

Approximations and Appropriations Making Space for Song Translation in Translation Studies

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Abstract

The article explores the suitability of the terms approximation and appropriation for describing source–target relations in song translations. It is argued that the terms are fit and flexible enough to serve the variability of sung target texts, the many contexts and genres songs appear in, and the fact a song must be performed to be a song. They can be understood simply as ‘coming or getting near’ and ‘making it your own,’ respectively, but they can also be used to recognize different kinds of approximation (textual, musical, stylistic-aesthetic, visual, etc.) and signs of appropriation (discoursal, sociocultural, ethnic, etc.). The terms have been used in previous research in music and translation but less so in general translation studies, perhaps because of a perceived connotation of imperfection or controversy. The variability of song translation is discussed through diverse examples: two hit tunes, a music video, a hymn, a scout song, and an opera aria. A song translation can (only) deliver an approximation of some qualities of a source song, but it will also (often) change some of those qualities in an appropriation for a new situation.

Keywords: song translation, approximation, appropriation, multimodality, *skopos*

1 Introduction

Do we need special terms in every special branch of translation studies? The answer is both yes and no, of course. Researchers of any kind of translation will wish to use the terms that best describe the issues involved, be it legal translating, interpreting, subtitling, translating for children, or translating comics. Just as naturally, translation studies will forge concepts that claim general relevance within the discipline – such as *skopos* and **manipulation**, to name two obvious ones.¹ A reason for differences is the very nature of a certain translation practice or mode. In legal translating, attention must be paid to terminological exactness. With interpreting, ethical and interpersonal relations are important. Subtitling has to handle restrictions of space, time, and the graphic medium, translating for children a recognized target group and often a pictorial dimension. Translating comics involves both these sets of concerns. All these issues can certainly be investigated in all kinds of translation, but probably with a varying degree of interest.

¹ This can be ascertained by consulting, for example, the *Dictionary of Translation Studies* (Shuttleworth & Cowie 1997).

Translating for singing, like translating for children, often shows translators taking creative liberties. Like with translating comics, the space to fit words in is restricted. However, song is not just a literary genre, but a basic mode of human communication, which, like oral interpreting, can be performed in many different contexts, genres, and situations. I wish to examine the suitability of the terms approximation and appropriation to describe the challenges and circumstances of this particular translation practice and text mode. I will first explore the possibilities in an outline of a research scheme, then offer some theoretical underpinnings, and finally give six brief examples of very different sung source and target texts.

2 Approximation and appropriation in research questions

In song translation analysis, a most relevant question is: in which of the many possible ways is the target language (TL) product based on the source material? To answer it, the term **approximation** presents itself as useful, in its plainest meaning of “coming or getting near to identity in quantity, quality, or degree” (*OED*, s.v. *approximation*). Understood thus, it can cover TL products that manage to get very near as well as ones that are – well, merely approximate. More importantly, the term allows for distinguishing between different qualities or degrees. Asking to which aspect of a source song approximating attempts were directed can bring enlightening discoveries: just one, some, or a compromise between several? Here is a list of suggested research questions in that vein:

- (How) Is the target text (TT) a **textual approximation** (semantically, narratively, factually) of the source song lyrics?
- (How) Is the TT a **musical approximation** of text to a given piece of music? (How much) Is there (of) a prosodic, poetic, and expressive/semantic fit to the source music?
- (How) Is the TT a **stylistic-aesthetic approximation** – of this particular source lyric or, more generally, the source text author’s ideals, generically or intertextually identifiable?
- Is the target song performance a **vocal or aural approximation** of a (particular) source song performance?
- Does the target song performance appear in a **visual or presentational approximation** of a (particular) source song performance?
- And two more speculative inquiries, to broaden the research scheme:
 - In what way might the original music have approximated the form (prosody, syntactic-grammatical structures, etc.) of the source language? How could (or would) these forms be heard as target language forms?
 - Does the original music incorporate recognizable or connotative musical intertexts? Do the source lyrics carry links to them? Can (or need) they be approximated in the target lyrics?

