This article has been published in Diana Yankova (ed). Cross-linguistic Interaction: Translation, Contrastive and cognitive Studies. Liber Amicorum in Honour of Prof. Bistra Alexieva published on the occasion of her eightieth birthday, St. Kliminent Ohridski University Press. 2014, 21-32.

RELAY IN TRANSLATION

Cay Dollerup, Copenhagen, Denmark
www.cay-dollerup.dk

Abstract

This article focuses on the phenomenon of **relay** in translation. Relay is by nature difficult to identify, let alone to discuss. Therefore even scholars who know of its existence usually refer to relay only in passing. Scholars unaware of relay occasionally come across relayed translations. They assume the relayed renditions are either poor or heavily manipulated translations. Historically, relay has been an important factor in translational activity. It can be observed in the **delay**, the slow spread of 'international fame', of prominent writers. Previously many translators and publishers would not inform readers that translations were based on a rendition in another language than that of the 'original'. Consequently few professionals were aware of how much it was used.

This contribution to the Festschrift for Bistra Alexieva represents an attempt to distinguish between 'relayed translations' and other types of non-direct linguistic transmission. It discusses their occurrence in translation, interpreting, and subtitling practice, and ends with a few comments on how relay can(not) be tackled in practical translation work.

Key words: Relay; definitions in Translation Studies; indirect translation; retranslation; relayed translation; relay in interpreting; practical translation, interpreting and subtitling; diachrony; synchrony; contact language.

Introduction

Relay translation has not escaped the notice of all translation scholars but terminological ambiguities obscure its specific nature. And practical problems in obtaining all translational realisations needed for incisive discussions make exemplification difficult. In a review of a literary translator's observations on 'surprises' in her own translation work, Dinda Gorlée briefly discusses relay in a passage that illustrates (a) the problems of terms and definitions, (b) translators' disaffection with the use of relay, (c) the difficulty of identifying it, and (d) the fact that it is found mostly in translation work involving 'minor ' languages:

> "Another example of surprising types of translations would be indirect translation [in the terminology in the present article: **relay translation**], or translations two-layers-deep, as seen, for example, in the translations of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1862-1869) from, say, a German or French translation transplanted into a Dutch or Norwegian translation … . This somewhat surprising procedure tends to blur the unwanted details of the "original" source text and has been (and sometimes still is) common practice on the commercial market, particularly in the case of minority languages considered "exotic" target languages. The original text is so much modified through the historical, commercial, anthropological, political, ethical, and psychological differences presented in the secondary metatexts that its varieties make the argument of the original text disappear from sight." (Gorlée 2007: 346-347)

There are two obvious reasons why relay is often overlooked: Translation Studies focuses on the source- and target texts and therefore ignores intermediate text production. Furthermore it is the source and target texts that are (out of necessity) central to teaching and training translation.

My own attention was drawn to the effect of relay i n the audience, when, a couple of years after Danish had become one of the (then) six official languages at the precursor of today's European Parliament, I came across a British journalist's report from parliamentary proceedings:

> "It is interesting to see how jokes ripple through the audience: first the French and Belgians laugh, this is followed by British, Dutch and Italian chuckles, and then finally, the Danes catch on and chortle." (quoted from memory from *Punch* c. 1975)

Since I had briefly worked as a consultant at the interpreting services of the European Commission, I instantly recognised the mechanism behind this description. It is as follows: 1. A French-speaking delegate cracks a joke that is immediately understood by all French-speaking delegates. 2. The joke is interpreted from French into (a) Dutch, (b) German, (c) Italian, and (e) English. 3. At the time, most Danish interpreters at the EU had no French, and accordingly they would use the English rendition as their source text. Since there is a time lag between the utterances in the source- and target languages, this explains the delayed Danish response.[1]

Definitions

To the best of my knowledge there are few studies and observations of relay. In this article, I shall refine the definitions and clarify points I have made in previous publications in which I have discussed aspects of relay.[2]

Precise definitions are needed for stringent discussions. Therefore I shall distinguish clearly between three types of translation in which we are dealing with two (or more) products of translation: (a) retranslations; (b) indirect translations; and (c) 'relayed' translations. I shall also briefly consider 'direct translation' and, finally, look at 'synchrony'.

