

Transfere non semper necesse est

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Published in *Quaderns. Revista de traducció* 1 (1998), 88-93.

In which it is argued that there is too much translation in Europe, that effective integration depends on degrees of nontranslated communication, and that an exclusive focus on translation seriously obscures our vision of a unified future.

A few months ago I attended a Translation Studies conference where the official programmatic text began as follows:

La communauté européenne qui est en train de se construire possède cette caractéristique unique d'être multilingue et de prétendre respecter les particularismes linguistiques et culturels par l'usage de toutes les langues lors de ses débats, c'est dire que la traduction y occupe une place de choix. (Colloque *Europe et traduction*, Artois, March 1996)

If I may translate (and I don't intend to outlaw the practice):

The European Union that is being constructed is unique in that it is not only multilingual but also seeks to respect its linguistic and cultural specificities through the use of all languages in its debates. This means that translation has pride of place.

The main features of this text can be found in the speeches of virtually all well-interpreted members of the European Parliament, in the glossy brochures of almost any translation school in Europe, in the introduction to several hundred well-meaning publications on European translation. Nothing new here: Europe means translation, and the more we have of both, the better.

Speaking at the conference in question I had the bad taste and worse manners to point out that although the conference itself was certainly in Europe, and although it was ostensibly a space for a European debates, the languages accepted for use were restricted to two (French and English) and there were no interpreters in sight. So much for respecting "l'usage de toutes les langues"! In practice, European multilingualism in a specific domain meant a restriction to two languages, and two is often pragmatically reduced to one.

Don't get me wrong: I am not particularly upset that there were no interpreters feeding my words into a dozen or so languages at that conference. I simply wanted to point out that the practical alternative to translation was a local language policy, a restriction to two, and a supposition that the conference participants knew enough of two to make do. I spoke goddam awful French and trusted the French could follow me; others spoke English and hoped for the same; and communication proceeded, as much as it merited to do so, largely thanks to the preselection of participants willing and able to negotiate the vicissitudes of bilingual exchange. This was indeed a practical and effective regime, none the least because the added cost of interpreting services would have meant that I, along with any other unsubsidized soul, could not have afforded to attend. Translation is expensive and often unnecessary; nontranslation is cheap and can be effective. Yet this concerns more than efficiency.

Of course, there is a minor paradox here. A conference on translation, precisely, should need minimal translating. Indeed, translators and their academic simulacra could be defined as the group of people requiring least recourse to translation. They tend to be actively at least bilingual and passively polyglot. We could picture this roughly as follows:



The drawing is crude, to be sure. Yet if I repeat it often enough, someone might eventually see what I have to say. In the middle, of course, is this Tr standing for Translator, living and working in an overlap, a middle ground, an intersection formed by two languages (we might say the same for cultures). This intersection might have a certain geopolitical basis, perhaps the twelfth-century Toledo of the Jewish and Mozarab intermediaries, the island of Pharos where 72 rabbis supposedly produced the Septagint, the Central Asian regions where 176 equally legendary monks transmitted the Buddhist sutras from India to China, even the Brussels that now houses the world's largest ever translation bureau. Thanks to such overlaps, with or without underlying soil, translators can translate. And because of the same overlaps, at least in term of lingual competence, they can often do without translation. Let's call the overlap "interlingual space" ("intercultural" if we want to talk about cultures), insisting that the "inter-" refers to shared space; it is not blithely qualifying any old movement from one

side to the other (the prefixes for which should be “cross-” or indeed “trans-”). The intersecting circles might thus be the glasses I use to look at translation, and the interlingual place and role of the translator is, for me, as plain as the nose on my face. Yet not everyone can see their own nose, which is why I hold up this mirror.

I want to make two general points about the model:

First, the discourse of translation denies it. More exactly, that which makes a translation a translation (the general assumption that A translates as B) omits or jumps over possible intersections, presupposing from the outset that A and B exist in separate languages, texts, worlds, cultures, whatever. The discourse of translation, no matter what kind of translation, projects initial separateness; it draws a border; it conceals the position of the translator. You can see the border in paratexts (references to two titles, two languages), in translator’s footnotes (separated by a line from the translation proper), in inserted foreign words [*Wörter*] (the lines are shorter and vertical, but lines nevertheless), in interpreters’ booths (input and output are not supposed to meet), not to mention the hundred or so theoretical models that show a lot of A and B but rarely leave room for an interlingual Tr. As for active concealment of interlingual positions, ask yourself why translators cannot say and mean “I” when translating, since every “I” they pronounce automatically refers to someone else, somewhere else, on the other side of a lingual border, a division that exists in translation but virtually nowhere else. I don’t care how much fancy theory can be cited in defence of translations as hybrids, decentring and subversive purveyors of difference, pathways of unity and understanding, all things to all people. Translation itself builds the lingual borders it then claims to transcend; it separates, and in so doing makes us overlook the interlingual noses on our faces.

