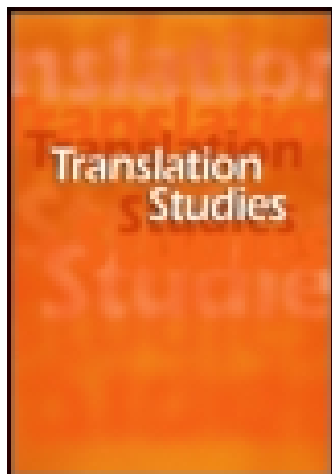


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Cultural translation: An introduction to the problem, and Responses

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***Translation Studies* Forum: Cultural translation**

Editorial note

The following position paper by Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny opens a new rubric in *Translation Studies*: an occasional forum for interdisciplinary debate. The paper is followed by a series of responses that pick up the argument from a variety of perspectives. Further responses will follow in subsequent issues, and we warmly invite readers to send their contributions.

“Cultural translation” is a term currently much used in a range of disciplines – both inside and, perhaps especially, outside translation studies itself – and in very different ways. Many of these approaches seem to promise valuable insights into cultural practices of transfer, yet the precise use of the term “cultural translation” remains controversial. It is also as yet unclear how the concept will impact on some of the fundamental assumptions of translation studies. This Forum aims to explore and evaluate the potential of the concept both for translation studies and for its neighbouring disciplines.

Cultural translation **An introduction to the problem**

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Etymologically, translation evokes an act of moving or carrying across from one place or position to another, or of changing from one state of things to another. This does not apply only to the words of different languages, but also to human beings and their most important properties. They too can be moved across all sorts of differences and borders and so translated from one place to another, for instance from one cultural and political condition to another. Thus, one can culturally translate people – for a political purpose and with existential consequences. No discussion of the concept of cultural translation can easily dispense with an analysis of the very concrete devices of such translation if it strives to maintain contact with the political and existential issues at stake in the debate on cultural translation. The political meaning of cultural translation is not a quality external to the concept and capable of being discussed in a haphazard way. Precisely by becoming cultural, translation opens up the problem of its intrinsic political meaning.

Keywords: cultural translation; heterolinguality; homolingual address; translation in Romanticism; social contract; structural linguistics

Giving correct answers to wrong questions

Let us evoke one recent case of a cultural translation by quoting a curious question: “Every five years one of the most important exhibitions of modern and contemporary art takes place in Kassel. What is it called?”

To be sure, people interested in culture and arts, mostly members of the well-educated middle class known in Germany as the *Bildungsbürgertum*, can easily answer this question. But the question is not addressed to them. In fact, this is the 85th question of a 2006 test which had to be passed in the federal state of Hesse in order to achieve German citizenship (Lehrbuch Einbürgerungstext Hessen 2008). There are actually many other questions (100 altogether) in the test, mostly dealing with German history, the German Constitution, civil rights, the German juridical and political system, German culture, sport, national symbols, etc. Some of the questions are quite peculiar. For instance: “A woman shouldn’t be allowed to go out in public or to travel alone without the company of male relatives. What is your opinion on this?”, “Please explain the right of Israel to exist”, or “If someone said the Holocaust was a myth or a fairytale, what would you answer?”

Let us put aside the content of these questions and ask instead what their purpose actually is. Taken together, they are supposed to be an answer to one particular question: “What is German?” or, more precisely, “What is German identity?” They present a sort of instant canon of features put together with the purpose of drawing a clear boundary line between German and non-German and thus making possible authoritative control over all movement across this line – that is, over the processes of exclusion or inclusion which directly influence the constitution of a political community. By answering most of these questions correctly, one is in the literal sense culturally translated into “being German” and consequently provided with a new political identity, in other words with a particular set of rights and duties attached to German citizenship.

In its content as well as in its practical application, the test for German citizenship is in fact a perfect example of the fundamental contradiction of an identitarian discourse: the contradiction between its essentialist claims and its self-constructed character. It is not difficult to see how arbitrary this self-construction has been. Even its actual political motivation (the exclusion of one particular identity, the so-called Islamist one) is completely disclosed. On the other hand, this collection of features is overtly attached to (one could also say: essentialized into) the allegedly unique, original character of being German. Does knowing what happens in contemporary art every five years in Kassel really make you German? It sounds ludicrous, but according to the test for German citizenship the answer is Yes.

Moreover, this nonsense – more precisely, the contradiction behind it that we have just mentioned – informs in a fundamental way what we perceive as our political reality today, for it creates that reality’s very basement, the human substratum of a particular society: it decides directly who belongs and who doesn’t belong to the society, and thus shapes the forces of which our political reality is made. This is why we can think of the test for German citizenship as a politically institutionalized form of cultural translation.

Actually, this example is only one, comparatively visible, manifestation of a common principle: our societies and consequently our perception of political reality are culturally framed. This throws light on one of the most striking phenomena of the “postmodern condition”, the “cultural turn”. Culture has not, as is often believed, simply pushed the notion of society from the political stage and taken on its leading role in the theoretical debates and practical concerns of political subjects. The change is more radical. Culture has become this political stage itself, the very condition of the possibility of society and of our perception of what political reality

is today. This is the reason why democracy – that is, the quest for freedom and equality, as well as the pursuit of social justice, welfare and so on – appear today as culturally determined, and why so many people believe that having particular rights means belonging to a particular culture.

Multiculturalism versus deconstruction

It is in this context that the notion of translation, or more precisely that of cultural translation, has such immense importance. For it can be applied to both sides of the contradiction between an essentialist and a constructivist understanding of culture, in order either to arrange relations between different cultures or to subvert the very idea of an original cultural identity. In other words, the concept of cultural translation can be generally understood and applied in the service of both the contradictory paradigms of postmodern theory and postmodern political visions: essentialist multiculturalism and its counterpart, deconstructionism.

As we know, multiculturalism is based on the idea of the uniqueness and originality of cultural formations. It assumes there is an intrinsic connection between culture and “racial”, gender or ethnic origins. For multiculturalists our world is a sort of cluster of different cultural identities either tolerantly recognizing or violently excluding each other. From this perspective, multiculturalism challenges the very idea of universality, for it sees every universal concept as culturally relative. To give an example: there is no such thing as a world literature, the idea of a canon of masterpieces which, as Goethe once claimed, articulates in the best way what is universal in human nature. From the multiculturalist point of view there is, instead, only a plurality of specific canons, each of them originating in some kind of essential identity. Thus we can talk only about “German” or “French”, “white” or “black”, “male” or “female” literature including different combinations of these identitarian features like, for instance, “black-American-female” literature or culture, and so on.

Multiculturalism is the ideological background of what we call identitarian politics – a political practice which still decisively shapes our world today. Although it emphasizes the rights of minorities and marginal communities within the homogenized space of nation states, at the same time it legitimates the right of a specific national or ethnic community to protect, as a majority within the political frame of the nation state, its allegedly unique and original cultural identity. Our major political visions of the further development of democracy and prosperity – such as the project of European integration – also basically follow the same multicultural pattern.

