When Accessibility Becomes Performance: Performativity as an Element and Carrier of Accessibility in Sign-Language-Interpreted Music

 Angela Tiziana Tarantini ✉

Utrecht University

_____

Abstract

Accessibility is a key concept in audiovisual translation. In recent years, the importance of equal access not only to information, services, and media, but also to the arts has been gaining more attention. Accessibility provisions for popular music, however, have not been as comprehensive as for other types of music. In order to facilitate access to music for deaf signers, a generation of interpreter-performers started to embody nonverbal elements of the "text," such as rhythm, pitch, tempo, etc., when translating a song into sign language. This practice, which is a form of audiovisual translation, is gaining momentum and has been the object of analysis in other disciplines (e.g., Musicology or Deaf Studies), but is under-investigated within Translation and Interpreting Studies. Working from studies in signed songs, from the work of Grant, and from Marinetti's notion of translation as "performative rewriting", I aim to show that performativity, intended as an action related to performance, but also with transformative potential, can become an element and a carrier of accessibility, and is at the core of these interpreting practices. The distinction between accessibility and access, however, must also be taken into account, and whether these practices actually facilitate access remains to be established by the deaf community.

Key words: sign language interpreting, translation, music, song signing, performance, performativity, accessibility, access.

✉ a.t.tarantini@uu.nl; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7142-7739

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to establish performativity as an element and a carrier of accessibility in sign-language-interpreted music. The frames of analysis chosen for this article are built at the intersection between Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS), Performance Studies, and Accessibility Studies. By combining the notion of performativity as understood in TIS (e.g., Bermann, 2014; Marinetti, 2013, 2018a; among others) and in Performance Studies (Grant, 2013, 2015) with Greco's theories on accessibility and access (2016), I argue that performativity is a vector of accessibility.

The practice of sign language interpreting in music, also known as song signing, has been gaining momentum in recent years, also thanks to social media and platforms such as YouTube, and has been the object of analysis in disciplines ranging from Deaf Studies to Musicology. However, it has received scant attention from TIS scholars. As Tamayo (2022) has argued, "sign language, sign language interpreting and sign language translation have often been left out of both theoretical and more practical approaches within Translation Studies, Audiovisual Translation (AVT), and Media Accessibility studies" (Tamayo, 2022, p. 130). To that I would add that the practice of song signing has received even less attention from TIS scholars. While a recent publication provides a comprehensive overview of sign language interpreting and sign language translation around the world (Stone et al., 2022), studies on song signing are still scarce within TIS, with some noticeable exceptions (e.g., Desblache, 2021).

2. Sign-Language-Interpreted Music: Types, Scopes, and Definitions

To avoid confusion, it is important to distinguish between different types of signed songs. There are diverse classifications by scholars in various disciplines, such as Deaf Studies (Bahan, 2006), and Musicology (Maler, 2013). In this article I will use the more recent and comprehensive classification put forth by Pereira (2021, p. 101) reported in the following diagram:[1]

---

[1] Working within an AVT perspective, Tamayo (2022) offers a rigorous and compelling classification of the different types of sign language interpreting and sign language translation practices in the media. While her classification could be fruitfully used to categorize different types of song signing, Pereira's model is more easily applicable to sign-language-interpreted songs, as it was specifically devised for song signing.

Figure 1

Classification of Different Types of Song Signing Adapted From Pereira
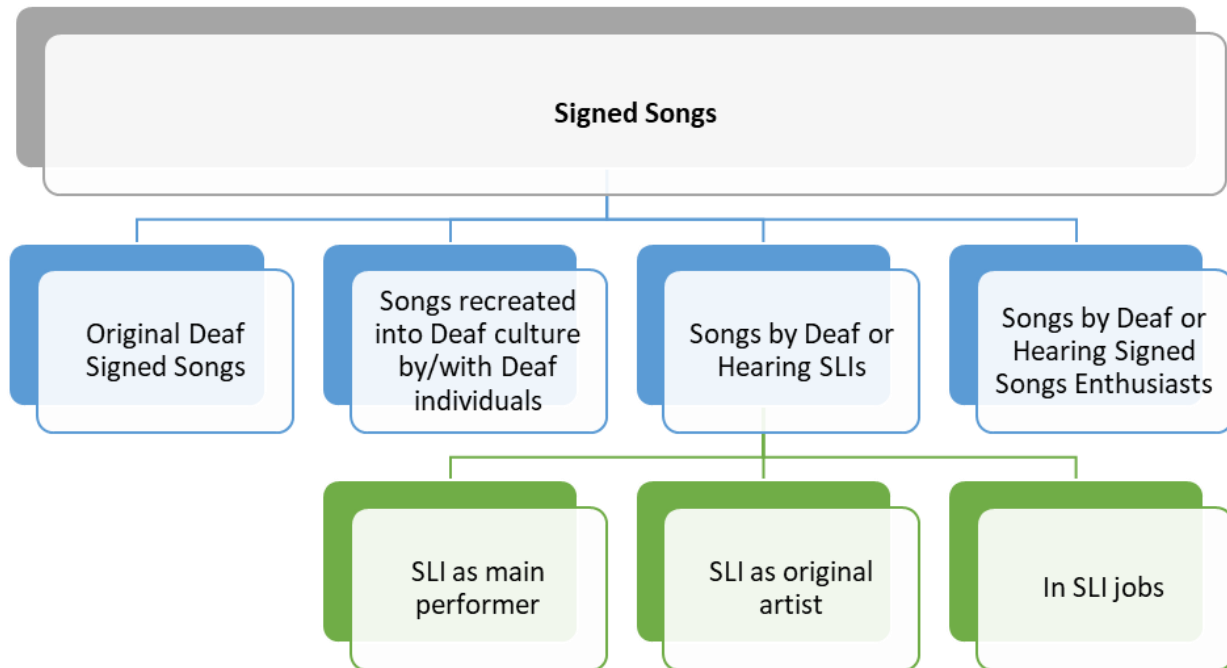
Source: Pereira, 2021, p. 101.

