

ON EMPIRICISM AND BAD PHILOSOPHY IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

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Revised January 28, 2010.

A previous version of this text has been published in: Hasuria Che Omar, Haslina Haroon, and Aniswal Abd. Ghani (eds.) *The Sustainability of the Translation Field*. Persatuan Penerjemah Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur, 2009, 28-39.

ABSTRACT

Translation can be known through direct engagement with the practice or profession, through theoretical propositions, or through empirical applications of theoretical propositions. Here we make the argument that the repetition of theoretical propositions without empirical application leads to some unhelpful pieces of philosophy. This particularly concerns the following general postulates 1) "translation is difference", tested on Walter Benjamin's reference to the untranslatability of words for bread; 2) "translation is survival", tested on Homi Bhabha's use of Benjamin and Derrida (who do not survive the use); 3) "translators are authors", tested on the "alien I", pseudotranslations and process studies; and 4) "translation is cultural translation", tested on the subject positions created by a piece of current Germanic theoretical discourse. On all four counts, the case is made that the practice of translation exceeds its theory, thus requiring an ongoing empirical attitude.

I think the most important trend has been the shift from philosophical conceptual analysis towards empirical research. (Chesterman 1998: 201)

1. INTRODUCTION

My purpose here is to defend a kind of study, with respect to translation or anything, that goes out into the world to see what is happening. I am arguing against an alternative kind of study that sees the world through the authoritative insights of others, mostly as recycled certitudes of theory. My arguments could have been made in the European twelfth century, in the Enlightenment, or in the nineteenth century. In the current context, however, most of what I have to say will be aimed at a brand of literary Translation Studies that recycles snippets of Benjamin, Derrida, Borges and the like. I certainly have nothing against philosophy, literature or the names just cited (all of whom I read with pleasure), but I do have doubts about whether that canon can survive untested. That would seem to put me in the same general camp as the various empirical approaches that have developed in a wider Europe since the Russian Formalists, and I am happy enough to be situated there, since it is much better than being nowhere. Thanks to that positioning, I need not blithely sing the praises of any non-theory; I will not naïvely suppose that one can go out into the world and simply see what it there. I extol instead the virtues of a particular kind of theorization, one that must be completed and extended and questioned in the act of application. But before we get there, my plan is to present a few cases of non-optimal theorization, loosely and probably unfairly labeled as bad philosophy, of which there is quite a lot to choose from.

2. "Translation is difference"

A plethora of theorists never cease to remind us that translation is not repetition of the same; it is the constant creation of difference. That is common sense: a translation is always different from its source, in countless places. It might also be common sense to say that a translation is always supposed to have something in common with its source, in at least several places. But let us leave the commonality aside. The plethoric theorists return, time and again, to Walter Benjamin's essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (see Jakobs 1975; de Man 1986; Andrew Benjamin 1989; Gentzler 1993/2001; Bhabha 1994/2004; Vermeer 1996; Rendall 1997; and much since then). They do so to pick up timeless truths like the following:

In „Brot“ und „pain“ ist das Gemeinte zwar dasselbe, die Art, es zu meinen, dagegen nicht. In der Art des Meinens nämlich liegt es, daß beide Worte dem Deutschen und dem Franzosen je etwas Verschiedenes bedeuten, daß sie für beide nicht vertauschbar sind, ja sich letzten Endes auszuschließen streben; am Gemeinten aber, daß sie, absolut genommen, das Selbe und Identische bedeuten. (1923/1977: 55)

The first part of this can be rendered along the following lines (our translation, but the others are not so different):

In the words Brot ["bread" in German] and pain ["bread" in French] the thing meant is the same, but the way in which it is meant is not. Indeed in that way of meaning it happens that the two words signify different things to a German and to a French person respectively, and that the words are not interchangeable for either of the speakers, [...]

