

Interpersonal and Professional Relationships in Translating Poetry

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Abstract. Translating poetry involves multiple actors, each with their own special expertise. Even when a ‘solo’ translator does most or all of the translating, bringing translations to readers means working in a team along with funders, editors and/or publishers, etc. This team operates within a network of wider professional relationships.

The article focuses mainly on relations between ‘translating agents’, who work on the translated text. ‘Text helpers’ assist a solo translator by answering queries about the source poems, advising on target-language wording, or both. When the source poet acts as a text helper, her/his involvement ranges from ‘hands-off’, via ‘fruitful dialogue’ (where she/he answers queries and spots errors, but leaves the translator to find solutions), to partially or wholly taking over the translating process.

In ‘collaborative (co-)translating’, two or more people translate jointly, ideally working face-to-face in real time. They may both have full solo-translating skills, but jointly revise their drafts. Or a target-language poet who does not know the source language (a ‘target poet’) may work with the source poet. Alternatively, a target poet may collaborate with a ‘language advisor’, an expert in the source language and culture. The ‘poettrio’ configuration involves the source poet, a language advisor, and a target poet. Unfortunately, publicity and book covers often credit only the target poet as the translator, with others only mentioned in notes, if at all.

Dialogue is a key enabler of these interactions. This involves constructive discussions about translating, but also establishing roles and responsibilities, and ensuring that participants remain included in conversations. Conversely, tensions arise when participants feel that others have breached role boundaries, or failed to keep them informed by interpreting talk in the other language. Power hierarchies (between source poet and translator, and between target poet and language advisor) are a reality that participants need to work with. Loyalty (particularly of other translating agents towards the source poet) and mutual trust help reinforce good will and enable productive dialogue. Affective responses also play a key role in the success or otherwise of translating partnerships.

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Data for this article are drawn largely from published sources plus the author's own experience as a poetry translator.

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Translators, teams and networks

Poetry translating is often seen as a solo venture, where one person painstakingly rewrites a poem in another language. It is true that a single translator usually does most of the language transfer work. But converting the translator's draft into a finished paper or electronic text to be read or heard by target audiences is a multi-person 'project', i.e. a venture where a 'team' of people works towards a defined outcome (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, in Folaron and Buzelin 2007: 626; Jones 2011: 4). In Cordingley and Frigau Manning's words (2017: 1), "The popular image of the lonely translator is strikingly at odds with the reality of his or her work. In both literary and 'pragmatic' contexts, many 'collaborators' with different roles will typically shape a translated text before it is published."

Translators, therefore, work in networks of interpersonal and professional relationships, and even translating itself usually involves more than one person. Figure 1 illustrates this. It maps human actors and their interactions in three linked projects where I translated the same source poet's work:

Project 1: Journal Editor A asked me (Translator B) to translate poems by Source Poet C into English for a UK poetry journal. Informant D – my wife, a source-language native reader – checked my first drafts for misinterpretations, answered my queries, and suggested improvements, which we then discussed.

Project 2: Several years later, Funder E from the source country's literature promotion body asked me and Poetry Expert F to lead a seminar on translating C's poetry into English. In the seminar, I plus Translators G to P each produced our own target-poem drafts, with Source Poet C answering our queries on the final afternoon.

Project 3: After the seminar, I thought of producing a "selected poems of C" in English. But as Translator P had already draft-translated much of C's poetry, I felt this would be inappropriate. Years later, however, and after C's death, no book-length translation of her/his work had appeared. Hence, I ran my selected-poems idea past Translators N and O, who had since translated and published poems by C, and Funder Q (Funder E's successor). All mentioned that Translator P's whereabouts and

plans were unknown, and gave me the go-ahead. Funder Q, moreover, encouraged me to apply to her/his colleague Funder R for a grant to write a proposal with sample translations for offering to publishers. I then contacted C's Literary Executor S several times seeking permission to translate, but received no reply. Hence, on Funder Q's advice, I asked Source Publisher T, who finally approved the project. I sent the proposal dossier, completed with Informant D's help, to Target Publisher U. She/he agreed to publish the book, and to arrange further translation funding with Funder Q. I then heard (via the two publishers) that Translator P was about to publish one of Source Poet C's collections in English after all. I therefore contacted P, who said she/he was happy for my project to go ahead. Again with Informant D's input, I finished translating, and delivered the manuscript to Target Publisher U.

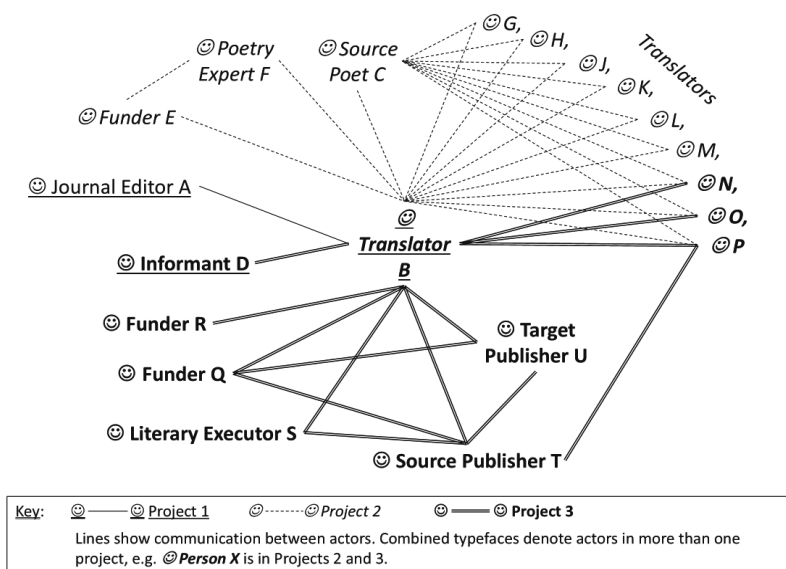


Figure 1. Interpersonal networks in a triple translation project.