The deconstructionist approach challenges the concept of multiculturalism in its essentialist kernel, that is, in the idea that every identity originates in some sort of a pre-given essence. For deconstructionists, a culture is a narrative without any historical or physical origin, or to use the older structuralist terminology, a system of signs that is in relation only with other sign systems or signs, or else with non-signs – a relation that itself also belongs to the level of signs. In this approach, there are no origins at all, but only their traces, only their “copies”. This actually means that cultures, too, never relate to some natural state of things, but rather construct their own origin, beyond any essential feature like “race”, sex or ethnicity. Therefore, being “German”, for instance, is simply a product of a specific cultural activity, in short, a cultural construction. For deconstructionists a nation is never something

given, persisting over time as an eternal essence that can be clearly distinguished from other nations, that has stable boundaries, and so on. It is, rather, to use the well-known phrase coined by Benedict Anderson (1983), an imagined community, which implies that the “unity” of a nation has been constructed through certain discursive and literary strategies. Nation is narration, writes Homi Bhabha (1990). It emerges in human history at certain points in time and as a consequence of certain economic and socio-cultural developments. For Ernest Gellner (1983) those developments are the conditions for the production of a standardized, homogeneous, centrally sustained high culture: a free market in commodities and labour, for instance, or the emergence of a civil society which can be differentiated from the state sufficiently to allow a sphere of autonomous culture to develop, and so on. The so-called national cultures which nationalists claim to defend and revive are, for Gellner, their own inventions.

This is extremely important for our understanding of the phenomenon of translation. Its present social and political role becomes clear only against the background of the historical process of nation-building. In this context translation is a cultural and political phenomenon which provides the specific context of what we today call “cultural translation”.

The Romantic theory of *cultural translation*

It is thanks to the German Romantics that translation came to be conceived of in Europe as an essentially cultural task. This becomes particularly clear in their advocacy of foreignizing – instead of domesticating or naturalizing – the language of translation, i.e., in their preferring fidelity to licence in translation (see, for example, Schleiermacher 1813/2007). In Romanticism, translation was understood in terms of its positive effects on German language and culture; its role was to improve both. And since language and culture were, for the German Romantics, the very essence of the nation, translation’s ultimate purpose was to build a German nation.

This is clearly implied by Wilhelm von Humboldt’s theory of translation (1816/1909). He introduces a moral category, a special virtue, which he calls *die Treue* (fidelity) and which is necessary for the translator to achieve a good translation. However, *die Treue* doesn’t apply to some authentic meaning of the original text, but rather to the translator’s mother tongue or to his or her nation, which for Humboldt amounts to the same thing. In fact, the translator should be faithful to the “foreign” (*das Fremde*) of the source text, for it is a new quality which is added to his or her language, thereby building its spirit, the spirit of the nation. Fidelity is ultimately a patriotic virtue, a commitment to the task of nation-building or, in German, to the task of *Bildung*, which we might understand as a sort of cultivation in both the individual and the social sense. Thus, for Humboldt translation is always already cultural translation. Herder, too, understood *das Fremde* as a sort of added value that refines the language of the translator and his or her nation. For him, the German language in itself has no classical character, but it can acquire this through translations from the classical languages Greek and Latin (see Herder 1767/1990, 199). It is therefore only translation that can endow German language and culture with a classical quality. Otherwise, German would remain imperfect, since in its original form it finds itself in a kind of linguistic state of nature, a condition of language before its first encounter with other languages – before its first translation.

This unmistakably resembles the concept of an individual existing before his or her first encounter with other individuals, before entering social relations; in short, before the emergence of society.

In fact, one can hardly overlook the obvious parallel here with the concept of the social contract, the well-known theoretical fairytale about the emergence of society and social order. Translated into the language of the social contract, the concept of translation as developed by the German Romantics – as well as the reason for their welcoming the foreign in translations and consequently preferring fidelity to licence – would probably sound like this: a nation, expressed through its language as its very essence, gives up a part of its natural originality and accepts contamination by the foreign in order to achieve the state of culture. Translation, based on the normative idea of fidelity, is simply a means of cultivation, a cultivation tool. Like the “individual”, a conceptual dummy of social contract theory, the ideal translator of German Romantic translation theory must sacrifice a part of his or her freedom in order to accomplish a cultural mission that is seen as an intrinsic part of translational practice. Once again, the cultural task of the translator is always a social – indeed a political – one, the task of nation-building.

After the original: Benjamin, Bhabha

However, the concept of cultural translation as we understand it today has arisen not out of traditional translation theory but out of its radical criticism, articulated for the first time in the early 1920s with Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “The task of translator” (Benjamin 1923/1992). In his text – and this is essentially new – Benjamin actually scrapped the idea of the original and therefore the whole binarism of traditional translation theory. A translation for Benjamin does not refer to an original text; it has nothing to do with communication and its purpose is not to carry meaning. He illustrates the relation between “original” and translation using the metaphor of a tangent: translation is like a tangent which touches the circle (i.e., the original) at one single point only, thereafter to follow its own way. Neither the original nor the translation, neither the language of the original nor the language of the translation are fixed and enduring categories. They do not have an essential quality and are constantly transformed in space and time. It is this vehement questioning of the very idea of an essential origin that made Benjamin’s essay so important for deconstructionist theory.

Out of the same deconstructionist tradition emerges the concept of cultural translation, coined by one of the most prominent names of postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha. His motivation was originally the criticism of multiculturalist ideology – the need to think about culture and cultural relations beyond the essentialist notion of unique cultural identities and communities originating within these identities.

However, it must be said that multiculturalism has developed its own concept of cultural translation, what is known as inter-cultural translation. In fact this is a metaphor for different sorts of successful – respectful, tolerant, inclusive – cultural interaction between individuals and communities assumed to belong to different, clearly distinguishable cultures (see Mišćević 2002). It is modelled on the interaction between cultural groups, typically majorities and minorities within a state, and takes place both within a national community or state (intra-national multiculturalism)

and on an inter-, supra- or post-national level (a sort of cosmopolitan multiculturalism).

For Homi Bhabha (1994) this understanding leaves us in the deadlock of identitarian politics, helplessly obsessed with cultural diversity. Instead Bhabha proposes the concept of the “third space”, as the space for hybridity, the space for subversion, transgression, blasphemy, heresy, and so on. But hybridity is also the space where all binary divisions and antagonisms, typical of modernist political concepts including the old opposition between theory and politics, cease to hold. Instead of the old dialectical concept of negation, Bhabha offers the idea of negotiation or cultural translation, which he believes to be in itself politically subversive, as the only possible way to transform the world and bring about something politically new. In his view, then, an emancipatory extension of politics is possible only in the field of cultural production, following the logic of cultural translation.

But this raises the question of whether it is in fact this concept of cultural translation that defines the social, political and existential condition of those migrants who not only attend curious tests for German or whichever citizenship, but are very often subjected to various forms of repressive exclusion – from deportations and detentions to “clandestinization”. To put it more radically: do migrants really embody the new transnational “elite” of cultural translators, faithful to the task of hybridity proliferation and therefore to the mission of emancipatory change? Or should we also consider another, dystopic side of cultural translation? For cultural translation may not be only a vehicle of progressive development, but also a means of exclusion that finally turns its promise of liberation into oppression.

