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CONSTRUCTING CULTURES

[Introduction]

Where are we in Translation Studies?

Translation Studies Today

THE QUESTIONS that are generally accepted as relevant and important enough to be asked in the field of translation studies are very different now from what they were twenty years ago, when we first began to publish on translation. That fact is perhaps the clearest indicator of the distance we have covered in the meantime. Another indicator is that 'translation studies' has now come to mean something like 'anything that (claims) to have anything to do with translation'. Twenty years ago it meant: training translators. It is amazing to see, with hindsight, how preposterous some of the questions that were asked twenty years ago seem to us now.

The most preposterous question was that of translatability or: 'is translation possible'. The question seems preposterous now because we have discovered the history of translation in the meantime, and that discovery enabled us to counter that question with another, namely: 'why are you interested in proving or disproving the feasibility of something that has been going on around most of the world for at least four thousand years?'

History, then, is one of the things that happened to translation studies since the 1970s, and with history a sense of greater relativity and of the greater importance of concrete negotiations at certain times and in certain places, as opposed to abstract, general rules that would always be valid. In the post-war period, the agenda behind the analysis of translatability was that of the possible development of machines that would make translations valid for all times and all places, and would do so at any time, in any place. Machines, and machines alone, were to be trusted to produce 'good' translations, always and everywhere. History has turned out to be the ghost in that machine, and as the ghost has grown, the machine has crumbled.

Perhaps the most arresting example of this crumbling of the machine is the long retreat, and final disintegration of the once key concept of equivalence. Twenty years ago those in the field would ask themselves whether equivalence, too, was possible, and whether there was a foolproof way to find it if it were possible. Again, the underlying assumption seemed to be that there could be something like an abstract and universally valid equivalence. Today we know that specific translators decide on the specific degree of equivalence they can realistically aim for in a

specific text, and that they decide on that specific degree of equivalence on the basis of considerations that have little to do with the concept as it was used two decades ago.

The Jerome Model

The concept of equivalence lies at the heart of what may be called the 'Jerome' model of translation, after Saint Jerome (c.331-c.420 AD) whose Vulgate set the acknowledged and unacknowledged standards of much of translation in the West until about two hundred years ago. In its simplest avatar it reads more or less as follows: there is a text, and that text just needs to be transposed into another language, as faithfully as possible. Faithfulness is insured by good dictionaries, and since anybody can, basically, use a good dictionary, there is really no reason to train translators well, and even less of a reason to pay them well.

The days of the Jerome model are now numbered, at least in the West. The model is characterised by the presence of a central, sacred text, that of the Bible, which must be translated with the utmost fidelity, and the early ideal of that fidelity was the interlinear translation, in which one word would match another, indeed, in which the translated word would be written under the word it was supposed to translate. Even if the interlinear ideal could not be maintained in practice, short of producing a text syntactically so skewed as to become unintelligible, it did remain the ideal, not just for Biblical translation, but also, by extension, for translations of other texts. Precisely because it could never be realised, the ideal continued to haunt translators and those who thought about translation over the centuries. Since it could not be realised, de facto compromises were necessary, which were, of course, entered into, although at the double price of interminable wrangling about precisely how 'faithful' faithfulness should be, or what could really be termed an 'equivalent' of what and, more importantly, of generating a perennial feeling of guilt in translators and of permanently marginalising them in society as necessary evils, more evil at some times, more necessary at others.

To be able to elevate faithfulness to this central position, to the exclusion of many other factors, the Jerome model had to reduce thinking about translation to the linguistic level only. This could be done all the more easily because the text that served as the yardstick for fidelity was seen as timeless and unchangeable precisely because of its sacred nature.

It is because the Bible no longer exerts such powerful influence as a sacred text in the West to the extent it once did, that thinking about translation has been able to move away from the increasingly sterile 'faithful/free' opposition, and that it has been able to redefine equivalence, which is no longer seen as the mechanical matching of words in dictionaries, but rather as a strategic choice made by translators. What has changed is that one type of faithfulness (the one commonly connected with equivalence) is no longer imposed on translators. Rather, they are free to opt for the kind of faithfulness that will ensure, in their opinion, that a given

text is received by the target audience in optimal conditions.

