Ana Isabel Soares/Merja de Mattos-Parreira,
Faculdade de Ciências Humanas e Sociais, Universidade do Algarve

Translating iconicity from Finnish into English: the case of the *Kalevala*

The Finnish epic poem *Kalevala* (1849[1]) is a written transcription leaning mainly on a collection of ancient narrative songs of the Finnish people. This means that when trying to translate the written *Kalevala* into another language, the relationship between the content-text and the organization of the texture – that is, the way the particular linguistic realizations fit the goings-on as a whole – shifts from a singer's memory-based creative process in front of a live audience to a translator's reaction in the presence of a written product.

The archaic, song-like Finnish language behind the written *Kalevala* is widely acknowledged for its extremely iconic features, a quality that works at all levels of the main ranks of linguistic realizations, whether phonetic, lexical, syntactic or textual. It is our thesis that although this collection of traditional folk songs put into written form only some 150 years ago is often referentially incomprehensible to a contemporary literate urban Finnish reader, it is nevertheless somehow understandable to him through its striking iconic quality[2]. In other words, the general idea of the text is usually captured, even though a present-day Finn may not be able to tell the precise meanings of the words, or to distinguish words referring to

[1] The 1849 *Kalevala* is the internationally known, commonly translated newer version of the earlier Old *Kalevala* of 1835. We make reference to the 'official' 1849 *Kalevala* in this paper.

[2] It is evident that arbitrariness in the case of the *Kalevala* is also challenged by an extreme social motivation, since this text is omnipresent in Finnish daily culture (i.e., people's names, toponymies, contemporary cultural products, names of enterprises, food items, the list goes on). Thus the iconicity on the level of language is also naturalized through the processes of everyday social semiotics (see for instance Halliday's *Language as social semiotic*, 1978, *passim*).

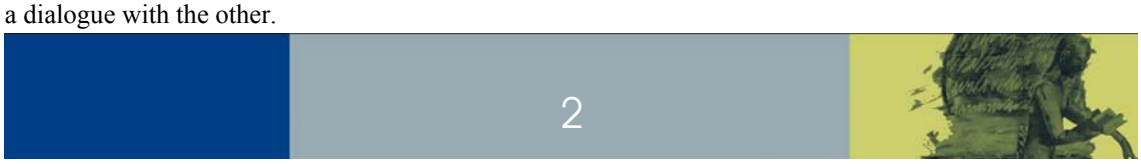
actions from those referring to qualities or states, for instance. In order to illustrate our viewpoint, we are going to discuss and compare some of the choices made by the translators of the four complete English-language versions of the *Kalevala*, as far as the iconicity of the source-text is concerned.

In the first part of the 19th Century, when Elias Lönnrot listened to and wrote down some of these popular songs in the most remote eastern regions of Finland and then later published them in the form of a critical edition, Swedish was still the only prevailing language of all "high" culture and thus of the entire literate, educated minority on the Finnish territory. Finnish was the language of the country people. The ideas and ideals of the central European Romanticism[3] (namely Herder's and Fichte's writings on *Volksgeist*) gave rise to a Fennophile movement that found its justification in the issue of a nation-defining language, as Benedict Anderson (1983) has pointed out. The publication of the *Kalevala* as a literary manifestation of the vast cultural oral heritage of the Finns functioned as a first step into the established family of the European "high" cultural tradition. The concept of a language-based Finnish national identity[4], founded upon numerous translations of this literary *Kalevala*, then rapidly spread abroad in the coming decades.

Both internationally and nationally, the *Kalevala* is simultaneously the most highly valued and most widely translated cultural item of Finland. – Some years ago we were offered the work of translating the 1849

[3] It is argued in some non-Finnish literary studies (Perry, 1967) that due to its fantasy elements the literary *Kalevala* represents a genre shift from Finnish folk epic to romance operated by Lönnrot himself. The Finnish critics' general agreement is that less than 3% of the text is Lönnrot's own invention

[4] Our basic theoretical argument on identity construction is that, first of all, it is always a relational concept and it is built upon the notions of alterity and difference – in this case, the cultural and linguistic supremacy of Swedish. Difference is actually central for the existence of all meanings. Binary oppositions are no doubt over-simplified because there is always one who dominates; the dimension of power – and the continuous negotiation of it - is omnipresent in all language activities. Besides, we only construct meanings (cf. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism) and ourselves (psychoanalytic stance, for instance) through a dialogue with the other.



