

Translating Poetry into Music

Dr Felicity Haynes, The University of Western Australia

This paper examines the problems of commensurability of diverse arts, focussing on the problem of translating a poem into musical form or vice versa. It can be misleading to presume a distinction, as Hofstadter did, between a literal and a figural translation, the spirit of one artistic form and its 'letter'. Any relationship of artistic style, with its discipline' (method of analysis and disinterpretation) requires a rethinking of traditional notions of the autonomy of representational discourse. I propose a notion of embodied imagination or metaphor which allows us to make sense literally of multiple arts and their frames of discourse.

Why atomistic translation doesn't work

On an atomistic view of knowledge, any two conceptual systems are commensurable if each language can be translated into the other, sentence by sentence, preserving truth conditions. The French word {\i chat} can be translated by the English word {\i cat} because they both refer to the same thing, "The cat sat on the mat" means the same as "Le chat se place sur le tapis", and so on, to cover the whole range of possible sentences. But even at a propositional level we have problems. Does the notion of the cat placing himself on the mat mean the same as the very proper English of the cat sitting on the mat? Is 'tapis" too grand to replace a mere mat?

The problem becomes more apparent if we look at book titles, where the meaning is more compressed. Hofstadter (1985, p.586-7) gives us the problem of translating {\i All the President's Men}, a political thriller, or {\i Le corps a ses raisons}, a book about health and physical fitness, noting that "a word for word translation would be as dull as dishwater, as flat as old carbonated ginger-ale whose carbonated kick has long since evaporated". In order to keep the title alive in any language you have to find a line that captures the essence of the whole book. And the particulars don't seem as important as the idea, the essence, the spirit of the thing.

In 1981, Hofstadter and Dennett published a book called {\i The Mind's I} , subtitled "Fantasies and reflections on self and soul". On the atomistic view of translation, we would have to begin translating this by seeking the thing(s) that 'mind' and 'I' refer to, and somehow try to accommodate these with the idiomatic "the mind's eye" that most English speakers will be familiar with. Hofstadter says that he would find satisfactory the French {\i Vues de l'esprit} (literally "Views of Spirit") because it gets across the main purpose of the book - to focus on the nature of mind from many angles, and at the same time preserves an idiomatic meaning, namely the grandiose dreams such as are dreamt by visionaries and lunatics - visions, or hallucinations (Hofstadter, 1987, p 587).

You can see from the above that an atomistic or structuralist

view of knowing the world cannot allow for the translation of phrases into different languages. I list its presumptions below. There is no room here for something we can add on as the shape of the idea.

ATOMIST or STRUCTURALIST VIEW

- * Thought is the mechanical manipulation of abstract symbols.
- * The mind is an abstract machine, manipulating symbols essentially as a computer does, that is, by algorithmic computation.
- * Symbols (eg words and mental representations) get their meaning via correspondences to things in the external world. All meaning is of this character.
- * Symbols that correspond to the external world are internal representations of external reality (Goodman, Languages of Art)
- * Abstract symbols may stand in correspondence to things in the

world independent of the peculiar properties of any organisms

- * Since the human mind makes use of internal representations of external reality, the mind is a mirror of nature, and correct reason mirrors the logic of the world.
- * It is thus incidental to the nature of meaningful concepts and reason that human beings have the bodies they have and function in their environment in the way they do. Human bodies may play a role in choosing which concepts human beings actually employ, but they play no essential role on characterising what constitutes a concept and what constitutes reason.
- * Thought is abstract and disembodied, since it is independent of any limitations of the body, its perceptual system, and nervous system.
- * Machines that do no more than mechanically manipulate symbols that correspond to things in the world are capable of meaningful thought and reason.
- * Thought is atomistic, that is it can be completely broken down into simple building blocks - the symbols used in thought - which are combined into complexes and manipulated by rule.
- * Thought is logical in the technical sense used by philosophical logicians; that is, it can be modelled accurately by systems of the sort used in mathematical logic. These are abstract symbol systems defined by general principles of symbol manipulation. (This and the table on experiential realism on p.11 are taken, with modifications, from Lakoff's *Women Fire and Dangerous Things*.)

The idea of a categorizing structure is central to the atomistic view. The idea is that most symbols do not designate particular things or individuals in the world. Most of our words and concepts designate categories - either in the physical sense, such as chairs and zebras, or activities and abstract things - singing and songs, voting and governments. Things are in the same

category if and only if they have certain properties in common. Those properties are necessary and sufficient conditions for defining the category.

