Translation

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Abstract Translation is an act of articulation that takes place in the social topos of difference or incommensurability. The topos of difference, to which translation is a response, is anterior to the conceptual difference of species or particularities. Yet, translation is often represented as a process of establishing equivalence according to the model of communication. This misapprehension of translation derives from the confusion of the act of translation with its representation. By representing translation that is unrepresentable in itself through the schema of co-figuration, the representation of translation inscribes and re-inscribes the twin figures of languages between which a transfer of information is supposed to have taken place. This whole regime organized around the schema of co-figuration is a historical construct of modernity that has worked powerfully to project national/ethnic languages and the international world, only within which national languages are possible. Our task is to historicize this regime of translation.

Keywords communication model, regime of translation, representation of translation, schema of co-figuration, subject in transit, translation

Introduction

Today an increasing number of scholars are aware of both the conceptual complexity and the politico-ethical significance of translation. Simultaneously, they have come to realize that translations, not only in the fields of literature and religion, but also in the spheres of commercial advertisement, popular entertainment, public administration, international diplomacy, scientific research and publication, judiciary procedure, immigration, education and family livelihood must be problematized. The conceptual complexity of the term 'translation' and the difficulty in any attempt to define it make it necessary to historicize the particular ways in which translation has been understood and practiced in modern societies.

What may be summarily called translation has been practiced in many parts of the world for centuries and millennia. The rendering of the Buddhist texts in literary Chinese and the Latinization of the Bible are two instances during the first millennium, of the celebrated achievements in the long histories of translation, while there are innumerable cases of translation that are known to have played decisive roles in the developments of literary cultures, pedagogical institutions, ecclesiastic reformations and the global spread of the nation-state and capitalism, particularly since the Renaissance and the European conquest of the Americas.

What is most problematic about the conventional conception of translation is that, due to its inherent metaphysics of communication (Nancy, 1991), it presents translation as a process of homogenization and of establishing equivalence. But translation always inscribes itself in the social topos of incommensurability and difference, and what I specifically call *cultural difference*, to which translation is a response, is anterior to and fundamentally heterogeneous to the conceptual difference of species, the difference between particularities. Translation articulates one text to another, but it does not mean that translation merely establishes equivalence between two texts, two languages or two groups of people. On the contrary, it is in a specific *dispositif* or regime of translation that translation is represented according to the model of

communication. What I am going to attempt in this entry on translation is to liberate it from the metaphysics of communication.

My approach is basically historical. I will first discuss the conceptual intricacy of the term translation and the difficulty in any attempt to define it, with a view to historicizing the particular ways in which translation has been understood and practiced in modern societies. And, second, I will discuss the politico-ethical significance of translation in reference to the fact that it is always complicit with the building, transforming or disrupting of power relations. Translation involves moral imperatives on the part of both the addresser and the addressee, and can always be viewed to a larger or smaller degree as a political maneuver of social antagonism. Third, I will investigate how the representation of translation brings about sociopolitical effects and serves as a technology by which the individual imagines his or her relation to the national or ethnicized community. And, finally, I will touch upon the relationship between the issues of translation and modernity by showing how the particular mode of representing translation is conditioned by the essentially modern *schema of co-figuration*, by means of which we comprehend the unity of natural language as an ethno-linguistic unity. In other words, we will probe into how our commonsensical notion of translation is delimited by the schematism of the world (i.e. our operation of representing the world according to the *schema of co-figuration*) and inversely, how the modern image of the world as the inter-national world (i.e. the world consisting of the basic unit of nations) is prescribed by our representation of translation as a communicative and international transfer of the message between a pair of ethno-linguistic unities.

