Philosophy and translation

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In the overall history of Western philosophy, hardly any attention has been paid either to the practice of translation or to the philosophical questions it raises. In fact, until quite recently, the relationship between institutionalized philosophy and the study of translation was considered to be clearly asymmetrical: translators and translation specialists seemed to have been far more interested in philosophy than philosophers had explicitly pondered on the conundrums of translation (Pym 2007: 25). The dynamics of this relationship began to change in the last few decades of the twentieth century as contemporary thought became increasingly aware of the inextricable connections that bind together philosophy and translation. It has been argued, for example, that contemporary thought is not simply interested but actually "fascinated" by translation as it provides the "concept" in terms of which "the possibility, if not the actual practice, of philosophy is discussed" (Benjamin 1989: 9).

This intimate relationship between the very possibility of philosophy and deeply ingrained assumptions about language and translation has been addressed by Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher associated with deconstruction, one of the most influential and productive trends of post-Nietzschean thought. As he argues, in order for philosophy to establish itself as the area that should have the privilege of systematically investigating truth, it had to rely on the possibility of univocal meanings that could evade the alleged limits of any one language and, thus, remain the same as they cross linguistic frontiers. Consequently, the belief in the possibility of translatability necessarily implies the "fixation" of the idea of translation as "the transportation of a meaning or of a truth from one language to another" (1988: 140), a conception that has dominated the ways in which translation is conceived and theorized in the West for more than two millennia, from Cicero to the present.

1. Translation as transportation: The essentialist tradition

This widespread conception of translation is perfectly compatible with one of the foundational assumptions of Western metaphysics and the Judeo-Christian tradition, i.e., the belief that form and content (or language and thought, signifier and signified, word and meaning in similar oppositions) are not only separable but even independent from one another. Viewed as a mere instrument for the expression or communication of stable meaning, language would function as an outer layer that is supposed to protect what it allegedly carries so that it could be safely taken or delivered elsewhere.

The basic arguments that support these notions can be found in the exemplary essentialism of the Platonic tradition. As Socrates reasons in the *Cratylus,* since things "do not equally belong to all at the same moment and always," they must be independent from us, and "supposed to have their own proper and permanent essence" (Hamilton & Cairns 1961: 424–425). Consequently, if "things are not influenced by us," and if "names have by nature [an enduring] truth" (idem) that represents the things to which they refer, one could argue that this "truth" should indeed transcend the formal constraints of any one linguistic system and be ideally repeatable whenever or wherever there is a change of words, contexts, even languages.

Those who believe in the possibility of separating themselves from things and meanings from words tend to view translation as the impersonal transference of essential meaning across languages and must condemn or repress the translator's interventionist role in the process. Actually, the resistance to the translator's agency is one of the most recurrent issues in the discourse about translation that has dominated the Western tradition, a discourse that has been generally prescriptive in its attempt to safeguard the limits that should clearly oppose translators to authors, and translations to originals.

The ethical guidelines implied by this conception can be illustrated by the recurrent metaphor of clothing, which imagines words as the clothes designed to protect and style the naked bodies of their meaning. As it is usually employed to suggest that translators should refrain from improperly touching the bodies of the texts whose clothes they are expected to carefully change, this metaphor is also efficient in portraying the translator's task as a serving, mechanical activity that needs to be undertaken in respectful neutrality (Van Wyke 2010). In their refusal to accept the productive character of the translator's activity, essentialist conceptions must disregard the political role of translation and its impact on the construction of identities and cultural relations, and are, also, largely responsible for the age-old prejudices that have often considered translation a secondary, derivative form of writing, reducing the translator's task to an impossible exercise in invisibility.

2. Translation as regulated transformation: The post-Nietzschean intervention

The inextricable association between translation and philosophy pointed out by Derrida is closely related to the critique of Western metaphysics undertaken by Friedrich Nietzsche, "the first to connect the philosophical task with a radical reflection upon language" (Foucault 1973: 305), a critique that has been pivotal in the development of anti-foundationalist trends in contemporary philosophy such as postmodern, poststructuralist thinking, deconstruction, and neopragmatism, opening up new paths of inquiry as the ones represented by gender and postcolonial studies.

