

## On cooperation

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For too long our descriptive moment has avoided the fundamental question of how one should translate. Translators, teachers, students, critics and policymakers rightly expect our research to have something to say on the matter. I wish to propose that the goal of any translation project should be to promote long-term cooperation between cultures.

Even before we delve into the nature of this cooperation, the proposal is not without consequence as it stands. If accepted, it could mean that decisions about how to translate should depend on the actual communication partners, their aims and interests, the corresponding kind of text, the historical context, the pertinent opportunity costs, that is, on the specific cooperative interaction involved at the time. And if that much can be accepted, it could mean that we can only know about how to translate by looking at rather more than just translations. In other words, deontological questions—the professional ethics—cannot really be answered from within translation studies. So we should probably be elsewhere.

Let us tread lightly before dispersing into the void. Let us try to see what cooperation is in the first place.

### **Cooperation and its negation**

Cooperation already finds a certain place in translation theory, most fully in Justa Holz-Mänttari's theorization of 'translational action'. There we find the term defined as "the intentional action of different operatives [i.e. people] that is positively or negatively oriented in terms of a superordinate goal" (1984:23-24, my translation). It is what is supposed to happen when different people work together to achieve a shared aim. Holz-Mänttari argues that, with the progressive division of social labor, people become experts in different fields and thus increasingly have to work with each other in order to achieve anything substantial (41ff.). Translators thus become experts in cross-cultural communication, cooperating with experts in other fields in order to reach shared goals. Translating is by nature a cooperative act.

As it stands, Holz-Mänttari's concept of cooperation is unobjectionable. However, as with much of German-language cultural functionalism, the approach rather too easily assumes that people share the same or compatible goals; it takes for granted that cooperation has to happen; it has little to say about what translators should do when there is a conflict of expertise or several competing conceptions of how cooperation should work. Indeed, the only deontological advice the theory could really offer a dilemma-bound translator is 'you are the expert, you decide'. Impeccably existential, this is often not much help.

If we look for a more subtle understanding of cooperation, we inevitably fall back on Grice's cooperative principle for conversation: "Make your conversation contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (1975:45). This is the general principle that underlies Grice's maxims of quantity ("Make your contribution as informative as required"), quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false"), relation ("Be relevant") and manner ("Avoid obscurity", and so on). For Grice, if we understand and respect the cooperative principle, the rest should follow naturally enough. Compared with Holz-Mänttari (as far as comparison is possible), Grice at least has the advantage of looking like an ethical statement (he uses the imperative); he does not appear to be assuming a world of discrete experts trained by experts; there is something decidedly social going on here. Further, if conversation partners mutually adopt the underlying cooperative principle, any deviation from the four maxims will be recognized as being of significance for the conversation: those deviations will also be understood as functioning in the interests of cooperation. It thus does not particularly matter whether the maxims themselves are essentially British—as has been claimed—, nor how often they might be violated in order to achieve effect. There may be four maxims, or two, or twenty: no real issue. It may not even be of much interest that different cultures develop different maxims and degrees of common application. The basic idea is that once the cooperative principle is adopted, everything works in the interests of cooperation.

So what is cooperation in itself? Grice is of remarkably little help here. Much like Holz-Mänttari, he indicates that each of the conversation partners must recognize "to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction" (ibid.). But, to what extent, exactly? How should the partners know the purpose or purposes are really shared? What are the signs of mutual acceptance? In short, at what point would we drift off into non-cooperation?

The question is of some importance. After all, if we can define the opposite of cooperation, we might have a clearer idea of what the thing itself is. We might also have more fun: it is merely angelic to think about goodness, more engaging to consider ways to be bad. Chesterman (1997:184-185), finding inspiration in Popper, even suggests that such negativity might have special interest for our ethics. Instead of seeking equivalence, for example, translators should prevent misunderstanding (or non-equivalence), since the latter is easier to locate and to form a consensus around. In our terms, if we want to think like Chesterman, the translator would then not so much seek cooperation as try to eliminate the conditions that promote non-cooperation. We would then merely have to know what non-cooperation is.