That is more or less where most of the citations stop. It is a convenient point: we are all now daydreaming about different kinds of bread, comparing bubbling warm baguettes with heavy nourishing rye, fondly remembering *pâtisseries* and quick breakfasts in the early morning of wet train stations. How true, how true, we surmise: our cultures are so different in even the most basic of things (well, especially in the basics). The citations at this point might pair up with Eva Hoffman's story about Polish milk, which she remembers she had to boil before drinking, and so could never translate as English milk (Hoffman 1989). Such memories are certainly not interchangeable. Bread is never just bread; milk is not simply milk; cultures differentiate everything. But then, as we see in the German text, the next phrase perturbs the reminiscence:

, and that in the end they strive to exclude each other. [...]

The two words, or the two cultures, or the two nationalities, actually work to be different? Well, yes, that is partly how identities operate – the self is defined in opposition to the other, as in the *identité ipse* that Ricœur sees ensuing not just from happy dialogue, but also, surely, from ultimately mistrustful interaction with the other (see Ricœur 2004). Mutual exclusion is a part of boundary work, and that is perhaps not a happy place to leave translation. So Benjamin returns to the level of sameness:

As to the intended object, however, the two words, taken absolutely, mean the one and same thing.

Our theorists want to forget about that return to the same; they are perhaps not so worried about the practices of mutual exclusion by which borders are traced and wars are fought. Difference is cool. There can be little doubt that the subsequent passages in Benjamin's text place the absolute sameness (as if anything can be "taken absolutely") in an idealized pure

language and/or the Messianic end of all translations – if there were no differences, why translate, after all? So we are left with the crux of all translation theory: “equivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguistics”, said Roman Jakobson (1959/2004: 139), and Benjamin would simply be giving an eschatology of the same paradox.

Is this bad philosophy? Not necessarily. But the Messianic end of all translations might have been closer than Benjamin wanted to see. When is French bread the same as German bread? Is it when the redeemed souls and angels have no need to eat? But consider the following:

Benjamin’s text was written as the preface to his renditions of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens* (a section of *Les Fleurs du mal*). Now, in this case, the text is so firmly set in Paris that the French *pain* might fairly be rendered as *baguette* (as an English word), allowing few glimpses of any pure meaning of bread. However, as it happens, the only bread in Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* comes from explicitly Christian tradition (“bread and wine” in the poem *La Bénédiction* and “to earn your daily bread” in *La Muse vénale*), and that common Christian heritage or imposition gives French and German shared expressions (yes, equivalents) at both those points. At one very important level, the French and German Baudelaire are parts of the same common culture, and in the practices of the here-and-now.

Translational dialectics can surely continue to the end of the world, but various institutional churches have solved the problem in the meantime. One only has to go and see, in the texts, in the translations, or in the churches.

But we tread lightly. Our argument is not at all that good philosophy will produce good translations, or that the value of Benjamin can be found in his renditions of Baudelaire (Heaven forbid!). Our plea is simply that questions of the eschatological can sometimes be resolved by looking at actual practice, indeed at the translator’s daily bread.

3. “Translation is survival”

Homi Bhabha, as one of many readers of Benjamin, is interested not so much in the bread as in the notion of untranslatability, found in Benjamin’s passing claim that “translations themselves are untranslatable” (Benjamin 1923/1977: 61). For Bhabha, that apparently untranslatable quality of translations is a point of resistance, a negation of complete integration, and a will to survival found in the subjectivity of the immigrant. As such, it presents a way out of the binary dilemmas. And this, we suspect, is the great attraction of translation as a metaphor or way of thinking, here and throughout the whole of Postcolonial and Cultural Studies.

To get to the association of resistance with survival, however, Bhabha has to mix this “untranslatability” with the part of Benjamin’s essay that talks about translations as extending the life of the original. Benjamin does indeed say that translations give the original an “after-life” (*Fortleben*, “prolonged life”), thanks to the “fleeting” way in which meaning adheres to them (Benjamin 1923/2004: 61). But to get from “after-life” to “survival”, Bhabha takes us on a short trip through Derrida’s commentary in *The Ear of the Other* (1982/1985: 122-123), where Derrida tells us that 1) Benjamin uses the terms *Überleben* and *Fortleben* interchangeably to mean “living on”, and 2) the one French term *survivre* (“survive” but literally “on-live,” “to live on”) translates both Benjamin’s terms. Benjamin’s “prolonged life” (*Fortleben/Nachleben*) can thus become “survival” (*Überleben, survie*) in the eyes of Bhabha, and both are related to being on,

or in, a problematic border. Thus, the previous theorization of translation can be invested in just one word: *survival*. Bhabha knits the concept together as follows:

If hybridity is heresy, then to blaspheme is to dream. To dream not of the past or present, nor the continuous present; it is not the nostalgic dream of tradition, nor the Utopian dream of modern progress; it is the dream of translation as "survival," as Derrida translates the "time" of Benjamin's concept of the after-life of translation, as sur-vivre, the act of living on borderlines. Rushdie translates this into the migrant's dream of survival; an initiatory interstices [sic]; an empowering condition of hybridity; an emergence that turns "return" into reinscription or re-description; an iteration that is not belated, but ironic and insurgent. (Bhabha 1994/2004: 324).

Is this bad philosophy? Not necessarily. The passage is concise, poetic, suggestive, and deals with a major question of our time: how should different cultural groups live within a shared state structure? But note the way the thought is presented, not from any claims about the world, not from a sociology of multi-ethnic societies, not from a history of migrations, not from comparisons of any good or bad societies, but from the apparently authoritative pronouncements of prior theorists. One charitably suspects the impetus came from experience of the sociocultural networks closest and dearest to Bhabha, and that the work on prior theory merely operates here as an instance of academic legitimization. On the face of it, though, the newness in the world is that translation theory is now able to solve major social problems. Really?

In Bhabha's chicane of interlingual interpretations, of course, a few nuances have been shaved off, with alarming certitude. What for Benjamin was "fleeting" has become "resistance", which is almost an opposite; what was a discussion of *texts* in Benjamin and Derrida has become an explanation of *people* in Bhabha; what was an issue of *languages* has become a concern within *just one language* (Bhabha writes as a Professor of English texts and translations written in English); what was the border between an individual's life and death for Derrida has become the cultural border of migration, and what was generally a theory of translation as linguistic transformation has now become a struggle for new cultural identities. This is then generalized in the formula: "Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication" (1994/2004: 326). In this condensation to performative survival, the concerns of Benjamin and Derrida obviously do not survive.

All stories thus become one story; multiple differences are lost; so much for difference being cool. One might argue, of course, that Bhabha would never have seen cultural hybridity as a survival strategy if he had never read about translation in Benjamin and Derrida, so the rigmarole is justified. It seems equally possible, however, that a trite and ultimately empty conclusion is made to appear substantial through the authority and complexity of past theories. If so, it is bad philosophy, and readers should check each of its sources, not to mention the survival rates of immigrants.

4. "Translators are authors"

Some theorists claim that the translator's authorship deserves recognition, or better recognition. This claim is mostly made with respect to literary translation (cf. Zeller 2000), political metaphors of translator-author relationships (cf. Chamberlain 1995) or copyright regimes (cf. Venuti 1995: 12). Lawrence Venuti has probably been the most consistent and vociferous proponent of the translator's authorship, which he opposes to a "Romantic conception of

authorship” that would accord all creativity to the writer of the source text, thereby relegating the translator’s work to a secondary “derivative” status (cf. Venuti 1992). This critique is largely in tune with mainstream literary ideology: the “death of the author” was identified by Foucault and Barthes; theories of intertextuality took off from Kristeva’s reading of Bakhtin; the idea that all creativity is translational has been with us for some time, as a general feature of postmodern thought. From this perspective, to say that the translator has authorship is also to say that all authors work translationally, which seems nothing fundamentally new.

Is this bad philosophy? Not on the surface – many contemporary theorists would sign up to the general proposition that translation embraces all communication, indeed all acts of identity. Yet in what precise sense can we state, categorically, that all translators are authors, and all authors translators? If the statements were “taken absolutely”, to borrow Benjamin’s phrase again, the distinction between translator and author would be entirely meaningless, the label “translation” would be similarly superfluous, and this does not quite seem to reflect the situation in our contemporary cultures.

