Translation technology as rupture in the philosophy of dialogue

Anthony Pym
Intercultural Studies Group
Universitat Rovira i Virgili
Tarragona, Spain

Much modified text of a talk given at the sixth Portsmouth Translation Conference, 11 November 2006, on Translation Technologies and Cultures, as published in the corresponding proceedings. A great deal of the text has nevertheless been taken from the author's report on Laygues' PhD thesis Pour une éthique du traducteur poéticien *(2007) and has further been drawn from the author's talk "Contre l'éthique de la rencontre. La technologie comme rapport indirect à l'autre", delivered to the conference La traduction, et après? Éthique et professions, Liège, 26-28 April 2007.*

Abstract
The "philosophy of dialogue" (Buber, Marcel, Levinas, Ricoeur) has been related to translation ethics in the work of Arnaud Laygues. This tradition underscores the need to open the self to the other, casting translation as an intimate dialogue in which one can "receive the other as other" (Berman), "translate the text as a person" (Laygues), and indeed then perceive that we, as translators, are ultimately "others to ourselves" (Kristeva). The underlying ethical position, however, assumes a mode of presence that is scarcely tenable in terms of an anthropology of technology. How can we enter into a dialogue with an other who, thanks to displacement of the *gramme* through inscription, is never wholly there? What are the effects of this displacement, fundamental to the relation between all technology and language? In the extremes of technology, the humanization of the source text ultimately becomes an act of massive self-deception, using the otherness of the other as the mark of elitist leverage. The ethical dialogue, in the age of extreme technology, must seek cooperation with the end-users of translations, unforgivably excluded from the classical philosophies of otherness.

Translation and the philosophy of dialogue

Arnaud Laygues (2001, 2005, 2007) develops a philosophy of translation from Martin Buber's *Ich und Du*, first published in 1923:

> The attitude of people [*der Mensch*] is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words we speak.
> The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words.
> The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou*.
> The other primary word is the combination *I-It*, where, without a change in the primary word, one of the words *He* or *She* can replace *It*.
> So the *I* of people is also twofold.
> For the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*. (2000, p. 19, our revision of the translation)

Buber here is talking about interpersonal relations, about the way subjectivity is positioned by those relationships. The theologian's primary frame of reference is the act of prayer, where the communication positions the *Thou*, this intimate second person, as God. We are not the same person when we pray (to a *Thou*) as when we work on a computer (with an *It*), or so would posit Buber. Nor are those two kinds of relation ethically equal. The only stable relationship, posits Buber, is the content of the primary word *I-Thou*. On the other hand, the relation with the third person, with things, is a constant search for content, as when one definition requires another, one possession needs the protection of another, in the process otherwise known as semiosis.

We might choose to ignore the mysticism of dialogue with the divine. However, most of us would sense a substantial difference between communicating with an intimate ‘you’ (a close friend, a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a daughter or son) and communicating with a ‘he’ or a ‘she’, people relegated to the status of third-person things. This could be no more than the Kantian ethics of treating people as ends rather than means, as second persons rather than third persons. Here, however, the difference is framed in terms of communication, and specifically of pronouns.

In his early review article (2001) and more recently in his PhD thesis on the philosophy of dialogue (2007), Arnaud Laygues uses this piece of Buber to insist that translators should seek out the *human relations* behind the texts, the readers behind the client, the interpersonal behind the objective. Rather than work with language as a set of things, we should work with people as expressed through language. The things of this world, the countless tasks of *I-It* relations, are better seen as exchanges between people able to help each other. Such might be the ethics of human cooperation.

In a word, when translating, we should communicate with people (intimate second persons), not just with texts (third persons).

That lesson is so valuable that I teach it at the beginning of every translation course. And I teach it all the more when the course is on technical translation, localization, translation technology and the like. Wherever our work processes and perceptions seem most caught up in networks of things, one must make at least the pedagogical effort to insist on the people. That is hard, of course, and all the harder when the things include pay packets, deadlines, and instructions that show no awareness of language, culture, or indeed translation as human communication.

