
VIEW POINT

Translation Studies and the Common Cause

Michael Cronin

Trinity College Dublin, IE

croninm8@tcd.ie

This position paper argues that the interaction between translation studies, comparative literature and modern languages has not been as productive as imagined by the ‘cultural turn’ in translation studies in the 1990s. It is argued that the vocational orientation of translation studies education and the continuing presence of national literary ecologies have limited collaborative developments. The notion of ‘untranslatability’ has not always been productive of a more open exchange and a case is made for an ecological notion of difference and the concept of ‘fecundity’ as a means to move towards the common cause of a terra centric paradigm in modern languages, comparative literature and translation studies.

Writing in 2005 on the emerging conceptual relationship between translation and society, the late translation studies scholar Daniel Simeoni addressed what he perceived as a striking enigma in the social sciences. Why did they have so little to say about translation?

The question of ‘translation and society’ has not always been a topic on which research could be done; it has not always been possible to write on the links between the two concepts, on the role played by translations and translating in society, on the social dimensions of the practice, the interplay of the complex forces shaping the politics of translation worldwide, or on the history of these interrelations. (Simeoni, 3)

The silence for Simeoni was all the more puzzling given the relative inclusiveness of the sociological eye. Why was translation not included among the legitimate objects of sociological enquiry at an earlier stage when even the most private acts (e.g. suicide) were deemed fit for investigation and almost every branch of the human sciences, including notably history, underwent change as a result of the work of Durkheim and his followers (8–9)? His conclusion was that fundamentally social scientists were not sufficiently self-reflexive to free themselves from their national contexts; ‘the cognitive confinement within which scholars operated was due to the fact that the words and the rhetoric they used, the ways in which the new treatises and analyses were elaborated, followed what were typically national (nationalistic) traditions of thought’ (9). In this context, the true scandal of translation is translation itself, which, although it underpinned the working practices of the polylingual pioneers of the social sciences, could not be foregrounded as it would bring to light the nationalist or situated origins of social theory and analysis. For Simeoni, this state of affairs was not a regrettable incident from the past but a persistent feature of the present and translation had still a long way to go before it would become a core concern, for example, of North American

Anglophone social sciences. If Simeoni had focused on comparative literature rather than the social sciences, it is not obvious that he would have reached radically different conclusions with respect to the role of translation. In both the social sciences and comparative literature, despite the apparent operability of translation as a concept, it has only emerged very recently as an object of enquiry and even then it is arguable that its position or usefulness is still somewhat contested, for reasons I hope to explore in this contribution.

When Susan Bassnett in her foundational *Translation Studies* sought to mark out territory for the emerging discipline of translation studies, she identified the overbearing siblings of comparative literature and linguistics. She was engaged 'in an attempt to demonstrate that Translation Studies is indeed a discipline in its own right: not merely a minor branch of comparative literary theory, nor yet a specific area of linguistics, but a vastly complex field with many far-reaching ramifications' (Bassnett 2002: 11). Part of the motivation for this move towards disciplinary distinctness was that translation studies would be able to engage with modern languages and comparative literature on an equal footing. Translation would no longer be a distant and vaguely patronized relative but a full member of the family of literary enquiry. The optimism of the cultural turn in translation studies has not always, however, been borne out by subsequent developments. From a relatively modest base in the 1970s and 1980s there has been an exponential growth in the number of translation programmes, often under the aegis of modern languages departments and frequently at postgraduate level. An explicit part of the rationale for many of these programmes is vocational relevance, designed to convince university administrators of the continued value of modern languages in the contemporary marketplace. The European Master's in Translation label, sponsored by the European Commission and currently recognizing sixty-four translation programmes across Europe, is clear in the instrumentalist criteria it uses to evaluate candidate programmes:

The main goal of EMT is fully in line with the EU priorities for higher education: improve the quality of translator training in order to enhance the labour market integration of young language professionals. The EMT translator competence profile, drawn up by European experts, is at the core of the project. It defines the basic competences that translators need to work successfully in today's market. More and more universities, also beyond the EU, use it as a model for designing their programmes. (European Commission 2018)

The emphasis is clearly on pragmatic translation (scientific/commercial/legal texts) and literature or literary translation do not in any way feature as a priority. So although translation studies has clearly acquired a status and an identity it did not have two decades ago, this has not led to a major resurgence in interest in questions of translation and literature that one might have expected or hoped for in the expanding institutional presence of translation studies.

