

From minor to major: accessing marginal voices through music. New ways for translation?

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This talk discusses music in relation to translation and more broadly, what it means to make it accessible. It argues for the development of a theory of accessibility relevant to music in relation to three main ideas.

The first idea is that our cultural perceptions of the world today are shaped by dominant views and countries. They are established for economic, cultural and politic reasons, primarily through translation. The general trend in the 20th and 21st centuries has been to translate from dominant languages and cultures into minority languages. Most media products for instance are translated from American English into a range of less dominant languages in order to provide cultural products globally. Many scholars from Arjun Appadurai (1996; 2013) to Marwan Kraidy (2005) have discussed the consequences that this one directional cultural flow has regarding exclusion, isolation and inequity. Translation Studies scholars have also emphasised the multifarious ways in which translation is the main instrument of this flow (Cronin 2006; Bielsa 2016). This imbalance is present in interlingual cultural products, but also in provision made for audiences with some disabilities such as the deaf and hard of hearing and the blind.

The second idea is that music, in many respects, destabilises this translation flow from dominant to dominated cultures. Of course, musical products are controlled and distributed by a handful of multinational companies which are primarily Anglo-Saxon. It is also undeniable that the standardisation of musical products and instruments has increased massively since the popularisation of music in the last seventy years or so. Yet there is an appetite for marginal voices in music which somewhat disrupts this cultural global imbalance. As Martin Stokes (2007: 6) has shown, ‘people in specific places and at specific times have embraced the music of others [...] and in doing so, they have enabled music styles and musical ideas, musicians and musical instruments to circulate’.

The third idea is that of the accessibility of music. Accessibility has two main meanings in relation to music. For most musicians and musicologists, it refers to difficulties of approach to music. Music, in particular classical music, has long had an ‘ivory tower’ reputation. The development of popular music after World War II has relaxed this view, but to a large number of people, music making is only available to a minority of highly talented individual,

and it is a sphere that they feel excluded from. The second view of accessibility is the one shared by translators and Translation Studies scholars, particularly in the subfield of Audiovisual Translation, referring to how linguistic and multimodal content can be made available for audiences with certain disabilities such as deafness or blindness.

These three ideas will be key to my exploration of accessibility in music, which will be illustrated with examples taken mainly from popular music. I shall suggest that three prevailing myths need to be punctured for a wider enjoyment of and better access to music:

- the myth that music does not have to be made accessible;
- the myth that audiences with special needs have a restricted perception of music;
- the myth that mainstream audiences and musicians would not benefit from different ways of perceiving and listening to music.

I shall conclude on how translators and media accessibility providers are not always best placed to offer the effective provision and how translation as a whole might benefit from models of translation which are particularly suited to music.

References

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