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## Coming to Terms With and Against Nationalist Cultural Specificity. Notes for an Ethos of Translation Studies

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One would have to be hard-hearted, soft-headed and thick-skinned to argue against nationalist specificity in a political state set to split largely because of nationalist cultural sentiments. Yet this is the risk I decided to take at the Prague conference. I expected some retort from local nationalists; none was forthcoming, perhaps out of politeness. My comments instead seemed to arouse the discontent of specialists in descriptive translation studies, whose astute criticisms and subsequent correspondence have helped me to correct and slightly reorient this written version. My purpose must now be to focus more on certain epistemological and ethical problems presented by descriptive studies, using the problem of nationalist cultural specificity as a major illustration rather than as a single object of study. So with this reorientation in mind, let me now try to state my case a little more clearly than was done in the heat of oral confrontation.

I shall first say what I mean by nationalist cultural specificity, then briefly consider its relation to the new-found flexibility in descriptive models of culture, and finally suggest certain principles of an "ethos of translation studies" that might not only inform the relations between our discipline and its social environment but perhaps also open the way for a properly translational approach to cultural specificity of all kinds.

### **Cultural Specificity as a Nationalist Ideal**

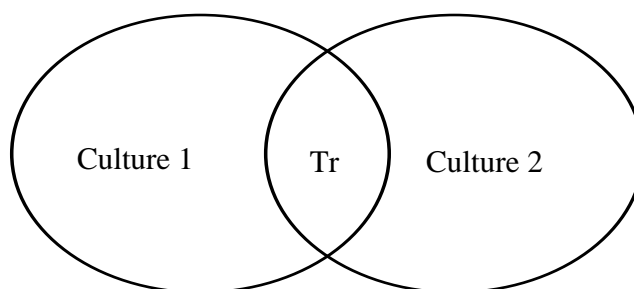
The kind of cultural specificity I want to call nationalist seems close to what people in Prague and Bratislava know as *Narodnespecificke*. My spies tell me the word is derived from the verb "to be born". This kind of specificity might thus be assimilable to a concept of "nation", derived from "natio", as a fact of birth and not of political units. That is, it can function as an ideal with or without a corresponding nation-state. Nationalist specificity is nevertheless a strong belief uniting apparently closed and congruent circles of language, behavioural norms, ethnicity and, ultimately, occupation of territory, all focused on an axiom of original identity and an affective sense of belonging (on this latter aspect see Pym 1992a:111-125). If the workings of such an ideal are nationalist, its general form is best described as a superposition of closed circles.

Moreover, since belief in this strong kind of cultural specificity is found interculturally—*Narodnespecificke*, for example, is the same term in Czech and Slovak—I am obviously not talking directly about Czechs, Slovaks, Moravians, Hungarians, Gypsies, Jews or anyone else. I am concerned with a general notion or even feeling that such peoples might have about their specificity. In fact, I am talking about a unitary paradise able to motivate the way you or I or anyone else may manifest or interiorise a national cultural identity through adherence to specially marked action and thought. As such, the nationalist ideal has more to do with judgements of value than with judgements of fact.

I want to argue that translation studies, as a discipline more in harmony with its terrestrial transcultural object than with unitary paradises, should be prepared to recognise and question this nationalist ideal of cultural specificity.

### **Congruent Cultural Specificity in Simple Models of Translation**

Ideally congruent or coinciding specificity once commonly entered translation studies as two casually drawn or intimated circles marking the places where translation begins and ends:



If we can ignore for the moment the intersectional position of the translator (with which not everyone would agree), what are these circular cultures 1 and 2 if not concrete invitations to concentric specificity? With or without nationalist references, what other geometry could better substantiate a nation's sense of unitary belonging when, for example, one circle is called Spanish and filled with “dinner at 10” and the other is labeled German and filled with “dinner at 6 or 7”, together with a thousand other details taught as *civilisation*, *Landeskunde* or “knowledge of the culture in which the language is spoken”?

But is there only one dinnertime to each language, one language to each culture, one culture to each ethnic group, one ethnic group to each society, one society to each territory? It is generally recognised that much of our historical world is thankfully out of joint with nationally congruent specificity. When I am having a late lunch in a Canary Islands restaurant, speaking Spanish but sitting next to German tourists having an early dinner, should I tell these Germans to

go home and study their *Landeskunde* or *Kulturspezifität* before they start messing up the diagram? Should I condemn them for imperialistically distorting the purity of Spanish national culture? Should this be the prescriptive morality of cultural specificity, attempting to keep each culture in its own God-given national territory? But then, the waitress is German, the menu is multilingual and the restaurant itself is owned by Germans, as is a major part of the tourist industry in the Canary Islands. With what territorial right should we all be engaged in Spanish mealtimes, themselves a result of a rather less subtle conquest some 500 years ago? After all, tourism and conquest are only two of the many modes of transfer by which congruent specificity is broken and much work is created for translators. An ethics of eternal cultural stability would perhaps risk leaving our discipline with unemployment as its practical base. A more complex kind of thought is needed.

