# The (un)translatability of cultures

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This paper wants to explore some of the in between spaces of translation studies and (inter)cultural studies by retracing the twofold origins of their theoretical convergence and interpenetration: on the one hand the "cultural turn" in translation studies and on the other the use of the concept of translation in anthropology, postcolonial discourse, intercultural philosophy and cultural studies. In the course of the last decade a growing number of translation theorists have come to discard the purely linguistic view of the process of translation expanding it into an ethical and political act of intercultural communication. Conversely ethnologists, anthropologists, literary critics, philosophers, psychologists and historians have come to use the term of translation in new, not only metaphorical ways, viewing social and cultural negotiations as acts of translation. Both developments have led to an expansion and redefinition of the term of translation in its relation to cultural context. This redefinition, however, has also its problematical side: the constant expansion of the meaning of the term translation, in fact, threatens to drain it of its content and through this of its operability. This paper, nevertheless, tries to show how enriching and challenging, both for the concept of culture and the concept of translation, an interdisciplinary approach of the kind depicted here can be.

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## 1. The theoretical convergence of translation studies and (inter)cultural studies

The present cultural and economic globalization, the steadily increasing population mobility within national borders, worldwide mass migration and the rapidly developing new global communication technologies are all phenomena that involve translation and cross-cultural negotiation of some kind. Translators perform a variety of intra- and intercultural functions: they provide cultural mediation in Convention Refugee-Hearings and court appearances, operate in professional and educational contexts and are called upon to reconcile conflicting corporate interests across cultural borders. Translators may also be employed as communication managers or as export assistants in business enterprises. Conversely the construction and maintenance of the religious an ethnic identity of displaced and exiled people can be viewed as the result of complex and contradictory processes of cultural translation. The nomadically living populations of Asia, Central America and Africa, the migrant workers and the displaced ethnic communities in the Western hemisphere live a life "in translation".

A poignant example for this new extended view of the eminently cultural role of translators is given by Barsky in his paper *The Interpreter as Intercultural Agent in Convention Refugee Hearing*. Barsky describes translators as intercultural mediators, as "agents of culture rather than transmitters of words (Barsky 1996: 46)." As he points out, the role of interpreters is still generally underrated and restricted to that of simple "translation devices". This is of great significance in Convention Refugee-Hearings where translators rather than restricting themselves to accurate and fluent translation should seek to improve the chances of the claimants to get a fair hearing. In fact, their role clearly goes beyond that of simple translators. They should, for instance, compensate for errors of judgement on the part of the claimant. Since in Western culture clarity and linearity in narration suggest accuracy and honesty of intention the translator should try to recast the utterances of the claimant – very often coming from countries with quite different narrative traditions – "into an acceptable format (...), minimizing potential damage by mediating culture-specific attitudes (Barsky 1996: 53f.)." and clarifying the possible misunderstandings inherent in any kind of intercultural communication. They should thus not only amend and improve the narrative but sometimes try and tell a compelling story by using examples acceptable in the target culture. If they ignore this cultural dimension in their everyday activity their clients risk rejection on the basis of a simple misunderstand-

ing. In short: they should be much more than just translators in the restrictive, purely linguistic sense of the word.

Although every translation is a form of intercultural communication this is not necessarily true of the opposite. Despite this basic asymmetry however, every translation act can be considered within the framework of intercultural communication and conversely every communicative act attempting to bridge the gulf between different cultures form the point of view of translation theory. The functioning of translational processes can thus be used to reflect upon intercultural communication acts from a new challenging point of view and the idea of cultural context can help to expand the restrictive linguistic view of translation as a simple unproblematic transfer of meaning from language to language into an ethical act of decision on the part of the translator, that is, a culturally relevant act of mediation between different cultures. In fact, as postcolonial discourse has shown, every (cultural) translation process presupposes and operates within conflicting sets of interests that lead very often to an appropriation of the economically and politically weaker of the two cultures by the dominant cultural code (Robinson 1997).

Intercultural communication, on the other hand, can be seen as a translational attempt to build (im)possible bridges of mutual understanding protecting the rights of the other and using cultural differences to enrich both communicative partners. Translation and intercultural communication are two dialogical models asking for ethical responsibility on the part of those that engage in it. In view of these facts there has been a growing reciprocal awareness and theoretical convergence of two new emerging areas of study – translation studies and intercultural studies – leading to a series of fruitful interdisciplinary cross-fertilizations some of which I want to deal with in this paper.

In the syllabus of several Universities courses of translation and intercultural communication are offered alongside each other. Translation is widely perceived as an interdisciplinary activity.[1] Let me give a few examples: The Social Studies department of the University of Bayreuth in Germany[2] ran already in the early 1990s a course on translation as an act of

[1] (http://www2.umist.ac.uk/ctis/trss/research_methods_in_translation.htm) The Centre for Translation & Intercultural Studies (UMIST) runs a course on research methods in translation & intercultural studies. See also the journal The Translator. Studies in Intercultural Communication. http://www.stjerome.co.uk/translator.htm.