There is agreement that a **direct translation** *involves two languages only*. Thus a translation from, say English into Bulgarian, is a 'direct translation.'

Conversely, a **retranslation** is a new translation into the target language of an 'original' that has already been translated into the same target language at some moment in time. A retranslation thus also *involves only two languages*. A retranslation can be prompted by a variety of reasons. In literature it is often disaffection with existing translations that prompt retranslations (I once came across a Danish translation of A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* in which the translator condemned the 'errors' of a previous translator). Language change, changes in ideology etc., may make previous translations outmoded or undesirable. And financial considerations (notably concerning translators' copyright) may make publishers commission new translations.

Let me add that I do not consider translators' revisions of their own produce retranslations. The main reason is that few translators will be fiercely critical of their own previous work and reject their own first rendition in its entirety. They will preserve many passages from their previous translations intact, and it is therefore most consistent to classify them as 'revisions' (with a time lag).

An **indirect translation**, according to my definition, is a process that comprises an intermediate translation and therefore *involves three languages*.The intervening translation does not cater for a genuine audience, or, to phrase it otherwise, the linguistic realisation will not be dealt with in this L_2 and exists only as a means of transferring the message from one language (L_1) to another (L_3). This is a description of indirect translation used at a murder trial in Denmark:

> "The woman's deposition reached the jury in circuitous ways, since it was first rendered from Thai into English by one interpreter and then into Danish by another interpreter." (*Politiken* 12 September 1998. My translation)

This procedure was used because in Danish courts all legal proceedings must be in Danish: the witness's account in Thai and the renditions into English carry no weight in themselves. The chain of translational communication is as follows.

The sender makes her statement in L_1 (Thai)
Interpreter A renders this into L_2 (English)
Interpreter B renders this into L_3 (Danish) to the addressees.
This, of course, leads to questioning by the judge or by the councils for the defence and for the prosecution in L_3 (Danish). It is only the statements realised in Danish that are relevant in court and hence all statements in L_3), viz. the witness's account must be uttered in Danish.
Interpreter B renders this into L_2 (English), and
Interpreter A renders this into L_1 (Thai).
The witness answers in Thai which is rendered into English by interpreter A, etc.

The characteristics of an indirect translation are that

- all senders, mediators and recipients know that the intermediate translation is merely a stage in the communication, the exchange of messages, between the parties directly interested: the senders and the recipients;
- therefore the intermediate translation is not directed towards an 'authentic audience'.

Since the mediator is not swayed by considerations for an audience in indirect translation, there are no obvious situational factors that affect the intermediate translation into L_2. I suggest that in real life, indirect translation by this stringent definition is relatively rare but not unheard of in multilingual settings, both in multiethnic societies and in our present-day globalised world.

By contrast a **relayed translation** is based on a translation that has a genuine audience in the first target language. Like indirect translation, it spans realisations *in three or more languages* (viz. the source text (L_1), the first translation (L_2), and the relayed translation (L_3)). When the first translation is chosen as the source text for the 'next' translation, the first translation becomes **a relay**. We may consider the example of a Bulgarian book that is translated into French and subsequently from French into Danish:

The French translator renders the Bulgarian source text (L_1) for a French audience (L_2). The translator has no inkling that later on the translation will serve as a source text for a Danish translation. Since the rendition is destined for French readers, the translator orients the text towards

Frenchmen, e.g. by paying attention to 'style' (however we define it), by explaining special Bulgarian features and so on. In previous epochs publishers and translators often 'took liberties' with translations. Even today most publishing houses 'edit' books stylistically in order not to jar reader sensibilities and not least to make for better sales. They usually do so without consulting authors and translators. In sum: in some measure or other, the target text is oriented towards (or adapted to) a French audience.

Years later, the French translation (L_2) is chosen as the source text by a Danish translator who, in the process of translation, makes sure that the book will meet the expectations of a Danish audience (L_3). It goes without saying that the Danish translator does not know what adaptations were made of the Bulgarian text for the French book.

