

abstract

The aim of this paper is to find the abstract space in which translation takes place. It will not discuss the physical location of translators, nor the relations between agents, nor the political terms involved in all the process, but rather the substanceless metaphorical place in which the mental works, the mixings and the options, occur. Making use of Chomsky's concept of universal grammar, it will explore collective unconscious and human imagination as a common ground beyond and prior to all forms expression, thus to every language and literature, combining and contrasting the oneirical aspects of translation, intending to reach the unmanifested realm from which all cultures derive, related to the "pure language" of Walter Benjamin.

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Subjectivity and interculture: The abstract space of translation

Working within a culture with one's mind in another culture, judging or considering how to shift linguistic symbols in the most appropriate way. What is the difference between real (physical) space and mental space? Is not this division merely conceptual? Perhaps the advent of culture in history came following man's rupture with a larger, less rational consciousness. Perhaps it is the consequence of the animal becoming aware of himself. Either way culture is the collective expression or manifestation of man's notions of selfhood. Borders derive from property, which are definitions of territory. Essentially, there are no boundaries. However, within the gearings of society, made up by different cultures with different languages and forms of representation, translators function as agents of communication.

Each language or culture operates within its own boundaries, although these are by no means definitive — on the contrary, boundaries are continually changing and interpose on other languages and cultures. There are points of contact and structural differences between two given languages, and the translator approximate the structures of those languages, working in a system that comprehends them both. An example of intersection or points of contact are the words *mama* and *papa*, similar in diverse languages, even in cultures that had no ancient historical contact, such as Chinese and European. Might this phonetical similarity express some kind of universal feature of man? It seems very plausible; Chomsky, for instance, refers to a universal phonetic theory and even to an universal grammar, relating language and mental works in general:

The principles that determine the form of grammar and that select a grammar of the appropriate form on the basis of certain data constitute a subject that might, following a traditional usage, be termed “universal grammar”. The study of universal grammar, so understood, is a study of the nature of human intellectual capacities. It tries to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions that are not accidentally true of the existing human languages, but that are rather rooted in the human “language capacity”, and thus constitutes the innate organization that determines what counts as linguistic experience and what knowledge of language arises on the basis of this experience. Universal grammar, then, constitutes an explanatory theory of a much deeper sort than particular grammar, although the particular grammar of a language can also be regarded as an explanatory theory. (p. 24)

[...]

Philosophical grammarians had typically maintained that languages vary little in their deep structures, though there may be wide variability in surface manifestations. Thus there is, in this view, an underlying structure of grammatical relations and categories, and certain aspects of human thought and mentality are essentially invariant across languages, although languages may differ as to whether they express the grammatical relations formally by inflection or word order, for example. (p. 66)

[...]

When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the “human essence”, the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know,

unique to man and that are inseparable from any critical phase of human existence, personal or social. (p. 88)

Illustratively, on the collective imagination level, there are many myths which appear in different cultures of the world, with particular characteristics, of course, such as vampires, demons, spirits, fantastic beings, gods (wargods, lovegods, sungods, etc. are present everywhere).

Walter Benjamin has it in his 1916 text “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” that “Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity” (trans. Edmund Jephcott). Thus, the translator works in an area of intersection and transformation. This is the superficial level at which translation occurs — the level of changing phenomena, the level of appearances, the surface of it all. Actually, as any action, work or instance, translation occurs (or can be seen) in many different levels, from the deepest to the most superficial, from subtle to gross, from essence to substance, from meaning to sound, passing through the syntactic structures. Those levels are not clearly distinguishable, though, and they are used for didactic and understanding ends. Hito Steyerl, commenting Benjamin’s text, writes:

Benjamin’s idea of translation — at least in this text — boldly ignores this obvious and perhaps banal feature of translation. And thus, an entirely different concept of a politics of translation emerges. Instead of national languages, which are only mentioned passingly in this text, he focuses on what I would call languages of practice: the language of law, technology, art, the language of music and sculpture. And more importantly: translation doesn’t take place between them, but within them. That is: between the language of things and the language of men, at the base of language itself. Thus, a few very important modifications are introduced with regard to traditional translation theory: firstly language is defined not by common origin, belonging or nation, but by common practice. Secondly, translation primarily takes place within language not between languages. And thirdly, translation addresses the relationship of human language and thing language.