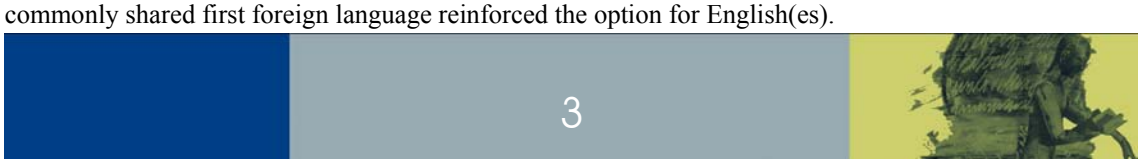
Kalevala directly from Finnish into Portuguese[5]. But the multiplicity of the already existing *Kalevala*-translations – based on chronological, linguistic, or genre-bound criteria – has made our task extremely complex, transdisciplinary and crosscultural. This abundance of translations has thus led us into research about some of the many Indo-European versions of the text – i.e., in Spanish, Catalan, French, Latin, German, Swedish – and, more importantly, versions in the English language(s).

Although some of the languages mentioned above are much more closely related to the target-language Portuguese than English, there are, however, compelling reasons for English having become the most significant tool for comparison in our work-in-progress. Besides English being the contemporary *lingua franca*, it is also a relevant factor that there are four complete English translations of this massive text, and all of them are quite different from each other[6]. The first and oldest one by Crawford (1888) is based upon a German edition, whereas the three 20th Century translations by W.F. Kirby (1907), by Francis P. Magoun, Jr. (1963) and by Keith Bosley (1989) are translated directly from Finnish. From the register point of view, Crawford and Kirby opted for rhymed verse, whereas Bosley's *Kalevala* is represented in free verse. His version also diminished the repetitive textual iconicity of the source-text by leaving out many verses. Magoun's translation, which is close and mostly literal, is a prose narrative but typographically versified.

As we wrote earlier, the grammar of the archaic Finnish language of the *Kalevala* is characterized by its extreme iconicity, and it works at all

[5] Curiously enough, Portuguese remains the only European national language that has no translation of this identity-forming Finnish poem in the beginning of the 21st Century. Whether the underlying reasons for this absence of a Portuguese version have got to do with the great distance of two linguistically and socio-culturally peripheral, even ideologically opposing historical realities of Europe, however, is outside the scope of this paper.

[6] Only the German and Swedish languages offer a both more numerous and genre-wise more varying translations (probably for well-known historical reasons) of the *Kalevala*, but the fact that English is our commonly shared first foreign language reinforced the option for English(es).



levels of the main ranks of linguistic realizations, whether phonetic, lexical, syntactic or textual.

For instance, the following are examples of how both sound-patterns, near-synonyms and noun-declensions together contribute to the same effect of iconicity. In this passage, Aino is crying over her fate for being obliged to marry the old Väinämöinen and declares that she would prefer to be ordered to "[through a noun-declension: to transform herself into] a sister of tiny powans, into a brother of water fish"[7] [than to marry an old man]:

"sisar-e-ksi siika-si-lle
veiko-ksi ve-'e-n kal-oille!"[8]
sister (sg-tra) powan (pl-diminutive-all)
brother (vowel harmony-sg-tra) water (sg-vowel omission-gen) fish (pl-all)

Kirby: "There to be the powan´s sister,
The companion of the fishes!"
Bosley: "to be sister to whitefish
and brother to the fishes!"
Magoun: "to be a sister to the whitefish,
a brother to the fishes of the water!"
Poem IV, vv.245-46

In archaic Finnish, in the same way as a brother and sister are kind of 'near-synonyms', animals[9], or precious metals[10], different types of boats[11], or numerals

päivä-nä muutama-na
huomen-na moni-aha-na
day (sg-ess) a few (sg-ess)
morning (sg-ess) many (?-ess)[12]

[7] This is our own literal translation.
[8] In the *Kalevala* Finnish, there are only 13 consonant phonemes, and rhyming takes place through the first syllable of the first two words inside a verse.
[9] Such is the case of elk, reindeer, horse, stallion, steed, for example.
[10] Gold, silver, copper.
[11] Warships, fishing-boats, etc.
[12] "In a few days, in many mornings"