Over the past twenty or so years translation studies has seen a general questioning of beautifully closed circles. This is news to no one. Saussurean systems have given way to talk of polysystems, macrosystems, microsystems and non-systemic positions (Even-Zohar, Toury and followers); *Skopostheorie* subscribes to a similarly flexible terminology of “paracultures”, “diacultures” and “idiocultures” in order to handle non-congruent complexities (cf. Vermeer 1989:35-36); and José Lambert, most notably, has very correctly insisted that we come to terms with the more general case of multicultural and multilingual societies (Lambert 1989). There is thus common awareness that some more subtle geometry is needed if we are to describe the actual effects of movements between cultures. Closed circles are not good shapes for the places where translation begins and ends.

The approaches I have just cited have done much to contest the more monolithic and normative circles that preceded them. They have effectively fragmented the kind of simple prescriptive morality that would condemn all changes to cultural specificity. This has partly been done by making normative theory itself an aspect of the historical object to be described (after Toury 1980:62; Lambert 1988:128,130; 1991a:31-32; 1991b; assessed in Delabastita 1991), but the underlying relativism has also been in the name of greater adequacy to the historical complexity of languages and cultures (as in Lambert 1989; 1991b). Research has advanced significantly as a result. Translation studies is becoming a series of good ways to describe complex formations and interrelations that might otherwise escape the attentions of anthropologists, sociologists, linguists or semioticians. We are thus gradually finding a place and role as a scholarly discipline full of concepts and models and data and publications and a few academic chairs like those of other scholarly disciplines, and potentially with something to say about the general validity of nationalist circles. But this new orthodoxy is not yet wholly satisfying.

## The Splendor and Limitations of Description

Although not all the approaches cited above should be called descriptive (Vermeer, for one, has wider concerns), they have all had ultimately descriptive purposes when dealing with the question of cultural specificity. So it is description that we have to thank for tangible advances on this particular point. However, having recognized this as a positive historical development, I must confess that I am unprepared to go all the way down the road thus signposted. Let me briefly summarize the general doubts I want to raise with respect to current descriptive approaches to cultural specificity:

- When description presents itself as a scholarly purpose ranked above historically normative theory, there remains the problem of situating the historical subjectivity able passively to describe cultural specificity. Since even the most scholarly hypotheses and findings cannot be value-free, there is no reason to believe that cultures can be described with entire neutrality, as if from an a-cultural position. A belief in value-free description would moreover have to address legitimate deconstructionist doubts as to whether the terms describing translation can entirely be separated from the terms of the object described (cf. Bakker & Naaijken 1991). These epistemological problems remain to be resolved.

- In keeping with the breaking of nationalist circles, it has become fairly common to say that all cultures are “dynamic” and “open”. There are two epistemological problems here. The first is that we cannot be sure that not all dynamism comes from *within* individual cultures, since a good deal more may well derive from relations between cultures. The second problem is then that we have no way of ensuring that there are no cultures that are closed to such dynamism—so closed that they escape external description—, since there is ample evidence that many cultures have mechanisms for at least partial closure, most notably by forgetting intercultural origins and referring to individual birthright. Cultures can be relatively open, but they can also promote exclusivism as resistance to intrusion, be it descriptive or otherwise. The fact should be recognized more generally than is currently fashionable.

- Similarly opposed to big circles, there is a tendency to abandon nationalist levels like that of *Narodnespecificke* in favor of fairly innocuous if nebulous entities like “corporate culture” or “MTV culture” (Lambert 1992). But if these smaller analytical units and conglomerations are proposed as general models, they risk leaving the notion of “a culture” so weak and transitory that no ideally national culture could do any harm. Nationalist cultural specificity can do harm; people fight and die for it. Recent weeks have seen it appear not just in Serbo-Bosnian “ethnic cleansing” and not unrelated *Fremdenhaß* in Germany but also with certain electoral variants in the Baltic states, Kuwait and Bhutan, to name only the most current instances. Nationalist cultural specificity is taking disturbing forms in this post-Cold-War world. Translation studies,

as a discipline dealing with a major mode of intercultural relations, should not easily remain indifferent to it.

- Also apparently neutral in outlook, polysystem theory has developed rather more spatial models for complex target cultures, with centers and peripheries and movements between the two. In so doing, it on the one hand calls for complete descriptions of cultural systems or fragments that are covered by other disciplines, and on the other excludes the active role source cultures could be playing in the breaking of congruency. That is, it creates a lot of analytical work in the name of describing the historical function of translation within just one complex cultural specificity, a task that could perhaps more elegantly be achieved by focusing directly on the frontiers and intercultural relations upon which translation operates.

