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Cultural Translation as Hybridisation

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I.

How does the concept of hybridity relate to that of cultural translation? The two were put together almost two decades ago by Homi K. Bhabha in the penultimate chapter of *The Location of Culture* in a discussion of the writings of Salman Rushdie. This is what Bhabha says:

> Rushdie translates this into the dream of survival: an initiatory interstices [sic] an empowering condition of hybridity; an emergence that turns 'return' into reinscription or 'redescription'; an iteration that is not belated, but ironic and insurgent. For the migrant's survival depends, as Rushdie puts it, on 'how newness enters the world.' The focus is on making the linkages through the unstable elements of literature and life —the dangerous tryst with the 'untranslatable'—rather than arriving at ready-made names.
>
> The 'newness' of migrant or minority discourse has to be discovered in medias res ... the newness of cultural translation is akin to what Walter Benjamin describes as the 'foreignness of languages'—the problem of representation native to representation itself. If de Man focussed on the 'metonymy' of translation I want to foreground the foreignness of cultural translation.
>
> With the concept of foreignness Walter Benjamin comes closest to describing the performativity of translation as the staging of cultural difference. ... This process of complementarity as the agonistic supplement is the seed of the 'untranslatable,' the foreign element in the midst of the performance of cultural translation. (Bhabha 227)

Here Bhabha is seeking to define the terms of 'the "newness" of migrant or minority discourse,' which he describes both as 'an empowering condition of hybridity' and as 'the newness of cultural translation.' Cultural translation, he argues, 'stages' cultural difference by maintaining 'a foreign element' in

Trans-Humanities, Vol.5 No.1, February 2012, 155-75

its performance. It must preserve what Walter Benjamin called the 'foreignness of languages' in its translation, or as Bhabha puts it more provocatively, a 'seed of the "untranslatable,"' just as hybridity must contain the element of residual difference without which it would become a simple melange, fusion, resolution of the difference between the other and the same. Hybridity is a concept that I and many others have already analysed at length (Young, 1995). But what about 'cultural translation'? How can it involve both translation and the untranslatable? The phrase 'cultural translation' is easy to invoke, but what do we mean by it when we do? Can there be such a thing as a hybrid translation? If so, what would a hybrid translation look like?

In recent years, the idea of 'cultural translation' has been increasingly used across a wide range of disciplines in the humanities, enabling them to focus on the dynamic processes of interaction among different cultures that appear to characterize our contemporary era. The metaphor of translation has been particularly utilized in the relatively new fields of Postcolonial and Migration Studies as a means of considering the wider effects of the ways in which cultures are transmitted and developed in different contexts, either historically through the operations of colonial expansion and the consequent global diaspora of millions of people, or more recently through the processes of globalization, immigration and the movement of refugees. The concept of cultural translation seems to offer a means for thinking about the ways in which cultures are transported, transmitted, reinterpreted and re-aligned through local languages, and more broadly through other cultures with which migrants come into contact, as well as articulating the realities of how individuals on both sides experience and interpret such encounters in the 'contact zones' between different cultures. These have become the focus of recent postcolonial theories of translation which have given particular attention to the questions of power, of resistance and of domination.

In this essay, I will address the parameters of what, in its basic formulation, is a very simple question: what is the relation between the practice and theory of translation to the idea of the translation of cultures, or, as it is often referred to, 'cultural translation'? The idea is used more and more widely, yet it is often hard to pin down what it means. No one translates a culture in the same way as they do a text—while Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* can be translated, more or less, into English, it makes no sense to propose translating French culture into American—that would be the equivalent of saying that you were going to translate the French language into American. Cultural translation must

refer to a specific text of culture, that is to performing a specific act of cultural translation, or to the need for cultural translation in a particular circumstance. What relation would such cultural translation have to the literal idea of translation, grounded as it is in the forms of language? Would other words in this context do just as well as translation—for example, change, exchange, interaction, mediation or transformation? Does cultural translation really rather describe a form of cultural mediation? Is cultural translation in fact possible? How far is culture something that can be 'translated' at all? What is the relation of 'culture' to 'language,' or, to put it another way, what happens when we put the linguistic activity of 'translation' together with 'culture' and in doing so try to make them coalesce under this common rubric? Does the term translation have any real conceptual or theoretical weight when transferred to the realm of culture? What implicit assumptions and values does it carry with it? What does it mean to transfer a word that describes the precise practice of the transformation of one language into another into a more general method for cultural change and interaction? What does it mean to put the two together: to 'translate' a culture? How does such a process work? Is there a theoretical model that we can use comparable to those developed over many centuries for translation itself?

