## **Alternatives to Borders in Translation Theory**

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Translation is mostly believed to take place between two different sides (languages, cultures, texts) that are separated by some kind of border. This binary conceptual geometry may be a defining feature of translational phenomena. Yet there are at least five ways in which non-binary analysis can attempt to reconceptualize the border: 1) as a set of translative signs marking isolated points of contact rather than continuous lines, 2) as a set of physical cross-cultural movements referred to by such signs, 3) as a set of spaces defined by relative economic efficiency with respect to the more diffuse intercultural activities of language-learning, 4) as a set of social and professional relations between translators as discourse-producers, and in summary 5) as a transitory communication strategy destined to give way to more stable forms of cross-cultural communication. On this view, translation becomes a fact of nomadic intercultures, pressed into the service of sedentary national cultures.

The most problematic intercultural relationships at this end of the twentieth century are associated with disputes over borders. They often ensue from notions of cultural sovereignty, from beliefs that a culture has some kind of unalienable right to some kind of specificity. Such beliefs become most problematic when expressed as claims to a particular territory, to a cultural homeland, spreading across the space of one particular color on a map of world cultures. A few steps then reach notions of all-purpose cultures, all-purpose languages, and all-purpose sovereign states to make sure everything stays in place, as if there were no alternative solutions to problematic intercultural relations. But are there any alternatives? Where might they be found?

Some would say borders are not properly cultural but are imposed by external manipulation, perhaps by apparently noncultural factors like global politics, rationalist economics, or local appeals to racism and ethnocentricism. Cultures are thus seen as open, heterogeneous, dynamically evolving and axiomatically guiltless entities. Alternatives to borders would be found simply by liberating the cultural from the noncultural. Yet such noble idealism can only solve the problems of cultures by simply not seeing them. When one bothers to take a good look, particularly at Balkanic powederkegs, there are no firm criteria able to separate the question of different cultures from that

of different ethnicities and thus from conflicting territorial claims. Indeed, derivation of the term "culture" from *colere*, to till, suggests that cultures are by nature sedentary, occupying land, requiring time in one place for their benefits to be reaped. We might thus talk about something like territorial cultures, based on the filling of space and time. We could even try to solve the problems of such cultures by drawing fragmentary color maps, like the various maps proposed in recent years for the various divisions of greater Yugoslavia. The color-map approach at least has the advantage of recognizing that territorial cultures oppose other territorial cultures, that they define themselves by opposition, that they construct and indeed change borders. But the real question is whether all cultures need be territorial. What kind of borders should define a multicultural city?

Answers to this question cannot be reached by fiat, by declaring all cultures suddenly open, placeless and mixed. The task must be approached carefully, through attention to what happens in and around actual intercultural relationships. The office of map-makers must be appreciated in all its difficulty. One of the most complex and fundamentally ambiguous intercultural relationships, potentially subject to mapping, is of course translation. Its relation to borders deserves to be studied with particular attention, especially in a Europe that seems unable to stop translating. What is translation doing to our borders? What should it be doing? What can it tell us about more general alternative solutions?

Most approaches to translation assume there is a border between two cultures well before any translator enters the scene. Translation thus crosses a pre-existing border. Yet this is not necessarily so. In the interests of breaking down a few barriers, I would like to put forward five ideas that might encourage us to think about translation without presupposing borders between cultures. My long-term general aim is to shape a vision of relatively borderless cultures. My immediate purpose is simply to suggest alternatives.

#### First Idea: Borders Need Not Be Lines

The traditional study of translations presupposes borders simply by arranging texts on desktops in a certain way. We place the source on one side and the target on the other, then develop tricks for making our eyes ricochet from one to the other. The centre of our space is a border between two texts, by definition between two cultures. As we proceed and allow the texts to define themselves reciprocally, we arrive at conclusions about what belongs on one side and what belongs on the other. We discover something about what is common and what is specific to the cultures concerned. This comparative procedure further defines the intercultural border defining its space.

This is not an entirely negative way of working on translations. It elaborates a form already implicit in the very nature of translation, since even pseudotranslations project a line between cultures. The challenge, however, is to think about translation without simply presupposing these borders. There are several ways of doing this.