- More generally, when descriptive researchers use their models to piece together a culture from data on numerous levels—including a culture's own self-representations—the resulting specificity should be expected to differ significantly from the image the culture in question has of itself. Scholarship gives one result, but a nationalist ideal external to scholarship should lead to quite a different result. If not, why engage in analysis in the first place? For example, careful descriptions of Czecho-Slovakian cultures would be expected to reveal far more complexity than the relatively coherent circles projected by common usage of *Narodnespecificke*. The former would purport to present scholarly judgments of fact, the latter are more given to organizing judgments of value. Yet descriptive approaches so far seem unaware of any conflictual or critical relation between these two kinds of outcomes. No descriptive study that I know of has presented criteria able to say that a culture is clearly *mistaken* in the way it thinks about itself or relates to other cultures; no descriptive model that I know of has led to anything like an ethical critique of an external ideal. Indeed, when José Lambert provocatively lists genocide alongside translation in a shortlist of social strategies for dealing with multilingualism (1989:223), his belief in scholarly neutrality forces him to declare that, from the perspective of descriptive studies, “rien ne permet d'établir qu'une forme de ces solutions soit par définition meilleure (selon quelles normes?) que les autres” (1989:224). Is this not eloquent evidence that descriptive studies is currently blind to the possibility of translational principles that might allow us to prefer translation to genocide? But then, what part of translation studies might be able to see such principles? Gideon Toury has been even more explicit in his desire for scientific neutrality: “It is of no concern to translation *theory* to cause any changes in the world” (1991:189), putting “theory” in italics presumably to relegate ethical concerns to the level of “applied extensions”, beneath the business of translation studies as a whole. Our scholars thus appear prepared passively to describe and theorise even the most pernicious modes of cultural specificity, at the same time as they seem unable to say what actual effect their descriptions should ultimately have on the way of the world.

In short, there is a paradoxical danger of descriptive models becoming *too* flexible, *too* fragmentary and *too* apparently value-free to engage actively with external ideals promoting ideal cultural specificity as rigid, homogeneous and closed. I suspect we have reacted so radically against normative models that we are now methodologically unable to come to terms with the ideals of nationalist specificity, which nevertheless continue to have strong affective, social and political functions regardless of our theories.

An adequately oriented translation studies should be able to address the above questions. But what kind of thought could help us to grasp such nettles?

### **The General Nature and Derivations of a Translational Ethos**

Let me be more explicit. I think it is very good to have a scholarly discipline and to pursue descriptive studies within that discipline. In fact, I would like descriptive work to be even more rigorous in its use of models and hypotheses (Pym forthcoming). But the function of research is not merely to occupy academic space. Disciplines come and go. They come in response to social needs and preoccupations; they go when they fail to respond to social needs and preoccupations. If we cannot develop clear ideas about our place and role, about our epistemology and our ethics, about the real problems to be solved, we do not deserve to be around for long. And since such ideas require judgements of value (translation is preferable to genocide) as well as judgements of fact (either strategy can come to the fore in the presence of certain social parameters), we have to think on a level that can provide an adequate evaluative frame over and above the apparent neutrality of scholarly descriptive work.

The best word I can find to describe such an orientative mode of thought is “ethos”, in the sense of a set of general principles able to organize rough priorities for a wide range of contextual and historical problems, including those I have outlined above. But since “ethos” is a very polyvalent term—I have no wish to exclude its many related uses—, let me briefly summarize the general kind of features that might be required:

- An ethos should not be confused with a theory or a metalanguage, since it is neither predictive nor analytical. Its relation to actual theory and analysis might be like a musical key in which many different scores can be written, or a preamble to a political constitution allowing the formulation and modification of numerous pieces of legislation, or even a computer operating system that allows the use of many different programs to produce many different texts (some analogies are remarkably close at hand). But also, beyond these images, an ethos should be able to evolve dialectically, in keeping with the broad historicity of the theory and analysis it at the same time orients.

- Although the term “ethos” is directly related to “ethics”, it should not be associated with

simply prescriptive moral positions. Nor should it ignore the historical need for such ethical concerns. Since intercultural ethics is undoubtedly one of the areas that translation studies has to address, an adequate ethos should provide a general orientation for context-specific ethical propositions.

- The principles of an ethos should be regarded as valid for the whole of translation studies rather than for individual constitutive parts. They should thus incorporate and transcend partial and conflicting propositions that would see the ultimate purpose of our discipline as being “to help translators in their work”, “to help train translators” or “to formulate laws of translational behaviour”. Truly general principles should thus not be restricted to the level of “applied extensions” but should ideally pervade translation studies as a whole.

- With respect to empirical studies, an ethos should provide a general evaluative orientation able to point towards the kinds of problems to be addressed and the kinds of initial hypotheses to be tested. But it cannot itself be subject to empirical testing. Its justification must instead be based on criteria of consensus among the groups working in translation studies, and of course on the continued ability of the discipline itself to identify and deal with non-trivial problems. The life of an ethos is effectively terminated when, through failure to evolve, consensus is lost or the discipline becomes socially unimportant. In unfortunately practical academic terms, a scholarly ethos is probably clinically dead when funding dries up because researchers are unable to explain why their societies should pay them.