Despite the frequent contemporary use of the term, there has surprisingly been relatively little substantial analysis that focuses on or interrogates the concept of cultural translation itself. Commentators often invoke the term, but without offering a theoretical analysis or model of what it means or of how it works. The complexity of the two terms individually—culture, translation—should, however, give us pause. Culture, after all, is a very complicated concept and one that has always been changing—the concept, let alone its putative object of analysis, whatever that might be, is transient. We might feel that we are on a securer foundation with translation, since it is grounded in a material activity, a practice of linguistic transformation; but theories of translation have become highly contested of late, particularly in fact with the degree to which translators should take on board factors of cultural difference in the act of translation. If cultural translation is metaphorically derived from literal translation, it is also the case that ideas about cultural translation are now in turn impacting theories of language and translation, as well as historical accounts of cultural history.[1] All translation, it has been said, is in some sense a cultural translation. So cultural translation may, and may also not, involve the verbal. Perhaps we should distinguish between them.

Although it is possible now to argue that acts of cultural translation took place at any historical moment in the past, it is only relatively recently that the term has come into widespread use, particularly in the academic arena in the fields of Anthropology, Postcolonial Studies and Sociology. The idea of equating cultural change with the transformations between discrete languages was in fact invented by anthropologists, in a trope analysed by Talal Asad in his well-known essay, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology" of 1986. What we discover here is that the idea of cultural translation is or was used in anthropology in a different form from the way in which it is currently used. Asad's focus falls on the perennial concern in anthropology of how the anthropologist mediates the implicit meanings of the so-called 'primitive thought' of so-called 'savages' in order to present it in terms comprehensible to the 'sophisticated,' or so it is assumed, western reader: how, in other words, to translate the ways and language of the primitive to the recondite academic mind. Translation thus becomes a means of negotiating the gap in understanding and in time between 'primitive' and modern cultures. Cultural translation, in fact, is the practice that mediates what Johannes Fabian has criticised as anthropology's 'denial of coevalness' between primitive and western cultures, transforming the primitive into the academic language of western rationality. This kind of translation is, perhaps, the ultimate form of foreignizing translation, since the material translated emerges in a form that bears little or no resemblance to its original. In other words, not only the language is translated, but also the form of the content, as well as the interpretation of its meaning.

Asad's critique does not extend so far as to cover the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who sought to translate the cultural differences that he analysed into human universals, an anthropological version of Roman Jakobson's translational principle of 'equivalence in difference' (Lévi-Strauss 1968; 1978). Lévi-Strauss, however, was attacked for this strategy by Clifford Geertz, who argued that 'what Lévi-Strauss has made for himself is an infernal culture machine. It annuls history, reduces sentiment to a shadow of the intellect, and replaces the particular minds of particular savages in particular jungles with the Savage Mind immanent in us all' (Geertz 1973, 355). Lévi-Strauss, he argued, was a "translator of culture, *even when it is untranslatable*. ...

1. For example, Peter Burke and R. Hsia's volume *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*, 2007.

Translation can only be achieved by subjecting the cultural productions (myth, arts, rituals, or whatever), the things that give these lives their immediate look of strangeness, to a universalizing analysis that, in dissolving the immediacy, dissolves the strangeness" (Geertz 1988, 33). Instead of Lévi-Strauss' domesticating translation, Geertz sought instead to represent the foreignness of languages in the form of the particular strangeness of differences within the universal of culture. But at the same time, he admits that at another level culture itself is the universal term through which the anthropologist 'translates' the individual practices of the society that he studies, the difference of equivalences. This poses the question, does not the very conceptual category of 'culture' imply a form of translation, that is, involve a mediation between some notion of a particular and a universal?

