

How can a writer's choices provoke or cause transformation?

The **transformative** power of a text or work can be caused or provoked not just by reader-response but by the choices that a writer makes in the creation and production of a text or work. The next set of texts will explore this process.

The next source we will explore is an advert for the company *Protein World* which sells supplements that claim to help you become healthier and to lose weight. Scan the adjacent QR code to read this text.



The print advert, created by the company *Protein World* in 2015, was intended to promote its range of 'health' supplements. The writer used a prominent image of a thin, toned woman in a revealing bikini against a bright yellow background, to communicate to the reader the potential benefits to one's physical appearance as a result of taking the *Protein World* supplements. The advert essentially suggests that you, too, can look like the model depicted in the advert if you take *Protein World's* supplements, which are called 'The Weight Loss Collection'. The advertisement also queries the reader, 'Are you beach body ready?' The advert was released in April when many people in the UK, where the advert was published, are planning their summer time beach vacations. This was an intentional choice by the company as the rhetorical question is designed to communicate to the reader a question about whether they have enough time in between planning their beach vacation and actually being on the beach to feel confident in a swimsuit while there.

CONCEPT CONNECTION

COMMUNICATION AND TRANSFORMATION

However, the communication that was intended by the writer was not the one that was received by many readers of this text. There was a huge backlash against the advert with many people criticizing it for perpetuating a depiction of beauty standards in the mass media that are not reflective of most within society. It was also noted that the advert seemed to be directly aimed at women, suggesting that they were the market that *Protein World* seemed

to think would be most susceptible to the meaning communicated through the advert. How much of this transformation in communication from what was intended by the writer to what was received by many readers was due to the structural and stylistic choices made by the writer?

If the writer had chosen to use both a man and a woman on the advert, would it have been so controversial? The fact that the writer chose to only

include a female model on the advert communicates to the reader that it is only women who need to worry about being 'beach body ready' which isn't a message that is entirely acceptable to a contemporary society. The decision of the writer to structure the advertisement so that the rhetorical question 'are you beach body ready?' is placed directly next to 'the weight loss collection' of supplements also communicates to the reader that the solution to not feeling confident about your body is to lose weight, which is a reductive and harmful message to convey

to the mass public. It seems to also be a deliberate choice by the writer to have the model as the most dominating aspect of the advert and to place this image of the model in the middle of the advert, in the middle of the rhetorical question. This decision could be interpreted as a communication to the reader that unless you look like the model, the answer to whether you are 'beach body ready' is probably 'no' and as the vast majority of people don't look like the model, then the implication is that they need to buy the supplements in order to look more like her.

The above interpretation is evidence that the choices made by a writer are not static in their communication – a reader, by interpreting their choices in a specific way can transform the meaning that they intended to convey.

ACTIVITY 3

Read the question below and write down your thoughts in response to it. You will need to review the notes that you made in Chapter 3.2 about the deviation of conventions over time in order to help you answer. You will also need to refresh your memory about feminist reader-response theory as delineated in Chapter 3.4 and could also use the information given about allusion, parody and pastiche in Chapter 3.5 to help you answer the question.

Apply a feminist reader-response to the *Protein World* advert. What kind of criticism would a feminist reader apply to the text? Use this criticism to think about how the conventions of the advert could be transformed to ensure that it is more appropriate for a contemporary society that does not expect women to be represented in a misogynistic and stereotypical way in the mass media.

Read the following commentary in response to this task.

The next source we will explore is an advert by the British online clothing brand *Navabi* that sells clothes for plus-size women. They created this advert in 2018 as a response *Protein World's* 2015 advert. Scan the QR code to read it.

Navabi created an advert that is clearly a parody of *Protein World's* 'Are you beach body ready?' advert and may even look a little like what you may have envisaged in your response to the previous activity. The writer of the advert has interpreted the meaning and has transformed the conventions to create an original text that represents women in a completely different way. The writer replicated the decision to use a bright yellow background and female models in swimwear to promote their product, but they have subverted the traditional use of a 'swimwear' model by using models that are atypical. The three women are perhaps more representative of the variety of beauty that exists across society and have been deliberately chosen to depict a range of sizes, ethnicity, height and aesthetic style; using a body covered in tattoos is also further breaking down taboos from some societies and celebrating them as commonplace. The use of these models subverts the message that women need to look a certain standardized way in order to feel comfortable when wearing swimwear at the beach, and instead the writer transforms this into a suggestion to the reader that women should feel confident at the beach no matter what they look like. The writer has also deliberately modified the 'Are you beach body ready?' slogan. Instead, the writer has transformed this from an interrogative and demeaning rhetorical question into a



positive, declarative of 'We're beach body ready'. This subverts the idea originally conveyed in the *Protein World* advert that women need to take health supplements in order to be deemed 'ready' to be seen at the beach, and instead conveys the message that as long as a woman has a body and swimsuit then she should feel 'ready' to go to the beach.

