

## Preface: Print and modernity – questioning the grand narrative

Anthony Pym

“We need more Bibles like that.”  
Musa Dube (2012)

Technologies, we know, strongly affect how we communicate, and especially how we communicate from one language to another. In the case of print technologies, that general relationship can be thought about in the following way, in what would seem to be an all-embracing narrative:

- Print gives texts a degree of fixity, which allows degrees of survival over time and mobility through space that were greater than with previous technologies.
- That fixity means translation can take place from a socially established start text, rather than being just one form of rewriting in a series of variant copies, modifications, and adaptations.
- Since print establishes the start in this way, there is something there to which a translation can be assumed to be faithful (or in the twentieth century, equivalent). This fidelity (or equivalence) is thus the text as object prior to being to an author as person.
- Since this fidelity is to a thing rather than a person, it is a relationship into which anyone can enter, if and when they have the required literacy. The spread of literacy thus allows more democratic access to knowledge, and fewer restrictions of the right to translate. Print thus allows a democratization of knowledge.
- Since the fixed text allows this democratization, the value of the translation is then assessed in relation to its start text, rather than in terms of interpersonal relations or the functionality of the translation as an independent product.
- At the same time, print brings about the need for linguistics conventions thus standardized languages, which have tended to be the languages of the European nation state and its colonial imitations.
- Since the nation states developed a regime of mutual recognition based on a fiction of equality, their languages were also presumed to be of equal value (as opposed to medieval regimes where some languages were closer to divine revelation and thus superior – with corresponding additions, deletions, and adaptations).
- Rather than take knowledge from a superior to an inferior language, print-based translation is thus presumed to operate between equal languages. This in turn reinforces the regime of fidelity (or equivalence), similarly based on a fiction of equality.

According to this reasoning, the age of print would correspond to a particular way of thinking about translation: based on a start text; working between languages of

potentially equal values; producing a text whose value is potentially equivalent to that of the start text; carried out by individuals; potentially carried out by anyone with literacy. That general mode of thought was rarely found prior to print (if only because of the presumed hierarchy of languages); it is not common beyond Europe prior to the nineteenth century; it is important and coherent enough to be seen as the Western translation form, which travelled out from Europe as one piece of that complex set of technologies and values known presumptuously as modernity.

Such might be the kind of grand narrative that is tested, implicitly, in all close analyses of translation in the age of print. As is the case with attempts to explain everything, it leaks in many places.

Here I would like briefly to test the narrative on the basis of a particular historical problem, just to see how it fares. The problem concerns the Bible, but it might contain lessons for much else as well. And it concerns Hispanic translation history, but hopefully resonates beyond.

One of the problems facing the Church in Hispania from the thirteenth through to the fifteenth century was the presence of numerous vernacular variants of the Biblical texts. Since institutionally authority was based on the book, different versions of that book (especially those held by the Jewish population prior to 1492) undermined the authority. This problem would be addressed by the physical burning of variant texts: for example in Tarragona in 1233 (prior to print) and in Salamanca in 1490 (in the age of print). Same problem, same solution, and the existence of print would appear to make no difference at all – a book burns as a book, no matter how it is produced.

There were other ways of dealing with the problem, however. One of them was to locate the differences and find out about them, then to use the knowledge either to produce a corrected version or to enter into a disputation. This would be the general spirit in which the Order of Calatrava organized a project, from 1422 to 1430, to have the Jewish rabbi Moses Arragel translate the Hebrew biblical texts into Spanish. The result is the superb illustrated manuscript known as the *Biblia de Alba*, since it has long been owned by the House of Alba. A second attempted solution, which ran from 1502 to 1520, was Cardinal Cisneros's project for a polyglot Bible based on linguistic scholarship, now known as the *Complutense Polyglot*, which was printed. Both these projects had as their aim the fixing of texts, albeit in different ways. One was pre-print; the other was print (bearing in mind that the Gutenberg Bible was produced in 1450-55). So what can these two projects tell us about print and translation?