Unfortunately, negative reasoning does not really get us very far in the case of Holz-Mänttari and Grice. The closest Holz-Mänttari comes to substantial non-cooperation appears to be a lost rustic world where everyone could do everything, so no cooperation between experts was strictly necessary (1984:41). However, since she calls that pristine situation "simple cooperation", the move really brings us back to square one. As for Grice, he merely states that "at each stage, some possible conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable" (ibid.; italics in Grice). This tells us people are at least aware of some kind of potential non-cooperation, but the statement does little to say what that beast might look like. Worse, the admission of exclusion offers us no real way of distinguishing those particular conversational moves from possible violations of the maxims which, in Grice's conception, are meaningful precisely in terms of cooperation. Grice's cooperative

principle would thus appear to be so strong that it cannot be violated; here we find no real concept of non-cooperation. We must look elsewhere.

As is well known, Sperber and Wilson functionally replace Gricean cooperation with the shared aim "to have the communicator's informative intention recognized by the audience" (1988:161). They consider this aim to be wider and thus in some way logically anterior to Gricean cooperation. For our purposes, their shift is unhelpful in itself yet instructive in its difference from Grice.

First, it is unhelpful because embedded in an unnecessary dichotomy of communication models; it harps on a speaker's 'intention' that is not necessarily available to anyone or of immediate value to everyone; and more importantly, it brings with it a series of individualist presuppositions, proposing a psychologist's world peopled by a subject bent on accumulating information, increasing efficiency, and improving their personal knowledge of the world (1988:47-49). Granted, the communicative work of such a subject will very probably build up the social stock of available information and thus have some virtue attached to it. Yet relevance theory cannot say why any such social aim should be desirable. That is, since its subject is individual rather than social, hypostatic rather than deontic, Sperber and Wilson's approach seems less than ideal for an ethics of cross-cultural communication.

The differences between relevance theory and Gricean cooperation are nevertheless instructive. If we insist on looking for some kind of social dimension, Sperber and Wilson's subject (strangely like that of Holz-Mänttari et al.) would seem firmly within the 'buffaloes down by the lake' theory of language: men using signs in order to hunt better. The theory offers little space for language as gossip, for exchange as the active creator of intentions, for the play through which social relations are established and maintained, over and above the accumulation of relevant information. Grice's vague form of cooperation, on the other hand, appears to condone a view of language as a social past-time, as a socially creative rather than informationally communicative activity. We would want cooperation to include both sides of that coin.

The second difference has to do with generality. Sperber and Wilson might argue, for instance, that when a twenty-first century anglophone reads Goethe, that receiver is looking for intentions and operating in terms of relevance but is no more cooperating with Goethe than Goethe was cooperating with them at the time of his writing. Cooperation would thus be restricted to the mutual presence of conversation; it would not be a necessary principle of unidirectional communication across time, space, languages and cultures. This argument would seem to have some intuitive weight, especially in an electronic age where conversation is unhappily defined by mutual presence. But such concern about distance need not concern translation as a communicative act. Many things can go on between a reader reconstructing Goethean intentions and a Goethe imagining a future reader, yet they are all quite different from the interactions between a translator, a client, an editor, a rate of pay, an image of immediate reception, a distribution network, and the intercultural space—the overlap of cultures—where all those professional and commercial elements impinge on each other. The space of translation, of the translator translating as a communicative act, could have more to do with conversation than with recuperating the thoughts of the dead (in this, Holz-Mänttari's location of cooperation is quite right). In principle, the sender and the receiver of the translation are mutually present to the translator, as figured forces if not in flesh and blood. It is between them—not between distant authors and unforeseen readers—than the notion of cooperation might yet make some sense.

