

# Cultural translation

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## Oviedo

“**I**n every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible. Melanie Klein, the Viennese psychoanalyst whom the Bloomsbury Group killed with kindness, suggested that the work of translation is an incessant shuttle that is a ‘life’. The human infant grabs on to some one thing and then things. This grabbing (*begreifen*) of an outside indistinguishable from an inside constitutes an inside, going back and forth and coding everything into a sign-system by the thing(s) grasped. One can call this crude coding a ‘translation’. In this never-ending weaving, violence translates into conscience and vice versa. From birth to death this ‘natural’ machine, programming the mind perhaps as genetic instructions program the body (where does body stop and mind begin?), is partly metapsychological and therefore outside the grasp of the mind. Thus ‘nature’ passes and repasses into ‘culture’, in a work or shuttling site of violence (deprivation—evil—shocks the infant system-in-the-making more than satisfaction, some say *Paradiso* is the dullest of *The Divine Comedy*): the violent production of the precarious subject of reparation and responsibility. To plot this weave, the reader—in my estimation, Klein was more a reader than an analyst in the strict Freudian sense—, translating the incessant translating shuttle into that which is read, must have the most intimate knowledge of the rules of representation and permissible narratives which make up the substance of a culture, and must also become responsible and accountable to the writing/translating presupposed original.

It is by way of Melanie Klein that I grasped a certain statement which comes to me from Australian Aboriginals. But before I go on to talk about it I want to say just a little bit more about Melanie Klein.

The subject in the shuttling described by Klein is something that will have happened, not something that definitely happens; because, first, it is not under the control of the I that we think of as the subject and because, second, there is such a thing as a world out there, however discursive. In this understanding of translation in Melanie Klein, therefore, the word translation itself loses its literal sense, it becomes a *catachresis*, a term I use not for obscurity, but because I find it indispensable.

Here is why I have to use the word *catachresis*. I was recently having a discussion with Dr. Aniruddha Das, a cell biologist. He is working on how cells recognize, how parasites recognize, what to attack in the body. I asked him why he used the word recognize, such a mindy word, a word that has to do with intellect and consciousness. Why use that word to describe something that goes on in the body, not really at all in the arena of what we recognize as mind? Wouldn't the word affinity do for these parasites 'knowing' what to attack? He explained to me that no, indeed, the word affinity would not do, and why it is that precisely the word recognize had to be used. (I cannot reproduce the explanation but that does not matter for us at this moment.) He added that the words recognition, recognize lose their normal sense when used this way; there is no other word that can be used. Most people find this difficult to understand. And I started laughing. I said, yes, most people do find it difficult to understand, what you have just described is a catachrestic use of the word recognition. In other words, no other word will do, and yet it does not really give you the literal meaning in the history of the language, upon which a *correct* rather than catachrestic metaphoric use would be based.

In the sense that I am deriving from Klein, *translation* does indeed lose its mooring in a literal meaning. Translation in this general sense is not under the control of the subject who is translating. Indeed the human subject is something that will have happened as this shuttling translation, from inside to outside, from violence to conscience: the production of the ethical subject. This originary translation thus wrenches the sense of the English word *translation* outside of its making. One look at the dictionary will tell you the word comes from a Latin past participle (of *transferre* = to transfer). It is a done deal, precisely not a future anterior, something that will have happened without our knowledge, particularly without our control, the subject coming into being.

**W**hen so-called ethnophilosophies describe the embedded ethico-cultural subject being formed prior to the terrain of rational decision making, they are dismissed as fatalistic. But the insight, that the constitution of the subject in responsibility is a certain kind of translation, of a genealogical scripting, which is not under the control of the deliberative consciousness, is not something that just comes from Melanie Klein. What is interesting about Melanie Klein is that she does indeed want to touch responsibility-based ethical systems rather than just rights-based ethical systems and therefore she looks at the violent translation that constitutes the subject in responsibility. It is in this sense that the human infant, on the cusp of the natural and the cultural, is in translation, except the word translation loses its dictionary sense right there. Here, the body itself is a script—or perhaps one should say a ceaseless inscribing instrument. (pp. 13-14)

BABLI MOITRA SARAF

From: “**Translation as Cultural Practice**”.

The introduction to the present issue agonizes about an “epistemological crisis” confronting the discipline of translation studies, laments the impasse within and looks towards “startlingly new” ways of defining translation. We are given to understand that it articulates the anxiety of scholars and practitioners of the discipline in “single nation states and linguistic limits”.

It is difficult for us in India to appreciate these anxieties and find ourselves in an intellectual cul-de-sac just yet with translation. There are 22 officially recognized languages, SIL Ethnologue lists 415 living ones, and one count puts the number of languages at 1652. However, languages are also dying with each generation resulting in epistemological losses. The crisis of the humanities has hit language learning particularly hard. In a rapidly globalizing world large swathes of geographical and mental landscapes in India stay cocooned in a time warp while others translate and are translated, transformed and transmitted. In a nation of story-tellers, oral and written narratives are recovered by scholars, scribes and performers to be translated. However, gaps have to be bridged between dialects and standard languages and languages which are spoken but do not have a script. Then there is the presence since ancient times of vigorous oral traditions as well as rigorous traditions of writing for dissemination of knowledge and these continue to be recuperated.