- With respect to single cultures, the required ethos should function as a feature of secondary enculturation processes able to establish a transcultural discipline with its own specificity, like that of a professional code. However, we should not forget that since the term “ethos” can also refer to the specific traits of a primary culture, our ethos could itself come under fire from the kinds of criticisms we might make of nationalist cultural specificities. This could involve apparent contradictions like closing our own ranks in order to insist that primary cultural specificities are more open than is nationalistically believed. And yet the outcries allowed by such paradoxes should not obscure the very different qualitative level of translation studies, especially to the extent that our discipline is a transcultural activity involving voluntary participation and exercising limited social power. An ethos may belong to a scholarly discipline or to an entire culture, but that does not mean that translation studies will automatically become a nationalist culture in itself. Certain ideological risks have to be taken.

If these few notes can point to the general nature of an ethos of translation studies, how might one then go about locating the principles that could give the skeleton some meat? Several possible strategies should be mentioned as components or complements of the approach to be used below:

- Most obviously, certain principles could be derived from personal reflection on the reasons

why one is engaged in translation studies in the first place. But subjective confession can at best be a starting point for the gaining of consensus. Indeed, it is rarely the most effective discursive mode in a context obsessed with impersonality. Confession is probably better integrated into a general appeal for similar reflection, arguing that anyone engaged in translation studies—instead of something else like the analysis of great literary works, Greek philosophy, astrology or genocide—should by definition believe that some general benefit can ensue from work on this particular object of study. This might be the fundamental principle of any scholarly ethos.

- Less subjectively, the principles of an ethos might be derived from generalization of what has already been done in translation studies. This is to assume that the ethos is really already there just waiting to be formulated from existing fragments. For example, when descriptive studies give results that differ from an external cultural ideal, one would hope that they do so by virtue of their own implicit ethos, even if the scholars concerned are unable or unwilling to describe that ethos. Our task would then be a simple process of explicitation. Alternatively, we could consider what modes of thought students learn as they advance in translator-training and translation studies, not just in class but in their practical translating and through the direct experience of cultural alterity offered by exchange programs. If students somehow learn to think translationally, reflection on their progress could provide clues as to the underlying principles of an ethos adequate to translation studies.

- Another approach would be to focus squarely on the nature of translation itself. This means assuming that the object selected, *das Ding an sich*, restricts the number of things that can be said about it and the range of reasons why anyone would want to study it. Such reflections been made unpopular by the need to break with prescriptive theory, particularly by attempts to restrict scholarly roles to results that can be supported by empirical data. Hopefully, the search for an ethos will help rehabilitate thought as a legitimate intellectual activity, at the same time as it should help ensure that an ethos of translation studies remains fundamentally translational.

- Certain principles of an ethos might then also be reached through contestation of what appear to be non-translational principles operative in discourses outside or on the fringes of translation studies. This is partly what I have done in asking how descriptive studies should grasp the external ideals of nationalist specificity. More generally, though, contestation is the most appropriate strategy when dealing with all ideal forms like closed circles, since such ideals are now mostly external to translation studies anyway.

In what follows I shall thus adopt a mostly *contestational* approach to certain discursive uses of the term or notion of cultural specificity, although I shall by no means exclude the results of personal reflection, knowledge of what others are doing, and basic thought about translation itself. I hope this is fair.

Two further initial caveats are perhaps necessary. First, as befits a contestational strategy, my

examples will be drawn from what are at best the limits of translation studies; they should not be confused with any state-of-the-art survey. And second, since my notes are intended as an individual exercise in an area requiring consensus, the principles I am about to propose should not be read as necessary laws or calls for disciplinary sanctions. They are merely suggestions that may or may not contribute to an explicit ethos of translation. Make of them what you will.

### **Cultural Specificity as a Subordinate Clause**

My first example is rather trivial. I recently wrote a book of which the first version merited the following comment from a German translation theorist:

“Either my command of English is too poor to understand everything or it is your way of putting things (should I say your culture-specific approach to the subject?), but it is somewhat difficult for me fully to appreciate your ideas.”

The term “culture-specific” functions here as a possible excuse, a potential cause of difficulty that lies neither with the sender (myself, an Australian) nor with the receiver (a German). Misunderstanding would then be no one's fault. As the sender I could cite cultural specificity as cause and proof of my innocence, and sender and receiver could happily go their separate ways. Or so would say an absolutist use of this kind of “cultural specificity”.

Happily, since my personal and discursive purpose in writing the book was to be understood both across cultures and within a scholarly discipline, I quite naturally took the comment as indication that my text had to be rewritten. I spent some six months doing so, and even now I confess that the result (Pym 1992a) is quite dense and obscure. Cultural specificity is all well and good, but it should be no excuse for bad writing. Where transcultural communication is the purpose, this kind of specificity—ultimately a cheap alibi—is necessarily mere noise that should be done away with as much as possible. And if the sender cannot always improve the text in this way, translators should be prepared to undertake the required modifications. That is why the above criticism quite correctly relegates the mention of cultural specificity to brackets within a subordinate clause, possibly with a touch of irony. An obverse discursive weighting would have allowed something like “Although I have trouble understanding you, your writing seems beautifully culture-specific”, and no communicative improvement would have been called for. Thankfully, the criticism in this case carried more weight than the polite excuse tendered in the name of specificity.

