Transcript of an interview with Lucile Desblache by Franis Mus

FM: Good morning. My name is Francis Mus, I am a researcher at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. Together with my colleague Sarah Neelsen from the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, we have edited this special issue of JoSTrans, dealing with 'Translation and Plurisemiotic Practices', for which Lucile Desblache has contributed an article in which she focuses on the relationship between translation and music. I am delighted to be talking to her today. Bonjour Lucile, how are you doing?

LD: Good morning, good afternoon as you say, and thank you for organising this interview.

FM: It's my pleasure! Thank you for your willingness to participate. Let us start with the JoSTrans special issue. In our Introduction, we elaborate a state of the art, in which we noticed that some semiotic systems have been more studied than others. Would you agree that, in comparison to other modalities, such as the relationship between words and images for instance, the translation of music has been neglected, or at least been studied from a perspective that is too narrow, for instance focusing too much on classical music only? And, if so, which subdomains then would deserve more attention today?

LD: It's a very wide question, and globally I would agree that the translation of music has been neglected, but there are many issues to consider. First of all, the translation of music can mean many things. It can mean the translation of songs; for most people, it equates with the translation of songs. And even within the translation of songs, it can actually be very many different things: it can be the subtitling of songs on television, it can be surtitling in opera, it can be having a parallel website to an album for example. It can be, even within song translation, very many things: the translation of musical texts, texts that are discussing music, which use vocabulary, which is linked to music; it can be – as I often understand it in my book – the ways of considering adaptation and interpretation within music, and that wouldn't just consider lyrics, but the music itself, how the music is changing, transforming, being adapted, for example. Within all these different fields, music has been overall neglected. If we consider the aspect of music translation which most people understand, which is song translation in general, it has been neglected for several reasons, and they can vary according to genres of music and situations. First of all, I would say that many translators are slightly frightened of music when they are not musicians themselves, and sometimes for no good reasons. You don't need to be a musician to translate songs in most circumstances. There are a few circumstances where musicians are required, like in surtitling opera for example, which is live, and in which you need to respond to the conductor. In these situations, you need to read the music in order to be synchronised with the conductor – but these are rare cases. In most cases, like in songs in films for example, you don't need to be a musician; you need to have an affinity with the song,

and you need to be aware of the characteristics of music, but you don't need to be a musician. I think that translators are sometimes unnecessarily frightened of tackling song translation. Another aspect, is that music is often considered as an ivory tower environment: it is self-sufficient, it is its own domain, and it doesn't relate to other domains. This is, of course, complete rubbish. Music entirely relates to all other domains. Music is part of culture, but there has been this prejudice that has been perpetuated over the years, especially in relation to classical music. This has done a little bit of damage. This has changed, of course, and this has changed mainly from the 1980s onwards, because opera became not so popular, and opera houses were in danger of losing their subsidies if they didn't make their texts more accessible. This is how they have changed things, by providing surtitling, audio description, all the marvellous ways of providing texts and translation that we know now, and which have influenced all genres of music. Of course, classical music in a way has become a pioneer of accessibility, especially through opera, which is paradoxical, considering this ivory tower syndrome that had been so prominent for many years.

FM: There seems to be a huge contrast between opera on the one hand, where indeed you see that song translation is flourishing, but on the other hand, if you look at pop music, for instance, song translation seems to be something odd, something bizarre. You were talking about the ivory tower: I can imagine that listeners and fans of music wonder why texts, why music should be translated at all?

LD: Yes, and that was my third point. In popular music, the situation is very different. First of all, there are some aspects, some genres in popular music, in which listeners do not *want* a translation, where the words are sometimes not so important, or where they are reasonably limited, or where they are so, I would say, 'subservient' to the melody and the rhythm, that both singers, composers, and the public don't necessarily want a translation. There are cases, not so popular, not so common, but they exist, where the words are in fact intended to be part of a code, where they do not really want, they want to be addressed to a very particular audience, and the translation is not wanted, and this was how hip-hop started. Hip-hop started as codes for a very particular public, not to be widened to a very general public. This has changed of course. Hip-hop has changed and has become much more global, but there are still some instances of music like that. Then, there are the very large issues of copyrights, which are so complex in popular music, because copyrights don't belong to one or two people; they can belong to so many different people in so many different percentages, and you sometimes only require one person to oppose the rights for the whole thing to become extremely challenging and sometimes impossible. This can dishearten people. And then there are traditions. For instance, in film, I think it is a great shame. A lot of songs which should be translated, for which the meaning of words is very important, are not translated. And this is, I think, primarily out of laziness, because to buy a

film, you have to buy the copyrights for the song, so it's not so complex to buy the copyrights of the translation as well. But there has been a tradition where it was acceptable not to provide the translation, and I think they carried on with that tradition, it is a great shame.

