The (Well)-(Ill) Being of the Translator between Languages-Cultures

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Abstract

Although often denied by theoreticians and translators, to this day these two groups see translation as heir to a linguistic perspective that has dominated the field since the 1960s. Many translators tend to compose their texts as if coming from the task of translating the meaning of one word after the other, reticent of writing a text in the target language that fails to respect the source text, or diverges from the author or her/his intentions. Thus, the word in the source language must have primacy over that of the target language, which is a constant hostage to the language of the so-called original or source text. This subservience is generally understood as a quality of a translator who is concerned in remaining faithful to the author, whose relation to the translator is that of an authority. Translation in this paper will be discussed from the standpoint of this strongly-held assumption among translators, who strive to achieve the ideal of (im)possible faithfulness to the source text (or author). On one hand, this is understood as violence against the source text (Foucault, 1975 [1977, p. 23) and on the other, as a result of difference, postulated by Derrida (1967).

Keywords : Translation, author, meaning, language, culture

Introduction

Translation as An act of Violence

The term "translation" (lt.: *latus* = borne*; trans* = from one place to another) cannot indicate transition – the action of taking to the other side, as if a bridge, in this case, to take words from one language to the other, as if words were empty, mere information (single meaning possible to pass on to the other language with no change of meaning, without transformations occurring in the source text and without the target text suffering the impact of the source language-culture. Language, after all, is culture. One does not exist without the other. This means that the words and expressions that comprise them are 'full', laden with meanings that manifest the way of being, thinking and acting of a social group or given discursive formation in which are inserted both the author and translator of the text – or better put – the author of the source text and the translator of the target text. Both are authors and producers of meaning: the author of the source text produces meanings from her or his own experience, language-culture, and history; the translator, author of the target text, produces meanings from effects that the text produces in her or him, when interpreted in contrast or symbiosis with the language-culture of which the translator is a subject. We know that texts manifest language and "we live inside our language" (DERRIDA, 2012, p.77), or as Lacan (1998) suggested, the subject is constituted in and by language ("subject of language")[1], effect among signifiers.

If this were insufficient, no language-culture is monolithic: it is hybrid, mestio, heterogeneous, since it is criss-crossed with threads from weaves of other language-cultures. Therefore, just as any discursive background is made up of threads from other discursive formations or rather from other discourses continuously in formation. Due to the fact that it is constantly in formation, even though the movement of social transformations is slow, the ensuing instable discourses do not lend themselves to construction of fixed realities, despite the illusion of stability that comforts the imagination of the subject. These realities move with and in the diverse interpretations that give life and presence. Imagination is understood (LACAN, 1966) as the psychic instance of representations of self-based on the other, which merges the illusion of identity, completeness and wholeness to the subject. The desire to be the desire of the other, to be a pair with the other, makes the subject submit to the gaze of the other, seeking to

meet the other's expectations and thus realize the desire of the other and renounce her or his own or her or himself, until a break is produced and the individual begins to assume and be responsible for her or his acts and choices …

The author and translator are situated within this complex vision of subject that also complicates subjectivity, which is understood as the relation with the other. The former is submissive to the text that is not infrequently constructed separately from the author's conscious intentions. The author then sees her or his work grow and become autonomous, (in)dependent, open to plurality of meanings that come from multiple and perhaps even infinite interpretations. The author claims to be the creator of the text and yet sees this creation escape her/ his control. As the child cuts ties with its parents to live out its desire, even if in a process of eternal postponement, it does not eliminate the biological and linguistic-cultural similarities with the parents. This legacy can never (even if it so desired) be undone and will maintain it connected to its parents. Likewise, the text that results from an act of creation, maintains an indelible bond with the author, and ties of subjectivity that they (author and text) singularize, yet are submitted to the gaze of critics or of the translator, in her/his act of interpretation.