In transcultural situations, *the values of cultural specificity should not be ranked higher than shared criteria for effective and ethical communication*. As far as possible, the message should get through. This could be the first principle of an ethos for translation studies.

I should perhaps add that this basic principle is easily overlooked. When presenting the oral version of this paper in Prague, I forgot about the requirements of the simultaneous interpreter and spoke far too fast and abstractly, with non-communicative results for those listening to the translation. So in the name of an incipient translational ethos, I publicly apologise both to the interpreter concerned and to her listeners.

### **Cultural Specificity as an Exclusive “We”**

Let me move to a more conflictual usage from a neighboring discipline. In 1964 Ward Goodenough wrote that “The anthropologist's basic task [...] is to describe specific cultures adequately” and that “a proper definition of culture must adequately derive from the operations by which we describe particular cultures” (1964:36). This would be delightfully self-evident were it not for the problematic status of the “we” attached to the verb “describe” (“...the operations by which *we* describe...”). Who is this “we”? Is it inclusive or exclusive? In the anthropologist's cotextual discourse the pronoun turns out to be exclusive, since it is opposed to the “they” appearing in the subsequent much-cited definition of a culture:

“A society's culture [only one?] consists of whatever it is one [we?] has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that *they* accept for *themselves*.” (1964:36, italics mine)

Now, who is this “we” that is perhaps also “one”? It could perhaps be an infant engaged in primary enculturation, but here, in conjunction with the act of description, it is more likely to be the anthropologist engaged in very secondary enculturation, especially since no infant really needs a definition of culture. Anthropologists, like spies, immigrants, Quine's jungle linguist and perhaps all translators, stand on the frontiers of the object to be defined and described. And since this relative externality is by no means a neutral position—the ethos of anthropology is derived from Western cultures—the definition and description must ensue from an active intercultural relation. Here on the anthropologist's frontier, one culture describes another; a “we” describes a “they”. And this initial alterity is of course why there can be no value-free description.

We thus find that Goodenough's insistence on describing “specific cultures” conceals a discursive process that occurs between cultures, accepting and then attempting to bridge a discontinuity between pronominal positions.

I have a practical reason for choosing this example. Goodenough's definition of a culture has been rendered into German—Göhring's 1977 version makes many improvements, although strangely turns the neutral “members” into the even more exclusive *Einheimische*—and has subsequently been incorporated into *Skopostheorie*, most fully in the work of Vermeer (1986:178-179; 1989:35). The definition has been cited and re-cited as apparently solid ground

able to provide at least one pylon for a general translation theory. But the anthropologist's position is in fact no more secure than the translator's, since both are set on the moving sands of intercultural relations.

There are further reasons why Goodenough does not provide solid ground for translation studies. Most evidently, the passage cited above equates “culture” with “knowledge” in such a way that cultures are presumed accessible to a learning process, incorporating and including those who would wish to join. And yet cultures themselves can surely be just as exclusive as Goodenough's initial “we”. They can exercise strategies for forgetting, for unlearning as an active form of unknowledge. Their secrets and hidden nuances can knit together social wholes in ways designed to ward off outsiders, including prying anthropologists and translators. For example, over the past century or so Europeans have been describing Australian aboriginal cultures, but it is only recently, in the new intercultural situation created by a Native Land Rights Act, that much formerly concealed knowledge has been revealed as elders seek to have their traditional territorial rights recognized by white Australian law. Prior to the Act, tribal elders sought to ensure the exclusivity of this knowledge. And classical European anthropologists believed so much in the specificity of their object and its accessibility to non-culture-specific learning that they failed to appreciate to what extent their own intercultural situation restricted the knowledge they sought. They interpreted many cultural barriers quite inadequately; the cultures were even more closed than their definitions. And major parts of these cultures might still remain closed and unknown to us, awaiting silent graves. This is why we—Europeans or white Australians—cannot be sure that all cultures are open to learning processes.

There are thus grounds for rewriting Goodenough's initial precept in the following way: The definition of a culture must ultimately derive from the intercultural position of the describer. Or more succinctly, *interculturality is anterior to the description of specificity*. This could be a further general precept for an ethos of translation studies.

### **Cultural Specificity as a Condition for Internationalist “Cooperation”**

An anthropological kind of specificity is sometimes elevated to the rank of an internationalist ethical principle. An example of this is UNESCO's 1982 recommendation on intercultural relations:

“Intercultural cooperation depends on respect for cultural identity, for the dignity and value of each culture, for independence, for national sovereignty and for non-intervention.”