On this view, poetry and music are categories of symbols that allow us to express things - emotions, selves, a sense of place - to one another, and therefore are translatable from one to another. This category view of the world is what gives us a notion of disciplines in education, forms of knowledge in Hirstian terms. It could be argued that this atomistic view of knowledge could accommodate translation of the "shape" of a work of art from one form to another - all we have to do is to find common symbols which express the shape, just as we did with the book titles. And we could do this with common forms, other shared signs, as well as with words. We do seem to assume that this is possible when we ask students to produce a visual diary, to articulate in words or diagrams, their ideas for a work of art.

We can give shape to music or a poem literally. We do often use the visual image to add meaning to poetry - for instance,

Herbert's *Easter Wings*.
LORD, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poor:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks,
Harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did begin:
And still with sickness and shame

Thou didst so punish sin,
That I became
Most thin.
With thee
Let me combine
And feel this day thy victory:

For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me
But does this give meaning to the poem or merely add it? Does it help to understand Chopin's Etude in C major Op. No 1 if we make it into a picture like this?
and say that *this* is what gives us a shared nonverbal meaning, a series of peaks and troughs that lifts our emotions or

throws us into the depths of despair? We can and do use spatial metaphors to describe music, when we speak for instance of the soaring arches of Allegri's *Misere* rising high above the mundane plainsong. The visual images are appropriate - they do give shape to the meaning. Does that translation into a different shape transmit the understanding of it? To even ask that question I seem to have to assume that I can stand aside from it and reflect on the differences from a metalevel. Many philosophers, and particularly Nelson Goodman, have remarked that poetry and music are unlike painting in that they can be, indeed are, read linearly, in a sequence. This should make them easier to translate - it is simply a matter of abstracting the structure and finding shared relationships. And this 'translation' into a higher level seems to be what we are doing when we transpose it into another symbol system., when we add the shape of the poem, or look at the shape of the music alongside its sound. We are doing a rational reconstruction, stepping into a higher-order structure to "heighten consciousness" - this however is directed to anonymous rule-systems simply at another level. That is to slide back into the atomistic assumption that the meaning is analytic, that we could in principle articulate it in a list of words and discrete parts. What we are still missing here is the pulling together of discrete elements to form harmonic chords, counter movement. In art we require other dimensions, yoked together. When we try to reduce a theme of music or a poetic sequence to a linear sequence, even graphically, something is lost. It is the particular way the constitutive elements hold together that endows them with significance.

This has not got us very far in our search for translation. What has the notational structure to do with the music anyway? As much as the letters have to do with the words which constitute the poetry? They are only parts of the poem or piece of music and the whole is more than the sum of its parts. We want more than the shape of its components. It is something to do with fluency and style. And style is not tied to its components. It goes beyond the letter, note or shape.

What counts as spirit or style?

Hofstadter illustrates the quality of style by a charming matrix of 56 variations on the letter A (Fig 12-3 *Metamagical Themas* p.243)

What do these have in common? We understand them all as the letter A. But it would be misleading to assume that there was a "real" letter A, which had necessary and sufficient conditions for its use, of which these were all elaborations. We see these as the letter A, and there is no one feature common to them all. Hofstadter says (1987, p.279) of these: "There is more going on in typefaces than meets the eye, literally. The shape of a letter form is a surface manifestation of deep mental

abstractions. It is determined by conceptual considerations and balances that no finite set of merely geometric measurements

could capture. Underneath each instance of A there lurks a concept, a Platonic entity, a spirit. This Platonic entity is not an elegant shape such as Univers A (D3), not a template with a finite number of knobs, not a topological or group-theoretical invariant in some mathematical heaven", but both a mental abstraction and a tacit understanding - a different sort of beast. Each instance of the A spirit reveals something new about the spirit without ever exhausting it.