Let us imagine, for example, that the formal border actually presented by a translation is not a line but a point or a vague locus. This could be seen as a place centred by a moving text intersecting a pre-existing border. We could see the border as vertical, the movement then being horizontal. Where the two lines cross, there lies a translation. The border has become a point. We have reached one minor precision, albeit not quite an alternative.

To reach something more like an alternative, think of this point as a place formed on the horizontal line only. One can think horizontally. If we follow the transcultural trajectory of a text, the moment of translation appears as a discontinuity, a sudden change of quality. This discontinuity need not mean that any vertical line is being intersected. Indeed, if we can imagine the text in its untranslated state gradually moving further and further away from its locus of maximum comprehensibility, moving towards peripheries of weakly or alternatively encoded time and space, the moment of translation can be seen as a break responding to continuous semantic degradation, restoring a sufficient degree of comprehensibility to allow further movement, possibly in quite a different direction. Everything can happen along the one line. A full application of this idea requires some appreciation of the way discourse genres retain different degrees of elasticity, different capacities to remain meaningful over distance, different translation requirements if they are to continue their voyage (Pym 1992a: 103-116). Yet the aspect I want to stress here is that the apparently intersected line, the supposedly pre-existing cultural border, is not necessarily part of the conceptual geometry of translation. It may well be something that is constructed après coup, as a result of translations. If this is so, translation itself can be seen as a momentary place on a horizontal trajectory rather than as a vertical line between cultures.

This idea can be pursued in two directions. On the one hand, the place of translation can be developed into a situational geometry of translator, client, potential readers, source-text analysis, alternative target-text strategies, and so on. The place becomes a discursive locus in itself, apt for the production and discussion of what I have elsewhere termed internal knowledge about translation (Pym 1993). It is a place for exchanges between translators, would-be translators, competent controllers of translators, and indeed anyone willing and able to compare source and target texts. Although the discourses produced in this internal space often presuppose an intercultural border, they themselves are constantly on both sides at once, effectively annulling the function of the border as a barrier, even when they are unable to recognize his function. On

the other hand, one can insist that translations are generally not produced for such strictly internal discourses. The ostensible function of a translation is to be received by someone who does not have access to the source text, who cannot fully appreciate the various comparisons and strategies involved, and who can thus only have *external* access to the phenomenon of translation. On this second level, that of external knowledge, the translation-as-received does indeed construct a frontier, signifying the absence or opacity of a source text that belongs to a whole world beyond the limits of familiarity. Although internal knowledge effectively annuls intercultural borders by crossing them, external knowledge can play an active role in their construction.

The distinction between internal and external knowledge should not be understood as any absolute division of labour. Translations are not just for readers who cannot translate. Some external readers have access to partial internal knowledge; some internal translators and critics make efforts to understand external positions. And yet the basic distinction remains far stronger for translation than is the case for wider distinctions between (internal) writing positions and (external) reading positions. Thanks to its definitional presumption of linguistic opacity, translation itself separates the two kinds of knowledge. Actual subjects may have access to various proportions of one kind of knowledge or the other, but the basic distinction remains part of the phenomenal level of translation. More important, the internal/external distinction does not express any line between two cultures. The difference is instead between certain intercultural positions (internal knowledge) and relative unawareness of those positions (external knowledge). Or more neatly, it is between the border as place (seen internally) and the border as line (seen externally). This difference is yet another alternative to the traditional view of cultural borders.

### Second Idea: Translative Signs Represent Movements

If the geometry of internal knowledge is based on a place and not a line, its mode of description should not presuppose linear frontiers. This particularly concerns projects like José Lambert's call for world literature maps, which sounds as necessary as it is ambitious. And yet, if one sets out to describe "literature *in* France, *in* Germany, *in* Italy, instead of French, German or Italian literature" (Lambert 1991: 141), one is still presupposing a linear geometry – national borders – that more properly supports external rather than internal knowledge. The map would now have many little color-spots rather than big colored areas, but the colors would still be there anyway.