Second, the above model concerns more than translation conferences. Almost any European conference in the sciences, and increasingly in the humanities, will have a local language regime limited to one or two. Where there are two (say, English plus the local language), interpreting services may be available, and hard-working interpreters are often bemused and occasionally dismayed to leave their booths and find conference participants conversing quite freely in bad English and associated mixes. More generally, the interlingual position of the translator is increasingly that of anyone with recourse to international exchange: diplomats, negotiators, travellers, academics, teachers, journalists, scientists, explorers and traders of all kinds, high-class prostitutes, top-flight footballers, politicians. Although not necessarily agents of international peace and understanding, such people do increasingly work between languages. The list of intermediaries might also include more dubious figures like spies, traffickers of drugs and arms, unscrupulous tourist promoters, experts in ecological dumping, political insurgents, hegemonic colonizers and occupying armies. True, these are the people that occasionally create work for translators. Yet they do so because they are formally in the

same interlingual position as translators and may thus, if they choose, do without translation. The paradox of the translator concerns more than translators.

Let me briefly pursue this logic. When do these interlingual figures actually require translation? When do they not need it? A rationalist answer, based on cost-benefit analysis, would have to focus on the time factor involved. If the exchange relation is short-term, perhaps a one-off visit to a foreign country or an international negotiation designed to resolve a transitory dispute, then it is clearly more beneficial to employ translators than to make everyone learn enough languages to be their own translator. If, however, the exchange relation is long-term, perhaps an established trade relation or repeated contacts as a part of a profession, it is simply much cheaper to learn languages than to keep employing translators. The question of needs is essentially a question of time. One should thus ask if “the European Union that is being constructed” is a short-term or long-term project. One should ask if it is leading to greater or smaller degrees of interlingual spaces. One might even ask if the enormous translation costs currently involved could actually *prevent* our exchanges from becoming substantially long-term. Coulmas estimated that some 40% of the administration budget of the EC of 12 was due to its language policy; one shudders to calculate the theoretical added percentage for each new official language in the expanding EU.

To ask such questions is to go beyond the logic inscribed in the discourse of translation. If one is to believe in translation, in the people who support and live from translations, translation is always necessary and that’s the end of the story. But if one begins by looking at interlingual space, the only real question is how we ever came to believe in translation so much. How did we ever get to this ideal “usage de toutes les langues” and the associated fairyland theories?

Several reasons:

First, there is a wide gap between the official discourse and what actually happens on the ground. Despite claims to respect multilingualism through translation, the European Commission deploys what is called a “real needs policy”, which basically incorporates use of a *lingua franca* or the use of passive competences wherever possible, as happened in the French-English conference cited above. This tends to mean that the more specialized the meetings, the less there are interpreters present. The official discourse on translation is thus largely produced for external consumption, to keep the multitudes and academics happy.

Second, because the official discourse exists, many translations are carried out for purely symbolic purposes. Here, for example, I have the minutes of a meeting of financial experts to discuss the implementation of company registers in Europe. The meeting took place three months ago, in English, with all sorts of exotic calques and deviances indicating a rather non-English interlanguage through which the specialists understood each other. And yet now, three months later, these minutes have to be

translated into French, even though all the potential readers obviously already have passive competence in English. If this kind of translation is necessary, it is for political rather than economic reasons: the French, at least, can claim that their language is still of some importance in this particular field.

Third, there is a certain cynical interest invested in maintenance of the official discourse and its symbolic translations. Some, for example, openly justify unnecessary translations on the grounds that they at least keep translators employed. As much as job creation is a very noble and necessary political objective, few serious professionals would like to see their goal in life as the mere maintenance of their employment. Far better, I suggest, to envisage future intermediaries as doing more than just translation.

Fourth, much of the academic discipline of translation studies, institutionally based on a massive increase in translator-training programmes, is structured to exclude interlingual positions from its field, either by applying linguistics to texts or by looking at systems rather than translators. In so doing, it remains a faithful reflection of translation itself by surreptitiously excluding the various communicative possibilities of non-translation, notably the many modes and degrees of language learning. The notion of interlanguage, which has revolutionized language-acquisition theory, has scarcely progressed beyond the odd metaphor in translation theory.

Fifth, if one looks carefully at the development of translator-training programmes, a key moment appears in the 1950s, when French initiatives laid the foundation of European unity and French diplomacy sought importance on the world stage. Following the creation of the *Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs* in Paris in 1953, the two main French translator-training institutions were set up in Paris in 1957. Not wholly by chance, the French language dominated the first international network of institutions, the *Conférence Internationale des Instituts Universitaires de Traducteurs et Interprètes* (CIUTI), which met informally from 1960 and has long brought together independent schools that are concerned almost exclusively with translation (as opposed to language teaching) and focus on the training of conference interpreters. From that moment on, I suggest, European translator training has vigorously rejected non-translation and has been dominated by the figure of the invisible conference interpreter, providing magically instant cross-language communication in a Europe prepared to pay for such services. French political institutions, and more recently Germany, have indeed been prepared to pay highly for maintenance of their linguistic status with respect to English. Hence their ideal of translation as a national rather than human necessity. Hence, also, peculiar traits like the absence or marginalization of community interpreting in translator-training programmes, where translators are very present, languages are never entirely separate, and the needs are painfully more human than symbolic.

