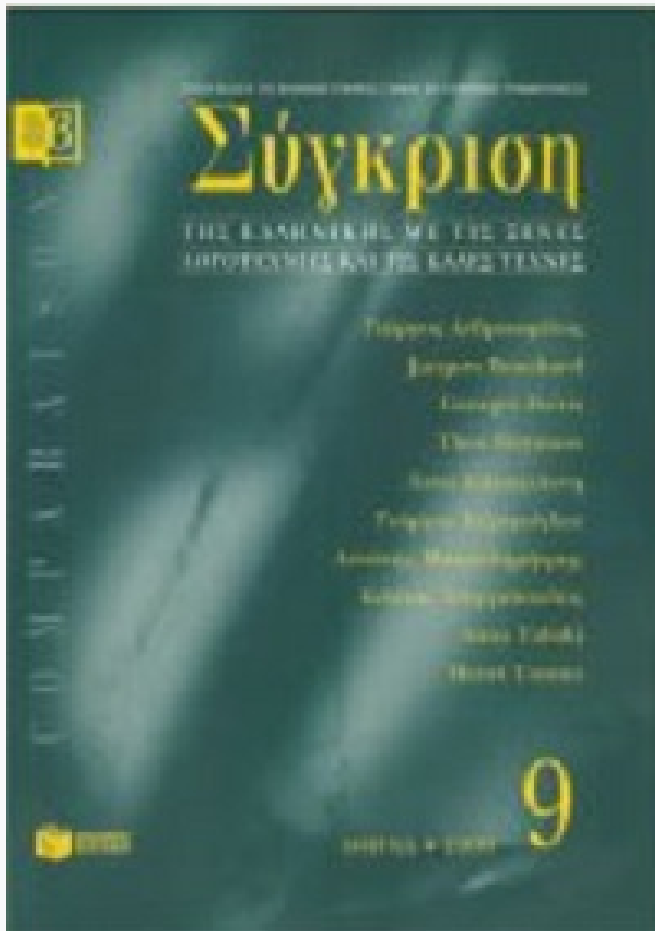


Σύγκριση/Comparaison/Comparison

Τόμ. 9 (1998)



Οι αναπαραστάσεις της μετάφρασης

Theo Hermans

doi: [10.12681/comparison.11448](https://doi.org/10.12681/comparison.11448)

Copyright © 2017, Theo Hermans



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Hermans, T. (2017). Οι αναπαραστάσεις της μετάφρασης. *Σύγκριση/Comparaison/Comparison*, 9, 14–30.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/comparison.11448>

THEO HERMANS

Translation's Representations

1

In 1966 the German hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer published an essay entitled 'Man and Language', an essay which, appropriately, in view of its grand title, begins and ends with issues of translation. In it, Gadamer takes up Aristotle's classic definition of man as a being endowed with 'logos'.¹ But rather than the usual rendering which defines man as a 'rational being', translating 'logos' as 'reason' or 'thought', Gadamer prefers to understand, and therefore to translate, 'logos' as 'language'. Man is not only a rational being but also, even primarily, a language animal. Gadamer's point is that man's distinguishing feature consists in the capacity to communicate beyond the sphere of the immediately given, for example by referring to general or abstract concepts, or to the future. Other animals are incapable of such reference. Through language man can make manifest that which is not immediately present to the senses. This allows complex social organisation and culture, so that 'logos' will eventually extend into notions like 'concept' and 'law'.

Hermeneutics and, with it, translation, are now just around the corner. To the extent that language facilitates human interaction and fixes forms of cultural expression more or less permanently, it requires interpretation, time and again. This is precisely what hermeneutics does: it interprets and explains texts. The operation takes place in the first instance within a given tradition, when the accidents of time and change have erected obstacles to the transmission of linguistic meaning in texts that have come to look distant, alien, hard to understand. Crucially, the process involves a form of translation. How it works in practice within one and the same linguistic and cultural tradition is illustrated in the opening chapter of George Steiner's *After Babel*. The chapter, which deals with the kind of deciphering required in making sense of the language of English writers from Shakespeare to Noel Coward, is suitably entitled 'Understanding as Translation'.²

Once we have reached this point, the point where we understand 'understanding' as 'translation', we can broaden our scope. In fact we can broad-

en it so much that it is hard to see where the end might be. Translation then very nearly becomes the human condition. Every act of understanding involves an act of translation of one kind or another. This is a point made by several contemporary philosophers, from Jacques Derrida to Donald Davidson, but also by ethnographers like Edmund Leach, who observed in 1973 that social and cultural anthropologists trying to understand other cultures 'have come to see that the essential problem is one of translation.'³