After asking how, or whether at all, the TT made use of what the source material offered, one must ask why, or why not. To what end, intended purpose, use or function, has the

song been translingually appropriated? **Appropriation** has been described as a kind of **adaptation**, a more “deliberate intervention” (Bastin 2009: 6) by a translator. However, meanings and implications vary greatly: from taking possession of other people’s property to “assignment of anything to a special purpose” (*OED*, s.v. *appropriation*, to use English language definitions as examples). In most uses, there is a core of the original Latin phrase *ad proprius*, in the sense of: ‘(making something) into one’s own (distinctive feature or property).’ A well-established idea about singing a song is that singers (may want or have to) ‘make it their own,’ which may mean anything from learning it by heart to thoroughly changing it.² The singer who ‘owns’ the song gives it away by singing it to others. As a more developed concept, appropriation can be evidenced in either obvious changes, adaptations to a target context, or just a consistent styling. Here is a list of questions to exemplify the options, levels and degrees that may be involved:

- Do the target lyrics use a (recognizable) linguistic register or stylistic scheme?
- What content do the target lyrics carry? As a narrative whole, or in single words, factual references, or implied context? What broader discourse might it tap into?
- Is there also an actual context: a song genre, particular event, target audience, singer persona?
- Can a special impression or intention be perceived in the musical arrangement or performance choices?
- Can anything be made of the co-text or presentation (theatrical, physical, visual) the song is embedded in?
- To what effect was the song presented, as evidenced in the target context? Going on to which afterlife, continued use or other performances? Does it (seem to) fill a sociocultural or practical function?
- Are there later changes in the living, oral tradition of the (target) song?

And most importantly, does it differ from the source song? Is the linguistic register/use/alter change/etc., different from the corresponding register/etc., of the source lyrics in their context? The distance between the two should naturally hint at a reason, motive, need, or cultural difference, which could be further investigated. Not to forget: even a close textual or vocal approximation by a TL performer can amount to an appropriation, if, for example, the song is continually sung by that performer, or it becomes popular or somehow significant in the target culture.

In short, the terms and acts of approximation and appropriation seem flexible enough to contain various phenomena of song translation, translingual traffic and use of song. They have appeared in previous research in music and translation, but more marginally in translation studies at large. I will proceed to ask how and why.

² This is similar to what Greenall (2014: 205) describes as one possible *skopos* of a song translation: “The covering artist needs to put something into the mix: something of their own personality, image and/or culture.” Ownership through copyright is a chapter onto itself, which must somehow combine with the notion of the poetic saying: the best thing that can happen to a song is that it grows wings and flies away, and stops being the property of its maker.

3 Approximation and appropriation in song translation studies

The two terms have proved handy in discussions of song (and verse) translation. Already Eugene Nida (1964: 25) proclaimed that “in the case of lyric poetry some approximation to the form must be retained, even with some loss or alteration of content.” The concept runs through Burton Raffel’s book on *The Art of Translating Poetry* (1988), where he solves the “basic impossibility of full and complete translation” by stating: “The impossibility of exact recreation does not preclude the very real possibility of approximation – and it is precisely on approximation that good translation of poetry must be built” (Raffel 1988: 12f). Ronnie Apter and Mark Herman begin their book on *Translating for Singing* (2016: 3) by quoting this but do not take it further. Discussing Brazilian pop song lyricists, Heloísa Pezza Cintrão (2009: 817) sees them choosing between “a higher or lower semantical approximation between TT and [source text] when translating a song.” Another choice concerns phonetic qualities, as when Italian target song lyrics can be evaluated for their likeness to spontaneous speech, as Rocío García Jiménez (2014: 184) does – “oralidad [...] concebida como la aproximación al discurso oral espontáneo.” On yet another aspect of song, Lucile Desblache (2019: 327) states that music “can only be ‘translated’ by words with extreme approximation and with no relation to a traditional narrative.” Finally, in the introductory essay to the anthology *Song Translation: Lyrics in Contexts*, Annjo K. Greenall *et al.* (2021: 29) see target lyricists choosing between similarity or not: “Approximation vs. redoing: rewriting/ domesticating/formally adjusting.”