The Concept of Translation and its Complexity

The network of lexicographical connotations associated with the term translation leads to notions of transferring, conveying or moving from one place to another, or of linking one word, phrase, or text to another. These connotations are shared by the word for translation in many modern languages: *fanyi* in Chinese, *translation* in English, *traduction* in French, *honyaku* in Japanese, *Übersetzung* in German, and so forth. It may therefore appear justified to postulate the following definition: 'Translation is a transfer of the message from one language to another.' Even before one specifies what sort of transfer this may be, it is hard to refrain from asking about the message. Is not the message in this definition a product or consequence of the transfer called translation, rather than an entity that precedes the action of transfer, something that remains invariant in the process of translation? Is the message which is supposedly transferred in this process determinable in and of itself before it has been operated on? And what is the status of the language from which or into which the message is transferred? Is it justifiable to assume that the source language in which the original text makes sense is different and distinct from the target language into which the translator renders the text as faithfully as possible? Are these languages countable? In other words, is it possible to isolate and juxtapose them as individual units, like apples, for example, and unlike water? By what measures is it possible to distinguish one from the other and endow it with a unity or body? But for the sake of facilitating the representation of translation, however, it is not necessary to posit the organic unity of language rather than see it as a random assemblage of words, phrases and utterances, if one is to speak of translation in accordance with the definition.

Accordingly, the presumed invariance of the message transmitted through translation is confirmed only retroactively, after it has been translated. What kind of definition is it, then, that includes the term in need of explanation in the definition itself? Is it not a circular definition? Similarly, the unity both of the source and the target language is also a supposition in whose absence the definition would make little sense. What might translation be if we suppose that a language is not countable or that one language cannot be easily distinguished from another?

It is difficult to evade this problem when we attempt to comprehend the terms 'meaning' and 'language'. At the very least, we can say that, logically, translation is not derivative or secondary to meaning or language; it is just as fundamental or foundational in any attempt to

elucidate these concepts. Translation suggests contact with the incomprehensible, the unknowable, or the unfamiliar, that is, with the foreign, and there is no awareness of language or meaning until we come across the foreign. First and foremost, the problematic of translation is concerned with the allocation of the foreign.

If the foreign is unambiguously incomprehensible, unknowable, and unfamiliar, then translation simply cannot be done. If, conversely, the foreign is comprehensible, knowable and familiar, translation is unnecessary. Thus, the status of the foreign is ambiguous in translation. The foreign is incomprehensible and comprehensible, unknowable and knowable, unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. This foundational ambiguity of translation is derived from the positionality occupied by the translator. The translator is summoned only when two kinds of audiences are postulated with regard to the source text, one for whom the text is comprehensible at least to some degree, and the other for whom it is incomprehensible. The translator's work consists in dealing with difference between the two audiences. The translator encroaches on both and stands in the midst of this difference. In other words, for the first audience the source 'language' is comprehensible while for the second it is incomprehensible. It is important to note that the 'language' in this instance is figurative: it need not refer to the 'natural' language of an ethnic or national community, German or Tagalog, for example. It is equally possible to have two kinds of audiences when the source text is a technical document or an avant-garde work of art. In such cases 'language' may well refer to a vocabulary or set of expressions associated with a professional field or discipline, for example, law; it may imply a style of graphic inscription or an unusual perceptual setting in which an artwork is displayed. This loose use of the term 'language' invariably renders the task of determining the 'meaning' of the term 'translation' difficult. For, all the acts of projecting, exchanging, linking, matching and mapping could then be talked about as sorts of translation, even if not a single word is involved. Here the discernibility of the linguistic and the non-linguistic is at stake.

Roman Jakobson's (1971) famous taxonomy of translation attempts to restrict the instability inherent in the figurative use of the word 'language'. Jakobson divides translation into three classes: '(1) Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. (2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language. (3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems' (p. 261). According to the Jakobsonian taxonomy, one who translates 'legal language' into common parlance would be performing an intralingual translation, while one who offers a commentary on an obscure artwork would be engaged in an intersemiotic translation. In neither case can one be said to be a translator strictly speaking. Only someone who translates a text from one language to another would be doing translation proper.