According to Pereira, original deaf signed songs are created by deaf individuals and are not a form of translation or interpretation. Examples are songs created by artists such as Sean Forbes or WaWa (working in American Sign Language), or Signkid (a.k.a. Kevin Walker), and rapper and dancer Chris Fonseca (working in British Sign Language). In Pereira's classification, songs (re)created into deaf culture[2] by/with deaf individuals are "products where Deaf people lead a process of creative translation, adapting the lyrics and music into a signed performance" where "some Deaf artists work in partnership with Deaf or hearing people" (Pereira, 2021, p. 102). Songs signed by Deaf or hearing sign language interpreters are further subdivided into songs where:

---

[2] Scholars in Deaf Studies (e.g. Kusters et al., 2017) have put forth the proposition that we should move away from the d/Deaf and hard of hearing nomenclature and use "deaf" as umbrella term. Until recently, the convention was to use the lower-case "deaf" to refer to the physiological condition of hearing loss, and the capital D in "Deaf" to indicate a person who belongs to a sign language community and whose cultural identity is connected to their deafness (Ladd, 2003). Some scholars (e.g. Pereira, 2021) maintain that the distinction d/Deaf is still relevant, and in some countries (like Australia or the Netherlands) the definition "hard of hearing" (slechthorend in Dutch) is commonly and extensively used. In this article I will use "deaf" as broad umbrella term as suggested by Kusters et al. (2017). However, when quoting the work of other scholars verbatim, I will use their words and therefore their nomenclature/spelling.

a) the SLI [sign language interpreter] is the main performer. That is the case of "professionally recorded videos where the original music appears in the background and the SLI [sign language interpreter] is the most visible element; or live artistic installations where the signed performance of the SLI [sign language interpreter] (and other visual elements, e.g., lights or videos) has a main role" (Pereira, 2021, p. 102);

b) the SLI works alongside the original artists, be it in live or recorded performances;

c) the SLI provides live interpretation, either in TV programmes or at public events, such as concerts.

According to Pereira, in this latter case "Signed Songs can vary in quality, depending on the availability of preparation materials (lyrics). When no preparation is possible, it is simultaneous interpreting, not a performing art" (Pereira, 2021, p. 102). I disagree with this latter statement. Having observed and analysed many SLIs interpreting a song into sign language on the spot without preparation, I can affirm that while it is true that the quality of the interpretation may vary, depending on the interpreter and their experience, there is still a performative element which is what will ultimately strives to facilitate access to music for deaf signers, as we shall see. To claim that "when no preparation is possible, it is simultaneous interpreting, not a performing art" (Pereira, 2021, p. 102) is to overlook the prominent theories within the "performative turn" in TIS, and to ignore the performative element that is still very much present in the practice of song signing, even with little preparation for a specific gig (see Tarantini, Forthcoming-a). Even if the performance of a song signer is less rehearsed and more improvised, that does not imply that it is not a form of art and that the "essence of performance" (Grant, 2013) is not present. Behind an "improvised" performance there are hours and hours of study and practice, as jazz players know all too well.

The last category identified by Pereira is that of song signing enthusiasts, whether deaf or hearing, who have little to no background in translation and with varying degrees of fluency in sign language and/or understanding of deaf culture. In this article, and in my work in general, I focus exclusively on songs signed by deaf or hearing sign language interpreters who translate a popular song into sign language to facilitate access for deaf signers, i.e., those in green in Figure 1.

In this article I will use the term "interpreter-performer" (henceforth IP) or "song signer" interchangeably to talk about those sign language interpreters who translate music into sign language for accessibility purposes, be it in recorded videos or live performances. I also use the term "translation" as an umbrella term, well aware that there is a difference between translation and interpreting. The word "translation" is often used "for a written target-language reformulation of a written source text" while "interpretation or interpreting for a non-written re-expression of a non-written source text." (Giles, 2004, p. 11). However, there are many overlaps between the two, and particularly in the practice of song signing. Some signed songs are a form of interpreting (e.g., live interpretation services) while others can be classified as sign language translation rather than sign language interpreting. For examples, videos where the interpreter has the time to translate the lyrics, prepare the performance, film it, and share it on social media can be considered a form of sign language translation, whereas a live concert would be a form of sign language interpreting

(depending on how much preparation time the interpreter had, though). I will therefore use the term "translation" as an umbrella term to refer to any practice which entails the transposition of lyrics and other nonverbal elements of the musical text into a sign language in the context of song signing. Moreover, the notions that I will adopt and adapt from translation (e.g., performativity) can be considered valid for interpreting as well, particularly in the context of the performing arts.

