Locating the digital in literary translatorship

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Thanks to the inclusion of sociological perspectives in the development of translator studies, the roles played by literary translators in the movement of texts between languages and cultures, and their positions within the fields of power that govern these processes, have become increasingly popular objects of study. However, despite the focus of sociological and translator studies on the agency and habitus of translators in literary translation processes, little has been done to connect this work to the ever-changing and proliferating digital contexts in which literary translation now takes place. This introductory article therefore seeks to position existing perspectives on literary translatorship within contemporary digital contexts whilst highlighting the increasing role of digital technology within literary translation processes, thereby emphasising the need to include digital technologies within all forms of research on contemporary literary translatorship going forwards.

Keywords: translatorship, literary translator, translator studies, sociological approaches, digital age, authorship, professional identity

1. Literary translatorship in digital contexts

Since the "sociological turn," the focus in literary translation studies has expanded beyond the textual to examine literary translators and their labour within the contexts that they work. Through a focus on the social structures in which translators operate, the agents with whom they collaborate, and the translator's agency in relation to these two external factors, translators have come to be understood as "socialized individuals" (Meylaerts 2008, 91) whose behaviour and activities are constrained by the prevailing norms in their socio-cultural contexts. Such sociological perspectives have marked a shift from focusing on the translated product to viewing translation as an "event" (Toury 1995, 249) or process that starts "with

the client's request for a translation" and ends "with its reception by other agents on various levels" (Chesterman 2007, 173). Translation is now, therefore, regarded as a collaborative activity and the final product is the outcome of "multiple translatorship" (Jansen and Wegener 2013, 1) whereby the translator is not the sole decision-maker in the translation process, but rather their agency is intertwined with that of other agents across the "spheres" of transnational creation, production and reception (McMartin and Gentile 2020). This focus on the "central role of translators" (Hu 2004, 115–116) and an "abundance of translator-centered publications since the 2000s" (Kaindl 2021, 12) have, therefore, resulted in the development of what is now referred to as (literary) translator studies (Chesterman 2009; Kaindl 2021). However, despite demonstrating the complex and vital social roles played by literary translators in the movement of texts between languages and cultures, much of this work has remained historical in nature (see Freeth 2022, 8–9). Thus, if the concept of translation has now expanded to encompass the entire process from commission to reception and if the various agents involved are all responsible for the translated text to some degree, the question becomes: what does it mean to be a literary translator in our contemporary, digital world?

This special issue aims to address this question by examining the literary translator "in digital contexts." In translation studies, discussions of translation and the digital are often associated with the work of Michael Cronin, whose *Translation in the Digital Age* "examines the role of translation with regard to the debates around emerging digital technologies and analyses their social, cultural and political consequences" (2013, ii). Notably, in both Cronin's work and that of others such as sociologist Gabe Ignatow's *Sociological Theory in the Digital Age* (2020), "the digital age" is used in a general sense and is often interchanged with terms such as "the information age." For us, digital contexts are similarly understood in a broad sense, referring to contemporary contexts marked by the widespread use of digital and online technologies enabled through the proliferation of computer technology. Furthermore, while humans are inevitably involved in Cronin's work (2013), his focus largely remains on the relationship between the act of translation and the digital tools and technologies that now facilitate this act, rather than explicitly on translators. As such, we develop Desjardins, Larsonneur and Lacour's argument that "translation is a social practice" in which digital technologies play a role (2021, 3) to focus squarely on what it means to be a literary translator in a context that is now dominated by digital and online technologies.

This idea, which we refer to as "literary translatorship," is used as an umbrella term across this special issue to encompass the multifaceted roles played by translators in the creation, production and reception of literary texts; their working patterns and flows; their (self-)perceived image and status; their interactions and collaborations with other agents; and the wider literary production and publish-

ing spheres in which they operate. This broad understanding reflects the etymological ambiguity inherent in the English term "translatorship." As noted by Flynn and Gambier (2011, 93), the combination of the nounal suffix "-ship" with translator results in a change of meaning that most commonly falls within three categories. The first pertains to the "quality or condition" of being a translator. However, such an ontological view of translatorship fails to account for the fact that the state of being a translator must be reified through an act of translation. Thus, the second meaning of a "competence" comes into play, whereby it is in the skill and ability to translate that the condition of being a translator is fulfilled. In demonstrating this skill, then, the third aspect also comes into focus: "status." Demonstrating the requisite skills and being classified as a translator is therefore a process that must be conceived as a "social role" because these skills and abilities are learned, practised and recognised "within a cultural environment" (Toury 1995, 53). As demonstrated by this etymological aside, then, the general concept of translatorship is not only broad and multifaceted, but also slippery.

