

# Translation Studies

*Perspectives on an Emerging Discipline*

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*Edited by*

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002  
Reprinted 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Times 10/12 pt    *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Translation studies: perspectives on an emerging discipline / edited by  
Alessandra Riccardi.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 81731 5

1. Translating and interpreting    I. Riccardi, Alessandra.

P306 .T74357    2002

418'.02 – dc21    2002017499

ISBN 0 521 81731 5 hardback

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# 1 Paradoxes and aporias in translation and translation studies

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*Theo Hermans*

Many of us make use of translation, in one form or another, on a daily basis. We also talk about it, informally, perhaps not quite on a daily basis, but regularly. The terms in which we speak about translation are familiar to all concerned. We find ourselves perfectly at home in the standard images and metaphors we employ to characterize translation. Consciously or subconsciously we are all profoundly influenced by the way in which our culture denotes, delineates and, ultimately, constructs translation through various kinds of figurative usage. We take these ways of speaking for granted.

We recognize what is happening, for instance, when translation is described by means of such metaphors as building bridges, as ferrying or carrying across, as transmission, transference, ‘Über-setzung’, ‘trans-latio’. Further, similar metaphors could effortlessly extend the series. All convey the enabling function of translation. The enabling which translation brings about is to be achieved by a product, a finished translation, which is deemed to offer the user a reliable image of its parent text because it bears a close and pertinent resemblance to that which itself remains beyond reach. This is where we encounter the metaphors of translation as likeness, replica, duplicate, copy, portrait, reflection, reproduction, imitation, mimesis, mirror image or transparent pane of glass.

Perhaps it is because these ways of speaking about translation sound so familiar or even hackneyed to us that we are hardly aware of the metaphor hiding in a phrase like ‘President Yeltsin was speaking through an interpreter’ (what does it mean, speaking *through* an interpreter?) or the remarkable shorthand of a statement like ‘I have read Dostoevsky’, which, when we unpack it, means something like: what I read was actually a translation of Dostoevsky, but because it was a sound translation, it was, to all intents and purposes, as good as reading the original – just as the voice of Yeltsin’s interpreter, practically and pragmatically, coincides with Yeltsin’s voice.

One curious aspect of casual statements like these is their tendency to elide the translator’s intervention. Yeltsin speaks right through an apparently disembodied interpreter, and like most other readers I cannot remember the name of Dostoevsky’s English or Dutch translators. We are so casual about these statements, I suggest, because we construe translation as a form of delegated speech

governed by the assumption of equivalence. Translators do not speak in their own name, they speak someone else's words. The consonance of voices, but also the hierarchical relationship between them, is expressed in the ethical, and often also the legal, imperative of the translator's discretion and non-interference. Brian Harris once formulated it as the 'honest spokesperson' or the 'true interpreter' norm (Harris 1990: 118). It calls on the translator simply and accurately to re-state the original, without addition, omission or distortion. The translator's words appear as it were between inverted commas. Although the translator speaks the words, it is not the translator who speaks. The words of the original speaker are supposedly relayed to us with minimal, and ideally without, mediation, by a wholly discreet, transparent, disenfranchised mediator. Two voices are telescoped into one. They are not fused; rather, one is subsumed into the other. Discretion and transparency, and the disenfranchisement they bring about, underwrite equivalence.

Of course, we know that when we discuss translation in these terms we are entertaining a fiction. A translation cannot double up with its parent text. It uses different words, which issue from a different source, in a different environment. A translation cannot therefore be equivalent with its prototext, it can only be *declared* equivalent by means of a performative speech act. Moreover, since the translator's manual intervention cannot simply be neutralized or erased without trace, we shall have to come to terms with those traces.

In what follows I should like to illustrate this point by recalling, first, the presence of the translator's 'differential voice' (the term is Barbara Folkart's, 1991: 394) in translations, and, next, the implications of a norms-based approach to translation. The considerations regarding the translator's 'differential voice' and the relevance of translation norms will provide the groundwork for suggesting that translations are untidy and partial rather than transparent representations of their source texts. I will then use that plank to address the paradoxes and aporias of our representations of translation, arguing that those representations are themselves translations, and therefore also untidy and partial.