The resulting mesh of people and interactions is large, perhaps surprisingly so. It is true that the core team in a single-poet translation project with no forerunners or funders would typically be smaller. But projects often do “succeed and take over from one another”, with new projects involving a mix of old and new actors (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, in Folaron and Buzelin 2007: 626). Moreover, Figure 1 omits actors such as those responsible for

graphic design or publicity in Projects 1 and 3. It also omits the 16 other translators who contributed to Project 1’s journal issue.

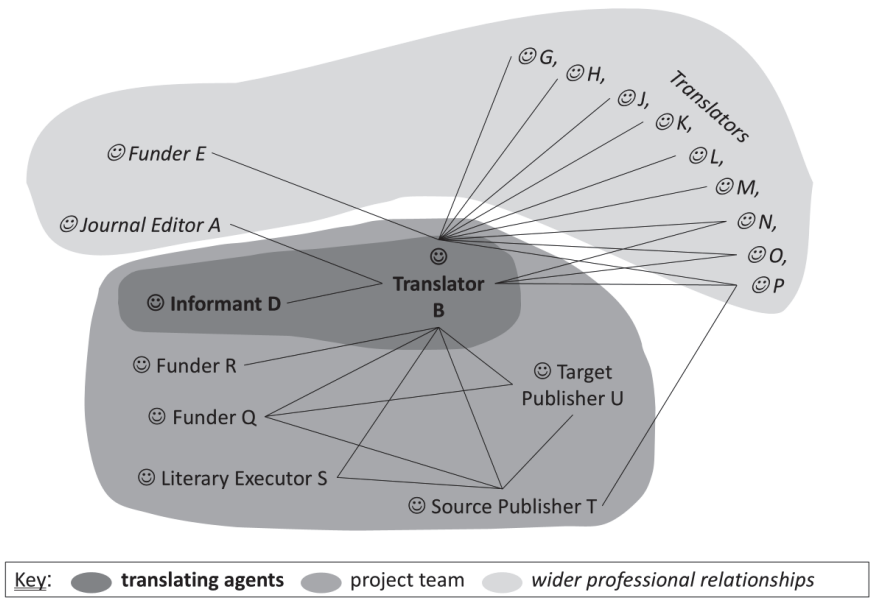


Figure 2. Project 3: levels of involvement.

Poetry translation, therefore, involves multiple actors, even when just one has the status of translator. There are, of course, different levels of involvement. Figure 2 illustrates these for Project 3. “Translating agents”² shape, or help shape, the manuscript’s text (Jones 2011: 28). In Project 3, these were Translator B and Informant D. They, however, are just part of the project team (translating agents plus funders, publishers, etc.) directly enabling and producing the published translation. The team is also embedded within a wider network of professional relationships (Jones 2011: 39–51). These sometimes stem from previous projects, as shown in Figure 2³. Moreover, professional norms and ethical considerations are expressed and maintained across these wider networks, for instance, my checking with Seminar Translators N, O and P that I was not being uncollegial by muscling in on ‘their’ source poet.

² Also known as “translation actors” (Herbert et al. 2025: 209–210).
³ Source Poet C and Poetry Expert F from Project 2 were no longer alive, so do not appear here.

Data and introspection

The rest of this article looks at just one aspect of this mesh: relationships between translating agents. It then discusses issues of power, loyalty and emotion raised by these relationships.

Data are taken largely from published sources. Unsurprisingly for a relatively young research field, I found just one relevant research study involving multiple subjects (Herbert et al. 2025). This meant relying largely on case studies and reports about individual translation projects. Case studies give in-depth insights, and situate people, texts and events in their real-life context (Simons 2009: 20–21), but their findings are rarely generalisable outside that context. Looking at multiple case studies, however – as here – can give a wider, more generalisable picture (Ellinger et al. 2009: 11–13).

Several reports tell of my own practice as a poetry translator. These were initially intended simply to illustrate my arguments, but writing them often generated new insights. As with the published reports just mentioned, I cannot claim they are free from faulty or biased recall, but being aware of this risk has hopefully helped to reduce it. More widely, introspection by the researcher is not necessarily problematic: indeed, her/his subjectivity is an “inevitable” and even “essential” factor in interpreting any case study (Simons 2009: 24). To avoid making ungrounded claims, however, I try to analyse my own reports as critically as those of others (cf. Barnard 1988, in Inghilleri 2005: 138).

Text helpers and co-translators

When looking at how translating agents work together, one may distinguish between ‘helping’ and ‘collaborating’. With the Figure 1 projects, Source Poet C and Informant D answered translators’ queries about the source poems. Informant D also suggested and discussed textual improvements. But it was agreed beforehand that their role would be advisory and time-limited. In other words, that they would be “text helpers” (who give information about the source poem and/or advice about the target poem: Jones 2011: 40) rather than co-translators, and that responsibility for target wording would lie with the translators proper. Collaborative (co-)translation, by contrast, involves “joint decision-making” by two or more people, who pool similar or different expertises (Herbert et al. 2025: 8, quoting Zwischenberger 2016).