FM: If you are talking about copyrights, you are talking about official translations, but, as you mentioned in your book, there is a lot of community translation, made by fans, made by amateur listeners or readers, for instance in the string commentaries on YouTube. Is this also something that should be examined, studied by translation scholars?

LD: Well, it is very interesting actually. It's a very important part of translation, and community translation has been studied by very prominent scholars. Maeve Olohan, Luis-Pérez González, etcetera, etcetera. And of course, it is increasingly studied, but not so much in the context of music, and yet, this is where it appeared! If you look at the very early developments of, I would say, marginal albums. For example, I'm thinking of Ethiopian music. How many people speak Ethiopian? In the context of the Ethiopian political crisis, where music was very prominent, it is absolutely fascinating to look at the sites that were created or that spontaneously happened in 2009, which is when community translation started to emerge. It started to emerge in those contexts, because you started to have people wanting to know what this was about, people, for example, of Ethiopian origin who didn't speak such good Ethiopian. We started to have texts below the video, giving the translation. And, after that, we started to have comments: "Oh, I don't think this translation is quite right. The word 'government' doesn't really mean 'government', in this context". And, so on and so forth. In the case of this ethnic music, it was very politically charged, but this is where community translation started, and yet so few translation scholars have actually considered it. And there is a lot of work to do in this area, I think. Fascinating!

FM: If we come back to the elements of the example you just gave about the translation of film music, you said that very often the music has a meaning, has a role in movies, and that is why it deserves to be translated. Now, if we look at research dealing with audiovisual translation, we see that there is an agreement upon the fact that communication passes also through non-verbal elements. On the other hand, however, very often communication is still seen within the narrow framework of conveying a meaning. As a consequence, other important dimensions of these audiovisual products tend to disappear, such as aesthetic, ludic or emotional aspects going beyond the idea of meaning. In your book, you give a very relevant quote, from Marc Pedelty and Linda Keefe. You say:

> "Meaning is hard to pin down in song, even when focusing on lyrics. People react as much or more to the 'feel' of a given song as to the manifest meanings of the words. Lyrical meaning is intimately linked to, and conditioned by, semiotic cues in the music and performance, such as vocal inflection, rhythm, and musical tone".

Now, would you agree that when dealing with music and translation, too much attention has been paid to these issues of meaning-making, and meaning-making only? How, then, should the balance be restored?

LD: By meaning, here, you mean meaning of the lyrics. All of it is meaning for me. When music has a way of giving meaning, even without words, to visuals for example, much more than visuals give to music, although it can happen as well. All these different semiotic languages give meaning. But I think you mean the meaning of lyrics. I don't think too much importance is given to lyrics, but I think that lyrics should be interpreted and translated according to the context that they are in, within the music in question. If, for example, a visual is making lyrics satirical, through comedy, for example, well, obviously, this should maybe be expressed in the translation. It should reflect all the semiotic clues around it. But there are also times when a song and the words are just meaningful in themselves. We were talking about film, and about what a shame it is that in so many cases the songs are not translated. Of course, sometimes a song doesn't need to be translated: if it's a song on the radio, that is played while somebody is passing by and it has no meaning in itself, of course, it shouldn't be translated. But many songs in music, in films, are very meaningful, and one example that a lot of people will know is the example of a canonical film, *The Graduate*. In *The Graduate*, there is the marvellous song, 'The song of silence', which is a song about the difficulties we have to communicate with each other and the suffering we have when we are closed within our own silence, and the whole film is about the difficulty of communication, and the words are extremely meaningful, and they are never translated, as far as I know, in any language. And this, just, in the film in translation something is missing. And in that case, the words in themselves should be focused for themselves as a poem, because that's what their main meaning is. The visuals themselves do the rest. So, I think that a translator who translates songs needs to pay enormous attention to the context and to the different semiotic languages that are in existence within the circumstances.

FM: I completely agree that meaning goes beyond lyrics, of course. Therefore, when dealing with the translation of plurisemiotic practices, at a given point we are confronted with boundaries, or possible boundaries, of what a translation can be or should be. In your article, and also in your book, you make some explicit claims about how translation should be or can be defined. You make a plea for a wider use of translation. For instance, in the book, you say, "Translation in its wider sense has many virtues", and "A wider use of translation would lead to a more open world". I was wondering whether this wider definition could resolve some methodological or theoretical problems. Can you explain why you want to widen this definition of translation, because there are also other voices who say that we need more strict definitions, more clear-cut distinctions, about what translation is, or can be, or should be?