Happily, color maps are not the only solution here. A more elegant and economical approach, particularly for those with limited palettes, is to insist that even the externality of a translation *first* marks a border point and *then* 

– but not always – a border line. Rather than map entire literatures or cultures, one could simply map translations, represented as a distribution of points. The great advantage of this latter approach is that it avoids presupposing continuous linear frontiers between cultures. It indicates operative border points; it shows dots instead of lines. Translations can thus tell us something about a border-to-be, although no cartographer is required to join up the points vertically so as to form a linear frontier. The points can remain points, indicating but not sealing the general areas occupied by cultures, showing but not presupposing degrees of permeability or closure.

Such maps could remain at the level of points. Indeed, something like my map of twelfth and thirteenth-century scientific and philosophical translations into European languages (Pym 1998: 96) must largely remain so, for want of good information on the movements of source texts, translators and translations. But where sufficient information on such movements is available, the points can be joined up not vertically but sideways, by lines representing the trajectories of texts and translators. The points still indicate potential cultural borders: in the map in question the density of translation points immediately shows exactly when Toledo was on the vertical border between the Christian and Islamic worlds. But the nonvertical lines, the ones tracing the movements of translators and translations, now show something quite different. They make up transcultural networks, connecting several cultures, forming zones of intensity, peripheries, major crossover areas and the like, all in a geometry that is neither culturespecific nor universalistic. Translation can thus be studied in terms of concrete transcultural networks instead of ideally specific cultures. This is another alternative.

Such network maps have certain implications for the conceptualization of translation itself. I have already suggested that translation is a place on the horizontal trajectory of a materially moving text. We can now go one step further. Since it is possible to use translations in order to map horizontal trajectories, translations can be seen as representing these material movements rather than anterior source texts. Or more simply, translation can represent transfer (cf. Pym 1992b: 186). The idea may require some explanation.

Translation analysis traditionally assumes that a target text in some way represents a source text, since this is the semiotic basis for a comparison of separate cultures and an affirmation of presupposed borders. But translation is also a discursive act that can represent its own locus. Analysis from this second point of view need only focus on those aspects of a target text that are peculiarly translative, on the paratextual signs or significant deviants that mark a translation as a translation. Since these marginal signs cannot represent anything actually in the source text or culture, they must stand for the way the translation itself came about. That is, in terms of our mapping, they represent the various transfer movements that made the translation possible.

To read translations in this way is partly to interpret what they say about networks. Further, comparison with composite transfer maps can indicate what translations do *not* say about networks (only the materiality of the network can really say what is or is not a pseudotranslation). Both approaches involve thinking in ways that overcome intercultural borders.

Translative signs are particularly intriguing in that they can be read from both internal and external perspectives. For instance, the title-sign "translated by" might introduce a defining clause from an internal perspective and a relative clause when read from an external position. The analysis of such signs can bring together two kinds of knowledge, helping to counterbalance the arrogance of those who believe all knowledge should be internal or all definitions external.

#### Third Idea: Translation is a Transaction Cost

The transfer of texts usually plays a role in the real or virtual transfer of something else. Merchandise is unmetaphorically transferred, often with the help of translated texts. But many other kinds of value are created with the help of translation, including diplomatic or cultural recognition, military cooperation or pressure, stored and circulating capital, goodwill and prestige. The role of translation is not just to make these values correspond, to find agreement on meanings or prices, as might be read into the etymology of the interpreter as *interpres*, a figure between prices. It is also to function as an added commercial cost in its own right, since some part of the final agreed value or price has to find its way into the translator's pocket. If this were not so, translation history would be an improbable tale of countless altruistic idiots.

Translation involves a transaction cost that has to be accounted for. Someone has to pay for it, sooner or later. And questions of who pays, how much, and what for, depend on factors that are rarely bound by intercultural borders. These problems have more to do with communication partners seeking cooperation and mutual benefits.