The national educational agenda factors in translation as a tool to open up the world of knowledge of a specialized kind to native vernacular speakers. With the formation of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), translation is also on the regional agenda as countries grappling with languages and cultures of the region strive to promote mutual understanding and eco-

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conomic co-operation. With so many permutations and combinations of the communicative contexts, the potential of translation studies is far from exhausted.

For the Indian sub-continent, the world has always been intercultural and cultural exchange has long been a mode of being. Five definitive moments can be identified for our purposes. The first is the translation of Buddhist texts and their travel right up to the Far East. The second is the encounter with Islam and the great cultural energy that encounter produced. The third is the colonial experience which culminated in the organization of the nation state along linguistic lines. The fourth, the post-independence era, which marked a spurt in regional translation activity, promoted by state patronage. The last is the contemporary condition of globalization. Yet predating these identifiable epochs is a continuum stretching back into the era of maritime and overland activity of trade and commerce, a 'globalization' with its own set of markers. For a region of such linguistic diversity where since ancient times translation is axiomatic, a given of the great commercial and social networks of trade routes, it seems an activity so innocuous and un-selfconscious that there is no reflection on it till we come to the translation activity undertaken with the advent of Buddhism and then in the encounter with the world of Islam, when we also see the operation of translation as metaphor, as two world views come into contact. Different historical epochs have thrown up their particular problematic. We in India are still negotiating these epochs in translation and translation studies.

Ethnographic studies might just hold the key to opening new vistas and thinking about translation in new/different ways. My ongoing work with texts of pre-colonial Bengal (1204-1756), confronts the problem of reconciling the massive cultural knowledge in circulation with the fact of mass illiteracy. How does a text travel across linguistic boundaries, cultural borders, geographical spaces in pre-literacy contexts? It leads me to think about translation as cultural practice. As a cultural practice translation needs to be viewed in the specific contexts of what people are doing with texts, how they are circulated, disseminated and received. My findings suggest that cultural articulation of the time, both erudite and folk, is oriented towards performance and mediated by an acute sense of an audience: through ritual, recitation, song, dance, puppets, paintings, and other modes of folk expression. Do performance and its dynamics in the social space, especially in pre-literacy, pre-print mass cultures constitute and produce legitimate and viable texts as well as methodologies of translation? Further, may these methodologies constitute a paradigm shift from the Eurocentric modes of regarding translation within the parameters of 'source texts and target languages, in terms of the 'original' and its equivalent in the 'translated'? Is it possible to redefine the notion of 'original text' in specific cultural milieus? Is there an 'original text'? Can we retrieve translational strategies in oral cultures? May 'adaptation' for performance function as a translational strategy?

**T**he caste structure of society in India, the division into *jatis* and *upajatis*—largely occupational groups and subgroups—and the nature of their encounter with texts, both oral and written, is fundamental to the understanding of translation as cultural practice. The existing social stratification has been crucial to the development of cultural

practices which are more often linked to occupation and economic conditions, than to erudition and literacy, a situation in which impoverished and illiterate peoples may actually produce the text by providing the supporting infrastructure and human resources to realize it in the performative. Canonical texts were meant to be performed, through recitation, song, dance, puppets and other modes of folk practices which clustered around caste occupations, particularly of the 'nimnakoti', or the lower castes. The Namasudras of Bengal produce the castes of *Gope* (writers), *Sutradhar* (storytellers), *Gayans* (singers), *Bayen* (Percussionists), the caste of *Teli* who cured leather and made musical instruments, *Patua* (painters and pictorial storytellers), *Nat* (magicians/actors), practically constituting the production team of a performance. These occupations groups could be Hindus or Muslims, drawing upon the common heritage of the oral tradition and shared cultural codes. The occupational diversity and division of labor, the presence of many jatis, and within them of religious groupings means that a text could find diverse articulations within its locale, as well as travel with itinerant performing troupes across discrete linguistic and cultural regions. A text in pre-modern Bengal therefore, may be thought of as translated and retranslated as many times as the number of performances, and edited/adapted for its audience and for the occasion on which it was performed. This permitted the text the cultural crossovers that translation allows and the former also reinvented itself in various languages. This process produced a dynamism within the act of translation which carried the text through the many linguistic and cultural regions that it traveled in this trajectory. And texts did travel, from the deserts of Arabia to the forests of Bengal and back. The arena of performance we find is actually an overlap, an encounter of the oral and the written text. It is also a space which produces a new text. I call this new text a translation. Would this notion of translation stand critical scrutiny and be accommodated in translation theory? (pp. 1-3)

