

TRANSLATION AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF DIALOGUE

Report on the PhD thesis by Arnaud Laygues *Pour une éthique du traducteur poéticien*, defended at the University of Helsinki on 11 May 2007.¹

Why the philosophy of dialogue?

Arnaud Laygues 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. We might struggle to see, initially, what any of this has to do with translation. 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 PhD thesis, 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).

¹ These notes reproduce many of the points made in Pym (2007).

That lesson is so valuable that I teach it (citing Laygues) 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.

In his more complete development of this fundamental insight, Laygues includes multiple contributions from the remarkably French 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 (*identité 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 want to extend the lineage beyond the texts mentioned by Laygues. For example, Julia Kristeva (1998) 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, 2002, 2006; Akrich et al., 2006; Apter, 2006). Such, it seems, would be the fundamental problem of Translation Studies in our current day and age, where European sociologists and American literary scholars see translation working well beyond the texts others know as translations. Laygues does not directly address that problematic, yet his concerns and references reverberate with precisely that *actualité*.

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.

Why not the philosophy of dialogue?

Laygues' problematics and solutions are elegant, noble, and based within a strong tradition of elegant and noble thought. To argue with him is inevitably to argue with that tradition, with an intimidating list of names and texts. One objection, however, might be simple enough to stimulate some fundamental debate. It is this: The entire tradition thinks of "dialogue" as if it were something carried out between people engaged in unmediated conversation, as if face to face, as if in a shared presence. Yet the texts of that tradition, certainly when translation is concerned, involve situations that are anything but face-to-face. If there is indeed a bi-directional conversation, it is irredeemably mediated not just by the textuality of the text (as an object open to multiple interpretations), not just by its intertextuality (incorporating expectations and understandings from countless other situations), but also by the physical and cultural distances bridged by distribution, dependent on multiple technologies. There is no immediate presence; technology always intervenes.

Proof? 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 understanding. 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 scepticism and uncertainty. It should, by rights, undermine any simple attempt 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 should, however, put paid to translation as an unmediated dialogue between people. The metaphor might be collective self-illusion.

So what should I now be telling my students in that first translation-technology class? What should we do with the elegance and nobility of Laygues?

Applying the thesis

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 condoning any such move.

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 than 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 intercultural. 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. The dialogue, I suggest, should also 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.

Laygues' advice is ultimately that we seek out the human in and through the texts. If we object that the search is based on an illusion, that the presence of the other will always be illusory, that does not in itself undermine the ethical virtues of the enterprise. The attempt is rewarding in itself. And the otherness of *l'autre* might ultimately be based on a future-oriented materialist humanism, as well as on the more abstract ethical guidelines from a backward-looking past.

I am very grateful for the lesson learnt from Laygues, and I will continue to apply and extend that lesson wherever possible: whatever the mediation, we translate people, not just texts, and we translate for people, not just texts.

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