Whether the relationship is one of translator + text helper or collaborative co-translating is usually clear to participants. However, this is not always explicitly agreed beforehand. Also, there is no clear point at which extensive text-helper input becomes co-translating. And even with collaborative

co-translating, one person's expertise may lie more in decoding source-poem meaning, and another's more in writing target-language poetry. This pooling of different skills gives the team added translation power, but can also lead to tensions between actors. We discuss all these relationships in the following sections, beginning with translator + text helper partnerships.

Text helpers

Areas of expertise

Text helpers may be "source-poem informants" (Jones 2011: 40), who explain language or content issues in the source poem, such as Informant D in the Figure 1 projects. Alternatively, they may advise on target-poem effectiveness. Thus Brian Holton, a translator of Chinese poetry, discussed with me my draft English translations of Bosnian poet Mak Dizdar. This project, however, also had an element of co-translating, with Holton's Scots version of one poem replacing my draft in the final publication (Dizdar 1999). Occasionally, text helpers specialised in the translator's language pair may advise on the whole translation process. Under the mentorship scheme of Utrecht University's Expertisecentrum Literair Vertalen, for instance, experienced literary translators advise novices during their first translation project⁴.

Seeking the source poet's help

Most poetry translation projects almost certainly involve a living source poet.⁵ For many translators, this makes her/him the ideal source-poem informant. Some scholars, however, question the value of this input in literary translation. Hersant, for instance, sees it as "based on a presupposition ... that the author would know more about his own text than any other reader, and his or her intention would be at once defineable, circumscribed and beneficial. None of this is self-evident, a fact translators are indeed well-placed to judge." (2017: 102–103)

⁴ <https://literairvertalen.org/english/education-and-training> (03.03.26).

⁵ In a survey of Serbian and Bosnian poetry translated into English between 1992 and 2008, 39 of the Serbian projects featured only living source poets, and 26 only dead source poets (Jones 2010: 233, plus unpublished data). The Bosnian imbalance was even bigger (42 to 10 respectively), but was probably influenced by the drive to publicise contemporary poetry about the 1990s war in Bosnia.

My experience as a translator is that the author usually does know more about her/his text than other readers. In poetry, a word with two possible meanings or an unclear image, for instance, can rarely be rendered with the same ambiguity in the target language. But hearing from the source poet what she/he meant by that word or image can be invaluable. This rarely supplies a translation solution, I find. Instead, and crucially, it enables the translator to define the translation problem. This input comes with two provisos, however.

Firstly, it is not the only factor to shape the output. For instance, the target wording should arguably also try to reflect how uninformed readers might experience the source poem. Faced with source-text obscurities while translating, say, I clarify them with the source poet if possible. And then, armed with that knowledge, I try to replace them with obscurities that work in the context of the target poem. For example, I was recently translating this verse by the Dutch poet Erik Lindner (2024: 16, with a literal English gloss added):

als de lappen uit de mand	→ when/if the cloths/rags out of the basket
uithangen over het wrakhout	→ hang [out] over/across the wreck-wood
en er een loslaat	→ and one of them gives way

My first-draft version felt far from satisfactory:

if the rags are dangling out of the basket
 across the wreckage/driftwood
 and one of them drops

Was the scene inland (“wreckage”) or a beach (“driftwood”)? What were the rags/cloths? Was “one of them” a piece of cloth or of wood? So I asked Lindner. He replied that the verse describes a take from Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1975 film *Зеркало* (*Mirror*). After watching the scene, where a woman hangs washing from a bowl on the ruins of a wooden hut, I rewrote my draft into

if the laundry from the bowl
 is hanging on the wreckage
 and a plank gives way

The revised version, I felt, was now internally coherent. But, no less importantly, it remained as enigmatic to target readers as to source readers, unless they spotted the Tarkovsky reference. Of course, it deviated ‘creatively’ from the literal at several points, i.e. it conveyed the underlying poetic drive while changing the source semantics (Jones 2011: 33–38). Hence I ran it past Lindner. He replied that he was happy with it.

This example also shows the second proviso. As Hersant implies throughout his survey of source writer-translator relations (2017), it should be the translator's responsibility – not the source writer's – to decide on target wording, because the translator is the target-language expert in the partnership.

Degrees of source-poet involvement

The source poet's engagement in the translation process varies along a spectrum between hands-off and close involvement. Estonian poet Kristiina Ehin describes her hands-off relationship with her English translator Ilmar Lehtpere in warm terms, and even sees it as positively affecting her own writing: "Ilmar is ... exceptionally sensitive to poetry and literature. The translations are totally his work and I very rarely get involved. I eagerly look forward to his translations.... My conversations with him and his wife Sadie Murphy about life, poetry and translation have often made me see and write more broadly." (Arc 2012)

For Hersant (2017: 92), hands-off source writers give their translators "carte blanche" because they trust them to do a good job, as Ehin's account shows. Hersant cites three reasons for this trust: "earlier collaborative experience", "the translator's reputation", and believing that the translator now owns the emerging target text (*ibid.*). A fourth potential reason is that source writers who do not understand the target language are *forced* to trust their translators.