The most important concept here for this article is that “translation doesn’t take place between languages, but within languages”. To get across languages, one has to go inside the languages. And languages are complex structure systems in which “transformational operations”, as Chomsky has it, occur. Tymoczko (p. 194) also opposes the idea of the translator position as “in between”:

Whatever its logical limitations, as a metaphor *between* has other values for poststructuralists. Poststructuralist thought has been notable in opposing the idea of an absolute origin, the idea that values, cultural concepts, or systems of knowledge are grounded on a bedrock of certainty, that they rest on essentialist cultural foundations upon which all else can be built with security. Instead critics in this tradition view ideas, knowledge, thought, language, and culture as all being in process, between the uncertainties of the constructions of the past and the uncertainties of the constructions of the future. Rather than being founded upon fundamental or essential realities, *such human constructions as language and culture rest upon a chain of signifiers and in turn generate a succeeding chain of signifiers* [my emphasis].

Now, culture itself, “as a colonial space of intervention and agonism, as the trace of the displacement of symbol to sign”, as Bhabha puts it, is ever changing, transforming, assimilating, expressing, mixing, in short. Indeed, language and culture are concepts so intimately linked and difficult to be distinguished that culture may also be where translation takes place. In his *Method in Translation History* (1998, p. 189), Pym introduces the idea of changing the traditional scheme

culture 1 > translator > culture 2

to

translator 1 > culture > translator 2

So that the translators do not make the bridge between cultures, but culture itself is the place where translation is worked, as well as where resistance to it can be found. Wolf (2002, p. 186) goes further on this, stating that the “concept of ‘culture as translation’ thus projects culture as the site of interaction of the components of translational process

and as the space where translation is conceived as the reciprocal interpenetration of Self and Other”. Seeing that people act within a culture as translators of their own ideas, thoughts, desires, imaginations and receptions, that is, as translators of themselves, this notion is more easily understood. Approaching translation as a form of communication also helps this perception, since communication is an essential constitutive element of a culture. Ultimately, translations are operated in all human relations at different levels.

According to Kadir (2005, p. 51), “Culture, generally, is the consensual and communitarian hallucination in which collectivity conjures, conscious and unconsciously, with its conformities and contradictions”¹. Culture therefore is presented as a mental projection, in this manner social relations may be seen as extensions of mental functionings. In fact, physical actions begin at first within the mind; there is always an idea prior to an act — unless the level where idea is concomitant to action is reached. This idea may become clearer as the actual act takes place: there is no real division at all, delineations are presented for didactic purposes, and may be a barrier or restraint for the larger consciousness mentioned above. The lines and boundaries are social creations derived of the imposition and struggle of varied and ultimately illusory selfhoods.

In global society of the beginning of 21st Century, networks spread through the world across national borders with more ease than in any previous time in history. Consequently, the territorial location of the agents involved relatively loses its importance. And there is the internet, a virtual free-access non-space of interaction, communication and culture exchange in global level, in which there are in fact no national boundaries. There are of course social and economic restrictions to its access, but then the world is divided (roughly) in included and excluded persons (locally) and peoples (globally).

¹ La cultura, em grano, es la alucinación consensual y comunitaria em que uma coledividad conjura, consciente e inconscientemente, con sus conformidades y contradicciones.

Mass media and cultural industry spread cultural concepts beyond national borders, in such a way that the original transmission influences social behavior in the location it is received. This ends up creating spaces of what Pym called intercultural: "I use the term 'interculture' to refer to beliefs and practices found in intersections or overlaps of cultures, where people combine something of two or more cultures at once". (Pym, 1998, p. 177) Colonization, imperialism and territorial dominance evidently shape such spaces, however the main concern for this article is the actual abstract space where hybridization of idea happens, which might be somewhere in the collective unconscious or imagination, for that is where idea lies and comes from, before emerging to consciousness and being rationalized.