Kirby: And at length one day it happened,
In the early morning hours

Bosley: and one day among others
one morrow among many

Magoun: So on a certain day,
on a certain morning
Poem XV, vv. 25-26;

or, opposing deictic verbal expressions, such as

Ei ole mies-tä menne-hessä
ei-kä tuiki tulle-hessa:
No is man (sg-el) go (2ptc-ine)
no (no-cl) wholly come (2ptc-ine)[13]

Kirby: No man can from this be fashioned,
Not from what you have discovered

Bosley: There is no man in one gone
in one come to grief

Magoun: There is no man in the departed one,
not really in the vanished one.
Poem XV, vv. 287-288

All these examples are used interchangeably to refer to the same entity in the outside world. Therefore, in the *Kalevala* it is common to find references to the same entity made through the use of different nouns. Numerals fall into this category.

[13] Our version: "There is no man in one gone, nor in one wholly come."

Kupli nyt siellä kuusi vuotta, seuro seitsemän kesyttä, karehi kaheksan vuotta (VI, 203-205)	Magoun: ”Now bob up and down there for six years, drift for seven summers, splash along for eight years on those extensive waters.”

In the case of numerals referring to time, and at a superficial level of interpretation, this process has a double consequence: on the one hand, the exact number of years (or months, or days) becomes indifferent; on the other, there is an expansion and amplification of time, which makes it even more powerful as a mythical device (= so much time passed, that the narrator lost count of the years, months, or days; the measure is no longer human, it is super-human, only hardly imaginable). In the English translations, however, in order to avoid confusing the reader, the authors have often chosen to repeat the same lexical category of animal, metal, and so on, and thus contradict this sense of indifferent meaning.

Due to the vast amount of inflections, syntactic choices are probably the most evident representation of iconicity in the *Kalevala*. There are at least two main devices:

1. the agentless, clauses, i.e., total absence of a human-like causer of the action;
2. transitivity-lacking clauses, thus the actions happen almost automatically.

The difficulty of translating is illustrated in the following versions of the opening lines of the poem *Kalevala*[14]:

[14] Please compare these four translations with our own literal translation.

Four English translations of Canto I, lines 1-10

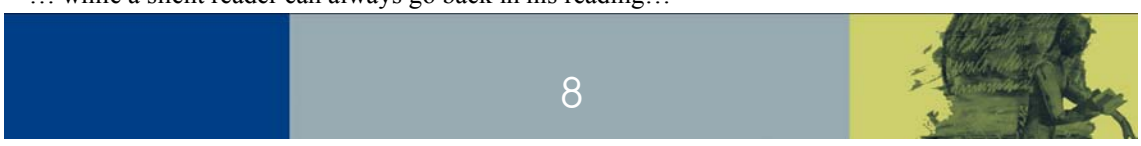
Keith Bosley, 1989 I have a good mind take into my head to start off singing begin reciting reeling off a tale of kin and singing a tale of kind. The words unfreeze in my mouth and the phrases are tumbling upon my tongue they scramble along my teeth they scatter.	Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr. 1963 It is my desire, it is my wish to set out to sing, to begin to recite to let a song of our clan glide on, to sing a family lay. The words are melting in my mouth, utterances dropping out, coming to my tongue, being scattered about on my teeth.
W. F. Kirby, 1907 I am driven by my longing, And my understanding urges That I should commence my singing, And begin my recitation. I will sing the people's legends, And the ballads of the nation. To my mouth the words are flowing, And the words are gently falling, Quickly as my tongue can shape them, And between my teeth emerging.	John Martin Crawford, 1888 Mastered by desire impulsive, By a mighty inward urging, I am ready to begin the chanting Of our nation's ancient folk-song Handed down from by-gone ages. In my mouth the words are melting, From my lips the tones are gliding, From my tongue they wish to hasten; When my willing teeth are parted, When my ready mouth is opened, Songs of ancient wit and wisdom Hasten from me not unwilling.
Elias Lönnrot, 1849 Mieleni minun tekevi, aivoni ajattelevi lähteä laulamahan, saa'ani sanelemahan, sukuvirttä suoltamahan, lajivirttä laulamahan. Sanat suussani sulavat, puhe'et putoelevat, kielelleni kerkiävät, hampahilleni hajoavat.	Our own literal / "poetic" translation, 2003/2004 My mind desires, my brain thinks / my thought is eager to go to sing / to start off singing my word to recite, the family song to release, the hymn of kin to sing. The words in my mouth unfreezing, utterances drop, /go sliding onto my tongue [Ø] hastening, on my teeth [Ø] breaking.

