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The reason of borders or a border reason?

Translation as a metaphor for our times

The field of translation studies has come a long way in the past two decades from the margins of the linguistics department to today's central position in the field of cultural studies and critical theory. António Sousa Ribeiro traces how translation has become a fundamental and dominant metaphor for our time and how the act of translation has wider repercussions on our notions of multiculturalism, identity, and cultural practices. On the basis of this, Ribeiro sketches out how translation can provide for "mutual intelligibility without sacrificing difference in the interest of blind assimilation".

Translation studies, in their early days, confined the notion of translation within very narrow limits, the limits of what has been called a "language meets language" model, restricted to relationships between texts within interlinguistic transfer processes. In the simplest, most simplistic formulation, such processes presuppose the unity of both the source and the target language, limiting the activity of translation to the search for such equivalences as will be most suitable to the transfer of a preformed meaning from one language to the other — in the end, the translator would be but a mere interpreter, placed in a very narrow field of action and endowed with almost no autonomy. It is only fair to say that, in the present state of translation studies, the model I described is no more than a mere caricature. As a matter of fact, those studies have consistently enlarged their epistemological ambition far beyond the over-simplifications of that model. This has implied, among other consequences, a dislocation from the axis of applied linguistics to the axis of cultural studies and, concomitantly, the definitive establishment as an interdiscipline.

In the past two decades, the question of the definition of translation has become an increasingly complex one. One particularly significant moment of this process lies in the putting into question of the univocal universalism of the concept of translation and its redefinition from a contextualizing point of view. According to Maria Tymoczko, Gideon Toury's approach at the beginning of the 1980s has been decisive in this respect: translation, as defined by Toury, is "any target language text which is presented or regarded as such within the target system itself, on whatever grounds" (Toury, 1982: 27). Thus, as stressed by Tymoczko (2003), the way lay open for a decentring of translation studies and, namely, for an incorporation of non-Eurocentric perspectives, since a definition such as the one proposed by Toury applies only a posteriori: translation is that which functions as such within a given context, not that which conforms to the transcendence of a preconceived and ultimately prescriptive model.

The pluralising model underlying Toury's definition was situated within the boundaries of a textual paradigm. More recently, however, the concept of translation has been redefined within cultural studies in a way that goes beyond that paradigm and leads to a substantially broader field of application. It goes without saying that, inevitably, the broader its scope the more diffuse and polysemic the concept tends to become. And so, to paraphrase one of the many aphorisms on language by the Austrian writer Karl Kraus, the truth is that, nowadays, the closer the look one takes at the word translation, the greater the distance from which it looks back. The growing difficulty of defining translation is plainly acknowledged e.g. by Susan Bassnett (2001) — and she does not seem in the least worried about it. As a matter of fact, the transdisciplinary theoretic productivity of a broader concept of translation is indisputable; it now occupies an increasingly important position not only within cultural studies, but also within the social sciences and the humanities in general. Thus, translation as an object of analysis can no longer be dealt with from a disciplinary point of view but clearly requires a multidisciplinary approach.

If, in every epoch, there are concepts that at a certain point in time achieve such a broad circulation that they seem able to name just by themselves the main determinants of the epoch, one such concept, nowadays, is the concept of translation. It can, in fact, be said without the least reservation that translation has become a central metaphor, one of the keywords of our time. Potentially, any situation where we try to relate meaningfully to difference can be described as a translational situation. In this sense, translation points to how different languages, different cultures, different political contexts, can be put into contact in such a way as to provide for mutual intelligibility, without having to sacrifice difference in the interest of blind assimilation. This also explains why the question of the ethics of translation and of the politics of translation has become all the more pressing in our time.

It could, of course, be argued that in the era of globalization translation has become more and more superfluous and the need for translation less and less self-evident. The use of English as a *lingua franca*, as it is the case in so many international meetings around the world, can, it is true, mean no more than the creation of a "neutral" space of communication, serving the instrumental purpose that resonates in the commonplace of the English language as the Esperanto of our time. But English is the *lingua franca* of globalization because it is the language of Empire, of the only empire that subsists on the contemporary world scene. And the logic of empire, that of an all-encompassing centre governed by the goal of total assimilation, is essentially monolingual and monologic. Under such a unifying perspective, for which difference is not to be acknowledged or simply does not exist, translation is, in fact, irrelevant. As it turns out, one possible definition for hegemonic globalization is that of a globalization without translation, which, at another level, amounts to the process through which an hegemonic country is in the position to promote its own localisms in the form of the universal or the global.