Jakobson's taxonomy neither elucidates nor responds to our query about the supposition concerning the countability and organic unity of the source and target languages. It does not empirically validate the supposition; it merely repeats and reconfirms it. Nevertheless, it discloses that 'translation proper' depends on a supposed discernibility between the interlingual and the intralingual, between a translation from one language to another and a rewording within the same language. It thereby prescribes and demarcates the locus of difference between two presumably ethnic or national language communities, by virtue of the fact that Jakobson presupposes that translation proper can take place only between two unequivocally circumscribed languages. It therefore eradicates the various differences within such a linguistic community and locates the foreign exclusively outside the unity of a language.

No doubt this conception of translation is a schematization of the globally shared and abstractly idealized commonsensical vision of the *international* world, consisting of basic units – nations – segmented by national borders into territories. It is not simply Jakobson's idiosyncratic view. In this schematization, 'translation proper' not only claims to be a description or representation of what happens in the process of translation; this description also prescribes and directs how to represent and apprehend what one accomplishes 'perlocutionarily' when one translates. In this respect, 'translation proper' is a *discursive* construct: it is

part of what may be called the regime of translation, an institutionalized assemblage of protocols, rules of conduct, canons of accuracy, and ways of viewing. The *discursive* regime of translation is *poietic*, or productive, in that it foregrounds what speech acts theorists called the 'perlocutionary' effect (Austin, 1967). Just as a perlocutionary act of persuading might well happen in a speech act of arguing but persuasion does not always result from argument, 'translation proper' need not be postulated whenever one acts to translate. Yet, in the regime of translation, it is as if there were a causal relationship between the co-figurative schematization of translation and the process of translation. Collapsing the process of translation onto its co-figurative schematization, the representation of translation repeatedly discerns the domestic language co-figuratively – one unity is figured out, represented and comprehended as a spatial figure, in contrast to another – as if the two unities were already present in actuality.

As long as one remains captive to the conventional regime of translation, one can construe the ambiguity inherent in the translator's positionality only as the dual position a translator occupies between a native language and a foreign tongue. Hence the presumption persists that one either speaks one's mother tongue or a foreigner's. The translator's task would be to discern the differences between the two languages. And this difference is always determined as that between two linguistic communities. Despite countless potential differences within one linguistic community, the regime of translation obliges one to speak from within a binary opposition, either to the same or to the other. Thus, in the regime of translation the translator becomes invisible because the translator is the one who eludes an identification within the binary (Venuti, 1995: 1–46). This attitude in which one is constantly solicited to identify oneself within the binary may be called 'monolingual address', whereby the addresser adopts the position representative of a putatively homogeneous language community, and enunciates to addressees who are also representative of a homogeneous language community. The term 'monolingual address', however, does not imply a social situation in which both the addresser and the addressee in a conversation belong to the same language; they believe they belong to different languages yet can still address each other monolingually.

Translator: The *Subject in Transit*

Is it possible to understand the act of translation outside the monolingual address? To respond to this question, it may be helpful to consider the translator's position of address. When engaged in the task of translation, can they perform a speech act such as making a promise? Is the translator responsible for what they say while translating? Due to the translator's unavoidably ambiguous position, the answer too is ambiguous. Yes, they can make a promise, but only on behalf of someone else. They 'themselves' cannot make a promise. The translator is responsible for the translation but they cannot be held responsible for the pledges expressed in it, because they are not allowed to say what they mean; they are required to say what they say without meaning it. In essence, the translator is someone who cannot say 'I'. Here the problem of the invariant message returns as the question of meaning, of what the translator 'means' to say.

In relation to the source text, the translator seems to occupy the position of the addressee. They listen to or read what the original addresser enunciates. At the same time, however, there is no supposition that the addresser is speaking or writing to them. Here again the translator's positionality is inherently ambiguous: it is both addressee and not addressee. The translator cannot be the 'you' to whom the addresser refers. A similar disjunction can be observed in the enunciation of the target text, that is, in the translation. In relation to the audience of the target text, the translator seems to occupy the position of the addresser.