From this perspective, we could say that all new concepts demand that a certain process of translation takes place in the material on which they are brought to bear: for example, the linguist's idea of language as a rule-bound system rather than the traditional idea of language as a grammar plus a vocabulary; or Stammbaum's idea of individual languages forming a part of a system of linguistic family trees. Such conceptual transformations are how new concepts enable us to see things differently, produce new connections and knowledge-formations, but they can also destroy the way things were seen in the past. This process of knowledge production therefore often involves not only new ways of seeing things, but also inevitably areas of exclusion, of loss in translation. Once the homogenizing term 'culture' has been used to describe the entirety of a people's social and aesthetic practices, their languages, traditions and beliefs, for example, the totalizing term ('culture') can be attached to other concepts, such as 'nation.' In general, the effect of ideas of a singular 'culture' historically has been to destroy the heterogeneity of the very practices that are being described as cultures.

As a result of Asad's, Fabian's, Geertz's, and others' critiques, this is, however, generally no longer the way in which anthropologists think of 'translating culture'; indeed typically anthropologists no longer use the word culture at all. But at the time of Asad's essay, just as he was pronouncing the death of the idea of cultural translation in anthropology, it was revived in a different domain, now called Postcolonial Studies, by Homi K. Bhabha. Asad gave a version of his paper on cultural translation at the 1984 Essex Conference "Europe and its Others," at which Bhabha also gave the original version of his essay "Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of

Colonialism," now better known as "The Other Question" (66-84). In "Translating Europe's Others," Asad, writing together with John Dixon, emphasized the asymmetrical power relationship of the anthropologist as cultural translator: "there is a prevailing trend for the language of the dominated cultures to accommodate to the demands and concepts of the dominating culture. Equally there are powerful resistances to making any comparable adjustments within the discursive practices of European scholarship" (Asad and Dixon 171). The dominating culture, Asad and Dixon argued, citing Walter Benjamin's famous 1923 essay "The Task of the Translator," does not foreignise itself by means of integrating any aspects of the culture that it is studying. Other cultures remain entirely foreign to the conceptual and discursive apparatus of anthropology. Cultural translation in anthropology is a discourse of power and appropriation that destroys the particularity of the culture that it translates.

This might seem to have been more than enough to toll the death bell of the idea of cultural translation. However, in his writings on cultural translation Bhabha retrieved the idea by in effect reversing Asad's argument. In Asad's account, it is the anthropologist who translates the so-called primitive culture for his or her Western audience. For Bhabha on the other hand, the direction of the translation is reversed: in his description, the 'native' becomes the new migrant, who then translates his or her own culture *into* that of the new host community. This means that it is the subaltern, not the anthropologist, who becomes the mediator, but actually at this point Bhabha extends the point so that it means something beyond that. For Bhabha, the migrant's cultural translation involves a process in which the migrant intervenes in the hegemonic culture that he or she finds him or herself confronted with. It is at this point that cultural translation operates in parallel with hybridisation, according to Bhabha's description in which hybridity involves an agential process of intervention and interaction within the power dynamics of conflicting contemporary cultures. Bhabha's strategy here is to counter traditional sociological theories of migrancy that involve ideas of assimilation or acculturation: in his account, therefore, it is the migrant who transforms the receiving culture, not vice versa. For Bhabha, the dominant culture gets culturally translated by the migrant. Bhabha's theory of cultural translation is thus one in which the translation is, as it were, back to front, or to put it in more traditional translational terms, entirely foreignizing. The brilliance of Bhabha's intervention means that

twenty years later we are still adjusting to and coming to terms with this radical account of cultural translation as a form of hybridisation.