The term appropriation has perhaps appeared more often, but also more vaguely, sometimes meaning: translation involving adaptation, sometimes in the general sense of: foreign import. Nancy Senior (2001) studied “Translation and appropriation in Nancy Huston’s *Plainsong / Cantique des plaines*.” Polly McMichael (2008: 201) analyzed the “rewriting and appropriation” of rock music in the Soviet Union. Cintrão (2009: 826) speaks of “an appropriation of tune as a pretext for lyrics that are fundamentally different.” Similarly, Peter Low (2013: 236) distinguishes between translating and “appropriating only the music” to go with an all-new “replacement text.” Mervi Tervo (2014) describes a progress from “appropriation to translation: Localizing rap music to Finland.” With more precision, Greenall (2014: 193) sees “five basic appropriative paths” in international musical exchanges: from original recordings to domestic cover recordings (with either original or translated lyrics) to writing new songs in imported genres – “the deepest degrees of appropriation.” Describing the more uncharted spread of folk song, Şebnem Susam-Saraeva (2018: 359) needs a hyponym: “‘Appropriations’ between neighbouring cultures [...] as well as between ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ cultures (e.g. Kurdish folk songs in Turkish and Arabic, and vice versa).” Similarly, Marc Pomerleau (2019) tells of how a song in Catalan, “*L’Estaca*,” first was translated into many languages, then took on free life as an anthem for any fighting minority – “le public s’est approprié cette chanson au point où l’auteur en a perdu le contrôle, sans qu’il ne s’en indigne.”³

³ ‘The public appropriated this song, to the extent that the author lost control of it, which did not anger him.’ *L’estaca* means ‘the stake’ (to be tied or burned at).

While approximation requires a relation to a source, appropriation speaks of a prospective song, “received and appropriated within a new ‘target’ context” (Marc 2015: 7). Translation theorist Peter Newmark – otherwise prose-focused – finds use for both terms when discussing songs in the genre of *Lieder*, describing lyrics relating to a composition: “their texts as approximate translation of their music” (Newmark 2006: 1) as well as composers setting a poem: “translating its meaning via a musical appropriation” (Newmark 2012: 66). Desblache (2019: 118) has an even broader view: “Appropriation is inherent in music making.”

4 Approximation and appropriation in translation studies

Apparently, general translation studies have found the two terms less inspiring. They are used, but marginally, as explanation, not central concepts. A notion like Raffel’s is found in Andrew Chesterman (1998: 21), when he explains: “[in Catford 1965] formal correspondence denotes an approximation, an optimal or maximal closeness, not a true identity.” Somewhat similarly, Ernst-August Gutt (2000: 97) distinguishes between translators seeking **equivalence** and those “content with a high degree of approximation.” The word seems tinged with the notion of a somehow imperfect, alternative solution. Susan Bassnett (2013: 15) explains how a translator, who cannot translate culture-specific words literally, “has to resort to a combination of units in order to find an approximate equivalent.” Likewise, Mary Snell-Hornby (2006: 10) defines Dryden’s concept of **imitation** as “a loose approximation of an author’s emotions or passion.”

As for appropriation, the uses vary, often between the positive and the negative. It can be seen as enriching a target culture: for example when discussing the “annexation and appropriation of the literary and philosophical resources of Greek and Roman Antiquity by means of translation into German” (Casanova 2010: 291), or when in modern times translation “into Québécois [...] was both an attempt to appropriate European theater tradition and make it their own by developing works that better articulated repressed social and political conditions in French-speaking Canada” (Gentzler 2017: 189). However, in a negative evaluation, translation steeped in “the English-language valorization of transparent discourse [results in] less an exchange of information than an imperialist appropriation of a foreign text” (Venuti 2010: 73). Such translators obey prevailing norms, but appropriation can also be aberrant from normal translation, as when Snell-Hornby (2006: 106) cites the “translation of Milan Kundera’s early novel *The Joke* [...] or rather its rewriting, in this case used negatively as ‘appropriation,’” by which she meant it was “misinterpreted, mistranslated, and misunderstood” (ibid.: 107). Apparently, translations that appropriate can do it both respectfully and (too) freely, depending on the cultural power relations.