This helps us to define our object of study: Rather than comparing intentions or cultures, we are interested in what happens in intercultural space. But we still have not progressed far in our understanding of cooperation. For a more definite proposal, we need another discipline.

### **Mutual benefits**

Gricean cooperation, like the assumption of intentions, is so general that its only negation can be a kind of silence: without the cooperative principle, a conversation is no longer a conversation. This is a very weak kind of negation. Surely there are more robust forms of non-cooperation?

The model of the Prisoner's Dilemma is neo-classical game theory, much applied to decision making in economics and negotiation theory. It allows that two prisoners can escape if they cooperate with each other, as Gricean logic would want it to be. But the game stipulates that if one player chooses not to cooperate and instead reveals the other's plans (i.e. 'defects'), that player will gain more than would be the case if both cooperated. So in each particular game, each player must choose between cooperation and defection, with gains and risks being entailed in each option.

The abstract nature of the game is no doubt insulting to most forms of cultural subjectivity. Yet it does give us a very definite form of non-cooperation. If cooperation is a professional aim, defection is definitely not a professionally correct move: it would indeed fall foul of the minimalist prohibition of 'non-destruction of the other'. Yet it remains a crude extreme. What would be the correlative of defection in the case of translation? The revealing of professional secrets, certainly; perhaps also the plagiarism by which translators are sometimes wont to sign as authors. But beyond those definite lapses, the idea of defection would seem a little too blunt for the trickier parts of translatorial deontology.

The Prisoner's Dilemma is nevertheless of interest on other counts.

First, it tells us why people should seek cooperation, since there are benefits available that could not be obtained without communicative interaction. Cooperative interactions are where all parties win; non-cooperation is archetypically a zero-sum game where if I win, you lose. The idea of mutual benefits is no doubt implicit in all the above concepts of cooperation (especially Holz-Mänttari and Grice) but is rarely spelt out as an aim in itself. Such mutual benefits are nevertheless involved in all kinds of social transactions, from a simple sale to the idle chat that mutually kills the time waiting for a bus to arrive. Now we might understand why someone might want to help improve someone else's understanding of the world.

Second, the Prisoner's Dilemma can tell us something about why social relationships are built. When the game is played repeatedly, each player draws on information about how the other player has acted in the past. This information allows certain predictions to be made as to the other's future actions, predictions that may thus inform one's decision to cooperate or to defect. The more such information is held, the greater the relationship of trust between the two players and the more likely a cooperative outcome to their interaction. Beyond the game scenario, trust-building information may be seen as forming cultural blocks, conveyed by markers of belonging to one social group or another. The activity of gossip may then become the mutual search for such markers, developing relationships of mutual reliance and even friendship that may better ensure the success of future acts of cooperation. The importance of

general trust should not be underestimated, particularly in the world of e-commerce and the like, where many of our partners are only seen through electronic representations. Indeed, in computer modeling of games repeated over successive generations (some 50 generations of 24,000 moves each), such trust is shown to underlie the evolution of norms and eventually cultures, which thus exist in order to enhance the likelihood of cooperative outcomes (Axelrod 1997). To this extent, a social subjectivity may incorporate and go beyond the individualistic increasing of informative efficiency.

Third, since degrees of trust improve the likelihood of cooperative outcomes, they are in turn enhanced by a restriction in the number of players. We may, for example, predict the moves of ten people we know fairly well but not a hundred people we know only slightly. A decision not to enter into the game, either by choosing silence or announcing an inclination to defect, may actually assist the degree of cooperation in the interactions that do take place. To the extent that it reduces the number of players, a declaration of neutrality or even of war may indeed be seen as benefiting the cause of cooperation. In this, the game theoretic model takes us much further than the pragmatics where silence was about the only form of non-cooperation imaginable. Now we have rather more robust forms of non-cooperation to contemplate.