It seems that the nowhere land in which languages enter a wordless union is the same as that from which all languages come, or to which all languages refer. Both belong to the realm of idea prior to expression. Then there are the infinitely (or as many as there are individuals) variable perceptions, whose relations compose cultures, of the same universe. In Shelley's words:

In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order. And, although all men observe a similar, they observe not the same order, in the motions of the dance, in the melody of the song, in the combinations of language, in the series of their imitations of natural objects.

Languages have been historically formed along the development of the organization of group perceptions. Different groups had different foci for their perceptions, they concentrated on different aspects of the whole perceived, thus they combined the representations differently, each group accordingly to its primary focus and necessities. Still there are many points in common for all languages, since the natural objects perceived are basically the same (though geographically varied) and essence of man is one despite place and time. Languages, however, are not just tools for representation; they are expressions in themselves, and expressions of cultures.

Bigger than conscious communication and comprehending it is imagination, the collective unconscious, from where all cultures draw

their constitutive elements, or of which all cultures are expressions. Human imagination is a realm vaster than one can think. It is beyond and behind any verbal expression, it permeates — and maybe it shapes — the universal essence of mankind. The only way to get some sense of it is through silence and observation. Dreams, for instance, give a hint of it, but cannot be fully expressed, in the same way as emotions cannot be contained in words. As Kristeva (1991, p. 15) puts it, “between two languages, your realm is silence. By dint of saying things in various ways, one just as trite as the other, just as approximate, one ends up no longer saying them”. The translator, reaching the silence prior to language, allows the other language to fill it. The silence realm is where lies Benjamin’s “pure language”, the silent language expressed by things and nature:

Wherein resides the relatedness of two languages, apart from historical considerations? Certainly not in the similarity between works of literatures or words. Rather, all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole — an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. (Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”)

Still, symbols are used to represent some concepts of imagination. In writing, one delves in it and tries to bring to surface, i.e., to language, the ideas and insights he/she intends to express. However,

In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized. It is the former only in the finite products of language, the latter in the evolving of the languages themselves. And that which seeks to represent, to produce itself in the evolving of languages, is that nucleus of pure language. [...] In this pure language — which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages — all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. (idem)

Languages thus are limited (though infinitely variable) representations and expressions of imagination. In translating, which is a form of writing, or re-writing, one attempts to dive in the source text and into a bilingual arena to come up to the surface again in another system of

codes. This place where languages fuse and are transposed (and ultimately originate from) can be seen as an intersection between languages — a common ground, based in the universal grammar structures. It lies at a deeper level than languages themselves. The task of the translator, then, would be to unveil the pure language in the source text and dress it with the target language code system. However, the approach to a definition of pure language might be too abstract to be reached by words. As Sussman has it,

Pure language is the study of impulse breaks that occur on a subtle level, traveling the channels of speech into spoken form. The brain/mind functions as an interpreter, seeking to expand the range of what is possible, what is infinite. [...] The expressed linguistic stopgaps in consciousness are signals from the brain/mind to pure consciousness to begin the sequences that create spoken language. When language is a living expression of telepathy, it is not necessary for it to be as fully sequenced nor brought so fully forward as it is now. Ancient languages were closer to their linguistical stopgaps because they did not call for such complex elaboration.

Thus supposedly ancient languages, as more directly connected to pure consciousness, did not have the same need for expression as modern languages do; they were related more closely to silence, in such a way that is difficult to explain through words, due to their intrinsic limitation — words, although they compose a world on their own, are ultimately mere signs and expressions, manifestations. Nevertheless, metaphors can be useful to make a clearer picture of it. Bhabha (p. 53), on the other hand, refers to a third space, perhaps in a more superficial level (although levels are not quite clearly distinguishable):

The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot “in itself” be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. The pronominal I of the proposition cannot be made to address — in its own words — the subject of enunciation, for this is not personable, but remains a spatial relation within the schemata and strategies of discourse. The meaning of utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other. This ambivalence is

emphasized when we realize that there is no way that the content of the proposition will reveal the structure of its positionality; no way that context can be mimetically read off from the content.