Some differences are immediately obvious and eloquent. The *Biblia de Alba* was ordered as 'vna biblia en rromançe, glosada e ystoriada' – a Bible in Romance, with glosses and explanations. And indeed, for many of the pages, there are more words in the commentaries than in the actual translation, and the only translation present is in Spanish. The *Complutense Polyglot*, on the other hand, establishes previous versions of the biblical text: Hebrew, Latin and Greek for the Old Testament, with Aramaic Targum of Onkelos and its Latin translation, and then various etymologies and a Greek grammar, but no commentaries or explanations as such. So both volumes are presenting knowledge about the biblical text, but in very different ways. The *Biblia de Alba* presents the worldview of Hebrew as a relatively unknown language, offering particular explanations and interpretations: this is what the Hebrew-speaking rabbi can tell us, as a cultural informant. The *Complutense Polyglot* pretends to give no worldview beyond linguistic

knowledge; it ostensibly provides the tools with which a humanist could set about interpreting the text: now *you* decide what you think. As such, the difference could map onto the kind of distinction that one would like to attribute to print and modernity: in making knowledge available on printed pages rather than through personal authority, the book opens to many possible interpretations, in a democracy of knowledge where all potentially have the tools with which to decide.

If only history were that easy. Let us see how the effect of print actually works, for example on Isaiah 7:14, a litmus test for any Bible translation: it is the line where some believe the biblical text announces a virgin birth. The Hebrew has (עַלְמָה *'almah*); Jerome's Vulgate clearly has the word *virgo* (virgin); the Greek of the Septuagint has παρθένος (young, unmarried woman, maiden, or virgin), and the *Complutense Polyglot* efficiently aligns those three words with each other (the words share the same superscript numbers), so = עַלְמָה *virgo* = παρθένος in Isaiah, justifying another *virgo* later in Matthew 1:23. The text offers no particular gloss or explanation, but the message seems clear enough: the young woman was a virgin, because the little superscript numbers tell us there is equivalence at work.

The *Biblia de Alba*, which offers abundant commentaries, is rather more eloquent at this point. The glosses mention the Hebrew word *'almah* as meaning "young woman", and the translating rabbi notes two possible versions in Spanish: *moça* (young woman, not necessarily a virgin) and *virgen* (virgin). The translator offers both these possibilities; the process of interpretation is not foreclosed, at least not in the commentary. And it seems the rendition as *moça* was not entirely an aberration: it appears in some copies of the Ferrara Bible of 1553, which was commissioned and produced by Sephardic Jews (Lazar 1992: 193). There are nevertheless traces of something else, a spoken negotiation of sorts, most probably between the translator and his Christian correctors. The Christians certainly knew the young girl was supposed to be a virgin and wanted her rendered as a *virgen* (as had been the case in Jerome and the Septuagint); the Jewish translator no doubt felt they were putting words in his mouth, imposing an interpretation that was inadequately justified by the Hebrew. So the solution put in the actual text borrowed a beautiful compromise strategy from Jerome: when in doubt, transliterate. The biblical text has neither *moça* nor *virgen* but *alma* (soul), as a phonetic imitation of *'almah*, which no doubt satisfied no one but was at least not wrong. That solution, though, was probably not won easily: Lazar comments that a word, probably *virgen*, has been scratched from the manuscript and replaced with *alma*. It was only after a debate of some kind that the text found its soul.

Now, which of the two Bibles opens to greater diversity of interpretation? Both projects involved work by many hands, both took place in hierarchically controlled intercultural situations, but the manuscript text in this case actually does more to invite a plurality of interpretations. This principle is fairly explicit in the translator's own explanation of what he has done: "Since I have done no more than relate or record [*memorar*], everyone is left free to believe, debate [*disputar*] and defend their law as much as they can" (fol.15r). What this means, I suggest, is that the oral debate has taken place within the production process, and this is actually what is being recorded for posterity, not just in the translated text but more importantly in the explanations and glosses. In the purely print text of the *Complutense Polyglot*, those traces of oral debate have been lost: the materials are for a *future* debate, perhaps, but the principle of visual

equivalence (those little numbers that correspond) effectively selects the material that can then be open to question.

Of course, there is much wrong with comparing these two projects in terms of any simple divide between pre-print and print. The vernacular, in this case, falls on the pre-print side, whereas print was the age of national languages; the more individualistic project is certainly the *Biblia de Alba*, much as one would like to associate the lone translator with print; and the mass distribution that one might like to associate with print was actually not the case for the *Complutense Polyglot* (it was very expensive and badly marketed, having been upstaged by Erasmus's *Novvm Instrumentum* of 1516). The comparison fails on all those points.