A feminist reader of the *Protein World* advert would have criticized the depiction of unattainable (and standardized) beauty standards for women in the advert, as well as the exploitation of a woman's insecurities about her body to sell a product. They would also have taken exception to the suggestion that it is the role of a woman, and a woman only, to look a certain way when going to the beach and that this standard of beauty is not applicable to a man. The transformation in the use of conventions in the *Navabi* advert also transforms the meaning communicated in the advert making its representation of women far more suitable for a contemporary and socially aware reader.

If you would like to read more about the various reader-responses generated by these adverts, then scan the QR codes on the right.



TOK Links

In response to the controversy generated by *Protein World's* 'beach body ready' advert, the mayor of London at the time, Sadiq Khan, made a decision to ban all forms of 'body shaming' adverts from public transport in London. To read more about this, scan the QR code.



DISCUSSION

This prompts the question, to what extent does society have a duty to ensure that everyone in society is represented equally and fairly in the mass media? To what extent should politicians and lawmakers be involved in regulating adverts?

So far in this chapter we have explored how the **perspective** of a reader towards an issue, theme or topic can be **transformed** when **interpreting** and **comparing** texts and works. We have also inquired into how the choices made by a writer and the meaning that they intended to convey through a text or work can be **transformed** in the act of **interpretation**. We then discussed how a reader can use their response to the meaning communicated in a text or work to transform the text itself and use it to convey a completely different message to the reader. In the next part of this chapter we will explore the act of **translating** a text or work and analyse how this act of translation can **transform** the text or work itself and its meaning.

How can a writer deliberately transform a text or work through the act of translation, and how can that transform its meaning?

The Vegetarian by South Korean writer Han Kang is a novel told from the perspective of the husband, brother-in-law and sister of a woman who decides to become a vegetarian as a result of a recurring violent nightmare that she experiences. The consequences of this decision are substantial, leading to alienation from her parents, the breakdown of her marriage, the breakdown of her sister's marriage and a violent decline in her mental health.

The novel was first published in South Korea in 2007 and was then translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015. Upon its translation, the novel received much critical acclaim and the novel won the Booker International Prize (the version of the Booker Prize given to works in translation) in 2016.

The source below is an extract from the novel. The narrator is the husband of the female protagonist, Yeong-hye, and he is describing her character to the reader. It would be useful for you to scan the QR code opposite in order to read this opinion article about gender equality in South Korea before reading the source.



- 5 She was a woman of few words. It was rare for her to demand anything of me, and however late I was in getting home she never took it upon herself to kick up a fuss. Even when our days off happened to coincide, it wouldn't occur to her to suggest we go out somewhere together. While I idled the afternoon away, TV remote in hand, she would shut herself up in her room. More than likely she would spend time reading, which was practically her only hobby. For some unfathomable reason, reading was something she was able to really immerse herself in – reading books that looked so dull I couldn't even bring myself to so much as take a look inside the covers. Only at mealtimes would she open the door and silently emerge to prepare the food. To be sure, that kind of wife, that kind of lifestyle, did mean that I was unlikely to find my days particularly stimulating. On the other hand, if I'd had one of those wives whose phones ring on and off all day long with calls from friends or co-workers, or whose nagging periodically leads to screaming rows with their husbands, I would have been grateful when she finally wore herself out.

(Han Kang 12–13)

Han Kang

Han Kang is a South Korean writer and teacher who was born in 1970. She is best known for her novel *The Vegetarian* which won the International Booker Prize in 2016. She is also known for her other works that have been translated into English, *Human Acts* and *The White Book*.



The writer has been praised by critics for her exploration of the role of women within the institutions of marriage and family in contemporary South Korean society and culture. The protagonist of the novel, Yeong-hye, is silenced throughout the novel. She does not have her own part through which she can provide her own perspective on the events that occur in the novel, but instead she is spoken about to the reader by other people. The only time we, as a reader, are given access to her voice is when she is recounting the terror of her recurring nightmare, passages that are placed within the parts belonging to other characters. This could be symbolic of patriarchal cultural norms in South Korea that are seen by some to silence the voices of women in society.

The way that she is described by her husband is as a person almost devoid of character and agency – 'It was rare for her to demand anything of me, and however late I was in getting home she never took it upon herself to kick up a fuss. Even when our days off happened to coincide, it wouldn't occur to her to suggest we go out somewhere together. While I idled the afternoon away, TV remote in hand, she would shut herself up in her room (lines 1–4).' However, it seems as though her husband regards this as a positive characteristic and sees the only other alternative as 'one

of those wives whose phones ring on and off all day long with calls from friends or co-workers, or whose nagging periodically leads to screaming rows with their husbands (lines 9–11).’ This reductive way of categorizing the behaviour of women could be, yet again, mirroring misogynistic attitudes towards women within some parts of South Korean culture. It is also important to note that we at no point hear Yeong-hye’s husband refer to her by name, instead she is referred to using the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘her’. In fact, we as a reader do not find out Yeong-hye’s name until near the end of the first part of the novel. This again, could be seen as mirroring the purported lack of visibility of women in some parts of South Korean culture, especially their role within a marriage, where they are expected to be subservient to the husband.