It is, however, strictly necessary to take into account that, as the theory of globalization has repeatedly insisted upon, the appearance of homogeneity is, in many ways, deceptive. The new technologies and the virtually infinite ability to manipulate information that they offer allow the adjustment of global cultural products to local logics. And they allow, consequently, the increasing possibility of an active intervention by the addressees, building up a sphere where the interpenetration of the global and the local may occur in multiple,

not always foreseeable ways. From this perspective, the processes of globalization are heterogeneous and fragmented (Appadurai, 1996: 32; Santos, 2002a); "globalization" denotes, also in the cultural field, a process that is not uniform but internally complex, contradictory, and conflictual. In other words, borders, and for that matter cultural borders, are not disappearing, they are instead being multiplied and dislocated. Thus, the illusion of homogeneity is simply a fiction through which hegemonic globalization renders invisible those differences, inequalities, and contradictions that counter-hegemonic globalization strives to expose. In this way, if we can think of hegemonic globalization as globalization without translation, the very idea of a counter-hegemonic globalization is totally dependent on a notion of translation, since it has by definition to be critical of any centralism or universalism and cannot rely on any transcendental principle, but, instead, has to go along through providing the means for the articulation of cultures and intercultural interchange.

This brings us inevitably to the question of identity. According to Stuart Hall (1992), identity is not so much a matter of tradition, but of translation, since the concept of identity can only be thought of, not as some substantial core, but in terms of the position occupied in a relational network. In other words, the simple equation of culture and identity — "culture as identity", as Terry Eagleton (2000) puts it — is by no means admissible. Such an equation is based on a definition of culture as an ultimately supra-historic substantial content that is legitimised by the body of tradition and circumscribed as a kind of inner territory. On the contrary, as Bakhtin reminds us:

The realm of culture should not be conceived as a spatial whole marked out by borders, but in possession of a territory of its own. In the realm of culture there is no inner territory: it is situated entirely on the borders, there are borders passing everywhere, through each of its components [...]. Every cultural act takes place, essentially, on the borders. (Bakhtin, 1979: 111)

There is culture where there is interaction and a relation with difference, in the terms of that which Bakhtin designates as the "participatory autonomy" of every cultural act (ibid.: 111). In other words, the concepts of culture and of the border imply each other, but in a way that is dynamic and not static, heterogeneous and not homogeneous. On the other hand, to reflect upon the inner heterogeneity of cultures implies conceiving of translation as having to do with not just intercultural, but also intracultural relationships.

It is inevitable at this point to make a reference to the question of multiculturalism. As a matter of fact, there is, paradoxically, a version of multiculturalism that also dispenses with translation and is, in this sense, but the reverse image of the imperial attitude. If you conceive of multiculturalism as the simple coexistence of cultures that are self-sufficient in themselves and do not have to interact — a common image for this, justly criticised by Susan Friedman (1998), is the mosaic, whose pieces have well-defined, self-contained borders and are simply juxtaposed to one another — if you conceive of multiculturalism in this way, then indeed there is no need for translation. The political consequences of this are well known: they lead, in the extreme, to a right-wing version of multiculturalism, well represented by the discourse of a populist politician like Le Pen in France. But, in the end, this same version also underlies the well-known and much discussed model of the "clash of civilisations" put forward by Samuel Huntington. This model is based

on the assumption of the essential untranslatability of cultures. It thus represents, to my view, the ultimate form of an insanity of identity, as it has been aptly named by Thomas Meyer (1997), an insanity based on a vision of culture as some kind of monolithic block, whose only way to relate to other cultures, analogously seen as monolithic, is, in the best of cases, simple coexistence and, in the worst, the war of civilisations. As Huntington puts it, "We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against" (Huntington, 1996: 21). No theory of translation can be founded on such a view of mutual exclusion and on a definition of the border as a dividing line and not as a space of meeting and articulation.

If, on the contrary, we share the assumption that every culture is necessarily incomplete in itself and that there is no such thing as a self-contained, homogeneous culture, then the very definition of a given culture has to include what I would call intertranslatability. In other words, being-in-translation is an essential defining feature of the concept of culture itself. Under the assumption that, as Wolfgang Iser reminds us, translatability "implies translation of otherness without subsuming it under preconceived notions". In other words, to quote Iser again, in the act of translation, "a foreign culture is not simply subsumed under one's own frame of reference; instead, the very frame is subjected to alterations in order to accommodate what does not fit." (Iser, 1994).