Some linguistic aspects

In order to develop these questions, let us glance at some of the linguistic implications of translation theory and, at the same time, return to the idea of a “social contract” underlying the very relationship within which translation takes place; it is an idea found not only in the German Romantics but also at the outset of modern linguistics, in Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* of 1916.

Indeed, Saussure’s famous distinction between the *langue* (language as a “code”, a synchronic system of sign relations) and the *parole* (language in the sense of individual speech acts) closely correlates with a distinction between social and individual components. The *langue* is what is social about language, whereas the *parole* relates to the individual and more or less accidental uses of a *langue*. Thus, even though Saussure explicitly speaks of the *langue* as a “product”, the practice of language finds itself largely reduced to the individual exercise of given *langues* based on their “passive assimilation”. By contrast, it is exclusively the *langue*, as a sign system, which is regarded as “the social side of human speech (*langage*), independent of the individual who, alone, can neither create nor modify it; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community” (Saussure 1916/1995, 31–2; emphasis added).

As we have said above, the mythicizing idea of a social contract, drawn on by Saussure in order to determine the sociality of the *langue*, locates sociality first and foremost in the contractual constitution of a community, which is regarded as taking place prior to any concrete practice. Only on the grounds of such a construction can

social practices be understood as individual “exercises” or more or less “accidental” exemplifications of something “essential”, namely a “contractually” fixed sociality – in Saussure’s case conceived of as a linguistic community which correlates with what he calls the “homogeneous nature” of a *langue* (ibid., 32).

Quite obviously, a profound theory of translation seems hard to imagine within this conception, given that translation necessarily deals with heterogeneous realities. This may be the reason why Roman Jakobson, one of the few structuralist linguists to have sketched out something like a genuine theory of translation, seems to oppose the Saussurian view when he states that “the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign” (Jakobson 1971, 261). Thus, translation is crucial for the actual putting into practice of any presumed homogeneous “sign system”, and this not only with respect to distinct linguistic unities in the sense of Saussurian *langues*, but already at an intralingual level – as a capacity of “rewording”.

What, though, is the driving force behind Jakobson’s conception of translation? It is grounded in the “cognitive function” of language, that is, in language’s capacity to provide cognitive experience, based on “metalinguistic operations”, with linguistic expressions. It is this cognitive function which “not only admits but directly requires recoding interpretation, i.e., translation” (ibid., 265), and which furthermore guarantees a general translatability within and between languages. Yet there is a characteristic limit to this general translatability, which comes into play precisely where the Saussurian *langue* or, in Jakobson’s terms, the specific “pattern of a language” interferes with the conveyance of cognitions through language – a limit that, interestingly, does not so much draw the line between a possibility and an impossibility as it defines a necessity. For in Jakobson’s view, languages “differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *can* convey”, as any language use raises “specific yes-or-no questions” which correlate to the native speakers’ (and listeners’) sense of what is “compulsory in their verbal code” (ibid., 264–5).

The “cultural” in the linguistic

At this point, let us return to the catalogue of questions related to the possible acquisition of German citizenship. The question behind all these questions is in fact a yes-or-no question. The real question is not whether individual applicants for German citizenship *can* answer the questions they are confronted with – and this perhaps in a whole variety of ways. It is rather whether or not they answer them in the way they *must* answer them. This of course is the whole sense of a “test”: it is not simply an instrument of exclusion, but rather an instrument of control over both inclusion and exclusion. It sets up necessities rather than impossibilities, and precisely by doing so it establishes strong boundaries that have a positively defining function for what is delimited by this kind of test.

We are not setting up a hollow analogy here between Jakobson’s perspective on translation and the German citizenship test. On the contrary, we believe there is a strong bond connecting them, a bond which is closely linked to the Saussurian heritage in Jakobson, namely the assumption of some sort of “contractual” foundation of sign systems. In fact the Saussurian assumption of a contractual sociality of linguistic unities (both in the sense of given *langues* and of given linguistic communities), pre-existing the actual putting into practice of language, is evidently

an *extralinguistic* assumption. It cannot be based on linguistic facts, for such facts inevitably rely, at least as far as Saussure and his followers are concerned, on the very construction of homogeneous sign systems, which in their turn depend precisely on the assumption in question.

Jakobson clearly draws upon this assumption. What he adds to it is, above all, the idea of a cognitive, metalinguistic activity, an idea which allows him to focus on translational processes but at the same time urges him to consider the “interference” of given language patterns as nothing other than a compulsory particularization of the “cognitive function of language”. He thus ends up with a characteristic schematism: even though there is something like a universal capacity in languages (allowing for their general translatability), the concrete expression of this universality is positively delimited by linguistic constraints.

In the fields of cultural and political theory, Judith Butler advances a similarly schematic view when – directly mobilizing Homi Bhabha’s notion of cultural translation – she argues that while cultural articulations can very well convey universal claims, they are simultaneously subject to particular cultural constraints (Butler 1996). The main difference of her argument from Jakobson’s conception resides in the fact that for Butler the translational process, in order to overcome these constraints, is marked by what she calls a “performative contradiction”, bringing into play the “excluded outside” of established articulations (*ibid.*, 48), whereas for Jakobson, its main purpose is to raise the cognitive “explicitness” of language. However, neither of them can ensure that the schematism on which their reflections are based really fosters the unambiguous universalization of the particular for which they seem to hope. On the contrary, it may also serve as a means of rigidly fixing the kind of “must” that Jakobson discussed, that is, the transmutation of translational processes into yes-or-no questions.

In view of all this, we find it less than convincing to consider the notion of “cultural translation” as a sort of extension or overcoming of the narrowness of linguistic concepts of translation. Rather, we would argue that the “cultural” dimension has always already been included in concepts of translation that emerged from general reflections on language or linguistics. Saussure’s extralinguistic assumption of the contractual character of the *langue* implies a whole cultural theory, and so does Jakobson’s tacit reference to Saussure. More precisely: they not only imply a cultural theory, but also demonstrate how thoroughly political this implication is, in that their conception of sociality in language is closely linked to one of the founding myths of political modernity.

The perspective of heterolinguality

One important feature of Jakobson’s translation theory is certainly his well-known distinction between intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translation. Although these categories clearly open up perspectives for a deeper investigation of translation phenomena, Jakobson in many ways remains faithful to a more traditional understanding of translation when he conceives of interlingual translation as “translation proper” (Jakobson 1971, 261). It is precisely in this point that Naoki Sakai has raised important objections against Jakobson’s whole classification. Sakai’s point of departure is his own experience of addressing what would appear in a classical structuralist view as two distinct “linguistic communities”, an experience

linked with the practice of publishing texts in both Japanese and English over many years. However, Sakai's interest is not so much the translational processes *between* two distinctive languages or linguistic communities, but rather the heterogeneity operating within such a practice of addressing. Sakai calls it "heterolingual address":

What the practice of heterolingual address evoked in me was not the sense of peculiarity of writing for two linguistically different readerships; rather, it made me aware of other social and even political issues involved in translation, and it illuminated what I had long suspected about the assumptions of the nonheterolingual address, namely, the homolingual address. [...] Strictly speaking, it is not because two different language unities are given that we have to translate (or interpret) one text into another; it is because translation *articulates* languages so that we may postulate the two unities of the translating and the translated languages as if they were autonomous and closed entities through *a certain representation of translation*. (Sakai 1997, 2)

We will confine ourselves here to briefly summarizing three important shifts that Sakai's concept of heterolingual address performs in relation to traditional understandings of translation.