3. Accessibility and Access

The notions of accessibility and access are central to my investigation, as they are at the core of the practice of sign language IPs who, with their interpreted performance, aim to facilitate access to music for deaf signers. In the past decades we have witnessed a shift from a "reactive approach" to a "proactive approach" to accessibility (Greco, 2018). In the "traditional approach", a person with limited access was an "after thought," and a service was made accessible to people with potentially limited access. Adaptations would be made to meet the needs of people with disabilities and/or to satisfy the requirements of individual users who would otherwise be unable to access information and/or a service in its original form. Given that adaptations to services and/or products are not always possible, in recent years, more and more service providers have adopted a proactive approach to accessibility, and a universalist account of access. This latter implies offering a product or a service made accessible to the widest possible audience, rather than considering "special needs" as an afterthought (Greco, 2016, 2018).

In relation to accessibility of music, Desblache notices how, while a lot of progress has been made in the last decades to make media and some music more accessible (e.g., opera), "these services have not extended widely to popular music, and overall, progress in accessibility provision for music has been less comprehensive than in media overall" (Desblache, 2020, pp. 713–714). This is where there is a huge gap not only on the part of institutions and agents that should proactively see that provisions are in place to facilitate access to music, but also and particularly on the part of the cultural institutions that should proactively investigate those practices aimed at facilitating access to music, i.e., academic and other cultural organizations. A lot of work is being carried out across the globe to facilitate access to concerts and popular music for deaf people, and usually these are *bottom-up* practices: individual interpreters and/or organisations provide live music interpretation services. Some examples of these are *Auslan Stage Left* in Australia, *Performance Interpreting* in the UK, and *Muziektolken* (Mirjam Stolk and Hanneke de Raaff) in the Netherlands. A few examples of currently practicing interpreters known to the author are deaf IP David Cowan and hearing IPs Amber Galloway Gallego and Holly Maniatti in the USA; deaf IP Fletch@ and Paul Whittaker, OBE, in the UK; hearing IP Giulia Clementi in Italy; and hearing IP Anouk Bakkers in the Netherlands, among others.

In order to establish how to facilitate or have access to something, it is important to define the notions of access and accessibility, which are far from uncontroversial. Since the approval of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008, the debate on whether accessibility is itself a human right has been central in Accessibility Studies (Greco, 2016). However,

"within the human rights debate" the claim that accessibility is a human right per se "is not unanimously embraced" (Greco, 2016, p. 13). The debate revolves around whether accessibility is a human right or a tool for achieving human rights. According to Greco (2016) accessibility is a "proactive principle" for achieving human rights, and access is a "necessary requirement" for the enjoyment of the right. As a principle, accessibility requires that the duty-bearers "proactively intervene in order to fulfill that right" (Greco, 2016, p. 23). In addition to (re)defining accessibility as a proactive principle and access as a necessary requirement to enjoy a right, Greco extends these notions to culture and the arts (Greco, 2017), and music is unarguably a form of art.

Following Greco's detailed analysis and classification of rights and accessibility, we can say that accessibility to music is the principle according to which the duty-bearers (artists, the music industry, music venues, etc.) should proactively intervene to guarantee that all individuals can enjoy their human right, i.e., they should facilitate access to a music performance. Access to music is then the necessary requirement to guarantee the enjoyment of this right. While there is a number of organisations and interpreters across the world whose practice aims to facilitate access to music for deaf signers, scholarly articles on this interpreting practice are very scarce in TIS, and therefore our understanding of it is very limited. It is this gap in the scholarship that this research wishes to address, and establishing performativity as an element and a carrier of accessibility is only the first step.[3] In order to establish the link between performativity and accessibility, however, a brief overview of the notion of performativity is necessary.

4. Performativity

The notion of performativity is very complex. Unsurprisingly, in TIS the concept has been theorised at the crossroads of translation and performance, stemming from the linguistic notion of performativity. Robinson (2003) was among the first to argue that translation is itself performative: a performative activity with perlocutionary effect. Since then, a number of scholars have engaged with and analysed the notion of performativity in translation, so much so that some claim that TIS has been experiencing a "performative turn" in the last decade (Bigliazzi et al., 2013, p. 1). The notion of performativity in translation has been analysed mainly from two distinct (yet related) angles:

1. Performativity related to the actual practice of performance;
2. Performativity as activism in translation.

The former has been primarily analysed and theorised by scholars working in theatre translation, first and foremost by Marinetti (2013, 2018a, 2018b). The performative turn in stage translation has departed from the concept of performability, which was highly debated in the 1990s (Bassnett, 1991, 1998; Nikolarea, 2002; Pavis, 1992, among others) in favour of theories such as that of "performative

---

[3] This article is part of a larger project aimed at enhancing TIS scholars' understanding of the practice of song signing.

force" (Worthen, 2003). Working from Worthen's theories, Marinetti claims that the theatre translator should not wonder about the performability of a translated text, but rather about:

> the force the text has in performance, what "it does" and how it functions "as performance" […] A performative understanding of translation in the theatre involves a reconceptualization of the role played by *spectators* [original emphasis] as well as a rethinking of more general notions of reception. (Marinetti, 2013, p. 311)

This notion of what the text "does" in (but also outside) performance overlaps with the idea of performativity as activism in translation. In a book chapter titled "Performing Translation", Bermann states that since the cultural turn in TIS (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990), the scholarship has redirected its attention from issues of linguistic equivalence to the actual "*acts* of translation and what these *did* [original emphasis] in particular contexts" (Bermann, 2014, p. 288). Bermann argues that the discipline has broadened its focus to encompass "the cultural and political *acts* and *effects* of translation" and to examine "the *doing* of translation […] but also the *doing* [original emphasis] of translators, readers, and audiences" (Bermann, 2014, p. 288). Bermann focuses on "translation's own productive and transformative potential, both in […] art and in what we call 'real life'" (Bermann, 2014, p. 288). This notion of performativity as transformative potential can also be scrutinised "in terms of an activist translation, understood as a political activity aimed at achieving social transformation" (Baldo, 2019, p. 74; see also Tymoczko, 2010). The notion of performativity, thus, can be understood as both related to performance, and as related to the effects of the performance of the translator on the recipients of the translation. The two are connected and are two distinct sub-notions of performativity, as further explained below.