In an essay written in 1873, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," Nietzsche outlines the basis of a conception of language that is first and foremost anti-Platonic. As he argues, because languages are undoubtedly human creations, there can be no essential meaning or concept that could be clearly separated from its linguistic fabric and, therefore, be fully transportable elsewhere. As part of an arbitrary, conventional system, every concept is necessarily human-made and "arises from the equation of unequal things," a conclusion that can be supported by the fact that even though we shall never find in nature, let's say, *the* ideal "leaf," that is, "the original model according to which all the leaves were perhaps woven, sketched, measured, colored, curled, and painted" (1999: 83), we still manage to use it as a concept. In short, language works precisely because the conventions that make it possible teach us to forget certain differences so that we can sustain the illusion that the same could actually be repeated.

Concepts and meanings are not discovered, but constructed, and because the circumstances of their construction are never the same, they can never be fully reproduced. Just as every leaf is different and cannot faithfully repeat one ideal, original leaf that could exist apart from our conventional concept of "leaf," every reproduction of a text into any other language or medium will not give us the integrity of the alleged original, but, rather, constitute a different text that carries the history and the circumstances of its (re)composition. This "different" text may or may not be acceptable or even recognized as a reliable reproduction of the original because the very opposition between "translation" and "original" is not something that exists before or above context and conventionality, "but must be constructed and institutionalized," and is, thus, "always subject to revision" (Davis 2002: 16).

In the wake of Nietzsche's critique of Platonic thought, translation can no longer be conceived in terms of a transportation of essential meaning across languages and cultures. Rather, for this notion of translation, "we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another" (Derrida 1978: 20). An early illustration of some of the far-reaching consequences of this conception can be found in Jorge Luis Borges's "The Translators of the *Thousand and One Nights*," first published in Argentina in 1935, which treats translation as a legitimate form of writing in its own right. In his examination of a few nineteenth-century translations of the Arabic text, Borges shows that even though their translators explicitly pledge fidelity to the original, their work constitutes a historical testimony of their own views about the text, in which the foreign and the domestic are fused in different versions that both construct and reconstruct the original, revealing the authorial thrust of translation as a mirror of each translator's interests and circumstances (2004: 94–108). Instead of criticizing the translators of the *Nights* for their "infidelities," Borges reflects on them as constitutive elements of the process, offering us a dazzling introduction to some of the issues that have become central for Translation Studies today: the role of translation in the construction of cultures and identities, the asymmetries in the relationship between the domestic and the foreign,

and, most of all, the translator's agency and the complexities it brings to traditional notions of original writing.

As an unavoidable, productive element of the relationship between originals and their reproductions, difference has been recognized as a key issue by contemporary approaches that implicitly or explicitly explore the consequences of post-Nietzschean philosophy for the translator's activity. The acceptance of the insight according to which translators cannot avoid making decisions and are, thus, necessarily visible in their rewriting of the foreign within the limits and the constraints of the domestic has allowed Translation Studies to move beyond the usual stalemates that for at least two thousand years have underestimated the translator's authorial role in the writing of translated texts (cf. for example, Venuti 1995).

3. The translational turn in the humanities

Nietzsche's reevaluation of the role of language in the production of meaning, which has rearticulated the relationship between truth and conventionality and, therefore, also between truth and power, has had far-ranging consequences not just for contemporary philosophy and Translation Studies, but for the humanities in general. One might even argue that this renewed interest in language and the fundamental role it has played in contemporary thought has actually blurred the limits between the different disciplines whose objects revolve around issues of culture and the subject.

In this context, translation – understood as a form of regulated transformation – has become central in redefining not only the ways in which cultures are actually constructed and relate to one another, but also the very notion of culture itself, now often understood as a form of translation (Bhabha 1994). In the field of comparative literature, translation-related issues are being used to reformulate the scope and the goals of the discipline (Apter 2006). Similarly, questions of translation have been critical in interdisciplinary projects that shed important light on the impact of language policies for colonization (cf. for example, Rafael 1988), as well as on the parallels between gender* and translation issues (cf. for example, Simon 1996).

This deep awareness of the intimate connection between language and power has brought increasing attention to the ways in which we construct and relate to the foreign and how this relationship transforms and redefines the domestic. Consequently, we can also associate the increasing visibility of translation – both in the usual sense and as a concept – to an overall interest in issues of transnationality and globalization*, an association that has led specialists to speak not only of a "translational turn" in the humanities, but actually to redefine the humanities *as* "Translation Studies" (Bachmann-Medick 2009: 11).

The exciting new possibilities opened up by the interface of contemporary philosophy and the study of translation seem to be reliable evidence that the move away from the stalemates imposed by essentialist thinking has empowered the discipline and brought needed

attention to the essentially political character of the translator's craft. Perhaps our next challenge should focus on the effort to translate the insights learned from this productive interface into the professional world of translators and interpreters.

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