1) It does not start from the assumption of pre-existing language unities between which translation takes place, but rather conceives of translation as a *social relation* and a field of *social practices*. For only such practices provide the very articulation of languages upon which any theory of translation necessarily draws. Thus Sakai's main question is: "What sort of social relation is translation in the first place?" (ibid., 3). In turn, it is only a certain representation of translational practices that allows for the construction of given, distinctive, but internally homogeneous language unities, and only on that basis is it possible to conceive of translation as an activity posterior to given languages, whose main task is to "render" meanings expressed in one particular language within the sign system of another language.

2) Thought of in terms of social practices rather than in terms of rendition, an investigation into translational processes cannot be reduced to the paradigm of communication, which precisely suggests pre-existing "linguistic communities" that enable communication on the one hand, and "failures of communication" that necessitate the work of translators on the other. Instead, it has to start from an analysis of different *modes of address* that are established on the grounds of a heterolingual condition. This once again foregrounds linguistic and translational processes as based on a social relation, namely the relation between the addresser and the addressee (see Solomon 2007). However, it also allows for an analysis of what Sakai calls "the regime of homolingual address" (as opposed to heterolingual address), which can be examined in terms not only of its theoretical and practical presuppositions, but also of its direct political and social implications – in terms of the ways that it configures the interrelations between different subjects and subject groups.

3) Since we can no longer work from the assumption of given and inherently homogeneous language entities when investigating linguistic and translational processes, analysis cannot be reduced to "language communities" arranged according to the criteria that these presumed entities imply. An examination of the heterolingual condition would therefore have to take into account various kinds of hybrid languages, broken languages, etc., as well as various ways in which those language uses are politically, socially and economically informed, reaching far beyond the idea of different linguistic or cultural "backgrounds".

The regimes of homolingual address

These shifts certainly open up a whole new field of investigation into translational processes – processes whose significance is certainly not limited to the heterolingual practices typical of intellectual elites. Such practices can be encountered anywhere, especially in the manifold existential realities of migrants. However, if we want to understand translational devices such as the German citizenship test, it doesn't seem sufficient merely to oppose the practices of heterolingual address to the regimes of homolingual address based on an *a posteriori* “representation” of the former. We also need to understand how this representation can turn into a “regime”, that is, how this representation itself is put into practice. One possible answer to that question can be drawn from a late text by Mikhail Bakhtin, in which he formulates a theory of address and introduces the figure of what he calls the “superaddressee”:

Any utterance always has an addressee [. . .], whose responsive understanding the author of the speech work seeks and surpasses. [. . .] But in addition to this addressee (the second party), the author of the utterance, with a greater or lesser awareness, presupposes a higher *superaddressee* (third), whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time [. . .]. In various ages and with various understandings of the world, this superaddressee and his ideally true responsive understanding assume various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth). (Bakhtin 2006, 126)

For Bakhtin, then, the relationship of addressing is constituted in a way which both presupposes and enacts a third party in addition to the addresser and the direct addressee. But what is it that brings about this peculiar presupposition of a superaddressee or the constitutive enactment of this third party in the act of utterance? Bakhtin answers: “This follows from the nature of the word, which always wants to be *heard*, always seeks responsive understanding, and does not stop at *immediate* understanding but presses on further and further (indefinitely)” (*ibid.*, 127).

Bakhtin describes a structural moment of the utterance which, at first, is only filled by the abstract notion of an “absolutely just responsive understanding” that is not simply given, yet pervades any utterance as an expectation or even a demand. But Bakhtin also describes how this structural moment becomes saturated according to the particular understanding of the world at stake; it is externalized into a remote metaphysical or temporal place, instead of being understood as a moment of the utterance itself. Thus, the superaddressee becomes a privileged site of ideology and ideological battles, for as every utterance, conceived of as a form of address, interpellates and enacts its superaddressee (without necessarily representing it in the form of a *noema*), it “expresses” the superaddressee more or less consciously. Therefore, the “third party” which is the superaddressee can be understood as the very point of contact or intertwinement of representation and practice that we have asked for: it is, at least in its ideological saturation, a *representation* of a structural moment founded in the relationship of address itself, but at same time it generates a particular *practice* of addressing, an ideological form of expression, which enacts the representation or ideological saturation of this very moment. It generates a regime of homolingual address.

Once again we want to emphasize that this is “more than just” a linguistic analysis, since linguistics is but one of the fields in which ideological horizons of homogeneity have been conceptualized. Nevertheless, Naoki Sakai has very good reason to begin his account of “cultural nationalism” from a critique of linguistic concepts. For it is the reflection on language within which the phenomenon of translation was conceptualized in the first place, and it is practices of language through which translational practices still strongly manifest their implications. To pick up again Sakai’s question “What sort of social relation is translation?”, “hybridity” and the hybridizing effects of translational practices are perhaps one part of the answer, and there are certainly others, such as an emphasis on the dynamic or processual aspects of translation. But this does not seem sufficient when it comes to analysing concrete devices of translation, not least of cultural translation. Translation can also establish powerful regimes regulating the ideological configuration of social relations. The question thus must also read: How can translation actually be used in order to *change* given regimes of social relations?

Posing correct questions to wrong answers

It is no coincidence that, among the various historical examples Bakhtin gives of ideological expressions of the superaddressee, we find a “court” is mentioned twice. This indicates that in order for a regime of homolingual address to be fully established, it is not enough to structurally locate the figure of the superaddressee within individual acts of utterance. That figure also needs to be institutionalized; in other words, tests need to be established which check whether an addresser is in fact addressing not only the right addressee, but also the right superaddressee, thus allowing for an inclusion of his or her utterance into the homolingual condition which alone he or she may be allowed to enter. We can see the mechanism at work in tests like the one we quoted at the beginning of this article.

