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Résumé de l'article

Bien que le déconstructionnisme déclare la traduction impossible à réaliser, il peut être utile aux études traductologiques. Par exemple, il servira d'outil pour résoudre certaines oppositions classiques entre traduction mot à mot et traduction libre, texte original et texte traduit. Sans prétendre vouloir bâtir une nouvelle théorie de la traduction à partir du déconstructionnisme, l'auteur démontre que certains faits qui paraissent évidents et préordonnés dans les théories ne le sont pas nécessairement, qu'ils sont basés sur des jugements de valeur et des idéologies dominantes et qu'il est important d'être conscient des présupposés qui servent de point d'appui aux théories.

(MIS)TRANSLATING THE UNTRANSLATABLE — THE IMPACT OF DECONSTRUCTION AND POST-STRUCTURALISM ON TRANSLATION THEORY

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Yo sé de una región cerril cuyos bibliotecarios repudian la supersticiosa y vana costumbre de buscar sentido en los libros y la equiparan a la de buscarlo en los sueños o en las líneas caóticas de la mano... Admiten que los inventores de la escritura imitaron los veinticinco símbolos naturales, pero sostienen que esa aplicación es casual y que los libros nada significan en sí. Ese dictamen, ya veremos, no es del todo falaz.

Jorge Luis Borges, *La biblioteca de Babel*

Résumé

Bien que le déconstructionnisme déclare la traduction impossible à réaliser, il peut être utile aux études traductologiques. Par exemple, il servira d'outil pour résoudre certaines oppositions classiques entre traduction mot à mot et traduction libre, texte original et texte traduit. Sans prétendre vouloir bâtir une nouvelle théorie de la traduction à partir du déconstructionnisme, l'auteur démontre que certains faits qui paraissent évidents et préordonnés dans les théories ne le sont pas nécessairement, qu'ils sont basés sur des jugements de valeur et des idéologies dominantes et qu'il est important d'être conscient des présupposés qui servent de point d'appui aux théories.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the impact deconstruction has made on many different fields of science (philosophy, literature, sociology etc.) during the past twenty years, until recently little attention has been paid to it in translation studies. Admittedly, it may at first sight appear to be hostile to translation as it even declares that translation is impossible. However, it also has something to offer.

Deconstruction does not offer easy access or shortcuts to its ways of thinking. Jacques Derrida, the originator and founding father of deconstruction (if you can say so about a man who disputes the very existence of any origins and repudiates his paternity), does his best to lead the reader of his texts astray and to avoid any possibility of final interpretations. By denying the existence of *Truth*, *Origin* and *Center*, deconstruction deprives us of the comfortable fallacy of living in a simple and understandable world. We lose security, but we gain endless possibilities, the unlimited play of meanings.

The complexity of many post-structuralist writings and especially Derrida's texts poses great difficulties for the reader, but on the other hand, if there are no final and legitimized

interpretations, one can easily mould the ideas for individual needs. I have picked up the issues that suit my present purposes and ignored a multitude of other aspects which someone else might regard as much more relevant for translation.

Our way of thinking is largely based on binary oppositions such as good/bad, man/woman, culture/nature. These oppositions are not innocent but imply that the second is a negative, dangerous and unwanted version of the first. Deconstruction is a useful tool for resolving these violent oppositions. In translation there are several dichotomies which require deconstructing: for example word-for-word translation versus free translation, theory versus practice and original text versus translated text. What I find most paralyzing to the actual translation and the actual translator is the hierarchical opposition where the original text and its author are placed on the upper level and the translation and other *second hand* interpretations and interpreters on the lower.

My aim is not to create any new and comprehensive theory of translation using deconstruction as a fashionable tool to sweep out everything that has ever been said about translation but to point out that the self-evident facts about translation are not necessarily so self-evident and pre-ordained as they appear to be. They are demonstrations of certain value judgements and ideologies, and it is important that we be aware of the presuppositions that lie beneath the theories.

LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

Derrida's work and deconstruction has sometimes been oversimplified as a straightforward reaction towards structuralism. It is true that structuralism has gotten its share of the criticism, but rather than just abandoning all the premises of structuralism, deconstruction and post-structuralism (as the name implies) have developed them further and made visible the complexity structuralism tried to control and conquer.

Derrida's conception of language is largely based on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, even if he has strongly criticized its logocentrism and phonocentrism. (On Derrida's relation to Saussure see *e.g.* Derrida 1967/1976: 30-73, and Culler 1982/1987: 98-99.) According to Saussure (1983/1990: 67), signs are composed of two sides neither of which exists prior to the other. These are the sound-image ("t-r-e-e") *i.e.* the signifier, and the concept (tree) *i.e.* the signified. Neither has any meaning outside its relation in the sign.

The relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and there is no clear difference between them; reaching for the signified one only encounters new signifiers. The sign could be compared to the Mobius Strip, a strip which has been rotated half a turn round its longitudinal axis before joining the ends. Instead of two separate faces it then actually has only one. Revolving around itself it only creates an illusion of separated inner and outer faces.

In the network where the signifiers can in turn become signifieds no final link to the chain exists: there is no transcendental signified which would stand as a final truth outside the play of meanings (Derrida 1972/1988: 28). And just as there is no transcendental signified there are no extralinguistic meanings. As beings constituted by and through language, we cannot make observations from outside it. This does not, however, imply that we should give up all our attempts to make analyses or explanations, but rather that we should be aware of our own limitations.

According to Saussure meanings are based on differences. Derrida goes one step further and claims that it is not difference but *différance* that creates meanings. *Différance* is one of Derrida's neologisms. It is not exactly a concept, and it cannot be defined exhaustively. Among other things it means that meanings are based on differences and on their relations to other signs, and that meanings are always delayed, they are never completely present. The meaning of the sign depends on what it is not, so the meanings are always already absent. Because of this, we can only produce partial meanings.

The deconstructionist view of sign stresses its ever-changing nature. As signs are repeated, the repetitions in various situations leave their traces in the sign, and all the traces affect the meanings the sign receives. Meaning is never singular. There is always a surplus of meanings as new meanings are added all the time. Language thus is a ceaseless production of meanings.

This kind of conception of language and meaning has tremendous implications for translation. The traditional view has been that the translator has to preserve the (singular and stable) meaning, *i.e.* the signified has to stay intact in the transportation to another signifier. According to Eugene A. Nida, for example, translating is like packing suitcases: it makes no difference in which suitcase one carries the meanings as long as they all come along (Nida 1969 / 1989: 92).

If we accept Saussure's and Derrida's view of the interchangeable nature of signifiers and signifieds and the ever-changing nature of meanings, we can no longer view the act of translation as transportation of meaning. The signifier and the signified are interlinked, and you cannot change one without affecting the other. This kind of a conception of language calls for radical rethinking of translation.

THE TEXTURE OF TEXTS

As well as signs, the texts, too, get their meanings through their relations to other texts. And, similar to signs, their meanings cannot be reduced to one singular entity. Intertextuality is thus much more profound than mere stylistic similarities or allusions; it is an essential quality of texts. The dialogue of texts is not only literary, but also includes issues concerned with *e.g.* history and social life. There are numerous intertwined voices within the text. Intertextuality also breaks the chronological order: every literary work creates its precursors, as Jorge Luis Borges has stated (Borges 1952 / 1990: 90).

Roland Barthes introduced the distinction between work and text to literary theory. Such textual concepts indicate the difference between writings that ask to be read in one single way (works) and those that rejoice in the plurality of meanings (texts). *Work* can also be defined as a concrete object (*e.g.* book) whereas *text* refers to a methodological field, a network which lives in a constant interaction with other texts and has no definable boundaries.

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (Barthes 1977 / 1988: 170.)

The plurality of meanings and the ever-changing nature of the sign lead to the conclusion that there is actually no such thing as *work*; the static object with (one) fixed and theological meaning is pure fiction. All *works* are in fact texts whose additional meanings have been suppressed.