A factor that further complicates the relationship between translation studies, modern languages and comparative literature is paradoxically that of language itself. What would appear on the face of it to unite these different areas of enquiry may in fact be what is holding them apart. Language and literature are held to be two separate professional activities, with the teaching of literature in modern languages still held by many to be superior to the teaching of language. Conversely, there is a view that modern languages is a straightforward exercise in communicative competence with a therapeutic dose of background studies and where literature is at best an otiose distraction. The consequences for translation studies and literature are equally dire in both cases. In the former, translation is guilty by association with language pedagogy, a form of hack work which is useful as a language-learning exercise but has little of value to teach us about literatures in different languages. In the case of the latter, literature is an unwelcome distraction from language, valuable teaching time in oral competence

wasted in pointless literary exegesis of foreign-language texts. Students, as a result, rarely get to engage with the literary texts in the source language, without which there no possibility of translation. In one instance, translation is not a concern because it is basically only a matter of instrumental language, while in the other translation (of literature) is not a concern because translation is basically only a matter of instrumental language.

This raises a crucial question though: what constitutes a language? A language is a dialect with a bayonet. A language is a dialect with an army. A language is a dialect with a regional assembly. These are common rule-of-thumb descriptions to deal with this vexed question. Alexander Beecroft in *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (2015) adds his own and claims that a 'language is a dialect with a literature' (35). It is not enough to develop a writing system. Missionaries and field linguists have done this for centuries for the speech varieties of countless groups around the planet. The crucial difference is the aesthetic self-awareness which renders certain conventions of diction and syntax culturally prestigious and desirable. What happens in the case of cosmopolitan languages – Arabic, Greek, Sanskrit, Persian, Latin, Chinese – is that the conventions become attractive to many millions of non-native speakers of these languages. Not only this, but long after these languages cease to be the primary instrument of military conquest or trade they continue to exert a considerable influence. Persian as a cosmopolitan literary language was used at the Ottoman court in Istanbul, the Safavid court in Esfahan and the Mughal court in Delhi for centuries after the eclipse of Persian imperial power. Latin continued to dominate the intellectual and religious life of the Christian West for over a thousand years after the fall of Rome. Explanations for the enduring prestige of cosmopolitan languages can be found in the fact of generally low literacy and non-use of vernacular languages for literary purposes. Using a cosmopolitan language was the most effective way of putting a literary text into wide circulation. The elite education provided by the universities of Bologna, Oxford, Heidelberg and the Sorbonne, or the preparation for the civil service examinations in China emphasized the centrality of cosmopolitan literary languages, even when vernacular languages acquired increasing prestige. This is, perhaps, not so surprising, in that in addition to continuing low levels of literacy there was often a wide gap between the vernacular the people spoke and what the writers wrote. In other words, learning the literary form of the vernacular did not necessarily make communication any easier.

An unfortunate consequence of the nationalization of language in the nineteenth century is that national literary histories were keen to demote the role of cosmopolitan languages. These languages were seen to trouble a story of spontaneous, indigenous, organic growth. At worst, they were the malign remnants of foreign occupation, at best, a harmless hangover from a past better forgotten. In the debate that raged in France in the late seventeenth century between the Ancients, championed by Boileau, and the Moderns, led by Charles Perrault, the prestige of the classical authors of antiquity was pitched against the technical inventiveness of the great minds of modernity. The Moderns would, over the course of the long nineteenth century, emerge victorious and classical languages would eventually disappear from the curricula of many (though by no means all) educational systems in Europe. One consequence was to skew the intellectual understanding of different literary traditions and the other to kick the traces of translation in the transition to vernacular pre-eminence.