But what if this very mechanism gets broken? What if it is betrayed? What if translation ceases to work as a filter? What if heterolinguality starts to enter, in perhaps unexpected ways, the very practices that protect the homolingual condition? It seems that one possible answer to these questions was already given in 1943 by Bertolt Brecht:

In Los Angeles, before the judge who examines people
 Trying to become citizens of the United States
 Came an Italian restaurant keeper. After grave preparations
 Hindered, though, by his ignorance of the new language
 In the test he replied to the question:
 What is the 8th Amendment? falteringly:
 1492. Since the law demands that applicants know the language
 He was refused. Returning
 After three months spent on further studies
 Yet hindered still by ignorance of the new language
 He was confronted this time with the question: Who was
 The victorious general in the Civil War? His answer was:
 1492. (Given amiably, in a loud voice). Sent away again
 And returning a third time, he answered
 A third question: For how long a term are our Presidents elected?
 Once more with: 1492. Now
 The judge, who liked the man, realised that he could not

Learn the new language, asked him
 How he earned his living and was told: by hard work. And so
 At his fourth appearance the judge gave him the question:
 When
 Was America discovered? And on the strength of his correctly answering
 1492, he was granted his citizenship. (Brecht 2004, 2–4)

The title of Brecht's poem is "The Democratic Judge". Strangely, a judge, who is in fact a civil servant, becomes democratic here precisely by not carrying out his duty, his commitment to the law in the name of which he is appointed. Quite the contrary, he has betrayed the law – for the good of a migrant – and so betrayed the people as the sovereign (the superaddressee) in whose name laws are passed and applied. In whose name has he done this? In the name of democracy, believes Brecht. But where are the people that give the name to this democracy? Where are the faithful servants who care for it, the guards who protect it? Or is "democracy" simply a wrong answer still waiting for a correct question? The search for this question, and nothing else, is cultural translation.¹

Note

1. Some of the ideas developed in this article are presented in Buden and Nowotny (2008).

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Response

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The circulation of concepts across disciplines and geographies is full of lessons. And really good analyses of the travels of ideas – like François Cusset's *French Theory* (2008), an account of the way that French thought was taken up in the US during the 1970s and 1980s – are valuable for what they tell us of the meeting between people, institutions and concepts. The trajectory of translation studies, when its arc one day becomes clear, will also be a revealing chapter in the history of ideas. But for the moment, its travels still seem to be full of surprising twists. And one of these is the increasing importance of “cultural translation” as a platform of analysis, especially in the European context. The rich collection of articles found on the eipcp website (<http://www.eipcp.net>) is striking evidence of the way cultural translation is being mobilized in the critique of nationalism, social exclusions and narrow definitions of multiculturalism. The term serves as a rallying point for a broadly activist academic agenda – in particular in relation to the ways that citizenship is being tested and borders instrumentalized.

A similar emphasis on translation – accompanied by a new vocabulary of academic militancy – has taken place in the United States, largely through comparative literature. Placing travel, geography and power at the centre of analysis, the “new” comparative literature looks both for new definitions of world literature (Apter 2006; Damrosch 2003), for a renewed emphasis on second languages and bilingual aesthetics (Pratt 2003; Spivak 2007) and for a redefinition of the United States as a vigorously plurilingual space (Dimock 2003; Sommer 2004). But, perhaps more significantly, translation has emerged within the sightlines of disciplines which historically have paid scant attention to it. The broadest statement of this change is the declaration by Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli in their introduction to an important issue of the cultural studies journal *Public Culture* entitled “Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition”: “It is no longer viable to look at circulation as a singular or empty space in which things move”, they say, and qualify this statement with a further development: “A form can be said to move intelligibly from one cultural space to another only in a state of translation” (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003, 392). Focus shifts then to the effects of mediation, to the ways practices of communication shape the knowledge that we receive, to the

ways in which it is developed, organized and passed on. The emphasis on circulation, transmission, passing on shapes a strong conceptual context for the study of “entangled objects” (Pinney 1998) – that is, objects whose meanings are inflected by the networks through which they circulate. Across the humanities, then, there is a recognition that *transmissive means* are also *transfigurative* (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003, 392). Translation (and not transfer) names the complexity of these processes, englobing geography and textuality. This recognition has led to ambitious research projects as well as new transdisciplinary masters’ and doctoral programs which use the broad term “cultural translation” as a centre of inquiry into meaning creation, focusing on the political geographies of displacement.

As it migrates across disciplines, translation is also applied to changing situations. With the intensification of migration, diasporal communities and cultural hybridity, translation operates increasingly across small spaces, “at home”. Multilingual contexts and multilingual forms of communication call for new ways of thinking about transfer and the ways in which language relations are inflected by the proximity of differences. Michael Cronin’s notion of micro-cosmopolitanism (2006, 14), but also the idea of “endotic travel” – of movement across small, “internal” spaces – applies to the complexities of translation across the shared spaces of today’s cities, for instance. How then do multilingual situations, where communities share a common geographical space – or compete for it – inflect the process of cultural creation? The spaces of cities offer a new terrain for translation studies, in particular cities which have a long history of linguistic cohabitation, where more than one community lays claim to the territory.

With these ever broader and more complex frames for the study of translation, the idea of “cultural” translation becomes all the more tautological. Buden and Nowotny root their version of cultural translation in a powerful counter-tradition in European thought, the line issuing from Benjamin and running through Derrida, Jakobson and Bakhtin and which refuses the regulatory functions of translation (as reproduction, as transfer), by giving translation a foundational status. This is in contrast to the more normative line of thinking which has historically served a nation-building program, propping up normative conceptions of language, nation, property and authorship. They find expression of this normative tradition in Humboldt’s idea of “translation as cultivation”. They could also have found it in Mme de Staël’s equally bold appeal to translation – as a welcoming of the foreign which nevertheless serves to reinforce the distinctive character of the national spirit. From the first definition of modern translation by the Italian Humanists in the early years of the Renaissance, there has been a link of solidarity between translation and normative institutions, and so translation has functioned as a regulatory mechanism, reproducing the “the ideological configuration of social relations”.

Buden and Nowotny look to the counter-tradition, beginning with Benjamin, to construct an alternative view. When meaning creation is a translative operation (as in Jakobson’s metalinguistic function, 1959/2004, 140), when translation is a “mother tongue” (Iveković 2006), then it can no longer operate as a process reproducing and policing the borders of authorship, language, nation. The categories themselves are adulterated. Jakobson makes the link even more firm when he places translation at the heart of meaning-making processes, just as Bakhtin placed polyphony at the heart of the narrative. Naoki Sakai’s definition of translation as “a social relation” rather than a transfer between two predetermined units is a continuation of this

mode of thinking. Rather than a mode of communication (transfer), he foregrounds social relations and modes of address, homolingual and heterolingual.

It would be fair to say that translation studies has long been aware of these opposing regimes – and the influence of the “counter-tradition” has been crucial to many varieties of translation studies, from the feminist theorists of the 1980s and 1990s to postcolonial translation studies. In these views, “culture” is not a protective envelope but an object of suspicion. “This destabilizes the view of translation as a ‘bridge between cultures’ or makes it obsolete, since – if we draw on postcolonial theories of culture – translational transfer takes place between cultures that are already contaminated in themselves” (Wolf 2008). And so it sometimes seems as if the default kind of translation studies (the kind that is not cultural translation) is a sort of straw dog. There cannot be a clear-cut distinction between cultural translation and the ordinary kind, because, as Buden and Nowotny show, even the linguistic categories used to define translation are more than linguistic. And so translation studies – in whatever form it takes – engages with categories and norms, either to confirm the normalizing tendencies of translation or to draw attention to the ways in which translation can disturb existing regimes.

