

Christina Schäffner

## Review

Rainer Kohlmayer

*Rhetorik und Translation*

*Germanistische Grundlagen des guten Übersetzens*

(Publikationen des Fachbereichs Translations-, Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz in Germersheim 71)

Berlin: Lang 2018, 280 S.

This book is the fruit of Rainer Kohlmayer's many years of experience in teaching students of Translation and German Studies at the University of Mainz in Germersheim. The author's basic premise is that in order to do his/her job well, a translator needs to know the two languages and also needs to be able to speak about translation in an expert way. The main aim of the book is therefore to help readers (students, lecturers and professional translators are given as addressees) become conscious language experts who are able to perform their role as mediators between languages and cultures in an informed way. The author intends to illustrate that such an expertise is the result of the acquisition of rhetorical and linguistic knowledge which can be used for analytical reflection in order to get close to the meaning and style of the source text as a prerequisite for translation. The book primarily focuses on a solid text analysis, informed by rhetoric and text linguistics, as a first step towards high-quality translation, whereas actual decisions which lead to a translation are not addressed in depth. Although it is said that the book is based on a series of lectures and that students are among the addressees, it is not a textbook as such. There are no tasks or exercises which could be completed in a classroom or in private study. What we have instead is a scholarly publication presenting theories, concepts and methods of rhetoric, hermeneutics, and text linguistics which are applied by Kohlmayer himself to a number of illustrative texts. A main value of the book is thus its potential use as supplementary reading to accompany a particular course.

The book consists of five parts and is preceded by a preface and a chapter which summarises the development of text linguistics in the 20th century (chapter 1). It is completed by a very short concluding statement, a bibliography and an author index. Each part starts with a very short summary in English. The first part (chapters 2–3)

presents aims and devices of rhetoric as a theory of text and as a practice of text production, with special attention given to Quintilian's teaching. It is indeed a main aim of Kohlmayer to give credit to rhetoric, to illustrate its relevance and value to any form of text analysis and text production. For him, many issues addressed by modern text linguistics can be traced back to rhetoric. This first part finishes with a detailed description of a large number of rhetorical devices, very well illustrated with examples to make a complex issue accessible to readers. The second part (chapters 4–8) is devoted to hermeneutics (e. g. reflecting on what is meant by "understanding"), text typologies, the interaction of author, reader, textual devices, and context for meaning creation of a text, and finishes with illustrations of categories of grammatical cohesion and of semantic coherence.

These first two theoretical parts are demanding and intellectually challenging. They reflect the author's wide knowledge of traditional and modern theories, concepts, and analytical methods. Although the theories discussed are not new, they are presented in a way which shows their value for an in-depth analysis, including a pre-translational analysis. The use of illustrative examples (all in German) for all rhetorical and hermeneutic devices presented makes the theoretical explanations clear to the readers. Some of the rhetorical concepts and devices will be new to students (who actually seem to be Kohlmayer's primary addressees) and probably difficult to remember should they be asked to speak about specific textual features. The addition of a separate glossary, or a subject index, would therefore have been useful.

The third part (chapters 9–13) applies the insights and tools of rhetoric, hermeneutics, and text linguistics to five functional texts (which actually represent journalistic genres) written in German: soft news, an ironic commentary ("Glosse" in German) and a leading article (as types of newspaper comments), an advertisement, and a transcription of a radio interview as an example of oral speech. The texts chosen for illustration are not recent ones though. They were used by the author in his own teaching over the years and, in his own words, proved useful in stimulating thinking and reflecting about linguistic features and the cultural background of the texts. Kohlmayer himself sees the application of the tools to concrete texts as mental and intellectual gymnastics ("geistige Gymnastik", p. 151) for translators who are willing to learn, learning to read closely and questioning what seems to be a self-evident fact. For each text, some characteristic features of the genre are provided, referring to the function of the genre, its structure, and typical linguistic features. The actual analyses provided by the author are insightful, detailed and critical, and he makes very good use of the categories and devices introduced in the first parts of the book.

The following two parts are devoted to literary texts. In the fourth part (chapters 14–16), Kohlmayer at first discusses subjectivity, ambiguity and aesthetic materialism as the main features of literary texts. Then the rhetorical devices in a humorous satire by Irmgard Keun are illustrated, followed by an analysis of text grammar and isotopic composition in a piece of modern prose by Günter Kunert. As a key concept, the "written voice" (suggested by the German poet Novalis at the end of the 18th century)

is introduced, indicating that literary texts are also intended for listening. Literary translation is therefore also characterised as artistic labour (“*musische Arbeit*”, p. 212) in which a translator can listen to and pass on the voice, thoughts and emotions of interesting people.