LD: Yes, this is an impossible question, and I'll try to give some answer. I understand the criticism that some translation scholars make of a wide definition of translation. I understand it particularly within a professional context, because in the professional context of translation, we have all struggled to try to increase, and better, the status of the translator through boundaries that would allow us to give the translator a status as a professional, as a respected, and as a reasonably well paid, professional. And this has been a very difficult path. If you start saying that translation can be something a little bit fuzzy, and broad, and very wide, I understand that this can be a threat to all the hard work that translation scholars, translation professionals, translation associations, have done to try to better the status of the translator. And, of course, in some cases, it is important to define translation within very specific categories. If you discuss subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, you need very specific categories and very specific guidelines, for example, and very strict definitions are required. However, to define is to limit. And limiting systematically is not a good thing. We also need to stretch how we understand the notions that we work into. My view is mainly twofold. First of all, that translators are sometimes a little bit afraid to go beyond the traditional view of translation with a source text and a target text. And that it is not going to hurt them to go beyond this definition, even if it is not useful to them within a particular context. I have always been shocked, for example, at how philosophy and sociology have been revolutionised by the concept of translation by philosophers such as Latour or Michel Serres, but that translators have been kept *out* of it virtually, have kept *themselves* out of it. What a missed opportunity! The second thing is linked to the idea of language. I think that, as we have developed the modern culture that has come to the contemporary culture that we have lived, we are living in now, verbal language has been at the beginning the most useful form of communication between human beings. And it has been probably very, very suitable to most forms of communication that human beings have had between themselves. However, it seems to me it is no longer the case. We communicate in very, very many different ways. Of course, it doesn't mean that verbal language is no longer important, but it's only one part of the way we communicate. And it seems to me that translators can be a little bit behind in accepting this. We communicate through mathematical language, through informatics, for example, and IT, and computer language. And this is also very important. We communicate through visual language, we communicate through movement, we communicate in a whole variety of ways, which media today have completely embraced, and which we need to consider when we think of translation. So, it does not mean we need to disregard verbal translation, but to me it needs to show us that we need to consider it within a wider context.

FM: I see what you mean. In your article for JoSTrans, you write that "Translation is more than a metaphor for music. In many respects, music is translation if the latter is understood in its widest sense". In your book you give more examples of that, when you consider "musical translation as

a cultural tool, as an imaginative space, a critical instrument of enquiry that can lead to new ways of listening and understanding". As a final question, could you elaborate on these ways of listening and understanding? Does such an understanding also have maybe consequences for Translation Studies, for translation scholars?

LD: Yes, I'll do my best. In my view, there are two questions. One question is that music, and in the third part of my book I consider music not just as vocal music, but just as an extraverbal form of expression, which can also include a verbal form of expression but is not limited to it – I wanted to make that clear. What I understand by 'music' is a form of translation: any music is a form of variation on an existing sound. Any music comes from something we've heard already. And that a composer, a singer, a singer-songwriter, or whoever works in music, moulds into new meaning, and not necessarily verbal meaning, a new meaning. Music is not translation in the sense that it starts from a source text and it finishes in a target text, with some sort of idea of equivalence, between the source text and the target text, of course. But it emerges from something that we know, and it shapes this something that we know, into something new, that also has meaning. And that meaning wouldn't have been possible without the original meaning. And, in that sense, it is a translational tool. The second thing, relates in a way to the previous questions that we have just discussed with the widening of languages, and this is something that is very important to me. As we have evolved as human beings, we have been able to go a little bit beyond ourselves, and yet we haven't done this very much with regard to communication. So, we have looked at animals, for example, and we have tried to get animals to understand us, because this is to our own interest. But we haven't really tried that much to understand animals. Very little has been done on how we could understand what they are saying, what is that 'take' on the world. My view is music, because it's non-verbal, can be something that we can begin to consider as a form of non-verbal communication, that could allow us to maybe go beyond communication between just humans. And I know it is something that is perhaps very controversial, but I think that it is urgent that we start to have interspecies communication. We are destroying our planet, we are destroying species, we know all these things, and yet linguists, and people who are involved in communication, do not seem to be that interested in it. And it's a very important part of how we can make our planet better. This is what I understand by it.

FM: Thank you very much! I think this is a wonderful conclusion to our conversation. I want to thank you once again for your time, for being with us, for your willingness to share your ideas. Thank you very much, Lucile.

LD: Thank you, Francis.