The characteristics of a relayed translation (L_3) are that

- the 'original' source text has an audience in the source-language$_1$ and its culture$_1$;
- the translation into L_2 was made by a translator who knew that it was made for an audience in the target language and culture (L_2 and C_2).
- when this translation (L_2) serves as a source text for a subsequent translation into L_3, the translation in L_2 **becomes a relay** for the **relayed** translation that has an audience in the third culture (L_3).

In principle, the translational chains of communication involving relay and relayed translations can be continued for ever as follows:

- 1. Source text -> audience 1 + translator
- 2. Translation 1 -> audience 2 + translator
- 3. Translation 2 -> audience 3 + translator
- 4. Translation 3 -> audience 4 + translator, etc.

Some of the most popular works in world literature such as the fairytales of the brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen as well as the dramas of William Shakespeare have been through this process.

In Andersen's case the chain would go as follows:

Danish > German > Bulgarian,

and in most non-European countries:

Danish > German > English > e.g. Japanese and Chinese.

In the case of popular books adequate translations replace ones with obvious errors (one early German translation of Andersen thus had the princess in *The Princess and the Pea* sleep on two peas rather than only one.) Yet scholars may find traces in the relayed translation of audience-adaptation in the intermediate source-texts.

In a study of Romanian translations of the English writer Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* Rodica Dimitriu has thus found that the Romanian translation that was relayed via French reflected French manners, and that Robinson's parrot had the name it was given in French, 'Jacquot'. (Dimitriu 2006)

When translations have been through numerous relays, it may be very hard to recognise that the ‘original’ was the same: witness the following translations of the opening of the brother Grimm’s *Snow White and Rose Red*.

- into Danish (from Italian 1973): ”There was once a poor widow who lived in a cottage in the wood with her daughters. One was called Snow White and the other Rose Red, and they were both diligent and nice girls.” (My translation).
- into Danish (from Dutch 1975): ”There was once a poor widow who lived in a cottage in the wood with her daughters. In her garden grew two exceedingly beautiful rose bushes, and every year one of them bloomed with snow-white blossoms and the other one with blood red ones – and the woman named her daughters after them.” (My translation).

It goes without saying that in epochs when national taste was imposed on translations as a matter of course, renditions were not at all ‘faithful’ to the contents, neither in the first translation, the relay, nor in subsequent relayed translations. This is amply exemplified in *Arabian Nights*.

Arabian Nights (Indian, Persian etc.) was first translated into French from Arabic by J. A. Galland (1704-1717). Only 25% of the stories in the Arabic version were rendered in French and many crude passages were not translated. Nevertheless the French translations served as source texts for numerous relayed translations in other European languages such as English (The “Grub Street version” (1705)) and Danish (1757-1758)).

In modern literary translation most transfers are probably direct. Yet, as mentioned by Dinda Gorlée who was quoted above, relayed translations will be published with ‘exotic language combinations’ when no translator can undertake a direct translation.

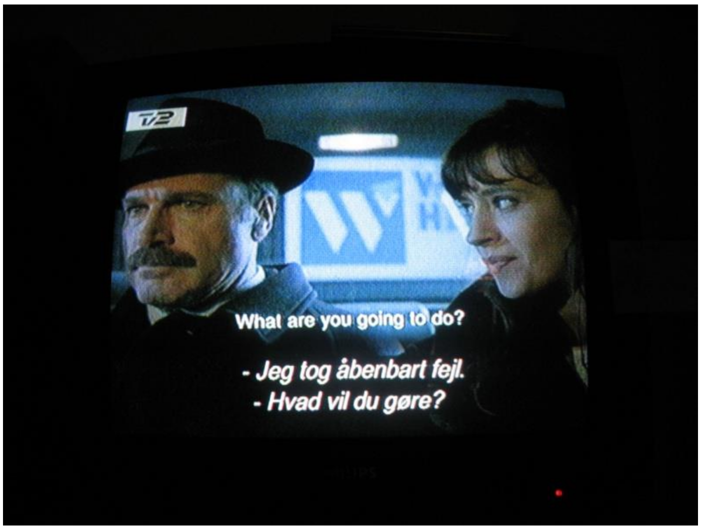
Relay in translation work is not confined to literary translation.