However, I should like to stay with Gadamer just a little longer. Hermeneutics may initially have envisaged its endeavours as taking place within one and the same cultural and linguistic tradition, but to the extent that its general thrust, its 'general problem of making what is alien our own' resembles the structure of translation,⁴ it is certainly not confined to monolingual operations. The alien appears alien to us because it is, to all intents and purposes, part of an alien world, a foreign language. Let me quote Gadamer again, speaking about hermeneutics as the transmission, the 'trans-lation', of lost or inaccessible meaning, and invoking the origin of the term itself:

As the art of conveying what is said in a foreign language to the understanding of another person, hermeneutics is not without reason named after Hermes, the interpreter of the divine message to mankind. If we recall the origin of the name hermeneutics, it becomes clear that we are dealing here with a language event, with a translation from one language to another, and therefore with the relation of two languages.⁵

What becomes clear from this is that the model of hermeneutics is translation, in its conventional sense, as translation between languages. The gods speak a language different from ours, therefore Hermes has to mediate and interpret between them and us. But human communities too speak in mutually unintelligible tongues. In the end it does not really matter whether we think of this unintelligibility as extending diachronically within one linguistic and cultural tradition, with language change erecting the barrier over time, or as being spread, synchronically, over a certain geographical space, with different languages being spoken side by side. Man may be a language animal, but he is never a language animal in a general or abstract sense. Each of us always inhabits a specific language, in a given spatio-temporal setting. More than that: unless we find ways of overcoming the limits of the language we inhabit, we remain imprisoned in it. Hermeneutics, like translation, offers us a way out of our own language, and opens up others.

The shadow that falls over a statement like this is, of course, that of Babel, of the multiplicity and confusion of tongues. Babel obliged, even condemned us to translate, but rendered translation problematical at the same time. It is entirely appropriate, as indeed Derrida has exquisitely reminded us, that 'Babel' itself is a word that defies translation, being both a proper name — and therefore as singular and untranslatable as a signature — and a common noun, and as a common noun it means, precisely, 'confusion'.⁶ If understanding is translation, surely Babel confounds not only the translator but the hermeneuticist as well.

However, hermeneutics is not really my main concern here. I have brought it in merely because I want to retrieve from the hermeneutic endeavour two aspects which seem to me to be of particular relevance to translation, or at least to translation as we have traditionally perceived and conceptualized it. The first is that of cultural transmission and retrieval across time and space, the second that of interpretation as making intelligible to others by means of words that they understand, by representing that which is incomprehensible in a comprehensible manner.

The first aspect, transmission and retrieval, points to the translator as enabler, as one who provides access by removing or overcoming barriers, by leading across the chasms that prevent understanding. The second, making intelligible, indicates how the enabling and the provision of access is to be achieved: by offering a mirror image of that which itself remains beyond reach, by presenting a replica, a reproduction, a representation. From these two aspects we can derive the standard metaphors of translation. The first aspect generates the metaphor of translation as building bridges, as ferrying or carrying across, as transfer, 'trans-latio', 'meta-phor'. The second appeals to translation as resemblance, as likeness, as imitation, as mimesis, not of the world of extra-linguistic phenomena but of another text, another entity of a linguistic order.

The two metaphors are connected, because the trust that we, on this side of the language barrier, place in the translator as mediator and enabler depends on the quality, or the presumed quality, of the translation as likeness, as resemblance, as a truthful portrait. A translation may be a derived product, a mere copy, it may be secondary and therefore second-best, but because we trust the translator's integrity, professionalism and good faith we assume that the replica is 'as good as' the real thing. The last thing we want to do is to put our money on a forger or a counterfeiter.

Yet — and here is the turning point — it seems to me that this is exactly

what we are doing when we go along with the standard view of translation as it is captured in the metaphors I have been dishing up. The rather smooth, unruffled picture of translation that I have just painted is one way of representing 'translation'. It is part of the conventional perception and self-presentation of translation, but it papers over the cracks. In what follows I want to try and poke my finger into one or two of these cracks, to make them larger, more visible. One reason for doing so lies in the recognition that translation, for all its presumed secondariness, derives its force from the fact that it is still our only answer to, and our only escape from, Babel. Another arises from the consideration that the cracks, and the way we deal with them, are extremely revealing in themselves. What I want to focus on, then, are, firstly, some paradoxical and problematical aspects of the way in which translations 'represent' other texts; secondly, what translation can represent for us, as students of translation; and thirdly, the problematics of our representations of translation — especially other concepts of translation.