While it is easy to see how the practice of sign language interpreting in music can bring about a social transformation, since it might increase inclusivity of a segment of the audience, the idea of translation as a creative and performative practice requires even further elucidation. According to Schechner:

> Performativity as understood by performance studies is part of, or closely related to, postmodernism. One of the decisive qualities of postmodernism is the application of the "performance principle" to all aspects of social and artistic life. (Schechner, 2013, p. 129)

Schechner hypothesises that "any behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied 'as' performance" (Schechner, 2013, p. 41). Working from these premises, Aaltonen sees translation and "the translation process *as performance* [original emphasis]" (Aaltonen, 2013, p. 386). If the "performance principle" can be applied to all aspects of social and artistic life, then translation can also be understood as performance. The notion of translation as performance has been analysed by Cheetham (2016), who scrutinises the implication of the TRANSLATION IS PERFORMANCE metaphor, as opposed to the previously dominating TRANSLATION IS TRANSFER metaphor, working from the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). According to Lakoff and Johnson, humans understand and categorize many concepts (more or less consciously) through metaphors. Since translation is a complex human activity, translation, too, is often understood through

metaphors (Cheetham, 2016). Cheetham claims that the TRANSLATION IS PERFORMANCE metaphor is better suited to describe the work of the translator, since it allows us to see translation as the outcome of the translator's creative activity rather than as a mere transfer from one place to another, or from one audience to another. Aaltonen (2013) and Cheetham (2016) see translation as performative in the sense that the process is comparable to (or understood as) performance. Instead, Marinetti (2013), Bermann (2014), and later Baldo (2019) see it as relational to the audience. That process will have an effect both on the translated work of art and "in what we call 'real life'" to use Bermann's words (2014, p. 288). The process of translation will have an impact on the text, but also on the recipient of the translation (i.e., its audience), hence its potential for social transformation. In my work, however, I move beyond considering translation *as* performance, or performance as a metaphor through which we understand and theorise translation; rather, I argue that in the performing arts (Tarantini, 2021), and particularly the practice of sign-language-interpreted music (Tarantini, Forthcoming-b), translation is inextricable from its performance component. In song signing, the performative element of translation is embodied in the IP's practice, so much so that Fisher (2021) talks about "embodied interpretations".

As previously mentioned, this study hinges on an understanding of translation as a performative practice, where "performative" is intended both in its potential for social transformation, and as a creative practice on the part of the translator. One of the first scholars to advocate for a greater interaction between the translation and the performance interface is Marinetti, who has theorised the notion of translation as "performative rewriting" (Marinetti, 2018a). According to Marinetti, the stage functions as a "translation zone", where:

> translation […] occurs not only discursively, through subsequent rewritings of a foreign text, but also performatively, through the negotiation of multiple languages in performance and the creative juxtaposition of those languages with the actor's body […] (Marinetti, 2018b, p. 129).

Marinetti analyses the issue from the perspective of theatre. However, that is applicable to translation practices in the performing arts more broadly, and particularly to the work of sign language IPs, who physically embody nonverbal elements of music in their interpretation. In her analysis of cross-modal meaning-making, Fisher (2021) notices how notions from the Conceptual Metaphor Theory are embodied by the interpreter in signed songs. While TRANSLATION IS PERFORMANCE is a metaphor within the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, in the practice of sign-language-interpreted music, translation *is* performance and performance *is* translation. Notions from the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (e.g., HAPPY IS UP or SAD IS DOWN/HEAVY) become embodied metaphors through which the performer interprets the emotions of the song, but also other nonverbal elements such as rhythm, pitch, intensity, instrumentation, etc. when translating music and lyrics into signs and movement (Fisher, 2021), both conceptually and performatively.

As already noted, the TIS theories on translation and performativity are usually developed working from Performance Studies. Theories mediated from Performance Philosophy, however, could shed more light on the notion of performativity, and can be fruitfully applied to the study of translation.

Perhaps less known among TIS scholars is the work of Grant (2013, 2015), who recognises the need for more clarity and better definitions of terms related to performance and performance theory. According to Grant, there is:

> a persistent confusion in performance studies, caused by the historical accident that, in English, the word "performance" can be used to designate a number of different phenomena. No doubt the collapse of sign and referent in Austin's performative utterance contributes to this situation (1975, pp. 5–6). (Grant, 2013, pp. 127–128)