The two terms have been present but not overly popular within translation studies. One may wonder why. More extensive use would perhaps have had to build on George Steiner’s erudite but eccentric work of translation theory. He first denies the existence of universal equivalence: “What passes for translation is a convention of approximate analogies, a rough-cast similitude” (Steiner 1975: 74), then describes the need for the

“appropriative ‘rapture’ of the translator” (ibid.: 300), one who “invades, extracts, and brings home” (ibid.: 298). Another reason might be the controversy the latter term is fraught with. Out of the vast numbers of writings on **cultural appropriation**, I content myself with Richard A. Rogers (2006), who found uses ambiguous and the concept “undertheorized,” but identified four applications: on 1) fairly mutual, international cultural exchanges; 2) the imposition of a dominant culture upon a minority (which even so may show cultural resistance); 3) the exploitation of a culturally/economically less powerful ethnic group; and 4) a process of **transculturation**, which sees all culture products as hybrids, ever-evolving and constructed from various sources of influence. The moral implication, equating appropriation with ‘theft,’ need not always be present.

The term is used by many, sometimes accusingly, often vaguely defined. The dividing line between *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Sanders 2006), in a book on adaptation studies, is vaguely drawn. Still, “appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product” (Sanders 2006: 26).⁴ Rogers’ (2006: 474) definition is more precise: “the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture.” That can certainly apply to translingual and intercultural traffic of song, to which questions about economic, ethnic, and power-related causes and consequences can certainly be asked. Another implication, perhaps too obvious to spell out, is that something is taken, and something is changed. Be it pieces of the Parthenon, named Elgin marbles when placed in another part of the world, didgeridoos used in pop music, or belly dance or dreadlocks sported by the wrong people – whatever the moral significance – the term posits that something is recognizably the same (with the symbol, artifact, etc.) while something else, related to the new context in which it appears, changes the expression incurably. To put it simply, it can cause a translated product to be perceived as “‘fake’ hip hop” (Tervo 2014: 171).

Another obvious fact is that no translation is ever ‘the same,’ but at best an approximation, “near to identity” (*OED*, s.v. *approximation*) in some respect. It begs the question: Should it have become the central concept of translation studies? Could it have spared us some of the confusion and debate caused by (Nida’s and Catford’s) equivalence? My guess is that both approximation and appropriation sound too vague, too much like truisms, or value judgments, to be attractive to translation scholars focusing on other text types. They may prefer to view target texts more precisely: as information, instruction, carriers of qualities of epic narrative, negotiations of fine linguistic or cultural nuances, or exponents of institutional norms. For a text type such as song, the two terms highlight two important and prevalent characteristics: highly variable imperfection levels, and the fact that a song must always be sung to be a song; it must be used in a concrete way, performed or transmitted, to make a cultural impact.

⁴ The defining difference – the latter being presented without its source “clearly signalled or acknowledged as [a source] in the adaptive process” (Sanders 2006: 26) – seems less applicable to song translation. Often an original songwriter is clearly acknowledged in the crediting done in print, on record sleeves or in copyright notes, but when sung, translated songs and anonymous songs may sound the same.

5 The variability of song translation

To show how the variability of song translation needs two versatile concepts, I will cite six very different cases. Three are quoted from academic articles, to which I refer for a fuller account. Beside the verbal form and content of the source lyrics, a translation relation may be determined by factors such as an initiator, a singing or acting performance, visual or musical staging, the music as a source onto itself, the reference world of the TL, transposition between song genres, or the artistry of a particular songwriter. On a general level, these are genre or *skopos* concerns, comparable to any kind of translating. In actual practice, there are many kinds of songs and situations, where some of these factors may be most decisive, but may be less relevant or non-existent in other cases. What connects them is how they lead to a necessity, opportunity, or temptation to approximate or appropriate.

5.1 Hit tunes tailored for a star

Is or isn't Frank Sinatra's big hit "My Way" a translation of a French song? A recognition that interlingual traffic of song consists of many layers of approximations and appropriations can perhaps be a way out of that fruitless discussion. On one of these layers, we find a determinant that carries much weight: the prospective singer. Another one is the initiator, who may be the translator, the music producer, the singer, or the songwriter; various people can serve as what *skopos* theory calls **the commissioner**. As we see in examples 1 and 2, factors such as these can push a target song towards likeness as well as change.