[2] See http://www.uni-bayreuth.de/forschungsberichte/94/pen95019355.html.

scientific and intercultural communication with the intent of determining problems of communication in translating scientific literature. The University of Turku in Finland runs courses for translators as interpreters and experts in intercultural communication.[3] The Faculty of Human Sciences in Durban (Republic of South Africa), finally, organizes first level classes in translation studies and intercultural communication for a whole series of different curricula, among them Multilingual Studies, Media and Communication, as well as Management and Communication Studies.[4]

A further signal of the growing importance of this development and, in a way, the culminating point of a long theoretical debate[5] is the conference *Translation and the Construction of Identity* to be held on August 12th - 14th 2004 at Sookmyung Women's University in Seoul. This conference will also mark the launch of the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies (IATIS), "a global forum", so the organizers in their call for papers, "designed to enable scholars from different regional and disciplinary backgrounds to debate issues relating to translation and other forms of intercultural communication. (...) Existing organizations tend to be restricted in their aims and scope, whether to the professional development of translators and interpreters, to certain geographical areas, or to the narrower field of translation. At the same time, issues of translation and intercultural communication feature only occasionally in the conferences and publications of scholarly associations in such fields as anthropology, comparative literature, or pragmatics. Hence the need for a worldwide broadly based association encompassing both translation and intercultural studies." The conference organizers rightly deplore the lack of a common theoretical framework and of any systematic theoretical cross-over between the two fields of research. The following reconstruction will show how the theoretical evolution in the two areas over the last ten to fifteen years has already laid in part the common theoretical ground for the kind of practical interdisciplinary work the conference organizers envisage for the future.

[3] See http://www.utu.fi/aurora/3-2001/41.html. "As an expert in intercultural communication, the translator is by definition an expert whose task it is to cross and help others cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. He or she has to master such fields as translation, interpretation, work organisation, procurement of services, and management of intercultural communication processes."

[4] See http://www.und.ac.za/humansciences/handy/h4.htm.

[5] See Christina Schäffner's contribution in this issue.

## 2. Translating cultures. The "cultural turn" in translation studies

In the last decade the field of translation theory has been radically reshaped by a series of reconsiderations and redefinitions that are of particular importance for a new understanding of intercultural communication seen as a decisional act of ethical responsibility determining the relationship to the other. In the wake of the above mentioned paradigmatic shift traditional translation theorists have been criticised for dealing exclusively with texts and intertextualities, that is, with the linguistic dimensions of the problem alone (Bachmann-Medick 1996). This has moved the discussion from word and text as translation units to discourse and above all to social context: the reality of translation and human communication are not any hypostatized abstractions but people themselves. A purely linguistic translation theory needs therefore to be supplemented by a culturally oriented translation determining the implicit meaning of the speech and actions of the others. Translations are specific ways of representing foreign cultures and existing cultural differences (Graham 1985).[6] Add to this the fact that translation is not merely across languages and cultural borders but among interest groups and discourses competing for hegemony within social arenas, be they local or trans-national. This shift brings the position of the translator under scrutiny. The question is not so much, how can one carry safely the original meaning from one text to the other, but, which cultural aspects shape the translational activity itself. The translator becomes part and parcel of an overall cultural reference system implying among other things, as in the English tradition, a translational attitude asking for transparency and self-effacement. This leads often enough to a form of tacit appropriation of the other culture through an act of domestication. A possible answer to this could be a "foreignizing" (Venuti 1995) form of translation in Schleiermacher's sense (*verfremdende Übersetzung*), attempting to establish a dialogue with the foreign culture by respecting the existing cultural differences (Graham 1985).

[6] Philip Lewis' concept of 'abusive fidelity' envisages a translation practice that avoids simple fluency by deliberately reproducing those aspects that resist dominant cultural values in the source language. He speaks of "charges of discursive dynamite" (Lewis 1985: 32) and "productive difference" (Ibid. p. 41). This essayistic form of translation working through reproduction and invention acts as if it "sought to occupy the original's already unsettled home, and thereby, far from 'domesticating' it, to turn it into a place still more foreign to itself." (Ibid. p.43).

In view of the aforementioned, the responsibility of the translator becomes particularly relevant. A translation is never fully programmable and calculable beforehand. It always implies a moment of undecidability, asking for a decision to be made despite a remaining moment of doubt. Translators must make decisions in the strong sense, as they are constantly faced with impossible choices, for which no right alternative is presented. Translations are thus performative events, ethical-political acts very often forced to opt between two or more equally unsatisfactory choices. Foreign texts although meaningful and interpretable maintain their irreducible otherness. Translation theory and intercultural communication should therefore focus on the issue of responsibility rather than on ideal strategies claiming to define the unique characteristics of the translation process itself, as, for instance, the concept of semantic equivalence, since "canons of accuracy", as Lawrence Venuti rightly points out, "are culturally specific and historically variable (Venuti 1995: 18)."

In his recently published *Translation Studies Reader* Lawrence Venuti briefly retraces the history of translation studies in the course of the last century trying to avoid both an evolutionary model, wrongly suggesting a linear, cumulative development and a systematic critique, in order to catch the variety, complexity and contradictory nature of the theoretical field. I would like to give a short historical overview following in the steps of Venuti's narrative in order for the paradigmatic shift of the late 1980s and early 1990s to become more apparent.