Bhabha's transformation of the idea of translation was so radical, in fact, that, some years later, in an essay entitled "Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation," the Indian critic Harish Trivedi was moved to comment that despite the obscurity of Bhabha style,

> What is nevertheless clear and indisputable in Bhabha's formulations of what he calls cultural translation is, firstly, that he does not at all by this term mean literary translation involving two texts from two different languages and cultures, and secondly, that what he means by translation instead is the process and condition of human migrancy. (Trivedi 5)

Bhabha, Trivedi objects, removes the linguistic element from the concept and practice of translation altogether, so that it effectively becomes a term with which to describe the fractured lived experience of migrants in host cultures. Here translation seems to have been returned to its literal meaning in English of the Latin *translatio*, 'carrying across.' But if language appears to have disappeared in Bhabha's account of cultural translation, despite Trivedi's strictures, it is also the case that Translation Studies has itself taken a 'cultural turn' in recent years. So translators can now be found describing themselves as not so much translating a language as translating the culture that a specific language embodies. The origin of this idea, now generally known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, can be traced back to Alexander von Humboldt in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who held that the structure of a language reflects the culture of its speaker—the idea which represented the beginnings of the problematic identification of nationalism with vernacular languages. So if Bhabha's cultural translation appears to have taken language out, translation theory itself has been actively putting culture back in to its own account of its practices. We might also observe that if cultural translation has been re-invented by Bhabha as a concept to describe the activities of migrants ('translated men' in Salman Rushdie's phrase, or immigrant writers as 'cultural translators' (Ranasinha, 2007)), such individuals are themselves very likely to be bi- or multilingual and find that language and differences of language remain at the core of the experiences which they seek to mediate. In the empirical situation of multicultural societies where such cultural translation is occurring, the host languages themselves, such as

English, are becoming more mixed, transforming our ideas of the identity and nature of languages, and necessarily of translation itself, in the process. So perhaps Trivedi assumes a little too quickly the evanescence of language in Bhabha's concept of cultural translation.

As might be expected, Bhabha's ideas have been taken up most actively by those working in Sociology and Migration Studies, where the concept of cultural translation has been widely appropriated to describe aspects of the processes and conditions of contemporary human migrancy. The Australian sociologist Nikos Papastergiadis, for example, includes a chapter on "The Limits of Cultural Translation" in his book *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*. Here he states that he focuses on 'the concept of translation as a metaphor for understanding how the foreign and the familiar are interrelated in every form of cultural production' (Papastergiadis 124). Invoking Walter Benjamin's famous comparison of translation to the gluing together of fragments of a broken vessel in "The Task of the Translator," he continues:

> Translation as a metaphor for the very process of communication—emerging out of fragments, approaching the totality of the other, confronting the foreignness of languages but also regenerating the basis for reciprocity and extending the boundaries for mutual understanding—can also provide an entrance into the mechanisms through which dialogue and negotiation between cultures is possible. To think of translation neither as the appropriation of a foreign culture according to the rules of one's own culture (where the origin Translation as a metaphor for the very process of communication—emerging out of fragments, approaching the totality of the other, confronting the foreignness of languages but also regenerating the basis for reciprocity and extending the boundaries for mutual understanding—can also provide an entrance into the mechanisms through which dialogue and negotiation between cultures is possible. To think of translation neither as the appropriation al is treated as an inferior source that needs correction), nor as a reproduction which totally reflects the world-view of the other (where the translation aims to be identical with the original), but rather as a dynamic interaction within which conceptual boundaries are expanded and residual differences respected, may allow for a more radical understanding of the multiple levels and diverse routes of cultural exchange in modern society. (Papastergiadis 131)

So cultural translation, according to Papastergiadis's formulation, describes a process of cultural exchange, dialogue or negotiation that produces knowledge transformation and cultural respect for those differences that can only be understood through expanded conceptual boundaries on all sides. Cultural translation is about give and take, which at one level, turns it into a synonym for kinds of exchange and mixture: when different cultures interact "within the 'contact zone,'" he argues a little earlier, "the effects of this interaction can be referred to as transculturation, creolization or hybridization" (Ibid. 128). At this point Trivedi's argument would certainly apply, for here such cultural translation is no longer translation as such but a loose metaphor exchangeable with a list of other concepts relating to mixture that are all recklessly assimilated to each other.