Relay was previously often used in consecutive interpreting at international conferences at which there were several working languages. With the invention of microphones and earphones, it was gradually replaced by simultaneous interpreting and today it is rarely found in developed countries.

Relay is used in simultaneous conference interpreting at EU institutions, especially in the Parliament where all members tend to speak their national language. Previously some users and many outside observers believed that the use of relay in simultaneous interpreting led to numerous errors. Having listened fairly systematically to simultaneous conference interpreting, my assessment (in the 1970s) was that the actual number of errors must be very low. I never found indisputable errors due to relay. The errors I pinned down were caused by the original senders (and led to errors in the first rendition): delegates mumbled, they turned their faces, they spoke dialect, they quoted figures in incomprehensible ways, etc. (For a practicing interpreter’s views, see Pearl (1995)).

The reason why relay does not lead to many misunderstandings in professional, high-level conference interpreting is obvious: Professional interpreters are trained in delivering extremely well-phrased and easily understood produce.

Relay is also found in some subtitling when the original language is found in the sound-track and this is subtitled into the ‘original language of the film’. The picture is from an English film that unexpectedly introduces Italian speech. This was subtitled in English for English audiences in the original film. In the Danish subtitles for a Danish audience, the English subtitle served as the source text for the Danish one.



The actors switch to Italian in an English film.
The top subtitle is meant for the British audience.
The two lower ones are translated from English (L_2), not Italian (L_3)
for the benefit of the Danish audience (L_3)

The time dimension: relays and delays

In the literary examples discussed above there was a pronounced delay between the appearance of the original, the first translations, and subsequent relayed translations. It took decennia or centuries for Shakespeare, Defoe, the brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen to become ’world famous.’

Today, as Professor Bistra Alexieva well knows from a lifetime in Translation Studies, all modes of translation are under constant change: they are transformed by, for instance, language change, technological advances (microphones, computers, machine translation, etc.). And new procedures are emerging on the language scene (e.g. subtitling and simultaneous conference interpreting).

Therefore it is not surprising that ‘relayed translation’, slippery as it is, moves in and out of the modes and changes form from one situational context to another.

Factors in relay

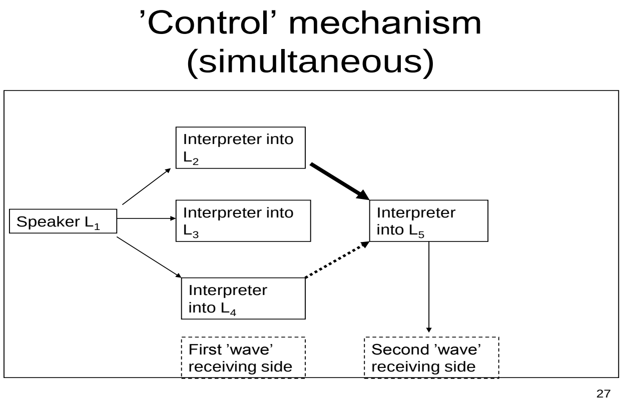
It is useful to have a look at the factors that affect relay.

There is no fundamental difference between a direct translation and the first translation that serves as the relay for subsequent relayed translations. The first translation is made with the target-language audience and its culture (L_2, C_2) in mind and usually without any awareness that it will subsequently serve as a first link in a relay chain.[3] The inevitable asymmetry in terms of vocabulary, syntax, etc. between the source and target languages are the same. And since translators of both types work for well-defined audiences and clients, there is some audience-orientation in the translation process. This target orientation may involve any strategy spanning from the most literal rendition (e.g. with legal and religious texts) to free renditions (e.g. of children’s literature or popular music) and from insertion of notes to rephrasing.

In real life, the second translator will know that the source text is not the ‘original’ since there is ample confirmation of this in, for instance, the contents, the identity of the sender (author) or the title, and in subtitling (DVDs, films and television) from the cast, the sound track, etc. It is rare for translations that serve as relays to be discussed as relays since they are hard to identify, let alone to get hold of.[4] It follows from the nature of relay that the translator involved does not command the ‘original’ source language.

Nevertheless, there is one notable exception in which those who render relayed translations can make a choice between different source-texts or relays.