2

Let me return for a moment to what I called the self-presentation of translation as it appears in innocuous metaphors tucked away in statements like: 'Speaking through an interpreter, President Yeltsin declared that...'. What does it mean: 'speaking *through* an interpreter'? Or take a variant: we all blithely claim that we have read Dostoyevsky, Dante, Ibsen, Kafka, Kundera, etc. Hardly anyone, I trust, has read all of these in the original language. We have read some or most of them in translation. To the extent that the translations successfully manage to produce, or to project, a sense of equivalence, a sense of transparency and trustworthiness which entitles them to function as full-scale representations and hence as reliable substitutes for their source texts, statements like 'I have read Dostoyevsky' etc. are a legitimate shorthand for saying 'I have actually read a translation of Dostoyevsky' — which then amounts to saying 'and this is practically as good as reading the original'. But note: only to the extent that a 'sense' of equivalence, of equality in practical use value, has been produced. And we tend to believe that this 'sense' of equivalence results from the very transparency of the translation as resemblance. A translation, we tend to say, is at its most successful when its being a translation goes unnoticed, i.e. when it manages not to remind us that it is a translation. A translation most coincides with its original when it is most transparent, when it approximates pure resemblance.

This requires that the translator's labour be, as it were, negated, or sublimated, that all traces of the translator's intervention in the text be erased. The irony is that those traces, those words, are all we have, they are all we have access to on this side of the language barrier. Yeltsin may well speak right 'through' an interpreter, but all we have to make sense of are the interpreter's words. Nevertheless we say that Yeltsin declared so-and-so, that we have read Dostoyevsky. Even though it is precisely this presumed authoritative originary voice that is absent, we casually declare it is the only one that presents itself to us.

We feel entitled to be casual about this because we construe translation as a form of delegated speech, a kind of speaking by proxy. This implies not only a consonance of voices, but also a hierarchical relationship between them, and a clear ethical — often even a legal — imperative, that of the translator's non-interference. The imperative has been formulated as the 'honest spokesperson' or the 'true interpreter' norm,⁷ which calls on the translator simply and accurately to re-state the original, the whole original and nothing but the original. In this view the model of translation is direct quotation: nothing omitted, nothing added, nothing changed — except, of course, the language.

The moment we stop to think about this, we realize we are entertaining a massive illusion, for the obvious reason that a translation can never coincide or double up with its source. Languages and cultures are not symmetrical or isomorphic systems. For every instance of consonance, however measured, there is also dissonance, and hence the likelihood of mismatch, of manipulation and misuse. Not only the language changes with translation; so does the context, the moment, the intent, the function, the entire communicative situation. Moreover, since the translator's intervention in this process cannot simply be neutralized or erased without trace, we shall have to come to terms with the way translation superimposes and intermingles the various voices that make up its re-enunciation.⁸ This intermingling suggests it is difference and therefore opaqueness and untidiness that are inscribed in the operations of translation, not coincidence or transparency or equivalence in any formal sense. Speaking of translation in terms of equivalence means engaging in an elaborate — if perhaps a socially necessary — act of make-believe.

I should like to dwell for a moment on this question of the translator's supposed non-interference, which tends to require the translator's invisibility in the translated text. My point is that translated texts — like other

texts, but more emphatically, transculturally so - are always plural, unstable, de-centred, hybrid. The 'extra' voice, the translator's voice, is always there. But because of the way we have conventionally construed translation in terms of transparency and consonance, we prefer, we even require this voice to remain totally discreet. In practice many translations try hard to comply with this requirement. Sometimes, however, translations run into what we might call 'performative self-contradiction', i.e. moments where they can be seen to contradict their own performance. The resulting incongruities that open up in the text are due to the fact that, while we generally accept that translated texts are reoriented towards a different type of reader in a different linguistic and cultural environment, we expect the agent, and hence the voice, that effected this reorientation to remain so discreet as to vanish altogether. That is not always possible, and then the translation may be caught blatantly contradicting its own performance. If we can demonstrate the translator's discursive presence in those cases, we can and should postulate a translator's voice, however indistinct, in all translations.

