

**THE SELF AND THE OTHER:
TRANSLATIBILITY AND CULTURAL MEDIATION
IN GLOBAL TIMES**

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“From a menacing, anxiety-provoking term,
the ‘other’ has become the central value of postmodern culture”

Sanford Budick, *The Translatibility of Cultures*

1.

As one area of thought and criticism has shown in recent years, the term ‘translation’ encompasses –among its philosophical ramifications– the relation with the ‘other’, the negotiation between one’s own language and culture and those of the other: what we can term the same and the different. We can then interpret the recent transformation in the concept of translation as an attempt to translate ‘the other’, an attempt, as mentioned above, that reflects the crisis in the concept of the subject and Otherness. According to K. Stierle, we can state that:

Translation necessarily marks the bordercrossing where, if anywhere, one culture passes over to the other, whether to inform it, to further its development, to capture or enslave it, or merely to open a space between the other and the self (Stierle en Budick 1996: 11).

The relationship between subject and object has always been a key issue in the displacement inherent to the notion of translation, whether we consider it as *translatio* –that is, ‘move’, ‘transfer’, but also ‘transposition’ and ‘metaphor’– or as an act of *transferre* –understood as ‘moving’, ‘displacing’, ‘transcribing’, but also as ‘transforming’, ‘deferring’, ‘using a term in a different sense’. Hence the concept of Otherness, which occupies a central position in postmodern thought, has been reconceptualized and has extended into translation studies, greatly influencing current thinking on translation and its discourse. This paradigm shift,

which sees translation as the object of a new cultural framework, is mentioned in the following passage from the work of Sherry Simon:

Translation has recently become the object of a kind of conceptual reframing, finding itself at the centre of contemporary debate on processes of cultural transmission and collective relationships to language. *Translation is not only an operation of linguistic transfer, but also a process which generates new textual forms, which creates new forms of knowledge, which introduces new cultural paradigms* (Simon 1990 : 96-97).¹

The term now commonly used in cultural studies as a replacement for ‘Otherness’ is ‘secondary otherness’, in an attempt to pave the way for plurality and to bring together the same and the different in a multicultural era (and context). This has led to proposals of a mutual translation between cultures, a mixture of the same and the different in a ‘sameness’ (Clifford), or in a new articulation of the self built on the basis of an identity influenced by the memory of the other (Motzkin). As A. Assmann states, the other has not only become the central value in postmodern culture, but ‘otherness has now largely become a trick for seeming to include ‘the other’ in our discourses of self’ (A. Assmann in Budick 1996: 99).

A major factor common to all cultural experience – a factor which ultimately brings with it a cultural crisis, according to W. Iser – is the need to face Otherness. ‘Crisis’ – a concept closely related to ‘criticism’/‘critique’ – would, according to Iser, be understood as a synonym of self-reflection that derives from: **a)** the failure of our culture to provide a possible framework for our interpretations; **b)** the disruptions in the cultural dialogue between the self and the other; **c)** a vicious circle, of often unpredictable consequences, between research and the demand for otherness; and **d)** an element of self-transformation, the influence of which we can never rule out (Iser in Budick 1996: 245-264, 294-302). In this sense, we intend to analyse the narrative between alienation and assimilation that is reflected in this

¹ My italics.

theoretical and textual ‘journey’: the constant transgression of the limits between the self and the other, the same and the different, presence and absence. This ‘journey’ occurs in any intercultural context and underlies the very concept of translation.

In his discussion of the relationship with the other, Stierle proposes a highly political, even diplomatic, model based on the Dantean notion of ‘courtesy’ (Stierle in Budick 1996: 66). Whilst this notion opens the way for dialogue with the other, it also brings recognition of difference without transforming it into an identity-based fetish. In other words, this notion of *courtesy* expresses a willingness to understand that goes beyond the tendency (all too often observed) to blindly reassert the identity of both parts. But is this space between cultures somewhat utopian? Is it merely an aspiration that is not in practice borne out in intercultural dialogue?

All cultural translatability is at odds with a resistance to our essentialist notions of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’: what we are (or think we are) and what we are not (or think we are not). Cultural untranslatability is at the root of the concept of identity as a cultural construct. And I insist on the term ‘construct’ because identity is, in fact, upheld by a *construct*. In any case, moving away from essentialist viewpoints, the important thing about intercultural –and intracultural– relationships is that the ‘construct’ arises from this failure to know the ‘other’, signalling the intrinsic need for Otherness. Although all identities are rooted in cultural specification –or ‘pseudo-specification’, for many, and also for us– this identity ultimately becomes a normative self-definition derived from the experience of a hyper-alienation. From this perspective, it is pertinent to question any concept of identity that is based on a univocal, conclusive mentality, in the belief that language is, above all, a vehicle for communication and interrelation with the rest of the world.