CONCEPT CONNECTION

CULTURE AND TRANSFORMATION

This perspective of South Korean culture, as told by Kang, is only accessible to us as English speakers because of the transformation that the original Korean language of the novel has undergone in the process of translation. It could be argued that without this act of transformation it would be difficult for a reader from outside of South Korea to be able to hear an authentic and subversive voice like Kang’s and be able to understand her perspective about her own South Korean culture.

However, the transformation of language in the act of translation can sometimes be a contentious one. Read the source below and then scan on the QR code opposite. Both discuss the issues involved in translating works from their original language.



The voice of the story, the unpleasant husband’s, is stiff and formal, in line with this traditional and conventional mindset that his wife experiences as a straitjacket (along with her vegetarianism she also refuses to wear a bra, because she finds it constricting). So we have phrases like ‘Ultimately, I settled for a job where I would be provided with a decent monthly salary in return for diligently carrying out my allotted tasks.’ There is a rather nineteenth-century ring to it, as if we were reading an old translation of a Chekhov short story. Combining this stiffness with a determination to keep the prose ‘spoken’ and idiomatic leads to some uneasy formulations. ‘However late I was in getting home,’ the husband tells us ‘she never took it upon herself to kick up a fuss.’

‘To take something upon oneself,’ the Cambridge dictionary tells us, is ‘to accept responsibility for something without being asked to do so.’ Does this make sense next to the idea of ‘kicking up a fuss’ about a husband’s later return? Is this Han Kang indicating the husband’s limited grasp of idiom, or a translation issue? There is always a danger, when translating a spoken voice, of opting for the idiomatic at the expense of precision. During the unpleasant dinner with the husband’s business associates, for example, we are told that ‘awkward silences ... were now peppering the conversation.’ One can imagine a conversation peppered with obscenities perhaps, but aren’t silences just too long to be peppery? Earlier, complaining of his wife’s reading habits, the narrator talks of her ‘reading books that looked so dull I couldn’t even bring myself to so much as take a look inside the covers.’ Is that ‘looked’/‘look’ repetition in the original? And the overkill of ‘even bring myself to so much as look at’? Sometimes this mix of the uptight and the colloquial creates an awkwardness at the limits of comprehensibility.

(Tim Parks)

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

In Chapter 3.6 of this section you analysed some examples of opinion articles. The two texts above are also examples of photojournalism. Check your understanding of this text type by re-reading the information in Chapter 3.3 and filling in the table below which uses step 1 (genre, audience and purpose) and step 4 (other features of text type) of the non-literary analysis strategy that you were introduced to in Chapter 1.1. You can fill in the table for one or both of the opinion articles. You should focus on how the article(s) convey(s) the opinion of the writer towards the issue of transformation via translation.

Once you have done this, read the end of book commentaries for an example of a table that has been filled out for you which analyses the second opinion article.

Genre	
Audience	
Purpose	
Other features of text type	

CONCEPT CONNECTION**TRANSFORMATION AND CREATIVITY**

The writers of these articles convey differing opinions towards the act of transforming language through translation. The writer of the first extract conveys the confusion that he felt when reading parts of *The Vegetarian*. He wasn't certain if some of the awkward and peculiar phrasing in parts of the novel were intentional or a casualty of the translation process – 'Is this Han Kang indicating the husband's limited grasp of idiom, or a translation issue?' He also expresses his misgivings about how precise the translation of language, especially spoken language, can be, 'There is always a danger, when translating a spoken voice, of opting for the idiomatic at the expense of precision.' The writer essentially conveys to the reader his opinion about what is lost in the process of transforming language through translation – security in interpretation for the reader and precision in authorial intention.

However, even though the writer of the second extract agrees that some precision has been lost through the process of translation, the key area of concern for her is Smith's 'stylistic alteration of the text' which shows that Smith 'took significant liberties with the text'. However, the writer of the first extract also concedes that any 'losses' in precision or authenticity the act of translation has led to was 'worth the "gains" of Smith's effort' as 'Readers and critics have enjoyed the work

immensely, South Korea has been placed on the world's literary map, sales of both the original and the English version have exploded, and interest in Korean literary translation has soared. Most important, Smith successfully introduced Han, a highly respected South Korean writer, to much-deserved recognition abroad.'

It could be argued that an entirely accurate and precise transformation of one language into another is impossible and that something will always be lost in the process of this transformation. It could also be argued that the act of translation has to be a creative one on the part of the translator because of this. How far a translator goes in the amount of creativity they apply to their transformation of the language could be entirely contextual. For example, a transformation of language in a translation of a set of instructions should be as accurate as possible. However, the transformation of one language to another in a creative and artistic pursuit can probably be more liberal.

Ultimately, the interpretation of the original text or work by the writer will always be transformed through the translation process, but most readers will be unaware of the degree of transformation unless they have the linguistic capabilities to compare both texts or work.