The change that has occurred, then, is from the belief in one type of faithfulness, conveniently equated with 'faithfulness as such', to the realisation that there are different types of faithfulness that may be adequate in different situations. After this change, people in the field gradually stopped asking the old questions and started replacing them with the questions that are dominating the field right now. These questions include: 'What is the function of the (this, not a, any) translation likely to be?' 'What type of text needs to be translated?' 'Who is the initiator of the/this translation?' Translations, we have learned, are not faithful or free as such, not 'good' or 'bad' for ever, in all circumstances; rather, it is perfectly possible that they have to be faithful in some situations and free in others, in order to work to the satisfaction of their initiators.

We have learned to ask these questions, and we have realised their relevance, because we are no longer 'stuck to the word', or even the text, because we have realised the importance of context in matters of translation. One context is, of course, that of history. The other context is that of culture. The questions that now dominate the field are able to dominate it because research has taken a 'cultural turn', because people in the field began to realise, some time ago, that translations are never produced in a vacuum, and that they are also never received in a vacuum.

The Horace Model

We are in the process of moving beyond the Jerome model, towards a model that is associated with the name of the Roman poet Horace (65 BC-8 BC) and which historically predates the Jerome model, but has been overshadowed by it for about fourteen centuries. Horace's often quoted, though not always understood, 'fidus interpres' was not faithful to a text, but to *his* customers, and they were his customers only in Horace's time. A 'fidus' translator/interpreter was one who could be trusted, who got the job done on time and to the satisfaction of both parties. To do so, he had to negotiate between two clients and two languages, if he was an interpreter, or between a patron and two languages if he was a translator. The fact that negotiation is the central concept here militates heavily against the kind of faithfulness traditionally associated with equivalence. Indeed, it is entirely conceivable, not to say inevitable, that the interpreter who wants to negotiate successfully a business transaction may, at times, be very well advised not to translate 'faithfully', so as not to let the negotiations collapse. In the Horatian model there is no sacred text, but there definitely is a privileged language, namely Latin. This implies that negotiation is, in the end, always slanted toward the privileged language, and that the negotiation does not take place on absolutely equal terms. The parallels between the position of Latin in Horace's time and English today are interestingly close. English today occupies the same position throughout the world that Latin occupied in the Mediterranean

during the last centuries of the republic and the first centuries of the principate. Translations into English, particularly from third world languages, are almost invariably slanted toward English: we are confronted with what we may term the 'Holiday Inn Syndrome', where everything foreign and exotic is standardised, to a great extent. At least this is the case with texts that can be considered to build the 'cultural capital' of a civilisation. The question does not even arise for another type of text, and for reasons that have little to do with translation as such: the day when computer manuals will be translated from Uzbek into English, rather than the other way around, is obviously not near.

Another change is that today, we have come to recognise that different types of texts require different translation strategies. Some texts are primarily designed to convey information, and it stands to reason that translations of such texts should try to convey that information as well as possible. How they do so in practice will, in each particular case, be the result of assumed or explicit negotiation among the initiators who not only want the text translated, but also want it to function in the receiving culture in a meaningful way, the translator who actually translates it, the culture to which the text belongs, the culture the translation is aimed at, and the function the text is supposed to fulfil in the culture the translation is aimed at.

There are also texts that are primarily designed to entertain. They will have to be translated in a different, though not necessarily a radically different manner, since texts that are primarily designed to convey information, may well also try to entertain their readers, if only to ensure that the information will be conveyed in the most painless manner possible. Conversely, texts that are primarily designed to entertain, may, and often do, also contain information.

A third type of texts, which obviously has elements of the other two in them, as well as elements of the fourth type, tries to persuade. The fourth type consists of those texts that are recognised as belonging to the 'cultural capital' of a given culture, or even to the 'cultural capital' of something like 'world culture'. The novels of Trollope would be more 'British' than 'world' cultural capital, the plays of Shakespeare would be both. Texts that are recognised as cultural capital will, obviously, have started out as belonging to one, two, or all three of the other types, and they will continue to influence the other types.