Unfortunately the beautiful symmetry of mutual respect between nations—selected smiling eyes gazing at selected smiling eyes—is constantly contradicted by things that go bump between

cultures, many of them through translational acts. As much as these ethical conditions for “cooperation” picture an ideal world of static national specificities, the kind of relations that pass through translation depend on some degree of transcultural movement and intervention. Movement brings change, and change is often unkind to the ideals of established national identities. Moreover, if there is to be no change, it is difficult to see why there should be anything like cultural “cooperation” in the first place. In fact, the above ethical conditions are so idealist that one has trouble imagining exactly what kind of cooperation could meet them. If each culture already has dignity, value, independence and sovereignty, what further aim should they hope to achieve? To what end? This is one reason why a simple ethics of “non-intervention” or even “non-exclusion of the other”—which might also be the only non-deconstructed proposition of a deconstructionist ethics—is inadequate in the field of translation.

But there is more at stake here than the theoretical status of cultural change. Since UNESCO morality strictly concerns respect between entities that can be recognized as nations (“respect for...national sovereignty”), its real problematic is who or what has the right to be treated as a national culture. The UNESCO passage was first brought to my attention by a Catalan who quite correctly criticized its conditions for being inadequate to the case of “stateless nations” like Catalonia. This raises problems that bear directly on the capacity of translation to change the way in which such cultures are perceived (Pym 1991). The UNESCO emphasis on national cultures is no accident. It is obviously in keeping with UNESCO's mandate as an organism of the United Nations, an entity comprising nations as primarily political states that do not want their inner unity brought into question. The ideal of cultural cooperation without change is thus by no means ideologically gratuitous.

There are also more insidious implications in this morality of mutual respect. If there is to be positive change in the world, the United Nations mandate would seek to call it “development”, a term associated with the economic and sometimes political fields. Few nation-states talk of “cultural development”. Indeed, mutual respect would have the effect of keeping cultures as unchanging conservative masks able to make people feel that, whatever the externally-derived changes in economies and politics, something essential might yet remain the same. Cultural specificity is that which is not supposed to improve; its future is its past; without history, it is an eternal localisation. And none of this is in keeping with translation as an agent of cultural change.

This falsely conservative view of cultures traditionally enters translation studies whenever cultural specificity is cited as the reason for adaptation or for functional “dynamic equivalence”. When an Inuit “Seal of God” replaces Agnus Dei à la Nida, respect for existing identity allows the Christian God to enter all homes as if already there, bringing in change under the cloak of continuity. Such deceptive respect should not easily figure in a properly translational ethos for

the whole of translation studies.

Translation is a fact not of symmetries but of asymmetries, of movements and the changing of national cultures. An ethics that would have cultural specificities remain respectfully unaltered cannot properly respect translation, which has as part of its task the attempt to alter cultures. An ethics of translation would have to be based not on eternal specificities but on the contextual desirability of one kind of change or another. *Recognition of potential change* might thus be a further major element of an ethos for translation studies.

### **Cultural Specificity as a Translational “Has To”**

I have so far outlined principles ranking cultural specificity beneath the priorities of intercultural communication, interculturality and potential change. And yet these priorities alone cannot be expected to configure a mode of thought necessarily contestational of all the ideals of nationalist cultural specificity.

The insufficiency of the above criteria becomes particularly evident when dealing with nationalistic translation practices. My illustration here is based on Michel Garneau's translation of *Macbeth* as a play about Québec. However, my concern is not with the play's translation as such. I am more directly interested in Annie Brisset's analysis of it. And I'm more particularly interested in the way Brisset's analysis has been translated from French into English. That is, my example comes from a translation that has been carried out within translation studies, and only then from a translation carried out within Québec.

Brisset's analysis gives a clear demonstration of how various translation strategies re-nationalist the Scottish play. For example, Shakespeare's term “Scotland” frequently becomes “not'pau'pays” or “mon pays”, and so on. Similarly, the translator deletes a long passage describing “the healing powers of the King of England”. The result is that, according to Brisset, “Anyone watching Michel Garneau's version of *Macbeth* will get the impression that Shakespeare's tragedy symbolizes the Québécois situation uncannily well” (1991:137). Brisset-in-English moreover explains these translation strategies in terms of a very culture-specific situation:

“In a society such as that of Québec, which is still searching for its identity, translation *has* primarily *to* provide a mirror in which the prevailing social discourse can be reflected and thus legitimized through the external confirmation it receives. [...] This implies that the fundamental otherness of the foreign text *has to* be set aside so that it can serve to give credibility and legitimacy to the Québécois viewpoint.” (1991:137; italics mine)

My initial problem when I first read this passage was to determine the status of the repeated verb-form “has to”. This verb is surely similar to the ethical “depends on” seen in the UNESCO example except that here it remains without a clear mandate. Exactly who is saying what “has to” be done? Is the verb describing some kind of cultural terrorism obliging all translators to

behave one way and not another? Or is it indicating the analyst's agreement with these principles?