The most common working relationship between source poet and translator, in my into-English translating experience, is what Hersant calls "the best case scenario" of "fruitful dialogue" (2017: 93), as in the Erik Lindner example above. If the source poet can read the target language, she/he (like other source-poem informants) may also highlight the translator's errors and misunderstandings: Lindner, for instance, recently signalled tactfully that I had misread *de maan in het dakraam* ("the moon in the roof window") as *de man in het dakraam* ("the man in the roof window"). Again like other informants, she/he may even suggest improvements. The fruitful-dialogue scenario implies that translators should cheerfully accept a source poet's corrections and useful suggestions, but also feel able to reject suggestions that they feel would harm the target poem's quality.

Further towards the 'close involvement' extreme, the source poet (or her/his proxy: for example, a spouse who knows the target language) may wish to discuss each line of the translator's draft. If this remains 'fruitful dialogue', then fine. But it increases the risk that the source poet may try to overrule the translator's native-writer judgment. For Hersant, such source writers are "concerned with ensuring the preservation of their intended meanings" (2017:

103). In my experience, this usually entails arguing for semantic equivalence at the expense of idiomaticity or poetic effectiveness. As Edmund Keeley, the English-language co-translator of Greek poet Giorgos Seferis, observed: “like most poets, [Seferis] held the principle that the translation of his work should be as literal as possible” (quoted in Honig 1985: 148). Sometimes, however, a source poet or her/his proxy may want to preserve both literal and idiomatic meaning, a difficult task which results at best in time-consuming and often clunky workarounds. And at worst, in the source poet pulling the plug on the project because she/he feels that the translator’s idiomatic but non-literal equivalents have betrayed her/his text (fortunately, this has only happened to me once). Occasionally, a source poet fluent in the target language may also contest the translator’s native-writer judgement as to what wording works best in the target context. This can slow down discussions even further.

This may even lead to “authorial appropriation”: the scenario (relatively rare, thankfully) where “fear of betrayal” leads the source writer to take control of the translation process (Hersant 2017: 101). For instance, two English-language translators of émigré Russian poet Joseph Brodsky report that he made radical changes to their translations, producing poems that worked less well in English (Kline 1989: 98–99; Weissbort 2004: 24–25).

Hersant also reports that authorial appropriation may occasionally lead to versions that, far from being over-literal, are radically domesticated to suit the source writer’s view of target readers’ expectations (2017: 95,104; cf. Kaldjävrv 2024: 147–148). He adds that, even in fruitful-dialogue scenarios, source writers may permit translators to take radical liberties with the source text (Hersant 2017: 95–96). From experience, I can corroborate the latter claim. However, it has always been me as the translator, not the source poet, who has proposed creative solutions to otherwise insoluble conundrums, such as recreating wordplay. And with particularly big creative leaps – for example, changing the central image of the poem to recreate a theme of linguistic playfulness – the source poet has taken quite some persuading to approve these.

Co-translating partnerships

Collaborative co-translating, in contrast with both text-helping and author-appropriation, assumes that all participants contribute roughly equally to the final product. Hence they all arguably deserve the title of translator. This section looks more closely at some of the various working configurations (see Herbert et al. 2025: 9–11 for a broader outline).

Source-poet + target-poet duos

Firstly, a target-language-native poet ('target poet' for short) may work with the source poet. For Sampson, this enables her/him "to make a deep and practical creative relationship with a writing peer" (2012). The target poet often does not know her/his source counterpart's language, but they need a shared language in which the source poet can explain her/his poem.

Language-advisor + target-poet duos

Alternatively, a target poet may work with an expert in the source language and culture – a so-called "language advisor" (Herbert et al. 2025: 2). (I avoid the more common term 'bridge translator', to avoid implying that she/he is the only real translator in the partnership.) Such collaborations are relatively common. They occur especially with source languages which, like most of the world's languages, have relatively few non-native readers: such languages therefore have relatively few solo poetry translators, who usually work from their non-native into their native language. Language advisors may or may not be translators and/or poets in their own right. They are tasked with explaining the source poem to the target poet, and/or providing a written "interlinear". This is a closely literal guide to the source, often with annotations about culture-specific allusions, for example (Herbert et al. 2025: 53). The target poet, by contrast, is responsible for writing the target poem.

An example of such a partnership is when Hungarian language advisor János Csokits and British target poet Ted Hughes translated the work of Hungarian poet János Pilinszky. From their accounts, both co-translators found this experience rewarding. Hughes (1989: 18) praised Csokits's skill in "projecting ... a sense of the strange original". And Csokits (1989: 11) praised Hughes's poetic sensitivity that enabled him to "X-ray" "the whole astral body" of the source poem via Csokits's interlinears. Interestingly, Hughes was beguiled by the raw poetic power of the interlinear, and stressed literalness as his translating ethic (Bergin 2013: Chapter 1; Hughes 1989: 18). However, Csokits (1989: 18) did feel that Hughes's resulting abandonment of Pilinszky's metre and rhyme made the target poems "sound harsher and Pilinszky's view of the world [appear] grimmer than in Hungarian". No less interestingly, Bergin argues that these literal translations influenced Hughes's own poetry-writing style: "his desire ... to write the 'songs of a crow' – in other words, 'songs with no music whatsoever'" (2013: ii).

Poettrios

Sometimes, a target poet may collaborate with both the source poet and a language advisor, forming a so-called ‘poettrio’. A recent research project that I co-led (described in Herbert et al. 2025) looked at this in detail. It examined the translating processes and relationships of three Dutch poets, three British poets and four language advisors working in various trio configurations. All had at least some poetry translating experience. In two four-day workshops, they translated work by the British poets into Dutch and then work by the Dutch poets into English.