Some stimulation can be gained here from the theory of relative transaction costs in international negotiations. I do not wish to go into prisoners' dilemmas and the like, which too often paste nationalist sovereignty onto liberal individualism. Let me just retain two outcomes. First, the theory of cooperation between rational egoists logically concludes that partners will not enter into agreements when the transaction costs outweigh the projected benefits of cooperation. If the translation of a text costs more than the benefits to ensue from the translation, the project should not go ahead. Second, the theory also proposes that cooperation will not ensue when transaction costs are so low that agreements can be entered into with an unrestrained number of different

partners: "under certain conditions an infinite series of available coalitions may form" (Keohane 1984: 87). In this second scenario each relationship risks being a one-off affair, such that the partners fail to build up mutual trust, prediction and shared principles of action. Some degree of translation might thus be good, since the cost involved effectively selects and limits the communication partners. Putting these two limits together, long-term or multiple-play cooperation can only ensue when transaction costs are at an Aristotelian mean, restraining the potential participants but not outweighing the projected benefits. Translation only works when it is not too expensive and not too cheap with respect to the mutual benefits to be obtained.

If translation can be seen as a transaction cost, translation networks can be rationalistically – and naïvely – interpreted as maps of relationships where these costs have actually remained within the required limits. The fringes of a network will be places where translation was thought to be either prohibitively expensive (e.g. no translators could understand the source text) or benignly inexpensive (e.g. everyone can read the source text). The sites of greatest intensity would indicate where the mean was best attained, where translation was considered most effective at building up networks and promoting cooperation. The assumptions may be historically fanciful, but the resulting approach happily avoids assuming eternal intercultural borders. Indeed, if and when a range of secondary socialization factors can be taken into account, since historical subjects are notoriously not rational egoists, cooperation should become a real alternative to conflictual difference.

Fourth Idea: the Principles of Translation are Shaped by Relations between Translators

A current trend in translation theory is to consider translation norms as culture-specific. This is unobjectionable for as long as *culture-specific* means "historical" or "non-universal". But if left at that, the term does little to relate such norms to concrete networks. The danger, of course, is that this term *culture-specific* can be read as saying that each culture translates the way it wants to, independently of the way other cultures translate. Such a reading would ensue from the common normalizing assumption that translators belong to the target culture, thus returning theory to presuppositions of intercultural borders.

Thought about networks demands that these assumptions be questioned. Do translators invariably belong to target cultures? Their cultural identity seems more likely to be displaced towards the overlaps of cultures; their work should be more indicative of a border area than any specific gravity. From this perspective, analysis can begin from the (falsifiable) hypothesis that translation norms are fundamentally intercultural, being shared within "intercultures", the

latter term being understood as the secondary cultural complexes developed by professions based on cultural overlaps (Pym 1998: 177-192).

Some evidence can be found for this view, and not only in clear examples like interpreters working both ways for two mutually present clients. Very few of the translators working in twelfth-century Toledo were wholly Hispanic Christians. Most were Jews, Conversos, Mozarabs, or from England or Italy. They would seem to have translated according to the norms of their intercultural profession. Is this an exceptional case? Even examples of radically opposed norms can reveal some evidence of interculturality. At the end of the last century, French prose translators had rather specific principles concerning the use of omission, to the extent that a high-profile French critic could claim that "no great novel has ever been rendered into French without cuts" (Wyzewa 1901: 599). But why was this claim made? Precisely because another translation critic had lamented the fact that such cuts did not conform to the norms of other European cultures. Even if the conventional cuts were peculiarly French, the debate about them took place in an intercultural situation. At much the same time, some German nationalists were arguing in favour of translating like the French: M. G. Conrad (1889) proposed that German translators make more cuts as an act of adaptive protectionism against the disloyal cultural competition – unfair trade practices – of French translators. These debates took place within intercultural networks, not within single cultures. Their history should not be bound by borders. The frames of traditional narratives (like "translation in France", or "in Germany") have to be rethought.

Let us suppose that a traditional approach sees translation as something that happens between two cultures. The basic link would be Culture1, Tr, Culture2 (the translator connects one culture to another). A network based on this pattern would then have strings of translation and retranslation formed in the following way:

Culture1, Tr, Culture2, Tr, Culture3, Tr, Culture4...