While translation itself, Papastergiadis argues, is in a tricky double bind, "seemingly caught between two impossibilities: that of isolating the essence in the original and that of determining an equivalence in another language" (Ibid. 130), cultural translation, however, he tells us, is not about either of these things. It does not revolve around the customary axis of possibility/impossibility, nor Jakobson's 'equivalence in difference,' nor universal exchange, nor even about the transformation of the exchanged object or concept into the language of the new system—it is something that produces a change in the target, or receiving culture. Since the perspective is one of migrancy, then we may assume that it does not transform the source culture at the same time, though given that the source culture is probably not Western, it is doubtless experiencing a somewhat different form of cultural translation through the forces of globalization that is less determined by boundary interactions and respect for difference. At any event, in Papastergiadis's account, which here becomes a simplification of Bhabha's, cultural translation, unlike translation, apparently works fine and is not caught conceptually in a double bind of any kind. It is about mutual transformation at the borders and respect for difference, with some concern about relations of power, namely how the disempowered manage to effect the change in the host culture, given that they are in the position of a minority.

II.

You might argue that Papastergiadis' description suggests that the concepts

of culture and language are too different for them to be easily or effectively assimilated together. In practice, they drift apart, and whenever it moves outside a linguistic context, cultural translation begins to sound less and less like translation. If cultures are flowing processes that interact on a constant basis, how are they stable enough to be translated? That said, the model of porous boundaries is not irrelevant to translation theory. In general, translation theory, conceptualising what happens when a translation is made from source to target language, say from French to German, assumes that these are two different languages, that each makes up a discrete totality as spatially bounded as the two countries where French and German are spoken. Whether languages actually work like that is another matter.

In this context, the central problem for translation, as Roman Jakobson argued in his famous essay of 1959, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," is the finding of 'equivalence in difference.' At one time, cultures too were conceptualised in this bounded way, in the era of nation formation, so that the French and German languages, and so too French and German culture, embodied and expressed the essential spirit of the French and German nations, equivalent but different. On the same kind of assumption with regard to cultural totalities, when anthropologists went away to do their field work, in Borneo or Brazil, they sought to find and study pure, authentic 'native' cultures, whose practices could be represented as an autonomous totality—different, but not equivalent to Western cultures, hence the need for translation. Extraneous elements, starting with the anthropologist him or herself, were carefully removed. Though portraying 'native culture' as timeless, the anthropologist was paradoxically involved in a race against time, trying to document the native culture before it was transformed irreparably by contact with the outside, colonial world of the anthropologist him or herself.

Since those days of what we might term classic anthropology, things have swung in the other direction completely. Cultures are no longer regarded as holistic, authentic, static entities. Anthropologists emphasize the degree to which they are syncretic, hybrid, cultural mish-mashes; they show the ways in which they have always interacted with other cultures, and have always been fluid and caught up in a process of change. Culture, including so-called native culture, from being totally timeless has become time-bound and transformative. Anthropologists such as Ulf Hannerz or Jean and John Comaroff have developed methods where they deliberately study the peripheral margins of a culture—the very bits that anthropologists formerly

ignored. The Mexican anthropologist Néstor Garcia Canclini analyses cultures as international networks where the members of the group are spread geographically between different countries, with the cultures developing hybrid forms that could not be described as, for example, entirely American or entirely Mexican. This mode of peripheral cultural translation, or a form of partial translation in which parts of the translated text or culture are aligned with other untranslated parts, is better characterised as 'syncretism,' which indeed is a more popular term in anthropology today than cultural translation, which as we have seen in anthropology had a rather different meaning. If cultures are always already hybrid and diffuse, what would it mean to talk about the idea of cultural translation? Especially when translation theory continues to be derived from a model of language which seems to follow the earlier, classical anthropological idea of the world being made up of a mosaic of discrete cultures and languages—a model which, incidentally, still seems to underlie many discussions of so-called 'multiculturalism.'

III.