But if it is the frame itself that has to be put into question and redefined in every act of translation, then the relations of power have to be put into question and redefined as well. The act of subsuming, of assimilating, corresponds, as Adorno repeatedly insisted upon, to exercising power in the conceptual realm. Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo, among others, have proposed the concept of *colonialidad* or *coloniality* to signify such an operation of subsumption of the allegedly subaltern (Quijano, 1997; Mignolo, 2000). In his study *The Scandals of Translation*, with the programmatic subtitle *Towards an Ethics of Difference* (Venuti, 1998), Lawrence Venuti provides some extremely revealing examples of the way in which the search for transparency, for perfect assimilation to the target context, expresses itself through modes of familiarisation implying processes of elision and forced transformation that correspond to the imposition of the ideologies or values of the centre and of patterns that in the last analysis are colonial in type. One of the most shocking examples adduced by Venuti refers to a history of the peoples of Mexico published in a bilingual version, in English and Spanish, in the *Courier of UNESCO*. In the English version, "*antiguos mexicanos*" ("ancient Mexicans") is translated as "Indians"; "*sabios*" ("wise men") as "*diviners*"; "*testimonias*" ("testimonies") as "written records", testifying to the contempt towards knowledge that is transmitted through the oral tradition (Venuti, 2). These are telling examples of the way in which Eurocentric rationalism does not recognize a rival knowledge and thus cannot value it in the act of translation, but, instead, simply moulds it according to the pattern of Western modernity, implicitly assumed as the only valid one.

An ethics of difference in Venuti's terms would have to entail a critique of the much abused word *dialogue*. It is indeed not enough to use this word as some kind of magic solution. What is crucial of course is how the terms of the dialogue get to be defined. As can easily be observed in postcolonial contexts, offering to engage in dialogue, if it is not accompanied by the willingness to put into question the dominant frames of reference, often amounts to just one more act of power — no wonder the colonised or subaltern are often not

prepared to accept such a gift of dialogue, much to the (in the end unjustified) surprise of the offering party. It was undoubtedly having in mind such a practice of translation — already exposed in the classical analysis of Edward Said in *Orientalism*, a book that, to a great extent, even if not explicitly, is about translation — that Michael Dutton gave to a remarkable essay he published in 2002 in the journal *Nepantla: Views from the South* the title "Lead us not into translation". From the perspective of postcolonial Asian Studies and drawing on Said's theses, Dutton develops in this essay a well founded critique of the model of translation to which the figure of the Other has been traditionally submitted by western scientific discourse. This was a model ultimately concerned with the corroboration of its own assumptions and, thus, intent on devaluing, ignoring or silencing anything in that Other that would present itself as heterogeneous or as being at variance with those implicit assumptions.

Michael Dutton's article follows the line of multiple other studies that have been engaging in a critique of a colonial epistemology. This epistemology operates systematically through the construction of a topography of the world based on a rhetoric of the universal that is at the same time a rhetoric of translation understood as a reduction of the other to the same. The concept of translation that results *ex negativo* from the critique of that epistemology, a concept that is coincident with the broad definition I have been alluding to throughout this essay, must distance itself from the simple notion of a dialogue between cultures. Since it by necessity implies a negotiation of differences, translation is about something other than dialogue, which also implies that it refuses the hermeneutical position based on a Gadamerian "fusion of horizons". It is true that, as John Frow reminds us, the figure of the Other is the inevitable product of a cultural construction that results from the immanent logic of each specific cultural configuration:

[...] there can be no simple contrast of "their" cultural framework to "ours," since the former is generated as a knowable object from within "our" cultural framework. The division between "us" and "them" operates as a mirror image — an inversion that tells us only what we want to know about ourselves. (Frow, 1996: 3)

It is in an analogous sense that Jurij Lotman's cultural semiotics develops the concept of the border as a basic component of every cultural practice, as a form of organisation of the world that constructs the "I" in the process of defining the "other" as exterior and strange (cf. Belobratow, 1998). But to say this amounts to saying that the concept of alterity is always inseparable from the processes of translation that allow to relate to that alterity. The core issue is, precisely, the mode of that translation, the question whether those processes tend simply towards assimilation and reduction to the identical or, on the contrary, are able to put forward the non-identical, which can only be done by keeping alive a relation of mutual tension and mutual strangeness.