But there is another layer to this debate and it has been discussed by Harish Trivedi. Trivedi rightly points out that cultural translation has become a way for cultural studies theorists to appropriate “translation” – without learning the languages. Applied to colonial practices of knowledge-creation, to human migrancy, to bilingual or diasporic situations of writing, translation becomes an indicator of the global reach of monolingual Anglo-American cultural studies. “And then those of us who are still bilingual, and who are still untranslated from our own native ground to an alien shore, will nevertheless have been translated against our will and against our grain” (Trivedi 2007, 286). For Trivedi, “cultural translation” is the threat of monolingualism and planetary English; it is the expression of the power of diasporic intellectuals over the ones who have stayed home. Trivedi’s concerns with the way the concept of “cultural translation” expresses the institutional power of Anglo-American scholarship are to be taken seriously, as are the concerns of those who fear that an uncontrolled enlargement of the idea of translation will be a threat to the new discipline of translation studies. The hard-won attention to language issues, the rigorous analysis of texts, the gradual development of a consensual vocabulary – these could quickly be relegated to the margins again if translation becomes an area of pure theoretical speculation. There would be legitimate grounds for such a view, if today’s intense generalized interest in translation were to prove a step backwards into a time when the textual dimensions of translation were returned to the area of philology or comparative linguistics, and confined once again to zones of perceived narrow interest. However, this seems unlikely – considering that such a broad array of entry-points into the issues cannot help but contribute to the institutional strength of the field at large, proving its appeal to contemporary thought and social action.

It makes sense, then, to *enlarge* the field, as Maria Tymoczko argues so persuasively in her last book (2007), and as many other translation studies scholars have been doing over recent years. The list of remarkable scholarly books which originate in fields other than translation studies and which use translation as their conceptual pivot increases each year. The very best of these works combine a broad historical outlook with investigation into the implications of concepts in translation.

Among many examples are two remarkable books, *Faithful Renderings. Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* by Naomi Seidman (2006) and *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial thought and historical difference*, by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000). The first comes out of a more traditionally translation-oriented field (the study of religious texts) and extends its thinking into the social realm; the second begins with the history and politics of postcolonialism and devises a method of investigation that relies heavily on translation. Both illustrate the rich implications of cultural translation as a guiding research concept – though both are grounded in questions of language. Seidman’s work originated in a pioneering study of the way that early Holocaust testimonies, like that of Elie Wiesel, were translated through the lens of a culturally legitimizing and neutralizing language. The series of detailed studies which make up the book analyze the translation of religious difference through a long and complex social and political history. Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* has already become a classic, not least because of its compelling title. In a now well-known formulation, he argues: “European thought [...] is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India” (Chakrabarty 2000, 6), and “the very critique of colonialism itself” is “unthinkable except as a legacy, partially, of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent” (ibid., 4). What this position means is that the history of India is to be read as a process which evolved through translation with Europe – but a process which questions the very terms of inquiry. Following Homi Bhabha’s theoretical lead, but adding needed flesh where Bhabha provides only a skeleton, Chakrabarty makes translation an important lens through which to view the traffic in ideas. The careful attention to concepts should allay the fears of Harish Trivedi – as Chakrabarty addresses not only the concepts of study but the language of historiography itself:

The problem of capitalist modernity cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transition [...] but as a problem of translation, as well. There was a time – before scholarship itself became globalized – when the process of translating diverse forms, practices, and understandings of life into universalist political-theoretical categories of deeply European origin seemed to most social scientists an unproblematic proposition. That which was considered an analytical category (such as capital) was understood to have transcended the fragment of European history in which it may have originated. (Ibid., 17)

But it is now understood, says Chakrabarty, that “rough” translation is inadequate, and that “critical and unrelenting attention” must be paid to the process of translation. Between the poles of incommensurability (resulting from crude domination) and successful mediation, Chakrabarty points to the “partly opaque relationship we call ‘difference’”. Following Benjamin and Bhabha, he calls for “narratives and analyses that produce this translucence – and not transparency – in the relation between non-Western histories and European thought and its analytical categories” (ibid., 18).

One example of such a narrative is his discussion of the poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore in relation to the idea of the nation. Juxtaposing Tagore’s “viewing” of the nation and Benedict Anderson’s successful formula “imagined community”, Chakrabarty wonders how the very category of the imagination has made its way across conceptual and linguistic lines – questioning whether one can in

fact stand as the equivalent of the other. Rather than taking the category of “nation” as the focus of discussion, he shifts instead to the idea of “imagination”. Was “piercing the veil of the real”, the phrase Tagore used to describe the mode of viewing in which India appeared as already lovable – was this mode of viewing the same as what is conveyed by “imagining” in Benedict Anderson’s book on nationalism?

I do not intend to reduce Tagore’s point about “seeing beyond the real” to practices that preceded British rule in India and thus present Indian nationalism as a site of an unbridgeable difference between the West and the East. Tagore (and nationalism in general) obviously derived much from European romanticism. His idea of the transcendental was unmistakably idealist. My point is that the moment of vision that effected a “cessation of the historical world” included plural and heterogeneous ways of seeing that raise some questions about the analytical reach of the European category “imagination” (ibid., 174).

Chakrabarty is careful not to oppose East and West, Europe and India. Tagore is very much a product of European romanticism, yet Chakrabarty is suggesting that the way Tagore “imagines” the nation in his poetry is both the same as and different from the received meaning of this word. And so translation gives him an angle of approach which is revealing of conceptual dissymmetries.

As a Bengali intellectual, schooled in the lessons of the Bengali Renaissance – itself a remarkable translational event – Chakrabarty brings a singular perspective to the discipline of history. As much as the contributors to the eicp website, his is an activist stance, which challenges the borders of language and nation. Translation studies can only benefit from such interventions and from generalized attention to its topic.

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Response

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As someone whose background is in literature (particularly poetry and postcolonial literatures), I make no claims to any special expertise in translation studies. However, while writing *Cultural Translation and Postcolonial Poetry* (Bery 2007), I explored certain aspects of translation theory which seemed relevant to my discussions of the Anglophone poets I studied in that book – Judith Wright, Les Murray, Louis MacNeice, A.K. Ramanujan, Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott. In considering the concept of cultural translation, I looked mainly at ethnographic perspectives, drawing on the work of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Godfrey Lienhardt rather than on Homi Bhabha and others working in the postcolonial field. This background shapes my response to Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny’s article “Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem”. The article touches on a large number of issues and draws on the work of a variety of scholars; clearly a selective, even possibly tangential, response to their piece is all that will be possible in the space allowed to me here. If it is tangential, however, I hope it will prove to be so in the productive sense implied in Walter Benjamin’s metaphorical representation of translation as a tangent touching a circle (to which Buden and Nowotny refer in their article).

My starting point is the example of cultural translation which they use at the beginning of their essay: the German citizenship test, with its questions designed to weed out those adhering to certain versions of Islam. This test is evidently, as they say, bound up with “processes of exclusion or inclusion which directly influence the constitution of a political community”. I was, however, struck by the fact that their discussion of this particular example, and indeed the article in general, looks at the processes in question almost entirely from the point of view of the translator; little is said about how those who are being translated might respond to the questions in the test. When Buden and Nowotny do discuss an addressee, it comes in the form of the Bakhtinian “superaddressee” which is really a function or component of the addresser; the “author of the utterance [...] presupposes a higher *superaddressee*”, as Bakhtin says in an extract they quote.