As Bhabha points out, in such contexts of transition, which produce complex theories on identity and difference –inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion– theoretical innovation comes from focusing on the articulation of cultural differences: those spaces ‘between’, which provide the new signs of identity of modern times. It is precisely in the emergence of such gaps –in

the ‘overlapping and movement of domains of difference’- that cultural value and its exchange is constantly being determined, sometimes through dialogue, sometimes through antagonistic opposition to existing trends (Bhabha 1994: 2). This division between fixed, immovable (self)identifications of identity can potentially overcome essentialist identities through the creation of a hybrid culture, in which cultural difference is not subject to any type of hierarchy, whether this be imposed or simply adopted; a culture in which the synchronic and spatial representations of cultural difference no longer constitute the framework determining cultural otherness within the dialectic of division that postmodernism proposes. The need to speculate on the cultural significance that underpins intercultural phenomena -to analyse the restrictive notions of identity and otherness that affect all cultural exchange- is clearer than ever in this age of globalisation. As Bhabha states:

the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity* (Bhabha 1994 : 56).

When speaking about the crisis of Otherness (a crisis of the articulation between the same and the different, the self and the other), we refer to the failed attempt to ‘imagine’ the other. Any attempt to create cultural specificity and identity necessarily generates Otherness, which in turn can bring isolation, exclusion, even aversion and hatred. Culture thus understood would be a collection of strongly preserved untranslatabilities, in the face of which there appears a *possible* culture of translation and cultural mediation, concerned with version and not *aversion*. This would presuppose a plural social ascription (at different levels), and require us to contemplate the possibility of a cultural syncretism based on (at the very least) a cultural duality; that we belong to our own culture and also to a more general one, and where translation is established as the metaphor *par excellence*. In this case, though, we would be dealing with interculturality or

pluriculturalism, and no longer with multiculturalism; of inclusion rather than exclusion. That is to say, cultural mediation.²

But, is this gap ‘between’ cultures populated, or merely a void; are we dealing with presence or absence? Is this not a negativity that in itself is untranslatable? In any case, surely cultural *interaction* on this basis suggests movement in both directions - potentially fruitful if not altogether devoid of dangers. The fundamental question is whether it is in fact possible to occupy this middle ground.

At this point, we should turn to the work of (among others) Maria Tymoczko (2003), for her reflections on the ideological stance of the translator. From multidisciplinary theoretical standpoints, Tymoczko questions the heuristic validity of such ‘middle ground’ in the context of postcolonial translation, particularly in transcultural cases, since the decisions of the translator – as indeed of all of us – will always be taken from the same inescapable ideological position. As we understand it, the critical position of the translator extends to any area of cultural mediation:

[...] from the point of view of the ideology of translation, the discourse of translation as a space between is problematic because it is misleading about the nature of engagement 'per se'. Whether translation is initiated for political purposes from a source culture, from a receptor culture, or from some other third culture, translation is a successful means of engagement and social change—like most political actions— requires affiliation and collective action. [...] Effective calls for translators to act as ethical agents of social change must intersect with models of engagement and collective action. This the discourse of translation as a space between abandons. [...] the translator is in fact all too committed to a cultural framework, whether that framework is the source culture, the receptor culture, a third culture, or an international

² For an explanation of these terms, see DRAGOJEVIC, Sanjin. (2000). “Pluriculturalism, multiculturalism, interculturalism, transculturalism: Divergent or complementary concepts?”, in BAIER-ALLEN, Susanne & CUCIC, Ljubomir. (eds.). *The Challenges of Pluriculturalism in Europe*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft (in cooperation with Europe House Zagreb), 11-17.

cultural framework that includes both source and receptor societies. [...] The ideology of translation is indeed a result of the translator’s position, but that position is not a space between (Tymoczko 2003: 201).