But internal knowledge can also focus on just part of this string in order to formulate the alternative basic link Tr1, Culture, Tr2 (a culture connects one translator to another). That is, it can see translation history as a series of relationships between translators (more exactly, between those with internal knowledge about the translations in question). For instance, some Spanish translators of the mid-fifteenth century are traditionally considered pre-Humanist, as opposed to the more properly Humanist Italian translators whose Latin versions they rendered into Castilian (cf. Russell 1985; Round 1993). Our alternative link, however, would see the Spanish and Italian translators as actors within the one process, sharing norms and negotiating new principles within one and the same culture, at once Humanist and pre-Humanist (Pym

1992c). Whereas the traditional basic link uses cultural specificity as the heuristic source of elements to be compared, our alternative model describes it as a measure of disturbance or transformation in the passage from translator to translator. If intercultural borders are nevertheless present and operative, this model challenges them to show themselves as sources of disturbance or transformation.

## Fifth Idea: Translation is a Temporary Communication Strategy

All the above would suggest that translation is a good thing. This is indeed the general conclusion reached or intimated by most work on translation, often in the spirit of promulgating internal knowledge, mostly in ignorance of the actual historical effects of external knowledge. But if we are attentive to external knowledge, some assessment must be made of the way translations project and maintain intercultural borders. If translations are always a good thing, separated cultures might also always be good things. I have doubts about this.

Despite the limited visions of many theorists, translation is only one option in a range of possible strategies for intercultural communication. The most significant alternative to translation is polyglotism, of having a person speak several languages and operate within several cultures, within multicultural communities. Societies that consume many translations are perhaps likely not to learn foreign languages (so might say a naïve economist); they perhaps invest in training specialized groups to learn the languages for them; they may resist tendencies towards polyglotism. The bearers of internal knowledge would thus be translating so that others need not translate for or from themselves. Translation and polyglotism would be mutually opposed strategies. Polyglotism would be the most radical alternative to interlingual borders, and perhaps to intercultural borders as well.

This is indeed the thought implied in Dominique Colas's commentary on government subsidies for translations:

The nation-state prefers translation to linguistic pluralism. Translation maintains the nation-state's principle of superposing cultural and political frontiers, whereas linguistic pluralism undoes it by affirming multiple cultural loyalties. (1992: 101)

A state policy in favour of translation into a national language would be against individuals speaking several languages, or more exactly against mixes of cultures. And state financing of translation studies, of our own activities, would equally be in the interests of congruent cultural and political frontiers, ultimately affirming the borders of territorial cultures. One might go further. Hobsbawm

(1990: 117) has described the "examination-passing classes" as connecting nationalism with language, promoting the idea that political and cultural boundaries should coincide. After all, such classes have the most to gain from all the linguistic work and administrative positions thus created. The same classes now proclaim the need for more translations. It's all work for us and our students.

Such ironies at the expense of translation, which virtually see translation as part of a world-wide nationalist conspiracy, are perhaps interesting but incomplete. There are several reasons why universal polyglotism is not the alternative I want to propose here.

First, there is no guarantee that translation and polyglotism are in fact mutually opposed. Both factors could well derive from the same openness to intercultural exchange; they often occur together; they can be complementary rather than reciprocally exclusive.

Second, translation and language-learning are markedly different with respect to their durability as strategies. The training of polyglot individuals involves extremely high initial costs but very low long-term costs once the languages have been learnt. Translations, on the other hand, are essentially high-cost one-off affairs. Their quantitative historical distribution, in response to specific demands, tends to be parabolic, peaking and then declining to background levels. Thus, although translations can build up into sizeable text flows, repetition brings only minimal reduction in the high initial costs. Translation is not a good kind of transaction cost for long-term relationships. It can function well as a short-term strategy for intercultural communication but becomes decidedly uneconomical for long-term or extremely voluminous flows.

Third, and in ultimate agreement with Colas's general analysis, translation may nevertheless become a long-term strategy under the non-market conditions created by state subsidies. And it is really government subsidies, not actually read translations, that many examination-passers most directly seek.

My suggestion here has two parts. On the one hand, translation, if left to itself, tends to be a short-term strategy, in keeping with the conceptual logic of loci instead of lines. On the other hand, if subsidized as a long-term policy, it must ultimately support the logic of the lines enclosing territorial cultures, and must do so in the interests of monocultural political units.