In his more complete lessons, Laygues (2006, 2007) includes multiple insights from the tradition known as the ‘philosophy of dialogue’. In Gabriel Marcel he finds a humanized version of Buber, given to dialogue with the other not just as one of our own, but with *Autrui*, the ‘other as other’, more in keeping with what one might expect of a cross-cultural encounter. From Paul Ricoeur he draws on the duality of identity. On the one hand, we have the identity of the same (*idem*), of the kind of repetition, at whatever level, associated with equivalence. Yet Ricoeur (1990) also conceptualizes the identity of selfhood (*identité ipse*), continually constructed in dialogue with the other. This second kind of identity, retrospectively discernable in the duality of the *I* in Buber, would be that sought through translation as dialogue. Most importantly, it is an identity constructed over time, through multiple translation decisions, and indeed through multiple translations. It can become the identity not just of the translator but of the entire translating culture, which continually identifies itself through encounters with cultural others. All that, posits Laygues, constitutes a philosophy of dialogue with keys for the ethics of translation.

We might be familiar with the way this basic thought leads to the formulas of Antoine Berman: the task of translation is to ‘recognize and receive the other as an other [*l’autre en tant qu’autre*]’ (1999, p. 74); translation itself is ‘the inn of the distant’ (*l’auberge du lointain*) (1999) where travelers are welcomed; the ethics of translation involve a constant opening of the self to the other. Some might also want to associate this tradition with the reflections of Julia Kristeva (1998), who sees a multicultural Europe of multiple immigrations as a frame where identity is profoundly ‘foreign to itself’ (we are *étrangers à nous-mêmes*, or so goes the slogan), constantly engaged in redefinition of the self. Not gratuitously, this foreignized postmodern identity is elsewhere conceptualized as ‘translation’, here as a metaphor for all communication between groups in a disaggregated society, or indeed the pragmatic or aesthetic constitution of an *identité ipse* (cf. for example Renn et al., 2002, Renn, 2006; Akrich et al., 2006; Apter, 2006).

That philosophical lineage, especially with its recent conceptual extensions, is a little frightening for someone dealing with the everyday professional realities of translating texts between languages. Has translation really become so dramatically important? It is also a little frightening for anyone aware of what has happened in translation theory over the past thirty years or so. How can all these philosophers, sociologists and cultural theorists believe translation theorists have been spending their time analyzing about no more than accuracy and fidelity? How can they so cheaply ignore the very existence of research-based Translation Studies? More important, the recently flourishing philosophies must be frightening for anyone moderately aware of how cross-cultural communication has been evolving in recent years. At the same time as fragmented societies are metaphorically seen in terms of translational dialogues (with globalization as an underlying cause), interlingual translation itself has become anything but a one-to-one dialogue (with the same globalization as an underlying cause). The reason is technology, since technologies reduce distance and multiply cross-cultural communications. And it is technology that must ultimately undermine the philosophical illusion of translation as dialogue.

The historical role of translation technologies

A series of electronic technologies (translation-memory systems, content-management systems, and terminology-management systems) now allow multilingual semi-automatic text generation, particularly in the fields of product documentation, websites and software. That should be news to no one working in professional translation or indeed in the localization industry. The resulting communication is cheap, relatively accessible, and potentially democratizing, in keeping with the ideals of globalizing capitalism. The technologies are all based on the simple idea of taking previous texts, encoding the terms, strings or text chunks, and putting them together to create new texts semi-automatically. Far from spreading international English, they apply the dynamics of 'translation from code' (an apt phrase from Apter, 2006) to all text production.

At the same time, however, these technologies tend to separate communicators from the act of communication. Translators usually cannot see the whole source text; they are unaware of any iconic qualities that might profile a particular end-user; they are normally given no specific information about the purposes of the communication act; they thus cannot assess usability in anything more than generic terms (cf. Byrne, 2006); they rarely receive any feedback from the distant world of text use; and if any of those things happen, it is a the stage of revising, publishing or marketing, beyond the technologies that keep the translator looking at nothing but phrases from memories.

If that sounds like an unfair characterization, try working with professionally with a translation memory, preferably on something like a piece of software. And if that fails to convince, try working in a team using web-based translation memories. Very soon you will be counting the things (words, phrases, minutes, money); you will have forgotten that someone is trying to say something to someone.