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|---|---|
| <p>(1) French source lyrics
 Ma main caresse tes cheveux
 Presque malgré moi
 Comme d'habitude.
 Mais toi, tu me tournes le dos
 Comme d'habitude.
 (François 1967)⁵</p> | <p>English target lyrics
 I've lived a life that's full
 I traveled each and
 every highway.
 And more, much more than this,
 I did it my way.
 (Sinatra 1969)</p> |
| <p>(2) French source lyrics
 J'habite seul avec maman
 dans un très vieil appartement
 Rue Sarasate.
 J'ai pour me tenir compagnie
 une tortue, deux canaris
 et une chatte.
 (Aznavour 1972a)⁶</p> | <p>English target lyrics
 My mum and I we live alone
 A great apartment is our home
 in Fairhome Towers.
 I have to keep me company
 two dogs, a cat, a parakeet
 some plants and flowers.
 (Aznavour 1972b)</p> |

⁵ Gloss translation: 'My hand caresses your hair, almost in spite of myself, as usual. But you, you turn your back on me, as usual.'

⁶ Gloss translation: 'I live alone with my mother in a very old apartment, on Rue Sarasate. To keep me company, I have a turtle, two canaries, and a cat.'

It is well documented that Paul Anka, after hearing, liking and acquiring the rights to translate the French hit “Comme d’habitude,” got the idea it should be a soliloquy for Sinatra. He wrote his target lyrics as an imitation of Sinatra’s way of speaking. He would not textually approximate Claude François’ story of a deteriorating marriage, but musically, he showed a keen ear: the two-word sentence starter “And more” fits the prosody of the melody, precisely like “Mais toi.” In French, the feminine rhyme word *habitude* is repeated, which must have cued Anka to mark the symmetry of the three stanzas with three memorable rhymes: “highway,” “byway,” and “shy way” instead.

“Comme d’habitude” was appropriated to suit Sinatra’s persona, voice, and stylistic register, but Charles Aznavour’s song “Comme ils disent” needed not be appropriated since he already owned it. He also was the initiator, and presumably checked the text closely, like he cooperated with all translators of his English repertoire. Though both songs were designed to be corporeally appropriated by a singer-actor, the character Aznavour acted in English should also be the closest possible approximation of the character he acted in French.⁷ Both target texts are expert musical approximations, but “What Makes a Man” is a textual approximation as well – dramatically and narratively, but not factually, one might say. “Rue Sarasate” is the only specific, geographic fact given, but it definitely places the man in Paris. “Fairhome Towers” can be, perhaps, Fairholm in either New York or Los Angeles. Small manipulations, like the change of a name (which in a piece of prose would be seen as blatant domestication), are fairly regular occurrences in song translation, even at the ‘faithful’ end of the spectrum. Approximation need not mean maximal closeness.

5.2 A song made into a music video

Song translation juggles three main ingredients: music, lyrics, and prospective performance. If the performance takes the form of a music video, it perhaps cannot be too much like the video of the source song, if it is already well-known. So if the source lyrics become less of a model to approximate, perhaps the music will be a more influential source instead.

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| <p>(3) French source lyrics
Les filles ont les cheveux hirsutes.
Les garçons portent parfois des jupes.
Sur les trottoirs on écrit des poésies.
Les enfants claquent des doigts
car la musique c’est la loi.
(Cohen 2013, “Dans mon quartier” [music by Riff Cohen & Lenny Ben Basat, lyrics by Patricia Cohen], as cited in Susam-Saraeva 2021: 195f)</p> | <p>Turkish target lyrics
Sorun bende değil sendeymiş.
Daha iyisine layıkmışım.
Hangi kitaptan ezber bu.
Miş miş miş
de muş muş muş.
(Simge 2015, “Miş Miş” [lyrics by Sibel Algan], as cited in Susam-Saraeva 2021: 195f)</p> |
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⁷ Several film recordings of his performances, in French and English, can be found, for example, on YouTube.

Gloss translation

Girls have unkempt hair.
Boys wear skirts sometimes.
We write poems on the sidewalks.
Children snap their fingers
because music is the law.

Gloss translation

The problem, you say, is with you, not me.
I deserve a lot better, you say.
Where did you cram all this from?
All this blah blah blah
(that you are saying to me).

In her study of the interlingual, Turkish cover of Riff Cohen’s song and video, Susam-Saraeva (2021: 177–197) shows how some elements – the self-assured girl persona, the theme of honesty, the play with ethnic symbols, a neighborhood with dancing in the streets – may have served as inspiration for the target music video as a whole. However, the elements were appropriated into a song that tapped into a discourse on gender roles, a slightly satiric attack on social mores, pertinent to Turkey (though maybe not exclusively Turkish).