If the translator is the other of the author, then she or he is responsible not only for the interpretation, but also for the `transition` spoken of by Derrida (2004, p. 575). Perhaps a single word is enough to make us understand that translation is a haggling, a negotiation, a trans-action between cultures (transcultural) and as such is trans-lingual (if one can state this). The title of Derrida's small book comes to mind, *Des Tours de Babel*: how to translate "des tours" into English, with all the meanings that Derrida gives it throughout the book? The first translation would be "Towers", but in our culture, this word evokes 1) buildings; 2) structures, usually metallic, where television, radio and other broadcasting equipment is installed. The second translation without translation - because the word comes to us from French – would be "tours", to take a tour, a trip, a spin to other places, the artist's "tour". "A tour", in "take a tour", in the sense of "a trip", "going out" is not a word within the word tower or tour, in the English language-culture (of the US) that is the same as what occurs in the French language-culture, which is not monolithic, as any other language, it is made of fragments of other language-cultures (such as Arabic, the African languages of the colonies or Provençal…), More than one word in a word, more than one language in a single language, more than one culture within a culture, texts within a text… this is what the translator addresses multiplied by two, since she/he works with the source language and target language. What to do about the play on words that unites the preposition "des" and "tours" and, in oral language, forms a third word – "détours"-which means 'detour, in English? Obviously, the effect produced by the sound in French will be lost in English and the meaning changed.

Returning to "des tours", we can certainly state that the translator or the target language will be in debt in relation to the word in the source language; thus the reiterated statement by Derrida (1987 [2002]; 2004) that the translator is an eternal debtor, although he admits that often the author is the one who comes to own the translator. In the words of Derrida (2002), returning to Walter Benjamin:

> There is life at the moment when survival (spirit, history, works) exceeds biological life and death. (…) does not say the task or the problem of translation. He names the subject of translation as an indebted subject, obligated by a duty, already in the position of the heir, entered as survivor in a genealogy, as survivor or agent of survival. The survival of works not authors. Perhaps the survival of authors' names and of signatures, but not of authors and signatures, but (…) not authors. (Derrida, 2002, p. 32-33)

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Derrida proceeds, affirming that the debt is not of the translator, because the debt passes "between two texts (two "productions" or two "creations")" (Derrida, 2002, p. 33). Note that Derrida approximates the debt of inheritance and survival in the passage cited.

It is this debt that enables us to speak of the impossibility of translation and simultaneously of the need for translation: taking again the words of Derrida (2002), the translator is at all times faced with the impossibility of translation, where she/he wishes to be faithful to the author and therefore to the text, with the need for the same: a work that cannot be read in (an)other language(s) is a work that tends toward disappearance. Therefore it is needful to translate – the text begs, the author's name asks – despite the impossibility, to make the best choice, with the minimum of loss. What is this loss we of which we speak?

In light of the (im)possible task of translating, the translator sees her/himself constantly in the contingency of making choices of all types, consciously or unconsciously, or explainable or otherwise: choice of vocabulary, syntax, morphology, semantics... Now, in the sphere of language, making choices necessarily assumes a gesture of interpretation. Thus, translation is defined as interpretation, to translate is to interpret. Derrida (1998, p. 04) goes further:

> Whoever reads a text, reads it well, paying all necessary attention to the language, in the work of writing, in the singularity of composition etc., is in the position of a translator, experimenting to put it to test, the resistance of a thoughtful, poetic, idiomatic text.

Now as we know, to interpret is to produce meaning from a reading, which is always unique but never, in the end, of a text. Actually, to read well is also to interpret, which implies an investment of the subject, of its singularity, in the first gesture of interpretation. This does not mean that an interpretation is so singular to the point of being completely different from that made by the same or another subject. Every gesture of interpretation, however, is similar and different at the same time. There will always be something unresolvable, uncontrollable, something that escapes the control of the subject who has to "invent" – since it is always constructed – transforming, modifying the so-called first or source text. It is not by chance that Foucault (1997) says that all interpretation is violence: violence against the first text, which is cut, struck to produce another text, which retains traces of the first text that makes them similar without assimilation, which distinguishes them without the differences voiding the similarities.