Participants were briefed beforehand that target poets should make target-poem decisions, while source poets and language advisors should help and inform (Herbert et al. 2025: 162–163). This meant that the target poet usually was the *de facto* group leader. She/he drove interaction by initiating most speech sequences, usually by questioning the source poet or the language advisor (ibid: 164). An example, taken from previously unpublished data, is where a Dutch→English trio tackles a poem beginning with the word *hela* (glossed in the interlinear as *hey there*):

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Target Poet: | So, the first question is: how do we say <i>hey</i> in English |
| Source Poet: | <i>hela</i> |
| Target Poet: | without sounding like we are cool and hep kids? (Clicks fingers). |
| Source Poet: | (Chuckles) <i>hela</i> – it is not really cool and hip, that’s true. |
| Target Poet: | Yeah, yeah, yeah. |
| Source Poet: | Yeah. But... hmm. Yeah. It’s... but... |
| Target Poet: | I mean, you know, what’s our range here? Could it be “hi”, “hello”, “hola”, “ho”? |
| Source Poet: | It’s not the normal way. So, we... because it’s not... you don’t say “hi”. That’s not the way. But it’s more like shouting at someone |
| Target Poet: | Yeah. |
| Source Poet: | or the... |
| Target Poet: | But I’m guessing “yo” won’t do it. |
| Language Advisor: | No. |

These sequences enabled the target poet to define the translation problem: here, to find a word meaning something like *hello* that involves “shouting at someone”. Another aspect of the target poet’s leadership was that she/he determined how much input the language advisor should have in drafting the target poem, as discussed below.

Trio members usually reported in follow-up interviews that interaction had been positive and productive. It typically showed what Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow”: the intense, creative concentration brought about by deep immersion in a task (1991, 1996). All three participants spoke, though talk was often largely dyadic, i.e. involving two of the three co-translators. Thus, as in the example above, the target poet would establish source-poem meanings by questioning the source poet, and occasionally the language advisor. But when it came to drafting target wordings, the target poet would typically check these with the language advisor, at which the source poet would take more of a back seat (Herbert et al. 2025: 164).

Echoing the arguments above about source poets as text helpers, the other participants regarded the source poet’s input as invaluable. She/he “really helped me to translate”, in one target poet’s words (Herbert et al. 2025: 175). This was underlined when one source poet could not attend one workshop. The other members of her/his trios draft-translated her/his poems, but were left with enigmas and unanswerable questions even after consulting her/him by video-link later each day. These issues were solved, to all participants’ relief, when she/he attended a later face-to-face day to revise the draft translations (ibid.: 165–166).

Nevertheless, one target poet mentioned in interview that having a source poet present could also “inhibit the translator” (Herbert et al. 2025: 175). It is perhaps relevant here that all target poems kept fairly close to the source poems’ semantics (ibid.: 114). Though they sometimes deviated creatively from the literal for the sake of target-poem effectiveness, this never went beyond phrase level (ibid.: 114). As discussed below, this textual faithfulness, tempered by a need for the poem to live in the target language, could at least partially have reflected the target poet’s sense of loyalty to the fellow (source) poet sitting at the same table.

The language advisor’s role was perhaps the most challenging to perform. Briefing guidelines (given to all co-translators) followed typical conventions of poetry translating workshops by stating that she/he should advise on “connotations, cross-language equivalents and cross-cultural issues, etc.”, but not “normally take part in drafting and polishing the translated poems” (Herbert et al. 2025: 63). So that they could work in both Dutch→English and English→Dutch trios, however, most language advisors recruited were balanced bilinguals. Hence most would potentially have been able to help the target poets with target-poem wording. In practice, most target poets did indeed expect the language advisor mainly to answer their questions, though many used the language advisor as a sounding-board when brainstorming solutions. Conversely, language advisors usually tried not to offer unprompted

target-text advice (ibid.: 166). One target poet, however, invited the language advisors in her/his various trios to brainstorm target-language solutions with her/him. And with another, more reticent target poet, language advisors found themselves having to initiate many translating sequences (ibid.: 170–171). Hence, because trio make-up changed each day, language advisors repeatedly needed to adapt to different target poets' working styles. As one language advisor said in interview, it was "challenging to know when to step back and when not to" (ibid.: 166). Nevertheless, working relations were usually very positive, and in interviews poets praised the language advisors' input.

Sometimes, however, target poets felt that their language advisor was constraining their creative freedom by trying to co-draft the target poem without having been asked (Herbert et al. 2025: 174). And, once, a source poet felt that the language advisor had encroached on her/his role in explaining the source poem (ibid.: 176–177). Conversely, another language advisor felt sidelined as the target poet drafted the target poem mainly with input from the source poet.

When the target poet was discussing target-poem solutions with the language advisor, they inevitably spoke in the target language. Because source poets, especially in the English→Dutch trios, often could not follow this, the language advisor had to break off these discussions regularly to inform the source poet about what had been said. Combining the role of co-translator with that of interpreter added to the language advisor's burden, but performing it was essential for group harmony. This was highlighted in one trio, when the briskness of pace set by the Dutch target poet meant that the language advisor found it hard to relay their Dutch-language discussions to the British source poet, leading the latter to feel excluded (Herbert et al. 2025: 72–73).

Other configurations

Other text-helper and collaborative translating modes exist, of course. Those outlined above assume one person playing each role. But in translating workshops, several people may perform the same task. A seminar on a source poet's work, as in Figure 1's Project 2, may involve several translators who can read the source language, with the source poet acting as text helper. Or it may involve several target poets who cannot read the source language but who work from interlinears. Text-helper input then comes either from the source poet, as in the 2019 Poetry Translation Workshops organised by Cyfnewidfa Llen Cymru/Wales Literature Exchange⁶, or from a language advisor.