In the first third of the century translation theory was dominated by theoretical assumptions dating back to German Romanticism, as well as by contemporary philosophy, mainly hermeneutics and existential phenomenology. In the 1940s and 1950s the issue of translatability was at the centre of translation theory, that is, the question whether the act of translation was capable of reconciling the differences existing between separate cultures or languages. The difficulties, mainly of linguistic nature, were considered insuperable or negotiable obstacles according to the chosen point of view leading to diverging translation methods and philosophical attitudes ranging form scepticism to a pragmatic optimism. In the 1960s and 1970s linguistically oriented approaches proliferated and the discussion revolved mainly around the concept of equivalence. Translation was thus seen as a communication process creating a relationship of analogy or identity between the foreign and the translated text. The functionalist approach focusing on the recipient, that is, on the target side of translation, redirected attention away form the concept of equiva-

lence questioning as a result the idea of adequacy and stressing the importance of the values and expectations of the receiving culture: a first significant step directing research away from the prevailing unilateral paradigm which subordinated target to source language in interests of the authenticity of the original.

In the course of the 1980s the issue of (un)translatability was revived from a poststructuralist and deconstructive point-of-view leading to a concept of language as site of "uncontrollable polysemy" and a view of translation as a 'third code' capable of semiotic innovation, triggering target potentialities and revealing the fundamental "incommensurability of cultures." The concept of equivalence is "reformulated in linguistic terms that are at once cultural and historical, ethical and political (Venuti 2000a: 218)." It was also in this decade that postcolonial reflection on the processes of translation opened up new areas of study and a radically different view of cultural transactions. But this theoretical shift, as Venuti points out, had little or no impact on the practice and pragmatics of everyday translation processes still widely dominated at that time, and in many respects also today, by more technical questions.

In the course of the 1990s the area of translation studies rapidly evolved into a complex mixture of a wide range of theoretical and practical orientations. Culturally oriented translation theories received a boost by the emergence of a new area of interdisciplinary studies, cultural studies, "cross-fertilizing such fields as literary theory and criticism, film and anthropology", bringing to translation theory "a concern with the social effects of translation and their ethical and political consequences. Culturally oriented research tends to be philosophically sceptical and politically engaged, so it inevitably questions the claim of scientificity in empirically oriented work which focuses on forms of description and classification whether linguistic, experimental, or historical (Venuti 2000a: 333)."

The poststructuralist and postcolonial debate had a decisive influence on culturally oriented translation theory as the work of Annie Brisset and Antoine Berman to whom I will come shortly abundantly proves. In the course of the 1990s a series of historical studies exploring the formation of cultural identity in terms of a translational transaction were published having through this an impact on translation studies as well. The work of Eric Cheyfitz (1991), Tejaswini Niranjana (1992) and Homi K. Bhabha (1994), as we will see in this paper, shows how identities are constructed through translation in a process determined by a series of contradictory forces – gender, race, ethnicity etc. – acting upon each other. "Here trans-

lating goes beyond the communication of foreign meanings to encompass a political inscription (Venuti 2000a: 337)." On the side of translation theory, apart from the already quoted work of Berman and Brisset, this reorientation becomes most evident in the work of Doris Bachmann-Medick, one of the leading German theorists in contemporary translation theory and Lawrence Venuti himself who reunites in his poststructuralist approach the main trends of the culturally oriented research in this field during the 1990s.

In a series of articles Bachmann-Medick has retraced some of the steps of theoretical evolution that translation theory has witnessed in the last decade – from the ethnographic "Writing Culture" debate of the late 1980s to postcolonial discussion and the attempt to define a new concept of "Weltliteratur" in view of global processes of transformation – leading to a gradual interdisciplinary exchange and an opening up to other areas of research resulting in a spill over effect of translational terminology into other fields of discourse.

Translational interchanges between cultures, argues Bachmann-Medick, reveal the existence of many-layered "Mischungs- und Überlappungsräume" radically questioning any essentialist assumption of a common ground between diverging cultural traditions. "Gefordert ist eine Abkehr von Universalismen und ein Überarbeiten der eurozentrischen Landkarten, in denen die Leitlinien für interkulturellen Transfer noch vom Austausch zwischen voneinander abgegrenzten Nationalstaaten markiert sind. (....) dagegen (sind) neue Formationen in den Blick zu nehmen, welche die gewohnten kulturellen Unterteilungen und Einheiten verschieben, überlagern, in Frage stellen, auflösen (Bachmann-Medick[2] 1998: 263)". This calls for a constant negotiating and renegotiating of intercultural meaning between basically unequal partners adding a social and historical dimension to the deconstructivist concept of difference. "Gefordert ist (...) ein aus den einzelnen Gesellschaften und Nationen gleichsam 'ausgelagerter' Bereich des Oszillierens zwischen den Kulturen. Hier ist jenseits der Vorstellung von multikulturellen Synthesen (...) eher die Produktivität von (...) Grenzerfahrungen, Widersprüchen, Hindernissen und Konflikten zwischen den Kulturen aufzuspüren (Bachmann-Medick[2] 1998: 273)". From this point of view the constant danger of misunderstanding that accompanies any kind of intercultural communication assumes a new innovative significance. It is no longer a hindrance to be duly avoided but the very stuff out of which new provocative insights for both communicative partners

ensue. Interestingly enough this very notion echoes theoretical reflections within the translation theory of the late 1980s with regard to the power of explicitation that any translation process entails (Venuti 2000a: 216).