But perhaps more important than the several and separate types is the existence of what can be called a 'grid' of text, the textual grid that a culture makes use of, the collection of acceptable ways in which things can be said. Different cultures may, of course, make use of essentially the same textual grid. The French, German, and English cultures, for instance, make use of the same textual grid, with slight variations in emphasis, because that is the grid they inherited from Greco-Roman antiquity through the shared vicissitudes of history. Other cultures, like Chinese and Japanese culture, have textual grids that are much more unique and not shared with other cultures. The interesting point in all this, though, is that these 'textual grids' seem to exist in cultures on a level that is

deeper, or higher, or whatever metaphor you prefer, than that of language. In other words, the 'textual grid' pre-exists language(s). These grids are man-made, historical, contingent constructs; they are by no means eternal, unchangeable, or even 'always already there'. They can, and do, appear given for all eternity only when, as so often happens, they have been interiorised by human beings to such an extent that they have become totally transparent for them, that they appear 'natural'.

If textual grids do exist, and we claim that they do, not explicitly, but as a pattern of expectations that is felt, has been interiorised by members of a culture, who may not be able to list most, or all of their characteristic features and the rules that regulate their production, then students of translation should pay more attention to them than they have in the past, whether they want to learn the technique of translating, or whether they want to analyse translations and the part they play in the evolution of cultures.

One of the great strides that has been made over the last twenty years is the realisation that the house of translation has, indeed, many mansions now, not least because the definition of the field has been widened to include more than just the technique of translating, as it is studied and taught. Yet it would seem that the set of questions identified above as dominating the field, is as valid for the house as a whole as it is for its many mansions. This central set of questions guarantees the unity of the field at its core; beyond that, there is much work, and of various different kinds, to be done in the various subfields, or 'interfields', of translation. It is easy to imagine translation as an interfield of linguistics, for instance, of literature, and of anthropology, cultural and otherwise. Again, while the different interfields can be 'felt' to exist by those working in the larger field, it would not be altogether wise to try to erect barriers between them, since one can, and should, indeed learn from the other whenever necessary.

A tremendous change, perhaps the most tremendous change in the field of translation occurred not when more and more interfields were added, but when the finality, the goal of work in the field was drastically widened. In the 1970s, translation was seen, as it undoubtedly is, as 'vital to the interaction between cultures'. What we have done is to take this statement and stand it on its head: if translation is, indeed, as everybody believes, vital to the interaction between cultures, then why not take the next step and study translation, not just to train translators, but precisely to study cultural interaction? There are no doubt various other ways in which that process can also be studied, but we contend that translation offers a means of lying cultural interaction that is not offered in the same way by any other field. Translation provides researchers with one of the most obvious, comprehensive, and easy to study 'laboratory situations' for the study of cultural interaction. A comparison of original and translation will not only reveal the constraints under which translators have to work at a certain time in a certain place, but also the strategies they develop to overcome, or east work around those constraints. This kind of comparison can, therefore, give the researcher something

like a synchronic snapshot of many features of a given culture at a given time. Moreover, it can easily be shown that certain translations, and not just of the Bible in the West or the Buddhist Scriptures in China, have exerted an enormous influence on the evolution of societies and, through them, the evolution of history.

Translation is in history, always. It is, in many cases, a vital factor within history, and the more we learn about its history, the more obvious this fact becomes. It is no coincidence, therefore, that many histories of translation have been published over the last ten years, just as it is no exaggeration to say that if we want to study cultural history, the history of philosophy, literature, and religion, we shall have to study translations to a much greater extent than we have done in the past.

If you are a researcher in the field of translation and you think that translation does, and should, promote international understanding, you will define meaningful research in your interfield (which you should not equate with the field as a whole) as the activity that provides those working in that interfield with the tools needed to do their work better, to improve the techniques of translating. If, on the other hand, you think that translation should primarily be used as a tool to analyse the processes through which international understanding comes into being, you will define meaningful research in your interfield (which you should also not equate with the field as a whole) in a different way. In the first case you will produce books and articles aimed at improving the training of translators, you will concern yourself more with translating than with translation. In the second case, you will produce the kind of case studies that are brought together in this book, as possible instances of the direction in which this kind of research could develop. There is no reason why both mansions should not be able to coexist in the house of translation.

The Schleiermacher Model

The case studies collected in this book deal with texts that constitute cultural capital, which should not be equated with capital as it is used in economics, but which makes it easier for people within a culture to gain access to that kind of capital as well. Many of these are the texts you need to be able to talk about, or at least bluff about convincingly enough in polite society. These are the texts the bourgeoisie hastened to read from the seventeenth century onwards because the aristocracy had been reading them, indeed claiming them as its own, and because the bourgeoisie did not want to be cut off from the company of the aristocracy, because that company would eventually provide access to the aristocracy's power, often also in exchange for the money of the bourgeoisie.