The concept of "translatorship" has similarly eluded strict definition within academic discussions and we see existing research as falling into three main perspectives: (1) author–translator hierarchies (e.g., Pym 2011; Jansen 2019; Bantinaki 2020); (2) the social structures that define translatorship in line with translators' agency, habitus and position in the literary translation and publishing fields (e.g., Toury 1995; Meylaerts 2008; Freeth 2022, 2024b); and (3) translatorship as a professional identity (e.g., Paloposki 2016; Svahn 2020; Heino 2021; Sela-Sheffy 2023; Bednárová-Gibová and Majherová 2021). For a special issue focussed on literary translatorship in digital contexts, then, the goal becomes locating digital media and technologies within these various perspectives on literary translatorship and positioning other forms of literary translatorship within our contemporary digital contexts and environments.

1.1   Author–translator hierarchies

The first perspective on translatorship within current research pertains to ontological questions of what conditions make someone a translator and how these relate to other textual producers. As the "creators of aesthetic objects whether visual or textual," the condition and state of being an author is fairly simple to trace and, even in cases of pseudonymous, anonymous or collective authors, can be attributed to a persona if not a person (Longolius 2016, 1). Within translation studies, however, the translator's responsibility for the creation of the translated literary text almost inherently positions translatorship in conflict with original authorship, whether that be through competition between translatorship and authorship or through envisaging the translator as an authorial presence themselves. As such,

there have been consistent debates on whether translators can claim authorship and whether this authorship should be acknowledged, paratextually or otherwise.

One of the most prominent scholars in favour of acknowledging the translator's authorship is Lawrence Venuti, whose exploration of "invisibility" in an Anglophone context (1995) emphasised the role of the translator as "a co-producer of a text, enforced by the prevailing practices of marketing, reading and evaluating translations, and encouraged by the ambiguous legal status of translation and of translators" (Emmerich 2013, 200). In taking this view, translatorship is positioned in hierarchical conflict with authorship, with authorship coming out on top. Hierarchical distinctions between the translator's inferior and subordinate status and the author's sacred position have mainly resulted from the Romantic concept of the author as creative genius (Summers 2019, 35). Thus, authors are viewed as the creators of their texts and as the source of the meanings within, whilst translators are regarded as imitators of the original author and usually do not enjoy the same treatment and status. As noted by Freeth (2024a, 8–9), this marginalised status of the translator can still be seen through the existence of campaigns for translators to be named on the covers of their translations, and so positioned alongside their authors, in contemporary Anglophone contexts. For scholars such as Venuti (1995), then, translatorship is not only tied to the translator's authorial role in creating the target text, but also how this (often limited) status is recognised both within and beyond the text.

Another scholar who makes a distinction between authorship and translatorship is Anthony Pym (2011), although he makes this distinction in terms of ethical responsibility rather than creativity. His focus on authorship is "precisely and exclusively in the sense of responsibility within communication acts, that is, from the perspective of formal pragmatics" (2011, 32). For Pym, it is reasonable that translators cannot be responsible for their words in the same way as authors because they are not the originators of the message (2011, 31). In making this distinction between authorship and translatorship based upon the ethical question of whether a translator can take full responsibility for a text, Pym therefore clearly distinguishes between the differing duties and labour inherent in the roles of author and translator.