The contemporary popularity of the idea of cultural translation is in some ways remarkable given that translation itself has always lived under something of a cloud: *traduttore traditore*. What though, Benjamin asked, in his much less well known essay on translation of 1935-6, "'Translation—For and Against,' can be said in favour of translation?" (Benjamin 2002, 249). His first answer is radically different to that of the de Manian and Derridean interpretations of "The Task of the Translator" and takes us back to his own drive towards the ultimate goal of a 'pure language,' for his first answer is, "Progress in science on an international scale (Latin, Leibniz's universal language)." Benjamin's idea of a 'pure language,' towards which, he believed, all translation tends, comes close in conceptualisation to Leibniz' *characteristica universalis*, the universal symbolic language that Leibniz believed would reconcile the different forms of human knowledge, science, mathematics and metaphysics. Even without Leibniz's symbolic language, the possibility of translation in fact assumes the existence of a universal, without which translation would be impossible. Translation offers a technique of transmission which enables mediation on a universal basis while at the same time allowing individual languages to retain their own

particularity, including perhaps their own elements of untranslatability. Translation thus operates as a concept which apparently offers to resolve debates between universalism and relativism.

While presuming universal language, the act of translation also however violates the specificity of the source language, and it is for this reason that Benjamin speaks of the 'brutality' of translation. Yet, he argues, translation makes this violence against language productive, remarking that:

> Stresemann's dictum (intended as a *bon mot*) that "French is spoken in every language" is more serious than he thought, for the ultimate purpose of translation is to represent the foreign language in one's own. (Benjamin 2002, 251)

This is perhaps why the essay, though written in German, is in the original called "La Traduction—Le pour et le contre," a feature which brings out a different form of translational impossibility, that of translating texts written in multiple languages. Languages, in fact, like cultures, can no longer be thought of as being so discrete, but operating within multilingual environments, are already 'foreignized.' How does translation theory deal with this? In practice, it erases differences and translates into a single language. For Benjamin, the ultimate purpose of translation is to invert the process, to make it work backwards, to reverse time, in order to create a space for the foreign language within the original tongue, which loses its pure and authentic form. This idea, which Lawrence Venuti has since called 'foreignizing translation,' in fact goes back to Friedrich Schleiermacher: here the translation, instead of rendering the source language perfectly into the 'target' language, transforms the target language so that it begins to read like the original source.

Benjamin never gets to the question, "what can be said against translation?," perhaps because he starts with a complaint against translation. He begins by offering an example of the impossibility of translation, in this case a French translation of Nietzsche: his complaint is that "the horizon and the world around the translated text had been substituted, had become French" (Benjamin 2002, 249), so much so that the most interesting passages in the Nietzsche text appeared to have almost disappeared in translation. The objection here, interestingly, is that the translation has been almost too successful, so that the cultural world of Nietzsche's text has disappeared. A *successful* cultural translation means a *failure* of translation, a translation whose

gain paradoxically brings a loss. Conversely, therefore, Benjamin argues that the most successful literary translations must involve a deliberate failure of cultural translation. Here we have the general principle of cultural translation in the realm of language which sets up the back-to-front structure of Benjamin's, and Bhabha's, foreignizing translation.

IV.

In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin makes a similar point through a discussion of the very different cultural resonances of the words for bread in French and German, *pain* and *Brot*. He then argues that "translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (Benjamin 1996, 257). Translation, he says, in his most difficult formulation, is about *form* rather than *content*, indeed that it is a form, and in this situation, the dichotomy of 'fidelity' and 'licence,' he suggests, has to be reworked according to the formula of Rudolf Pannwitz:

> Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a mistaken premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. ... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own, he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally recognized to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed ... (Benjamin 1996, 261-62)

This argument highlights the way in which the traditional model posits an essentially static spatialized idea of language—a ready-made entity like a box of tools which the translator employs. Translation, according to Benjamin, should rather involve the activity of the transformation of language. Its primary aim is not to recreate the spirit of the original in the language of the target language, but to transform the target language so that it sounds like the original. "The ultimate purpose of translation," says Benjamin, "is to

represent the foreign language in one's own" (Ibid. 251). Translation, says Benjamin, should so to speak force the reader to journey back into the language-time of the original.