Most details in Patricia Cohen’s story of a utopic place of peace, freedom, and art were left unused, but on a special musical passage, the target lyrics put words that embodied the musical gesture – which the original song perhaps used less effectively. After three symmetric lines, describing hairstyles, skirts, and poems, there were two lines sung in a quicker tempo, *a cappella*, with a neat rhyme (*doigts–loi*), right before a “la la la” refrain. Sibel Algan, apparently, felt this special place needed something special. After some agony and asking advice, she found the words to depict the passage: “Miş miş miş de muş muş muş.” It is a play on a Turkish suffix used to mark that what one says is something one heard from someone else, a rumor or reported fact (Susam-Saraeva 2021: 184f), but it also sounds like euphonic nonsense and mocks the men who speak in clichés. The musical notes were changed a little (along with the whole musical accompaniment), but not the chords, rhythm, and structure of the song. “Miş miş” became the target song’s title.

With a song embedded in many layers of appropriation (visual, narrative, sociocultural), the semantic relation to the ST may become somewhat lost, but there can still be source–target relations, a musical approximation, and a semantic fit to what the music seems to say at any certain point.

5.3 A hymn sung in church services

In the previous examples of pop music, there was a link to a commercial context, a situation of wanting to appeal to music buyers and audiences. To explain the changes made in a liturgical hymn, translated because of the Reformation, one might also imagine a need to reach a new target group: with a song sung in Swedish instead of Latin, the priests may have felt they were addressing Swedish peasants, not just God. However, as Mattias Lundberg (2021: 233–253) argues, describing the case of “Lucis Creator optime,” this cannot be the only explanation. The sacred purpose remained, and decisive factors behind the free translation might be the sociocultural, intertextual world of the target language itself, a lacking vocabulary, or simply the ideas and improvisations of an individual (anonymous) translator treading new ground.

(4) **Latin source lyrics**

1. Lucis Creator optime
lucem dierum proferens,
primordiis lucis novae,
mundi parans originem:
2. Qui mane iunctum vesperi
diem vocari praecipis:
tetrum chaos illabitur,
audi preces cum fletibus.

(Latin Mass, from the Graduale Romanum, as cited in Lundberg 2021: 241)

Gloss translation

O perfect creator of light
who brings forth the light of the days
and from that first new light
prepared the beginning of the world.
You who joined morning and evening
naming it day.
The chaos of darkness collapses.
Hear our prayers filled with tears.

Swedish target lyrics

1. O Herre Gudh som all ting skop
himmel och stiernor med sit lop
Tu stoor liuus haffuer tu uppsatt
sol til dagh och måna til natt.
2. Och daghen är så skafft aff tigh
at hwar man skal tå bruka sigh.
Den alle på den iorden boo
skola om natten haffua ro.
[Added stanza:] All creatur hwart i sitt skick
är upsatt til at prisa tigh.
Och är menniskian skapat så
at hon all diuur skal förestå.

(Swedish Mass, Sandhem manuscript, ca 1555, as cited in Lundberg 2021: 241)

Gloss translation

O Lord God who created everything
heaven and stars with their trajectories,
Two large lights have you placed up high.
The sun for the day and the moon for the night.
And the day was so shaped by you
that each human may serve well,
and everyone who dwells on earth
shall find good rest by night.
Every creature in its own way
is made to praise you.
Also, Man is created
to be master of all the animals.

The singing priests performing the Vesper hymn in their 16th century Swedish church had no apparent need to make changes. The translated song performed an identical institutional function, presumably in the closest possible vocal approximation to the Latin melody which they sang daily. Still, of the Latin hymn's five stanzas, the Swedish manuscript lacks one, shows another turned into two target stanzas, and has an added one of different content (see example 4). One might say the approximation went only so far as to use most words, themes, or images of the ST, but rearranged them syntactically. They became paired statements about God and the world: sun and moon, cultivation by day and rest by night, creatures to live as created, and mankind to rule them all. In Latin, God was addressed periphrastically, as 'creator of light,' with perhaps an underlying idea that the light created was Jesus Christ. The theological message of God quelling chaos by uniting morning and evening, naming it *diem* ('day'), may have seemed too grand to fit into the mundane Swedish word *daghen*.