In the oral version of my paper I decided against terrorism and interpreted this “has to” as Brisset's discursively subjective agreement with the nationalist strategies she describes. That is, I read the analytical description as an unambiguous justification of the translation. I could support this reading with some of Brisset's more clearly subjective statements such as her description of the play as “a literary gem in its own right” (1991:137), as well as the fact that nowhere in the translated article, which I have since reread with more than due care, is there any discursively explicit dissent from the social and literary goals of Québécois nationalism. However, in the discussion that followed the paper in Prague, Clem Robyns argued that I had misread “has to”. For him, it was merely a descriptive summary of the strategies under analysis, without subjective intervention on the part of the analyst. So in the interests of scholarly fairness I wrote to Annie Brisset for her own interpretation of the verb. The essential elements of her reply are as follows:

“Your letter draws my attention to an unfortunate and misleading choice of words. Indeed, what appears to be a normative stance must rather be construed as a kind of ‘antiphrase’. [...] I neither approve nor disapprove the Québécois translation of *Macbeth*. My aim is to show in what way translation is part and parcel of social discourse at a given time. [...] The article was translated by two undergraduate students whose search for ‘truths’ about translation might have interfered with the real purpose of the study. [...]” (November 2 1992)

Professor Brisset has also kindly sent me the French version of her analysis, where the corresponding passages do indeed avoid the subjectivity of “has to”:

“Dans la société québécoise encore peu certaine de son identité, la traduction *remplit* d'abord une fonction spéculaire de nature à légitimer le discours constitutif de la représentation sociale, en lui apportant de l'extérieur des appuis qui le confortent. [...] Cela même *implique* une mise entre parenthèses de l'altérité fondamentale du texte étranger, appelé à cautionner la représentation du fait québécois.” (1990: 252-253; italics mine)

The difference between the French and English versions is of some minor importance with respect to my own scholarship (I think I was justified in basing my interpretation on the one article as translated, since my purposes in Prague were far from biographical, but I won't push the point).<sup>1</sup> However, there is also an interesting paradox here. The English-language “has to”, whether read as monolithic terrorism or analytical subjectivity, quite possibly conforms to much the same nationalist criteria as the Québécois translation of *Macbeth*. Can Brisset then coherently refuse to take position with respect to a “mise entre parenthèses de l'altérité fondamentale” in the case of *Macbeth* and yet regret the reorientation of her own text in the hands of translators? That is, more generally, can descriptive studies remain neutral to nationalist

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<sup>1</sup> Nor am I alone in my misreading of intended neutrality. Jane Koustas shows similar problems in her review of Brisset's book: “Provocant et parfois agressif, ce livre ne se veut surtout pas un survol ‘neutre’ de la traduction théâtrale au Québec [...]. Le ton donc est celui d'un débat et l'auteure ne laisse pas de place aux objections.” (1991: 162)

specificity even at the price of their own transcultural communicability?

A simple solution to this problem lies in the first principle formulated above: The priority of effective communication would enable us to criticize the translational “has to” as inadequate to the sender's intentions, whilst Brisset could probably argue that the same principle is made virtually irrelevant in the case of *Macbeth* by the extreme distance of Shakespeare's intentions (who can say he didn't have a Québécois situation in mind?). But this would merely be a clever evasion of the specific issue in question.

Despite the problems with the translation, a basic line of contention should be drawn at this peculiar phrase “...implique une mise entre parenthèses de l'altérité fondamentale”, in English *and* in French. Brisset's translators may have been wrong to take advantage of this statement in order to set aside some of her own alterity. But was Brisset entirely coherent in neutrally describing this strategy in the first place?

To what extent can a translation suppress fundamental alterity and yet remain a translation? Surely even limit cases like pseudo-translations are only translational precisely to the extent that they project otherness? And surely works that are “literary gems in their own right” then lose translational status to the extent that they *fail* to project otherness? So can Brisset then passively describe this suppression of alterity and yet claim to be describing a translation?

It is at this point that description wants to have its cake and eat it too, with or without student translators. On the one hand, Brisset's surface discourse goes along with the suppression of alterity, most notably in cases like the *Macbeth* translator's deletion of the problematic reference to England and his playing down of toponymic references to Scotland. As we have seen, Brisset correspondingly accords the translation a non-translational value as an independent text. On the other hand, however, the mechanics of her descriptive analysis cannot help but *undo the same suppression of alterity*, since she is obliged to *reveal* the omitted references to England and Scotland. She does this by placing the English and Québécois versions side by side so as to reveal strategies that are visibly translational in that they go from one side to the other. The translator suppresses; the analyst reveals the suppression. The two discourses are thus fundamentally incompatible. If Brisset did identify with the translator's strategies, if she really did believe in a socially imperative need to suppress “fundamental otherness”, then she logically should not have undertaken a translational analysis of this text. Her position in translation studies would then be like arguing in favour of state secrets by revealing state secrets. However, since she *has* undertaken a translational analysis, her descriptive purposes must logically be distanced from the nationalist purposes of the text she describes, no matter what the uncertainties of her surface discourse and its misleading English translation.

In this way, the questions raised by the translational “has to” (monolithic cultural terrorism or analytical subjectivity?) retrospectively reveal the problematic distance of a descriptive mode

unwilling or unable to state its position with respect to the nationalist object described. By the very nature of her location within translation studies, Brisset cannot coherently go along with the suppression of “fundamental otherness”. Her discourse can claim neutrality, but as an action it cannot be neutral.