In contrast to the common requirement of the translator's supposed discretion and non-interference, which demands that the translator remain invisible as a speaking subject, I want to maintain that translated texts, like other texts but more emphatically so, are necessarily plural, de-centred, hybrid, and polyphonic. The translator's discursive presence, as a distinct voice and subject position, hence as what Folkart calls a 'differential voice', is always there, in the text itself.

Many translations keep this voice well covered up, and hence impossible to detect as a *differential* voice in the translated text itself. The resulting impression of homogeneity is what allows us to say we have read Dostoevsky and forget the translator's name. Sometimes, however, incongruities may open up within a text, short-circuiting our willing suspension of disbelief and revealing

the basic contradiction in the attitude which accepts that translated texts are reoriented towards a different type of reader in a different linguistic and cultural environment, but which nevertheless expects the agent, and the voice, that effected this reorientation to remain so discreet as to vanish altogether.

In its simplest and crudest form this kind of incongruity occurs, for example, in dubbed films, when the words being broadcast in translation are not properly synchronized with the actor's lip movements on the screen, so that we in the audience become aware of the discrepancy and realize that this is a translation, and therefore the voice we are hearing does not actually speak the words being mouthed on the screen. Subtitled films, and printed books which present bilingual or interlinear versions of source texts jointly with their translations, are equally revealing in this respect. The conference speaker whose words are being interpreted and who says: 'This is me speaking and not the interpreter', creates an embarrassing but revealing situation: when interpreted, the statement contradicts itself because the words in translation are spoken by the interpreter, not the original speaker. The incongruity springs from the fact that in a case like this the 'I' of the utterance is not supposed to refer to the producer of that utterance, and yet it cannot help doing so, for such is the nature of the first-person pronoun. The ambivalence of the reference highlights the gap.

Let me give a few more, text-based examples. They bear on what Roman Jakobson would call the metalinguistic function of language, or what Jacques Derrida refers to as language 're-marking' itself, thus ironically drawing attention to itself.

Marginal, paratextual comments by translators on their own performance are bound to rupture the apparently seamless web of the translated discourse. Wordplay sometimes calls for such interventions. In exploiting the economy of a particular language, wordplay constitutes that language's 'signature' (Davis 1997), referring metalinguistically to the particular system onto which it is felicitously grafted. In rendering wordplay, translators may be able to handle the matter entirely in terms of the receptor language, without the reader of the translation detecting that a semantically very different constellation has been erected. In some cases however translators admit defeat and intervene in paratextual asides such as footnotes or bracketed elucidations. In so doing they disrupt the discursive flow by pushing to the fore the voice we as readers were not supposed to be conscious of. The phenomenon is not restricted to humorous texts. It is very hard to read philosophers like Heidegger or Derrida in translation without being struck by the proliferation of apparently 'untranslatable' or otherwise indispensable, usually italicized German and French words between brackets. They remind us that everything that is not bracketed is translated. Put differently, they remind us of the overarching genre-like convention that governs the common reading attitude as regards translations. The attitude we as readers bring to translations requires that we forget the information on the



title page which mentions two names, author and translator, and that consequently, suspending our disbelief, we read as if there had been only a single name. When the translator intervenes in the discourse, the self-reference of that explicit intervention jolts us out of the suspension of disbelief and reminds us of the conventionality of the convention.

Something similar, and equally obvious, happens when a text is translated which contains words or phrases already in the language of the translation. In the letters of Vincent van Gogh, for example, we regularly encounter English phrases interspersed in the Dutch text. In the Penguin translation of van Gogh's letters these phrases have been left untranslated – or they have been translated into themselves, if you prefer. However, in order to convey to the reader the surplus value of an original Dutch text sporting English words, the English version inserts a series of footnotes by the translator acting as an editor of sorts and informing the reader that those particular words were in fact already in English – which then reminds the reader that the rest of the text was not originally in English, so that it cannot have been van Gogh who wrote all those other English words that are not footnoted.