The concept of authorship can be understood in many senses. It concerns not just creativity or copyright, but also ethical responsibility, a point that has been overlooked by many of the literary ideologies. In Goffman’s analysis, it is one thing actually to produce a text (as a professional speechwriter might do), and something a little different to take responsibility for it (as should the president who then reads the speech). That is, there is a sense of ethical authorship that can be aligned with what Goffman terms “the principal”: “someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say” (1981: 146). These terms are strangely reminiscent of the discourse ethics that Habermas (1990, for example) uses as the keystone for liberal humanist governance; the affair is of some importance. Now, in this sense, do translators take responsibility for the language they produce? Do they necessarily act in the same way as authors?

At this point the questions posed by theory will hopefully take us out in search of evidence. There are several ways in which a basic empiricism might attempt to decide the toss:

- *The “alien I”*: Whenever a translating translator or interpreter says “I”, the discursive conventions of our cultures allow that this first person does not refer to the translator or interpreter: its vector is towards the author of a previous “source” text of some kind. According to convention, the translator is not responsible for the content attached to that “I”; they are responsible for the *representation* of that content, not its truth value as such. Our cultures thus allow that, discursively, translators are distinguished from the responsibility of authors.
- *Pseudotranslations*: Thanks to this discursive convention, history is littered with pseudotranslations, understood here as texts presented as translations but for which there was never any source text. That is, some authors pretend to be translators, often in an attempt to sneak around censorship: “Don’t blame me – I’m just the translator!”. If translators were authors, there would be no pseudotranslations.
- *Empirical studies of translation processes*: Thanks to various think-aloud protocols, screen-recording and eye-tracking technologies, we think we are gaining some insight into the ways translators actually produce texts. The general evidence is indeed that professional translators are more “authorial” than are novices: they are apparently more aware of global communicative purposes, textual strategies, stylistics and pragmatics (we summarize a summary given in Englund Dimitrova 2005). On the other hand, this

may be what the researchers most want to discover. Some findings would seem to swim against the current: Jensen (2000) reports that translators tend to use a “knowledge-telling” mode of production, rather than the “knowledge-transforming” mode that would seem more in tune with the concept of (literary) authorship: expert translators would engage in less problem-solving, goal-setting and re-analyzing behavior than do young professional translators. They would thus do less work on rhetorical patterning as a mode of knowledge production. Similarly, research by Immonen (2006) suggests that translators, as opposed to monolingual writers, pause fewer times in the first draft, revise for longer, and pause longer at lower-level textual units. In other words, translating is not like authoring a text from scratch. But any translator could tell you that.

Are translators authors? It is an interesting question to ask, but the answers cannot come from theoretical reflection alone.

5. “Translation is (always already) cultural translation”

My final example will be a slightly different approach to the same problem. I would like to describe the experience of reading a text that draws on several of the above strands without presenting anything stunningly original. The text is called “Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem” (Buden & Nowotny 2009). It was sent to me for comment prior to its publication. At the time I declined to comment because, to be honest, I had no idea what the text was about. Now that I see it has been published alongside no less than eight responses, I do not feel quite so ashamed – most of the respondents simply talk about their own ideas, perhaps as a polite way of avoiding the embarrassing confusion of “cultural translation”. I have nevertheless now read the piece several times, carefully, and I’m afraid I still have no clear idea of what “cultural translation” is. Is that the problem the text introduces?

“Cultural translation”, we are told, is in a German citizenship test for immigrants, full of absurd questions requiring yes/no answers about German identity and culture. And that is the only example. The theoretical text is full of things like the bell-ringing conclusion: “Or is “democracy” simply a wrong answer that still waits for a correct question? The search for this question, and nothing else, is cultural translation” (209: 207). Oh, so that’s what it is! *Alles klar!*

I feel, however, a more profound frustration when reading this text. The problem is not just with not knowing what it is about, but with the way it positions the reader in terms of a sharp ideological divide between good and bad concepts of translation. Here is an example:

[...] the notion of translation, or more precisely of cultural translation, has immense importance. For it can be applied to both sides of the contradiction between an essentialist and a constructivist understanding of culture, either in order to arrange relations between different cultures or in order to subvert the very idea of an original cultural identity. In other words, the concept of cultural translation can be generally understood and applied in service of both the contradictory paradigms of postmodern theory and postmodern political visions: essentialist multiculturalism and its counterpart, deconstructionism.(2009: 198)