Our portrayal of technology should not be construed as a demonization of the postmodern. Technology has long been there, shaping communication in general and translation in particular. Its economies have long had profound effects not just on the way we translate, but also on the way we think about translation. When texts were inscribed on parchment, the most problematic part of the translation process could be to locate (and pay for) trustworthy manuscripts, then reconcile the numerous variants. Since there was little certitude about the point of departure, there was no strong concept of authorship, nor of equivalence. Translation could be one further link in the semiotic continuation of the text. Further, given the cost of the support, much of the actual translation process could be oral, as was reportedly the case in twelfth-century Hispania. Translation problems would be discussed in an intercultural team, then the result written down. With the arrival of paper, inscription was cheaper. The translators could write down rough copies; translations would be revised; there would be re-translations; and there was a wider social circulation of unfair copies (cf. Pym 2000, pp. 80-89). Not gratuitously, the use of paper coincided with the significant translation activities in Baghdad in the ninth century, and in Toledo in the thirteenth century. However, the circulation of more manuscripts meant there was even less certitude about the representative value of inscriptions, and thus even less possibility of conceptualizing strong authorship or strong equivalence. With the printing press, on the other hand, we move to an age of standardized orthographies, distribution of the same signs, and the Renaissance ideology of equal languages. Here we do we indeed find strong ideologies of authorship and corresponding concerns about establishing equivalence (albeit without the term), and indeed debates on whether or not relations of equal value were possible between languages. Thanks to print, we had definitive texts to which a translation could be equivalent. There ensued centuries of concern with textual accuracy and fidelity to texts. We had a regime of things, perhaps more than people.

We present this potted history in order to situate, very briefly, our age of electronic communication, or more exactly, the cross-cultural sectors most affected by electronic communication tools. Electronic communication offers instantaneous transmission and low text-modification costs. The first result is that the source text we work from is a transitory and unstable phenomenon, with a place in an ongoing series of textual avatars, mostly without fixed authorship by an individual. When we translate a website or a piece of software, the texts we work from are themselves being worked on, notably through all the processes of internationalization and programmed updating. It follows that translation itself becomes part of the one dynamic text-production process, as it would seem to have been in pre-print technologies. In this respect, translators could ideally be involved in multifarious adaptation to new end-locale uses, as indeed was often the case in pre-print regimes. If that were true, the term 'localization' would not be an entire misnomer. At the same time, however, electronic translation technologies are based on the memorization of phrase-level information, and are likely to remain that way for some time (whether the information be statistics on collocation or, less likely, encoded semantic knowledge networks). Memory, the primary inscription, is thus restricted to relatively small linguistic objects, at a level much lower than the ones where dynamic adaptation can take place. It follows that translators work with phrase-level or, at best, paragraph-level linguistic objects ('information objects' for Hofmann and Mehnert, 2000; 'information elements' for Lockwood 2000, 'chunks' in common parlance). They are positioned a long way from anything like face-to-face dialogue with the other. Even as a weak metaphor kindled in ignorance, this kind of translation can be no model of ethical communication between cultures.

Then again, it never was. Technologies have always been there, mediating between the self and the other. The presence of dialogue through texts has long been an illusion. Even the translators working from Arabic in medieval Hispania, obliged by technology to talk among themselves, were not communicating with an Islamic other. The translation teams brought in Mozarabs (Arabic-speaking Christians) and Jews (who knew Arabic), and kept the technology of writing firmly in the hands of Church Latinists. The Islamic other, authors of the (often translational) texts transmitting the most advanced knowledge of the day, was sublimated into a series of divergent manuscript variants. The texts were very much objects to be questioned, not persons to dialogue with.

Because of mediation by technology, translation is not direct dialogue, nor has it ever been.

Inscription as semantic displacement

Our basic point here is simple enough: technology intervenes. Just look at the cognitive processes of translators as they use different technologies. Any passing observation should show that there is no immediate presence of the other. That point is not our own invention, of course. It has been made, at a much higher level, in a philosophical tradition that must be considered an alternative to the ethics of dialogue.

In Derrida, right from the seminal texts (cf. Derrida, 1967), language allows no immediate access to meaning. In the early books this is explained through the analysis of *écriture*, of writing as general inscription, both in the use of letters and, potentially, in transmission through memory. For as much as we might believe that the text in front of us communicates a simple meaning, there is always something else there, to corrupt, distort or add to the illusion of meaning. That fundamental act of displacement is the work of the *gramme* (hence 'grammatology' as one of the many names for 'deconstruction'). In our re-reading of those texts, Derrida takes the fact of technological mediation (that is what the *gramme* is) and shows its work to be general. There can thus be no simple presence of the other. There can be no dialogue that it not mediated by technology.

That insight joins up with the entire tradition of twentieth-century skepticism and uncertainty. It should, by rights, undermine all the attempts to found an intercultural ethics on metaphors of dialogue (and by extension of translation as a kind of idealized negotiated dialogue). We hasten to add that generalized mediation does not spell the end of scientific analysis (constructivism and probabilistic methods survive quite well), nor does it do away with cross-cultural ethics (awareness of technological displacement breaks down simple binarisms and can thus open the self to the complexities of the other). It does, however, put paid to translation as a dialogue between people. The metaphor is shown to be collective self-illusion.