With the theorisation of the performative utterance in linguistics, in which "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action […]" (Austin, 1975, p. 5), the boundaries between the *saying* and the *doing* have collapsed. While that was "a founding moment in the discipline of performance studies" (Grant, 2015, p. 214), it undoubtedly contributed to terminological confusion, hence the need to draw a distinction between "*the performative event, performance, the moment of performance,* and *the theatrical as opposed to the performative* [original emphasis]" (Grant, 2013, p. 127). According to Grant, the "performative event" could be "a ritual, a theatre show, a sports game, a ceremony, a rehearsal, a social occasion such as a date or a job interview, a presidential inauguration speech, the cooking of a meal, the painting of a picture, a prayer" (Grant, 2013, pp. 128–129). The term *performance*, instead, "refers to that moment of the performative event in which it performs, in which it is performed […] performance is understood here as a kind of essence which makes performative events performative" (Grant, 2013, p. 129).[4] Grant then introduces the concept of the *performative moment* (or *moment of performance*) which is a moment bound in time, and is "the moment of *decision* [original emphasis]" (Grant, 2013, p. 129), when the performer chooses between the options available to them in that particular instant. No matter how well rehearsed a show is, that moment is always, at least in part, improvisational, Grant claims. To better understand this moment, which is bound to its temporality and to its fleeting nature, it is necessary to operate a distinction between the *theatrical* and the *performative* (Grant, 2013).

> The *theatrical* dimension [original emphasis] of the performative event is the showing-to, the attempt to represent, make predictable and repeatable, to communicate with or affect another, the endurance of the sign, the material, the temporal. The *performative* dimension [original emphasis] is the flash of the moment of the coming-forth, the almost imperceptible, unencompassable, and inexperienceable inceptive occurrence, the doing, which, in its apprehension, ceases to function as what it was, and joins the apparatus of the theatrical, the enduring. The performative temporalises, the theatrical is already in time; in the theatrical, the representational gap of metaphysics has already opened, the performative occurs as the unfolding of Being. A performative event is always, in these definitions, a combination of the theatrical and the performative. The two dimensions always work together as complementary axes of the temporality of performance. In the performative event, the theatrical and the performative cannot exist without each other. (Grant, 2015, pp. 216–217)

---

[4] Elsewhere, Grant (2015, p. 216) defines this as "the essence of performance".

Grant works from Heidegger's concept of *Augenblick*, which literally translates as "the blink of an eye" and "describes a 'decisive moment' in time that is both fleeting yet momentously eventful" (Ward, 2008, p. i). Grant uses Heidegger's notion of *Augenblick,* "the moment of vision, which temporalizes itself in a resolution" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 394, as cited in Grant, 2015, p. 220) to define his "moment of performance"[5], when the performer chooses amongst the range of possibilities open to them in that instant.

When discussing translation and its function, Scott also adopts a concept from Heidegger. According to Scott translation should become "a philosophical enquiry into its own functions and possible relationships with the translator's being-in-the-world" (Scott, 2019, p. 89). The concept of "being-in-the-world" was first theorised by Heidegger (2001), who posited that human beings cannot be directly in the world, but can only be in a specific situation and context, i.e., *Dasein* (literally "being there"). *Dasein* is constituted by "Being-in-the-World" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 102), which is a unitary phenomenon that cannot be broken into smaller entities.

Scott's idea of the translator's function and their "being-in-the-world" (a concept he adapted from Heidegger) combines with Grant's notion of *performance* and *performative moment* (this latter adapted from Heidegger's notion of *Augenblick*). According to Grant (2013, 2015), it is in the *performative event* (i.e., during a show) that the *essence of performance* manifests itself and makes the *performative moment* performative. The practice of sign language IPs is bound to the performative moment which is a moment bound in time, and is "the moment of *decision* [original emphasis]" (Grant, 2013, p. 129), when the translator's "being-in-the-world" is not a philosophical enquiry into their function, but rather, a materialisation and an embodiment of their "transformative potential."[6]

5. Performativity as an Element and Carrier of Accessibility

This article argues that sign language interpreting in music is a performative practice, both because it is related to performance and because of its "transformative potential" (Bermann, 2014) for its capacity to bring about social change (Baldo, 2019). The aim of the practice of sign language IPs is to facilitate access to music to deaf signers (Galloway Gallego, 2018). Fisher (2021) has identified some strategies used by IPs to embody non-verbal elements of the text (rhythm, tempo, pitch, etc.) employed for that purpose. By recognising the practice of sign language IPs as performative as intended above, then we can claim that in sign-language-interpreted music, performativity is

---

[5] Grant (2013, 2015) uses the terms *performative moment* and *moment of performance* interchangeably, as well as *performance event* and *performative event*.

[6] The notion of "transformative potential" has been discussed in different disciplines. For the notion of the transformative potential of translation, see Bermann (2018), Heinish (2021) and Campbell and Vidal (2019), among others. Greco (2018) talks about the transformative potential of accessibility, while Flynn and Tinius (2015) analyse the transformative potential of performance.

"embodiment", because accessibility to nonverbal elements of a song (rhythm, pitch, etc.) materializes through the performer's body, through interpretations where vocal and musical elements of a song are embodied. Song signing, then, is a form of "performative rewriting" as intended by Marinetti (2018a), where different languages but also different communicative codes juxtapose on the performer's body.