In other words, in translation, the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciated – the speaking I and the I that is signified – are not expected to coincide. The translator's desire is at least displaced, if not entirely dissipated, in the translated enunciation, if by *desire* we understand that what is signified by *I* in 'my' utterance ought to coincide with the supposedly concrete and unique – but imagined – existence of 'me' (the desire expressed

as 'I want to be myself'). This is why the translator cannot be designated straightforwardly either as *I* or *you*: they disrupt the attempt to appropriate the relation of the addresser and addressee as a *personal* relation between the first person and the second person. The translator cannot be the first or second person, or even the third 'person' undisruptively. Ineluctably, translation introduces an instability into the putatively *personal* relations among the agents of speech, writing, listening and reading. The translator is internally split and multiple, devoid of a stable position. At best, they are *subject in transit*.

In the first place, this is because the translator cannot be an 'individual' in the sense of *individuum*, the undividable unit. In the second, it is because the translator is a *singularity* that marks an elusive point of discontinuity in the social, even though translation is the practice of creating continuity from discontinuity. Translation is a *poietic* social practice that institutes a relation at the site of incommensurability. This is why the discontinuity inherent in translation would be completely repressed if we were to determine translation as the communication of information; the *ambiguity inherent in the translator's positionality* would have to be entirely overlooked as long as translation is grasped as the transfer of information.

In the case of translation, however, an ambiguity in the translator's positionality marks the instability of the *we* as subject rather than the *I*, since the translator cannot be a unified and coherent personality in translation. This suggests a different attitude of address, namely, 'heterolingual address' (Sakai, 1997: i–xii), which is, a situation in which one addresses oneself as a foreigner to another foreigner. Held captive in the regime of translation, however, the translator is supposed to assume the role of the transcendent arbitrator, not only between the addresser and the addressee but also between their linguistic communities. As monolingual address, translation, as a process of creating *continuity in discontinuity* (Tanabe, 1963), is often replaced by the representation of translation in which translation is schematized according to the co-figurative communication model.

Modernity and the Schema of Co-figuration: A Genealogy of the Modern

Let us consider how translation is displaced by its representation and how collective subjectivity, such as national and ethnic subjectivity, is constituted in the representation of translation. Through the translator's labor, the incommensurable differences that call for the translator's service in the first place are negotiated. In other words, the work of translation is a practice by which the initial discontinuity between the addresser and the addressee is made continuous. In this respect translation is like other social practices; translation makes something representable out of an unrepresentable difference. Only retrospectively, therefore, can we recognize the initial incommensurability as a gap, crevice or border between fully constituted entities, spheres or domains. Cultural difference which prompts translation is unrepresentable in this sense and can by no means be reduced to either specific difference or spatial distance. But when represented as a conceptual difference or gap, it is no longer an incommensurability. It is mapped onto a striated space, which may be segmented by national borders and other markers of collective (national, ethnic, racial or 'cultural') identification.

Incommensurable difference is more like a feeling (Deleuze, 1994) prior to the explanation of how incommensurability has occurred, and cannot be represented as a specific difference (in schemas of genera and species, for example) between two terms or entities. What makes it possible to represent the initial difference as an already determined one between one language unity and another is the work of translation itself. Hence the untranslatable, or what appears to escape translation, cannot exist prior to the enunciation of translation. It is translation that gives birth to the untranslatable. The untranslatable is as much a testimony to the sociality of the translator, whose elusive positionality reveals the presence of an aggregate community of foreigners between the addresser and the addressee, as the translatable itself. We fail to communicate because we are in common with one another. Community does not mean we share common ground. On the contrary, we are in community precisely because we are exposed to a forum where our differences and failure in communication can be manifest. Nevertheless, the translator's essential sociality with respect to the untranslatable is

disregarded in monolingual address, and with the repression of this insight, monolingual address equates translation with the representation of translation.