This happens in simultaneous conference interpreting at some of international organisations such as the EU and the United Nations when the original source message is rendered into two and more languages by the first ‘wave’ of interpreters, namely those who can interpret speeches directly from the source- to the target-languages they command. These interpreters will serve as relays for the interpreters who do not understand the ‘original language’:



Professionals doing relayed interpreting can choose between renditions they understand in the first relay. The most important parameter determining which rendition they choose will be the assessment of superior quality. But even here, we are discussing only the first translation.

As far as the relayed translation (the secondary translation) is concerned, the sobering reality is that the recipients are helpless even when they feel the message may deviate from the original. Their chances of identifying mistakes are just as slim as those of professional translators who suspect that there may be an error in a relay(ed) translation. The possibilities of checking and correcting are small. The end users see or hear only the relayed renditions. It is difficult to track down a source of error and it would also require a command of languages that few users of relayed translations have. One can usually not move beyond a vague suspicion that there may be an error somewhere in the translational chain.

Three cases involving relay

A few examples serve to illustrate how tricky relay is and some of the ways it is received, tackled and traced. Let me stress that this merely shows how difficult it is to discuss relay.

The first one is from a review in a Danish national newspaper of a novel *The trapeze of memories.* (*Politiken* 14 February 2008) The book was written in Arabic by the Iraqi-born Muniam Alfaker.

The novel was translated into French by Touria Ikbal. Subsequently, it was translated into Danish by Sejer Andersen (2007). The reviewer was enthusiastic:

> "In its specific, comforting way the humour typical of the novel appears time and again: 'I'm scared of two things, my wife and the government,' says one man to another in one passage. One does not know whether to laugh or cry."

Here, then, the chain of translational communication functions well in the eyes of the reviewer.

The second example derives from an experienced Danish translator of children's books (Mette Jørgensen). She was asked to do a translation of a Dutch children's book and received an English text from the publisher. She found this translation too tame for the illustrations and concluded that the English text had been made only in order to promote sales of the book with publishers (the book was a co-print i.e. an international book destined for many different markets with the same illustrations and with 'localised', national texts).[5] Knowing some Dutch, she procured the Dutch original and consequently did an adequate translation. In this case, the first translation to be used in the chain of relay was bypassed and ignored because of its inferior quality.

The third case concerns the instructions on an inflatable mattress I bought for a canoeing trip with my children. It mystified me at first sight.

The mattress was produced in China and the warning looked as follows:

注意：仅在适当监护下使用。

I believe that the Chinese text covers both the concepts of **competent** and **adult** (perhaps in one comprehensive term). The translator rendering the caution into English focussed on 'competence'. Accordingly the English translation was

"Use only under **competent supervision**".

The English translation served as the source text for Italian, Danish and some other languages. The Italian translation ran:

"Da usarsi solo sotto **competente supervisione**." And the Danish one as follows

"Må kun anvendes under **opsyn**."

The translator who did the German translation realised the Chinese concept linguistically as 'adult'. Therefore the German rendition was "Nur unter Aufsicht von **Erwachsenen** zu benützen" = "To be used only in the presence of/under the supervision of **adults**."

This German translation then served as the source text for Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Norwegian and Swedish. Consequently the translation into Spanish was