⁶ <https://waleslitexchange.org/event/poetry-translation-workshop-in-aberystwyth> (19.02.26)

Alternatively, two translators who read the source language may translate collaboratively. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, for instance, co-translated much 20th-century Greek poetry into English. Keeley (interviewed by Honig 1985: 137–138) reports how they would first-draft different poems by the same poet, but would then revise these drafts together.

Recognition

Though everyone in a collaborative partnership translates, this is not necessarily recognised on book covers and in publicity. All too often, the target poet is the only translator mentioned. Other co-translators are simply ignored: this is especially the case with interlinear writers, whom Csokits calls “the pariahs of the realm of letters” (1989: 14).

This seems at first sight to be the case with *Moose Beetle Swallow*, an English-language edition of work by Estonian poet Andres Ehin⁷ (2005). Most poems were translated by Irish poet Patrick Cotter, using Taavi Tatsi’s English interlinears and with input from Ehin. Only Cotter is named as the translator in on-line publicity⁸ and on the book cover. However, the title page does mention Tatsi as “intermediate translator”. And in his foreword, Cotter writes “I am indebted to Taavi Tatsi for the intermediate translations he prepared so diligently and to Andres Ehin in the guidance he gave during the remaking process” (2005: 10). Cotter also mentions that some poems were translated by Ehin himself. This – co-translators other than the target poet being omitted from publicity and book covers while being acknowledged in a foreword, etc. – actually happens quite often. Whether this is more common than the complete erasure of other co-translators is very hard to find out, precisely because evidence of their participation is absent in the text.

Calleja and Collins (2019) analyse, and rightly condemn, the frequent sidelining of the language advisor in such partnerships. They counter this, however, by claiming that language advisors are the only real “translators” and that co-translating target poets are “closer to being editors – or post-editors”. In my view, this no less unjustifiably sidelines the target poet’s crucial role in producing the target-language poem.

Nevertheless, it is unusual for all co-translators to be mentioned on the book cover. An honourable exception is the *Selected Poems* of Hungarian poet János Pilinszky (1976). The cover states “translated by TED HUGHES &

⁷ The father of poet Kristiina Ehin (mentioned earlier).

⁸ E.g. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Moose-Beetle-Swallow-Cork-Translation/dp/1905002130> (03.03.26)

JÁNOS CSOKITS”, the target poet and language advisor respectively, whose collaboration is mentioned above.

Factors that shape working relations

At this point, it is worth further exploring factors that influence working relationships. The shape of talk between participants, for instance. Questions of power and authority, of loyalty and trust. Affective (i.e. emotional) responses, which are important for the success of translating partnerships (Kaldjävrv 2024: 145, after Koskinen 2020). And whether co-translating via video or e-mail is as effective as working in the same room.

Interaction and dialogue

Hersant sees a good relationship between translator and source-poet text helper as involving “fruitful dialogue” (2017: 93). This could be extended to all the patterns described above. For Horn, “dialogue” is conversation where “people examine their personal assumptions and then suspend them; thus opening new spaces where new meanings can be constructed” (2005: 311, after Jenlink & Carr, 1996). More precisely, successful translating discussions can be seen as “design conversation”: a type of dialogue that is both *generative*, i.e. builds “common ground” between participants, and *strategic*, i.e. tackles defined tasks and seeks “specific solutions” (Jenlink 2008: 6, quoting Banathy 1996, 2000).

One aspect of generative dialogue arguably comprises agreeing goals, working methods and who does what, all of which enable the strategic dialogue of translating itself. All too often in poetry translating partnerships, though, this is left implicit (as when solo translators consult source poets) or imposed externally (e.g. via guidelines for workshop participants). As shown earlier, this need not prevent successful design conversations, i.e. those which lead to outcomes that participants are happy with. But discussing at the outset what participants see as a ‘good’ translation, and what role each person should play in achieving that, would arguably pre-empt some of the potential misunderstandings and tensions between actors.

Generative dialogue also arguably involves managing the conversation. One person – usually the target poet in a poettrio, for instance – often does so by initiating sequences of talk. Another aspect of discourse management occurs when some co-translators are talking in a language that another does not understand. One person then needs to interpret while co-translating. This is not always easy, a fact that should be highlighted in briefing.

As for who participates in translating conversations, some scholars are wary about including the source writer. Poettrio participants, however, generally saw the source poet's input as very helpful, and my experience with most source-poet text helpers echoes this. The source poet's key value lies in supplying the backstory or inspiration for a poem or an image. This, though arguably irrelevant to 'normal' readers, is potentially invaluable for translators. Translators can rarely just translate the surface of the text, or recreate all potential readings: all too often, they have to choose just one reading to recreate. Hence ignoring the source poet's intended reading, if they can discover it, would be counterproductive.

Some source poets, however, also try to intervene in target-poem wording. As argued below, source poets have the right to signal whether or not they are happy with the target draft. And such feedback is useful for translators (including co-translating target poets). But contesting the latter's native-writer wording rarely improves, and often harms, its quality. As discussed below, however, issues of power make it hard to exclude source poets from co-revising target drafts if they insist on doing so.

Power, ethics and ownership

When analysing relations between translating agents, in fact, one cannot ignore potential differences in power. Zhang and He (2018: 135–137, after Poynton 1989) view power in translation as an interplay of authority, status and expertise. It is worth looking at each element separately.