Cases like these are probably too crude to carry much conviction. Let me try to do better. Jacques Derrida's essay 'Signature Event Context' (1977a) as translated into English by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman abounds with bracketed French words signalling the limits of translatability as perceived by the translators. Some interventions are explicitly identified as stemming from '*trans.*', as in one famous crux which appears with a bracketed amplification as '*différance* [difference and deferral, *trans.*]' (Derrida 1977a: 179). On other occasions the translated discourse shows a degree of lexical instability which the translators appear to regard as unfortunate but inevitable. The repeated insertion of the same French term to match a variety of English rendering suggests as much, as we read of 'his intentions [*vouloir-dire*]', 'the desire to mean what one says [*vouloir-dire*]', 'its "original" desire-to-say-what-one-means [*vouloir-dire*]', 'the presence of meaning [*vouloir-dire*]', 'the exchange of intentions and meanings [*vouloir-dire*]' (Derrida 1977a: 177, 181, 185, 191, 194). The translator's presence makes itself felt through the marked contrast between the singularity of the French term and its various context-bound approximations in English.

In 'Limited Inc abc . . .', a lengthy response to John Searle's critique of 'Signature Event Context', Derrida states in so many words that he is writing in French ('I am trying to respond in French', 1977b: 173) – but since we read these words in English, the incongruity of the statement highlights the presence of two separate voices inhabiting the translated discourse. A couple of pages earlier Derrida had introduced the French acronym 'Sarl' ('Société à responsabilité limitée'), which puns on the name of his opponent Searle. Knowing that his essay would be translated into English, Derrida directly addressed the translator

with a request: 'I ask that the translator leave this conventional expression in French and if necessary, that he explain things in a note' (1977b: 170); the request is translated, and met, leaving the duly italicized, untranslated acronym as the visible evidence of the translator's cooperative handiwork. Speaking positions are dramatized in the very performance of translation.

More paradoxical is the passage where Derrida, having used the term 'fake-out', carries on for a few sentences and then suddenly retraces his steps, wondering: 'I cannot imagine how Sam Weber is going to translate "fake-out"' (1977b: 213); it is a peculiar statement to make, for in the translation we are reading the term has already been translated by Sam Weber, a few sentences earlier, without a hitch. To explain what he anticipates will be a problem Derrida returns to the French term 'contre-pied' (now appearing in French, untranslated) as it is defined in Littré's French dictionary, a definition which we read quoted in English, down to a citation from La Fontaine – when 'fake-out', on its first occurrence in the text, covered 'contre-pied' in an unmarked, one-to-one matching. In anticipating what subsequently turned out to be a non-problem for the translator, Derrida has not only implicated that translator in the translation, but allowed us to register Weber's discursive presence in the curious situation where, having adequately dealt with 'contre-pied' as 'fake-out', the translator is taken back to the corresponding French term which he is now obliged to leave untranslated, and we end up reading, incongruously, because in English, the definition of a French word in a French dictionary.

If this is perhaps a rather convoluted case of translation being thematized in the act of translating and thus folding back on itself, the altogether different example of the translation crux in Multatuli's novel *Max Havelaar*, first published in Dutch in 1860, is at once straightforward and striking (Hermans 1996). In the original, the following exchange takes place between husband and wife:

Weet je nog hoe je myn naam vertaald hebt?

*E.H.V.W.: eigen haard veel waard.*

The two most recent English translations cover the passage as follows:

Do you remember how you once translated my initials?

*E.H.V.W.: Eigen haard veel waard.* (trans. Siebenhaar, 1927)

Do you remember how you once translated my initials: E.H.V.W.?

*Yes. Eigen haard veel waard.* (trans. Edwards, 1967)

Both translators attach a paratextual note explaining that the initials E.H.V.W., which are those of the wife of the fictional hero Max Havelaar, correspond with those of the real-life wife of the novel's real-life author Eduard Douwes Dekker (who wrote under the pseudonym Multatuli). Because the entire book first plays on and then famously collapses the difference between fiction and historical fact,

the name of Havelaar's wife in the novel cannot be altered at will, as this would compromise the crucial link between the world of fact and that of fiction. And because the name cannot be changed, the matching proverb 'eigen haard veel waard' ('there's no place like home') remains equally resistant. Apart from the explicit intervention by the translators in their footnotes, the text itself pulls the reader up sharp: in manifestly declining to be translated and thus opening up a yawning chasm in the English discourse, the passage reminds the reader that behind the words as they appear on the page there is another discourse in a different language. The two cannot speak simultaneously or with the same voice, and only one is intelligible to the reader of the translation. That makes the translator's differential voice very audible indeed.