MARIA TYMOCZKO

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There are a number of things that should be done in translation studies to enlarge and redefine the object of study (and its corollary, to reconfigure concepts about ways that a text and its translation are related), including examining the meanings of words for *translation* in non-Western contexts and looking at specific historical traditions associated with those variant conceptions of translation. In theorizing the data it is essential to view translation as a cluster concept, moving beyond attempts to define translation as a logical concept or a prototype concept, which have resulted in so many Eurocentric pronouncements about the field. Clearly, in order to understand the scope of the cluster concept called *translation* in English, translation studies scholars must be assiduous in seeking

out more of the world's words for *translation*, as well as investigating in detail the connotations, implications, translation practices and actual histories of translation associated with those terms. Only by engaging in such an investigative enterprise can translation scholars fully understand the objects of research in translation studies—encompassed in the large and complicated cluster concept of translation—and the types of family resemblances that bind these objects conceptually, thus expanding translation theory in the process.

In broadening the definition of translation and breaking the hold of Eurocentric stereotypes of translation, it may also be helpful to consider forms and modes of cultural interface that are related to translation but distinct from it. Such forms include, for example, postcolonial literature and related hybridized forms of cultural production; work on these forms of translation studies has already been productive for the field. Three additional modes of cultural interface to explore are illustrated by the English words *transference*, *representation* and *transculturation*.

In *transference* or *transmission*, material is moved from one cultural context to another, but the mode of transfer is not specified. It can range from physical transfer to symbolic transfer (such as happens in a bank transfer) or transfer that involves a radical shift in medium (such as a television transmission). Thus, *transference* can result in cultural products that are either very close (even identical) to the source substance or very different from the source material. In cultural transfer, then, there is no presupposition about either the process or product of the cultural transposition. By contrast, *translation* in a single culture at a single point in time is usually governed by cultural prototype encompassing both product and process, notwithstanding the fact that such prototypes have varied widely through history, from close linguistic transfer to free adaptation, from fluency to radical abridgment, and so forth [...]. Thinking about *transference* or *transmission* can remind translation studies scholars of how varied cultural mediation can be in process and product, helping to move their thinking beyond their own particular cultural presuppositions and stereotypes.

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Still another strand of translation is indicated by the word *representation*. [...] [It] constructs an image, but implies as well the exhibition of that image. It involves clarity of knowledge and symbolic substitution. It has a serious import connected with social goals, including social change. Representation, therefore, presupposes both a perspective on what is represented and a purpose in the activity itself. In fact, since the decline of positivism, there has been a new awareness of the constructivist aspect of representation, of the fact that representation is not an 'objective' process. As a form of definition that involves substitution in the symbolic realm, representation creates images that have an ideological aspect. It is the power inherent in representation, the potential for speaking with authority on behalf of another, and the ability to make statements that have legal or political standing, as well as the inescapability of a perspective of purpose, that have led to the crisis of representation in the social sciences, most particularly in anthropology and ethnography, where the potential for manipulation and ethnocentrism in representations has been discussed and debated (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986). Obviously translation is a major intercultural form of representation, and, as such, translations must be scrutinized for the various factors associated with representation, even when translation occurs internally to a plurilingual society.

Finally, translation can be seen in the light of the process of *transculturation*, which can be defined as "the transmission of cultural characteristics from one cultural group to another". The term has come into English from Spanish, where it was first used to speak about the interchange of cultural characteristics between Europeans and the indigenous population in Latin America, and to describe the creolization and hybridization of most Latin American cultures. Transculturation goes far beyond the transfer of verbal materials and includes such things as the transfer of ideas about religion and government; the spread of artistic forms including music and the visual arts; the transfers having to do with material culture including clothing, food, housing, transportation, and so forth, not to mention more recent cultural domains such as the modern media. Thus, the popularity of Chinese food, reggae and US films around the world are all examples of transculturation. Transculturation has elements in common with intersemiotic translation, for it is not exclusively or even primarily a linguistic process. With respect to texts, transculturation is often a matter of transposing elements that constitute overcodings, such as the poetics, formal literary elements and genres of literary systems, as well as discourses, worldviews, and so forth. Obviously transculturation is an essential aspect of cultural interchange in cultures where more than one language and culture are in interface; indeed transculturation is operative in any postcolonial nation.

One of the distinguishing aspects of transculturation, in contrast to either representation or transmission, is that it entails the performance of specific forms or aspects of another culture. It is not sufficient that Chinese food be displayed nor defined nor described for transculturation to occur: the food must be eaten and enjoyed as well. At the same time, paradoxically, transculturation does not always involve representation; one can easily imagine a person receiving and incorporating into her life a cultural form with little

or no sense that it originated in another cultural setting. That is, a cultural form can become completely naturalized in the receptor culture or transculturation can proceed in such a way as to obscure the point of origin of a specific cultural element. This aspect of easy interchange through transculturation is very common in places that bring together more than one cultural group; many things may be perceived as perfectly natural in a hybridized culture without people having a strong sense of their cultural point of origin. (pp. 26-29)