A similar distinction can be seen in applications of Michel Foucault's concept of "author-function" (1977) within translation studies, which refers to a discourse of authorship "that develops constantly over time and space, not only a contextual frame for the texts and life of an author but also a product of their interpretation and of the discourses in which they are embedded" (Summers 2012, 171). Scholars such as Hermans (1999) and Refsum (2017) have since developed the concept of "translator function" within translation studies, which in Hermans' terms "serves to keep translation in a safe place, locked in a hierarchical order, conceptualized

and policed as derivative, delegated speech" (1999, 3). For Hermans, then, translatorship (understood here as the translator function) remains second order to that of authorship on a discursive level. Refsum, on the other hand, suggests that the translator function can be used to ascribe "ownership" of a text to a translator (2017). This, however, becomes even more complex when we consider that the author function itself may also be translated and so the dichotomy becomes a complex web between the original author function, the translated author function, and the translator function (Summers 2012, 2017).

Cronin makes an interesting contribution to the author versus translator debate by differentiating between primary and secondary authorship in an era of digital reproduction. The former refers to the author of a programme "that generates other objects" whilst the latter refers to the designer of "individual end products" within that programme (2013, 61). This distinction is then likened to playing a video game, whereby the secondary author "may invent (author) their own stories, but they are playing by rules and in an environment designed by someone else" (ibid.). The inference here is that if we see the translator as a "secondary author" who translates within digital tools and environments, the end product is mediated by the constraints of that platform and the primary author who designed it. Here, translatorship remains secondary, but to a different, technological author. Thus, when we consider the increasing use of digital and online technologies such as Computer Assisted Translation tools in literary translation workflows (Youdale and Rothwell 2022; Rothwell, Way and Youdale 2024), the act of translation can be seen as increasingly distant from that of writing, which is mediated by different digital tools and technologies and so is subject to a different form of primary authorship. However, as AI technologies develop and enter the workflows of all forms of text-creation and "text-modifying practices" (van Doorslaer 2020), including (literary) translation, it remains to be seen whether this divide between the tools we use to write and to translate continues.

In terms of how translators see themselves within this dichotomy, scholars such as Jansen (2019) have examined how literary translators view authors and authorship. Based on a survey of literary translators in Scandinavia, she argues that translators should "be credited for their creativity, their originality, their art, as well as for their ownership of the text, in their very capacity as translators, not authors" and "there is no need to be sorry about the translator not being an author" (2019, 686). Jansen therefore argues that translators should have ownership, rather than authorship, of the translated text and translators should simply be acknowledged as translators. Conversely, Bantinaki (2020) assesses the idea that literary translators should be acknowledged as authors of the works that they produce from a philosophical perspective. She argues that "rather than being authors of *literary works* proper, even of a derivative kind, [translators] are

authors of *constrained representations* of literary works" (2020, 306, emphasis in the original). At the heart of this debate, then, lies the question of how we define and conceptualise translation as an act of textual production. In an age where digital and online media are infiltrating every facet of everyday life, including translatorial activities, the role of technology in defining both the act of translation and the status of those who perform this action cannot be understated.

1.2   Social structures and literary translatorship

Beyond hierarchical conceptualisations of the author–translator dichotomy, there have also been attempts to delineate translatorship along the lines of how translators fit within broader social structures and networks of translation. For example, according to Toury (1995, 53, emphasis in the original),

> "translatorship" amounts first and foremost to being able to *play a social role*, i.e., to fulfil a function allotted by a community – to the activity, its practitioners and/ or their products – in a way which is deemed appropriate in its own terms of reference. The acquisition of a set of norms for determining the suitability of that kind of behaviour, and for manoeuvring between all the factors which may constrain it, is therefore a prerequisite for becoming a translator within a cultural environment.

In Toury's understanding, then, translatorship is conceived as the function performed by translators within a given context and so such performances are subject to various types and degrees of norms. One benefit of Toury's definition is that its breadth allows different forms of translatorship to develop within different cultural environments, as defined by the relevant communities and the functions they associate with being a translator. Changes to the translation landscape, for instance through the proliferation of digital and online technologies, can therefore change the rules of the game when playing the social role of literary translator and necessitate an understanding of the norms and structures that exist within digital contexts.

To explore how translators interiorize norms and structures, Meylaerts (2008) places her focus on individuals and defines translatorship in terms of habitus. She argues that translators are "not only professionals but socialised individuals," so they have "plural and dynamic (intercultural) habituses" that interplay with norms (2008, 91). In Meylaerts's view, "translatorship amounts to an individuation of collective schemes related to personal history, the collective history of the source culture, the collective history of the target culture, and their intersections" (2008, 100–101). In other words, Meylaerts' exploration of translatorship takes a practical and historical perspective based on investigating individual translators'

socio-biography to identify the decisions made by translators and the impact of societal norms on these choices. Thus, if we seek to understand translatorship in digital contexts, we must begin to examine the norms that govern translators as socialised individuals within translation and publishing practices that are now mediated by digital technologies.