So what should I now be telling by students in that first translation-technology class?

A way forward

Some illusions are pedagogically useful, of course. There need be no overwhelming pressure to abandon the hope of dialogue simply because the concepts are inexact. To do so would involve simply conceding to technology, and we have no intention of doing that.

Far easier, perhaps, to point out that something was missing. All the discursive images of translation as dialogue, all those philosophies of the other, show us a translator talking with an author. The translator is thereby turned to the past, looking at the word of the other in a finite context. Whatever the power relations or ethical obligations, the game is played between those two. Why is it that none of the philosophers consider the translator's relation with future readers or users in the same terms? Why should the only ethical relation be with an author, rather then with a receiver?

Our question is of some importance. In pre-print cultures, that relation with the past was not of more weight than the politics of the translator's present, or than the ideal of transmitting knowledge to the future. Similarly, our post-print cultures work from texts that tend to be temporary, relatively authorless, and produced within a professional interculture. In those cases, it is quite hard to enter into profound dialogue with a cultural other. More to the point, the philosophies of such dialogue would seem to be attached to the intermediary age of print, to authorship, to fidelity, to equivalence as the technocratic sublimation of fidelity, and perhaps also to the literary-philosophical genres where quaint ideologies of individual creation still persist. Whatever the case, the ethics of the backward gaze would seem profoundly inadequate to the consequences of non-print technologies.

That does not mean, of course, that we should abandon all hope of a humanizing dialogue. It need not mean ignoring the ethics of cross-cultural relations, which remain the most pressing concerns of our age (people are not blowing themselves up for money). The dialogue, I suggest, should be with the places where our technological texts are going; it should be with end-users, and with feedback from end-users; and it should concern usability but also, perhaps importantly, capacities to breach the various digital divides that are separating our cultures. Those are all areas where work is needed on the ethics of post-print communication. More practically, our work should help advance technologies that enable language workers to enter into such dialogues. This means greater visibility of discursive contexts, more information on user profiles, and access to feedback.

Unfortunately, those aspects remain sadly lacking in our current translation technologies, which are all based on memory capacity. Memories, of course, are by definition of the past.

Bibliography

Akrich, M., Callon, M., Latour, B. (2006). *Sociologie de la traduction. Textes fondateurs*. Paris: Presses de l'École des Mines.

Apter, E. (2006). *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Berman, A. (1999). *La traduction et la lettre ou l'Auberge du lointain*. Paris: Seuil.

Buber, B. (2000). *I and Thou*. Trans. Ronald Gregor Smith. First published in German as *Ich und Du*, 1923. New York: Scribner.

Byrne, J. (2006). *Technical Translation. Usability Strategies for Translating Technical Documentation.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Derrida, J. (1967). *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit.

Hofmann, C., and Mehnert, T. (2000). Multilingual Information Management at Schneider Automation. In R. C. Sprung (Ed.) *Translating Into Success. Cutting-edge strategies for going multilingual in a global age* (pp. 59-79). American Translators Association Scholarly Monograph Series. Volume XI. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: Benjamins.

Kristeva, J. (1998). *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*. Paris: Seuil.

Laygues, A. (2001). Review article of Buber, Marcel, and Levinas. In A. Pym (Ed.), *The Return to Ethics*. Special issue of *The Translator* 7(2): 315-319.

Laygues, A. (2006). Pour une réaffirmation de l'« être-ensemble » par la traduction. *Meta* 51(4). 838-847.

Laygues, A. (2007). *Pour une éthique du traducteur poéticien*. PhD thesis. University of Helsinki.

Lockwood, R. (2000). Machine Translation and Controlled Authoring at Caterpillar. In R. C. Sprung (Ed.), *Translating Into Success. Cutting-edge strategies for going multilingual in a global age* (pp. 187-202). American Translators Association Scholarly Monograph Series. Volume XI. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins.

Pym, A. (2000). *Negotiating the Frontier. Translators and Intercultures in Hispanic History*. Manchester: St. Jerome.

Renn, J., J. Straub, S. Shimada (eds). 2002. *Übersetzen als Medium des Kulturverstehens und sozialer Integration*, Frankfurt Main and New York: Campus..

Renn, J. 2006. Indirect access. Complex settings of communication and the translation of governance. In A. Parada and O. Díaz Fouces (eds.), *Sociology* [sic] *of Translation* (pp. 193-210). Vigo: Universidade de Vigo.

Ricoeur, P. (1990). *Soi-même comme un autre*. Paris: Seuil.