A similar act of violence is also cited by Derrida (1972 [1981a]) as a cut, a split in the tissue, texture, text. The philosopher says it thus:

> The dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web: a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstructing it too as an organism, indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading. There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the `object`, without risking – which is the only chance of entering the game, by getting a few fingers caught – the addition of some new thread. Adding, here, is nothing other than giving to read. (Derrida, 1981a, p. 64)

Undoing the web, the fabric, the text, innumerable layers of threads, of traces of other texts, which criss-cross, braid, interweave, forming an inter-textuality, a constitutive heterogeneity, evokes the already-said (Foucault, 1972) or even is transformed with each gesture of production of meaning. Derrida defines text as an organism that, when cut, reconstructs, leaving traces (scars) that correspond to each reading. If we understand that

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translation is meticulous, careful reading or interpretation, then it produces splits in the text that unavoidably add something to it: this addition occurs through the inevitable interference of the subjectivity of each translator, who puts his hands on the text; in the desire to remain faithful to the author and the text, the translator is faithful to her/his interpretation, to the meanings produced in the deep cuts made, with the scalpel of the translator's life (experiences, knowledge…), leaving marks of her/his authorship. The translated text is thus not the same as the first text: just as a child is always similar to the parent and at the same time different, translation carries the original text and transforms it into another (another language, another culture, and unconscious choices of the translator that also leave traces).

It is inevitable! The translator sees her/himself as constantly faced with the contingency of making choices, making decisions. Every decision is a split, a cut, a rupture, a separation, impact, wound. Deciding, therefore, is to rend, to take one of the paths that appear before us (and the translator) and abandon the other(s). We must only decide, according to Derrida (2012), faced with the unresolvable, the impossibility of being divisible, but aporetically, the need to decide to enable life to proceed, continue on one path or change to another, which is never only one other. Which path to take? What term, expression, phrase should I choose to best suit `my` interpretation, which is what translation always is? This seems to be the major responsibility of the translator. She/he shall have to answer for each choice, even if made unconsciously: an explanation based on reason seems indispensable in a world where only that which has an explanation or justification is legitimate … In the words of Derrida (2012, p.69), the undecidable leads to where "a certain responsibility must be taken. Responsibility is always taken in a place of absolute undecidability, on the edge [bord] of this double possibility" (Derrida, 2002, p.226)[1]. To translate is to expose one's self to indecision, to undecidability. Decisions must be made, even though im-possible. Responsibility for the choices must be taken.

Translation as Différance

Now if translation is interpretation that results in another gesture: that of writing the other text, in another language-culture, while striving to `stick` (faithful) to the first text, the language-culture that produced it, one could use analogies for translation such as: the broken amphora where it is impossible to separate the inside from the outside. In other words, it presents the outside and inside as if they were one, or the king's mantle that covers his body while at the same time molds him, models and builds his identity, so that the clothing is the king and the king is the clothing, revealing him in the play of oppositions that do not radicalize binarily of the operator `or` (or this or that). Certainly, the oppositions do not disappear (body/clothing, inside/outside), but they also do not polarize, since, in the abovementioned examples, we are dealing with inside-outside and body-clothing or clothing-body, maintaining them united by the hyphen that both unites and separates them.

The interval of space is called *differance* by Derrida (1967), spelled with "a", to provoke a sense of strangeness to the French reader or anyone knowledgeable (friend) of the French language, used to seeing it spelled with an "e". Derrida hopes that this strangeness will show that what unites and separates oppositions in language can be shown with a hyphen or with parentheses or even by an "e", abandoning the dichotomy of using "or", which acts as a marker of alternance (either x or y), radicalizing the conceptual separation between the words. Therefore, opposites share the temporal space and special temporality. Moreover, Derrida plays with homophony – *différence* and *différance* – which simultaneously evokes what is different (everything is similar and different at the same time and differences must be respected) and, in French, defer, postpone, leave for later the single, only, final (un)expected meaning: a

significance always leads to another significance and that one to another and on and on in a vain search for completeness, totality, an interpretation that surpasses the others and that is right, correct, legitimated by an authority, that is, by an immutable truth, for a perfect translation. "There are only everywhere differences and traces of traces." (Derrida, 1981, p. 26). And Derrida continues:

> Nothing – no present and in-different being – thus precedes différance and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author and master of différance, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity - like objectivity – is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed as a system of *différance*. This is why the a of *différance* also recalls that spacing is *temporization*, the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation – in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality the *being* – are always *deferred*. Deferred by virtue of the very principle of *difference*, which holds that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces. (…) At the point of which the concept of différance, and the chain attached to it, intervenes, all the conceptual opposition of metaphysics (signifier/signified; sensible/intelligible; writing/speech; passivity/activity; etc.) – (…) become nonpertinent. (Derrida, 1981b, p. 28-29)[1]

Thus, the interval of space that unites and disunites opposites, dichotomies fundamental in Western culture, maintains the opposites but does not polarize them. They are linked but not separated, they add but not alternate. The fact that there are only traces of traces creates problems for beginning, origin and end. Nothing has meaning without the presence of another element. In an interview with Roudinesco, refers to the "great entities" and conceptual oppositions, "too solid, and therefore, as precarious as those that followed Freud" that he considered necessary "some *différance* that erases or dislocates their borders" (Derrida; Roudinesco (2001 [2004, p. 208]).

Let us not forget that the desire of authorship is what seems to move the (not always well-paid) translator, who needs to mourn the author, to be able to translate and ex-scribe – shamelessly in-scribing what resulted from the interpretation of the text, tessitura, the tangled web of threads of the language-culture of the other, into the target language-culture, based on the translator's own context, which is always social and unconscious and part of the archive of the unconscious (Derrida, 1995; Coracini, 2010), this archive acts without the translator's knowledge, in-fluencing in the interpretation and de-cisions.

So, according to *différance* as understood from Derrida (1967), translation occurs in the space between the desire of authorship and the impossibility of the same, since the first text is already present, giving itself to be read, contained in the incessant howbeit vain quest on the part of the one who interprets (or understands) a text or translates it (interprets and writes), for the final and unique meaning that would confer the status of perfection to the translation. Thus the double bind of *différance*, which embraces borders, neither wrong nor right – because wrong is the right and right is the wrong –, like the Moebius strip (Lacan, 1966), one can say with Derrida (2002, p. 226) "that the impossible is possible and what is possible is impossible – as such" and add that this threshold, between opposites, is where one finds the translator, in the tension and conflict of being "in between": between language-cultures, between texts, between the author of the source work (text) and the reader of the target work (text), between her/himself

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[1] In the French (original) edition, this fragment is found between pages 38-40.

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and the other, the other and self, between pleasure (contentment) of authorship, which is the pulse of life and that propels one to perform the task and the suffering of death (Freud, 1930), (discontentment) of disappearance as author (pulse of life) so that the author of the first work survives through translation (CORACINI, 2005; 2006).

Between languages-cultures

The statement that the translator finds her/himself between-languages seems trite and obvious. After all, even Jakobson, taken by Derrida (2004), classifies translation as intra-lingual and inter-lingual; the former produced within the same language – among modes of speech and regional variants, the latter, which linguists refer to as translation itself, between different linguistic systems. In this chapter, we are especially interested in the problem of inter-lingual translation, to better grasp the arduous-yet-instigating task of the translator, which can also truly occur within the scope of the same language.