For Zhang and He, *authority* is "a function of socially legitimated inherently unequal role relationships" (2018: 137). This arguably encompasses the legal framework of translation. Most countries' copyright law regards a literary translation as the translator's own creative output, it being "generally not a creation made in common" by the source writer and translator (Bird & Bird 2014: 89). However, translating also requires authorisation from the rights holder (*ibid.*: 52), who in poetry is usually the source poet. And copyright law stipulates that source texts should not be misrepresented (*ibid.*: 111). This is echoed in codes of professional ethics, which specify that translators must "refrain from introducing any tendentious modifications to the [source writer's] thoughts or words", for example (CEATL year unknown). Put lyrically rather than legally, the translator is a demiurge whom the source poet charges, or allows, to create new poems in the source poet's name. Or, to use a different analogy, the translator is an ambassador for the source poet: someone whom the latter has empowered to act autonomously in her/his interests (Jones 2000: 65). Practically speaking, translators are obliged to give a fair representation of

a living source poet's work (unless their output is to be called a "poem inspired by", for example, rather than a translation). Laws do not define what "fair representation" means in textual terms. But this duty explains why, if possible, I check with the source poet whether she/he feels that creative changes still fairly represent the source image.

More drastically, it allows a source poet to object that the translation does *not* fairly represent their poem. Whether or not such an objection would stand up in a court of law, the source poet has the ultimate sanction of withdrawing her/his authorisation to translate. This, however, would also mean the source poet losing international readers, unless the translation is indeed dire and a better translator is waiting in the wings. Hence source poets and translators usually opt for dialogue, jointly seeking a solution which takes account of the source poet's objection but which the translator finds acceptable in target-poem quality terms.

Turning to the second element of power, a source poet generally has higher social status than her/his solo translator. However, this does not necessarily apply when both have "canonical status as a writer" (Kaldjäv 2024: 144–145). If the (co-)translator is a target-culture celebrity and the source poet a target-culture newcomer, the former may even wield more status. This applies particularly to target poets acting as solo or co-translators: few non-poet solo translators and even fewer language advisors have celebrity status. As discussed earlier, this can lead to the target poet being highlighted in publicity, etc. and her/his language advisor being ignored. With solo-translated works, the translator is often named on book covers, but may not be mentioned in publicity and book reviews. Pressure from translators, however, that they should be regarded as creative (re)writers in their own right is gradually making this erasure less common (cf. Gentzler 2002: 197; Zhang and He 2018: 133).

It is less certain whether status differences affect actual translating processes, except perhaps when a novice solo translator works with a famous source poet. This is because status differences, in my view, are balanced out by differences in expertise. Here, solo translators, or co-translating language advisors and target poets, arguably have the advantage. Only they have the crucial cross-language and poetry-writing expertise to rewrite the source into an effective target poem.

The question of who owns the translated poem is closely related to that of authority and copyright. As mentioned earlier, the translator is by default the translation's legal owner, as reflected in the "Translation © ..." statement in a book's colophon. A text helper has no such rights. But if the latter is the source poet, she/he carries more authority than other text helpers because she/he owns the source work. And she/he also arguably co-owns the translation, because it bears her/his name.

Moreover, the assumption implied earlier, that text-helping is an unequal relationship whereas collaboration is equal, is almost certainly over simplified. In collaborative translating, there is a difference between the principle of equal participation and the reality of a power gradient: providing the raw material (the language advisor's role) tends to be less prestigious than writing the target poem (the target poet's role), for instance. And not all projects even hold to the principle. For instance, I once acted as language advisor in a project translating poems from the non-Anglophone Caribbean. The commissioner had promised the Anglophone target poet a fee, but expected me to work for free, until the target poet asked that my work should also be paid.

However, assuming that all participants' work is fairly recognised, are power inequalities within a co-translating team actually problematic? Raffel, discussing target-poet + language-advisor partnerships, argues that they are not: "Each possesses knowledge and abilities that the other does not have. They are thus fundamentally, substantively unequal. Their working relationship is ... as symbiotic as the fungus and alga which, jointly, constitute the compound plant we know as lichen." (1988: 130)

Their tasks, however, should remain distinct: "What the literary partner [i.e. the target poet] wants and needs is a linguistic partner, not another writer" (ibid.: 137). Crucially, Raffel continues, "the inherent inequality of [collaborative] translation is also an essential ingredient for its success." (ibid.: 137). More widely, one might regard inequalities as simply shaping the terrain in which translating agents operate, as in many areas of life. Then, what is important is how they negotiate this terrain, through dialogue that leads them to the destination of a successfully translated text.

Loyalty and trust

Loyalty can be defined (summarising Kleinig 2022) as: a subject persevering in an attachment to an object (a person or a group), in order to further the object's interests or wellbeing; the subject values this attachment personally, and pursues it even at a cost to her/himself. Loyalty towards the source poet is arguably an important cohesive factor in relationships between translating agents: the translator or co-translators pledge to further the source poet's interests by communicating her/his work to new readers, even at the cost of time spent, potential disagreements, or accepting restrictions on one's own translating freedom.