"Uso solo bajo la supervisión de un **adulto**." And the Swedish one ran

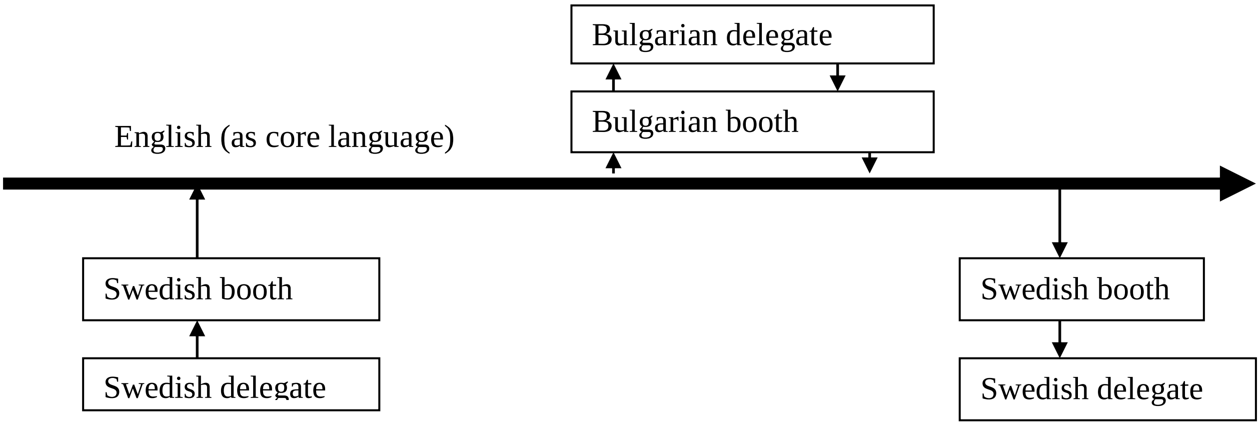
"Använd endast under **vuxens** överinseende."

Provided my hypothesis is correct, this illustrates how choices made by the first translators for their own target texts may have repercussions in the relayed translations that are subsequently based on the first target text.[6]

Relay in the future

There is no doubt that when there are no linguistic middlemen for rendering a direct translation, relay will continue to exist. However, in the future, globalised world, the use of relay will decrease in contexts involving formalised cooperation since English is already the dominant language of international communication and a command of English is a must for everybody who wants to play a role on today's international stage.

At the EU, it is a matter of principle that all translators and interpreters should only work into their mother tongue. Nonetheless there are occasionally situations at EU institutions where the following system is in operation with minor languages:



This is a sketch of what happens: a Swedish delegate speaks Swedish. This is interpreted into English which then functions as a relay (L_2) for the relayed rendition into Bulgarian (L_3) as well as other languages that have no interpreters who understand Swedish. The Bulgarian delegate answers and, via English, there is a relayed rendition of the response in Swedish.[7] Occasionally, interpreters of 'minor' languages will have to interpret both ways that is both into and out of their native language. This is a controversial view but such procedures were used with some national delegations participating in the 'Congress of Vienna' (1814-1815) after the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War as well as in such organisations as the COMECON in the Soviet era.[8]

Even when there are language professionals who are hired for assistance, many people at multilingual meetings will (try to) use one and the same language, English that thus functions as a **contact language**. A contact language is by nature quite distinct from 'relay' because it involves only *one language* (in many variants). In this context, the concept of contact languages heightens our awareness of the increasing complexity of human communication. This complexity is one of the factors that make it difficult to uphold strict definitions in the field of translation.

Delay vs synchrony

I have pointed out that 'delay' was formerly prominent – indeed present - in all translation work (with the exception of whispered (simultaneous) interpreting). Today's scene is characterised by a high degree of **near-instantaniety and near-synchrony** between the production of the source and target texts **(**for instance in simultaneous interpreting, machine translation, manuals, films, books!). This will make for easier (but not necessarily always systematic) 'control': Control will vary from relatively much at the EU and UN to haphazard when language-savvy consumers come across tourist brochures, manuals or home pages in which they suspect translation errors.

The fuzzy line between 'indirect translation' as I defined it and relay is disappearing (once again: not systematically). They are fusing. In addition, many of the distinctions formerly made between translation and other modes of international communication are dissolving.

What can translators do?

We must pose one final question, namely "what can translators and scholars do?" (two different groups in this context) – and remember that much relayed translation cannot be identified for what it is.

Translators (into L_3, L_4, etc.) may become suspicious when there is ambiguity, strange phrasing, inconsistency, and lack of coherence in the translation that serves as their source text (L_2, L_3, etc.). Unless they can consult somebody who commands the original source language (and thus circumvent the relay), there is precious little they can do, except for taking recourse to the following inadequate measures – provided the L_1 source text is available:

- check the punctuation which is usually calqued in translation.
- use translations into languages they command in order to see on how the source text is rendered in these languages. And
- check the L_1 version typographically with the length of the L_2 version (which must, however, allow for the fact that some languages are 'wordier' than others: Russian target texts are c. 25% longer than English source text, whereas Chinese target texts are much shorter than most other language texts).