In the foreignizing model, therefore, translation becomes dynamic, temporal, it puts the language in transit, on the move. Rather as anthropology has come to be concerned with the formerly invisible anthropologist who is doing the observing, translation Benjamin suggests should incorporate the marks of the translating operation rather than aim to produce a translation that reads so perfectly in the target language that its status as a translation gets hidden. Translation, we might say, moves from a noun to a temporal verb, where we all live in the milieu of the *Ursprache* of the Southern Hemisphere of Jorge Luis Borges' planet Tlön, where there are no nouns, but only impersonal verbs—a language in which the English "The moon rose above the river" is translated into "*hlör u fang axaxaxas* mlö" —or, as Borges puts it: "as Xul Solar succinctly translates: 'Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned'" (Borges 73).

So every translation becomes a performance of the original, the translator an actor or director who produces a 'version'—not *the* translation in the sense of a conversion, whether religious, or rather less ecstatically, changing currency from one money system to another, but "*a* translation, one in a never-ending series, at least an infinite *possible* series" (Hurley 519). Translation becomes a transient, transitory experiment, achieved but never fully definitive. Nothing is ever simply left behind. Rather than a hidden journey from A to B, with the translator an alchemist who has transformed A into B, so that the reader is only ever situated at B, now you never absolutely leave A, you never fully arrive at B. The ultimate, impossible goal of the translator, rather than turning language A into language B so that the reader can understand it, is to make the reader read it in the original. Failing that, the goal of the translator is to transform language B so that it begins to bear the foreignness within itself of language A. Here we may recall once again the way that literally, according to its Latin etymology, translation means to carry or to bear across, while metaphor, according to its Greek etymology, means to carry or to bear across. The two words both carry the seed of the foreign, and different foreignness, within them. The process of carrying can go both ways across the borders between languages—translation, to reverse Benjamin's 1927 book title, is a two-way street.

In Benjamin's own translation of Baudelaire, to which his essay was the

Preface, his idea of translation as the transformation of language into the foreignness of the original was regarded as an unmitigated failure, and his publisher refused to publish his next book as a result. Nevertheless, his concept or project of translation, highlights an aspect of modernity that had begun to emerge in his own time, namely that many writers, particularly but not exclusively poets, had begun to write in more than one language at once. One of the most interesting features of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is that it is a poem written in seven languages (Latin, Greek, French, German, English, (Cockney), Italian, Sanskrit). In *The Translation Zone* Emily Apter has recently examined the ways in which twentieth-century literature has increasingly been written in the form of linguistic multiplicity.

This runs parallel with the way in which, as a result of the global processes that have produced cultural translation, ideas about language itself have been changing in recent years, so that increasingly single languages are being transformed by their utilisation within multilingual environments. Just as cultures can no longer be regarded as discrete entities, so languages are now increasingly meshing with each other. The transformation of languages, which far from homogenizing, are becoming more multiple and certainly less discrete, has in turn had the effect of transforming concepts of translation also. How does one translate a text that is written in a language that is already multiple, such as the German-Turkish novel *Mutterzunge* by Emine Sevgi Özdamar, or the poetry of Sujata Bhatt who writes in a mixture of Gujarati and English?

Two things could be said to follow from this. First, what happens to translation theory when the original text is already written in several languages? The second, larger question is what happens when not only literary languages but language itself becomes mixed? We can think of this in two ways. First, what happens when we stop thinking of language as discrete and bounded, with these interesting but essentially peripheral variants, creoles and pidgin languages on the side, and begin to rethink languages themselves as fluid, moving, mixed and without fixed boundaries. The Archimedian point for linguistics, which was the point around which Saussure himself floundered when theorising language as an autonomous self-differentiating system, was where you could find its boundaries that would ensure the totality necessary for the system to function (Young, 2002). In fact, languages have no durable boundaries—their borders are transient and unfixed. What if we think of languages as existing in a more

rhizomatic relation to other languages, dialects, with which they are continually interacting and dissolving into? The second way that goes along with this, is to rethink languages at an empirical rather than theoretical or conceptual level, and to reflect on the ways in which translation, here of peoples especially through immigration, is transforming the language of the untranslated peoples amongst whom they are supposed to be assimilating.