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

The shift from work to text is logically followed by the dethronement of the Author. A work might have a god-like creator, but the text is created anew in every reading and no ownership can be declared. The identity of the subject of the text is dissolved. "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing," says Roland Barthes (1977 / 1988: 171).

The *death* of the author necessarily affects the translator. If the dominance of authorial meaning is dismissed, neither can translation be seen as a transmission of that meaning to another language. The hierarchical opposition between source text and target text is no longer acceptable.

During the Renaissance translators described their work with a metaphor of footprints. The duty of the translator was to follow in the writer's footsteps while the writer set the direction and the pace (see Hermans 1985: 108). Many theorists still regard the analogue and attitude as valid and acceptable. George Steiner (1989: 151-152), for example, lists translation among *secondary* texts which, compared to the virile primary texts, are like eunuchs.

As the example of George Steiner hints, there is a certain undercurrent of sexuality in textual relations. The relationship between the *original* and the translation is in many ways analogical to that between man and woman. Compared to the former the latter is found wanting: as the woman has no penis the translation never has that *something* the original has. Both these hierarchical oppositions are justified by saying that the former was the first to exist and is therefore more valuable. The endless intertextuality and the plurality of meanings give no preference or primacy to the first-comer. One can also question whether it is more valuable to write a book than to read it and whether it is the writer or the reader who actually produces the text.

The roles of the reader, the writer and the translator are largely interchangeable: the reader writes the text, the writer is actually the reader of his own writing, the translator is both a reader and a writer, and both the reader and the writer in fact translate the text for themselves.

In this context reader, writer and translator are to be understood rather as anonymous functions of the text than personalities. For example, Roland Barthes (1977/1988: 171) describes the reader as follows:

> The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal.

It is worth pointing out that similar to the writer the translator can declare no authority over the translation. The translation, as any other text, has to be set free.

The dismissal of authorial meaning leads to a need to reconsider our possibilities for communication in general. Debating the communicative aspects of language, Christopher Norris (1987/89: 186-187) refers to Derrida's postal principle and postcard analogy:

> The postcard is indeed a 'wandering exile', a message most often casually inscribed and promiscuously open for all to read. At the same time it is a writing that can only make sense to one person (the presumed addressee) whose knowledge of the sender enables him or her to figure out its otherwise impossibly cryptic message. The postcard thus exemplifies the twofold sense in which language eludes the sovereignty of philosophic reason. On the one hand textuality exceeds all the limiting specifications placed upon language by the need to maintain a strictly controlled economy of concepts. On the other, the postcard may be seen to insist that meaning is indeed *irreducibly* specific, but tied down to local particulars of time and place that likewise escape the universalizing drift of reason.

As even the above citation indicates, it is a far-fetched claim to say that deconstruction completely denies the possibility of communication, as some of its opponents have been willing to state. But it does indeed call for radical rethinking of the limits of communication and intentionality:

> Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving. And without this threat. [...] the circuit of the letter would not even have begun. But with this threat, the circuit can always not finish. (Derrida 1991: 460)

The sender's capability of controlling the destiny of the letter is limited. S/he can increase the amount of wrappings, fasten it with tape or register it, but there always remains the threat that it may be stolen or get lost.

According to the traditional view of communication, the sender, at least, is fully aware of the message s/he is about the send. The post-structuralist claim is that no one can step outside the play of meanings. The text does not return to its writer as identical to the one s/he wrote. If it ever returns it is no longer the same; new situations, commentaries and new intertextual relations have changed it. I am sure everyone has experienced this change when reading something they have written some time ago. Although the concrete 'work' is unchanged, there is peculiar strangeness in the text.

HOW TO DEFINE TRANSLATION?

Translations have often been seen as imitations trying in vain to copy the original. The attempt to reach equivalence with the original is often seen as the highest goal for the translator. Many translation theorists, like Neubert, Nida and Newmark, complain that translations never quite reach to the level of the original. Translation is seen as necessarily something less than the original, and even the right to add something, to create something *more*, is strictly denied. This approach to translation is based on a hierarchy where the original is considered to be far above the translation. It also presupposes faith in authority. If the author's role is diminished, and if meanings are never fixed and texts never static, the conception of translation as faithful reproduction of the (never-changing) original is untenable.