Let me illustrate the point with a single, utterly obvious example.⁹ It bears on what Roman Jakobson would call the metalinguistic function of language; in this particular instance Derrida speaks of language 're-marking' itself in a text which emphatically declares that it is in a certain language. In translation this causes problems, as indeed Derrida has shown in his discussion of the final chapter of Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*. There Descartes says, in French, that he has written his book not in Latin but in French, and why. The Latin translation of the *Discours* omits this embarrassing sentence, to avoid the self-contradiction of a statement declaring, in Latin, that it is not in Latin but in French. Derrida regards this as an instance of institutional untranslatability, which is a perfectly valid observation, as indeed in the Latin version the sentence was not translated.¹⁰ For readers of the Latin version, however, the omission is not immediately detectable (unless they compare the Latin text with the French) because the statement is simply not there. In translations into languages other than Latin, where the sentence *is* translated, the self-contradiction may be less glaring, but it is still obvious enough. The Penguin version, for example, has: 'And if I write in French ... rather than in Latin ... it is because ...'.¹¹ Now, the anomaly of reading an English text which declares, in English, that it is actually in French challenges the reader's willing suspension of disbelief. It creates a credibility gap which readers can overcome only by reminding themselves that this is, of course, a translation. But

in so doing the reader also realizes that the voice producing the statement cannot possibly belong to Descartes, or to Descartes only. There is, clearly, another voice at work, a voice we are not meant to hear, which echoes and mimes the first voice, but never fully coincides with it. And that other voice is there in the text itself, in every word of it.

Derrida himself has exploited this paradox of translation more than once in his own writings, on occasion even openly challenging his translators to find solutions to his insistent wordplay. Clearly, such solutions as are found are so charged with irony that they cannot be read without the awareness that the text contains another, intermittently audible voice that cannot conceivably be reduced to Derrida's. In all these cases we can ask: whose words are we in fact reading? Exactly who is speaking? And if we are dealing with more voices than one, where do we locate them?

3

What is at stake in cases like these, however, is more than a matter of plural, unstable, de-centred voices. The question of voice points to a much broader issue, that of the standard perception of translation as transparency and as duplication, as not only consonant but as coinciding with its original. It requires that translators too become transparent, that they spirit themselves away in the interests of the original's integrity and status. Only the translator who operates with completely self-effacing discretion and deference can be trusted not to violate the original. The loyal self-abnegation of the one guarantees the undisputed primacy of the other.

Historically the hierarchical positioning of originals versus translations has been expressed in terms of a number of stereotyped oppositions such as those between creative versus derivative work, primary versus secondary, unique versus repeatable, art versus craft, authority versus obedience, freedom versus constraint, speaking in one's own name versus speaking for someone else. In each instance, of course, it is translation which is circumscribed, subordinated, contained, controlled. And in case we should imagine that these are after all natural and necessary hierarchies, it will be useful to remember that our culture has often construed gender distinctions in terms of strikingly similar oppositions of creative versus reproductive, original versus derivative, active versus passive, dominant versus subservient. The point here is not just that the historical discourse on translation is sexist in casting translation in the role of maidservant or of faithful and obedient wife, but that translation has been hedged in by means of

hierarchies strongly reminiscent of those employed to maintain sexual power relations.

There is more. In the last twenty years or so, literary theory has emphasized the role of the reader in investing texts with meaning, and highlighted the role of convention and the play of intertextuality in the production of texts that are but variations on existing patterns and texts. As a result, we have come to appreciate, on the one hand, the inexhaustibility and irrepressibility of meaning and, on the other, the various mechanisms by means of which our culture has nevertheless attempted to control this proliferation of meaning. In Michel Foucault's essay 'What is an Author?', the concept of the 'author function' is posited as the ideological figure that our culture has devised to keep the potentially unbounded circulation of meaning within bounds.¹² We do this primarily by insisting on the author as a single unifying subject, with a single voice, behind the text. We thus suppress the more uncontrollable aspects of texts, their loose ends, their unintended or unattributable semantics, their plurality and heterogeneity. But translation constantly pushes in precisely *this* direction, the direction that the 'author function' was designed to block.¹³ Translations dramatically compound and intensify the refractory increase in voices and meanings, they simultaneously displace and transform texts, and fix interpretations which, as verbal artefacts, are themselves open to interpretation even as they claim to speak for their originals. It is not hard to see, then, that if our culture has needed an 'author function' to circumscribe the semantic potential and plurality of texts, it is not hard to see why it has also, emphatically, created what we might call a 'translator function' in an effort to contain the exponential increase in signification and plurivocality which translation brings about.

As an ideological and historical construct, the 'translator function' serves to keep translation in a safe place, firmly locked in a hierarchical order. The metaphors and oppositions through which we traditionally define translation, the expectations and attitudes we bring to translated texts, the legal constraints under which translation is made to operate, all accord with this function. And so we say we read Dostoyevsky, or Descartes. Just as we commonly accept that the most reliable translation is an 'authorized' translation, the one formally approved and legally endorsed by the author. The term itself confirms the singularity of intent, the coincidence of voice, the illusion of equivalence and, of course, the unmistakable relation of power and authority. The translator may author the translated text, but we want the author to authorize it.