The bad things are fairly clear: essentialism, original cultural identity, multiculturalism, nationalism, and ethnicity. The list is later extended to include the German citizenship test (of course), the “fairytale” of social contracts, the translation theories of German Romanticism (seen as signing up to a social contract), the assumption of homogeneous language systems, Saussure, the Saussurean part of translation theories, and any other form of “exclusion” leading

to “oppression”. All that in one big block of baddies. On the good side we find: “deconstructionism” (Germans like to add the –ism, it seems; the rest of us accepted deconstruction as a practice), hybridity, “the dynamic or processual aspects of translation”, Jakobson’s theory of semiosis as translation, “heterolingual address”, subversion, “something politically new”, Bhabha’s third space, hybridity, immigrants involved in “emancipatory change”, “change”, “democracy”. All that in an attractive menu of goodies, in which all items appear to be obligatory.

Bad guys there; good guys here; and we the readers are being asked to say yes or no to each, in order to become members of the progressive intellectuals club, which appears to be no less exclusory, random and absurd than the German citizenship test that it ridicules.

My problem as a reader here is, first, that I actually agree with almost everything the authors say about translation, and I have been saying similar things since about 1992. Translation, as a form, actively constructs the borders between languages and cultures; there are thus no identities prior to the moment of translation. The study of translators and the act of translating, on the other hand, can reveal tremendous variety and hybridity within the act of construction, and can indeed be used to deconstruct the bad faith of identity politics. I can generally agree with where these people want to go, but I feel insulted by the good/bad oppositions that make their text overtly propagandistic. And I am appalled that they are apparently unable to break “cultural translation” down in terms of appropriate distinctions (like the one between translations as products and translating as a process).

I want to agree with what is said, but I somehow cannot become the reader of this text. Something prohibits me from identifying with the goodies and shunning all the baddies, and it is not just because of any superior knowledge. Something stops me from accepting the implicit belief that social progress will ensue from having the right ideas – perhaps I have not been to enough social forums to earn the required membership badges? The problem is with who has the ideas. Consider a minor point: When the authors say that the German citizenship test is a “politically institutionalized form of cultural translation” (2009: 197), I instinctively thought the translator was the immigrant trying to answer the questions (Ashok Bery, in her response to the text, seems to have adopted a similar reading). In my second attack at the text, however, I think the authors see the test itself as an ideological translation of German culture, specifically as an exclusion of Islamic culture. Now, I have been an immigrant in Germany; perhaps the authors have not? The authors want the immigrant to become their revolutionary subject, to replace the proletariat, now lost to consumerism. I feel too close to immigrants to idealize our survival strategies – we translate ourselves.

My second main problem is that, as in Bhabha, past theories are grossly conflated in a way that simply cannot pass muster. Saussure, we are told, assumed the primacy of *langue*, saw it as a social contract, and thus threw the whole realm of *parole* into the bin. Such reductionism has little to do with the Saussure that sought anagrams in Latin poetry, or the one now revealed in his own words rather than his students’ notes (Saussure 2002). And even if we insist on the historical influence of those students’ notes, I can open the diachronic and geolinguistic parts of the *Cours*, which deal with language change, and find the role of “human communication” as an agent of change, opposing “provincialism” and “giving language its unity” (4.4.1). Saussure knows and states that “languages have no natural boundaries” (4.3.4); his assumption of a social contract was far from essentialist or undialectic; his was no facile assumption of a homogenous linguistic space; indeed he is not gratuitously labelled “essentialist”. True, no one reads those parts of the *Cours*, but they are there. Similarly for Roman Jakobson, who is accused of having a residual “Saussurean heritage” when he states

that different languages have different patterns and that is what makes translation difficult. If only we could root out the remains of the social contracts, all translation problems will be solved!

Go into the texts, see what they say. Or do some translating. Jakobson's reference to the "patterns of a language" might have been due to Saussure, but it might also represent the view of a translator struggling to translate.