### **How this concerns cross-cultural communication**

There is little reason to believe that communication between cultural frames is radically different from communication in general; it need not require a special theory or an independent discipline. However, the relative weakness of the cultural norms shared by the participants must have certain effects on the quality of the communication obtained.

It might be believed that participants from different cultures are prone to greater misunderstanding because, all else being equal, they have potentially greater ground for mutual mistrust. That is, since the participants have relatively little knowledge of how the other is likely to act, the risk of non-cooperation is likely to be higher than is the case of communication within the one culture.

Studies of cross-cultural communication do indeed show that something like this happens. But they also show that participants are aware of the higher risks involved. This does not necessarily mean there is greater misunderstanding of the actual information load. Cross-cultural production instead tends to involve various degrees of specialized compensation measures such as higher redundancy, explicitness, and various further features of what is loosely known as 'foreigner talk' and 'foreigner listening'. The reception process may similarly compensate through increased back-channeling, the discounting of unexpected breaches of maxims, and a correspondingly more concentrated focus on the cooperative aim involved. In short, repeated cross-cultural communication between the same partners is likely to develop its own norms, indeed its progressive intercultural.

We all know of examples of misunderstandings because of different cultural norms. Yet it is important not to be misled by one-off cases. An example: An imaginary Australian wants to buy a souvenir *bota*—that traditional Spanish leather thing used for spilling wine all over untrained shirts: he walks into a specialized shop full of *botas*, sees one about the right size, asks the price and buys it. Transaction completed: mutual benefits for both seller and buyer. Yet the Australian's Basque Spanish companion immediately complains about the maxims. Apparently one cannot visit a shop like that without allowing the salesman to expound the

various virtues of different *botas*, without expressing admiration for the difficult production process, without talking a little about where one is from, where one is going, and whatever else springs to mind. To do otherwise is to negate the social virtues of the transaction. The unelaborated sale reduces the seller from expert artisan to mere merchant; it reduces social life to money. And sure enough, looked at in those terms, the potential mutual benefits could have involved not just mercantile value but also the values of human dignity, respect, and interest in the other.

Now, before you say who is right and who is wrong in this kind of cross-cultural norm conflict, consider the following. First, although the transaction has been presented as a one-off event, the buyer was certainly not the first foreigner to walk into that shop. The sellers of such items are accustomed enough to the foreignness of foreigners: *chinos*, we are called (among worse names), and little we can do will surprise or shock. The intercultural tradition thus places us deceptively beyond the norms of welcoming monoculture, as if the presence of tourists and longer-term foreigners were not absolutely essential to the Spanish economy. Second, since the Basque-Spaniard's complaint is part of the event, through this and a series of similar situations the imaginary Australian eventually understood some Spanish norms, learnt about their human virtues, and finished up becoming a resident in that country precisely because of the social values at stake. That would then be a second intercultural position. The repeat-play transaction, extended over a number of years, would thus include mutual benefits well beyond the mere cash value of an isolated *bota* or two. The resulting interculture might yet teach more mercantile Europeans about the values that make a life worth living.

Although those two kinds of mutual benefit are certainly different in nature, they are both the object of invested communicative effort and are thus not entirely incommensurable. Our model should be able to include both. Cooperation constrains the whole of social life, not just its economic part.

### **How this concerns translation**

To say that cooperation is the aim of translation is not to say that the translator is responsible for fixing or defining that aim. There are buyers and sellers, teachers and students, new ideas and ancient wisdom, all of which are able to seek cooperation across cultural differences. The translator is there to facilitate the search for cooperation, not to negotiate on behalf of one or other of the parties.

Another example: The excellent film *Patton* at one point portrays an American-Soviet celebration immediately after the fall of Nazi Berlin. There is no communication between the American and Soviet generals until, when the Soviet proposes a toast, the American general instructs his interpreter in something like the following terms: "Tell the Commie bastard he's a son of a bitch." The interpreter understandably doubts that this is likely to improve international cooperation: "I can't tell him that, sir!" The general insists, the interpreter interprets, and the Soviet's relayed reply comes back as: "He says [note the footing] you're a son of a bitch too." And then there is a toast.