Translation includes the idea of repetition, but just as signs when repeated are never similar, translations can never be identical replicas. Différance takes part in every repetition. Translation is not the *same* text as the source text, but it is not a *different* text either. It deconstructs the opposition between sameness and difference.

It has been pointed out that Jacques Derrida sees translation as an impossible task. This is, however, only partially true. What he actually says is that the *traditional* conception of translation as transportation of meanings is problematic. He suggests that we should get rid of the term *translation* and start using the word *transformation* instead (Derrida 1972/1988: 29). This is contradictory to his own opinion that the old metaphysical concepts should not be changed but redefined.

The concept of supplement could be used to define translation. A supplement can be seen as an extra addition, but it may also indicate imperfection or insufficiency in the original since it can be seen to be in need of a supplement.

Translation can also be seen as a debt relationship. According to the traditional view, translation is the first and only debtor: it owes its whole existence to the original. But according to Derrida (1985: 184) the original is the first petitioner because it needs translation (and it also owes the translation its status as an original). There is a mutual contract between the two texts/languages. It can be described as a marriage contract, which includes the promise of a child. In spite of a resemblance to the parents, the child — the translation — is an autonomous personality.

THE DANGEROUS (MIS)TRANSLATOR

Misreading is normally seen as a negative deviation from the (one and only) correct reading. This apparently obvious truth can be questioned. As meanings are not pre-ordained by nature, the opposition between reading and misreading presupposes that someone has defined one of the myriad possible readings as the only correct one. The main issue then is how some (mis)readings are legalized and institutionalized while others are suppressed.

The theory of misreading promoted by Harold Bloom is based on the assumption that the text exists prior to the reading process. A more radical view is to claim that every reader actually writes the text, and as the capacity of every individual reader is limited by his or her historical and personal context etc., every reading is by force a misreading. Of course, the text can be written and read as a closure, ignoring its tendency towards plurality, or the plurality of meanings can be intensified and made visible.

Mistranslation is thought of as a dangerous and unwanted exception which should be avoided. But as texts and languages are not static objects and no one interpretation can cover the variety of meanings, there is no such thing as a correct translation, and all translators necessarily mistranslate. The demands for faithfulness cannot be fulfilled. There is no use calling for fidelity, because the text is not faithful to itself.

It is also good to realize that the meaning of fidelity itself is not stable. What is required from the translator in the name of fidelity varies according to the speaker and the historical context. Fidelity, too, is thus an ideological concept.

It has also been pointed out that similarity and difference are not independent qualities but only become meaningful in comparisons. Any two individuals have an arbitrary number of common characteristics: same birthday, similar habit of scratching their nose, similar tendency to put on weight easily, same favorite sport — the list could go on for ever. These similarities as such do not mean anything. Only in relation to a framework is similarity perceived as *meaningful* similarity.

What kind of a translation is regarded as a faithful reproduction of the original depends on which of the characteristics of the original are seen as meaningful and essential to reproduce. There does not necessarily exist any unanimity over these essential qualities.

The translator is often seen as a dangerous and invisible middleman hampering communication. There is need to trust him/her, but at the same time one can never know for sure whether s/he is telling the truth or a lie. The translator has power because s/he has something to say, and s/he may decide not to say it, or what is worse, decide to say something else instead. The need to be able to trust the translator has led to strict regulation of translation. The translator has to be kept under control.

Translation, as well as any other form of writing, is always manipulation for some purpose. No discourse is free from ideology. There is no such thing as objective truth, and thus the most dangerous manipulator is not the one who does it openly but the one who claims to be objective. The danger then lies in the invisibility of the translator, not in the act of translation itself. In my opinion the translator needs to come out from under cover, and openly show her/his manipulation. Instead of aiming at domesticated transparency and hidden foreignness, the translator should rather let the reader be aware of the linguistic and cultural differences and the plurality of meanings (see Venuti 1992).

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