Hofstadter argues that true understanding depends on more than understanding something about each symbol in isolation; it depends equally on taking into account the ways that symbols are interrelated, on the ways that they depend on each other to define a total style. An understanding of the letter "a" for instance requires a simultaneous solution to the vertical and horizontal problems of letter and form or spirit respectively. He (1987 p.287) continues to draw an illuminating analogy with the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law,

"The words spirit and letter of course recall the contrast between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law and the way in which our legal system is constructed so that judges and juries will base their decisions on precedents. This means that any case must be mapped, in a remarkably fluid way, by members of a jury onto previous cases. It is up to the opposing lawyers, then to be advocates of particular mappings; to try to channel the jury members perceptions so that one mapping dominated over another. The law canon, extant rules, statutes and so on are never enough to capture all possible cases. The legal system depends on the notion that people, whose experience covers much more than the specific case and rule at hand will bring to bear their full range of experience not only with many categories but also with the whole process of categorization and mapping. This allows them to transcend the specific rigid, limited rules and to operate according to more fluid, imprecise and yet more powerful principles. Or to revert to the other vocabulary, to transcend the letter of the law and apply its spirit. It is this tension between rules and principles, tension between letter and spirit that allows us to explore the relationship between artistic design and mechanizability."

claiming that people bring to bear on any particular case their full range of experience with the process of mapping and categorizing according to rules and principles of law. He believes that the difference between the spirit and the letter is what makes artistic design a non-mechanizable practice, that one can never reduce the experience to a mechanised following of the rules. Creativity involves what he calls a sort of knob twiddling, but it

involves knowing how far and in which directions one can twiddle the knob. That will presume that we as humans can somehow experience outside the structures of discourse that we as a community have established. It is not simply to do with its tacit nature - it is as much to do with the pulling together into a whole, the totality of relationships. Kant, Berger and Luckmann, Foucault have managed to persuade most philosophers that we cannot know the world directly, that our organisation of it is determined by our schemas, or the structures that we as a society have built up through systems of language or signs. But our actions in the world do not simply require a cerebral awareness of those schemas that define ourselves - we have to be able to enact it, know how to go on, in a Wittgensteinian sense, put it into embodied action. This action connects us directly with the non-interpreted world which provides feedback for our schema.

Relations between knowledge and creativity

I believe we can translate with understanding between different languages or between poetry and music only if we assume that there are communicable but tacitly understood wholes. There must

be some unmediated experience through which we can construct those mediated structures and forms of knowledge. This cannot be simply a bisociation of matrices in a Koestlerian sense. It is a recombination of schemas which draws on our embodied experiences, that set of associations unique to any individual. It may well be what we understand by our notion of style.

Style is what distinguishes the different spirit of the letters in Hofstadter's columns - it is what distinguishes a McEnroe's tennis game from a Pat Cash's, or a Madonna hit from a Sinnaed 'O'Connor song, a Dali painting from a Picasso. The whole style or spirit is not mystical, though it may well be irreducible to explication. It is reflected in the way the body moves, the grain of the voice, the movement and weight of the hand bearing the paint brush., moving in dance. It is what binds together the cultural complexities of a French or English book title to render it almost untranslatable. into another language.

We build up cultural constructs through what Dennett calls a heterophenomenology - differentiating by words and notes and shapes and then pulling together. Hegel described the productive imagination which gives us stories and music and poetry as a Mittlepunkt (middle point) in which "the universal and Being, one's own and what is picked up, internal and external, are completely welded into one". It is holistic. The familiar experience of the material world is in large measure constructed by the active human mind. I believe Kant was right to note that the world of inner sense, the world of sensations and thoughts and emotions, is also a constructed world. The mind's access to itself is equally mediated by its own structural and conceptual

contributions. To understand the mind we need to adopt a procedure of analysis and disinterpretation of our experience. This operates something like an open systems model in which living organisms act as autonomous, self-governing wholes on their own subordinate parts on the lower levels of the organic or social hierarchy, while being partly controlled by the coordinating centre at the next higher level. The structures drawn up by the imagination are fluid and dynamic. We can analyse them in terms of their parts, but in doing so we reduce their meaning to an analytic or propositional level and ignore the context which informs them. The principle constructive force underlying our knowledge and thought is not formal logic but productive imagination. These organisational schemata need not be propositionally expressed to be shared - we do communicate through facial expressions, gesture, what Barthes called the grain of the voice.