It is in the domain of cultural capital that translation can most clearly be seen to construct cultures. It does so by negotiating the passage of texts between them, or rather, by devising strategies through which texts from one culture can penetrate the textual and conceptual grids of another culture, and function in that other culture. What we call the 'socialisation process', of which formal education is a big,

though not the only part, leaves us with textual and conceptual grids that regulate most of the writing and the thinking in the culture in which we grow up.

The most obvious form of negotiation between textual and conceptual grids is that of analogy; it is also the most superficial one, and the one that leads, inevitably, to the obliteration of differences between cultures and the texts they produce. Analogy is the easy way in negotiations between cultures, precisely because it slants the culture of origin toward the receiving culture, whose prestige is perceived to be so much greater. But it need not be the only way. The Schleiermacher model of translation takes issue with the automatic standardisation analogy produces. In his famous lecture 'On the Different Ways of Translating', Friedrich Schleiermacher demands, among other things, that translations from different languages into German should read and sound different: the reader should be able to guess the Spanish behind a translation from Spanish, and the Greek behind a translation from Greek. If all translations read and sound alike (as they were soon to do in Victorian translations of the classics), the identity of the source text has been lost, levelled in the target text. The Schleiermacher model emphasises the importance of 'foreignising' translation. The privileged position of the receiving language or culture is denied, and the alteriry of the source text needs to be preserved.

Each of the three models referred to here has its place in a developing study of translation, as long as they are not seen (and do not see each other) as mutually exclusive. In programmes that are set up to teach the technique of translating, by which is most often meant the translating of texts that are not considered to belong to a society's cultural capital, though they are just as fundamental to that society in a different way — think of computer manuals, car manuals, medical, legal, and pharmaceutical texts — the Jerome model would have to come first, obviously, but only chronologically so. In a first stage of translation teaching, translation may still be used as a kind of proficiency check on students' knowledge of the language they are studying. Within the Jerome model students can be held to a more rigorous discipline. They can be shown where their strengths and weaknesses lie, and they can be helped to cultivate the former and overcome the latter. The Horace model needs to supplement the Jerome model in the first phase of the teaching of translating, to heighten students' awareness of the textual and conceptual grids that pre-exist the texts with which they are working.

The Horace model becomes more important on the level of the study of the actual translations of texts that can be subsumed under the category of cultural capital. It is not difficult to show how the process of negotiation, which can be said to refer to both the institutional constraints under which it took place, and the translators' own personal input, has affected the reception of certain texts in certain cultures, and how it has, at times, decisively influenced the evolution of those receptor cultures.

When juxtaposed with the Schleiermacher model, the Horace model helps us to ask the fundamental questions in the analysis of translations, questions that

deal with the relative power and prestige of cultures, with matters of dominance, submission, and resistance. It should be stressed that these questions need to be answered in the translating of all kinds of texts and the analysis of all kinds of translations. The relative power and prestige of cultures is extremely relevant for the selection of texts to be translated. Dominance shows itself in how translation changes the ways in which people write in the target culture. Advertisements written around the world now look much more like American advertisements than they did a few years ago. Submission, paradoxically, shows itself most clearly, these days, in instances of non-translation. Yuppies and would-be yuppies the world over will feel flattered by the fact that texts in their own language include the occasional English word like 'cool', or something upscale looking that ends in '-isation'. Resistance often shows itself in the refusal to accept certain aspects of the original that would lead to a negative reaction in the target culture, for instance when the original uses scantily clad models to advertise jeans and the advertising campaign is aimed at Islamic countries. Manufacturers, who want their product sold, are usually very happy to negotiate about this in the full Horatian sense of the word.