4

The issue of the 'translator function' can serve to highlight our unease at the uncontrollable ways in which translations rewrite, transform, appropriate and relocate their source texts. Just how much and what kind of attuning and adaptation is permitted or acceptable in practice, will depend on prevailing concepts of translation in the host culture and on who has the power to impose them. To the extent however that translation is construed as re-enunciation, the practice of translation inevitably results in all manner of tensions within the translated text itself.

This is partly at least because translations cannot help being enmeshed in the discursive forms of the recipient culture, including the whole array of modes which a culture may have developed to represent anterior and differently coded discourses. Translation — like adaptation, pastiche, parody, commentary, sequel, remake, plagiarism, formula writing, etc. — constitutes one mode of textual recycling among others. The specific and always historically determinate way in which a cultural community construes translation therefore also determines the way in which translation, as a cultural product, refers to its donor text, the kind of image of the original which the translation projects or holds up. In other words, the 'anterior text' to which a translation refers is never simply the source text, even though that is, of course, the claim which translations commonly make. It is at best an image of it — a mirror image perhaps, provided we think of it as an image reflected in a kaleidoscopic, distorting mirror. Because the image is always slanted, coloured, pre-formed, overdetermined, never innocent, we can say that translation constructs or produces or, one step further, 'invents' its original.¹⁴

If this is true, then the selection of texts to be translated, the mode that is chosen to (re)present or project or invent the source text, the manner in which translation generally is circumscribed and regulated at a particular historical moment, and the way in which individual translations are received, all this tells us a great deal about the cultural community that engages in translation. What exactly does it tell us? To my mind, translation presents a privileged index of cultural self-reference, or, if you prefer, self-definition. In reflecting about itself, a culture, or a section of it, tends to define its own identity in terms of 'self' and 'other', i.e. in relation to that which it perceives as different from itself, that which lies outside the boundary of its own sphere of operations, outside its own 'system'. Translation offers a window on cultural self-definition in that it involves not only

the selection and importation of cultural goods from the outside world, but at the same time, in the same breath as it were, their transformation into terms which the recipient culture recognizes, to some extent at least, as its own. And because the history of translation leaves in its wake a large number of dual texts as well as countless re-translations and reworkings of existing translations, it provides us with a uniquely accessible series of cultural constructions of the 'other', and therefore with privileged, first-hand evidence of the workings of cultural self-definition.

In this perspective, clearly, resistance or indifference to translation, even the absence of translation, can be as informative as the enthusiastic pursuit of this or that particular type of translation — and it is important to remember that when translation occurs it is always a particular type of translation. Translators never 'just translate'. They translate in the context of certain conceptions of and expectations about translation. Within this context they make choices and take up positions because they have certain goals to reach, personal or collective interests to pursue, material and symbolic stakes to defend. Both the context of translation and the actions of individuals and groups engaged in translation are socially determined. Translators too are social agents.

In short, where a culture feels the need or sees an opportunity to import texts from beyond a language barrier, and to do so by means of translation, we can learn a great deal from looking closely at such things as: what is selected for translation from the range of potentially available texts, and who makes the relevant decisions; who produces the translations, under what conditions, for whom, with what effect or impact; what form the translations take, i.e. what choices have been made in relation to existing expectations and practices; who speaks about translation, in what terms and with what authority or legitimacy.

5

If we reckon, then, that translation is worth serious and sustained attention, both on account of the complexity of the phenomenon itself and in view of its cultural significance, it is also worth assessing the precise weight and import of the concepts that govern this practice, and exploring its modalities and parameters. This involves delving into the question of what exactly, in different periods and contexts, is covered by the various terms and concepts, the images and metaphors used to conceptualize and locate translation. It means, more broadly, investigating not only the practice of

translation but also the discourse about translation, i.e. its representation by others, by all who speak about translation.

But here too we run into profound problems and paradoxes. To appreciate their nature and seriousness, we need to turn for a moment to Roman Jakobson's short but influential essay 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation' of 1959.¹⁵ Here Jakobson famously distinguished between three kinds of translation. They were, firstly, 'intralingual translation, or rewording', defined as the interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language; secondly, 'interlingual translation, or translation proper', i.e. the interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language; and thirdly, 'intersemiotic translation, or transmutation', the interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems.