The *Mittelpunkt* points both ways and, as imagination must, combines the genesis and structure of thought, its conscious and unconscious levels. In every level of this evolved and evolving hierarchy a temporary stability is maintained by the equilibration of forces pulling in opposite directions; analytic and holistic, propositional and aesthetic, centripetal and centrifugal, the former asserting the part's independence, autonomy and individuality, the second keeping it in its place as a dependent part in the whole. In Hegel's notion of *Aufgabe*, the uplifting quality of thought contains both conservation and negation. To call a thing *red* is to place it in distinction from all non-red things in the whole, and it requires an organising concept of colour which, from a higher level still, we can distinguish from other qualities such as shape by stabilising it in the concept of colour, distinguishing that at a higher level still from inherent or supervenient qualities such as loneliness in music or poetry. Atomists or structuralists make the mistake of maintaining a complete autonomy of logical or mathematical ideality and to reify it, see it as transcendental and a priori rather than self-constructed. The historical continuity of language and symbols across generations gives an illusion of permanency. However our experience of the world is

always implicated at each level of thinking. One cannot, as Campbell (1974) suggests, learn a language by telephone. Or in Wittgensteinian terms, if a lion could speak our language we could not understand him. There are implications in this for distance education, or learning by e-mail. Knowing becomes a matter of drawing up worldly interconnections from experience as well as from schemas. It can be built up by thinking about those connections and this thinking about them can set up, even if temporarily, structures which in turn in form, give form or shape to, our worldly interconnections. This is implied by the

seamless web of beliefs that Quine speaks of and by the holism that Davidson makes explicit. Somehow there is a continued dynamic which organises and reorganises those schemata. Our representational schemata, those categorical structures which make things relevant, contain structural features common to many objects, events, activities - for instance our concept of mother may involve no clear necessary and sufficient conditions but a cluster of associations surrounding the person who gives birth, the female who nurtures and raises a child, the female who contributes the genetic material, the wife of the father, the closest female ancestor (Lakoff, 1988). Similarly, our concept of the arts may include music, poetry, visual arts, drama, dance without there being any necessary or sufficient conditions for the joint categorisation of these terms other than that they have been experienced together. Meaning is now no longer merely based on truth and reference, concerning the relationship between things in the world. The cat does not exist outside my relation to it. Meaning is not a thing or simply an abstracted structure; it involves what is meaningful to us. Nothing is meaningful in itself. Meaningfulness derives from the experience of functioning as a being of a certain sort in an environment of a certain sort (Lakoff, 1987, p292). On the new view reason has a holistic bodily basis; the atomistic view sees reason as literal, as primarily about propositions that are true or false. The new view takes imaginative aspects of reason - metaphor, metonymy and mental imagery - as central to reason, rather than a peripheral and inconsequential adjunct to the traditional. Understanding of these schemata is most apparent at the level of praxis. Two conceptual systems are commensurable if they use the same concepts in the same context in the same way. Thus at this experiential level, it is not the case that anything goes. It is embodiment of the sort described above that makes the theory of cognitive models more than a mere mentalistic theory. Understanding is an experience criterion. Two conceptual systems (and I would here include art and music as conceptual systems) are commensurable if they can both be understood by a person - presumably via the preconceptual structure of his experiences and his general conceptualizing capacity. Meaningfulness involves not merely mental structures but the structuring of experience itself. Some kinds of experiences are structured preconceptually because of the way the world is and the way we are. In domains where there is no clearly discernible structure to our experience, we import such structure via metaphor. Metaphor provides us with a means for comprehending domains of experience that do not have a preconceptual structure of their own. A great many of our domains of experience are like this. Comprehending experience via metaphor is the imaginative force of the human mind making connections. The minute we make this shift into the embodied imagination as central constructing force of knowledge, we can see that it is possible for us to draw

other ways of meaning from the world than verbal ones. The images of visual art are no less meaningful - they too depend on our need to categorise certain experiences and share them with others. They mutually depend on experience and schemata. Music develops its own notations and principles and its own cultural heuristics. In art, poetry, music we develop an abstract level

of verbal criticism, expert language which describe the process and grow from it, but are not identical to it. There is little use trying to translate directly from one verbal level to another - as Kovesi (1964) said "One cannot make fried eggs out of scrambled eggs". We have to go back to the original egg, the holistic human experience out of which the artistic product was constructed.

EXPERIENTIAL REALISM

* Thought is embodied, that is, the structures used to put together our conceptual systems grow out of bodily experience and make sense in terms of it; moreover the core of our conceptual systems is directly grounded in perception, body movement and experience of a physical and social character.

* Thought is imaginative, in that those concepts which are not directly grounded in experience employ metaphor, metonymy and mental imagery - all of which go beyond the literal mirroring, or representation of external reality. It is this imaginative capacity that allows for abstract thought and takes the mind beyond what we can see and feel. The imaginative capacity is also embodied - indirectly - since metaphors, metonymies and images are based on experience often bodily experiences. Thought is also imaginative in a less obvious way; every time we categorize something in a way that does not mirror nature, we are using general human imaginative capacities.