Yasemin Yildiz in *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* describes the recurrent tension between the monolingual ideologies of national polities and the multilingual realities of urban settings. Monolingualism is 'a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as imagined collectives such as cultures and nations' (Yildiz 2012: 2). The difficulty is that both translation studies and comparative literature had to work against what Susan Bassnett calls the 'post-Romantic

monolingualization of literary history' (Bassnett, forthcoming). National literary histories conjoined to the rising prestige of national vernacular languages mean that literary curricula as they emerged in the nineteenth-century post-Westphalian university saw no room for any trace of the foreign, which would trouble the story of uninterrupted *sui generis* native genius. No English department in the world teaches Arthur Goulding's 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a core text, despite the enormous influence of the translation on English-language writing in the Tudor period (Oakley-Brown 2001). The difficulty is that the monolingual prejudice can find its way into modern languages or even versions of comparative literature where one considers the French, German, Italian, Russian, Chinese or other literary traditions primarily or exclusively within the monolingual paradigm and either ignores or marginalizes the translational crossings between literatures, languages and cultures. This not only compromises our historical understandings of earlier societies and cultures but has baleful contemporary consequences in the form of cultural protectionism and the instrumentalization of national languages and cultures as litmus tests for political integration.

The prevalence of a national language literary ecology has entailed an almost axiomatic equation of one state, one language with the inevitable exclusion and marginalization of less-favoured dialects and minority languages, and a suspicion of translation which dogs even those areas such as modern languages and comparative literature that might be deemed open to it. Another more perverse effect is conveniently illustrated by the tick box essentialism of ATMs. In many countries, the customer is invited to choose between different languages of instruction which are literally flagged by the national insignia of particular nations. For the hapless Irish or Canadian tourist whose finger hovers over the Union Flag, there is that fleeting moment of ontological doubt as to whether culture and language are a neat fit. Does speaking English make me a flag-bearer for British culture (whatever that might mean)? Thus, the single nation-language-culture of national literary ecologies produces strange pathologies of definition and confinement. It is little wonder that one of the most persistent demands of contemporary European populism has been the rigid enforcement of national language tests and the removal of supports for translation and interpreting services into the mother tongues of migrants. As the 2015 general election manifesto of the British Conservative Party put it: 'Being able to speak English is a fundamental part of integrating into our society. We have introduced tough new language tests for migrants and *ensured councils reduce spending on translation services*' (emphasis added). Speaking the shibboleths of the tribe is in this view the ultimate way of marking belonging.

Speaking English, of course, is not only a Conservative Party dream ticket to integration. It is also, increasingly, it would seem the indispensable calling card for participation in the agora of world literature. English is the source language for more than half of the translations done in the world, even though percentage figures for translated literature into English generally hover around 3 per cent. The emergence of English as a hyper-central language in a global literary ecology has, some argue, consequences beyond hogging shelf space in international airport bookstores. In a study of contemporary Italian fiction carried out by the writer and critic Tim Parks and his colleagues in Milan it was found that more and more Italian writers were tending to place adjectives before nouns, using possessives rather than reflexives to indicate body parts and expressing subject pronouns – all properties typically associated with the English rather than the Italian language (Parks 2011). The American sinologist Stephen Owen, writing on contemporary Chinese poetry, had already claimed over a decade earlier that the use of spare, translation-friendly diction, universal themes and strategic dashes of local colour was evidence of a writing directed primarily at Western, largely English-speaking, markets (Owen 1990). If location was a central part of the plot of the nineteenth-century novel (Balzac's Paris, Dickens's London) is it anything more than decorative detail in Scandi noir, the scenic Bond-like backdrop to a plot that could be situated anywhere?