The real question is whether public policies should intervene to support translation in the interests of territorial cultures, or should they just let translation peaks give way to non-translative strategies. At what price should translation become a long-term communication strategy?

This is a key issue for the future of Europe, and not merely on the financial level. Since advances in corpus-based machine translation are likely to reproduce the economics of language learning, our thought in this field cannot be merely economic. It is really a question of what kind of cultures we want to encourage.

Current European ideologies are quick to praise multilingualism (= each group has its own language) and the resulting need for translation, glossing over the actual transaction costs through abundant references to "democracy, transparency and equality" (as in Brackeniers 1992: 20). But this kind of multilingualism is not the same as polyglotism (= individuals able to speak several languages), which can replace translation by making individuals their own translators. The confusion of the two concepts enables a plurality of nations to pretend to be pluralist. This is an expensive and ideologically insidious confusion. Serious attention should be given to Coulmas's argument that "the [then] EC has been used by member states to defend their languages' privileged position rather than being given the chance to produce a language policy of its own" (1990: 8). Rich nation-states have so far been prepared to pay for their linguistic nationalism within the institutions of the European Union. But that is certainly no guarantee that the resulting use of long-term translation will or should last.

One of the models referred to in the planning of the EU language regime (favorably reported in Nyborg 1982: 9) was a national parliament that worked in four languages; there was simultaneous interpreting in all four languages; all documents were translated in all four languages; parliamentary motions were adopted simultaneously in all four languages. This ideal translation regime, upon which a supranational European regime could be modeled, was of course greater Yugoslavia, the fate of which suggests that translation can indeed maintain cultural enmities under the guise of cooperation and exchange. The example should raise serious doubts about the association of long-term translation with democratic ideals. Societies that use long-term translation are not necessarily better off because of it.

If translation is a short-term activity, it should be expected to change rather than just reinforce intercultural borders; it could provide alternatives to existing borders. If, however, translation is subsidized as a long-term activity, it seems destined to reinforce borders between cultures. These are working hypotheses worth investigating.

### A Conclusion

I am unconvinced that translation is anywhere near the universally positive answer it is made out to be. I would hope it is just a momentary step along the way to some better form of cross-cultural communication, and perhaps to some better form of culture. And I suspect specifically long-term translation is ultimately in the interests of territorial cultures. To question its goodness is thus to question the ideal of territorial cultures.

No translation map, no amount of translation studies, can say how territorial

conflicts should be resolved. One can merely trace the borders and the movements, the divisions and the flows of weapons and refugees creating new translation situations. But the use of such maps need not always be passive. Just as texts and populations have been moved by ethnic cleansing, so the past history of these cultures can be mapped as movements of texts and populations. Almost every apparently territorial culture can be mapped back to a series of movements, translations. The nomadic bases of Indoeuropean civilization may yet undo those who claim that their nations were always already there.

Alain Rey's etymological survey of our words for translation goes back several times to *transducere*, related to the shepherding and leading of flocks, the principle source of nomadic wealth (1992: 14-15). Although long-term translation may be good for the borders of territorial cultures, one should not forget that the activity itself is carried out by people who move, or at least, by people unable to forget that they have moved. The farming culture derived from *colere* not only came later than the nomadic culture of *transducere* but has always required nomadic intermediaries for trade, for exchange, for translation. The trouble is that, until now, territorial cultures have been the only ones to map their histories. Histories of movements and movers, of translations and translators, might alter that monopoly.

Like all the intermediaries needed for exchange, translators require the professional freedom to move from culture to culture, land to land, accepting a certain disenfranchisement and even disinterest as the condition of their task. Theirs need not be a territorial sense of culture. If they have a culture, it is about borders, not limited by them. Their conceptual geometry is ultimately that of the nomad, travelling from market to market, complementing sedentary culture but not fighting for it. If their work can be limited to a momentary strategy, if they can keep moving, translators might even promote some kind of fleeting victory for an apparent contradiction in etymologies, nomadic culture.

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