

On Translations

Nina Czegledy

Senior Fellow, KMDI, University of Toronto

Adjunct Associate Professor, Concordia University Montreal

Honorary Fellow, Moholy Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest

czegledy@interlog.com

Language is frequently the focus of postcolonial studies, partly because historically, language has been a functional tool of colonization. It has been argued that colonization destroys and replaces languages, cultures, communities and nations rather than enriching them. Undeniably, the wide use of English bridges communication gaps, yet simultaneously it seems to eradicate the importance of other languages. As a backlash to the burden of colonial heritage some activists advocate a return to the use of indigenous languages. In practical terms this stance, especially where technological terms are concerned, is highly debatable, chiefly because the vocabulary remains essentially un-translated. Thus we are faced both with the political and the pragmatic implications of translation. What can be done? The complexity of this unresolved question is outside the scope of my presentation, which briefly investigates the role of language including the meaning of translation into “other” minor languages. The term “translation” is commonly used for the act of rendering words into another language. In this text however, “translation” is also employed to expand the concept into a wider frame of reference to include cultural “interpretation” and “transposition” in an international context.

Translations, including cultural translations, are performed in a constantly shifting global framework and thus involve divergent, often contradictory paradigms — while raising numerous questions. Where is the real translation taking place, how is this perceived in different parts of the world, who are the actual translators, for whom is the translation done, where and how is a cultural bias employed and most importantly what is being translated? This is of course one of the most important and also most difficult questions — seemingly without well-defined answers. How much of the content is being translated might be yet another point.

In post colonial times where the scope of cross-political/economical networks, such as the European Union of eight thousand different ethnic groups speaking 5,000 distinct languages, extend across borders of nation states, the role of accurate translation is critical

(European Parliament). Beyond the European continent, South Africa has for example, eleven official languages (Languages South Africa), while the Indian constitution recognizes 22 languages (Languages India), representing a vast heritage of language families. Reflecting on these few examples — the consideration of how meaning in one language can be effectively recreated in another remains a significant concern for a translator, especially as idioms in one cultural context might have entirely different interpretations in another milieu. This is of special significance as each word in a given language has semantic, cultural, and historical associations whose meaning is to be translated as a totality.

Abby Kratz argued that “words carry with them the atmosphere and rhythm of a cultural, historical, and aesthetic tradition. She noted, “formulations that express emotional states, for instance, gain a certain refinement in one language that cannot be reproduced with the same intensity in another language”. Nevertheless she concluded that all acts of (cross-cultural) communication are acts of translation (Kratz). Thus translation presents a process continually being negotiated, confirmed, adjusted, and modified by practicing translators and by all who deal with translation. In this sense translation is more a cultural than linguistic practice especially as it embodies both cognitive and social expectations.

Among artists who investigate the subject, the *On Translation* series by Muntadas presents a prominent example. Since his 1995 manifesto, Muntadas publicly expressed his concerns about the transmission of information through different systems and how this process can alter, distort and obfuscate original meaning. He maintains that we live in a world, which is being constantly filtered and re-filtered.

From language to codes, from science to technology, from subjectivity to objectivity, from agreement to war, from private to public from semiology to cryptology. The role of translation and translators as a visible and invisible fact. (Muntadas)

The *On Translation* project explores issues of identity and representation far beyond the basic function of translation. The individual modules reveal significant differences in the perception and interpretation of socio-political and cultural situations. The project also aids us to visualize the fundamental etymological, cultural and historical associations connected with these issues. This is of special importance, because as Jiang Tianmin notes: “Translation is never innocent. There is always a context in which translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed. Translation can create stereotypes for the Other that reflects domestic cultural and political values and can be instrumental in shaping domestic attitudes towards the Other” (Tianmin).

Minor languages represent a special challenge for translating texts. The European Parliament initiated a system of ‘relay’ languages: a text is first translated into one of the most widely used languages and from there into the minor languages. Other major Community languages could also become relay languages in due course. This leads me to the primary inspiration of my presentation motivated by my Hungarian heritage and the “Critique of Publishing/Publishing of Critique” workshop discussions in August 2007 at the Summer Academy in Bratislava, Slovakia. In Hungary we communicate in one of those “minor languages.” According to the “Euro Languages Net Project”: “Their (Hungarian) language is spoken nowhere else. Their folk songs bear no resemblance to those of other nations” (Euro Languages). No wonder that most of the professional and technical literature has been published mostly in English in Hungary similarly to many of the neighboring countries with “minor” languages. Nevertheless there have been valiant initiatives. In October 1997 — for example — the Media Research Foundation published *BULLDOZER*, a 220-page anthology of contemporary media theory in Hungarian. The texts have also been freely available (readable +downloadable) in the spirit of anti-copyright, on two sites including the Hungarian Electronic Library (Bulldozer). Several notable examples of critical

literature followed across the region. Nonetheless when a decade later in the summer of 2007 a dozen of us gathered at the Summer Academy in Bratislava the persisting difficulties concerning professional publications were still evident. In our discussion critical issues of translation and publication re-emerged. This is a dire situation for emerging professionals, as there remains a serious shortage of available literature at academic institutions as well as commercial outlets. Furthermore there seems to be a downward trend, a negative shift since the 90s in terms of funding for translations and publications across the entire region. As literature seems inaccessible in several countries, vast areas of knowledge are completely missing and being ignored to the detriment of talented people who either are already or will be shortly working in professional jobs including the education of the next generation.

In conclusion few of the issues concerning translation are resolved today. It has been noted that languages are living organisms. Consequently it is hoped that this presentation serves as an introduction to germinate further dialogues on the issues involved.

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