Then again, why should anyone expect to find everything changing as soon as the technology changes? History tends not to work like that. Technologies open ranges of possibilities, not obligatory imperatives, and their consequences can take centuries to work through – the best we should hope for are long-term tendencies.

And there are also ideas, which work with the technologies. Staying with the Hispanic frame, the eruption of humanist translation ideologies actually occurred slightly prior to the advent of print, most prominently in the epistolary debate between Alonso de Cartagena and Leonardo Bruni, from 1430 through to 1437 (Gutenberg's printing press was around 1440). Cartagena was arguing for a translation procedure based on authority and tradition: a translation is good if it says what has to be said; Bruni replied on the basis of textual evidence: a translation is good if it gives what is in the start text (see Birkenmajer 1922). There is little doubt that, over stretches of history, Bruni won that debate and that his position stood near the beginning of the regime that assumes an individual translation working on an individual fixed text, and translating in a standardized national language (Bruni did not particularly want Greek in the middle of his Latin). That is, all those things that we would more generally associated with a print-based modernity were effectively conceptualized and debated prior to Gutenberg's press. The technologies no doubt helped the fortunes of the ideas, but the ideas also had their day.

And then, if you think about it, the fact of print is itself a millennial sequences of historical steps, from the wood blocks of first-century China through to Gutenberg but then more importantly the use of steam and the rotary press in the nineteenth century. In fact, it was steam that most effectively enabled cheap mass production, books in public education, democratic access to knowledge, and the communicative part of modernity. To project all of that back onto the Renaissance would be wishful thinking at best.

Our small textual comparison, though, is perhaps not entirely in vain. The suggestion that print may in some way help conceal the spoken dialogues of knowledge production, that the very fixity of the text may in itself be limiting the variants of democratic debate, that the fluidity of spoken debate is somehow closer to text in the pre-print era, these are all suggestions that demand to be tested, not just with respect to the transition to print, but more intriguingly on the post-print media in which we are now all involved. When we publish our translations in electronic form, there are few limits on how much of the production process can be included along with the text itself, few limits on what can be modified, when, and how often, no limits on how many different translations can be accessed, and only weak limits on who can participate in the processes of ongoing interpretation. Some of these features can be found, to varying degrees, in pre-print

translation. And by working at both ends, at the beginning and the end, we might ascertain the more substantial import of print-based fixity.

In print, we are invited to trust the printed text, which is its own proof, as it were, gaining value as an object of collective investment. Trust the text; be faithful to the text; reproduce the truthful record. Prior to print, and later, that trust is more likely to be in the human mediators, the groups that come together to move produce knowledge, and in the events that are dialogues between those actors.

An anecdote, to close. At the Nida School of Translation Studies in 2012, the Botswanan feminist scholar Musa Dube argued that the offensively sexist passages in the biblical text should be changed: that is, eliminated, or made ideologically acceptable. Bob Hodgson and others from the Nida Institute then proposed that an alternative solution would be to admit that much social world of the Hebrew Bible and the early Christian Church is now simply obsolete: we should translate what is in the text, but then declare that we no longer live like that. Change the text, or change the interpretation? That debate concerns theology, the unity of the sacred text, the role of textual scholarship, denominational belief, and particularly the political role of translation.

It occurs to me now, though, that the underlying opposed positions concern the import of print. For the feminist scholar close to oral tradition and actual churches, there should be many different translations, each serving a different purpose in accordance with the needs of the receptive moment. For liberation, translators should change the non-liberating parts of the text. We have oral debate, and then the differences from that discussion become different translations: orality begets variance in translation. On this view, which I suspect is to be found in pre-print and post-print translation cultures, the proof is the receptive event, and translators are to be trusted to convey the liberating values most appropriate to that event.

For the culture of the fixed text, though, for a religion of scripture, the text is proof of itself, or indeed of its revelation, and it remains the thing to be trusted over and above what any translator can do. That difference concerns far more than sacred texts: it concerns the import of print technology.

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