Derrida has astutely commented on this tripartite division,¹⁶ pointing out that if for Jakobson intralingual translation is a form of translation, then in the essay itself the term 'rewording' is a translation of the term 'intralingual translation'. In this way the first and the third term in the list are both translated intralingually: 'intralingual translation' is rendered as 'rewording', and 'intersemiotic translation' is reworded as 'transmutation'. But in the middle term, 'interlingual translation, or translation proper', the word 'translation' is not reworded or intralingually translated. It is merely repeated, tautologically restated. This form of translation *is* translation: 'interlingual translation' is 'translation proper'. The addition of the qualifier 'proper' suggests moreover that the other two are somehow not 'properly' translation. This, it will be appreciated, undermines the whole exercise of ranging them all three together as so many kinds of translation.

From there Derrida went on to question the apparent transparency and homogeneity of notions like translation, language, etc. I am interested in the more pedestrian question why the paradox is there in the first place. The answer, it seems to me, lies in the recognition that Jakobson's essay is anchored in at least two different fields. As a linguistic or, more properly, a semiotic statement, the claim that 'rewording' and 'transmutation' constitute forms of translation, is perfectly acceptable. From the point of view of someone professionally engaged in the study of sign systems there is no good reason to restrict the study of translational phenomena to interlingual translation, to the exclusion of intralingual, intersemiotic or for that matter intrasemiotic forms.

But seen from the vantage point of translation as it is commonly understood, or better: as it is socially construed, legitimated, institutionalized and transmitted, the move is not permissible because there translation *is* trans-

lation proper, and only that. The unease in Jakobson's formulation stems from ambivalence and transgression in declaring both that translation properly understood means interlingual translation only *and* that translation encompasses other, comparable operations not conventionally, or normally, covered by the term 'translation'. Looking at the essay from today's vantage point, we can also appreciate it both as being part of the self-description and self-reflexiveness of translation, in questioning precisely the boundaries of the field and thus engaging in the discussion about what is and what is not translation, what falls inside or outside, and as being part of an emerging academic discipline of translation studies.

What the example shows above all, however, is that, like other branches of the human sciences which cannot escape entanglement in the object they describe, the discourse about translation, too, - including the academic discourse, including the present discourse - is obliged to translate concepts and practices of 'translation' into its own terms. And it necessarily does so on the basis of a certain concept of translation.¹⁷ In thus performing the very operations it attempts to describe, it is implicated in the self-description of translation as a cultural construct, a social institution. However much translation studies today may want, self-consciously, to mark the distance between object-level and meta-level and to stress the orientation of its scholarly discourse to other discursive series, the complicity is always there, and its implications are unnerving.

6

In a way, though, this is merely to confirm that our knowledge about translation is itself culture-bound. This, of course, we knew all along. It is a feature of the humanities. The issue becomes acute as soon as we move beyond our immediate horizon, a move hard to avoid when dealing with translation. In fact, the problem surfaces whenever we wish to speak about 'translation' generally, as a transhistorical or transcultural phenomenon, i.e. when we attempt to grasp what another culture, whether distant from us in time or place, means by whatever terms they use to denote an activity or a product that appears to translate as our 'translation' - which implies that we translate according to our concept of translation, and *into* our concept of translation.

If this is the case, then our rendering, our translation of another culture's concept of 'translation', will definitely not constitute a transparent

image. As we saw, translation is never diaphanous, it is never innocent or transparent or pure, never without its own distinct or indistinct voices and discursive resonances. On the contrary, it transforms and dislocates everything within its grasp. To the extent, then, that our understanding of another culture's concept of translation amounts to a translation of that concept, it is subject to all the manipulations and distortions, all the blurred and untidy pluralization that goes with translation. Moreover, as we also saw, the nature and the particular slant of the distortion is itself socially conditioned and hence significant for what it tells us about the individuals and the communities performing the translative operation, i.e. about ourselves as students of translation. The study of translation continually rebounds on our own categories and assumptions, our own modes of conceptualizing and translating translation.

For those of us who take the study of translation seriously, there is no easy way out of these predicaments. But we can learn from them. We can learn also from parallel cases, for example in ethnography and social anthropology. At the beginning I briefly quoted the anthropologist Edmund Leach, who recognized that for his discipline 'the essential problem is one of translation' and concluded that 'social anthropologists are engaged in establishing a methodology for the translation of cultural language.'¹⁸ However, anthropologists have found that this 'methodology for the translation of cultural language' is a much more complex and formidable task than it may seem. Let me give one (abbreviated) example. Christian missionaries who lived for many years among the Nuer of the southern Sudan had concluded that the Nuer possessed a concept of 'religious belief' basically similar to, or at least not wholly incompatible with what Christian Westerners would understand by 'religious belief'. It is not unreasonable to think that perhaps the missionaries' assumption of translatability, which assimilated the Nuer conceptual world to their own, also facilitated the missionary endeavour itself. The observer's agenda may, consciously or unconsciously, have affected the observation by suggesting self-fulfilling presuppositions. When subsequently an ethnographer like Edward Evans-Pritchard studied the Nuer, he emphasized again and again the utter otherness of the Nuer concept, the impossibility of reducing it to our terms. What he highlighted was untranslatability, i.e. the fundamental, formidable and practically insoluble problem of translatability, of interpreting, let alone of rendering, something which is utterly alien but (hopefully) approachable through patient 'contextual interpretation', of rendering *that* in another language and culture, i.e. in terms that are familiar to us linguistically and culturally, and

