

## Surfaces



# EVERYDAY LANGUAGE, LITERARY LANGUAGE, AND THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION

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Volume 4, 1994

CONFÉRENCE INTERNATIONALE SUR LE DISCOURS HUMANISTE  
(PREMIÈRE RENCONTRE, 3-8 AVRIL, 1994)  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMANISTIC DISCOURSE (FIRST  
MEETING, APRIL 3-8, 1994)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064966ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064966ar>

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Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

1188-2492 (print)

1200-5320 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Krieger, M. (1994). EVERYDAY LANGUAGE, LITERARY LANGUAGE, AND THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION. *Surfaces*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064966ar>

Article abstract

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# **EVERYDAY LANGUAGE, LITERARY LANGUAGE, AND THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION**

Murray Krieger

## **ABSTRACT**

Any understanding of cultures and languages is caught up in the dynamics of translation. This essay outlines the issues of translation in a cross-cultural context and focuses on the relationship between the literary and other modes of discourse as exemplary for understanding issues of cultural translation. In describing the dissolution of the literary into general textuality, it gives a historical overview of the relationship between literary and other discourses from classical to New-Critical and Russian Formalist theories, down to today.

## **RÉSUMÉ**

Toute étude ouverte sur une pluralité de cultures ou de langues présuppose sa propre implication dans la dynamique de la traduction. L'auteur expose d'abord les grandes lignes de la problématique de la traduction trans-culturelle pour ensuite élaborer sa perspective à partir de l'exemple de la relation entre le littéraire et les autres modes du discours. Un survol historique de cette relation, depuis l'époque classique jusqu'à aujourd'hui en passant par le New-Criticism et le formalisme russe, fait voir la dissolution progressive du littéraire dans la catégorie plus générale de la textualité.

As I read our initial project, I believe we must, at this early stage, ask how we, with some expert knowledge of the best writings of a single family of language cultures, can usefully interchange these with those of other cultures. Robert Frost once defined poetry as that which cannot be

[translated](#). Such a notion suggests enormous difficulties in making the highest verbal art of one language system and culture accessible to another. But such difficulties must be confronted, and even partial solutions to them proposed, at a time when the communication and information revolution has, through its technological advances, made the intimate interaction among what are, obviously, radically different language systems and the cultures that largely determine them not only desirable but necessary. So we must press the question of whether texts in the verbal arts are translatable and, if so, with what losses in the fullness of their power.

In other words, as with fine wine, we must worry more than ever about how well a culture's literature can "travel" and with what spoilage or loss of flavor. In apparently alien cultures only now in the process of becoming newly related to one another, as in the case of the West and East Asia, one must face up to what can be translated and what cannot be translated without great loss, for we have to choose between the relatively easy task of reading translations, however inadequate, and the much harder task of learning a very foreign foreign language and culture in order to savor the original version of the text.

We have, within our own cultures, been worrying for some time about what is "unrepresentable" except in representations somehow set forth in literary texts. The question of what is untranslatable between cultures very unlike one another is a far more daunting version of this problem. Are we talking only of literary texts? What about theoretical texts that have been developed within our diverse cultures, partly in response to the workings of their literary texts? Are our theoretical and critical writings any more likely than our poetry to travel without spoilage? So, even as we discuss the difficulty, if not impossibility, of "faithful" translation, we must/pp. 5-6/ wonder about how many, and which variety, of our texts we are talking about?

Behind these questions lies the question about the nature of literary language and whether it differs essentially from what we used to call ordinary or normal or everyday language, in short, from "prose" -- meaning by that just about everything that is not "poetry," in the Aristotelian sense of the word. In short, is poetry best treated within the study of language or within the study of the other arts? Within Western cultures this has always been a troublesome issue, and literary theorists have debated it for centuries, if not for millennia. The pendulum has swung back and forth between those moments in which poetry was taken to be a distinct and aesthetically privileged form of discourse and those moments in which it was merged, without being essentially differentiated, into treatments of discourse generally.

I think it is worth tracing the history of this debate, beginning with its early versions in the heyday of rhetoric in late antiquity. There were innumerable handbooks -- actually rulebooks -- for rhetoricians written by those who followed in the discipline founded by Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which defined the art of persuasion as it should operate in the real world of action. It was a discipline that could be viewed in distinction from Aristotle's definition of *Poetics*, which was to govern the art of moving audiences through the structure of a created fiction. But for the Hellenistic handbook writers, with

their endless lists of instructions for the employment of figures, rhetoric was the only game in town and subsumed poetry.