It is a matter of distinguishing between operations within systems and operations *prior to* any language structure, which escape any analysis but relate to feeling as presented by Robinson (p. 10): “meaning and its interpretation are motivated and guided by feeling, or, more broadly, by body or somatic response; but that guidance is both contextually and personally variable (the flexibility and uniqueness of the individual speaking subject) and ideologically controlled (the shaping force of the speech community)”. However, the feeling is just a manifestation in the body level of this universal ether, so to speak, beyond and behind the universe. Robinson continues:

In this conception ideological control is wielded, and collective meanings therefore shared, precisely through the mediation of the body — through the society’s ideological (or “ideosomatic”) programming of each individual’s limbic system, seat of the emotions, habit, and rote memorization. We learn shared meanings by learning the proper (ideologically controlled) feelings that drive them; and we share them with other bodies, emotional states over other emotional states.

Thus, meanings are collectively shared and, as they are at a deeper level of language by definition — language structures seem ultimately to comport meanings in different forms — closer to the human essence, to “pure language” and to silence. But this is *not* to say *just* that there is only one thing being spoken in infinite manners, rather the one thing being spoken is infinite itself.

One location that resembles the non-place of translation is the Limbo. In that sense, the translator is close to a ghost, between this world and the next. He/she must move on to the other world, but still does not want to leave this one. In some cases, the ghost is not even aware of its condition, and keeps acting as if it were alive. The translator must depart from the source text, in order to accomplish his/her work. Thus translation is approached to death. Indeed, many traditions interpret death as transformation, renewal. Also, the same sense of not

belonging to a place that the foreign feels can be observed in the translator, for he/she does walk through foreign lands, even if those lands are only mental or textual. And the Limbo is not located anywhere: neither in Hell, nor in Heaven, nor in Earth.

However, the Limbo as third space still is positioned in between, and, therefore, too narrow of a view. As Tymozcko has it,

when translation is conceptualized in terms of transfer between languages as *systems*, this spatial metaphor of translation breaks down.

In very schematic terms, here is why. In theories of systems, one is seen as acting or operating within a system. In the event that one transcends the limits of a given system, one does not escape systems altogether or fall between systems, but instead one enters another system, generally a larger system that encompasses or includes the system transcended.

Thus, the third space would encompass both language systems, but still would be arranged in the universal grammar structures. Since both given languages are themselves framed in the universal grammar, then the system containing them is also framed in the universal grammar — else it contains the universal grammar in itself, and would support other systems than that of the formative principles of grammar. Translation then can be seen as occurring in the deepest level in a “place” beyond and behind all language — next to the “pure language” —, and within the universal grammar structures, in the deepest perceptible level.

Inter-language translation necessarily passes through intra-language structures. The translator analyzes the original text and, taking into account its sounding, its syntatic framework and its meaning, attempts to reproduce all of them in the translated text, making the choices imposed by the linguistic change. He/she may privilege one or other aspect — usually meaning is the most focused aspect of language in translations —, but those are aspects are in fact indissociable. Consciously or not, the mental works operated by the translator are effected in the movement from one system to another, possibly from a monolingual system to a more comprehensive bilingual or maybe

universal system. The non-place of translation is of continuous change, but it is embedded in a more subtle and difficult to grasp fixed reality that ultimately gives birth to all manifestations in the universe — language included — more closely related to silence than to language itself. Before language, and ultimately before sound, silence was there. Of course this can seem too metaphysical, especially for the empirical-oriented scientific thought, but still it has some relevance to the pursue of the philosophical truth — and contemporary philosophy is only too related to language studies, translation studies included.

The psychoanalytic concept of dreaming is closely related to translation: one's unconscious mind is translated to the conscious mind through dreaming. In this sense, dreaming itself is the place where translation occurs. And dreaming is a place of infinite possibilities, where illusion and reality confound, as languages are merged in the abstract place of translation. If translation was theatre, this non-place would be the backstage, perhaps located in the moments between the actual words, when they were not expressed or manifested yet, or maybe in the very act of translation, when the translator is attuned to it. It is the reflection of the translator at work, but also the actual writing in the translation; it is where the system of languages is embedded and comes from, and ultimately the source which originates everything, prior even to language itself. It is undefinable.

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