Finally a brief, more intertextual example. When some years ago David Luke brought out a new translation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, he added a preface which included several pages cataloguing alleged errors in the earlier translation of Mann's novella by Helen Lowe-Porter. As a result, Luke's own rendering pitted itself not only against Mann's German original but equally against Lowe-Porter's English version. That made it highly self-conscious, and also polemical. The reader who remembers the preface while reading the translation is bound to sense the text's double orientation. But it will be clear that this second intertextual dimension, that of the translator in critical dialogue with another translator, betrays the presence of a speaking voice that is not reducible to that of the original author.

Situations like these are common. They pertain to virtually all retranslations. The new Dutch *Don Quixote* by Barber van de Pol sets out to replace the 1963 version by van Dam and Weremeus Buning, widely felt to be dull and outdated (van de Pol 1994). This is what lends van de Pol's choice of words its deliberate, oppositional edge. It also signals a multidimensional rather than a two-dimensional agenda behind the performance of translation, an intertextuality which, however deep it lies buried, heightens the sense of the individuality of separate translations – and hence of their own density and presence. All translations bounce off existing translations. In all these cases we can ask: who exactly is speaking here? And if there is a hybrid, multiple, multi-voiced speaking going on in translations, surely the kind of representation of an original offered by a translation is slanted, and our conventional metaphors of translation as transparency and suchlike are too simple.

At this point we can turn to the notion of translation norms. The idea of translating as decision-making has been around since Jiří Levý in the 1960s. The concept of translation norms was introduced in an effort to explain why translators regularly make certain choices rather than others. The idea is broadly that norms not only represent constraints on the individual's behaviour, but also offer ready-made templates for action. They generate mutual expectations, 'dispositions', a 'habitus' in the way Pierre Bourdieu speaks of a 'habitus' as a set of 'durable, transferable dispositions', both structured and structuring. As a result,

norms make actions and choices more predictable throughout a community or parts thereof, and thus help to circumscribe and regulate the field of translation. We can become aware of the polyphonic nature of translation by reflecting that its discourse gestures not just to a given source text but just as much, obediently or defiantly, to prevailing norms and modes of translating.

But there is more. Norms are informed by values, and help to secure them. The content of a norm is a notion of what is regarded by a particular group as correct, or proper, or appropriate, and such notions carry an ideological load. If translating as a communicative and therefore a social activity is norm-governed, it follows that the entire operation of translation is filtered through the values which norms secure. This filtering extends from the selection and perception of a text to be translated, to the composition and orchestration of the translation itself and the responses to it.

A good example to illustrate this point would be the translations produced by the Dutch neo-classicist society *Nil Volentibus Arduum* for the Amsterdam theatre in the 1670s and after. Their strongly held views on literary, social and moral propriety meant that they were prepared radically to recast the foreign plays they translated into a mould they found acceptable. They not only mercilessly criticized original plays as well as translations that did not adhere to neo-classical principles but also replaced those plays as soon as possible with their own competing versions. They were spectacularly successful in their endeavour, monopolizing the Amsterdam stage for decades, and leaving a neo-classical legacy that would last a hundred years.

When John Payne translated Boccaccio into English in 1886 (*The Decameron, Now First Completely Done into English Prose and Verse*), his version may have been complete, but not necessarily wholly intelligible: one passage apparently regarded as too lewd for English eyes had been rendered in an approximation of medieval French; in the second edition (1893) he left it in Italian. J. M. Rigg's translation of 1903 (*The Decameron, Faithfully Translated . . .*, with reprints in 1921 and 1930) likewise left the offensive passage in Italian, foregoing translation. Clearly, it is not lack of competence which is at stake here, but a moral norm. When E. Stuart Bates reviewed these and similar instances in his *Modern Translation* he wholeheartedly approved of Payne's and Rigg's solutions (Bates 1936: 116–17).

