The role of empathy and language background in reading and reception of translated literary texts

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Reading for pleasure involves psychological immersion in a narrative to the point that the readers feel transported into the fictional world where they identify with the characters of the story and experience their emotions. Engaging with narratives requires a complex interplay between cognitive and affective processes including inference, memory and mental simulation (Jacob et al. 2018) which take place while the narrative is read. Truly engaging stories are literary masterpieces which are read in their original or in translations. Reading research using eye-tracking has shown that the fluency of reading depends on text-related and reader-related factors. While the impact of text-related factors has been addressed in empirical studies, much less is known about how reader-related factors affect the reading and reception of literary texts, especially those which have been translated from other languages. In this eye-tracking study, we investigate two factors which might have some impact on the narrative engagement of readers who read translations of popular fiction, namely their level of proficiency in the language of the original text and their level of empathy. The choice of these factors is motivated by the increasing understanding that using two or more languages has profound effects on bilingual users including their metalinguistic awareness and cognitive empathy (Dewaele & Stavans 2012, Dewaele & Wei 2012). Some studies found that empathy correlates with narrative engagement (Vaccaro et al. 2021, Weiss 2015, Green & Donahue 2009) but majority of these studies investigated narrative engagement when reading originally written narratives. Knowing that translated language differs from originally written language, e.g. may include odd unnatural word combinations and disfluencies which may require more processing effort from the reader, we investigate whether readers with higher L2 proficiency and therefore higher metalinguistic awareness will be more disrupted when reading translated fiction than readers with lower L2 proficiency. Moreover, we explore the role of empathy in how readers engage in reading translated literature. Three groups of bilinguals (L2 learners) read three excerpts from translated novels while their eye movements were recorded by EyeLink 1000 Plus. After reading each excerpt, they were asked to rate their narrative engagement. Finally, they filled in questionnaires about their empathy, language background and proficiency, and a reading habits survey. We report the results, taking into account the interplay of the factors mentioned above.

References

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