Although we usually refer to inter-lingual translation as happening between two languages, if one simply asks what makes a language, a linguistic system, and we shall realize that the ONE of a language has the visage; it resembles unity, homogeneity and camouflages heterogeneity, blurring borders between languages. From a historical standpoint, we know that any and every language is made from many others, or better, from traces (words, syntactic, phonetic, grammatical and other aspects) from others that, from loans (terms borrowed from another language) they become, with use, part of the language, so that over time, speakers reach the point where they no longer perceive their 'origin'. Such is the case of "Yadda, yadda, yadda…", which comes from Yiddish, instead of "blah, blah, blah…" or "so forth". It is also the case in Portuguese of "açúcar" (sugar) and all words that etymologically begin with "al" in Portuguese, which come from Arabic. It is the case with "hamac" in French, which comes from Provençal. The list of examples could continue *ad infinitum*. Forgetting the origin provides the illusion that all of the linguistic elements were created from within a single language, as if its interior did not flow outside and vice-versa. Obviously, in translation these connections to other languages are erased, altering the effects of meaning, even though memory has blurred out the traces of the other language-cultures. An example of this might be `to jew' or 'heeb', terms that evoke the Holocaust, and the mistreatment suffered by the Jews.

It is insufficient, however, to recognize that the apparently single language or linguistic system hides heterogeneity, which comes from and is provided by the outside, the stranger or foreigner. One must understand that the language does not exist as a being, an entity outside of culture, where culture is understood as a set of social values and aspects. The cultural aspects, traditional or current, make a given social group see the world in one manner and not another, to constructo representations of self and of the other. These representations are historically inherited by discursive memory or recreated by a given historical-social moment, by the historicity of the subject. Nemni (1992) defines culture as a system of values that constitutes the subject by and in the language. This system of values (that may cover or be confused with ideology) is not fixed nor generalizing, in the sense that it would construct a nation, class or social group in a stabilized manner. Values modify over time, modifying the subjectivity of each one. It is true that values are not individual nor homogeneous, which means that culture or cultures is/are also not (a) homogeneous block(s), yet exalt(s) heterogeneity, mobility and – why not – (in)stability.

This is why one can postulate that language and culture unite and separate by a hyphen, which actually unites what cannot be together, or with an `and`, or parentheses. These markers maintain the differences of the terms, without one excluding the other. When a child begins to speak, it is a sign that it is submitting to the language-culture in which it is inscribed (and was

inscribed), eternal language-culture of the other (of the mother, of those surrounding). Yet, by submitting to a language-culture, the child submits to traces of other language-cultures… How can one explain why one says in French "je me lave les mains" and in Portuguese "estou lavando as minhas mãos"? Why does one say in English "I am 40 years old" and in French "J'ai 50 ans"? Why was the title of the work of Austin – *How to do things with words* – translated into French as *Quand dire c'est faire*, if not for reasons of interpretation or for 'cultural' reasons? Cultural differences, as can be seen, manifest themselves by and in linguistic differences, just as different interpretations inevitably have to do with subjective differences.

Some authors, such as Pêcheux (1983) refer to these differences and to mistakes such as "the real of the language", which defies rational explanation, control and symbolization. Yet, would language be independent from the subject? We try to show it wouldn't, just as we try to show that the subject is not independent of the language/speech. Porous par excellance, however, the lack (equivocity) and phallus (desire). On the contrary, the subject, according to Lacan (1972-1973) is effect among signifiers, or rather, is what a signifier represents to another signifier, and these cannot escape, I believe, from the culture or cultural aspects of a given group, in a given historical-social moment. Thus, subject, culture (ideology), language mutually constitute themselves, at the same time that they distinguish themselves from themselves. They are the same and different at the same time.

All of this, as one can imagine, influences translation, which is always inter- or trans-cultural, because it always takes place in the confused, contradictory, conflicting and slippery space between languages(-cultures). This complex aspect of trans-lingua-culture makes the task of the translator im-possible (possible and impossible at the same time) as it is likewise im-possible making decisions, faced with the need to make im-possible choices. The translator is each moment in aporetic temporal space between the impossibility of decision, making cuts and the need to make decisions, assuming responsibility for the same, between her/his language that is never hers/his, because no language can be appropriated, be property of someone, and that of the other, which hers/his and the other's as much as the language(-culture) is hers/his and the other's that constitutes and made - and makes - her/him subject. According to Derrida (1996 [1998a], p. 23), language has no owner, master, *dominus* (lord):