The metaphorical dimension of the ST was exchanged for a more didactic religious discourse. The song was not appropriated by the church or singers, because they already owned it, but rather by the worldview of the Swedish-speaking churchgoers – which included the priests themselves. Even so, the loose approximation was close enough to serve as a song of worship to God as well.

5.4 A drinking song and a scout song

Song translation can be done in institutionalized settings, such as the pop arena and the church, but it can also take place in less formalized, less copyright-controlled situations. There, songs may move not just between languages but between different genres and uses. Who translated this drinking song into Finnish is not known, but apparently someone acquainted with singing songs at parties in Sweden, perhaps also affiliated with the scouting movement. I knew the song from my experience of the former, and was surprised to see a woman at a scout meeting in Finland take the stage and teach us the Finnish song, with expressive hand gestures illustrating every line of the story.

(5) **Swedish source lyrics**

Jag är en liten undulat
som får så dåligt med mat
för dom jag bor hos,
för dom jag bor hos
dom är så snåla.
Dom äter fisk varenda dag
och det vill jag inte ha.
Jag vill ha brännvin,
jag vill ha brännvin
och Coca-Cola.

(melody by Jules Sylvain, lyricist unknown)

Gloss translation

I am a little parakeet
who gets hardly any food,
because the ones I live with,
because the ones I live with,
they are so stingy.
They eat fish every day,
and I don't want that.
I want vodka,
I want vodka,
and Coca-Cola.

Finnish target lyrics

Mä olen pieni lintunen
ja aina niin nälkäinen.
Mun kotiväki,
mun kotiväki
on niin saita.
Ne tarjoo silliä aina vaan.
Sitä en halua,
vaan haluaisin,
vaan haluaisin
Coca-Colan
ja jätskin.

(lyricist unknown)

Gloss translation

I am a little bird
and always so hungry.
My folks at home,
my folks at home
are so stingy.
They ever only offer herring.
I don't want that,
but I would like
but I would like
Coca-Cola
and ice cream.

The translation has to be from Swedish, because the basis of it is an old Swedish congratulatory song, “Med en enkel tulipan” (‘With a simple tulip,’ Sylvain & Paddock 1938). How it became a drinking song is also unknown, but the phonetic similarity of *tulipan* to *undulat* might have had something to do with it (enabling a vocal approximation).

The textual approximation into Finnish is fairly close and literal, apart from the changes of “undulat” (‘parakeet’ or ‘budgie’) into just “lintunen” (‘bird’), and of “brännvin” (‘vodka’) into “jätskin” (‘ice cream’). One is a matter of versification, the other a matter of censure. The musical approximation is looser; the Finnish melody has changed a bit in the oral tradition, most noticeably adding a coda to make room for “ja

jätskin.” It was appropriated, not just by campfire, singalong traditions, but by the age-old genre of gesture-play song.⁸ A silly song for grownups turned into a children’s song for scouts, with a physical scenario somehow replacing the original alcohol humor. Such songs are taught at social occasions, to be spread as freely and far as they will go, allowing them, like folk songs, to gradually change. Even a close translation can change a lot through staging and presentation.

5.5 A work by Richard Wagner

Finally, all previous examples, where focus mostly was on changes, must be counterweighted by an example of fidelity. That may entail not just paying attention to musical form and verbal content, but what I would call a stylistic-aesthetic approximation, a careful minding of the authorial intentions behind a source song. It may demand special research, which the translator in this case has also presented (Wilson-deRoze 2020: 243–270; 2017).

(6)	German source lyrics Brünnhilde: Nur Tod geweihten taugt mein Anblick; wer mich erschaut der scheidet von Lebens Licht. (Wagner 1872, “Die Walküre,” as cited in Wilson-deRoze 2020: 258)	English target lyrics Brünnhilde: Those doomed to death are designed to see me; who meets my gaze must go from the light of life. (Wilson-deRoze 2017)
	Gloss translation Only [one who is] doomed to die is fit for me to look at; The one who sees me parts from life’s light.	