Of particular relevance here is the concept of the space in between, of a third language which neither of the two partners engaged in intercultural dialogue truly possesses and controls. In one of her essays (Bachmann-Medick 1999: 518-531) Bachmann-Medick discusses this third space in interdisciplinary terms, that is, as a space of multiple translational processes. In terms of economical reasoning: the fusion of Daimler Benz and Chrysler calls for a management of cultural differences, for intercultural management as an integration of cultural studies and economics. Instead of reducing cultural difference to the point of view of the economically predominant partner, along the lines of globalization with its logic of uniformity, instead of a mere synthesis of the two cultures involved, the third space allows for that which is in excess. "Interkulturalität geht eben nicht aus der bloßen Vermittlung zwischen zwei Kulturen hervor, sondern aus dem eigenen Spannungswert eines 'Dazwischen', eines 'Zwischenraums' (Bachmann-Medick 1999: 518)". I will come back to this aspect in the last section of this paper.

Reflecting on the relationship of translation and communication, Venuti concludes that translation does something else than just simply communicate the meaning of the translated text. Because of the inevitable cultural differences existing between the two languages involved in the act of translation, that is, the moment of untranslatability, translation always runs the risk of domesticating the foreign by inscribing it with domestic meanings to adapt it to the necessities of the target culture. This leads to a "concealment of heterogeneity and hybridity (Venuti 2000b: 468)". The covering up of cultural differences through the illusion of transparency with the intent of suggesting untroubled communication represents a tradition of long standing within European translation theory a practice which Venuti very fittingly sums up with the characterization the "translator's invisibility".[7] This translation strategy aims for a high degree of readability and fluency in the target language to the point where the transla-

[7] "Under the regime of fluent translating, the translator works to make his or her work 'invisible', producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems 'natural', i.e., not translated (Venuti 1995, 5)."

tion is (mis)taken for the foreign text itself, as if the target language were a transparent medium through which the original could be seen without any impediment. The other way to deal with this problem inherent in any translation process is to disarrange the domestic through a systematic process of defamiliarization. This is brought about by the release of that which exceeds communication as a univocal meaning, the "remainder", as Venuti calls it. Translation, then, always goes beyond communication, because it tends to stress the values and beliefs of the target culture to the detriment of the source culture inscribing domestic standards on the source text. Translation is, in short, an "asymmetrical act of communication (Venuti 2000b: 485)". Even if the main aim of translation is to communicate the original text, it should be more than just that. Instead of suggesting unproblematic communication translations should call attention to the very problems implicated in translating from one culture to another, that is, to the linguistic, cultural social and political factors involved, and through this highlight the difficulties inherent in any kind of cross-cultural communication. Venuti's reflections on the relationship of translation and communication could therefore also be read the other way round. They could, in fact, throw a new light on the process of cross-cultural mediation and intercultural communication pointing to the structural difficulties that go with it and the utopian potential they harbour. Intercultural communication seen as a form of translation is never unproblematic communication; it always takes place within a specific hierarchically structured context that calls for the necessary attention in order to avoid misunderstandings, using cultural differences as a means of enlarging the horizon of those engaged in it instead of negating them in the name of a common ground. Simply looking for the invariant or the equivalent meaning in intercultural communication leads to an impoverishment of the possibilities any cross-cultural meeting entails.

Antoine Berman whose concern for ethnocentric attitudes within translation theory is particularly evident makes a forceful point in view of the aforementioned aspect – the dangers of domestication – in his essay *Translation and the trials of the foreign.*[8] "Translation is the 'trial of the foreign'. But in a double sense. In the first place, it establishes a relationship

[8] The title of his paper goes back to Heidegger's concept of Erfahrung des Fremden. In the French original: l'épreuve de l'étranger. This form of translation – from Erfahrung to épreuve to trial is already an attempt not to reduce the original to an equivalent, but to preserve its disturbing charge of otherness.

between the Self-Same (*Propre*) and the Foreign by aiming to open up the foreign work to us in its utter foreignness. (...) In the second place, translation is a trial *for the Foreign as well*, since the foreign work is uprooted from its own *language-ground (sol-de-langue)* (Berman 2000: 284)". This second aspect has to do with the creative side of any translation process – what Berman calls "the power of illumination, of *manifestation*" (Berman 2000: 289), its ability to reveal the very kernel of the original, or some potential aspect hidden away in it and made visible through its relocation into another linguistic and cultural environment. Berman reconstructs in his paper what he calls the "analytic of translation", that is, the deformation that is operated on the original preventing the translation from truly being "a trial of the foreign". The original text is submitted to rules which stop it from developing its true semantic potential reducing its complexity and wrongly familiarizing what should remain foreign. Besides rationalization, unnecessary clarification and undue expansion of meaning – embellishment or ennoblement –, this form of translation practice leads to qualitative and quantitative impoverishment and to the destruction of rhythms, underlying networks of signification and linguistic patterning. Adding what is not necessary and curtailing what goes against the classical (literary) canon this form of translation is unable to do justice to the original in its relationship to the new environment. Translation as intercultural communication, though, offers a unique chance at reciprocal enrichment. In fact any translating process ultimately "transforms the translating language" itself. This is particularly true for the European tradition. "Translation stimulated the fashioning and refashioning of the great western languages only because it laboured on the letter and profoundly modified the translating language. As simple restitution of meaning, translation could never have played this formative role (Berman 2000: 297)".

## 3. Culture as translation: the concept of translation in cultural studies

The introduction of the notion of translation into the fields of cultural studies, ethnography, anthropology and postcolonial discourse has led to a series of challenging reflections.[9] In this paper I would like to concentrate on the problematic aspect of every anthropological point of view,

[9] See for instance Turk (1996).

that is, the relationship between the anthropologist and his subject and the practice of ethnography as a form of cultural translation, the use of the term "translation" within postcolonial debate and intercultural philosophy, as well as the creating of cultural identities through translational acts taking place within a culturally decentred subject. This last aspect will be dealt with extensively in the fourth section of this paper.