It should also be borne in mind that the cultural origins of the *Kalevala* lie in the animistic tradition of Siberian shamanism. Formulaic, magical (or super-human) qualities and the sense of a live audience – who may miss a part but because of the cyclical character of the text, but still grasps the general meaning[15] – is mostly lost in these translations. Therefore, the overall picture in the source-text is not gained in the translations from exact meanings but rather from the musicality of the leit-motives. Hence the iconicity.

In sum, instead of underlining the iconic quality of the source-text, these four translators often disregard a very relevant and maybe the most 'untranslatable' sphere of the text. Telling the story is primary; to transmit meaning-units comes in first place. The translators can thus compensate for the loss of the original musical patterns.

The matter of linguistic choices resides on the type of reader-position one wants to construct through the linguistic resources. The English translators place the stress upon reader-friendliness. In order to domesticate or localize the source-text, their main aim is to provide easy access for a wider public at the cost of losing the original iconicity – but enabling the construction of a new kind of iconicity – rather than to address a (rare) highly specialized researcher-type of reader. The original iconic character is, therefore, left to the artistic realm. The Kalevalaseura (or, Kalevala Society) counts over 100 artists among its members – photographers, painters, musicians, writers, choreographers, smiths, dancers, film and theatre directors, actors, etc, to mention only the Finnish, are part of a larger group of people working directly with, or about Lönnrot's text. In various manners, the *Kalevala* has always inspired a translation into different media; it incites a transcription, as it were, of words into visual signs, into painting, dance choreography, or sculpture. The most famous to

[15] … while a silent reader can always go back in his reading…



explore the connections between the set of characters and events portrayed in the *Kalevala*, and a different means of construing that gallery, was the painter Akseli Gallen-Kalella (1865-1931). He prepared the first impressive studies for a major work of illustration of the book. The work was left incomplete when the artist died, but Gallen-Kalella had already left behind him a legacy of paintings with the thematic of the Kalevala, and to this day he is considered as an inspiration for all those who continued to intertwine the webs of the Kalevala with other arts.

In the Finnish *Kalevala*, often the meaning is constructed only on the basis of the contiguity of elements. This can be understood as an index, but it can also be seen as an actualization of "convenientia", the first type of similitude defined by Michel Foucault in *Les Mots et les Choses*. In other words, the interpretation of meaning in the *Kalevala* depends on and defines a specific, a particular grammar, structured on the syntax of line space, or its musicality – or, as Focault would put it, a similitude which is the visible effect of neighborhood. As an example, one may think of certain sound patterns enclosed in the line by force of internal rhymes, which can be heard nowadays in the song "Maailman synty" / "The birth of the world" (a recording of 1905) in the CD *Kalevala Heritage*. This is also the reason why the words of the text claim for the vicinity of some visual image in order to be somehow fulfilled. In the *Kalevala* a whole imagery is formed from the coming together of the plural meanings developed along a history of relationships between artistic modes, and genres.

This need for "aesthetical" actualization to complete the understanding of the *Kalevala* – as well as its foundation on a strongly musical popular culture – explains the quantity and diversity of artistic actualizations suggested and inspired by Lönnrot's text since its publication in the 19th century. The "sampo" is only one of many examples. There is no translation for this word, because its referent is itself obscure, even in

Finnish. In *Kalevala-Lipas*, the many explanations about the Sampo are summarized, namely those which have been more popular. It has been related, in this order, to the image of God, a talisman, the sun, a treasure chest, a wizard's drum, metal shield, a dragon's ship, or, the statue of the world, with the North Star on its top, and around which the starry sky turns. Attempting to establish its meaning leads almost inevitably to an artistic, creative process, which amplifies the importance of the referent. The sampo is, thus, one of the mythical axis firmly supporting the narrative of the *Kalevala*. And it is also the illustration of the transcriptional character of the text.

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