diplomats, refugees, or even prisoners in the same cities at certain points in their life.

This last point is crucial. The ambition of our database is to highlight the role played by translation within revolutionary lives, even to highlight how translators, taken in their ensemble, might provide us with a glimpse of what happens ‘behind the scenes’ in any moment of revolutionary upheaval. But such a focus also has a distorting effect if lives are taken out of context. One way to correct this bias would be to cross-reference each prosopographical record with chronological events, whether in the protagonist’s own life or macro-events that may have spurred a pause or increase in translation activity, for example a flight into exile, imprisonment etc. As we have not yet been able to do this, we have compensated by including longer discursive biographies for key figures in our database as well as thumbnail sketches that feature in a project blog as a ‘lives in translation’ series.

These discursive biographies also go some way towards overcoming the inherent limitations of creating machine-readable records. For extensively documented individuals with highly eventful lives and shifting allegiances, we had to decide which events to privilege. For people for whom we have very little information, the challenge was to find a way to record and acknowledge the scraps of information that functioned as circumstantial evidence in our prosopography.¹ In the end we kept our records simple in order to build them incrementally, as new knowledge was unearthed. Each record therefore includes static attributes such as dates and places of birth and whether the individual was born noble. Also included are the following acquired attributes or life-events: languages spoken, date and place of death, main place of residence and other important

¹ To account for this extreme diversity, we were advised to use the FOAF system for establishing contact histories for our translators because it is generic, compatible with BIBFRAME and allows for a modular approach.
places of residence, the organisations or associations to which they belonged, as well as the other authors, publishers, editors, translators or journalists in our database that translator knew. Additionally, we provided a link to VIAF (virtual international authority file) where it exists for this person. Key obstacles to overcome here included dealing with multiple spellings of names, especially across French and Italian. There is also a problem of pseudonyms (who was “A Kentish Bowman” who translated a French republican drama in 1792?) and pen-names (which range from the obvious Voltaire to the more mysterious M.R.D.W, who pseudo-translated from the English a violent attack on the duke of Orléans in 1789\(^1\)).

4. Time: Chronological Aspect

Investigating the multiple temporali-ties of radical experience in a transna-tional context has been one of the driving interests of this project since its inception. Translations, it seems to us, are ideal objects with which to investigate how a text might be published in response to the opening and closing of political opportunity across national or regional boundaries. I’ve already noted how any translation reflects, and also contains a reflection, on at least two chronologies: the language and culture of the source text and the target language and culture of the translation. It must be emphasised again, however, that our chronolo-gies are not general political chronologies but contain events that have been deliberately selected to be “both operationalizable and interpretative”. In Digita-l Humanities parlance, they can be considered “eventful events” relevant for both translation history and the history of radicalism, that is to say, “events that make a difference”.\(^2\) To properly visualize this time-aspect, our database enables users to correlate any given translation with respect to 5 chronologies in three different linguistic contexts. These timelines not only provide immediate contextualising information; they also enable users to make inferences about how

\(^1\) Attributed to Pelleport by Robert Darnton, *The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 351. My thanks to Brecht Deseure for this reference.

\(^2\) Stuart Dunn and Marieke Schumacher, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (2016). I thank Arianna Ciula for this reference.
translations may respond to the opening or closing of political opportunity. Through this kind of temporal indexing, users can engage in a “narrative-based discovery”.¹

More crucially, it shows how translation history can be used to nuance our understanding of revolutionary events as they were experienced by concrete historical actors operating within a rapidly changing political climate or Stimmung. These granular chronologies, which can also mapped against each other, not only make possible the discovery of new case-studies but also provide a method for reading translation. By enabling users to apply a short time-frame onto translations acts, this project has the potential to reveal the sudden conceptual shifts that take place when a certain kind of revolutionary language, say of civic republicanism, moves from one context to another. These nuanced chronologies, we hope, will also yield insight into how ideas travel and come to be considered, by the historical actors themselves, as ‘displaced’ or even ‘misplaced’, relative to their own understanding of their local context. As the theorist Elias Paltí has observed, “a history of the ‘ideas about misplaced ideas’ implies a “historical treatment of political languages and the modes of their social articulation, circulation and re-appropriation”.”² This process, Paltí notes, is essentially about translation because “political languages” consist of terms whose meaning can only even be debated and never fully resolved.³ To re-cast this point in the terms of this project, one can say that such a language can only ever be re-translated.