The anecdote arouses several observations. First, the interpreter is undoubtedly correct to take an active role and offer his client some advice on the possible consequences of the communication. Second, his decision ultimately to convey the insult is justified by the extreme symmetry of the situation at all levels, which was to become the Cold War regime

that maintained peace for some 40 years. Third, in manifesting the mutual lack of interest in any long-term cooperation, the exchange at least enabled the partners not to waste efforts on further attempts; they could invest their energies in relations with other partners. To that extent, at least, it would be wrong to blame the interpreter for plunging the world into prolonged confrontation. If we do want to blame translators for such things—and there is a forlorn tendency in translation studies to empower translators by making them potentially responsible for everything—we really need a wider discipline able to address the actions of military generals as well.

When translators seek to facilitate cooperation, they can work through linguistic representation (convey the insult), metalinguistic elaboration (express doubts about the insult), and several things in between (shuffle the footing). If we take our extended botabuying example, we might imagine a translator representing a spoken price or two, and then—why not?—excusing the buyer's curtness, or giving the foreigner advice about the norms of Spanish chat, or even doing a bit of the talking that the foreigner is unwilling to do. There is no real reason why we should restrict our notion of translation here to the norms of NANS (no-addition-no-subtraction); any kind of elaboration is legitimate if it avoids misunderstandings that might block cooperation (note the negatives, straight from Chesterman in Popperian key: this is not quite the same thing as promoting any complete understanding). This is not where our disciplinary problems lie.

The more subtle questions of cooperation really concern not so much what is said or done in a translation, but how much effort is put into saying or doing it. We might suppose that the more we work on a translation, the better it gets. A regime of perfectability might thus bring us a constantly improved product, attaining correction either as a representation or as metalinguistic elaboration, here it does not really matter which. The problem, though, is that not all kinds of cooperation are always worth our best efforts. Or more formally, the effort invested in the translation should logically not exceed the mutual benefits to ensue from the transaction. If it does so—if we are investing so much effort in the communication that it outweighs the possible benefits to the partners—then all our hard work is actually blocking cooperation rather than facilitating it.

This means a translation may be non-cooperative not just because of misrepresentation or inadequate elaboration, but because of over-investment in the translation process. It is sometimes a crime to work too little, but it can also be criminal to work too much.

This is one major reason why attention to the details, the stylistic niceties, the semantic innuendoes, tends to be a pedagogical passion not readily transferable to professional translation practices. Many details may indeed be left out or rapidly glossed: for the purpose in hand, quite blatant imperfection is often 'good enough'. And when not, most long-term participants in intercultural situations do learn to compensate. Indeed, attention to detail is often more important when the translator is open to checking processes and must thus protect their own trustworthiness, in situations where our intrusive scholarship rarely circumvents the Observer's Paradox. But that translatorial self-protection may risk becoming counterproductive for cooperative outcomes.

The cooperation model perhaps has more to do with the effort put into translation than with any other aspect. However, thanks to this same reasoning, the model also suggests that the translator's moral allegiance need not be entirely to one side or the other, not even if only one side is paying. The argument ensues directly from the mutual nature of the benefits of

cooperation, since blockage on one side will automatically mean a loss of benefits on the other. Yet the same conclusion may also ensue from the translator's self-interest: the more mutual benefits are obtained, on both sides, the more resources are available to reward the translator and the greater the likelihood that future interactions will further grace the translator with well-being. Beyond that, of course, there is a certain humanist nobility in the claim that cross-cultural cooperation is good in itself. Yet it is not so good that it requires any magnanimous self-abnegation on the part of any translator.