The particular representation of translation as communication between two particular languages is no doubt a historical construct. Given the politico-social significance of translation, it is no accident that, historically, the regime of translation became widely accepted in many regions of the world, after the feudal order and its passive vassal subject gave way to the disciplinary order of the active citizen subject in the modern nation-state, to an order consisting of disciplinary regimes which Michel Foucault describes brilliantly. The regime of translation serves to reify national sovereignty. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 95) have argued, it makes 'the *relation* of sovereignty into a *thing* (often by naturalizing it) and thus weeds out every residue of social antagonism. The nation is a kind of ideological shortcut that attempts to free the concepts of sovereignty and modernity from the antagonism and crisis that define them'.

Following the Kantian schematism (Kant, 1956), the *poietic* technology endowed in the regime of translation which renders it representable may be called 'the schema of co-figuration'. Since the practice of translation remains radically heterogeneous to the representation of translation, translation cannot always be represented as a communication between two clearly delineated ethno-linguistic unities. Rather, it was this particular representation of translation that gave rise to the possibility of figuring out the unity of ethnic or national language together with another language unity. Thanks to this co-figurative schematism, there emerges an ethno-linguistic unity as if it were a sensuous and unified thing hidden and dormant behind the surface of random sensuous variety. In other words, the schema of co-figuration is a technology by means of which an ethno-linguistic community is rendered representable, thereby constituting itself as a substratum upon which national sovereignty can be built. 'People' is thus nothing but an idealization of this substratum.

This self-constitution of the nation does not proceed unitarily, but on the contrary, its figure constitutes itself only by making visible the figure of an other with which it engages in a relationship of translation. Precisely because the two nations are represented as equivalent and alike, however, it is possible to determine them as *conceptually different*, and their difference is construed as a *specific difference* (*daiphora*) between separate identities. Nevertheless, cultural difference, which calls for the work of a translator, is not a conceptual difference but an incommensurability.

Once translation is determined as the relationship of the two terms as equivalent and alike, it gives rise to the possibility of extracting an infinite number of distinctions between the two. Just as in the co-figuration of 'the West and the Rest' by which the West represents itself, constituting itself by positing everything else as 'the Rest', conceptual difference allows one term to be evaluated as superior to the other. This co-figurative comparison allows for typical binary oppositions – such as the presence of scientific rationality versus its absence, the future-oriented spirit of progress versus the tradition-bound sense of social obligation, the internalization of religious faith and its accompanying secularism versus the inseparableness of the private and the public – to characterize the West and the Rest.

The 'modern' is marked by the introduction of the schema of co-figuration, without which it is difficult to imagine a nation or ethnicity as a homogeneous sphere. As Antoine Berman taught us about the intellectual history of translation and Romanticism in Germany, the economy of the foreign, that is, how the foreign must be allocated in the production of the domestic language, has played a decisive role in the *poietic* – and poetic – identification of national language (Berman, 1992). Most conspicuously in 18th-century movements such as Romanticism in western Europe and *Kokugaku* (National Studies) in Japan, intellectual and literary maneuvers to invent, mythically and poetically, a national language were closely associated with a spiritual construction of a new identity which later naturalized national sovereignty. This substratum for the legitimation of national and popular sovereignty was put forward as a 'natural' language specific to the 'people', supposedly spoken by them in their everyday lives. Literary historians generally call this historical development 'the emergence of the

vernacular'. With the irruption of the sphere of nearness – extensive obsessions with things of everydayness and experiential immediacy – in which the ordinary and the colloquial were celebrated (Sakai, 1992), the status of 'universal' languages such as Latin, literary Chinese and Sanskrit was drastically and decisively altered. In their place, languages emerged whose markers were ethnic and national – English, German, Japanese, Spanish and so forth – and the ancient canons were translated into these languages. For this reason, Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible and Motoori's Japanese phonetic translation of the *Kojiki* (records of ancient matters) can be said to mark crucial steps in modernity.