Freeth (2022, 2024b) presents one such attempt to examine literary translatorship in digital contexts, with a focus on the practices and work of contemporary translator Jamie Bulloch. Starting from a general definition of translatorship as the "translator's involvement in broader literary translation and publishing processes in the global circulation of literature" (2022, 3), Freeth goes on to use an inductive analysis of the activities described by Bulloch during interview to define four key aspects of his translatorship: his role as a literary scout, as a rewriter, as a marketer and as an ambassador (27). In defining literary translatorship through the fulfilment of these social roles, Freeth harkens to the work of Sela-Sheffy (2008) and her studies on translator personae. This link to personae is strengthened further through discussions of what he refers to as "the performance of translatorship" (Freeth 2024b), which draws explicitly on the work of Sonja Longolius and her research into the performance of authorship and author personae (2016). In understanding translatorship as a performance, Freeth (2024b) emphasises the agency of the translator in fulfilling their translatorship and the opportunities for this performance to achieve visibility – particularly in digital and online spaces such as social media where translators can discuss their work outside the control of institutions such as publishers.

Sociologically informed work into the role and function of literary translators in digital contexts also reflects broader investigations into the sociology of the contemporary literary publishing industry. Notable works include John B. Thompson's *Merchants of Culture* (2010) and *Book Wars* (2021), which present large scale, Bourdieusian mappings of the English-language publishing world with a focus on the impact of the digital revolution on publishing practices. While Thompson's macro-level work is largely focused on the broader processes of literary production across the industry, it has since been complemented by more micro-level, production-side work such as Clayton Childress' *Under the Cover* (2017), which charts the creation, production and reception of a single text from conception to reception and has been adapted for use in translation studies by McMartin and Gentile (2020). Despite the different levels of focus, however, the extent to which digital technologies and online platforms have become central to the literary publishing field becomes increasingly clear in both Thompson and Childress' work. Indeed, even when taking a reception-side view, Simone Murray's Bourdieusian charting of *The Digital Literary Sphere* (2018) demonstrates

how "traditional literary 'processes'" have been adapted for digital spaces, with a particular focus on text reception and author interactions with readers.

In all three of the above-mentioned sociological studies of how literary publishing has been shaped by digital and online technologies, translation and translators are notable in their absence – perhaps due to the authors' focus on English-language publishing fields. Nevertheless, if we understand translatorship as a "social role […] within a cultural environment," and we acknowledge that such research has demonstrated how the cultural environment of the publishing industry has been significantly impacted by the widespread proliferation of digital technologies and online platforms, the translator's social role must also be understood as having been impacted by these same industry shifts and developments.

1.3   Literary translatorship as a professional identity

We describe the final primary perspective on literary translatorship within existing research as research on professional identities. One notable work within this branch is Elin Svahn's doctoral thesis (2020), in which she investigates the translatorship of various occupational groups in Sweden, including professional translators, literary translators and MA students in Translation Studies. Through an exploration of the nature of translatorship and professional identity in the Swedish context, how students acquire this translatorship, and how the function of translatorship is perceived by individual translators, Svahn uncovers the professional characteristics that commonly define translatorship, such as individualism, entrepreneurialism, collectiveness, translator status, responsibility and exit (the prospect of leaving the profession). Notably, Svahn links this professional identity to the translator's "social role," which she refers to as "extratextual translatorship," but notes that this role must be learned and so becoming a translator highlights the "developmental character" of translatorship (2020, 3). For Svahn, this extratextual translatorship sits alongside textual and paratextual translatorship, which refer to the translator's presence at the textual level and representations of translator's identities, working environment and translation practices in paratextual materials respectively (2020, 2–8). Given that scholars have demonstrated the changes and challenges within the publishing industry brought forward by digital technologies in textual, paratextual and extratextual spaces (such as Thompson 2010; Murray 2018 and Freeth 2022), all three levels of Svahn's translatorship present potential sites for investigations into literary translatorship in digital contexts. Nevertheless, in linking translatorship to professional identity, questions surrounding how translators construct, perform and reflect on these identities in digital and online spaces become increasingly urgent.