We thus reach a kind of ethics that has little to do with absolute fidelity to texts (often too much work), which cannot be reduced to mercenary loyalty to money (we must think of both sides), and which recognizes the translator's personal interests (what is good for both sides is ultimately good for us). More neatly, this would be an ethics of contextualized human relations rather than a barrage of abstract universal rules.

### **How this concerns non-translation**

Our concept of translation must be wider than those concepts based on representation alone. We have recognized not only the legitimacy of non-NANS strategies, but also metalinguistic elaboration as being part of the translator's task. Yet here it is important to resist the temptation to extend our concept of translation to the point where all texts are potential translations (since there is no absolute originality) and there are thus no non-translations. Our argument on this point is two-fold: first, translation is only one of several possible strategies for solving multilingual communication problems; second, translation must be separated from the non-translation strategies in terms of the relative costs involved.

When considered in these terms, translation is a relatively expensive solution when pitted against the various alternatives involving language-learning. It is ideally suited to initial short-term contacts or situations where cooperation requires texts with either legal status or norms that remain relatively uncodified in intercultural terms. In many other situation—most situations—long-term cross-cultural cooperation may probably be better facilitated by language-learning policies.

### **How this concerns teaching**

Applied to pedagogical practices, this view suggests that there are serious shortcomings involved in the training of specialists in text-reproduction practices. In particular, more should be done to teach students how to assess whole communicative situations and select strategies accordingly. Such training would necessarily involve awareness of when translation is necessary and when it should give way to other practices. In short, our training programs should progressively be oriented to the production of intercultural mediators, people who are able to do rather more than just translate. Our research models should be oriented in terms of that aim.

This is indeed what is happening in the commercialized top end of the current labour market, in the world of the 'intercultural management assistant', the 'language service provider', the 'localizer', or more benignly, the 'multi-tasking translator'. In domains such as information technology, marketing and international consulting, translators are regularly being called upon to do rather more—and often less—than just translate. Cooperation requires as much.

## How this concerns research

We started with a proposal about the ethics of translation. The proposal has clearly become something more: it directly impinges on the way we define the translation situation, on the way we define translation itself, and on the way we select an object of knowledge suited to the solving of actual communication problems. Our fundamental position on these latter questions is basically the one adopted by José Lambert many years ago, in the first issue of *Target*:

Translation is and has never been the only solution to the problem of multilingualism. It seems impossible to grasp the function of translations if that function is isolated from the many other possible solutions, notably from non-translation (1989: 223; my translation; italics in the text)

That is, our research should be free to investigate the way cooperation is facilitated in all forms of cross-cultural mediation. One might call that wider field something like ‘intercultural studies’. But the more important point is that it should at the same time be limited in scope: our questions do not strictly concern the comparing of territorial cultures or separate language systems (since the translation situation is intercultural); we are not in a position to moralize to non-mediators; we have no reason to make assumptions about all text production, the whole of linguistics, or the ideal global configuration of cultures. Within those limits, though, there is much to be done in the pursuit of cross-cultural cooperation.

Translation history, for example, might study the way norms evolve from the search for mutual benefits in intercultural situations, through the interactions of competing social groups rather than as a consequence of the systemic logic of just one receiving or sending culture. Our quantitative methods might usefully assess the capacity of low-cost translations to attain sufficient understanding for the purposes of cooperative interaction. That is, we should be taking more empirical interest in that way translations are received and in many cases compensated for through specialized receiving strategies. Further, some kind of sociology should be tracing the rapid evolutions of the translation market, locating not just stunning factoids but also the social logic by which the concept of translation itself is changing as its very name is being replaced. Finally, someone with common sense and good numbers will have to get down and work out what the European Union is going to do when it has 20 or so languages to work with. At the moment, given our current professional commitments to translation and nothing but translation—mirrored both in official European/Canadian policy and our own research—, transaction costs within that future Europe will be so high as to prohibit truly mutual benefits. Beyond our various attachments to the regional cultures in real need of defence, an ethics of cooperation may yet help research contribute to a viable international future.

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