Whatever measures are taken, it is impossible to avoid content deviations (and stylistic infelicities) that have been introduced in the first translation in practical relay translation work – even for the most conscientious translator.

Conclusion

'Relay' will continue to be found in translational contexts. It will always be used on an unpredictable 'ad hoc' basis in the same fashion that it has, so far, usually been the outcome of coincidence and circumstances rather than planned thinking on the part of the 'sending side.'

It is not stable: it differs between language combinations, text types, periods, etc. Its existence is another parameter in addition to those we already know in translation criticism. Some people believe it introduces numerous errors but this is not necessarily the case.

It is not worthwhile making relay the object of major scholarly studies. At best such critical studies can argue that special types of error that turn up frequently in specific language combinations in 'relay' chains are typical of these chains. But it is unlikely that studies of 'relay' are relevant except in the broadest terms (like this article) to Translation Studies in general.

On the other hand, it is important that scholars are always aware of the possibility that a translation is relayed. It is unwise to ignore it completely, especially in translation criticism.[9] Doing so may lead to errors of judgement.

Notes

1. The time lag will differ according to the languages, the interpreters, the topic etc. Around 1975, professionals would say that it was about five seconds between the six languages then used at the EU. The languages were Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, and Italian.
2. These previous publications are accessible at www.cay-dollerup.dk/publications.
3. I have occasionally come across *sub rosa* comments by literary translators who were well aware that translators in other languages would use their work. In one or two cases this was part of the publisher's commission.
4. Zilberdik's article is unusual in that she identified and compared (1) the Danish source text, (2) the English text used for the relay, and (3) the Israeli subtitles relayed from English.
5. Nowadays most international sales work in the publishing world takes place at international book fairs, notably the annual ones in Frankfurt (Germany) and Bologna (Italy). The first text Ms Jørgensen was given had been produced for sales purposes. The phenomenon of co-prints and their relevance to Translation Studies is dealt with in Dollerup & Kos-Orel (2001).
6. Many translations from Chinese are done by teams of Chinese translators who thus work into their second language, e.g. English and German. Such teams often rely heavily on dictionaries. Accordingly the different translations may be due to different interpretations of dictionary entries within one and the same team.
7. In the illustration, I use Bulgarian as an example. I have not met with a case involving Bulgarian, but I have discussed the point with EU interpreters from minor languages who *sub rosa* have provided me with examples.
8. At the 'Congress of Vienna' the core language was French. It comes as a surprise to most people today that the peace negotiations after the First World War were conducted in French (A British general who stated his case in English was ignored). The working language of the League of Nations (1919-1946), the precursor of the UN was French. The US never joined the League of Nations. The official languages for the peace negotiations and the Nurenberg Trials after the Second World War were English, Russian, French, and German. At the COMECON the working language was Russian. In all these contexts interpreters had to work 'both ways', that is both into the L_1, L_2, L_3, etc. and out of these languages.
9. The present orientation and centralism of the Anglophone world makes it hard to make Translation Studies scholars whose focus is basically uni-lingual realise that in small language communities e.g. Bulgaria, Denmark, and Romania, translators and interpreters actually have to work both into and out of even their fourth, fifth and sixth language.
   I have personally had to use my linguistic skills in Danish (L_1), English (L_2), Spanish (L_3), and German (L_4) in contexts that I would term professional.

References

Dimitriu, Rodica. 2006. From Robinson Crusoe to Robinson in Wallachia. The Intricacies of the Reception Process. In: Shlesinger, Miriam & Zuzana Jettmarová & Anthony Pym (eds). *Sociocultural Aspects of Translation and Interpreting*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.73-82.
Dollerup, Cay & Silvana Kos-Orel. Co-prints and translation. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 9. 87-108.

Gorlée, Dinda. 2007. Bending Back and Breaking [a review of Mary Ann Caw. *Surprised in Translation*]. *Symplokē* 15. 341-352.
Jørgensen, Mette. 2011. Personal information.
Pearl, Stephen. 1995. Lacuna, myth and shibboleth in the teaching of simultaneous interpreting. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 3. 161-190.
Zilberdik, Nan Jacques. 2004. Relay translation in subtitling. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 12. 31-55.