While these may be somewhat drastic cases, they illustrate the fact that the whole norms concept could be seen as a stronger version of the idea that all translation involves interpretation – 'stronger' in the sense that it suggests that interpretation is not just a natural given but an acquired social skill, involving evaluative as well as cognitive aspects and hence a range of parameters. The main point, however, is that norms implicate values in translation. Translation can then not be value-free, or neutral, or transparent; nor can the translator be spirited away.

Of course, this is exactly where the cultural and historical interest of translation lies. Translation is of interest as a cultural phenomenon precisely because of its lack of neutrality or innocence, because of its density, its specific weight and added value. If it were a merely mechanical exercise, it would be as interesting as a photocopier. It is more interesting than a photocopier in that it presents us with a privileged index of cultural self-reference, or, if you prefer, self-definition. The practice of translation comprises the selection and importation of cultural goods from outside a given circuit, and their transformation into terms which the receiving community can understand, if only in linguistic terms, and which it thus recognizes, to some extent at least, as its own. And because each translation offers its own, overdetermined, distinct construction of the 'otherness' of the imported text, we can learn a great deal from these cultural constructions – and from the construction of self which accompanies them. The paradigms and templates which a culture uses to build images of the foreign offer privileged insight into self-definition.

So what happens when we decide to pay sustained attention to translation for these reasons, when we want to investigate both the practice and the discourse about translation across a wide cultural spectrum, historically and geographically, i.e. when we engage in the discipline called translation studies? What happens is that problems arise. It seems to me that the accounts which translation studies offers are beset by epistemological paradoxes which have not received the attention they deserve.

To appreciate what is at stake we can turn to Quentin Skinner's essay 'Conventions and the understanding of speech acts' (1970). Skinner addresses the problem, not of translation, but of how to assess what, with a term borrowed from speech act theory, he calls the 'illocutionary force' of statements made by others for others then and there, i.e. statements made in a different context, and not intended for us who live in the here and now. The problem, Skinner points out, is relevant to historians and anthropologists, who 'overhear' those utterances. Erasmus responded to and wrote for his contemporaries, not for us. What do we, today, need in order to make sense of the words Erasmus wrote for his readers? Skinner represents the issue as involving a person  $A$  at a time and/or place  $t_2$  who is trying to make sense of an utterance by a speaker  $S$  who was speaking at a different time and/or place  $t_1$ . Clearly,  $A$  has to know enough about the concepts, language and conventions available to  $S$  at  $t_1$  to enable him or her to grasp the semantics of  $S$ 's utterance and what force  $S$ 's enunciation of that utterance must have registered when it was uttered. But, Skinner goes on, '... it also seems indispensable that  $A$  should be capable of performing some act of translation of the concepts and conventions employed by  $S$  at  $t_1$  into terms which are familiar at  $t_2$  to  $A$  himself, not to mention others to whom  $A$  at  $t_2$  may wish to communicate his understanding' (1970: 136).

Ethnographers and historians share this fundamental problem with travellers. How can the traveller who has seen things radically different from what the people at home are used to convey his or her impressions and make them intelligible? How can the ‘otherness’ of the other be described or represented to those who have not themselves experienced it? How can we at  $t_2$  get a sense of  $S$  at  $t_1$ , let alone of any utterances by  $S$  at  $t_1$ ? How can we recover otherness and make it available for inspection?

Herodotus was both an historian and a traveller. In his book *The Mirror of Herodotus. The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (1988) François Hartog offers an analysis of Herodotus’ method, which revolves around the question: ‘How can the world being recounted be introduced in convincing fashion into the world where it is recounted?’ (Hartog 1988: 212). The answer is: by translating and inverting, by reducing difference to the opposite of sameness. This, as Hartog shows, is how Herodotus operates. Herodotus translates the foreign into Greek, both literally and figuratively; he makes the foreign intelligible by presenting it as the inverse of what the Greeks recognize as familiar and as normal. Among the Amazons the Greek relations between the sexes appear inverted. The nomadic Scythians are in every respect the opposite of the urban Athenians; what with them is a way of life was for the Athenians a temporary, forced episode, when they briefly abandoned their city and took to the mobile ‘wooden walls’ of their ships to evade the Persian army.