On the same subject, it would be worth mentioning –with Bhabha– that cultural difference is constituted by the social conditions of enunciation. On a global scale, postcolonial translation introduces a new and relevant factor, the importance of which lies not only in the intercultural transposition of cultural values, but also in its *performative* nature, through which it prompts a revaluation of local cultural tradition. Postcolonial translation thus introduces a new *locus* of inscription: hybridised and displaced (in time and/or space). It obliges us to review the meaning of postcolonial ‘mediation’, opening the way for a ‘transvaluation’ (cfr. Bhabha 1994) of the symbolic structure of the cultural sign, in which the vision of modernity appears not in its content, but in its positional character. In the words of Bhabha:

The indeterminacy of modernity, where the struggle of translation takes place is not simply around the ideas of progress or truth. Modernity [...] is about the historical construction of a specific position of historical enunciation and address” (Bhabha 1994: 348).

Defining this secondary ‘mediation’ in the narrative of modernity –characteristic of postcolonial translation– is essential in order to establish the cultural translation undertaken. What do we understand by modernity ‘today’? Who defines the present from which we are talking? What is this ‘modernization’, implicit in postcolonial translation? What is the cause of the ongoing desire for ‘modernization’ in Western culture? Only by disrupting the present of modernity is cultural translation possible, ensuring that what ‘looks’ alike between different cultures is negotiated in this displacement of the sign, the enunciation of which always adheres to a specific history and culture (Bhabha 1994: 354-355).

In search for models of cultural dialogue, it will be useful to turn to Starobinski and his chiasmatic interpretation of the articulation of the other. The self and the other are in themselves inherently dual positions, or “self-sceptical”, as Starobinski

himself defines them (Starobinski, 1984: 182-196). Therefore, when approaching this issue we are faced with a constant double movement between, on the one hand, the untranslatability between cultures and the construction of one's own identity and, on the other hand, cultural translatability and the building of bridges for dialogue. Montaigne, when considering the 'tragedy' of all mutual translation between cultures in a clearly colonial context, had already used the term 'cannibalism' to explain the cultural relationship between Europe and what was then known as the 'primitive world'; he also (and even more interestingly) mentioned Europe's failure to understand itself and to try and understand the true nature of its relation to Otherness.³ The discovery of Otherness in oneself, the experience of negativity, are essential in overcoming all essentialism in the articulation between the same and the different, hence the confirmation of identity as a cultural *construct*, not inherently but artificially: an identity which is defined not as a fixed and immovable concept, but as wandering and evolutionary – a concept in the making.

A different approach is taken by Iser, who instead suggests an understanding of culture as a network in which different levels, positions and attitudes interact, and where Otherness is the necessary element for consolidating any cultural identity (Iser in Budick 1996: 294-302). Of the different types of (inter)cultural relation considered, Iser chooses 'mutuality', understood as inter- and intracultural exchange that interrelates on two levels: horizontally, in the relation between cultures (intercultural), and vertically, in the relation of each of these cultures with tradition – whether through continuity and stability, or instead through a rupture with the past. 'Mutuality', as it is understood by Iser, ultimately demonstrates that all cultural exchange is essentially a reification – a product of the latent anxiety that characterises all intercultural relations – aimed at suppressing difference. In such a context, Iser proposes the need for negotiation with the other in search of a third dimension of self and other; that is, of a space 'between', which can be based on ethical standpoints. As he states:

³ MONTAIGNE. (1962). “*Essais*, cap. XXXI: ‘Des cannibales’”, in: *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard (La Pléiade), ed. Albert Thibaudet & Maurice Rat, introduction and notes Maurice Rat, 200-213.

Cross-cultural discourse requires a certain amount of self-effacement, perhaps a suspension of one’s own stance [...] There is an ethics inherent in a cross-cultural discourse (Iser en Budick 1996: 302).

Translation, in its confrontation between the same and the different, the other in oneself, presence and absence, and in its constant negotiation with Otherness⁴, gives us not only a metaphor for intercultural relations themselves, but also a remarkable means of getting close to and analysing these relations. It does this both on its own merits (translation actually documents contact between cultures), and through its capacity to stimulate inter- and intracultural exchange. We should move away from the traditional concept of the translator as a simple ‘conveyor of meanings’, the innocuous filter between one text and another, from one language to another, one culture to another.⁵ We should abandon this idea not only to overcome the subordinate role of the translator –which Lawrence Venuti (Venuti 1998), among others, has already noted– and to re-establish authorial responsibility as an ‘interpreter’, but also to give critical recognition to something that is perhaps so obvious that it is often overlooked. The translator is, fundamentally, a constructor of meaning. In the words of Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere:

rewriters and translators are the people who really construct cultures on the basic level in our day and age. It is as simple and as monumental as that. And because it is so simple, and yet so monumental, it is also transparent: it tends to be overlooked (Bassnett, S. & Lefevere, A., 1990 : 10).