The practice of sign language interpreting in music speaks to Grant's (2013, 2015) view of the performative as the attribute of the performance event. In this practice, the *performance event* is a live concert, or a song signing practice aimed to facilitate access to music for deaf signers. The *performative moment* is the moment in which the IP chooses among the range of possibilities available to them: it is the moment of decision, no matter how well rehearsed the show or the text is,[7] and it is a moment that is irremediably bound in time. It is the moment of *performance*, as defined by Grant (2013) in which the performative event performs. Performance is the "essence which makes performative events performative" (Grant, 2013, p. 129).[8] As Grant (2013, p. 217) states "a performative event is always […] a combination of the theatrical and the performative": the theatrical being what is "scripted" and predictable and known before the performative moment, and the performative being the unknown, the improvisational moment before the audience. This is the moment when accessibility becomes performance: when the theatrical and the performative combine in the performative event, and the performative event performs. This is where the notion of performativity in Performance Studies and in Translation and Interpreting Studies converge, and the very notion multiplies exponentially, embodied in the performer's practice. Marinetti's idea of translation as "performative force", and an enhanced understanding of what the text "does and how it functions 'as performance'" (Marinetti, 2013, p. 311) is functional to theorising performativity as an element of accessibility. In what Grant (2013, 2015) defines as the performative moment, the translator and their "being-in-the-world" reach their transformative potential during a performative event, hence combining the notion of performativity as the potential to achieve social transformation with that of performativity as the translator's creative practice. The idea of translation as "performative rewriting", where different languages but also different modalities (aural, visual, and embodied) are juxtaposed and merge on the performer's body, make performativity itself an embodied notion, incorporated in and inextricable from the practice of translation. Hence, we can no longer consider performance as a metaphor through which we understand translation, because the translation *is* the performance itself or, to use Grant's terminology, the *performance event* is the translation itself (Tarantini, 2023).

---

[7] In some cases, some IPs interpret in real-time, having done some research on the artist before the gig, but without access to the texts or the program beforehand, so their interpretation is actually at least in part improvised (Celeste Di Pietro, IP, personal communication, April 28 2022). In other cases, such as concerts of famous singers, famous singers, IPs might have more preparation time and access to the setlist before the show (Caswell, 2017). Regardless of how much preparation there is behind a performance, the performative moment is always at least in part improvisational, and bound in time. It is always a combination of the theatrical and the performative (Grant, 2013, 2015).

[8] Elsewhere, Grant (2015, p. 216) defines this as "the essence of performance".

Scott puts forth the proposition that translation is synaesthetic, and states that "the central motor principle of translation is morphism, a sliding across languages or linguistic material, across the senses, across the *participating body*, in order to achieve an ever-changing *inclusivity* [emphasis added], a variational play" (Scott, 2019, p. 89). Understanding that in sign-language-interpreted music the performative event is itself a translation allows us to see performativity as embodiment, and translation as synaesthetic. The performativity of sign language interpreting in music as explained above is the key element in striving to facilitate access to music. Performativity thus becomes an element and a carrier of accessibility. Whether that actually facilitates access to music, however, is for deaf audiences to decide.

6. Conclusions and Further Research

Grant's distinction between the essence of performance, the moment of performance, the performative event, and the theatrical and the performative has provided the basis to analyse the practice of sign language IPs. During the performative event, in the moment of performance, the essence of performance makes the event performative. If we understand performativity not only as relational to the performative event, but as relational to the audience in its potential to bring about social transformation, we can see how the performative moment, when the interpreter embodies nonverbal elements of the text, is the moment when performativity becomes an element and a vector of accessibility. In sign-language-interpreted music, then, translation becomes a practice of "performative rewriting" through the interpreter's "participating body", to use Scott's words (Scott, 2019, p. 89), and performativity is thus embodied.

Accessibility, as we have seen, is the responsibility of the duty-bearer (Greco, 2016), but despite the growing number of deaf people attending live concerts (Smirke, 2016), the 2017 UK Live Music Census highlights that "there is still more to be done around accessibility for Deaf and disabled customers." One of the recommendations put forth by the census is for event organisers to "develop policies to incorporate […] accessibility for Deaf and disabled artists and audiences" (Webster et al., 2018, p. 42).

While there is a demand for live interpretation services for music events, it is important to acknowledge that "the deaf community expresses a variety of opinions reflecting mixed feelings related to translated signed songs", as noted by Cripps et al. (2017, p. 3). Similarly, Fisher (2021, p. 2) points out that "not all d/Deaf people are interested in signed song interpretations. It can be argued that a form which gives precedence to a hearing-oriented stimulus is irrelevant and even detrimental to Deaf culture."[9] Aware that there are mixed feelings about this practice, the number of sign-language-interpreted music events and concerts reveal that there is an increasing demand for this type of translation and/in performance. However, to this day very few studies have been conducted

---

[9] An in-depth discussion of this pivotal issue is not only beyond the scope of the present article, but also beyond my limitations, given that I am a hearing TIS scholar.

to identify the strategies implemented by Ips (with some noticeable exceptions, e.g. Fisher, 2021) and their efficacy (Mangelsdorf et al., 2021), or lack thereof.[10]

On the issue of sign language interpreters in the media and the arts, Schmitt (2017) argues that deaf performers, rather than hearing interpreters, should be given more visibility, and should be provided a space for artistic expression. This would also be functional to facilitating access for deaf audiences. While I do not necessarily disagree with Schmitt, this debate is beyond the scope of the present article, and beyond my limits as a hearing TIS scholar working in translation and performance. Schmitt's stance does, however, speak to one of the greatest limitations of the research on the topic, i.e., the lack of collaboration across different disciplines, for a greater insight into sign-language-interpreted music. Further research would be required to fully understand the practice of song signing, to frame it within the current practices of translation for accessibility purposes in the context of the global entertainment industry, and to evaluate its efficacy.

The experience of TIS scholars in researching translation and performative practices, translation for accessibility purposes, networks of translation, and notions such as agency and appropriation could provide a valuable contribution to the discussion. This article therefore concludes with a call for greater cross-disciplinary engagement and more collaboration among scholars from different disciplines in conversations with the deaf community, as more interdisciplinary work is needed to fully comprehend and contextualise such a complex practice and understand to what extent this accessibility provision actually facilitate access to music for deaf signers.