Sixth, since the 1950s, whole classes of European intellectuals have been prepared to follow or adapt this initially French discourse, converting the defence of French into a

defence of each and every national language (bad luck, just quietly, any forlorn stateless languages). These are what Hobsbawm has called the “examination-passing classes”, the social groups that get ahead by studying languages rather than inheriting or producing material wealth, the people that institutionalized the idea of the national language. That’s us, you and me! We have every interest in promoting and defending national languages, state languages, the kind that governments get translated and thus must create jobs for. All the more so in central and eastern Europe, where the category of the nation was doggedly maintained by the cultural policies of real socialism and can still be manipulated as chimeric liberation. Who wouldn’t want to defend a national language? More work for us and our students! More social prestige! If only there were listeners or readers who really needed us all that much. If only we weren’t committing some of our more critical brains to unseen reproductive tasks, as if there were nothing more important to be done.

Seventh, and finally, the maintenance of a largely illusory discourse on the need for translations is now entering a phase where the institutional aims fall slightly out of kilter, for want of hard cash. As long as the political ideals hold firm, translation is free to wallow in the slough of Europe’s subsidies, a perpetual *exception culturelle*. But when the economists start to calculate and real needs sew up deep pockets, the believers in translation can only play on troubled consciences, repeating and repeating the multilingual ideals until someone pays them to shut up. At base, this “usage de toutes les langues” is little better than a desperate demand for funds.

I have nothing against ideals. It’s just that the official discourses on translation are full of hollow ideals and impossible promises building up naïve expectations. I humbly suggest it would be far better, in this day and age, to accept a dose of realism and to build our Europe accordingly. Concretely, this would mean abandoning translation as a restricted field of inquiry, associating translator training with all the dimensions of language learning, and training people to make a long-term Europe work from within vastly expanded networks of interlingual spaces. More specifically, it would mean forgetting the implicit assumption that translation is always necessary.

The real question should not be *how* to translate but *whether* to translate. Answers to that question require more than translation studies.

My arguments will meet with objections. Let me address a handful:

Some might say I can’t see beyond my nose, that I consider only the middle position, that I remain insensitive to the role of translation in the Romantic defence and development of Europe’s minor languages. Reply: Yes, a fair enough criticism: defend and develop where you will, but please don’t confuse nationalist aims with those of intercultural communication or integration; many Romantic ideals will have to be renounced.

Then: Translation costs, say rules of thumb, are insignificant when compared with the huge sums spent on unnecessary wars; it follows that we might as well finance all the translations we can, since we're going to throw away the money anyway. Reply: The only good thing about unnecessary wars is that they tend to be short-term, whereas unnecessary translations, like superfluous cultural costs of any kind, rely on long-term policies that promise no end. Further, soldiers sacrifice themselves because they're not trained to do much else (hence their nobility, said Ruskin), whereas translators could do a lot else if trained correctly. Stupidity in one area does not justify stupidity in another.

Next: Democratic participation, say good politicians, requires that all citizens have access to information in their own language. Reply: Yes indeed, all the laws and regulations to which people are subject must be accessible to them; they must indeed be translated where required. Yet laws and regulations are not produced with overwhelming frequency; the translation they require need not extend to all the committee meetings, discussion papers, surveys and conferences by which they are produced. Not by chance are European lawmakers, the ones with the full panoply of information, increasingly working in interlingual spaces.

Perhaps more seriously: The mixing of languages, say millenarians, will lead either to a grey non-language of limited resources or to the hegemony of just one imperial language, the English of our day. Reply: The ability to speak and understand two or more languages is surely a source of cultural richness, opening a space of creative play and invention, necessarily beyond what Barthes termed the fascism of monolingual grammar. As for imperialism, yes, I regret the passing of medieval Latin, which depended on the Roman Empire just as little as European English depends on Hollywood, and did not, it seems, kill off too many vernaculars. More important, no *lingua franca* is all-purpose; it does not permeate our kitchens and bedrooms, our hearts and being, since intercultural communications are just as narrow and specialized as countless other domains. The mixing of languages simply means that no one language can be truly all-purpose, and this need not be dangerous in itself.

Finally: Literary and philosophical texts, say a row of Schleiermachers, require full command of the rich complexities of a language; they must be translated, and translated fully and faithfully, so that transcendent value can be made available to all; a culture that does not translate the great foreign texts will close in on itself, offering less quality of life to its members, so they say. Reply: Thus do the examination-passing classes pretend to have sole access to universal values, manipulating great texts as a matter of national pride, seeking to control the knowledge and language of their dependents, producing subsidized translations so that monolingual receivers finish up needing translations. Where a foreign work or culture is the object of an initial or one-off demand, by all means translate, and do so as carefully as you can. If, however, what is at stake is a long-term relation with another language, then teach that language or send

your students and children there, so that their quality of life will involve the ability to go out and discover value for themselves.

In sum, if you want integration beyond the nation, bring people into interlingual space; use initial translations to do so if and when necessary. But do not pretend to condemn Europe to eternal dependence on translations. And do not believe that the “usage de toutes les langues” is a promise that translation can or should fulfil.