
REVIEW

Exploring Henri Meschonnic's Poetics of Translating

Translation in History Lecture "Translating the Poem: Henri Meschonnic's Poetics of Translating," Dr Marko Pajević's, UCL, October 23, 2014

Silvia Kadiu*

Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009) is a relatively unknown figure in the Anglophone world. A French poet, linguist, and translator, he has authored several texts about translation, only one of which has been translated into English: *Ethics and Politics of Translating* (2011). Dr Marko Pajević's exploration of Henri Meschonnic's philosophy of language, given as a part of the UCL Translation in History lecture series on 23 October 2014, provided an informative introduction to the translation theory of this controversial French thinker. The present review describes the main aspects of Meschonnic's poetics addressed by Dr Pajević during his lecture.

Review

Translating poetry is a notoriously difficult, if not entirely impossible, task. And yet, poems are translated into other languages all the time. Why is poetry such a challenging genre to translate? What does this difficulty tell us about the nature of language? And how can one overcome it in practice? Dr Marko Pajević's examination of Henri Meschonnic's poetics of translating, given as a part of the UCL Translation in History lecture series, provided compelling answers to these questions.

This comprehensive and clearly organised one-hour lecture took the audience on an inspiring meander through Meschonnic's thinking. After introducing the man and his

work, Dr Pajević then discussed the linguistic philosophies of Emile Benveniste and Wilhelm von Humboldt, before explaining how they influenced and shaped Meschonnic's poetics, politics, and ethics of translating. Navigating between theoretical and practical considerations, his presentation performed a central idea of Meschonnic's poetics: the inseparability of form and content.

Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009) is a relatively unknown figure in the Anglophone world. A French poet, linguist, and translator, he authored several texts about translation, yet, only one has been translated into English: *Ethics and Politics of Translating* (2011). Dr Pajević clarified the reasons for this lack of recognition, stressing Meschonnic's controversial positioning and deliberate isolation throughout his career, especially in opposing influential movements such as hermeneutics, structuralism, and deconstruction.

* Centre for Multidisciplinary and Intercultural Inquiry, UCL, UK
silvia.kadiu.11@ucl.ac.uk

In France, Meschonnic is best known for his translations of the Old Testament. His key notions of rhythm and continuum relate to his own experience of translating the Bible. Dr Pajević's analysis centred on Meschonnic's use of appositions, alliterations, and breaks as examples of devices aimed at recreating the flow of language. For Meschonnic, translation was not just about rendering meaning; it also involved reinventing the echo of words, the silences and the pauses articulated in speech—that is, the other ways in which meaning is created and transported. He sought to express the physicality of language, its prosodic, consonantal, and vocalic patterns.

The premise behind Meschonnic's approach was that language mediates the subject's relation to the world and to oneself. Access to truth is never direct, as thoughts are created in and through language. Language was therefore always a creative activity for Meschonnic. It was an act of *poiesis* in the etymological sense (from the Greek 'to make'). In this view, the poem becomes a process of transformation, in which life and language interact. Following Benveniste, Meschonnic challenged modern acceptations of the concept of rhythm. Rhythm was no longer a regular movement of repetition, but rather, as Dr Pajević has suggested, what flowed over speech.

Rhythm is a crucial notion in Meschonnic's philosophy because it relates to the construction of the subject, the way it is inscribed in discourse, and its historicity as a unique utterance within a specific context. Good translating, he perceived, should strive to recreate not what the words say (that is, their meaning), but what they do (or how they convey it). Translating is thus itself an act of creation—a poetic activity in the sense of 'making.' As such it has extensive social, political, and ethical consequences. The unspeakable is spoken, in Meschonnic's view, not through revelation of the latent aspects of the poem, but within the creative act of translating itself.

One of the main highlights of Dr Pajević's lecture was his insistence upon the transformative aspect of Meschonnic's poetics. The latter's conception of untranslatability as a stepping stone for creativity and change recalls Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella's approach in *One Poem in Search of a Translator: Rewriting 'Les Fenêtres' by Apollinaire* (2008). This experiment calls on translators from different backgrounds and working contexts to engage with the multimodal dimension of Apollinaire's poem, which was inspired by Robert Delaunay's 'Les Fenêtres' series of paintings. The final product showcases a broad spectrum of creative techniques, ranging from machine translations to inventive uses of colour and collage.

Throughout Dr Pajević's lecture, Meschonnic's theory of translating echoed not only with what Loffredo and Perteghella refer to as a 'creative turn' in translation studies (2006), but also with wider philosophical movements, such as phenomenology and deconstruction. Dr Pajević's interpretation of Meschonnic's work further offered illuminating insights into the singular vision of this relatively unknown French thinker and a much-needed contribution, which opens up exciting perspectives and comparative avenues for additional research.

References

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