---

[10] Organisations such as *Auslan Stage Left* in Australia and *Performance Interpreting* in the UK offer this kind of service. For example, in 2022, Ed Sheeran toured the UK together with Fletch@, deaf performer, and Marie Pascall, hard of hearing interpreter (and founder of *Performance Interpreting*). Every performance was interpreted into BSL for deaf audience members (Withey, 2022). At the final performance at Wembley Stadium on June 25 2022 there were over 100 deaf fans in the dedicated area where Fletch@ and Marie Pascall performed Ed Sheeran's songs in BSL (Fletch, 2022).

References

Aaltonen, S. (2013). Theatre translation *as performance*. *Target, 25*(3), 385–406. https://doi.org/10.1075/target.25.3.05aal

Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words* (2nd ed.). Clarendon Press.

Bahan, B. (2006). Face-to-face tradition in the American deaf community. In H. D. L. Bauman, J. L. Nelson, & H. M. Rose (Eds.), *Signing the body poetic: Essays on American Sign Language literature* (pp. 21–50). University of California Press.

Baldo, M. (2019). Translating Spanish transfeminist activism into Italian. Performativity, DIY, and affective contaminations. *gender/sexuality/italy, (6)*, 66–84. https://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/4-translating-spanish-transfeminist-activism-into-italian-performativity-diy-and-affective-contaminations/

Bassnett, S. (1991). Translating for the theatre: The case against performability. *TTR: Traduction, terminologie, rédaction, 4*(1), 99–111.

Bassnett, S. (1998). Still trapped in the labyrinth: Further reflections on translation and theatre. In A. Lefevere (Ed.), *Constructing cultures: Essays on literary translation* (pp. 90–108). Multilingual Matters.

Bassnett, S., & Lefevere, A. (1990). *Translation, history, and culture*. Pinter Publishers.

Bermann, S. (2014). Performing translation. In S. Bermann & C. Porter (Eds.), *A companion to translation studies* (pp. 285–297). Blackwell-Wiley.

Bigliazzi, S., Kofler, P., & Ambrosi, P. (2013). Introduction. In S. Bigliazzi, P. Kofler, & P. Ambrosi (Eds.), *Theatre translation in Performance* (pp. 1–26). Routledge Taylor & Francis.

Campbell, M., Vidal, R. (2019). The translator's gaze: Intersemiotic translation as transactional process. In M. Campbell & R. Vidal (Eds.), *Translating across sensory and linguistic borders. Intersemiotic journeys between media* (pp. 1–36). Springer.

Caswell, E. (2017, Month? Day?). *How sign language innovators are bringing music to the deaf* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuD2iNVMS_4

Cheetham, D. (2016). Literary translation and conceptual metaphors: From movement to performance. *Translation Studies, 9*(3), 241–255. doi:10.1080/14781700.2016.1180543

Cripps, J. (2018). Ethnomusicology & signed music: A breakthrough. *Journal of American Sign Languages and Literatures*.

Cripps, J. H., Rosemblum, E., Small, A., & Supalla, S. J. (2017). A case study on signed music: The emergence of an inter-performance art. *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies, 13*(2). http://liminalities.net/13-2/signedmusic.html

de Raaf, H., & Stolk, M. (2015–2022). *Muziek Tolken [Music Interpreting]*. https://www.muziektolken.nl/wat-is-muziektolken-signdancen

Desblache, L. (2020). Music and accessibility. In Ł. Bogucki & M. Deckert (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of audiovisual translation and media accessibility* (pp. 713–731). Palgrave Macmillan.

Desblache, L. (2021). Live music and translation: The case of performances involving singing. *The Journal of Specialised Translation, (35)*, 45–68.

Fisher, V. J. (2021). Embodied songs: Insights into the nature of cross-modal meaning-making within sign language informed, embodied interpretations of vocal music. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.624689

Fletch. (2022, June 26). [Status update]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/FletchSignSong/posts/pfbid02bTd3AMYUhiGxD9dQWSUwCjHMo1aNrbN3SPeQkzQfbtMRQoj1XsBrbzuo9KyypkHrl

Flynn, A., & Tinius, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Anthropology, theatre, and development: The transformative potential of performance.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Galloway Gallego, A. (2018, Dec 13). How sign language can bring music to life. *TedTalk* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkfCD7c2HcQ

Giles, D. (2004). Translation research versus interpreting research: Kinship, differences and prospects for partnership. In C. Schäffner (Ed.) *Translation research and interpreting research: Traditions, gaps and synergies*. Multilingual Matters.

Grant, S. (2013). What if?: Performance is risk. *About Performance, (12)*, 127–144.

Grant, S. (2015). Heidegger's Augenblick as the moment of the performance. In S. Grant, J. McNeilly, & M. Veerapen (Eds.), *Performance and temporalisation. Time happens* (pp. 213–229). Palgrave Macmillan.

Greco, G. M. (2016). On accessibility as a human right, with an application to media accessibility. In A. Matamala & P. Orero (Eds.), *Researching audio description. New approaches* (pp. 11–33). Palgrave Macmillan.