The detail of the case need not detain us here, but it is instructive to put Herodotus alongside a modern meta-historian like Hayden White, who worries about which linguistic model can best aid historians ‘in their work of translation’; and White goes on to specify that ‘this is especially crucial for intellectual historians, who are concerned above all with the problem of meaning and that of translating between different meaning systems’ (White 1987: 189). As for ethnography, a discipline that did not really come into its own until the twentieth century, it may be sufficient for now to remember that almost half a century ago one prominent fieldworker memorably described its central task as consisting in ‘the translation of culture’. More about this in a moment.

What if someone is working in the field of translation studies, where the documents, the utterances to be studied, are translations or statements about translation? The outcome seems unavoidable: then we have to translate those translations. The problem which Skinner highlighted in general terms becomes acute for us, as students of translation, whenever we wish to speak about ‘translation’ as a transhistorical or transcultural phenomenon, i.e. when we attempt to grasp, and then to describe and communicate in our linguistic and conceptual terms, what members of another culture do when they engage in what looks to us like translation, or what they mean by whatever terms they use for an activity or a product that appears to us to translate as our ‘translation’.

If this is correct, then it has consequences of major importance for translation studies. One obvious consequence is that when we study translation as it occurs in other cultures, we have no option but to translate into our terms those practices and concepts of 'translation'. In describing translation we are also translating translation, i.e. we are performing the very operations we are attempting to describe. This is particularly troubling for descriptive and historical studies because those approaches have tried hard to separate the object-level, i.e. translations, from the meta-level, i.e. descriptions of translations, stressing the scholarly nature of their own discourse in the process. This distinction now turns out to be much less neat than we may have wanted it to be. Instead of a tidy division between object-level and meta-level there is an untidy entanglement and contamination of the two (as indeed Bakker 1995 has pointed out). The meta-level is compromised because it is practising that which it is simultaneously trying to describe at the object-level. The complicity is always there, and its epistemological implications are unnerving.

Moreover, if our descriptions of translation are also translations of translation, then the logic of my argument in the preceding pages points to the conclusion that our translations are 'partial' in every sense of the word. We translate according to our concept of translation, and *into* our concept of translation, in a manner which draws in differential voices and is filtered through local values.

There is no escape from these predicaments. But we can learn from them. We can also learn from parallel cases, from disciplines which are just as deeply implicated in translation as translation studies are, but which have shown themselves perhaps more aware of the theoretical and methodological consequences of the fact. We could look to such fields as ethnography and cultural anthropology (cf. Asad 1986, Bachmann-Medick 1997, Sturge 1997). Back in 1973 the anthropologist Edmund Leach suggested that for his discipline 'the essential problem is one of translation', and he concluded that 'social anthropologists are engaged in establishing a methodology for the translation of cultural language' (in Asad 1986: 142). However, the anthropologists have found that establishing this 'methodology for the translation of cultural language' is a formidable task. Let me give just a couple of examples to illustrate the difficulty.

When in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Jesuits were trying to convert the Chinese to Christianity, they needed to express Christian, Western concepts like 'God' and 'heaven', 'soul' and 'sin', in Chinese. In 1604 Matteo Ricci wrote his treatise on *The True Meaning of the Master of Heaven* in Chinese, but the only terms available to him were those which echoed Confucian and Buddhist usage. As a result, the Christian concepts he wanted to convey were locked in a discourse wholly incommensurable with the Christian message (Gernet 1985: 48–9, 146–7). Needless to say, the Jesuits were greatly puzzled by their lack of success in China.

When in the late 1920s the literary critic and semanticist I. A. Richards (1932) was trying to understand the ancient Chinese philosopher Meng Tzu, he faced a similar problem, but the other way round. In attempting to gauge the range of meanings of key Chinese terms he developed what he called a ‘technique of multiple definition’, mapping the semantic field and different contexts and usages of the Chinese terms without pinning himself down on a single term as its translation.

What Richards did with Chinese philosophy, the Oxford ethnographer Edward Evans-Pritchard did when he studied the beliefs of the Nuer in the southern Sudan in the 1940s and 1950s. Evans-Pritchard emphasized the radical incompatibility of Nuer words and concepts with Western, Christian terms. His book *Nuer Religion* (1956) highlights the Westerner’s formidable problem of understanding something so utterly alien as the world of Nuer beliefs, let alone of rendering it in a language like English, whose terms are tainted by the concepts, the history and the values of the Christian West. It was Evans-Pritchard who, in 1951, described the central task of ethnography as ‘the translation of culture’ (Needham 1978: 8).