As Talal Asad points out[10] the concept of cultural translation and the idea of translating cultures, despite its present success as a theoretical concept within postcolonial discourse and cultural studies actually dates back to the 1950s. Within the framework of British social anthropology translation was not so much used to refer to purely linguistic matters but to modes of thought and the attempt was made to establish a methodology for the translation of cultural languages. Connected with this was the notion of culture as text (Bachmann-Medick 21998) and the idea that whereas a historian was working on a given text the anthropologist had to write one of his own in the act of interpretation. Translating the foreign culture then, meant for the anthropologist constructing a new text representing a translation of the original cultural setting. This specific view is implicit in the title of the collection of essays within which Asad's own paper appeared: Writing Culture. Since the activity of the ethnographer implies communication with real people his narrative "must look for coherence" and is in this sense much more than "a matter of matching written sentences in two languages (Asad 1986: 155)" Add to this the fact that cultural translation always implies "a process of power", insofar as it involves an "institutionalized *practice*" taking place within "the wider relationship of unequal societies (Asad 1986: 148)".

In the chapter dedicated to the inequality of languages Talal quotes from Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* the idea that a translator should not attempt to preserve the state of the language he is translating into but rather let the foreign language affect and reshape it in new and unexpected ways. By doing this the ethnographer is trying to push beyond the limits of habitual usages, breaking down and reshaping the very language he is using to describe his experience in the field trying to make up for the inequalities of power that come into play when dominant forms of discourse try to assimilate economically and politically less prominent ones. "My point is (...) that the process of 'cultural transla-

[10] See Asad (1986).

tion' is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power – professional, national, international (Asad 1986: 163)."

In linguistic translation theory the notions of text, author, and meaning are often based on an unproblematic, naively representational theory of language. In creating coherent and transparent texts and subjects, translation, nonetheless, participates across a range of discourses in the fixing of colonized cultures, making them seem static and unchanging rather than historically constructed. This is of great significance when it comes to translate a text from a postcolonial environment into a globally dominant language like English (Dingwaney / C. Mayer 1995).[11]

Postcolonial discourse has used translation as a metaphor for the possibility of cultural inter-articulation. In fact translations can not only be seen as a metaphorical rendition of the original text but the workings of metaphor itself can be viewed as a translational act. Or to put it the other way round: translation is also a very apt metaphor to describe the functioning of metaphorical processes. Despite the implicit dangers of theoretical oversimplification that go with such an interpretation of translation (Baker 1998: 149-153)[12] the introduction of the term in cultural studies has led to a series of new perspectives and interrogations.

Cheyftiz, Niranjana and Bhabha have used the notion of translation to discuss power relations and the coming into being of new hybrid cultural identities drawing heavily on the metaphorical dimension of translation -- especially Bhabha. As James Clifford points out within this group "South Asian theorists are strikingly prominent, notably in Britain and North America. Postcoloniality is not much heard from elsewhere – for example in Latin America and Africa, where histories of de-,

[11] Venuti points out the persisting "aggressively monolingual attitude of English speaking countries." (Venuti 1995: 15).

[12] Baker points out that together with the use of metaphor as a metaphor for translation – and the other way round, that is, the use of translation as a metaphor for metaphor – the simple dichotomy of the literal and the figurative which reappears within translation theory as the opposition of original and translated text falsely suggesting a clear cut hierarchy of signification has been challenged by deconstructivist analysis along with the notion of representation that it implied. Venuti describes the paradoxical plight of transparent translation as follows: "On the one hand, translation is defined as a second-order representation: only the foreign text can be original, an authentic copy (...), whereas the translation is derivative, fake, potentially a false copy. On the other hand, translation is required to efface its second-order status with transparent discourse, producing the illusion of authorial presence whereby the translated text can be taken as the signal." (Venuti 1995: 7).

anti-, and neo-colonialism are significantly different (Clifford 1997: 366)". Cheyfitz and Niranjana focus on the difficult politics of translation as a significant form of the technology of colonial power, trying to retrace the history of Anglo-American domination from the sixteenth century on. Bhabha on the other hand reconstructs in his analysis the hybrid intercultural space using it to interpret the central problematic of ethnic and cultural transactions.[13] For Cheyfitz who analyzes texts ranging from the 17th century to the present the translation practice as well as the translated texts themselves are instruments of colonial hegemony inserting the post-colonial subject into a history he cannot perceive as his own. His situation is to be "in translation" (Baker 1998: 152): the imperialist mission consists in the translation of the colonial other into the terms of the empire. But this perspective of an identity constructed through processes of translation opens up the possibility of a radical criticism of cultural tenets. "Culture", argues Bhabha in an interview, "is both transnational and translational. (...) The transnational dimension of cultural transformation – migrations, Diasporas, displacement, relocation – makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural(ized), unifying discourse of 'nation', 'peoples', or authentic 'folk' tradition (...) cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling advantage of this position is that it makes you unceasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition (Bhabha 1992: 438)".