Greco, G. M. (2017). L'accessibilità culturale come strumento per i diritti umani di tutti [Cultural accessibility as an instrument for human rights for all]. In G. G. Cetorelli & R. Manuel (Ed.), *Il patrimonio culturale per tutti. Fruitbilità, riconoscibilità, accessibilità. Quaderni della valorizzazione* [Cultural heritage for all. Fruitability, recognizability, accessibility. Valorisation notebooks] (Vol. 4, pp. 94–102). Direzione Generale Musei.

Greco, G. M. (2018). The nature of accessibility studies. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, *1*(1), 205–232.

Greco, G. M. (2019). Accessibility studies: Abuses, misuses and the method of poietic design. In C. Stephanidis (Ed.), *HCI International 2019 – Late breaking papers: 21st HCI International Conference, HCII 2019, Orlando, FL, USA, July 26–31, 2019, Proceedings* (pp. 15-27). Springer.

Heidegger, M. (2001). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans). Blackwell. (Original work published 1962)

Heinisch, B. (2021). The role of translation in citizen science to foster social innovation. *Frontiers in sociology*, (6). https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.629720

Kusters, A., De Meulder, M., & O'Brien, D. (2017). Innovations in deaf studies: Critically mapping the field. In A. Kusters, D. O'Brien & M. De Meulder (Eds.), *Innovations in deaf studies: The role of deaf scholars* (pp. 1–53). Oxford University Press.

Ladd, P. (2003). *Understanding deaf culture: in search of deafhood*. Multilingual Matters.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.

Maler, A. (2013). Songs for hands: Analyzing interactions of sign language and music. *Music Theory Online, 19*(1). https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.19.1.4

Mangelsdorf, H. H., Listman, J., & Maler, A. (2021). Perception of musicality and emotion in signed songs. *Music perception*, *39*(2), 160–180. https://doi.org/10.1525/MP.2021.39.2.160

Marinetti, C. (2013). Translation and theatre: From performance to performativity. *Target, 25*(3), 307–320. doi:10.1075/target.25.3.01mar

Marinetti, C. (2018a). *Performative rewriting: Foreign language performance as translation* [Conference presentation]. "Performance and Translation", Misano Adriatico.

Marinetti, C. (2018b). Theatre as a 'translation zone': Multilingualism, identity and the performing body in the work of Teatro delle Albe. *The Translator, 24*(2), 128–146. doi:10.1080/13556509.2017.1393122

Nikolarea, E. (2002). Performability versus readability: A historical overview of a theoretical polarization in theater translation. *Translation Journal, 6*(4).

Pavis, P. (1992). *Theatre at the crossroads of culture*. Routledge.

Pereira, J. M.. (2021). Deaf on stage: The cultural impact of performing signed songs [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University College London.

Robinson, D. (2003). *Performative linguistics: Speaking and translating as doing things with words*. Routledge.

Schechner, R. (2013). *Performance studies: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Schmitt, P. (2017). Representations of ign language, deaf people, and interpreters in the arts and the media. *Sign Language Studies, 18*(1), 130–147. doi:10.1353/sls.2017.0023

Scott, C. (2019). Synaesthesia and intersemiosis: Competing principles in literary translation. In M. Campbell & R. Vidal (Eds.), *Translating across sensory and linguistic borders. Intersemiotic journeys between media* (pp. 87–112). Springer.

Smirke, R. (2016, July 7). *Number of deaf & disabled fans attending music events in the UK grows*. Billboard. https://www.billboard.com/pro/deaf-disabled-fans-uk-live-music-study-attitude-everything/.

Stone, C., Adam, R., Müller de Quadros, R., & Rathmann, C. (Eds.). (2022). *The Routledge handbook of sign language translation and interpreting.* Routledge.

Tamayo, A. (2022). Sign languages in audiovisual media: Towards a taxonomy from a translational point of view. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, *5*(1),129–149.

Tarantini, A. T. (2021). *Theatre translation: A practice as research model*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Tarantini, A. T. (2023). When performance is *not* a metaphor: The "performative event" as translation. *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics, 3*.

Tarantini, A. T. (Forthcoming-a). Patterns of performativity: Strategies by sign language interpreters and performers to translate songs into sign language [working title]. In E. De Francisci & C. Marinetti (Eds.), *Translation in the performing arts* [working title]. Routledge.

Tarantini, A. T. (Forthcoming-b). When transmedia music meets translation: The case of nightwish *'Élan' Fan Cover Contest* [working title]. In V. Giannakopoulou & E. Sütiste (Eds.), *Transmedia in translation and transculturation* [working title].

Tymoczko, M. (2010). The space and time of activist translation. In M. Tymoczko (Ed.), *Translation, resistance, activism* (pp. 227–254). University of Massachusetts Press.

Ward, K. (2008). *Augenblick. The concept of the 'Decisive Moment" in 19th- and 20th-century western philosophy*. Routledge.

Webster, E., Brennan, M., Behr, A., Cloonan, M., & Ansell, J. (2018). *Valuing live music: The UK live music census 2017 report*. http://uklivemusiccensus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/UK-Live-Music-Census-2017-full-report.pdf

Withey, R. A. (2022, June 24). "Signsong performer, Fletch@ and Marie Pascall of performance interpreting tell us about their UK stadium tour with Ed Sheeran", *The Limping Chicken.* https://limpingchicken.com/2022/06/24/signsong-performer-fletch-and-marie-pascall-of-performance-interpreting-tell-us-about-their-uk-stadium-tour-with-ed-sheeran/

Worthen, W. B. (2003). *Shakespeare and the force of modern performance*. Cambridge University Press.