Evans-Pritchard’s account of Nuer beliefs formed, in turn, the subject of a book by Rodney Needham. In his *Belief, Language, and Experience* (1972) Needham offers an extended reflection on the perplexing problems of this ‘translation of culture’. Needham points out, for example, that if we want to compare different Western interpretations of Nuer concepts we need a metalanguage to carry out the comparison. But such a metalanguage could only be constructed on the basis of the comparability of cultural concepts, and the concepts can only be compared on the basis of a suitable metalanguage. That lands us in a vicious circle, a real aporia (Needham 1972: 222). We cannot escape from perspectival observation, value-ridden interpretation, compromised and compromising translation.

What can we learn from all this? As far as I can see, even among professional ethnographers the question of how to comprehend, interpret and translate concepts belonging to distant cultural worlds, distant language-worlds, remains without a clear answer. 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.

How can we, in practice, bring about this critical self-reflexiveness in speaking or writing about translation? That is a difficult question, and one which I cannot presume to answer. What seems to me essential, though, is the need to create within the discourse about translation a certain self-critical distance. Let me, by way of conclusion, and very briefly, risk three suggestions for bringing such a self-critical distance about. What they have in common is the



dramatization of the process itself of making sense of the foreign construct, and the attempt to make explicit the position from which the analyst is speaking – even if, as my third suggestion shows, there can never be a stable, ultimate position to work from.

First, modern hermeneutics, as it is theorized and practised for example in Gadamer's work. The hermeneutic critic seeks 'understanding' in the full knowledge that the search is itself located somewhere, that it invariably serves a particular agenda and is predicated on a number of assumptions, presuppositions and prejudices. In reflecting upon the modalities of its own endeavour to understand, hermeneutics constantly reminds itself of its own situation. It seeks, explicitly, to reconcile historical self-awareness with respect for the difference of the other, and attempts to fuse these two in the form of exchange and dialogue.

Secondly, narrativity, which is the line taken in much 'postmodern' ethnography. An interesting theoretical reflection on these postmodern forms mixing narrative and analysis is offered in Mieke Bal's essay 'First person, second person, same person: Narrative as epistemology' (Bal 1993). The essay approves of the equation of transcription with translation, and of description with narrating. More importantly, it argues that the narrative mode invites the mapping of 'positioned subjects', primarily an 'I' and a 'you', and can thus steer clear of an illusory objectivism. By switching into narrative gear, the speaker or writer can show both how meaning is being constituted in the process rather than taking it as being pre-formed, and how the material is focalized, i.e. from what angle the narrator makes us view the material under scrutiny.

Finally, there is Niklas Luhmann's concept of second-order observation, or the observation of observation. If we think of someone who studies translation as being engaged in observing translation (describing it, tracing the practice of translation in a particular domain, historically or otherwise), then we could see that activity as first-order observation: a researcher observes an object, makes distinctions to analyse it, and so on. A second-order observer would be interested in *how* the first-order observer observes his or her object, i.e. by means of what distinctions and translative operations he or she observes. We could envisage this activity as a deconstructive practice, and there are indeed significant similarities between second-order observation and deconstruction, in that both are interested in revealing those distinctions and criteria to which the first-order observer remains necessarily blind (Luhmann 1993). Of course, such a practice will not yield ultimate answers, for two obvious reasons: the second-order observer also needs to 'translate' the translative operations with which the first-order observer appears to operate, and a second-order observer has his own blind spot, and can in turn be observed, just as every deconstructive analysis can in turn be deconstructed.

Each of these attempts – and there are others – to locate the analyst in relation to what is being analysed takes us well beyond translation and the traditional

domain of translation studies. The aporia that opens up once we realize that the study of translation translates translation, and does so in compromised and compromising ways, obliges us to reconsider not just what we know, but how we know. If the discipline of translation studies is to engage critically with its own operations and its conditions of acquiring knowledge, it needs to look beyond its own borders.

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