> […] the master is nothing. And he does not have exclusive possession of anything. Because the master not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it, because he can give substance to and articulate [dire] this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions, because language is not his natural possession […]

The speaker ("master"), who considers her/himself owner of "her/his" language, deceives her/himself and deceives everyone: no one "has" a language; no one dominates it, is lord (lt.: *dominus*) of a language; any language is anybody's and is no one's. It constitutes the subject – being simultaneously host and guest (lt.: *hospes*) – it is to the language that one submits (the subject is guest), while at the same time it is the one that constitutes (the subject is host), making the dynamic mutable, changeable, and why not, singular… Language is therefore always of the other, "imposed" by the other and by all those who are inscribed in it from birth. By being of the other, language - whether from the mother (mother tongue) or from the other (foreigner, foreign) – is always social, cultural and individual.

Summarizing,
This which is imagined to be a single language is more than one language, and this is the absolute untranslatability, since there is always more than one

language in a language, what is called a single language. The moment you translate, you reduce the plural to one. What is always difficult to translate, in addition to the difficulties classically located, is the multiplicity of languages in a single language, something that is produced all the time. (Derrida, 1998b, p. 6)

This is the difficulty that presents itself to the future translator, who insists in translating word for word what is naturally untranslatable, as "only that which is initially considered to be untranslatable is asked to be translated" says Derrida (1998b, p. 04). This difficulty, then, arises primarily from the fact that the student, youth or adult, believes that to translate (trans-late = lt. trans + latus = borne, carried to the other place) means to carry, transport a word, a text from one language to another, as if there were equivalents (same values, same meanings). The image of a bridge is often used when one speaks of translation (Arrojo, 1986): the bridge connects, but it also points to the passage, to the other place, the strange, the foreigner, the different. It therefore is necessary to make students understand the complexity of languages and translation, as (trans)linguistic-cultural, which makes the task of translation both a pleasure, causing the translator enormous contentment, which drives translation, and some discomfort, which not infrequently causes discontentment, leading the translator to reject while at the same time incites due to the addressing of constant challenges.

Conclusion

The translator is found in the contradiction (contrary diction) and in conflict, this discontentment between languages-cultures, and contentment at the same time, great satisfaction, inasmuch as at least the subject partially realizes the desire of authorship. By undergoing translation as an inter- or trans-linguistic-cultural experience, the translator in training is able to understand the im-possibility of absolute and cruel fidelity to the name of the author or to the text in the translation process, upon which the translator slaves. Infidelity is also fidelity: faith in the other and in self, in the gesture of interpretation – rigorous and responsible – which incides, cuts, abuses the text, modifying it, penetrating it to say it in another language-culture. By this act, the translator assumes responsibility (in the sense of giving her/his answer) for the choice of words, the order, the linguistic-textual aspects, even if this occurs unconsciously. The translator has been given the response to the inheritance, making something out of it, adding something. This is the task of the responsible translator, simultaneously guest (in the text of the other) and host (of the first text), in and from the language-culture of the other.

Therefore, translation occurs in the temporal space and spatial temporality that is always *différance*, as it deals with the irreducible difference between languages, which love and hate each other, and with the absolute postponement of any completeness, in the ultimate and perfect sense, with the promise of the impossible unity of language, text and subject.

In between languages-cultures, in between texts, between violence and dissemination (of the translated work) that pacifies and includes all, in between remedy and poison, between the impossibility and necessity of translation, in between the contentment and discontentment, between the undecidability and the need to decide, to make cuts, splits that re-generate, leaving folds, crumples, scars between the original and the translation, between the author of the first text and her/himself (translator) there is a space – conflicting and seductive – without borders or demarcated limits, at the edge, margin, threshold. This is the "habitat", embracing and inhospitable, of the translator, who sees her/his self-embraced and simultaneously rejected, excluded from the languages-cultures – apparently a single whole – of the other. Translation is violence and inclusion, it is more than one word in a word, more than one language in a single language; translation is *différance*.

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