James Clifford rightly points out how postcolonial discourse with its one-sided emphasis on a purely non-essentialist position runs the risk of reducing the complexity of the situation it intends to describe by reverting to a highly questionable dichotomy itself, that of tradition and renewal. "(...) isn't it time to sidestep the reverse binary position of a prescriptive anti-essentialism? Struggles for integrity and power within and against globalizing systems need to deploy *both* tradition and modernity, authenticity and hybridity – in complex counterpoints (Clifford 1997: 178)". But this is only one possible form of criticism.

In fact a point has been reached within theoretical debate that calls for a reconsideration of the meaning of translation as something that encompasses more than just purely linguistic transactions.[14] In their introduc-

[13] See section four of this paper.

[14] Compare also Umberto Eco's, Dire quasi la stessa cosa. Esperienze di traduzione (2003).

tion to *Übersetzung als Medium des Kulturverstehens und sozialer Integration*, a series of papers dealing with the culturally expanded view of translation (Renn / Straub /Shimada 2002: 7-12) I have been dealing with so far, the editors comment upon the theoretical advantages and shortcomings of such a view. The concept of "translation" has crossed the borders of translation studies into new areas of enquiry changing and expanding through this its very meaning – and that of "culture" the borders of cultural studies, moving into the domain of translation studies, one would like to add, as the theoretical interpenetration has been mutual. This evolution has led to a radical questioning both of the representational function of language and to the concept of linguistic equivalence itself. The cultural horizon of translation processes proves to be an essential precondition of the practice itself. A pragmatic model of translation has evolved that views the construction of otherness as a way of constantly creating and recreating the relationship between the self and the other. And finally, the movement between source and target language has become a paradigmatic case of intercultural relationship. But this is only one side of the process.

The theoretical reflection within cultural studies, in fact, has not been able to keep pace with the rapid growth of the different functions of the term translation over the last years. A systematic reconstruction and assessment of its use within the different forms of scientific discourse and the theoretical consequences it had for the respective fields of enquiry is still only in its beginning. The danger involved in this is an inflationary and uncontrolled use of the term translation which has assumed too many, often contradictory meanings. "Mannigfaltige Begriffe der Übersetzung koexistieren, es gibt unausgeleuchtete Überschneidungen, aber auch Widersprüche. Noch halten sich die fruchtbaren Resultate der erweiterten Verwendung und die Gefahr einer wachsenden Konturlosigkeit des Begriffs vielleicht die Waage. (...) es wird erforderlich einer uferlosen Inflation des Übersetzungsbegriffs entgegenzuwirken (Renn / Straub /Shimada 2002, 9-10)". The present collection of essays is such an attempt at clarification. It reunites papers that deal with the subject from a linguistic, pragmatic, sociological and intercultural point of view. It is an attempt to close the gap "zwischen der erweiterten Verwendung des Übersetzungsbegriffs und der theoretischen sowie methodischen Rechtfertigung entsprechender interdisziplinärer 'Übersetzungen' (Renn / Straub /Shimada 2002: 11)".

One possible way to sidestep such problematic uses of the term trans-

lation is to employ it deliberately as an abstract model of interpretation.[15] Wolfgang Iser, for instance, uses (un)translatability as a counter-concept to the notion of cultural hegemony. "Heuristically speaking, translatability is an umbrella concept that allows us to inspect the interpenetration of different cultures (Budick / Iser 1996: 295)". It works as a complex abstract term and the set of conditions it implies never actually comes to bear in one single concrete instance. But this makes possible its use in a series of different situations. Besides this, it can be used for different types of translation: linguistic, semiotic, cross-cultural, intercultural and intracultural.[16]

Another crucial aspect of translation processes as forms of (inter)cultural exchange is expressed in Iser's concept of "mutuality". The notion of mutuality arises out of the idea of interpenetration and stresses the fact that "whenever features of culture are translated intra- or cross-culturally, a trace of untranslatability" is imprinted on them, implying that mutual understanding of cultures will always encounter a certain degree of incommensurability. This, however, does not hamper communication itself but "energizes such attempts at comprehension". What we are faced with here is the double-bind nature of all translation processes, the basic (im)possibility of any translation, i.e. the constant necessity to translate so as to have access to the world of the other – or to our own past, for that matter – and the failure to ever fully achieve this. For Iser "mutuality reflects the basic workings of culture itself". It comprises a vast array of different modes of intra- and intercultural communication each of which is based on the assumption that "neither a transcendental stance nor a third dimension that would allow us to conceptualize cross-cultural interrelationships" is available. "It also exposes all umbrella concepts used in assessing cultural encounters as reifications that eliminate difference and pose as an overreaching third dimension. There is no way of grasping the ungraspable, and no final elimination of what remains intractable in these encounters (Budick / Iser 1996: 301-2)".

[15] Bachmann-Medick proposes to use the model of translation to analyse the relationship between different scientific disciplines. "Das Modell der Übersetzung könnte hier auf eine andere Spur führen (...); nicht nur Kultur als Übersetzung, sondern Wissenschaftskultur als Übersetzung (Bachmann-Medick 2002: 286)."

[16] Iser whose analysis of an expanded concept of translation resembles that of George Steiner in After Babel, gives the example of the resuscitation of the past in the present through the act of memory. "In other words, current necessities are projected onto the past in order to make it translatable into the present (Budick / Iser 1996: 296)."