More worrying, some social contracts might actually be made; phonemic systems might actually exert social force; speakers of different varieties could actually adjust to each other; different languages can and do create tremendous problems for translators; and the cultural role of translation might well be to draw the boundaries that delimit and reinforce many of those contracts (for Callon and Latour 1981, the "social contract" is itself a translation). Language has more mysteries than can be resolved by flippantly discrediting a linguist. You cannot simply say that all tacit agreements about communication are now suddenly "fairytales", to be added to the list of this week's baddies, to help in the identification of this week's goodies. You cannot tell traditional societies, organizations of ethnicity-based immigrants, believers in minority religions, and the rest, that their identity structures have now been deconstructed so they should disband and rejoice in hybridity. One is reminded of the two academic ethnologists in Fellini's *E la nave va* (1983) who see the rescued peasants dancing on the ship and rush down to tell them they are doing the dance wrong. Cultural identities may be an illusion, as might the binding forces of phonemics and syntactic structures, but as Bourdieu (1980) reminded us, "collective illusions are not illusory" – they retain considerable social strength, and that strength in itself must be understood.

For us, much as we might ignore the precise meaning of "cultural translation", the questions raised here are among the most important and harrowing of our time. In Europe, the bodies of Africa are washed up on the beaches of Spain and Italy, second generations are burning the *banlieues* of France, immigrants' houses are burnt in Germany, and the life-and-death dramas are acted out and on everyday in the courts and tribunals. The problems of justice in such postmodern societies obviously require a lot more thought and work than is currently available in the talk about cultural translation.

One of the questions associated with cultural translation would seem more promising than the others: "How can translation actually be used in order to *change* given regimes of social relations?" (2009: 206). And yet, if translation is the thing that sets up and reinforces the false borders, then our communication regimes could probably use a lot more *non-translation*: audiovisual communication, code-switching, multilingual conversation, creolization, decreolization, and much more that ensues from the institutional opposite of translation: basic and multidirectional language learning. Who said that translation had to save the day? One senses that an immigrant would not ask how translation might be used in the interests of justice and democracy. Only someone assuming possible power within a relatively rich regime, only an educated Western liberal, only a member of the *Bildungsbürgertum* would ask that kind of question. The rest of us are learning standardized languages, big and small, with no belief in rights or justice. The rest of us sense, remarkably like Spivak (2007: 274), that shared languages are still necessary and are often empowering.

Bad philosophy? These guys should feel flattered to see their names next to Benjamin and Bhabha.

6. Lessons for future work

In a minor talk to a minor backwater at the annual conference of the American Association of Comparative Literature, I recently wondered out loud about why, as a student, I did not try to stay in the United States. Translation theory is popular there now; it is felt to be something new, exciting, upsetting the apple carts of multiple languages, cultures, literatures, and academic disciplines. In my minor talk I concluded, unconvincingly, that I was quite happy to have worked in Translation Studies in Europe, within societies that actually depend on translation for their governance, and thus in relation to the institutional realities of translator training. When the societies around you need translators for their functioning, whatever you say about translation is likely to be checked against the realm of practice, sooner or later. Theories are not so easily detached from their empirical transformation.

One of the *quatre gats* in the audience asked what I meant by “empirical”; she later assumed that it meant comparing source texts with target texts. Yes, you can do that. But empiricism in this context should obviously mean a lot more. You can go out into the world to see what people think translation is, who translators are, how translations are actually used, what goes on in the translating brain (which is where the distinctions between cultures are actually constructed), what the political effects of translation have been, and what the actual alternatives to translation are. Empiricism might also mean envisaging (or looking for cases of) a society without translation, or with communication practices more ethical than translation. And so on. Anything the theories say should be tested on some kind of non-theory, quantitatively or qualitatively.

That said, European empirical Translation Studies cannot be dressed up as some great success story ready to be sold to the world. It has benefited from institutions full of students who want to be translators and interpreters, and that is no guarantee of intellectual insight. I cannot name any instance in which Translation Studies has had a major direct influence, positive or negative, on translation practices, and I am fairly sure that the profound changes, namely electronic translation technologies and the workflows of localization, have come instead from the language industries and have long been resisted by many translation theorists. The empiricism I am seeking is thus not a defense of any paradise; it is an attitude much needed on both sides of the Atlantic, and on other shores as well.

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