More generally, an ethos able to orient the purposes of translation studies *must accept (real or projected) alterity as the necessary condition for any text that is to be translational*. Whatever the culture-specific explanations of nationalist translation strategies, whatever the inadequacies of simple non-intervention (UNESCO), and whatever the delusive a-subjectivity of scholarly description, translation studies is by its very nature condemned to the intersubjective revelation of alterity. This could be a further principle in its ethos.

### **How to Recognize Cultural Specificity from within Translation Studies**

The four general principles that I have suggested could be considered broad arguments against any condoning of closed cultural specificity within translation studies. Indeed, it was as such that they were presented in Prague. But they do not oppose nationalist specificity in the name of any universalism, as was once the case in sterile debates about cultural relativity. Nor do they attempt to banish cultural specificity from the face of the earth, as might be the case of a worldview that could only see translation and nothing but translation. An ethos of translation studies can neither deny the existence of nationalist cultural ideals nor proclaim the inevitability of translational laws that would counter such ideals. Its task is merely to orient priorities with respect to such questions.

I now want to go one small step further. I want to suggest that the above principles, although superficially opposed to certain ideals of cultural specificity, in fact offer us a rather elegant way of recognizing how these same ideals work.

If it can be agreed that translation studies should place higher priorities on communication, interculturality, potential change and translational alterity than on cultural specificity, then it is possible to envisage our discipline as a privileged way of focusing on the way these and similarly intercultural principles are interrelated in the spacetime of history, over and above the mapping of individual cultures. That is, instead of looking directly at specificities we could be looking at the way cultures are formed from historical intercultural formations that comprise certain sets of ideas about what a culture should be. The best way to explain this is through some quick illustrations.

To return to the example I started with, it is of some interest that *Narodnespecificke* is a common term for at least two cultures that have lived together and are prepared to live apart, each agreeing to see some degree of its specificity measured in the other. One could interpret this

as indication of a properly intercultural set of principles, or as what negotiation theory has chosen to call an “intercultural regime” (Pym 1988). On a wider level—risking gross simplification for the sake of conveying a general idea—, a very large intercultural formation like European Romanticism might be seen as a regime or set of principles defining and interrelating symmetrical cultural ideals of nation-state-people; late-nineteenth-century development ideology would be a further regime reorganising cultures in terms of asymmetric relations between an international urban centre and an exoticised periphery; the Cold War era could be considered a redefinition of cultures in terms of two roughly symmetric modes of internationalisation; and our present moment would surely be involved in a troubled search for a new regime—“world order” is the unfortunately current term—able to integrate and stabilise the accrued contradictions of previous modes of intercultural organisation. Translations should then be seen as playing specific contextual roles within each of these regimes rather than within each individual culture. The important point, however, is that this use of an intercultural model would enable translation studies to address an object on the same level as its own underlying principles, and to use this approach to reassess the formation of nationalist cultural specificities.

Such a shift of perspective could make certain widely-held principles inadequate. For example, it would no longer be possible to attribute the causality of translations to just one culture, be it source or target; some causality would have to be sought in what happens between cultures. Or again, it could become wilfully uneconomical to embark on anthropological descriptions of entire cultural systems, since the level of regimes more directly concerns logics of the frontier, the place where translators work. And more generally, it would hopefully become clear that translation studies can make little of its own insight about cultures for as long as its concepts start from the term “culture” instead of from the actual study of translation.

If we want to say something that is not already being said by the many other disciplines dealing with cultures, we should accept translation as an act of communication within intercultural regimes, relegating cultural specificity to the level of resistance to the transfer of messages. In keeping with this line of thought, I have elsewhere argued (1992b) that our basic-link model should not start from two cultures (“culture1, translation, culture2”) but from the fundamental series “translation1, culture, translation2”. Multiple acts of translation would then indicate rather than assume intercultural frontiers. The space and time of a culture could thus be mapped in the following way (with a certain randomness in the presentation, to indicate that the form is in this case not necessarily circular):

...Tr...                      ...Tr...  
                     ...Tr...                      ...Tr...  
 ...Tr...    Culture    ...Tr...  
 ...Tr...                      ...Tr...  
                     ...Tr...

In contradistinction to the model sketched at the beginning of this paper, here the term “culture” is no more than resistance to the movement of messages from one translation to another, from input to output, requiring and distorting the many possible moments of ingoing and outgoing messages. Assessment of this resistance would then be a wholly translational way of recognizing and describing cultural specificity. And specifically nationalist ideals should appear as a major mode of resistance.

Translation studies might thus properly become the study of translation, and only then of cultural specificity. Moreover, once the moments of ingoing and outgoing translations are themselves analyzed on the level of intercultural regimes, on the level of a wider frame for the above basic link, due priority could be given to communication, interculturality, potential change and translational alterity. And all this might ideally be in accordance with a consensual ethos of translation studies.

But I know it is a lot to ask.

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