The practical work of translating opera for singing in a target language, as described by Apter and Herman (2016), is a complex combination of tasks, which includes making sense of the story and characters while not putting phonetic roadblocks in the way of singers’ vocalization. The above translation (example 6) also shows perfect musical approximation, minding both prosody (melody and syllabic stress) and the poetic form, in this case alliteration. This translator did even more: she studied the technique and ideals that created the aesthetic effect, following Richard Wagner’s own system, most specifically *Stabreim*: his idiosyncratic use of Old Norse alliterative verse, and *Versmelodie*: his way of highlighting important words with both patterns of repeated consonant sounds and expressive chords in complex harmonic progression. Thus knowingly weaved together, some sounds are changed (*erschaut–scheidet* : *gaze–go*), some remain (sometimes thanks to cognates: *Lebens Licht* : *light of life*).

⁸ The gestures can perhaps be seen in the amateur video, named “Pieni lintunen -laululeikki,” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trAZfWICFgE> [accessed 13 August 2021].

This translation was not appropriated **by** English language opera traditions as much as appropriated **for** the expressive, inherent resources of the English language. Inevitably, a translation cannot give the exact connotations evoked by the German words, nor the exact sounds Wagner heard when he composed his opera, but through the work of a determined translator, we can have a sung text that as a whole gives a close approximation of the intended aesthetic, melopoetic effect. Less respectful translations have been sung in opera houses before; here, it was the translator, being the initiator, who decided there lay an interest in pursuing a composer-lyricist's authorial intentions towards maximum nearness.

6 Concluding discussion

We have seen examples of various kinds of approximation: textual, musical (musical only in examples 1 and 3), presentational (example 2), stylistic-aesthetic (example 6), as well as some looser degrees. We have also seen assorted signs of appropriation: involving linguistic styling, factual reference, a target culture discourse, different song genres; translation staying within the comfortable reference world of a certain language (examples 2 and 4) or expanding its repertoire by an imported stylistic scheme (example 6); free translation filling an identical function (example 4), and close translation used for quite a different function (example 5). The list of possibilities can go on. I believe a variable concept of approximation and a flexible concept of appropriation is a good base for studying them. Of course, it is possible to view opera translation and folk song migration as two quite separate practices, to explore them through incompatible theoretical constructs, and find distinctions rather than common ground. Even translating for Sinatra and Aznavour are different kinds of tasks. Even so, it should be useful for all song translation studies to remember that songs, unlike some other text types, may cross language borders somewhat independently of literary fidelity norms, and be treated with an eye towards being performed before an audience. The terms approximation and appropriation reflect that view.

The conceptualization is relevant for singable song translation. A literal translation of a song lyric, made just for information's sake, would be an exclusively textual approximation. As such, it might reflect stylistic qualities to some extent, perhaps elucidate sociocultural overtones (in parentheses or footnotes), but to call it an appropriation of a song into the world of prose or print seems unnecessary.

In previous research, quite a few terms have appeared in discussion of intercultural song exchanges: musical palimpsest, intertextuality, bricolage, hybridity, homage, parody, domestication, or cover song.⁹ Within translation studies, the terms **tradaptation** or **transcreation** address similar processes. Transcreation, forged in copywriting and adopted by studies in translating for children (Dybiec-Gajer *et al.* 2020), seems well suited for processes where a creative element, illustration or graphic design, is reconceived or added to a translated text or book. Song translations may appear with newly composed music, but often not. If theatre translation is a more comparable practice,

⁹ For a discussion of most of those terms in relation to music and translation, see Desblache (2019).

studies could fruitfully apply the systematic concepts of **interlingual**, **intercultural**, **intercontextual**, and **intermedial rewriting** (used in Aaltonen & Ibrahim 2016). Studies may also fall under the general heading of **multimodality** or **restricted translation**, but there should also be room for terms that suit the peculiar circumstances, products, history, and actual behavior of translators of songs. A truthful but flexible description of song translation might then run something like this:

A translated song (target song lyrics) will approximate certain properties of its source song, but also differ from it, inevitably or deliberately, because of the need to appropriate the song for use as a song (or text) in the target situation – or because of the choosing, combining, or compromising between different levels, degrees, and kinds of approximation and appropriation.

More simply put: A song translation can (only) attain or deliver an approximation of all the inherent qualities of a source song, but it will also (often) curate or change those qualities in an appropriation for a new performance.

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