In this sense, any discussion of cultural translatability must duly observe that this is a concept that goes considerably further

⁴ Indeed, every translation *dramatizes* the need for a relation with and, concurrently, the presence of the other and the language of the other, as Arrojo states in “A Tradução como Paradigma dos Intercâmbios Intralingüísticos”, in Arrojo 1993, 67.

⁵ On the same point, R. Arrojo: “As Relações Perigosas entre Teorias e Políticas de Tradução”, in Arrojo 1993, 27-33.

than the mere act of translation. It encompasses not only any type of translation, but also the conditions governing cultural exchange and, by extension, a particular translation. Its study helps us to analyse what can benefit from a translation and what can be denied, what is perpetuated and what is consigned to the past. On an intracultural level, for instance, it can reveal the historical determinants and the manipulation of the past that gave rise to a particular translation, the mechanisms adopted in this attempt to update a past event (always with some ulterior motive) and the current needs that are projected on to that particular past to make it translatable and, ultimately, transformable. On an intercultural level, translatability -in proposing a jump from one culture to another- opens up a gap with multiple potential uses (with historical applications according to the needs of the present, whether in colonial or postcolonial terms).

Translatability emerges as a key factor when a crisis cannot be resolved simply by cultural assimilation or appropriation: when cultural mediation is required. The starting point for our work in this conference will be to (re)consider the intercultural discourse that sets the basis for the network of interpretations in cultural exchanges, the channels and spaces in which these take place, their similarities and asymmetries, and, most importantly, to analyse how cultures are reflected between one another. How does this changing structure evolve, acting as an 'interface' between cultures, across which operations of intercultural discourse are played out, often through transactional shifts? How is it articulated? What are its internal dynamics? The confrontation of every culture with Otherness, explained as a chiasmus, allows us not only to aim at overcoming difference as an indisputable structure of any intercultural relationship, but to suggest the existence of a mutual interaction between cultures which might do away with traditional frames of reference and, possibly, provide a basis for change.

In this respect, we will start from the assumption that translation studies, as already noted by Venuti (Venuti 1998), consist of much more than a simple description of the strategies and textual features present in translation. Current views on

translation are in fact more concerned with describing and evaluating the social effects of translated texts, assessing the role of translation as an intercultural operation, with all its imbalances, inequalities, relations of authority and dependency, with its power to construct meanings, to shape identities and validate those agents involved in a process of cultural inscription that is inherent to any translation. In his own words:

Translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures [...] As translation constructs a domestic representation of foreign culture, it simultaneously constructs a domestic subject, a position of intelligibility that is also an ideological position, informed by the codes and canons, interests and agendas of certain domestic social groups (Venuti 1998 : 67-68).

We can see, then, the importance of ethics in translation when dealing with the relationship between local and foreign cultures, as Antoine Berman suggests (Berman 1992) in an attempt to set some constraints on an excessively ethnocentric approach to the local culture; to ‘decentre’ the position of the translator in an approach to translation that evidently perverts the traditional concept of ‘faithfulness’ to the original text. It is within these ‘ethics of difference’, as envisaged by Venuti, that one should consider the placement of the culture(s) involved in the translation process, as well as the language(s) of mediation employed (nowadays this is generally English) in a global context. This may be for dealing with either colonial or postcolonial situations, or indeed the current economic and cultural neo-colonialism of large publishing groups, who perpetuate the same dissymmetry – the same uneven placement of cultures.⁶

I would like to end with a quote from Sanford Budick, which I consider central to the topic we have proposed for this conference:

Whenever we attempt to translate we are pitched into a crisis of alterity. The experience of secondary otherness then emerges from

⁶ On the present status of global economy, an issue that is only touched upon here, but one that we consider essential, see Venuti 1998.

“Transfer” I: 1 (mayo 2006), pp. 76-88. ISSN: 1886-5542

the encounter with untranslatability. Even if we are always defeated by translation, culture as a movement toward shared consciousness may emerge from the defeat. Thus the story of culture does not end with the experience of that which is nothing more than a secondary otherness. In fact, the multiple half-lives of affiliation known as culture may begin to be experienced, as potentialities, only there (Budick 1996: 22).

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