Longinus, resisting the idolatry of rules in the proliferation of rhetoric handbooks written to tell speakers and writers how to obey them, appears to have written the influential treatise *On the Sublime* in order to insist on the need for an internal spirit that would transcend the rules of rhetoric. He showed examples of the false sublime, mere "amplification" or bombast, when uninspired verbal formulas took the place of what he called "greatness of soul" or "the power of forming great conceptions," producers of the true sublime.

Central to Longinus' effort was his pioneering distinction between rhetoric and poetry, establishing for the latter a power to elicit awe in the reader, to make the reader marvel at the representation, instead of -- as in rhetoric -- merely admiring its correctness. Rhetoric had only to be "credible," he said, while poetry had to arouse a wonder in the reader that would "in every way transcend the merely credible." Here was an early theoretical attempt to separate out and privilege the special capacities and powers of poetry, one that would be taken up, in somewhat similar terms, in the Renaissance by Jacopo Mazzoni.

In most Renaissance and Enlightenment writers (with Julius Caesar Scaliger as the most blatant, and yet perhaps most influential, example), the interest in a didactic aim for poetry allowed the missions of poetry and rhetoric to be joined, since both, seen as equally didactic, were to be devoted to persuading the reader to one sort of behavior or another: rhetoric was to persuade, and poetry was to persuade by fictional example. Aristotle's fable was to be transformed into Aesop's fable. In this conception poetry was *not* seen as a special form of discourse. There were exceptions among Renaissance theorists: I have mentioned Mazzoni, and another would be Castelvetro, both of whom, in different ways, argued for poetry's special role, and hence poetry's special character.

I skip to the latter half of the 18th Century, when writers appeared who not only argued for a special role for poetry but, for the first time, for a special way of using language in poetry. The remarkable Diderot argued for what he termed the "syllabic hieroglyph" and the verbal emblem -- notions that, I believe, should not be altogether alien to East Asian cultures, many of whose languages consist of written characters that have some relation to pictures. Here is a quotation from his "Letter on the Deaf and Dumb":

In all discourse in general we must distinguish between the thought and the expression: if the thought is rendered with clarity, purity, and precision, that is enough for ordinary conversation; join to these qualities the selection of words with rhythm and harmony, and you will have the style that is suited to the pulpit; but you will still be a long way from poetry, especially the poetry used by the ode and the epic poem in their descriptions. In poetic discourse there is a moving spirit that gives life to every syllable...[through that spirit] things are said and represented all at once: at the same time as the hearing seizes them, the mind is moved by them, the imagination sees them and the ear hears them, so that the discourse is no longer only a string of energetic

terms that expose the thought with force and nobility, but it is a tissue of hieroglyphs heaped up one on the other that pictures it. I would be able to say, in this sense, that all poetry is emblematic.[\[1\]](#)

A bit later Herder explicitly made poetry one of the "sensuous" arts by insisting upon the primacy of its aural character, and consequently its aural effect that can modify, if not transform, the dictionary meanings of its words and phrases. Another contemporary, Lessing, argued, in language that should now sound like echoes of Longinus and Mazzoni, that, unlike the writer of "prose" who merely wanted to be clear, the poet had -- even if by some obfuscation, some clouding of the matter at hand -- to bring us again into the land of wonder.

In such theorists as these, and many who follow, we have an attempt to take poetry out of the family of language, as just one among many kinds of discourse (history, philosophy, science, and just everyday language), and to let it join the family of the arts (painting, sculpture, music, etc. -- all the arts that have a sensuous medium to be manipulated, since poetry now was conceded to have one too). But among all other kinds of discourse it now would stand alone, and privileged.

Should there then to be a special language for poetry, apart from "normal" language? The claims of these critics should not be confused with the claims that 18th-century English neo-classicism made for a "poetic diction," a special vocabulary reserved solely for the use of the poet. These were standardized poetic phrases, formulaic epithets, many of them found in Pope's translations from Homer, in which Dr. Johnson claimed to find just about every happy phrase that the English language was capable of yielding. As William Wordsworth was to remind us, Thomas Gray and many poets past mid-century exaggerated this tendency in poetry that was, from Wordsworth on, set aside as stilted and unnatural, the language of books rather than of living beings, not at all what Diderot or Herder had in mind. It was important for Wordsworth to insist "that between the language of prose and metrical composition there neither is nor should be any essential difference."