Iser is making a forceful point here in favour of a view of culture as an entity that has to be juxtaposed, that is, compared to other cultures in order to be fully understood. This implies that no culture can be understood on its own terms alone. Cultures do not exist as self-sufficient entities but need to be translated into each other – implying here a process of mutual interpenetration. Because of this, otherness becomes an excellent "means of profiling a culture". This recalls an idea already formulated within translation theory itself to which I have referred earlier on: the power of explicitation any translation possesses, that is, its ability to clarify what is hidden or potentially there even if only in an unspecified way. Iser speaks of the space in between cultures as an operative catalyst, changing, shifting or tilting positions, creating new correlations and bringing out unforeseeable interconnections. The basic impossibility of a "grandstand view" (Budick / Iser 1996: 302) from which to understand and define cross-cultural and intracultural transactions goes hand in hand with the idea that the space in between is neither an unbridgeable gap nor an overreaching third dimension, but the very emplacement where new cultural meanings are produced. Starting out from the concept of (un)translatability, that is, from an originally linguistic term, Iser arrives thus both at a redefinition of forms of intercultural exchange, as well as at a redefinition of the meaning of culture as such.

The concept of translation plays also an important role within a new and still growing field of enquiry, that of intercultural philosophy (Ram Adhar Mall 1995: 89-93 and Wimmer 1986). Interestingly enough Ram Adhar Mall's definition of an intercultural hermeneutics draws heavily on a fundamental distinction already formulated by translation studies, i.e. the difference between absolute translatability, absolute untranslatability and relative translatability. Intercultural hermeneutics has to steer clear of two extremisms: the fiction of the total commensurability and the total incommensurability of cultures. An "analogic hermeneutics" – based on the mechanism of relative translatability – "sets out from the existing overlaps, which are present for numerous reasons. It is only them that enable communication and translation in the first place (Ram Adhar Mall 2000)",

In section four of his paper dedicated to the issue of translation Mall writes. "It can be felt under the skin by whoever lives in more than one language and is forced to find orientation in more than one culture and philosophy that philosophical truth, despite the metonymical exchange of names, shifts back and forth and releases us from the overly narrow

constraints of the purely philological. (...) It is undisputed that the process of transposing is a troublesome thing and never succeeds in producing total congruence, be it on the inter- or intracultural level. (...) The European history of thought testifies to the fact that there has been translation and comparison in the European sphere of culture and thought from the beginning onwards".

Mall draws a similar conclusion to the one Iser arrives at. "In the absence of the interculturally oriented attitude one cannot possess the necessary distance to one's own tradition, no matter how well informed about a foreign culture one is. (Ram Adhar Mall 2000)".[17] Both intercultural communication and translation, and this is another (epistemological) trait they have in common, allow a new critical view of one's own culture and its limits.

## 4. Translation and the construction of identity

I would like to conclude with an analysis of the role translation plays in the construction of cultural identity approaching the issue from both sides, that is, from the point of view of translation theory first and then from a culturally oriented perspective.[18]

Annie Brisset investigates in her essay *The Search for a Native Language: Translation and Cultural Identity* how the translation of foreign drama into the Québécois idiom in the late 60s and early 70s was used to serve a basically nationalist agenda. Through the ideological appropriation of classical works of European literature a specific artificial native tongue was created postulating at the same time the existence of a specific geopolitical community.

As the instance of Luther's translation of the Bible into German in the early 16th century proves translation processes are able under particular socio-historical circumstances to create new languages. But in doing so, they do not create from nothing but fall back on already existing linguis-

[17] Mall's position has been criticized by another representative of intercultural philosophy, Heinz Kimmerle (Kimmerle 2002). The conception of understanding cannot be universalized. Before and beyond all interculturality there are fundamental aspects of failing to understand each other. The aim of understanding each other therefore is not a fusion of horizons, i.e. a common understanding, but an attempt at getting as close as possible to each other, while respecting the remaining differences, that is, the erratic blocks of non-understanding.

[18] See also Fuchs (1996).

tic material which they reshape or transform in specific ways. Luther's translation of the Bible for instance, as Brisset points out, aimed at unifying a number of local German dialects into a new comprehensive idiom that was supposed to be at the same time as close as possible to the language of everyday experience. Translation then does not fill in a "linguistic void" but changes "the relation of linguistic forces, at the institutional and symbolic levels (...). Translation becomes an act of reclaiming, of recentering of the identity, a reterritorializing operation. It does not create a new language, but it elevates a dialect to the status of a national and cultural language (Brisset 2000: 345-6)". In other words: even if these translation processes claim originality and authenticity they do in fact come about through the recombination of pre-existent heterogeneous elements, that is, through a synthesis, and as such remain open to criticism. This operation takes place in order to reduce threatening moments of cultural difference by excluding heterogeneity from an artificially construed homogeneous community recognizable through its 'native' language. The emergence of this new language for which is claimed the status of a mother tongue leads to a situation in which alterity is thoroughly expulsed and eliminated. So we assist here to the very opposite of the cultural aim of postcolonial discourse, which describes how new complex hybrid cultural identities are created through a sort of "bricolage" combining the most disparate and incongruent elements.[19] Brisset criticizes the totalitarian and ideological implications of a concept of homogeneity inasmuch as it leads to the exclusion of otherness. First of all "there is no such thing as a homogeneous culture (Brisset 2000: 353)". Culture comes about through the constant shifting and renegotiating of a complex contradictory and hierarchically structured set of components leading to a series of intra-cultural translation processes. Secondly the concept of homogeneity negates the basically dialogical relation between different cultures.