Another approach that focuses on the occupational profile of translators is Paloposki's (2016) research on translators in late-nineteenth century Finland. Paloposki finds that translators fulfilled various social roles, as traditionally a lot of Finnish translators were also priests or teachers, and so she turns our attention to the questions of "when and in what situations and contexts a person called him-/herself a translator, and when other people called them translators" (Paloposki 2016, 27). In this way, translatorship can be construed as a narrative that is constructed by both the professionals themselves and by others. Similarly focused on the Finnish context, Heino (2021) then explicitly applies the concept of narrative identity to examine the translatorship and professional identity of ten literary translators in contemporary Finland. Consequently, Heino's (2021) translatorship refers to "a social role," but not in the sense of how translators translate or interact with other stakeholders in a socio-cultural context. Instead, her focus is on "the contents of the translators' life-stories and how their translatorship and professional identity have been shaped through various experiences in their lives" and "if the narratives and ways to construct their professional identity differ between translators who have a formal translator training and those who have not studied translation" (2021, 123). Thus, clear links can be drawn between the research on social structures discussed above and the professional narratives of translatorship woven both by translators themselves and by others.

Bednárová-Gibová and Majherová take perspectives on professional identities in another direction by conducting a socio-psychological analysis of academic literary translators' happiness-at-work (HAW) in the Slovak translation industry, aiming to "explore correlations between selected sociodemographic, occupational prestige variables and happiness at work" (2021, 167). Based on data collected from a self-report questionnaire, their research shows that "despite their average status, influence and weak social appreciation, the translators seem to show fairly positive happiness styles," and correlations "were found between the translators' HAW and time dedicated to translation, their status and the level of remuneration" (Bednárová-Gibová and Majherová 2021, 183). While research into professional translator's status or job satisfaction has become a burgeoning field (see, for instance, the overview provided by Dam and Ruokonen 2024), such research has typically focused on institutional and business translators. Thus, Bednárová-Gibová and Majherová's work marks one of the few projects focusing on literary translators specifically and raises interesting questions around the impact of digital and technological advancements on literary translators' job satisfaction or HAW, as well as how we can investigate the status and satisfaction of literary translators in sociocultural contexts where the field is less professionalised.

Within this discussion on professional identities, it is also worth noting that questions pertaining to whether literary translation can be considered a profession remain. What makes someone a professional literary translator? Is this definition tied to whether a translator earns their living from solely literary work (or even from just translation); to membership of professional body; to how many literary translations they produce; or to a myriad of other factors? As argued by Sela-Sheffy, translators have an "enduring ambiguous status as a profession" and are "still permanently under-professionalized," even in prosperous markets (2023, 92–93). Furthermore, the highest level of literary translators' professionalism in her Israeli context "entails a natural predisposition to translating, regardless of formal professionalization markers" (97) and so "the higher one's position as a literary translator, the more strongly one rejects standard training and praises an autodidactic self-refinement" (98). Thus, according to Sela-Sheffy, the professional status of literary translatorship can be constructed through the accrual of symbolic capital within the literary field, rather than through professionalisation, and so the question of how this accrual of capital may be achieved within digital contexts or facilitated by technological developments becomes increasingly apparent.

As made clear by this overview of the various understandings of literary translatorship across translation studies and the repeated presence of digital and online technologies within our discussion, understanding the roles, functions and narratives that contribute to literary translatorship in digital contexts is a key step in understanding how translators fit into the contemporary publishing world. As such, this special issue seeks to make a meaningful contribution to developing that understanding, whilst also demonstrating how literary translatorship can be manifested across a variety of translational contexts and practices. Indeed, these five articles demonstrate the diverse and multifaceted ways that literary translatorship is growing and developing in digital contexts – and we look forward to seeing what innovations come next.

2.   Literary translatorship and the digital in this special issue

The contributions featured in this special issue explore aspects of literary translatorship in digital contexts across a variety of social fields, working outward from specific personal and political case studies to broader social and international contexts of literary translation. Nevertheless, despite these differences in scope, all of the contributions highlight the significance of literary translators' roles beyond the act of translation and address how recent technological developments have shifted the way translatorship is performed.