Modernity and the West

In talking about 'modern' as it is apprehended in many parts of the world today, first it is historically necessary to anchor it in the original uses of this notion in the history of Western Europe. This is neither because the most authentic forms of modernity can be found in Western Europe, nor because modernity emanated from the center somewhat associated with Western Europe to the periphery of the Rest. Rather this is because the notion of 'modern' has been accepted and used primarily as a translation from its European originals for more than a century in many places, including those outside the geographic terrain of Europe and North America. One can talk about 'modern' as if there were a globally common apprehension of it precisely because, all over the world, people assume it is impossible to apprehend it without referring it back to its European equivalents, from which their local translations are believed to have derived. In the globally-accepted conception of modernity the schema of co-figuration between the West and the Rest is already at work powerfully.

Despite linguistic and social diversities among the different sites of the world, therefore, the notion of 'modern' is supposedly retraceable to the singular history of Western Europe, thanks to the Eurocentric structure incorporated in the very notion itself. In this respect, the schema of co-figuration is the form which is most appropriate to the representation of the Eurocentric world, and it is also a form in which the legacy of European colonialisms is preserved. As far as the local terms used for modernity are concerned, however, the situation was drastically different in 'pre-modern' times preceding the translation of 'modern' into local equivalents.

The introduction of 'modern' qualitatively changed the manner in which people customarily organized their historical experience. With the arrival of 'modern', people in many places in the world began to map geopolitical directives, centered on colonial powers in Western Europe, onto their pasts and futures, and to order their destinies and desires in terms of cartographic relativity. 'Modern' now implied much more than a chronological closeness to the present moment in which periods are classified. Consequently they sought coherence in the transition from the experience of their past to the anxiety or hope for their future by projecting a trajectory from a locus outside the modern onto a locus within. The progression of time from the past to the future was thus associated with a movement, on the cartographically imagined surface of the globe, from a geographic location outside the 'modern' civilization to another within it. The dynamic ecstatic or ex-static process from the past to the future was deprived of its temporality, and represented spatially as a vector from a geopolitical location in the periphery to another in the center. Thereby the temporal movement could be appropriated by the schema of co-figuration, and consequently the two pairing figures of the West and the Rest were imagined as if each were somewhat homogeneous within, despite the fact that neither the West nor the Rest could be an entity or a unity of language anyway. As a matter of fact, this explains how the mythic construct called the West was constituted, and why the West had been perceived as structurally indissociable from the modern until recently.

Accordingly it is important to differentiate two dimensions in which the schema of co-figuration operates. In the case of the West and the Rest binary, it is always the one-and-many opposition, and the West remains the point of reference in all comparisons, whereas the Rest is variable. Therefore, the West is often imagined to be an ever growing originality such as the

continuing tradition of Christianity, the foundational structure of medieval legal and theocratic order, and the archaic seed of reason embedded in Greek geometry, while the Rest is simply an accidental assemblage of diverse life forms and does not constitute a single substance. This means that the centrality of the West consists in the polarity of the distribution of ethnic, civilizational and racial comparisons.

Conversely, in the case of the co-figurative identification of the ethno-linguistic unity, it is the postulate of specific difference between two languages in translation. To the extent that the ethno-linguistic unity could be thought of without reference to the polarity in the distribution of comparisons, the international world does not and should not have a dominant center and this idealized international world consisting of equal national sovereignties is expressed in the design of the United Nations.

But, of course, these two dimensions in the operation of the schema of co-figuration are intimately related to one another, and their correlation is one of the fundamental features of the modern international world.

Historically, how we represent translation does not only prescribe how we collectively imagine national communities and ethnic identities but also how we relate individually to national sovereignty. It is also complicit with the discourse of the West and the Rest through which the colonial power relationship is continually fantasized and reproduced.

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