The Québécois language is a closed system bent on eliminating any impurity that may have contaminated it. In order to achieve this, one of its main theorists, Gaston Miron, introduced the distinction between "mother tongue" and "native tongue" The idea of a "native language" pre-

[19] A very fitting image for this state of affairs is Lyotard's image of the 'patchwork of minorities'. The idea of a patchwork combines both unity and difference: disparate elements linked together without being subordinated to one centralizing overreaching totality.

supposes the existence of a unique form of being-in-the-world embodied in the French speaking Canadians. The European side of the French culture – the "mother tongue" – is thus rejected as something alien to the life of all those born on American soil. Considering French as a second, almost foreign idiom is tantamount to negating the fundamental situation of diglossia that characterizes the French speaking part of Canada. The "native language" alienated and deformed both by English and French interferences has to shake off its shackles of colonial experience if it truly wants to come into its own. The Québécois language is a language of translation insofar as it comes about through an act of translation reaching back to the lost origins and extirpating all foreign influences.

Michel Garneau translated Shakespeare's Macbeth into Québécois in an attempt to reproduce and ideal language spoken in a distant mythical past when Québéc was still free. This restoration using lexical and syntactic archaisms is an act of recreation that in its attempt to get in touch with the ancestral sources brings about the rebirth of lost innocence. In this cultural project the role of translation is completely reversed. Translation usually introduces a reader to a foreign language and culture trying to bridge the gap existing between the two dimensions. In this context, however, translation is called upon to put the reader in contact with his own lost native language. By translating the works of classical European authors such as Shakespeare, Brecht and Chekhov into Québécois the very language used for translation is brought to the fore, made visible, and can claim through this the truth of its existence and that of the people of Québéc. Since Québécois (joual) is a particular variant of French spoken mainly by the lower classes the translator had to change the original setting by lowering the register, that is, proletarizing the language, and eliminating any trace indicating that the characters of the play belong to a higher or dominant social position. "The pauperization of the signifier reflects the alienation of the Québécois public for whom the text is intended (Brisset 2000: 362)". This lowering of the linguistic register goes hand in hand with the already mentioned idea of original purity and simplicity to which the Québécois as the language of the people aspires. By differentiating it from the language of learned literariness of the educated French cultural and political elite an irreconcilable divide is created between the motherland and the native Québécois culture, a code that works not so much by inclusion, mixing and hybridity as by exclusion and separation. Another way of criticizing French culture consisted in retranslating works of literature into Québécois that had already been

translated into French. The retranslation, which is again a lowering of the register, leads to the discovery of a truth that was hidden away under the polished version of the high-brow French translation. The nostalgic nationalist agenda is complemented thus by a populist and demagogic argumentation hinging on the connection between the alleged naturalness of the everyday life of the people and its mythical past both joined together in the act of translation.[20]

A radically different conception of the culturally creative side of translation acts can be met with in postcolonial discourse. In a multicultural world cultural identity is the result of a translational act. "What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial", writes Homi K. Bhabha, "is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity' (Bhabha 1994: 1)". Bhabha's concept of the-space-in between can be traced back to Victor Turner's notion of liminality[21], as a moment in time and space during which social norms are no longer valid and a new identity is construed out of contradictory elements. The liminal being is "no longer" and "not yet", neither female nor male, but both, dead and alive at the same time. He is suspended betwixt and between. In Turners model of a momentary ritual suspension of order the liminal being finally returns to the heavily structured universe he has left only temporarily. The temporal limit of liminality is one of its essential features. For Bhabha, on the other hand, the multiple processes of displacement of liminality articulate the very antagonistic and incommensurable cultural practices within which the postcolonial subject happens to find himself. His attempt at translation will never be complete, that is, it will never generate a unifying synthesis. The hybrid identities projected through this process of redefinition will bear the unresolved traces of former meanings and give rise to further negotiations. "It is the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *na-*

[20] Brisset points to the many paradoxes that animate this cultural project one especially blatant being the fact the translators themselves have used Québécois only for the characters of the play reverting to French proper for the stage directions and when it comes to comment upon the work itself in footnotes or prefaces.
[21] See Turner (1967).

*tionness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (...)? (Bhabha 1994: 2)".

Guillermo Gomez-Peña has used a very appropriate metaphor to describe the specific plight of this subject caught in a constant translational attempt at cultural rearrangement and recreation. Instead of the classical "melting pot" he proposes the "menudo chowder". Whereas in the old model of integration the single components liquefy and amalgamate in a new homogenised whole, in the other only some of the ingredients melt, while others stubbornly resist remaining afloat, incommensurable chunks testifying the impossibility of a concluding synthesis, or to put it in terms of translation: heterogeneous traces of untranslatability.[22]

The previous considerations have shown that translation processes and acts of intercultural communication possess a utopian potential relevant not only for those engaged in constructing a hybrid identity out of the differing and contrasting experiences of an increasingly multicultural globalized life-style but also by creating new virtual communities, that are still in the making. As zones of contact between different cultures translations can in fact create imagined communities projecting new virtual groupings around a text or a shared experience building on the basic asymmetry revealed by translation, "the surplus of meanings (Venuti 2000b: 485)" released by the "remainder". These communities interested in cultural variation and differentiated foreign contexts rather than uniformity will be based on a common understanding of the irreducible but highly creative and innovative differences existing between cultures.

[22] See Gomez-Peña (1992-93: p. 74) quoted in Bhabha (1994: 218f.)

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