But this outlawing of "poetic diction" did not mean once again a complete closing of the distance between poetry and prose, a leveling of discourse. For what Wordsworth scornfully termed "poetic diction" -- just a fancy substitute for plain talk -- was not at all what transitional thinkers like Diderot and Herder meant by their distinctions between poetry and prose, based on the power of the poetic syllable to transform meanings beyond the ostensible references of words. To these Coleridge, following German theorists in some ways inherited from Herder, added another distinction in his argument with Wordsworth, conceding that, in their diction (the actual words used), poetry and prose might not differ from one another (that is, there need be no separate vocabulary fit only for poetry); but the intensity of the internal relations among words in poems -- the additional dimensions of meaning that poems force upon their words -- was such as would add to the possibilities for meaning in a way that is unavailable to a flat prose, whose words are meant to function only via their dictionary meanings. The latter is what Mallarmé called "newspaper language." (We must remind ourselves

that recent theory has taught us that prose may never be quite "flat," that the sorts of play we have been taught to find in poems may await us wherever we look in discourse. But that's to close the gap again between poetry and the rest of discourse.)

It was the introduction of new dimensions of potential effect in the poetic word that came to control the distinction between the language of poetry and of so-called prose. We were moving toward the distinction, enunciated systematically in the earlier part of our century, between language that was used primarily to refer (presumably prose) and a verbal system (in poems) that was used primarily to appeal to emotions or to break through to the complexities of our inner experience. It was a verbal system that could press toward a metaphorical identity that emphasized the special role of metaphor in poetry and, hence, the difference between poetic metaphor and mere prosaic analogy. From Bergson to John Crowe Ransom, this critical tradition distinguished poetry from "normal" discourse by means of the difference between the approximate and the precise, between the skeleton of the world and the fullness of its body, between the universal and the particularity of the particular.

We recognize a similar theoretical pattern in terms we commonly find in the attempt of Russian and Prague School formalism to define the effect of poetic, as distinguished from normal, discourse: "defamiliarization," "estrangement" or "making strange," "deviation from the norm" -- in short, the violation of how words "normally" are presumed to work. I repeat that, unlike the old "poetic diction," these manipulations of language occur right in the midst of what, until we read it closely, appears to be "normal" discourse. Thus we need critics of poetry, acute readers all, to bring these extra dimensions that create the literariness of the literary, the poeticity of the poetic, for the less acute reader who has been reading prose -- Mallarmé's newspaper language -- all his or her life.

Recent decades have seen yet another swing -- this one perhaps the most violent yet -- back to the assimilation of the literary into the generic domain of language, indeed of all culture, high and low. But the most exciting of these postmodern readers have not undone the specialness of literary ways of playing with language so much as they have been discovering those ways operating everywhere in discourse. This imperializing expansion of the tropological and narratological way of reading only makes any project of translation -- the carrying of texts between widely separated languages and cultures -- the more intimidating. For now almost no area of textuality seems eligible for uncomplicated transportation. In a theory of language from which synonyms have been precluded, the old "heresy of paraphrase" is now coextensive with language itself. So locked is each text within its particular verbal formulation, without a neutral substance that can be carried from one verbal formula to another, that the very word *trans-lation* is belied.

We can ask whether this renewed and radical attempt to reduce all texts to an egalitarian sameness can account for those verbal sequences that, as self-conscious fictions, seem dedicated to the play among their many dimensions of conflicting meanings, all functioning together and at once, but we should defer this question until the next swing of the pendulum back toward poetic

privilege. As my survey indicated, history does seem to produce oscillations between periods when poetry and prose are confounded and periods when poetry is given unique properties. It may very well swing back again as the oscillations continue.

It may be too late for most of our generation to work toward the comprehension of what we may think of as exotically unfamiliar languages, but it must be a goal for those who follow us. East Asian scholars, we must acknowledge with some embarrassment, do much better with ours. More than ever now, as more and more texts are being read with an intensity that locks them into their language, our efforts at cultural interchange require original language study to go hand in hand with translation, as we increasingly recognize that a culture lives in and through its language, often in the most delicate and sensitive manipulations of words that create that culture's special vision, its hold on its "reality" -- which is what those outside should most want to grasp. A center of humanistic discourses is most valuable as it opens us beyond ourselves to share those visions, hard as it will be to do so without those languages (and we must, accordingly, be grateful to those who have learned ours). We must not yield to the temptation, in our comparative zeal, of underplaying such distinctness in our desire to bridge differences. All of which leaves the special problems with which I began, given our situation in which languages multiply and the distances between them widen immeasurably.

At the least we can hope here to learn how their several kinds of writings relate to the language that shapes them. In looking toward next year's meetings, I want to ask about the function in East Asian cultures of such discursive divisions *or* discursive identities as I have discussed. Knowing this, we may better gauge the potential effectiveness of our attempts to comprehend the different kinds of works their cultures offer us, and we may begin the comparative study of the role of language in constituting our respective discourses in their variety and in their sameness.

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[1] Denis Diderot, "Lettre sur les sourds et muets à l'usage de ceux qui entendent and qui parlent," in *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*. ed. Assézat, vol. I (Paris: Garnier-Frères, 1875): 374.