So just as the idea of culture has transformed in recent years from a bounded authentic unique identity to something mixed and in process, so language too is gradually coming to be seen as operating according to exactly the same principles. Time has finally taken its revenge. In this context, where both culture and language are in a permanent state of interaction with other languages and cultures, we need to ask once again, what does it mean to speak of the idea of 'cultural translation'? We are, in a way, in a very similar situation to the problem of how we can translate multilingual texts. Does the idea of cultural translation still have any purchase any more if all cultures are already in a permanent state of translation and transition? How might translation operate if the entities which are being translated are no longer discrete but temporal, already moving and mixed? How might translation operate if languages, and cultures, are already 'foreignized'?

Cultures, even more than languages, are in simultaneous processes of translation, whereby they function as both the source and target at the same time. Benjamin's formulation would suggest that translation in fact involves a double process by which the translating culture is itself translated and transformed in the process of translating the source culture: so too with cultural translation the target culture begins to take on characteristics of the source, and vice versa. This 'back to front' theory of translation comes much closer to the process of cultural translation than to most standard practices of linguistic translation. Yet at the same time, we should recall that Benjamin's theory is designed to counter the phenomenon of a too successful cultural translation, whereby the particularity of the original culture is evaporated.

V.

From this we can say that just as there can be no perfect translation, so there can be no perfect cultural translation. In fact the very concept of a perfect cultural translation is an anomaly. The fundamental difference

between a cultural translation and a literal translation centres on the fact that in cultural translation the whole 'text' of a culture is not translated: the necessity for cultural translation only begins with the presence of elements in the source culture for which there is no exact equivalent elsewhere–the particular which is not translatable, that is, universal, is the element which is untranslatable. Unlike linguistic translation, which must begin by positing the idea of 'equivalence in difference,' however challenging the translation and however many 'untranslatable' cruxes a translator may encounter, cultural translation is always prompted by the necessity to mediate specific non-equivalent terms, cultural perspectives or practices that are in fact untranslatable. Sometimes this will involve a different form of equivalence, a kind of transposition of equivalent but non-equivalent entities. Unlike the general relationship between language that allows translation between two mutually unrecognizable entities, Jakobson's 'equivalence in difference,' cultures are in fact similar enough to require no translation at all—so-called 'cultural translation' only needs to be deployed at the level of individual cultural differences that are untranslatable. A meal is broadly recognizable and indeed eatable in any culture, even if the content of the dishes, the preparation and use of individual items in the meal, and the social significance given to them, may differ. If translation inevitably ends by failing, cultural translation starts with a failure of translation, something that if you want to understand you have to step outside your established conceptual boundaries to do so. If the translation is domesticated into your own terms, then it will fail.

At this point, therefore, we could say that if cultural translation can be defined as a coherent practice, then its form of translation involves one which embodies Benjamin's preferred model for linguistic translation—one in which far from providing a seamlessly assimilable 'domestic' equivalent, the target culture is required to translate itself into the 'foreign' idiom of the source in order to effect understanding. The difference would be that where cultural translation becomes necessary, it will always be at a partial moment: it comes at the moment where the universality of human culture—its translatability—breaks down. At this temporal point it is the translator him or herself who must actively insert the untranslatable element into the target culture. For this reason, cultural translation must always be 'foreignizing' and partial because it is always dealing with instances of untranslatability.

The term cultural translation therefore turns out to be strictly speaking

an oxymoron—for it is always concerned with elements that have no correspondence and therefore cannot be translated. It is cultural translation that really prompts the necessity of a theory of how to deal with the impossibility of translation, even perhaps at the level of individual words. Put it another way, cultural translation is the name we give to the axis within translation of the impossibility of translation. The negotiation of this void in representation or understanding, temporal and spatial at once, remains the irresolvable dynamic at the heart of all translation.

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Abstract

In this essay I consider the question of the relation of hybridity to cultural translation. The history of the idea of cultural translation is shown to have begun in the discipline of anthropology: at the moment when it was discredited there, it was appropriated according to a different theoretical model for postcolonial studies in which it comes close to the concept of hybridity. Nevertheless, the complexities of the concept of cultural translation, and its relation to linguistic translation, as well as to ideas of cultural hybridity, remains. The essay concludes by arguing that in fact cultural and linguistic translation are conceptually antithetical.

Keywords: translation, cultural translation, hybridity, untranslatability

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