The particular focus of their article needs, I think, to be complemented by some discussion of the addressees, the translated. Otherwise, we might be left with the

implication that the answer to their question “How can translation be used in order to *change* given regimes of social relations?” lies within the realm only of the translators. While this may not have been their intention, more explicit attention to the addressee will help to counter this implication that the translated might be passive, mere clay in the hands of the translators. Here, then, I wish to say a few things about what seems to me a missing – or at least underemphasized – link in their article and to consider in more detail the process of translation from the point of view of those being addressed. In what follows, incidentally, my use of terms such as “the other”, the “observed” or the “translated” is not meant to suggest that they are homogeneous groups; I am aware that the concept of the “heterolingual address”, which Buden and Nowotny draw on, is designed, in part, to disaggregate the other, but it will not be possible here to qualify every use of terms such as these.

In a work I drew on for my own book, Eric Cheyfitz’s *The Poetics of Imperialism* (1991), one of the arguments put forward is that European colonizers in North America “translated”, as it were, the relationship between Native Americans and the land into European terms in order to lay claim to that land. Because the European term and idea “property” did not seem to be shared by the indigenous population, the settlers could then say that, like animals, the native peoples lived in, but did not own, the land, since they did not cultivate it or fence it off: the colonizers imposed their “language” (their notion of property) on the native peoples of North America, and, by translating the Indians in this way, established their dominion.¹ For Cheyfitz, translation is an appropriative and exploitative relationship, one to be treated with extreme suspicion. The logical outcome of Cheyfitz’s view may well be, as Douglas Robinson claims, that since all translation appropriates and uses the other in some way, the only alternative is “non-translation”; that is, one must “immerse oneself in a foreign culture without colonizing it, [. . .] open yourself up to the ‘mysteries’ of an alien culture without necessarily trying to render what you learn into English, the tainted language of the colonizers” (Robinson 1993, 121). This is, of course, an impossibility, since it suggests an immersion in, or communion with, the other culture which can occur in a realm beyond any signifying systems.

Although he does at various points consider manifestations of resistance by Indians, for instance through opposing the English language with their own languages, Cheyfitz’s emphasis on the cultural violence of imperial translation often fosters an impression that the translating culture (in his example, the British settlers) is active and the translated one (Native Americans) is passive, so that the former – initially at least – imposes itself on the latter.² What I want to consider here is the possibility of a resistance that operates *within* the process of translation itself.

Here the notion of heterolinguality that Buden and Nowotny borrow from Naoki Sakai suggests an alternative which I originally approached from an ethnographic perspective, as I indicate below. Amongst the features of the heterolingual address that Buden and Nowotny note in their article is the implication that the processes occurring in translation may not be successful. “‘Addressing’ does not guarantee the message’s arrival at its destination”, as Sakai writes (1997, 4). One reason for this is that the translated (in Buden and Nowotny’s example, the people taking the citizenship test) are not simply being translated, they are also translating. “In the heterolingual address”, Sakai writes, “the addressee must translate any delivery [. . .] for that delivery to actually be received” (ibid., 8). And in that process of translation by the addressee, the delivery mutates in certain ways.

It is to this process of mutation that I now want to turn. In *After Babel*, George Steiner speaks of translation as coming up against the “resistant particularity of the ‘other’” (1998, 397). The text being translated resists the translator, proves intractable in various degrees. This might take different forms. One obvious manifestation is outright resistance (active or passive) and opposition to the act of translation (for instance, the failure of Christian missionary work to make much headway in colonial India). But outright resistance is only one part of a continuum which arises from the very nature of the translational relationship.

Here Clifford Geertz’s analysis of the way we try to understand other cultures is helpful. In his essay “Found in Translation”, Geertz argues that “we can never apprehend another people’s or another period’s imagination neatly, as though it were our own”. But this doesn’t mean that we can “never genuinely apprehend it at all. [...] We can apprehend it well enough, at least as well as we apprehend anything else not properly ours; but we do so not by looking *behind* the interfering glosses that connect us to it but *through* them” (Geertz 1993, 44). We cannot simply get rid of the interfering glosses of our culture(s), which operate in and through our signifying systems, including, particularly, language. Attempts at anthropological understanding, then, involve interactions between different sets of signifying systems, those of the observer and those of the observed. While Geertz’s focus is on the anthropologist as cultural translator and observer, these “interfering glosses” are clearly in operation for those who are being observed, even if they are in some sense politically or culturally “weaker”. The culturally translated are translating even as they are being translated – they are not just being observed, they are observing.

A classic case study of the possible outcomes of such a process is Vicente Rafael’s *Contracting Colonialism* (1993), which analyses the impact of Christianity in the Philippines and suggests that the way translation operated in the reception of Christianity by Tagalog society opened up the possibility of an evasion of colonial hegemony. “Mistranslations” occurred on both side of this encounter, as “each group read into the other’s language and behavior possibilities that the original speakers had not intended or foreseen”. While the Spanish aimed to reduce the “native language and culture to accessible objects for and subjects of divine and imperial intervention”, on the Tagalog side “translation was a process less of internalizing colonial-Christian conventions than of evading their totalizing grip by repeatedly marking the differences between their language and interests and those of the Spaniards” (ibid., 211).

The cultures that are being translated modify and adapt the versions of their translated selves that are, as it were, “offered” to them as models. Thus the version of the self being offered to the Tagalogs was in this case, as in others, altered, adapted or resisted in the very process of delivery and reception – in other words, through the operation of what Geertz calls “interfering glosses”.

To return to the example of the citizenship test: there is clearly no guarantee that the kind of cultural translation in operation here will, in fact, achieve its aim of successfully including those who adhere to the version of German identity underlying the test, and excluding those who don’t. It is obviously possible for those being tested to answer the questions “correctly” and pragmatically in the expected way – in “the way they *must* answer”, as Buden and Nowotny put it (“Yes, it’s fine for women to go out without a company of male relatives”, for instance) – and thereby become “German” without, in fact, believing it or putting it into practice. Although Buden

and Nowotny suggest towards the end of their article that heterolingual practices need not be limited to “intellectual elites” but “can be encountered anywhere, especially in the manifold existential realities of migrants”, this remains something of an abstract statement because little attention is paid to the processes of cultural translation from the point of view of the translated. Resistance by the translated, whether they are texts or people, is part of the very fabric of translation. Such resistance, which occurs by means of those “interfering glosses”, is one of the means whereby regimes of cultural translation can be evaded, and systems of social relations changed.

Notes

1. See Cheyfitz (1991), especially chapters 3 and 4.
2. Some examples of resistance are discussed in Cheyfitz (1991, 137–40).