therefore in terms that are always already tainted by our concepts, our history, our culture. Rodney Needham's *Belief, Language and Experience* (1972) is an extended and penetrating reflection on the linguistic, anthropological and philosophical issues raised by studies like those of Evans-Pritchard. It should be compulsory reading for anyone remotely interested in translation.¹⁹

We can of course attempt to measure the alien concept against some overriding, universal criterion, or one we take to be universal. This is what the sociologist Ernest Gellner did when he accused Evans-Pritchard's sympathetic, tentative reading of the Nuer concept of 'belief' of being excessively charitable. Gellner's view was that the Nuer concept appeared to be simply incoherent or pre-logical, and that we should be prepared to say this. Gellner in turn was subsequently pilloried by the anthropologist Talal Asad, who accused Gellner of arrogance and reductivism, but also pointed to the power relations involved: the Western academic who reckons he is able to see through and sort out a set of alien concepts and practices by applying a yardstick which is deemed to be universal but turns out to be ethnocentric.²⁰

What can we learn from this? The first thing we can learn is that the issue of how to comprehend, interpret and translate concepts belonging to distant cultural worlds, distant language-worlds, remains profoundly problematical and very much open-ended, even among professional ethnographers. But ethnographers have at least become aware of the kind of issues that are involved, and they have begun to address them. As a result, ethnography has become markedly more self-reflexive and self-critical, aware of its own historicity and its institutional position, of its presuppositions and blind spots, of the pitfalls of representation by means of language and translation. The other thing that those involved in translation studies can learn is that we ignore these issues and debates at our peril, because in studying translation we face essentially the same problem when we try to comprehend, interpret and translate what other cultures — the Nuer if you like, but it could equally well be contemporary Japan, colonial Brazil or medieval Spain — mean when they speak of 'translation', or whatever term they use that seems to correspond in some way or other to our 'translation'. The care and the respect with which Evans-Pritchard mapped the religious vocabulary of the Nuer, and the seriousness and nuance of Needham's intercultural exploration of the concept of belief do not have a counterpart in the field of translation studies. Yet there is every reason to assume that if their

patient methodology were applied to terms, discourses and practices associated with what contemporary English calls 'translation', it would lead to better results than the bland assumption that, say, the medieval Dutch 'over-setten' simply and unequivocally coincides with the modern English verb 'to translate.'

The awareness of the pitfalls of representation and the self-reflexiveness of 'cultural translation', as some ethnographers and social anthropologists call it,²¹ will not make the problems go away. They are probably insoluble anyway, and it may be a matter of finding ways of living with them. But the anthropological example can guard against a form of rashness that ignores its own ethnocentricity and naively, arrogantly, reductively, translates all translation into 'our' translation, instead of patiently, deliberately, recursively negotiating the other culture's terrain while simultaneously trying to reconceptualize our own modes of representation through translation. Translation studies, as a cross-cultural discipline, needs constantly to remind itself that its own mode of operation is one of cross-cultural translation.

Notes

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Man and Language' [1966], in his *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, transl. David Linge. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, p. 59-68.

2. George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, revised ed. 1992.

3. Edmund Leach, 'Ourselves and Other', *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 July 1973, p. 772; quoted in Talal Asad, 'The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology' in J. Clifford & G.E. Marcus eds., *Writing Culture*, Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 1986, p. 142.

4. 'From the structure of translation was indicated the general problem of making what is alien our own.' Gadamer, 'On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection' [1967], *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 19.

5. Gadamer, 'Aesthetics and Hermeneutics' [1964], *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 98-99.

6. Jacques Derrida, 'Des tours de Babel', in Joseph Graham ed., *Difference in Translation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 165-248. 'Roundtable on Translation', in Christie McDonald ed., *The Ear of the Other. Otobiography, Transference, Translation. Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, transl. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Schocken, 1985, p. 93-161.

7. Brian Harris, 'Norms in Interpretation', *Target 2* (1990), 1, pp. 115-19.

8. Barbara Folkart, *Le conflit des énonciations. Traduction et discours rapporté*. Candiac, Québec: Editions Balzac, 1991.