Gayatri Spivak in an *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* has argued that the 'diversity of mother tongues must challenge' the 'uniformity' of 'even a good globalization' (Spivak 2012, 53); it is this diversity that makes the dialogue between modern languages, comparative literature and translation studies even more urgent. A striking feature of much mainstream literary and cultural criticism, especially in English, is that while attention has regularly been paid to issues of race, ethnicity, gender and class, language almost invariably lags behind as an almost embarrassing afterthought. Stephanie Posthumus, in considering the decision of Michel Serres to only write in French, claims that '[i]n many ways, Serres' eco-thought cannot be separated from its expression. For Serres, language does not remove us from the material world; it is part of this world, as the water in which thinking swims. Ecological dwelling, thus, necessarily includes the practices of language' (Posthumus 2017: 57). This co-option of language practices into ecological dwelling indicates horizons of investigation beyond the notion of 'untranslatability'. While both Emily Apter and Barbara Cassin have been at pains to point out that the notion of untranslatability invites us to meditate on the plural possibility of translation rather than its impossibility (Apter 2014: vii–xv), the term is unfortunate in inviting the easy sacralization of language difference and a failure to attend to the socio-political processes that make translations happen or not in particular ideological configurations (Venuti 2015). Posthumus's insistence on the materiality of language difference in the framework of ecocritical issues, on the other hand, suggests that we ought to be less concerned with the putative endgames of untranslatability and more directed towards how we use our various modes of enquiry – modern languages, comparative literature, translation studies – to strengthen biocultural diversity and ensure that we relate cultures in their distinctness rather than eliminate them in their (imagined) commonality. There is a sense that what we have inherited are concepts of difference 'as a rigid separation between humans and nonhumans' that are 'intrinsic to agrilogistics, the survival-at-any-cost strategy that began in the early Holocene' (Morton 2018: 153). As Timothy Morton argues, '[e]cological thought requires a *different kind of difference* [his emphasis]. [AQ: please indicate whether emphasis in original] Surely it's obvious that a slug is different from a panda. But it's different in the way a distant family member is different; not different in the sense of black versus white, or here versus there, or good versus bad' (153). Arguably, translation studies concerns itself with this different kind of difference, how to acknowledge difference (the translator's task) but explore relatedness (the translator's *telos*); of course, this might equally well be said about comparative literature. If that is the case, then, and given the implications of climate change for all areas of life, is it not time to shift from the ethnocentric and geocentric paradigms of language and comparative studies to what might be termed a terracentric paradigm? Not the nation, not the globe, but the earth. Not the view from somewhere (nation), not the view from nowhere (looking at the blue planet from outer space) but the view from everywhere.

In thinking about what this terracentric paradigm might look like, I want to briefly engage with the notion of 'identity', much bandied about in our critical practices. The French sinologist François Jullien in his *Le pont des singes: de la diversité à venir* (2010) describes how decades of working with Chinese culture have taught him that the notion of 'identity' was deeply problematic. Any given culture or language is a product of endless mixing and cross-fertilization. New ways of working, generational change, new forms of technology subject culture and language to continuous transformation. He argues not for 'identity', which is always more or less fictive, but for the idea of *fécondité* [fecundity]. Expressing a dynamic sense of plurality, fecundity foregrounds the resources (*resources*) of a culture. Resources not to be confused with values. As Jullien says, 'values are the vectors of an affirmation of self. They are bound up, whatever one might claim to the contrary, in a relationship of power whereas resources are indefinitely exportable [...] and available to everyone' (2010: 15). He gives the example of Confucianism, which offers the thinker the resources of subtlety of expression, a

sense of balance, the importance of a notion of 'regulation', the avoidance of overly dogmatic thinking. However, when Confucianism is presented as a value system, it is far less attractive in promoting social conformism, a servile attitude to those in power and so on.

Our concern then would be not so much with defining identity as locating fecundity. Crucial to this terracentric perspective is the notion of situated knowledge. As knowledge is always produced in a particular place, it bears the marks and conditions of this locale, but crucially places are a polis that are made up of all kinds of human and nonhuman elements and these elements are connected to far distant events and influences. The crucial ethical thrust of this terracentric paradigm is best expressed by Félix Guattari in his *Chaosmosis* when he states:

How do we change mentalities, how do we invent social practices that would give back to humanity – if it ever had it – a sense of responsibility, and not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life the planet, for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species such as music, the arts, cinema, the relation with time, love, and compassion for others, the feeling of fusion at the heart of the cosmos. (1995: 119–20)

Here, Guattari articulates the all-important notion of biocultural diversity. In this view, the destruction of human languages is as momentous as the loss of animal species, part of a continuum that is targeted by contemporary monolingual and monocultural extractivist logics. It is here, surely, that we have common cause.

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