The fifth and final part (chapters 17–20) analyses extracts of four German literary texts (by Heinrich Böll, Wolfgang Koeppen, Elfriede Jelinek, Daniel Kehlmann) alongside their translations into English and French (French only for the last two texts). This is the only part which explicitly deals with translations as products. Here the author pays particular attention to the rhetorical structure as supported by punctuation and stylistic features and comments on the respective translators’ degree of success in reproducing the “written voice”. For each example, concise information is provided about the writer and the literary work analysed. The analysis of the German source texts is again very detailed and highly perceptive. In his critical reflection on the translations, Kohlmayer gives credit to the translators’ solutions and acknowledges linguistic and cultural constraints they are faced with, although his evaluative comments on the translations of the last two texts are rather short.

The sub-title of the book is “*Germanistische Grundlagen des guten Übersetzens*” (German foundations of translating well). The reference to German seems to signal that German serves as the language which is used for illustration. Moreover, for the theoretical parts, it is mainly research by German linguists and translation scholars which Kohlmayer introduces and relates to (in addition to key international scholars such as Grice or Searle). There is reference to German as both source and target language, but translations into German are not covered. I am missing, however, an explicit engagement with the notion of a “good translation”. What does it mean to translate well? Rainer Kohlmayer does not provide an explicit definition. Looking at the few cases where the formulation “*gute Übersetzung*” (good translation) is mentioned (notably in the context of literary texts), the reader can get an idea of what the author means by it: a faithful reproduction of the features and the value of a literary text. This value is seen in the artistic writing and the individual perspective on reality (“*kunstvolle Schreibweise und origineller Blick auf die Welt*”, p. 204). The value of a good translation is thus seen in reproducing these textual qualities as faithfully as possible (“*möglichst treue Wiedergabe dieser Qualitäten*”, p. 204). There are references to what a translator must or should do (e. g. on p. 253), suggesting a somewhat prescriptive attitude, although the problems a translator faces, for example in respect of the ambiguity of a literary text, are always acknowledged and reflected upon. A keen ear (“*feines Gehör*”) for hearing the voice(s) in the original text as well as a linguistic ability for redesigning the text in an analogical way are listed as essential capabilities of a good translator (p. 255–256). The use of redesign (“*Neugestaltung*”, literally: a new design) is noteworthy here, an aspect which could have been expanded and problematized (e. g., how can we differentiate between reproduction and redesign?). Since Rainer Kohlmayer has very rich experience in both researching literary translation and doing literary translations himself, his thoughts about good literary

translation are understandable. I wonder, however, to what extent the expectation that the rhetorical features should be reproduced would apply to non-literary texts such as the journalistic genres illustrated in part three. For the translation of news and advertisements, for example, purposes as well as socio-cultural and/or ideological aspects are as important as rhetorical features, if not even more important. It would have been useful if authentic translations of one or two non-literary texts had been included in the book as well.

The author presents his own understanding of language and culture in a straightforward way, not shying away from criticising other views and concepts (e. g. his argument that he finds a deconstructivist text theory exaggerated – “überspitzt”, p. 81). There is, however, not much engagement with Translation Studies research, including with insights into literary translation which are based on system theories or sociological approaches. In view of the aim of the book – illustrating the relevance of rhetoric to translation – this lack of engagement is acceptable, also bearing in mind that there are plenty of cross-references to others of Kohlmayer’s publications in which he does indeed reflect critically on other theories and models. How much use a reader will make of these invitations to read his other publications is difficult to say. His style is reader-friendly, especially thanks to the large amount of examples, also in the theoretical parts. And finally: Rainer Kohlmayer’s writing style is also characterised by rhetorical features which ensure that (the rhythm of) his voice can be heard. What struck me most is the frequent use of (often original) metaphors, which too are a challenge for translation. One example from p. 259 will suffice: “Der Weg zum guten Übersetzen muss mit gymnastischen Trockenübungen in Textlinguistik und Rhetorik beginnen, um

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allmählich zur gelehrten Kunst-Routine zu werden.” (‘The path to good translation must start with gymnastic dry runs in text linguistics and rhetoric so that gradually it can become an erudite artistic routine.’). Translator training programmes are a suitable venue where such dry runs can be exercised.

#### *Reviewer*

Christina Schäffner is Professor Emerita at Aston University, Birmingham, UK. Until her retirement in 2015, she was the Head of Translation Studies at Aston. Her main research interests are political discourse in translation, news translation, metaphor in translation, and translation didactics, and she has published widely on these topics.

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