It is in connection to this question that, to my view, the concept of the border unfolds its full productivity. Translational reason is a cosmopolitan reason, but not simply in the sense that it proceeds across borders; what is decisive is its ability to situate itself on the border, to occupy the spaces of articulation and to permanently negotiate the conditions of that articulation. In other words: the cosmopolitan reason that is the reason of the translator is, in a vital sense, a border reason. In this sense, the function of the translator, to use the suggestive formula advanced by Tobias Döring, is not the one of a "go-between", but of a

"get-between", someone who does not simply bring and take, but who, literally, gets in the middle (Döring, 1995).

As a matter of fact, when we are talking about translation in the terms I have been using, it is about a "third space" we are talking. One has to be aware of the risks of this concept, which are connected in the first place to the use of a spatial metaphor. We are, of course, not talking about "space" in a literal sense in this context. We are not talking either about some transcendental entity or regulatory principle, but simply about the "getting between" I just mentioned. The "third space" of translation signals the point of contact between the same and the other — the border — and points to the prevalence of a relation of tension between both frames of reference. Thus, any synthesis or assimilation that may represent simple cannibalisation can be avoided and the whole scale of interactions can be activated. We can give different names to the result of such a border relationship. Doris Bachmann–Medick, among many others, calls it a hybrid text, in the wake of Homi Bhabha (Bachmann–Medick, 1996); Lawrence Venuti (1998), in turn, resorts to the concept of minor literature developed by Deleuze and Guattari to suggest that the task of the translator is the production of "minor" texts, in other words, texts that refuse transparent communication and establish the density of a language that is foreign to the dominant discursive codes of the target context. In any case, the underlying assumption is the refusal of a rhetoric of authenticity — that the translator is a traitor is fully accepted in a positive sense, as a defining trait of the "getting between" that is inseparable from his task. And, naturally, the current notion that in the process of translation something will inevitably get lost loses weight compared to the perception that quite a lot can also be gained.

That the border, by definition, signals a condition of precariousness and instability is something that does not need to be stressed. One of the consequences of the acceptance of this interspatial, interstitial condition is that the accepted topoi, literally the commonplaces of a given culture, no longer apply as premises, and rather become themselves an object of contention and argumentation — of negotiation. This is stressed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos in a text that testifies powerfully to the relevance that the concept of translation has assumed for contemporary theory and, in particular, for contemporary social theory. I am referring to an article entitled "Para uma sociologia das ausências e uma sociologia das emergências" ("Towards a Sociology of Absences and a Sociology of Emergences") (Santos, 2002b). The concept underlying the argument developed in this text, in the wake of previous contributions by the Portuguese sociologist, is the one of a diatopical hermeneutics, defined as an epistemological position that, when faced with different cultures, recognises their mutual incompleteness, refuses to establish a hierarchy between them and, instead, chooses to value selectively that which, in both cultures, may contribute more markedly to the intensification of a dialogic relationship. Correlatively, translation is defined as "a procedure that attributes to any given set of experiences neither the status of an exclusive totality nor the status of a homogeneous part" (Santos, 2002b: 262).

The concept of translation is given a central status in Santos's essay. It is understood as lying at the core of a notion of social change, since it is through translation that one can "broaden the field of experience" in such a way as to "better evaluate which alternatives are possible and are available today" (ibid.: 274). Concomitantly, a postcolonial perspective of translation allows to open spaces of knowledge and fields for action that have too long been secluded within the terms of mutually excluding dichotomies. One of the several examples given by Santos concerns the question of so-called rival

knowledges. Postcolonial reformulations, based on the concern about biodiversity, of the relation between biomedicine and the biotechnologies developed in central countries and traditional medical knowledge in the South lead to the creation of mutual intelligibilities and to the revaluation of knowledge that has previously fallen victim to colonial or imperial epistemicide. And this process may, naturally, be treated as a process of translation.

In the whole final part of his text, where he deals with the "conditions and procedures of translation", it is apparent that Boaventura de Sousa Santos — sometimes explicitly, as when he resorts to the notion of "contact zone" borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt, at other times in an implicit manner — is engaging in dialogue with central perceptions of contemporary translation studies, the same perceptions that I have tried to put into perspective throughout my own text. I am referring to topics such as the problematisation of the concept of the original and the priority of the original; the notion of translation as a way of negotiating differences and of rendering difference manifest; translation as not just an intercultural, but also an intracultural phenomenon; translation as a condition of the self-reflexivity of cultures. The presence of these topics, listed here with no systematic intention, testifies to the centrality of the concept of translation as a vital meeting point in the present state of knowledge for the humanities and the social sciences. There is no doubt a full range of possible configurations for such a meeting point: to investigate in their specific contexts the different modes of translation of the concept of translation — I could think of far less exciting tasks.

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