5. Place: Mapping Movement of People

If translation can be used to trace the movement of texts, so too it can be used to map the movement of people. Many of the protagonists in our database

moved around considerably, whether as exiles or refugees, as part of the French army or in an official capacity as administrators or diplomats. As noted above, we have not yet provided a time-based analysis of people’s movements (i.e. when they moved where), so our mapping is inferred from other data-sets. Nevertheless, the sheer variety of places involved, particularly in the Italian context, provides a corrective, we hope, to the ‘circulation’-based modelling that constitutes a great deal of book history and tends to focus on major publishing centres. To an important extent, the ‘city’ and not the nation is our primary focus of analysis as we seek to chart how informal and semi-official acts of translation mediated between cosmopolitan and more local contexts.¹

6. Concluding Remarks

By focusing on translation, this project aims to provide both a synchronic and diachronic perspective on the circulation, translation and adaptation of radical texts into new contexts. It also aims to redefine how radicalism was experienced and communicated in practice by recovering where revolutionary language went, how it travelled and what it became. Although it builds on a rich and growing textual and historiographical scholarship, this project also differs from existing approaches insofar as it seeks to operationalize aspects of our own interpretation. This includes how we have identified translation forms and para-text functions, the genres and subject-matter of source-texts, the professional and political roles of our protagonists and the chronologies that we use. By drawing out unnoticed or unseen patterns of a mostly submerged activity, we also hope to direct attention to some of the basic assumptions of revolutionary historiography, in particular its use of established (mostly national) chronologies as time frames and its preference for studying the ‘meaning’ of “source texts” rather than the mobility of revolutionary language.

But digital humanities projects also have a tendency to unfold according to their own logic, reflecting the constraints of machine-language and standard-

¹ For the importance of the city as a critical lens of analysis for understanding the relations between multi and monolingualism, see Lieven D’hulst and Kaisa Koskinen eds, Translating in Town: Local Translation Policies During the European 19th Century (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).
ization as well as the vagaries of any collaboration that involves the coordination of multiple individuals, each with their own perspective on the problem. On the one hand, the ability to link to other databases, whether through the VIAF system or to full-text digitized publications where they exist, has resulted in a highly relational website that, we hope, will contextualize a process that remains relatively little known to the scholarly community. Through the application of quantitative methods to paratext functions, we also hope to uncover patterns, or at least clues for how to map similarities as well as differences across our three target languages as well to the individual and social identities of people. At the same time, the attempt to construct a *histoire croisée* of this extremely tumultuous revolutionary period has foregrounded a key challenge of any database: namely how to make visible the interpretative decisions that make up any so-called ‘corpus’ and how to strike a balance between public users whose concerns and needs are unknown to us and our own research questions which have framed the entire process of collection. In contrast to big data projects, our database is small-scale and does not rely on pre-existing datasets. Additionally, there is the problem of constructing a multilingual database given the predominance of anglophone terms within the digital humanities.

We have tried to resolve some of these conundrums by ‘embroidering’ our website—either by including longer discursive biographies for our key players or by making extensive use of the blog post on the project website to draw attention to problems of method, the work of other scholars in the field or, indeed, some of our discoveries. By making visible the circumstantial evidence that we have used to construct our database, we also hope to alert users to the importance of any frame in deciding who or what belongs in a collection, even if their own questions and needs take them elsewhere. Finally, our descriptions of the paratextual forms and functions of each translation should increase the visibility of ‘translated’ works within revolutionary culture as a whole. In the end, it may well be that only detailed case-studies will fully demonstrate the value of our database for our research question. In the meanwhile, we hope that the densely relational and detailed annotations of our records may also aid other scholars in formulating their own questions, while remaining cognizant of the limitations and inherent subjectivity of any corpus.
Bibliography