Martina Pálušová opens the special issue with her article "The translator as a social activist in the digital age: An autoethnographic study of translating *Insulted. Belarus* as part of the Worldwide Readings Project," which details her activist role in supporting the fight against the authoritarian regime in Belarus. Adopting an autoethnographic approach, Pálušová's self-reflective study provides in-depth insights into the formation of a digital network to translate, perform and publicise a politically charged play within the digital space. Her research addresses the influence, advantages and limitations of digital environments in the translation process and reflects on their suitability as a means to reach international audiences, while also demonstrating the growing importance of digital technologies as a means of facilitating collaborations between translators in diverse linguistic contexts. In doing so, Pálušová reflects on how literary translators can contribute to political activism and the role of digital technologies in allowing translators to actively contribute to achieving social change.

In her article "The instafamous translator: Exploring the manifestations of Francesca Crescentini's literary translatorship on social media platforms," **Silvia Fini** investigates how literary translators can use social media to autonomously increase their visibility. Fini presents a case study of the influencer and translator Francesca Crescentini, arguing that her status as a macro-influencer on platforms such as Instagram makes her an "instafamous translator." This novel approach combines social media studies with the concepts of "translator brand" (Zhang 2023) and "translator celebrity" (Akashi 2018) to give insights into how Crescentini uses social media to promote herself and her work outside the control of the Italian publishing industry – a context where translator visibility is typically low. Fini's article not only demonstrates the ways in which a translator's social media visibility can be studied, but also demonstrates how literary translators can use digital and social media to achieve visibility for themselves and their work through the development of a loyal fanbase on social media platforms.

Maialen Marin-Lacarta's article "Charting literary translator collaborations in digital contexts: A landscape" addresses the significance of research on literary translator collectives. She explores collaborations spanning the entire literary translation and publishing process, including text selection, pitching, promotion and self-publishing in the digital sphere. Through an analysis of five literary translator collectives in various linguistic contexts, Marin-Lacarta sheds light on the varied ways collectives are formed, their distinct goals and how digital tools enable their work, whilst also highlighting the diversity between market-oriented and socially driven collectives. Marin-Lacarta's research suggests that collaboration in literary translation extends beyond the act of translation itself, necessitating a broader understanding of the translation process and the various collaborations that take place within. Thus, her work constitutes a foundational

exploration that can guide further research into the innovative ways literary translators collaborate and the influence of such collectives in the global publishing sphere.

In her paper "Literary translators in-between: An exploration of their self-imaging discourse and relationship to technology," **Paola Ruffo** challenges the perception that literary translators are technophobic and indifferent to the economic imperatives of digitalization in contemporary translation contexts. Drawing on survey data gathered during her doctoral research, Ruffo examines translators' self-image in relation to their workflows and technologies and compares this to how literary translators believe outsiders to the profession perceive them. Ruffo's research emphasises the importance of studying literary translators' self-image in relation to their socio-technological context and suggests that the key to understanding professional translation practice is to recognise the diverse factors that affect translators' willingness and ability to adapt to changing technology. Her translator-centred approach therefore enables us to go beyond the dichotomy of technology versus literary translation, a traditional approach in literary translator studies, to provide a better understanding of the professional and technological needs of literary translators working in digital contexts.

Eva Janssens' article "How supranational literary prizes shape translation flows: Comparing the prizing logics of the Booker Prize and the European Union Prize for Literature" investigates the broader social context in which literary translators currently work through an examination of the relationship between literary prizes and translation flows. She focuses on two major prizes in the UK and Europe, the Booker Prize and the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL), and uses bibliographic data to develop the idea of "prizing logics," a concept that helps explain the differences in how and why these two literary prizes generate translations. Her analysis provides insights into how factors such as the prizes' prestige, their focus on commercial success, or their role in promoting supranational political agendas influence which texts are translated and into which languages. Thus, Janssens' article emphasises the position of literary translators within broader economic, political and sociocultural processes at an international level and showcases how the digital presence of such prizes can facilitate research to better understand these flows and their impact on literary translatorship.

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