Yet, and this is perhaps the most fascinating topic right now, perhaps also because it is hardly still within the limits of any translation interfield, unless we expand once again what translation is 'felt' to be, the process of acculturation, in which translation has, traditionally, been seen as a key element, takes place not just *between cultures,* but also *inside a* given culture, any given culture. At the beginning of the socialisation process, those about to be initiated into a culture are not given access to the 'originals' of the texts that are considered to make up the cultural capital of that culture. Rather, individuals are exposed to translations of those texts, not, in most cases from another language, although, in some cases, from older stages of the same language, but literally from another world into their own: the cultural capital is rewritten in such a way that it matches their assumed level of comprehension at a certain stage in their development. These rewritings appear not just in the shape of verbal, but also of non-verbal texts. When we are deemed old enough to be exposed to some of the laws of our universe, we do not read Newton's *Principia Mathematica,* not even in some kind of translation, we are told about Newton's laws in physics textbooks. Our culture has decided that all we need from Newton now are a few formulas.

It is a sobering thought that most, if not all people who participate in a given culture will never in their life be exposed to all the 'originals' on which culture claims to be based. It is important, therefore, to realise that rewritings and translations function as originals for most, if not all people in a culture in those fields which are not an important part of their professional expertise. If fewer and fewer people read *Pride and Prejudice,* the novel, and if more and more people watch versions of it on television instead, it stands to reason that the visual rewriting of the novel will effectively replace the original, or rather, function as the original for many people.

The more the socialisation process depends on rewritings, the more the image of one culture is constructed for another by translations, the more important it becomes to know how the process of rewriting develops, and what kinds of rewritings/translations are produced. Why are certain texts rewritten/translated and not others? What is the agenda behind the production of rewritings/translations? How are the techniques of translating used in the service of a given agenda? Rewriters and translators are the people who really construct cultures on the basic level in our day and age. It is as simple, and as monumental as that. And because it is so simple and yet so monumental, it is also transparent: it tends to be overlooked.

Where next?

And then the final question: where do we go from here? Where will Translation Studies, one of the fastest-growing interfields of the 1990s go in the new millennium? It will go in directions that we demand, as a result of our exploration of some of the as yet unresolved questions that remain to be answered.

We need to know more about the history of translation, and not just in the West, but also in other cultures. A great deal has been done, but the more we know, the more we shall be able to relativise the practices of the present, the more we shall be able to see them as constructed and contingent, not as given, eternal, and transparent.

It is no accident that so much exciting work in translation studies is coming from those cultures who are presently in a phase of post-colonial development. As the world reassesses its relationship to the European 'original', so concepts of translation are inevitably re-evaluated and canons of excellence based on Eurocentric models are revised.

We need to learn more about the acculturation process between cultures, or rather, about the symbiotic working together of different kinds of rewritings within that process, about the ways in which translation, together with criticism, anthologisation, historiography, and the production of reference works, constructs the image of writers and /or their works, and then watches those images become reality. We also *need* to know more about the ways in which one image dislodges another, the ways in which different images of the same writers and their works coexist with each other and contradict each other.

We need to learn more about the agenda behind the construction of these images: why did the Finns, for instance, suddenly decide they needed an epic? This leads us to the domain, another very promising interfield, of cultural policy, exemplified in translation and rewriting policy. Needless to say, the figure of the initiator looms large here, especially if that initiator is a (totalitarian) state, which tries to create a total image of itself with the' help of the partial images it

constructs. The other important factor in this respect is the relative prestige of cultures, that of Roman Antiquity versus English in Dryden's time, for instance, as compared to now, when English occupies the position of prestige language of the world.

We also need to learn more about the texts that constitute the cultural capital of other civilisations, and we need to learn about them in ways that try to overcome, or bypass the kiss of death bestowed by acculturation through analogy. Haikus are not epigrams, Chinese novels have their own rules, both the textual and conceptual grids of other civilisations should not be reduced to those of the West.

We need to find out how to translate the cultural capital of other civilisations in a way that preserves at least part of their own nature, without producing translations that are so low on the entertainment factor that they appeal only to those who read for professional reasons. Perhaps this is another area in which different forms of rewriting need to cooperate: we could imagine the translated text, translated in a way that also appeals to the non-professional reader, preceded by a long introduction which sets out to show how the original text works on its own terms, within its own grid, rather than to tell readers only what it is 'like' or even 'most like' in their own cultures. This kind of attempt is most likely to bring us up against the limits of translation, a necessary confrontation, for without such a challenge, how else are we ever to overcome such limits and move on?

Reference: *Constructing Cultures. Essays on Literary Translation*, 1998, Multilingual Matters, p. 1-11.