9. For a wider range of examples and a fuller discussion see my 'The Translator's Voice in Translated Narrative', *Target 8* (1996), 1, p. 23-48.

10. Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone' [1987], transl. Tina Kendall and Shari Benstock, in Derek Attridge ed., *Jacques Derrida. Acts of Literature*. London & New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 257.

11. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, transl. F.E. Sutcliffe. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, p. 91.

12. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author', transl. Josué Harari, in *Textual Strategies. Perspectives in Post-structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué Harari. London: Methuen, 1980, p. 141-60.

13. Karin Littau argues this case in her 'Intertextuality and Translation: *The Waste Land* in French and German', in *Translation: the Vital Link*, ed. Catriona Picken. London: Chameleon Press, 1993, p. 63-69, and in 'Translation in the Age of Post-modern Production: from Text to Intertext to Hypertext', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 1996.

14. Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation. History, Post-structuralism and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p. 81.

15. Roman Jakobson, 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation', in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben Brower. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959, p. 232-9.

16. See note 6.

17. See Matthijs Bakker, 'Metasprong en wetenschap: een kwestie van discipline', in *Vertalen historisch bezien. Tekst, metatekst, theorie* (ed. Dirk Delabastita & Theo Hermans), The Hague: Stichting Bibliographia Neerlandica, 1995, p. 141-62 for a discussion from a Deconstructionist angle. The more general problem in historical semiotics of 'translating the language of the source into the language of the researcher', which means that 'the instrument of semiotic research is translation' and involves the researcher's own historic-

ity, is also dealt with in Yuri Lotman's *Universe of the Mind*, transl. Ann Shukman. London: I.B. Tauris, 1990, pp. 269ff.

18. *Times Literary Supplement* 1973; quoted in Asad, 'The Concept of Cultural Translation' in Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 142

19. See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956. Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972. For a brief account see Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation. Cultural identity and the politics of transmission*, London/New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 138-9. For background and current debates see Kate Sturge, 'Translation Strategies in Ethnography', *The Translator* 3 (1997), 1, p. 21-38. With thanks to Kate Sturge, whose MA thesis on ethnography and translation first pointed me in this direction.

20. See Asad, 'The Concept of Cultural Translation' in Clifford & Marcus, 1986. See also Asad's 'A Comment on Translation, Critique and Subversion' in Anuradha Dingwaney & Carol Maier, eds., *Between Languages and Cultures. Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*, Pittsburgh/London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995, p. 325-32.

21. See James Clifford & George Marcus eds., *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. George Marcus & Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. The Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1986. S.J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Kirsten Hastrup, *A Passage to Anthropology. Between experience and theory*. London/New York: Routledge, 1995.

Περίληψη

Τέο ΕΡΜΑΝΣ, *Οι αναπαραστάσεις της μετάφρασης*

Ακολουθώντας τις καθιερωμένες μεταφορές που περιγράφουν τη μετάφραση με ερμηνευτικούς όρους, ως τη μεταβίβαση και ανάκτηση ενός κατά τα άλλα απροσπέλαστου νοήματος, το άρθρο προτείνει να κοιτάξουμε πέρα από αυτή τη συμβατική αυτοπαρουσίαση και να επικεντρωθούμε στην υβριδική, πλουραλιστική φύση των μεταφρασμένων κειμένων· προτείνει ακόμη να εστιάσουμε την προσοχή μας στους προκαθορισμένους αυτοαναφορικούς τρόπους με τους οποίους οι μεταφράσεις αναπαριστούν τα κείμενα-πηγές τους. Όμως, εφόσον η περιγραφή της μετάφρασης είναι επίσης μια μορφή μετάφρασης της μετάφρασης, πρέπει να συμφιλιωθούμε με την υβριδική φύση των δικών μας περιγραφών. Από αυτή την άποψη οι Μεταφραστικές Σπουδές θα μπορούσαν να διδαχθούν από το παράδειγμα της Εθνογραφίας, όπου η επίγνωση των προβλημάτων της αναπαράστασης της ετερότητας έχει οδηγήσει σε αυτοστοχαστικές και αυτοκριτικές πρακτικές. Εάν η μετάφραση καθεαυτή δεν είναι ποτέ αθώα, το ίδιο ισχύει και για τις περί αυτήν θεωρήσεις μας. Το άρθρο βασίζεται μερικώς στην εναρκτήρια ομιλία του συγγραφέα με τίτλο «Translation's Other», η οποία δόθηκε το Μάρτιο του 1996.