Loyalty-mediated relationships are often important for one's identity and social role (Connor 2007: 49–50). This implies that loyalty towards the source poet is a key aspect of the poetry translator's identity. And as interpersonal

loyalty often involves a lower-power subject (a solo translator, for example) and a higher-power object (a source poet, for example), the underlying power gradient is arguably also part of this identity. Furthermore, Nord (2001: 185) views the translator's interpersonal loyalty towards her/his "partners" – source writer, translation commissioner, and target readers – as shaping her/his textual decisions. Hence, as mentioned earlier, loyalty towards the source poet appeared to be a key factor in the relative faithfulness of the poettrios' translations. Loyalty to the commissioner's interests is rarely as prominent in poetic as in commercial translation: publishers and editors usually leave translators to decide how poems are translated. It may occasionally influence textual outcomes, however. For example, I was recently asked to translate a 17th-century Dutch poem into English, and I checked with the commissioner whether a 17th-century or a modern English version would suit his purposes better (he opted for the former). Similarly, loyalty to target readers' needs is arguably also less important for poetry translators than reflecting the source poet's relationship with her/his readers. One exception, however, is the widespread practice of providing a translator's foreword and notes to help a new community of readers appreciate the source poet and her/his work. One final aspect of loyalty, no less important in the long run, is the translator's loyalty towards her/his professional peers: as shown, for instance, by me checking that I would not tread on fellow translators' toes by translating Source Poet C's work for publication.

Loyalty, however, needs to be reciprocated by trust. The source poet needs to trust the translator's skill (Hersant 2017: 92; Kaldjärv 2024: 145). But mutual trust is a precondition for successful collaboration between all translating partners, "who have to rely on each other's competence, fairness and good will" (Nord 2016: 571). Conversely, lack or breakdown of trust can lead to conflict between translating agents or even the source poet's appropriation of the translating process.

Affect

Affective responses enable translating partners to "interpret, assess, and pass judgment" (Kaldjärv 2024: 145, after Koskinen 2020) on each other and the texts they produce. Moreover, much of what has been discussed above has a basis in emotion. Loyalty, for instance, is both emotional and social, "an individual's feelings and motivations wrapped up in the web of social interaction" (Connor 2007: 13–14). And trust is at least partially an emotional response to the other (Lee et al. 2023).

Translating agents often report on their experience of working together in positive affective terms. For Sampson, working in a source-poet + target-poet duo “cements translation as a process of friendship” (2012). Kristiina Ehin, quoted earlier, testifies to the warmth of her relationship with her translator Ilmar Lehtpere. And translators often write positively about working with a source poet, despite Hersant’s caveat that “some exaggerate the quality of their exchanges or the richness of their collaboration” (2017: 99).

Emotional responses may also be negative, of course. For source poets, letting translators “take away [and] take possession” of their texts can be an emotional wrench (Kaldjärv 2024: 145–146 after Covi, Rose, and Weaver 1987). This may be compounded by fearing the translator’s “potential unfaithfulness”, while the translator may fear the source writer’s reactions (Kaldjärv 2024: 149). And feeling sidelined in a poettrio as the other two translators forge ahead can be emotionally difficult.

Ultimately, Raffel advises that “[co-translating] partners must be prepared to sacrifice ego and all other merely personal emotion. It is on this issue, more than any other, that collaborations are likely to fail and fall apart. One must learn a special kind of patience, perhaps even a special kind of humility, to sustain a fruitful collaboration.” (1988: 137)

Easier said than done, perhaps, in the heat of the translating moment. In my experience, however, even collaborations where negative emotions occur usually end up producing outcomes that participants are happy with. Successful collaborations, however, arguably also involve an element of emotion management. For translators, for example, this might entail “empathetic listening to comprehend the intentions of others”, but also “conveying trustworthiness and professionalism” (Kaldjärv 2024: 154–155, after Koskinen 2020).

Face-to-face and virtual interaction

Might interaction between translating agents be affected by channel and physical proximity: that is, whether they are communicating face-to-face, via video link, or via e-mail? The video link input of the poettrio source poet who could not attend the main workshop (see above) was less informative than her/his later face-to-face input. In the video sessions, however, she/he simply answered questions about her/his co-translators’ drafts, whereas in the face-to-face sessions they all revised target poems line by line, which probably encouraged more expansive dialogue. Studies on creative and problem-solving tasks show that video enables a wider variety of participants to work together (Walnfan and Davis 2004: 14). However, it is harder via video to pick up information conveyed by gesture, body language and eye contact,

and there is no chance to build social bonds in coffee or lunch breaks (ibid: 15–16). Similarly, video-mediated communication generates less social talk and more task-oriented, formal interaction (ibid: 19–20). In face-to-face mode, by contrast, participants build more mutual trust, make more responses and suggestions, and experience more creative ‘flow’, though their “direct social and emotional engagement” makes face-to-face work more tiring (Macchi and De Pisapia 2024: 9–10). As for e-mail communication, this is much terser than spoken discussion, as I found when starting a translator interview (for Jones 2011) face-to-face and finishing it by e-mail.

The ideal, therefore, is for translating agents to work in the same physical space. Meeting via video, however, may be easier logistically and involves no travel and accommodation costs. E-mail may work fine for brief Q&A exchanges between a solo translator and an informant. But with co-translating proper, it is no substitute for real-time spoken interaction.

Envoi

No translator is an island, entire of itself. Poetry translation involves not just engaging with texts, but also interacting with other people. This article has examined a spectrum of translating practices, from translators working with text helpers to collaborative translating teams. But even the minority of poetry translators who produce their manuscripts alone need the help of others to bring their translations to target readers. And all work within a wider community of people committed to the same task, that of communicating this most exciting and complex of literary forms to readers and listeners of a different language.

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