* Thought has gestalt properties and is thus not atomistic; concepts have an overall structure that goes beyond putting together conceptual building blocks by general rules. (cf the letter A)

* Thought has an ecological structure. The efficiency of cognitive processing, as in learning and memory, depends on the overall structure of the conceptual system and on what the concepts mean. Thought is thus more than just the mechanical manipulation of abstract symbols.

* Conceptual structure can be described using cognitive models that have the above properties.

* The theory of cognitive models incorporates what was right about the traditional view of categorization, meaning and reason, while accounting for the empirical data on categorization and fitting the new view overall.

Rewriting the metaphorical mind

Metaphorical meaning shares with atomism (a) a commitment to the existence of a real world (b) a recognition that reality places

constraints on concepts, (c) a conception of truth that goes beyond mere internal coherence and (d) a commitment to the existence of stable knowledge about the world.

In domains where there is no clearly discernible preconceptual structure to our experience, we import such structure via metaphor. Metaphor provides us with a means for comprehending domains of experience that do not have a preconceptual structure of their own. A great many of our domains of experience are like this. Comprehending experience via metaphor is one of the great imaginative triumphs of the human mind. Much of rational thought involves the use of metaphoric models. It has been asserted for instance that the entailment of formal logic where premises lead to a conclusion arise from a notion of sentences forcing one to a conclusion, and that the symmetry of a mathematical equation was originally built up from embodied notions of symmetry and balance. To translate from music to poetry one must go back to the context of experience, the human purpose for which the original differences were pulled together, and build up again from that. Myth and metaphor are one important means of breaking through or bridging distinct levels. The productive imagination changes structures of propositional thought through interactive metaphor, myth and symbol, at the same time as it requires those structures of propositional thought to "inform" the criteria which make the metaphor meaningful at the literal level. The

symbol in its fullest artistic form is much more than an abstract sign - it must be related, the connections drawn, with one's own felt experiences via the imagination.

Style and Self

One could say that the idiosyncratic combinations made by the creative artist are an expression of the self. This does not run counter to the notion of an emergent self proposed by Popper in *The Self and its Brain*. But it insists that the self is more than the conscious awareness of self., As Toulmin (in Mischel, 1977, p.294) notes, to arrive at a satisfactory "psychology of the self" for instance, we must treat all human behaviour as a natural phenomenon and seek to reintroduce, subsequently, the elements that are abstracted out by that initial choice. Human beings normally deal with one another in ways that engage their entire personalities without regard to abstract distinctions between 'cognition', 'affect' and the rest. In their activities, they are not disconnected from the schema which are socially constructed through language. Nor are they divorced from the intellect and forms of knowledge.

To be able to translate fluently from one language to another requires this sort of embodied knowing - one doesn't have to think about it. - it "flows", as the notion of fluency suggests. Similarly when translating a style from poetry to music, one has to be aware of the whole style and transfer it holistically

rather than by disconnecting its visual or aural aspects. An artist can self-consciously adopt a style by transferring characteristics of another person into his own, but it will only work temporarily unless it is adopted, as we say "wholeheartedly" - that is, it informs his activities, his thinking, his speaking as a whole. Style is a notion of fluency, of dynamic embodiment, which can cross the boundaries of genre or medium, but only through an engagement of the *Mittelpunkt*.

What is presented in this paper is a chaotic theory of creativity - chaotic, that is, in the sense of Gleick's presentation of chaos theory, because it hovers somewhere between randomness and predictability, a recursive and flexible patterning of patterns that presupposes a freely choosing human mind, intelligence and organisation underlying the creation of art works. Our conceptual system is dependent on, and intimately linked to, our physical and cultural experience. It disconfirms the atomistic view that concepts are abstract and separate from human experiences. As with chaos theory, categories are neither predictable nor arbitrary, but instead are motivated, involving intentions and purposes, demonstrating the ecological character of the human mind as it evolves through social activities in a physical world. This is the view of the mind as an open system, a system with an overall structure, where the effects cannot be localised - that is, where something in one part of the system affects things elsewhere in the system. Translation is possible, not because of the intellectual act of transposing component parts, but because of the shared human activities which define our experience.

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