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Response

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In discussing cultural translation, part of the difficulty lies with the way in which culture itself has assumed a foundational role in contemporary society. If, in previous ages, God or Nature was seen as the ground on which all else rested for its meaning, in the postmodern age it is Culture which is summoned to the basement of epistemic and ontological coherence. The sense that culture goes all the way down satisfies the essentialists who see culture as a set of immutable attributes passed from one generation to the next. Conversely, the notion that anything can be understood as a cultural construction cheers the relativists, who can disassemble the handiwork of national chauvinists. The primary difficulty is that both camps explicitly or implicitly subscribe to culturalist readings of social and historical phenomena, which has the signal disadvantage of marginalizing structural questions in political discourse and analysis. In other words, whereas formerly racial or class difference was invoked to justify exclusion and inequality, it is now culture which is recruited to justify

surveillance and marginalization. “They” are not like “Us” because they eat differently or dress differently or speak differently. The differentialist racism of societies becomes culturalized.

This is one of the reasons why a common response to the highly mediated and mythologized “crisis” of multiculturalism (“ghettoes” as the sleeper cells of terror) is to focus on the cultural shibboleths of integration, notably language and citizenship tests designed to elicit appropriate cultural knowledge. However, the point about citizenship tests is not that most British or German or Danish or Dutch citizens would fail them. That is not what they are there for. The purpose is explicitly performative. The aim is to subject migrants to the public gaze, where the State can be seen to exact a particular form of linguistic or epistemic tribute. What is crucial to note, however, is that the “integration” held up as the telos of the tests is not a static but a dynamic category, which can be indefinitely reframed depending on the exigencies of the moment. That is to say, if the others become too well “integrated”, if they enthusiastically embrace the language, institutions, habitus of the host society, they become equally suspect as the “fifth column”, the “enemy within”, that dissimulate treachery through feigned assimilation.

The murderous forensics of anti-semitism in European history fed off precisely the highly volatile reconfiguration of what it meant to be “integrated”. Therefore, the question which might be asked is whether the very term “cultural” translation is not complicit in the de-politicization of the public sphere. As the social theorist Alana Lentin has noted:

Many theorists, artists, musicians and writers have emphasised the fluidity of cultural identities. But without challenging the underlying reason for why culture dominates our understandings it is unlikely that this will have a significant impact in the realm of politics and policy making. Thinking culturally about difference is the default for not talking about “race”, thereby avoiding the charge of racism. But the need for such a substitute obscures the fact that the hierarchy put in place by racism has been maintained. (2004, 99)

When migrants are asked to translate themselves into the dominant language and value system of the host community, they do so from a vantage point which is almost invariably structurally defined by categories of class and race, yet these structural conditions or contexts for the translation process (whose telos, the successful “translation”, is often indefinitely postponed) are rarely made explicit as such.

Buden and Nowotny detail the co-option of translation for the process of nation building and the manner in which linguistics in certain manifestations has posited a reified notion of what might constitute a speech community. It is possible to argue, however, that the notion of cultural translation highlights an even more fundamental feature of contemporary societies than the oft-repeated lingering hegemony of nation states, namely an intolerance of conflict.

A substantial section of bookshops in many richer countries is given over to self-help manuals. Implicit in these manuals is the notion that there is an ideal self which is somewhat out of kilter because it lacks confidence, vitamin B or the X factor or has failed to dejunk its life. “I am not myself today” implies that there is a unitary, consensual self which is the desirable default value for the good life. This psychologized consensualism finds its correlative at a political level in the notion that representative democracy consists of a collection of points of view which are all

equally valid. The point of view of the workers' representative where 2,000 jobs have been delocalized is as valid as that of the corporate vice-president who has engineered the "rationalization". So everybody gets to have their say. But what they are saying is that real conflict is no longer acceptable. In other words, in reality, points of view are irreducible, as speakers are situated very differently, both materially and structurally, but the false symmetrization of the mediasphere conceals the very genuine conflict of interests through the irenic fiction of the representative soundbite.

In another version of the tyranny of compliance, when social movements oppose government measures such as penalizing public sector workers for the financial irresponsibility of the private sector, government spokespersons and stockbroker economists talk about a "communications deficit". If only the people understood what we were doing, they would realize it was ultimately for their own good. Opposition can only be conceived of as cussedness or stupidity. No allowance is made for the fact that there are grounded material interests and structural conditions which make opposition not only inevitable but vital. It is in this context that translation can be of value to us in proposing a way of thinking about the ontological necessity of conflict.

As even the most rudimentary translation exercise soon reveals, translation is above all an initiation into unsuspected complexity. The simplest of texts turns out to be not as straightforward as we thought. Putting what we find in one text into another language and text and culture throws up unsettling questions about our sense of our own language and makes the familiar alien. What this schooling in complexity reveals is the radical insufficiency of cultural shorthand. That is to say, the cultural categorization of society as made of recognizable types designated by labels, "dyslexic", "epileptic", "Paddy", "gay", "Muslim", reduces the multidimensional complexity of humans to one defining trait. Once someone is described using one of these labels, that is all you need to know about them. They become transparent. What gay rights activists and the women's movement in various parts of the globe and at different times have attempted to do is to restore multidimensionality and complexity to the lives of human beings who were deemed to be instantly intelligible as "gay" or "woman", gender or sexual orientation revealing all.

Transparency, of course, is a kind of invisibility, and this is conventionally how translation is perceived, as an unproblematic transcoding process. The practice is predictably different and translators must of necessity engage with the multidimensionality of texts, languages and cultures. Nothing can be taken for granted (novices take a lot for granted, hence the culture shock of translation). Words are not what they seem and cultures are maddeningly plural. But there is particular quality to the agonistic basis of translation. In the classic binaries of translation theory, source language and target language, source and target culture, author and translator, translator and reader, we find the binary logic of specular confrontation. Entities with fixed identities face up to each other in a zero sum of binary opposition. But translation as conflict is not confrontation; it is conflict as engagement with the multidimensionality of texts, languages and cultures. It contests the culturalist versions of the contemporary biopower which denies translation and interpreting rights to internal minorities in the name of avoiding a "clash of civilizations", where all conflict is presented as confrontation through the binary stereotyping of Us and Them.

An agonistic conception of translation, which runs directly counter to the beatific visions of universal understanding underlying many public pronouncements on the subject, takes as a basic premise the incomprehensibility of the other. That is to say, translation is not simply the revelation of what is already there. If that were the case, the statistical chances of, for example, a relatively high number of students producing identical translations would be high, whereas in reality this almost never holds true. The reason is that in translation we have the creation of some form of shared sense, some degree of commonality, which gives substance to the idea of translation as not the uncovering of a universal substrate, waiting to be revealed, but the contingent construction of bottom-up commonality. It is in this conflicted sense that translation can provide a way of thinking about contemporary multilingual and multicultural societies that moves beyond revealed universalism and schismatic relativism. Christopher Prendergast, drawing on the work of Victor Segalen, claimed that we “are never ‘closer’ to another culture (and hence liberated from the raps of ethnocentrism) than when we fail to understand it, when confronted with the points of blockage to interpretive mastery” (Prendergast 2004, xi). If translation is about the eternally deferred, asymptotic attempts to get close to another culture, it also brings into sharp relief the material, social and historically situatedness of peoples, their languages and their texts, and how culture strategically misunderstood can have a new generation of benighted enforcers reaching for their pistols.

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